

Issue II | Fall 2019



*Astral
Waters*
REVIEW

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Masthead

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

I can't express how excited I am for this issue. I anticipate that each issue will be special in its own way, as the first issue was special because it was the debut, and this issue is special because it shows our eagerness to continue on this publishing journey.

I'm so grateful to all of our readers for their support; we can't exist without you. And we can't grow without you. Growth was our mission for this issue (we increased our submission count by 400%, and we've included 6 more pieces and 61 more pages than the previous issue to show it). We'll continue to grow into next year, especially in our marketing efforts. I learned a lot about what it takes to publicize and market a literary magazine after Issue I, and I'm looking forward to putting that new knowledge into action.

In 2020, Astral Waters Press will be looking to partner with nonprofit organizations that support underserved and underrepresented communities, and we'll share 100% of our Issue III profits with that partner. We're currently open to suggestions for potential partners, so if you have any leads, please feel free to contact me at admin@astralwatersreview.com.

Thank you again for your support. If you can, please help us spread the word about *Astral Waters Review* on [social media](#) and in person. We need your help to continue to promote underrepresented voices and to fight for diversity and equality in mainstream genre writing.

As always, at *Astral Waters Review*, we vow to be a safe haven for diversity in genre writing, striving to challenge and progress genres that are meant to do the same for society.

With gratitude,
Amylia Ryan, Editor-in-Chief

*Astral
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Menders



JOE BAUMANN's fiction and essays have appeared in *Electric Literature*, *Electric Spec*, *On Spec*, *Barrelhouse*, *Zone 3*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and many others. He is the author of *Ivory Children*, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was nominated for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories 2016* and was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. He can be reached at joebaumann.wordpress.com.

They bring the boy in without knocking. Despite the noise and clatter of two living bodies struggling to hold up a dead one, Etienne does not flinch. He shoves his bookmark into his book and mutes the news. As the two men struggle under the boy's slumped weight, Etienne's apartment fills with the tell-tale fecal smell of voided bowels and the copper tint of dried blood. He looks over the boy: wiry and olive-skinned, arms knobby and bony, the flesh stippled with burn marks. The boy's throat has been slashed a few times, but none of the gashes are bleeding.

Etienne can see the boy's spirit, a glob of black stuck to his dragging feet. It has stretched out behind the body, a shadow pulling like taffy, chewed gum.

So there is time, still. But not much.

Lukas, the shorter, prettier of the two men, doesn't say anything, but he angles his head toward Etienne's dining room table, where a makeshift tarp of taped-up newspapers is already prepared. He and the other man—a stranger to Etienne, skinny-fat, with underdeveloped muscles, spindly neck, rounded shoulders, a pouchy belly—haul the boy up onto the table. The newspapers slide with his weight. One loosened knuckle drags against the back of a chair.

"He needs to be facedown," Etienne says when Lukas and the stranger start to relax. "You know that."

Lukas shakes his head. "Sorry." He and the stranger flop the boy over like he's a caught fish. Lukas blinks at Etienne. "I know him. He's my neighbor."

Etienne's throat hitches. He wishes Lukas hadn't said anything. It adds pressure.

The boy's spirit is dripping toward the floor from his bare toes, the attachment loosening. A small part of Etienne always thinks that gravity is working against him, that the pool of black will fall away faster as it is dragged toward the earth, but he knows he would have no more or less time if they were floating in outer space, the only thing pulling the boy's spirit away time and the soul's desire to move on.

He rolls up his sleeves and opens the top drawer of his credenza, a battered, nicked thing that has seen better days and barely survived Etienne's last move. He has to unlock it with the key he keeps on a chain around his neck, the one thing he never takes off. Some nights, Luckas runs his fingers over the silver, tracing its loop across Etienne's chest and throat. His touch makes Etienne shiver, pleasure coursing across his skin at the bright kindness of his fingertips.

Etienne pulls out a small black case along with a spool that, to the unseasoned observer, would appear empty. He glances at Luckas, shifting his eyes toward the stranger, who is wringing his hands and staring at the boy. Etienne recognizes the tension of trying to hold back tears and the washing waterfall of searing pain, of breakdown. *The father*, Etienne thinks. When the man unlocks his gaze from the dead boy, he looks at Etienne with a blend of hope, sorrow, and frustrated desire for Etienne to hurry.

Which Etienne knows he needs to do. The shadowy spirit is dribbling closer to the ground, the connection at the boy's naked toes stringier by the moment. But he cannot rush, either. Otherwise, the boy could come back wrong. That's happened a few times. Once, a girl, seven: she came back intellectually disabled. Another boy became a sociopath, killing mice and then kittens and then trying to rape his nine-year-old cousin. He was fourteen.

Etienne takes the spool and holds it over the boy's throat, which is spattered with freckles of blood. He finds enough unblemished skin to set the spool against, which immediately draws up the color of the boy's flesh, settling into threads that were, until a moment before,

invisible.

"There's still time," Etienne says. The father crumples as if he is an aluminum can and Etienne's words have punched through his center. He leans over, turning away for a moment as if to hurl into the corner. But he clears his throat, straightens, and nods.

Etienne sets down the spool and the case. He'll need both hands; spirits are delicate things, more prone to tearing than the thinnest vellum or parchment. He might as well be trying to keep cotton candy untorn. Etienne bends down next to the black blob, which only he can see. He reaches out his forearms and drapes the boy's soul over them like he's transporting stretchy dough. Etienne doesn't breathe. Nor does Luckas. The father is huffing. Etienne can imagine him blinking, sweating. Mumbling prayers.

The spirit is lightweight, like a sheen of sweat. Etienne can feel its molasses movement as it dribbles away from the body. Spirit and dead flesh are like magnets, similarly-charged: they push away from one another, resist touching. As he lifts the boy's soul, he feels it stretch. Etienne raises his arms just high enough to crest the boy's prone body, laying down the spirit as he goes. It hovers just above the skin; so long as Etienne holds it, it cannot spring away. Although it does not want to touch the boy, it cannot help but follow the body's shape; as Etienne unfurls the black, it begins resembling half of a wetsuit, molded to the boy's thin legs that are, at their fattest, no wider than bowling pins.

"Is it okay he's still wearing clothes?" Luckas says as Etienne finishes, laying the last of the spirit at the back of the boy's skull, holding it down with two fingers.

"Yes. Clothing means nothing to the soul."

Etienne runs his free hand down the length of the boy's back, over his legs, cups him around his heels. He kneads the spirit carefully, layering it over the flesh like pie dough pinched to the edges of a pan. Then he takes up the spool and looks at Luckas.

"I need you to thread this for me."

Lukas blinks. The father coughs.

Etienne gestures toward his one hand still pressed lightly to the boy's hair. "I can't let go. You know this."

"Okay," Lukas says.

"The small needle," Etienne says. "You know the one."

Lukas nods and bends over next to Etienne, his left ear close to Etienne's nose. Etienne breathes him in, the bready, sweet smell of sweat—nerves, terror—clumped along Lukas' skin and hair. He radiates a heat that Etienne is familiar with; the skin Etienne has touched, pressed, and caressed is always infernally warm, pinking under Etienne's fingers and palms, pliant but strong, stretching over sinews and bones. Lukas has hips that flare like elephant ears, wrapped up with a pad of muscle that emphasizes the cut of his thighs. Etienne would much prefer that closeness to this, this watching as Lukas, with trembling, sun-chapped fingers, tries to push the end of the narrow filament through the eye of the small needle.

"Slowly," Etienne whispers into his ear. He reaches out his free hand and brushes at the edge of Lukas' jeans, letting one finger slip against his flesh where it is exposed at the stretch of his shirt. "Breathe, Luca."

The thread slips through the tiny, blinky eye of the needle, and Lukas hands it to Etienne, then deflates against the nearest wall, wiping the back of his hand along his forehead.

"There is vodka in the cabinet next to the microwave," Etienne says. "I suggest you two drink some."

He doesn't look to see if Lukas is listening. He doesn't listen for the sound of the creaky hinge, the clink of the bottle on the countertop, the screw of the lid, the slosh of liquid. Etienne is focused entirely, now, on the boy and the needle in his hand. The boy's spirit is whirling, trying to droop away from his legs. Etienne must start at the head; if he can attach the spirit at the boy's skull, he knows it will not be able to escape, at least for a while.

The first stitch is the toughest. No matter how many times

Etienne sews someone up, the first plunge through dead skin gives him a queasy lurch, even though there is no blood; it has all settled, ceased its whirling through veins and arteries and capillaries. Skin, after death, becomes nothing more than hide, like the leather of a couch or a purse. But that makes it somehow harder for Etienne to begin; live skin is pliant, inviting puncture, but that hardened by dying is stubborn, willful, like a wall.

He presses the needle through with a nearly inaudible pop. Etienne likes to start by getting the thread through the skin before assaulting the spirit; the latter, still alive in its burbling, escaping way, is always more resistant despite—or maybe because of—its delicacy. With his left hand he squeezes down on the spirit that wriggles against his touch like a blanket of ants, and he draws the needle upward through it with his right. The spirit, feeling the pinch, goes rigid and starts a frantic waggle under the pressure of Etienne's fingers, but he moves quickly, plunging the needle again, driving it straight through the spirit and then back into the crown of the boy's head. He works three speedy stitches and then exhales. The boy's soul can squirm and squelch as much as it wants; it won't go anywhere.

"The hard part is over," Etienne says, turning to Lukas and the father. "Now the long part begins. I suggest you take a seat, or maybe go find something to eat. I have cheese and grapes."

The father shakes his head. His eyes are glossy, hit hard and fast by the vodka Lukas has fed him. The level of the sloshy clear liquid in the bottle has dropped significantly.

Lukas approaches the table, blinking down at the boy's body. Etienne knows Lukas can't see the writhing black pulling at the stitches, oozing around the boy's thin, tan legs, scrabbling over the fabric of his mustied T-shirt. But Lukas trusts Etienne, and reaches out, squeezing his shoulder, rocking Etienne forward and back just so, like a ship lulling on calm waters. Etienne clasps his hand over Lukas's and lets his body swerve for just a moment, his eyes closed, gathering in the quiet tickings of his apartment, the hum of the fridge, the buzz of the

overhead light, the soft squelch coming from the boy's soul.

He taps Luckas' hand and leans forward.

"Now it's time for me to work."

*

Luckas feeds Tomas more booze and tries to press some brie down his throat, but he refuses, only slurping down the Stoli, knocking back his head like he is being punched every time he takes a shot. Soon he is lolling, slumped against the wall in the dining room, his vision spangled and dim enough that Luckas can coax him into the living room, where he lays him out on Etienne's couch.

He and Etienne first kissed there, Luckas perched on the cushion where Tomas's feet wobble with drunkenness, his loafers clacking together. Etienne was the instigator, wending his hand across Luckas's back, letting it shy up his spine to the bristly hair on the back of his head. Luckas had worked to control his breath and the thud of his heart and the hardening in his crotch as Etienne drew their faces together, lips munching against one another. That first time, kissing was all they had done, even though Luckas could tell Etienne wanted more; Luckas did, too, but didn't know what, or how. So they had split apart, blinking at one another, Etienne smiling sheepishly and Luckas doing the same. They watched a soccer game before Luckas went home, much too late and having drunk one too many of Etienne's beers in their heavy amber bottles.

Tomas snores, a wet doggish noise. Luckas watches his heavy, wretched breathing, his body stuck in mourning and sorrow even in the unconsciousness of drunken sleep. He had come barging into Luckas's apartment shrieking about his son Detjen, some gibberish about a gang he'd refused to pay protection money to—Tomas owns a convenient mart—and how they'd taken it out not on him but on Detjen. Tomas knew that Luckas knew Etienne, the one who could bring people back if he worked fast enough, and would he—Luckas—please, please, for God's sake take Tomas and Detjen to him.

Luckas had had no idea whether there was still time.

He hovers behind Etienne, who is hunched over the boy so the vertebrae of his spine swim along his back like waves pressing against the fabric of his shirt. His shoulders and arms twitch with tiny movement as he sews. Luckas knows there is something here Etienne can see: as far as Luckas, or anyone else in the world, knows, Etienne is simply threading string through the boy's skin like an outline, working down from one side of his head along his torso. Detjen's body doesn't bleed, or move, except as Etienne uses his careful hands to press and ply and shift the boy's weight just so. Luckas has seen him work a few times, and is always stirred by the warm arousal when watching Etienne's hands, which are rough on the knuckles from washing dishes for years as a young man. He remembers their nights together, the way Etienne's fingers work pleasant magic on Luckas's skin, wending their way across his flesh like a squadron of licking wands.

Luckas says nothing to Etienne and slips into the kitchen. He pores through the fridge, shoving the half-mauled brie aside in search of sandwich bread and some sliced meat; he finds Braunschweiger and some white bread and a jar of floating, limp pepperoncini and builds a spicy sandwich, the sugar of the bread dissolving into a tingly mess in his mouth. He cuts the sandwich in half and, when he's chewed through his greasy half, sets the other triangle on a plate and silently slides it onto the chair next to Etienne, who is working fast now, his threads darting through the boy's body with a calm, peppy speed; he has reached the delicate curve of the boy's buttocks, feeling his way through his mesh shorts, using one hand to pull the material tight against the tender gluteal skin, then pinning it with his wrist. Luckas can see it is a tangled struggle, but Etienne manages with dexterous grace, his fingers obedient, wrists strong and flexible. He asks for no help, and Luckas does not offer it.

After their first kiss, Luckas's chest had been filled with leaden weight for three days, a heavy mix of worry and elation. He'd never kissed another man before, and the electricity left behind in his mouth was a ball of tiny, tight lightning. He dreamt of Etienne every night

until he saw him again, his imagination peeling off Etienne's clothes to reveal lithe, swan-like muscle, a dusting of soft blond chest hair, fingers that whirled along Luckas's hips and groin, a hot mouth pressing at his skin. He had finally brought himself back to Etienne's apartment, who opened the door with a quick, happy flourish, grinning as if he'd known all along that Luckas would come back. They moved silently into Etienne's bedroom, undressing one another, Etienne's hands sure and warm, Luckas's tingling and trembly.

Tomas is still snoring on the couch, wet and panting like a dog, when Etienne leans back, the chair groaning under his weight.

"It's done?" Luckas says.

Etienne nods, closing his eyes. A sheen of perspiration glistens on his clean forehead.

"How long now?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe." Etienne looks down at the boy. "Maybe less. Help me turn him over?"

Detjen feels heavier now in Luckas's arms than he had before. Perhaps this is because Etienne isn't as strong as Tomas, unable to bear as much of the boy's weight. Or perhaps it is because, despite all practical maxims about dead weight, human beings actually hold more bulk when they are caulked to the earth by their living spirits. Luckas grabs the boy by the ankles while Etienne slides his hands under the shoulders. He can feel Detjen's bones, the pointy calcium of his ankles that poke out like rippled arrows. His feet are dry, talced with dust, hardened by days tromping over dirt, gravel, grass.

They swivel him over onto his front, and Etienne goes to work sewing the wounds on his throat together. He moves faster through this stage, body twitching with ease and comfort, muscle memory kicking in, the thread and needle pushing through the flaps of cut skin with simple ease. Luckas is spellbound by the little twitchy movements of Etienne's fingers; the needle and thread are like a viola, Etienne strumming through the suturing like he is plucking the notes of a familiar symphony. He even starts humming.

"Help me clean him up, yes?"

Luckas pulls a rag from where it hangs from a kitchen drawers and runs it under warm water. He passes it to Etienne and watches him brush the cloth against the boy's skin in careful, gentle strokes that remind him of the caresses Etienne's fingers kiss across his back after they make love, their bodies slick with moisture, the air in the room like a helium balloon, Etienne's hands working across Luckas's shoulders, down the outer swoop of his ribs, across his hips, digging into the base of Luckas's spine, heels of his palms pressing just above his buttocks, Etienne whispering low words.

"What are you saying?" he asked the first time.

"Just a little something," Etienne said, "to help you relax. Be at ease."

"I am," Luckas said into his own folded arms. "I am." Etienne had grinned and kissed Luckas' lower back, his tongue gliding over the knob of his coccyx.

Etienne releases a breath, a kick-out of exhaustion that Luckas can see welling in his eyes. Tomas stirs on the couch, the fog of alcohol wearing off enough that the ambient noise of their movement wakes him up. He lets out a thick, dry groan and rubs at his eyelids, blinking and stretching and then looking around, face filled with that temporary terror at waking up in a strange, unfamiliar place. Then his gaze settles on Luckas and Etienne and—most sobering—his son, and Tomas snaps stiff. His face goes tight, lips pressed, nostrils flared.

"He'll be fine," Etienne says finally, after the silence between them has gone rancid. "He should wake soon."

A quiver passes through Tomas, like he's being shaken by a ghost that no one can see. Then he begins to sob. Etienne blinks and looks at Luckas, who crosses the room. Etienne may have a way with the dead, but it is Luckas who must handle the living.

*

Etienne falls into a deep sleep. Luckas lays beside him. They are both sapped. When the boy woke with a start he cried out, leaned into

his father. They gobbled one another up and said nothing, sobbing into each other's shoulders while Luckas and Etienne watched. Etienne reached out a hand to Luckas and their fingers knotted together behind their backs where Tomas and his son would not see. The boy fingered his sutures and looked up at Etienne with a hollow look in his eyes.

"They'll dissolve on their own," Etienne said with a nod toward the boy's neck. "No need to come back."

"I am thinking less about coming back than I am going away," Tomas said.

Etienne nodded. He and Luckas watched them leave.

In the darkness, Luckas brings his hand to hover over Etienne's nostrils, feeling the tickle of his exhaled breath against his palm. He lowers his head so his ear is above Etienne's chest; he can hear the thump of his heart. Luckas moves down to listen to the gurgle of his gut; at Etienne's crotch, he feels the lightest echoing thump of blood moving through Etienne's body. At Etienne's palms, the warmth in his fingerprints courses with something magical and unknown.

"The world is full of the inexplicable," Etienne said when he first told Luckas what he could do, how he mended the dead, bringing their bodies and souls back together. "How else do you understand the two of us?" They were lying in Etienne's bed, where they always laid together, naked, filmy, their paired skin—Etienne pale, Luckas ruddy—a checked-cloth mismatch.

When Etienne wakes up the morning after sewing up the boy, Luckas is already gone. His smells, the twirl of the bed sheets, the impressions of his grip on Etienne's hips are still there, though, hovering like ghosts. The physical absence is no surprise to Etienne; he knows Luckas slinks away in the dark, not out of shame or even fear but a dislodged unknowing, an inability to slot the various parts of his being into their appropriate spaces. He—Luckas—is a puzzle whose pieces are all there but don't fit perfectly.

But Etienne is not worried. He knows Luckas will come back, dragging along with him a victim for Etienne to salvage. He will work

his miracle, knotting body and soul back together, and then he and Luckas will drink and eat and touch, cleaving themselves into one, their threaded parts meeting, shaking, trembling with life. ***

The Collector of Cursed Objects

Deadname



ERIS YOUNG is a queer trans writer from Southern California, based in Edinburgh. My poetry has been published in *Mycelia* magazine, and my fiction has appeared in several magazines, as well as the anthologies *We Were Always Here* from 404 Ink and *F, M or Other: Quarrels with the Gender Binary* from Knight Errant Press. I also have a short story forthcoming in the anthology *Uncanny Bodies* from Luna Press (2020). In 2018 I was a Queer Words Project Scotland mentee, mentored by Kirsty Logan.

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The Collector of Cursed Objects

Forty-six days
I can't tell her age to any degree, her face is only a little lined and her hair is deep, stringy tar-black but the mass, the sheer volume of *things* in the room suggests she's ancient, impossibly old. Her voice is a little raspy, as though she's unused to talking, though I can't imagine how that could be, considering her occupation.

My Arabic is worse than my French, so we speak to each other in French. She asks how long I've been in Morocco and it occurs to me I don't remember. I ask her was she born here and she smiles, says no and I feel a little stupid for asking. Not because it's a stupid question but because her expression makes me feel like I should have known.

She has nervous, flitting black eyes lined with smudged kohl. They're a little red and I wonder if she sleeps. At one point during the evening, when we are discussing the odd physical quirks of the objects themselves, she points at my feet.

"That rug, for instance. Safavid. It's five hundred years old and still in perfect condition. But it brings on nightmares. I sleep on it every night. I'd be mad by now if that thing—" She gestures carelessly at a glass cabinet to her right full of curios, alabaster table lighters, ugly ceramic spaniels. I have no idea what thing she's pointing at. "—didn't steal my dreams."

She flits around the room like a bowerbird, presenting me with curiosities, though she stops my hand when I move

to pick up an opal necklace, set in delicate scrolled silver. “I must remember to put that behind glass.”

And there are other, more innocuous items than the necklace and the rug, merely inconvenient. She bustles around the room—I’ve ceased thinking of it as a shop—tidying, making tea, as she tells me about them. She seems pleased at the interest I take in the things she’s collected, she hands them to me freely.

“He who eats from this *karahi* will end up hungrier than when he began.”

It’s got cigarette ash in it, or maybe incense. The whole place smells like musk. I look around for somewhere to put it and nestle it on a cabinet behind me between a cat skull and a little cornflower-colored box with silver corners. The lid of this is translucent and I can see something narrow and oblong resting inside. I wonder if the cat had been hers. She seems the type. Or maybe not, because there is here also a nervous-looking little finch, dusty brown, hopping silently around a silver cage.

“That bird is over a hundred years old. It’s never been out of that cage.”

She seems almost disappointed when the tea is brewed and the biscuit tin unearthed and we finally sit down to discuss business. I tell her though, about the curse, the book, all of it, because my life depends on it. She sits cross-legged on the rug facing me, knees flat against the floor. She watches me intently. I’m bored into and all the words that have built up come spilling out. After I feel empty, a little hopeful, as though I’ve been hollowed out so that something new can fill me. She’s the first person I’ve explained the whole thing to in a long time. I told her more than she needed to know but she made it easy.

“So you must have been the first boy-child—” she

repeats the phrase *boy-child* back to me, and even without malediction it makes me shudder. It rolls off her tongue like she’s said it before. “—in...”

“*Cent quatre-vingts ans*,” I pronounce carefully. In French I feel insulated from it, from the weight of the numbers. Small comfort.

“And how old are you now?”

My voice catches in my throat and I have to repeat myself,

“*Trente*.”

“So you’re living on borrowed time, eh?”

I nod, dumb. She’s right. She’s been taking notes this whole time in a little brown leather book and I notice she’s using a reed pen, dipping the nib in a little soapstone inkpot by her knee.

“And how did your...great-great-great-uncle, was it? How did he die?”

“Auto accident.”

“And before him?”

“His father fell down a cliff. *His* father died at Kastania. He was twenty-nine and a half.”

She dips her pen again. “And why did it take you so long to find me?”

There’s reproach in her voice, and I look at the floor, guilty, even though I’ve been searching since I was twenty. I would have given anything, done anything, to find someone with her skill in all that time. It took ten years to get here. Ten years of ships and planes and food poisoning and sunburn and dead ends and false leads and charlatan diviners and well-meaning ineffectual witches and day labor and hope and despair and exhaustion.

“And have you entertained the possibility,” she says, showing for the first time a hint of trepidation, a hint of the

pity I know she must be feeling, “that finding your book—” she calls it a *grimoire* “—will not solve your problem?”

“Of course I have.” I almost get up and leave right then. “I think about that every day. But what the fuck else am I supposed to do?”

She lays a conciliatory hand on my arm.

I go back to her several times that month, though she can’t see me every day. She contacts me in my hotel, always when I’m in bed, lying awake or dozing; I’ll hear footsteps in the hall, slow, measured. In a hotel this is normal, but then a single knock comes and a ssh as something slides under the door. I scramble out of bed to the door and look out but there’s no one there. Just a little folded piece of paper with some writing on it. I’m fairly sure she knows I can’t read Arabic.

I ask the desk manager to read it to me and he gives me a funny look. *Come after the evening call to prayer. Bring a live chicken.*

I bring the bird, clucking calmly in a covered basket under my arm. I try not to think about what’s going to happen to it. I find her place easily this time, and I feel as though I’ve been inducted into something, now. I can come and go freely. It’s night and there’s a couple of lamps lit; the light is yellow and it makes it difficult to see things in detail. She makes me strip down to my underwear for this part, though I’m not entirely sure this is necessary.

What happens to the chicken is exactly what I was expecting. I’ve been a vegetarian for a long time, just for good measure in the karmic sense, and I look away when she cuts off its head. She makes me put my hands into its chest cavity, pull out its guts and drop them—*no, like this, with more force*—onto a silver plate. They’re still hot and the smell of blood makes me gag. She hovers over them, her nose an inch from the plate. She even closes her eyes at one point and breathes in deeply. But when she opens them she looks disappointed. She shakes her head.

“I am sorry. But we will try again,” she says with an encouraging smile, though she looks drained, her face going gray before my eyes. I

force myself to smile back and then wander home. She doesn’t charge me for the day’s session.

The next time I see her she is locking her front door. She takes my hand and leads me away, toward the street.

“We will try something new today, something my great-grandmother taught me.”

We go deeper into the Medina, to the bazaar, thick with people. The air is smoky and fragrant. The noise is cacophonous: men and women are haggling, shouting, laughing with each other across the aisles and yelling at the two of us, trying to sell us things. She leads me through it as if we were alone, walking slowly, her eyes unfocused, head cocked to one side. I start to say something but she shushes me.

“Listen, Milos. Listen to the air. Let it speak to you.”

I try, but like I said, my Arabic is not good.

Gradually over the course of these visits my hope turns back into that familiar disappointment, mingled with fear. Lately the latter is beginning to overshadow the former. She doesn’t know how to find my book. I’ve been thinking of it as mine, anyway. It’s supposed to be in Ancient Macedonian, though, so I probably couldn’t read it even if I found it. To tell the truth, I haven’t thought that far ahead. I’m running out of time.

I feel a thrill of resentment at my relatives, my ancestors, for not finding it over the years; at countless generations of mothers so relieved to have borne daughters not to care much about the needs of a hypothetical boy, nothing more than a bogeyman for a future generation to deal with. A willful ignorance that lasted for two hundred happy years after the death of great-great-great-uncle Adrastos. But how could I blame them all, really? In their position I think I’d be happier without me, too.

I break down a little when our final session yields no results. I feel stupid for having pinned so much hope on it. She lets the

pendulum fall onto the map between us and puts a hand on one of my hands. I'll miss her. She's done a lot for me and hasn't asked for any money. And more importantly she's been kind to me, in her quiet, twitchy way.

Twelve days

I think of going home, feel the pull of the beach and afternoons dangling my feet off the pier and the comforts of home—decent olive oil, my mother's *ryzogalo*. But I don't want to be in a place where people know me, and I don't think I can face my mother, her offers of money, her tears and her apologies. By now they are a meaningless reflex: *I'm sorry you were born*. So I go to Skopelos and lie on the beach and get drunk for a week. It's almost a ritual by now, which in recent years has taken on more finality, more heft.

I've still got some money left and I'm feeling a little better, though the days are ticking by. I go to Thessaly to get a passage translated from Aeolic by a professor at the university there. I've got a black book full of these names, dates, locations, collected but not acted on over the years. The branches proliferate. I've gone back to the black book before when the trail goes cold and now I do so again but my list is growing thin; the despair I felt on Skopelos has turned into a compulsive kind of hope. My moods are up and down like a rollercoaster these days.

The translation is unhelpful. I'd hoped it was about one of my maternal ancestors, but it's a different person with the same name. Dr. Sanna can't help me, but is sympathetic to my plight (I've told him I'm writing a history of my family) and enthusiastic about the mystery and we go out to dinner to discuss it. I have too much to drink and I think he catches on to how desperate I am, though for what he seems to misinterpret. We have sex in my hotel room, and to my surprise it helps a little. I feel as if Dr. Sanna is giving me something, though I don't know what. I let myself cry a little, after it is over.

In the morning I think he's caught on that I haven't told him

everything, and we have an awkward, silent breakfast while he tries to figure out how to ask. The thought of explaining it all again exhausts me, and I'm unnecessarily cold to him until he stops talking around it. He gives me his number and I promise him I'll call, though I know I won't.

One day

I find myself back in Morocco, the last place my searching bore any fruit. The sun rises on the day of my thirty-first birthday. I haven't slept. I stand on my hotel room's balcony, watching the sunrise, pink and blue on Marrakech.

I was born at night, so there is time yet. I itch, deep in my body. I'm restless and I wonder if I should go in search of a drink, or something stronger, to pass the time until evening. But no, if this is my last day I want to see it, to feel it. I try to think what to do but I'm paralyzed by indecision. I leave the hotel. I can't meet anyone's eye as I walk downstairs.

I go into the first teahouse I find, and I order coffee. I want to be awake. When I can think again I pick up a brochure and look through it, but nothing strikes me and anyway I don't think I can bear to talk to anyone today. I want to go to the sea but it's too far. I don't want to get in a car, talk to a cab driver. I should have gone to Casablanca for my last week. I decide to walk instead. I get lost for a while and every time a car passes me too close, every dark alley I walk down, every noise I hear behind me, I think *Is this it?* But I'm still alive.

I do get a little drunk in the evening. I eat at Palais Soleiman and buy a bottle of Domaine du Comte Liger-Belair and drink it by myself. Part of me screams I'm spending the paltry rest of my savings, how will I get home, how will I pay for the hotel, but another part knows I won't go home, I won't return to the hotel. The wine is very good. I have it with rice and dates and a really nice lamb shoulder. Fuck karma.

As I linger over the last of the wine in my glass that restlessness

comes back again, bubbling up like bile in my throat. My hands shake a little and I tap two fingers on the table, a rhythmless staccato. I catch the waiter's eye and he rushes over, looking a little relieved. My clothes are not nice and I think he's been worried I'm not going to pay.

As I walk out into the evening, it's cooling. A little breeze comes from where I think the sea must be and cools my face, which feels very hot and red. Something shifts in my head and I know I need to see her one more time. It takes me a while to find her place. I have to wander around the medina for a while until I spot a landmark I know and my feet start to carry me in the right direction, following old pathways.

It takes a while and I almost give up but then there's the door, squat black painted through a clay-colored peaked archway. The blue nazar above the door glints blackly in the shade. I remember with a little jolt that she's not Moroccan, I don't know where she's from. I don't know anything about her.

No one answers my knock. I think of leaving but the late hour and the wine make me bold and I turn the knob and push the door open. The place is a little messy. I could hear someone reciting *Salat al Asr* as I was turning the corner before her door, the quavering voice finishes as I cross the threshold.

It's empty. I've never been able to get in before without her being there, never been able to find the door. The place is so cluttered it's hard to tell at first, but I've been here so many times I know where things are supposed to be, and there's something off in the arrangement, an imbalance that rubs me the wrong way.

The light is wrong, too. One of the cloths that used to hang over the window has been ripped down. The setting sun, shining through the hanging fabric, catches red in something glittering. A silver birdcage, dented and lying open. I step closer and my shoe crunches delicately on something. With a shiver of revulsion I crouch and peer in the gloom. A little brown form, a tiny beaked skeleton strung with shriveled flesh, lies half crushed into the Safavid rug. ***

The Collector of Cursed Objects | Young



THE RED FATE 3

Artist: CECILIA G.F.

Collection: THE RED FATE

Deadname

i. birth

she's cooking up something
no burgoo this, nor love potion
it crackles with ozone, sings.
rattle handful of alligator teeth
sweet milk of a water moccasin
lock of Jessie's hair Momma kept
shut in her bible and
Meemaw's fingerbone.
dug up from the out-back grave
under the right sign, the moon
auspicious coin
gimlet eye as she pries out
coffin nails gone red-furred in the wood,
says hello again.
Meemaw, watch me, I'm gonna be just like you.
she pours in blood, too, collected
from between her thighs,
a goodly splash of corn liquor.
a bright film forms, a skin floating
duckweed of womanhood
redbrown baby tears

Lord knows she's swallowed worse
these twenty-five years.
she drinks it off

tasting rust lifeblood and dissolution
and when the tremors
and sweats stop she has
made space in herself for it.
it has curled round itself
crystallized in the bottom of
meemaw's big pot
enamel blackened round its flush.

she wants to climb right into it
this golem
bone-sack
perfect doll unscarred
by workaday woe, but
it's not ready yet it needs
quickenings
a name she calls into being
and applies like a lancet
like the old one was used on her.
she brings to bear the weight
of the new thing, sharp as new-broke glass
a weapon.
pus of old grief gushes out
and she pours herself, fluid
into the new vessel she has made.

ii. revival

she puts on sneakers
and a top Meemaw would have called
slinky and goes in the world.
or to the gas station at least

for some doritos and a 40 of something.
not used to being seen she
feels the prickle in the wet night heat
of eyes like mosquitos.
the prick and bloodthirst
of every gaze.

new name is strong, though, no need
for her old specter's sloping tread she
walks with her whole body now
drawn like a sphinx moth to a clamor
she finds a meeting.
old church hall
summer deluge of fluorescent voices
hardwood floor scuffing
tambourine shushing
the rhythm takes her hands and claps them.
but the body she's made is
too big too black too arcane in here
its language too obscure for them.
she's larger than life than
natural birth would have made her
suspicious.

a human tide retreats as her footsteps
chase a silence through the room
till all but a solitary smudge of
peach remains marooned.
white short sleeve glasses
yellow hair shellacked and an amulet
on his neck, symbol of peace
shining like a new dime, like hope.
a long glass of milk,

Meemaw would have called him.
impression of him, want,
bright crashing wave alien angel
come, sister,
join us
runs through her
and she moves under his attention
wants to be good in his sight.
he gathers her in to himself, a shepherd.
and she bathes in the knowing
he loves his flock he loves Jesus he loves her.

iii. visitation

white preacher man
is scratching around sweating
in her yard in the yellow dust tangled light
of her Momma house, where no man
has stepped foot since Daddy died.
everything about him is whiter
than she first apprehended
in the dark church hall, here sun
lights him up pink like a shell
held up to the day or a baby's ear.
the sweat on him is new milk
raw from the cow.
she's tumbled over by the pertness of him.
he startles, white rabbit
as she leaves the treeline offering
lemonade, which she has been told is customary.
he drains the sweating glass with
a boy's vigor, she wants

him to drink her that way.
the bible he has brought her
blank nameplate, ripe skin
of possibility not yet punctured,
temptation.
but a dribble of warning
instinct clenching in her belly, mutters
he offers her a needless boon,
salvation from the work
of her own two hands. he says,
I can see you have the devil in you.

his words are colder water
than she wanted to expect
Meemaw's old brown corded hand faster
than a hornet's bite,
a teaching slap,
never forget!
she reels from him, laughs, grieves, all
in the space between one breath
and the next. because the *devil*
in her, animating the device that is her
is her.
she watches him pinken
grow more solid, the fabric of him filled
with a righteousness she will come to know as refuge
for that stripe of man.
impasse for now, in the kitchen.
sunbeam grown dusky in its pilgrimage
pauses on the tile, caught
humming between them.
Meemaw's old interdiction walks
unease down the nape of her neck:

*don't cuss, don't sign nothing with your name
and never invite darkness into my house.*
she stands, her thanks leaden on her tongue and
white preacherman stands too, allows himself
finally
to be banished.
limp in the wake of him she wonders
how could he hide darkness
under that translucent skin?

iv. exorcism

black snake rears in her path
wiggles away
its shape means binding
lightning strike, a portent:
man is here!
he is come again, too bright
for her eyes this time and
the sun lighting up
the cross around his neck
holy silver.
he thumbs it
checking in with his god which isn't
to be found in this tangle this
kudzu hollow this swamp.
sweat dewes him again his tang
draws her close enough to see bible
transmuted to manila.
he thinks himself a hunter but
she stalks him,
cryptid in the trees

she is Wampus cat.
no lemonade this time they stand
outside on dirt and cypress needle
no milk.

he is establishment now, marble
hard with the heat of his cause, still
beautiful but no longer benign.
the paper he wields, sigil
City Registrar
of a distant seat of power
she's never seen, it
has a bad caustic white aura
stink of bleach, plastic, indoors.
it defies her to look at it.
if nothing else he has impressed her
with his determination
she hears again the scream of coffin nails
to dig deep to get his collared shirt
of righteous white
his neat trimmed nails
dirty.

and she can see now what potency
what malignant will of man
hangs around the paper.
he seeks to bind her with it, hobble
the devil of her
unseat her from her self.
I know your real name.

but she's well-ensconced now
far too late for exorcism.
they're in her domain, too
house of her mothers, seat of swamp women
and it's an old weapon he holds,
weak now with rust and her skin thicker
she spits at his feet
makes the sign of warding Meemaw taught her, says
you know no such thing. ***

The Girl with the Iron Legs



ALEX ROBERT FRANCO is a writer from Atlanta, GA. He studied literature at Bard College and the Sorbonne. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Polychrome Ink*, *Callisto*, and *Blood Bound Books*, among others.

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Once, a young Woman set out from her home. She was a Merchant and the daughter of Merchants. Many miles she travelled, on the emerald roads of Ozvax, past the weeping mountains of Pleurik, along the Boiling River to the Endless Caverns, all the way to the great sea. She was twice as strong as thrice as clever as anyone you'd ever meet. Years on the march left her with feet of stone and an iron constitution—she could walk all day with no rest on a mouthful of bread and a sip of water.

Beside the Merchant stomped a mule, behind which a cart laden with goods rattled along. Whereas the Merchant Woman had begun to grow into her vitality, the mule was leaving its behind. It dragged along, slower and slower, troubled by aging hooves. Loyal beyond station, the Merchant Woman's heart broke to see the poor beast suffer, and so set off to find a Farrier.

A quick tongue and charm aided the Merchant Woman as she searched for a craftsman of renown sufficient enough for the job. Each village boasted men and women of skill, but each fell short of the Woman's standards. One charged two fistfuls of gold for work not worth the grit beneath her nails, another seemed more interested in the buttons of her shirt than the task at hand, and a third could barely hold a hammer for want of drink. At last, she heard talk of an Ironman in the west, known for his skill in working blood iron. A complicated art, a drop from the mule, and its shoes would know no rust or ruin as long as it lived, for it was said to be unbreakable save for by its own kind, though the Woman was unsure if this meant by a weapon of similar

make or one crafted with the eponymous element from the same source.

“But be warned,” cautioned the Baker’s Wife, who had first told her of the Ironman, “his daughter is beautiful, and he will suffer no one to look upon her with desire. Go, conduct your business, and be on your way.”

This only served to whet the Merchant’s curiosity, so she set out, over hills and through forests, till she arrived on the outskirts of the Farrier’s property, nestled in the valley of a river. Thick, black clouds belched out of the back of the forge, nearly hiding his house from view. Tethering her mule, the Woman came closer. She spied a well and went to wash her face. But as she leaned over the low wall, as if from the depths, a voice came to her singing sweetly.

*My love, my darling, promise me this
A moment, a lifetime, a dance and a kiss
Never leave me, my precious, my sweet
My heart will be yours the moment we meet*

*When I saw you, I had slept
Many tears have I wept
For a dream, sweeter than waking
Hurry back, it’s escaping
Always your heart shall be kept*

The Merchant looked up from the well and followed a line in the ground to the side of the house, up which snaked a pipe, disappearing into a room on the second floor. She had heard of such innovations as indoor water, but had never seen it in all her travels. She stood staring up at the window, transformed into a sheet of gold by the afternoon light. As she watched, a cloud hid the sun, and suddenly the Merchant

saw a Girl sitting there, with hair like honey and eyes more beautiful than any she’d ever seen before. And though she could not hear her, removed from the well as she was, the Merchant watched the Girl’s mouth move over the silent syllables of her song, drunk on the flash of her tongue.

Long it had been since the Merchant left her home, and her heart ached for someone to share the road with. Of all the lovers she had known in her many travels, none had inspired in her the feelings that the Girl had with a single glimpse. She knew, with the certainty of one who has seen much, that she would marry the Girl or die with longing for her.

Forgetting the business which first brought her to the Ironman’s door, along with the Bread Maker’s wife’s warning, the Merchant knocked. As she waited, she smoothed her clothes and brushed the dust from her hair. She waited, and had just raised her fist to knock again, when the handle turned and the door swung open to reveal a great bear of a man, whose body more than filled the frame of the door, his red hair blackened with soot.

“Who,” the Farrier asked, “are you?”

“Sir,” the Merchant began with a bow, “I am a seller of wares inquiring as to the maiden upon whom my gaze fell. She is your daughter, I presume, and it being my wish to wed her, I have come seeking her hand.”

The Ironman’s mouth twisted into a foul grimace. Though the Merchant could not see beneath the coat of ash covering his cheeks, his face ruddied with rage, for he was indeed the Girl’s father, possessed of a dark, unnatural love for his daughter. Many had come to court her, and every single one, regardless of their wealth or station, had been

sent away, but not before their hopes were dashed, punishment for their presumption.

“My daughter,” he said, “cannot be wed to one unable to care for her.” The Ironman’s gaze travelled over the Merchant’s road-worn boots and dusty cloak. “By your own admittance, you are but a peddler. How could you possibly hope to provide for her?”

The Merchant pricked at the Ferrier’s tone. A traveler she was, true, but one who had supped with kings and sailed with pirates. She had beheld wonders beyond the Ironman’s imagining—the Jeweled Suns of Skarrish, the Undying Sisters, the Lakes of Gold in the Lands of Gmrrah—and return with more than a few of them. Begging his leave, the Merchant went to her cart. Fine fabrics, jewels, of these she had plenty, which could have paid a dowry ten times over, but she knew the Ironman would accept nothing as ordinary as silk or sapphires. Besides, a creature as lovely as the Girl deserved much more than gold.

From a box tucked under the seat of the cart, wrapped carefully in scarves, the Merchant pulled a brass sphere. It glinted in the sun as each measured step brought it closer to the Ironman’s scrutinizing gaze. Just as he was about to remark that such useless trinkets were not worth his time, the sphere unfolded a pair of wings.

Cupped in the palm of her hand, the Merchant held a delicate brass bird. It hopped about before taking flight, darting up to the Girl’s window. She opened it to better partake in the spectacle unfolding below. She watched and clapped with joy as the bird looped through the air. When the Merchant whistled, the bird returned, alighting on her finger. It sang like pennies in fountains, full of promise and hope. The Girl, overcome with delight, blew a kiss.

The Ironman, who had never witnessed such a marvel, blinked

in awe. Watching his daughter’s glee sobered him, and he remembered the gift’s price. He hardened his heart and stiffened his face. “Feh,” he scoffed, “you seek to buy my daughter with such baubles as this? She is beautiful, yes, but also useful. She keeps my books and cooks. A pretty toy could never capture her worth.”

The Ferrier’s refusal did not surprise the Merchant Woman. She returned to her cart and returned the brass bird to its box. From a pouch she produced a waterskin capped with a silver stopper. She took it to the well, and within sight of the Ironman, filled it. She handed it to him and told him to drink.

“And the poison hidden within? Ha!” The Ferrier threw the waterskin in the Merchant’s face. She caught it, and popping out the stopper, downed a lengthy draught. Wiping her mouth, she handed the skin back. He held it to his nose and sniffed. His eyes widened and he hurried a sip. He nearly spat in surprise. “Wine!” He poured a burgundy puddle onto the dirt. “It’s wine!”

“And so will become any water put inside.”

The Ironman licked his lips. He loved drink with a passion almost as obsessive as that for his daughter. His mind turned to money, of the coin he could earn and save with such a wonder. But a hopeful glimmer in the Woman’s eye reminded him of what was at stake. He handed back the waterskin. “My daughter is no cheap vice, and cannot be gotten with such.”

The Merchant held her breath and yoked her frustration. She returned to her cart, unhitching it from the mule, and dragged it to the Ironman’s doorstep. She opened every box, untied every knot, and laid her riches out for him to see.

“I offer all I have in exchange for your daughter’s hand.”

#

The wealth splended in the sun. The Woman had undersold herself—she possessed a fortune, a fraction of which could have set the Ironman up for life. But the dark beast of his love sunk its claws into his heart. He looked down his fat nose at her and sneered. “Your fortune is great, true, but is my daughter to be bought and sold like a sow at market? No, truly the one that shall have her will do so based on merit and courage, not material possessions.”

Now it was the Merchant’s turn to color with ire. She clenched her fists and set her shoulders, spine sword-straight. “What would you have me do? Speak and it shall be done.”

The Ferrier feared the Woman would be of this sort—cold-eyed and determined. He knew that whatever task he gave her, she would complete, even if it killed her—which was his sincere hope.

“There is a Witch,” he said, pointing over the Merchant’s shoulder. The horizon pimpled with green hills. “She rusts my metals and dulls the fires of my forge. She plays hexes on my hammers and hollows my anvils. She’s a nuisance!”

The Merchant had heard of witches, though never met one, and knew that they were generally friendly, unless provoked. It took little imagining to figure why the Witch was besotted with cursing him. “You want her to leave you be?”

“I want her dead!” Spittle flew from the Ironman’s mouth, and had his cheeks been clean, one could not have guessed where his face ended and his hair began. “Bring me her hands,” he said, wringing his, “so I know the deed is done. Only then may you wed my daughter.” And with that, he slammed the door in the Merchant’s face.

The day spent itself as the Merchant prepared. She packed a satchel and checked the knots in the mule’s harness. Long strides brought her to the foothills beyond the edge of the Ironman’s property. Overhead, the sky purpled and blued, but the glow of the Merchant’s heart lit her way, until it grew too dark even for love. The Merchant turned about herself, unsure of how to proceed, until a blot of color sprang out of the darkness.

Moving closer, the blot turned into a window, lit from within by scandalous red. As she followed it, the darkness grew into a frame of wood, a siding of a wagon, a wooden wheel firm on the ground. Tracks trailed off behind it, though she could see no horse, and it seemed unadorned, save for the solitary window and door.

The Merchant listened. She could hear a pot bubbling. Unsure of what else to do, she knocked. Her knuckles barely graced the wood before the door swung open. A figure shrouded in rags hunched in the doorway. From within the shadows, a voice rasped and rattled.

“Wwwwhat dooo youuuu wwwwant?”

The Merchant shivered as if icicles had formed on her spine. The fact that she could see no face—if the Witch even had one—only further unnerved her. The thought of her beloved gave her the courage to unglue her tongue and say, “I have been sent by the Ferrier who lives beyond these hills. He takes umbrage with your sorcery.”

A dry, rattling wheeze, like a bag of bones being shaken, filled the wagon. It was a second before the Merchant realized that the Witch was laughing. Before her eyes, she collapsed, leaving behind only a pile of rags. The Merchant prodded it with the toe of her boot.

“Would you kindly wipe your feet before trotting on my clothes?”

The Merchant jumped. From the other side of the door stepped a dark, handsome mystery, with the face of a man and the hips of a woman. A head and a half taller than the Merchant, they had a cape over their chest. Rubies dangled from their ears and their smile held a golden glint. “The Ironman sent you?” the Witch asked. “The fool, blaming his misfortunes on others. Has he sent you to kill me?”

The Merchant should not have been surprised. She was dealing with a Witch after all. At their beckoning, the Woman followed them inside and sat at their squat table. The walls were cluttered with shelves, and a small fire crackled in the hearth. Though from the outside the wagon had appeared barely larger than her cart, the Merchant marveled at the spacious interior. She accepted the Witch’s offer of tea.

“You aren’t the first,” they said, leaning forward on their elbows, “nor the last, I suspect, since I do not plan to die today.” Their studious eye crawled over the Merchant’s face, making her skin pimple and itch. “You don’t look the mercenary type, not with those arms. So why then, hmm? What’s in it for you? Do you kill out of love for the Ironman?”

She spat, despite no memory of having taken a sip. The Witch’s eyes crinkled with laughter. The Merchant wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “No,” she said, “not out of love for the Ironman.”

“His daughter then?”

The Woman hesitated, afraid to reveal too much. Witches could do nasty things with truth. But a niggling suspicion made her think the two of them were on the same side. She nodded, and the Witch leaned back to rub their hairless chin.

Without a word they sprang to their feet. They rummaged among the shelves, tossing shrunken heads and exploding vials over their shoulder. They stuffed their pockets with various sundries, darting here and there, leaving an ever-larger wake of disorder, until the Witch collapsed into their seat, flushed and grinning.

“Give me three hairs.”

The Merchant had heard enough faery tales to be suspect. “What are they for?”

“Magic, of course,” the Witch said, rolling their eyes. “Don’t you want the Ironman’s daughter?”

Her heart swelled with the thought of her butter-haired beauty. She wanted nothing more. She plucked out three hairs and gave them to the Witch. They dropped them into a soot-black pot they pulled out from under the table. Ground pig nose and nail clippings from a hound were added to the brew. Water was brought to a boil, spat in, and poured into the pot. The Witch stirred the concoction over a steady flame till it turned to syrup, which they poured into a flask.

“Rub this onto your cheeks before you approach the Ferrier’s house,” the Witch instructed, handing over the flask. “Just a little will do.”

“And this will make the Ironman’s daughter love me?”

“There’s no magic in the world that can make someone love you. Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling you rotten peaches. No, this,” the Witch tapped a painted fingernail on the flask’s stopper, “will deliver her into your arms.”

The Witch explained her plan, and readied the Merchant on her way. Before she left, they warned her. “Whatever you do—*Do not touch* the

Girl until after you've drunk the antidote."

"What is the cost of your help, Witch? You don't work magic out of love for me."

The Witch laughed their same, bone-rattling laugh. "Not love," they said, "but spite." From within their robes, they produced a blood-red vial. "Pour this into the Ironman's drink, and he shall bother me no more. That is the payment I demand." The Witch smiled wide, flashing their one tooth, all the way in the back, made of iron. "Let the Ironman see what *true* misfortune is."

#

The Ironman hammered away at a stubborn stub of red metal. Sweat stung his eyes and ran dirty rivers down his face. Soot rattled in his lungs, in time with the beating of the anvil. It was this cacophony that prevented him at first from hearing the polite knock. It grew from a quiet *tap tap tap*-ing to a firmer *rap rap rap*-ing before he went to investigate, finding a finely dressed Gentleman on his doorstep.

"Who," the Ironman asked, "are you?"

"Sir Chauvis," the Gentleman said, extending his hand. "The Third." The velvet of his coat caught the light, as did the gold on his fingers. His beard drew into a point, and the ends of his mustache curled up towards his bushy brows. "I have come to make you rich."

After some convincing, the Ironman ushered him inside. As the Ferrier poured him a drink, the Gentleman explained that he owned a mine and had recently unearthed a vein of fine ore. With a forge as renowned as his, the Gentleman assured him that they would be wealthy beyond their imagining. He proposed a partnership. The

Ironman accepted on the spot.

This called for celebration, and from his cellar the Ferrier produced a bottle of excellent vintage, which he had been saving for his daughter's wedding day. He blew off the dust and poured them each a glass. They drank another, then another, jubilant and gay. At length the Ironman went to relieve himself. When he returned, the Gentleman proposed a toast, "to our lucrative friendship," and both men drained their glasses.

Suddenly sleepy, the Ironman fell back into a chair. His head lolled atop his neck, and his eyelids grew heavy as his namesake. With a yawn, he slumped forward onto the table, and soon his belly rumbled with the gentle roar of his snores. The Gentleman stood and made his way upstairs.

The Girl gasped when the Gentleman opened the door to her room. He ignored her meager furnishings; he only had eyes for her. From her window perch, she sat and quaked. He watched her with such intensity that she would have fled had it not been for the irons on her legs. From knee to foot, they were completely encased in a blocks of three-finger-thick metal. All she could do was wait.

The Gentleman, crossing the room in two long strides, wrapped the Girl in his arms, pressed his chest against hers, and kissed her. Despite a day of cloudless skies, a thunderclap boomed overhead, shaking the house down to its foundations. Startled back into himself, the Gentleman released the Girl, flying back. From a pocket in his coat, he pulled out a small vial, the contents of which he swallowed in a gulp.

Before her very eyes, the Girl watched the beard fall from the man's face. His chest widened and his hips narrowed. His hair grew long and his face softened, until the Merchant Woman who had come calling

stood before her.

“You!” the Girl cried, “but how?”

The Merchant explained it thusly: Before arriving at the Ironman’s home, she had sprinkled a few drops of the Witch’s unction and applied them to her cheeks. The spell transformed her—temporarily—into a man. A clever lie granted her entry into the Ironman’s home. At the first opportunity, she poured a sleeping draught into his drink. Now she was free to abscond with her beloved.

“But we must hurry,” she warned, “for your father will not be long in waking. Where is the key to these irons?”

The Girl cast a mournful gaze into her lap. “There is no key. My father did not see fit to forge one.”

“Then I shall smash them.”

The Girl shook her head. “You cannot, for they are blood iron.”

The Merchant swore through gritted teeth. “Then I shall cut them off!”

Even through the haze of her anger, she could hear the Ironman stirring downstairs. With no time to look for a cleaver, the Merchant scooped the Girl into her arms. Her knees buckled as they made their way down and out the door. She arranged her in the back of her cart. Gripping the mule’s reins, they took off at great speed.

They traveled as far as moonlight would allow, but an approaching storm clouded the sky and hid the stars. They made camp, lashing canvas over the back of the cart. They lay together, huddled

close for more than just warmth. After, they tumbled into sleep.

Hoof beats, distant but growing nearer, stampeded through the Merchant’s dreams. She awoke to the patter of heavy rain against their canvas roof. Explaining her fears away, she laid her head on the Girl’s chest, only to sit up when she recognized the staccato sounds of pursuit.

Waking the Girl, she sat her in the back of the cart, and whipped the mule into haste. Though urged on by lash and tongue, the mule lagged with fatigue as firm earth gave way to thick, spoke-clogging mud, its weak hooves sucked into the mire. The wheels dragged through rivulets of sludge, their progress all but halted. In a mad attempt to lighten their load, the Merchant cast off her wares.

Their path abrupted upon a stream-turned-rapids. The Merchant spied the remains of a bridge, long since swept away by a forgotten flood. Behind them, their pursuers gained ground. Their shouting could now be heard.

“Come,” she said, taking the Girl into her arms, “we must cross.”

The Merchant waded into the water, the Girl heavy round her neck, the irons dragging against the current. The flotsam tugged as her clothes and her boots sank into the mud. The Girl whimpered as the water darkened the hem of her dress. Each step brought the stream higher up the Merchant’s legs. She shivered as her navel went under. The Girl hid her face in the Merchant’s neck. She whimpered against the Merchant’s throat. To comfort the Woman or herself, she sang:

*Oh the nights I had slept
Oh the tears I have wept
For this dream, bitter on waking
Soured at the time of my taking*

Always your heart shall be kept

Though the Woman's heart quickened, her legs did not. Each squelching step drained more of the Woman's strength, her feet sinking deeper and deeper into the riverbed. Her toes went numb, her elbows quaked and quivered. She held the Girl higher as the water rose to her chest.

Behind them, she could hear the snort and neigh of the horses, the Ironman's mad urging *faster, faster damn you, faster!* She dared a glance back. Her foot caught on a stone, the mud gave no purchase. She stumbled and sank, head plunging below the surface. The Girl clung tight to her neck.

The Merchant clawed at the water, but her diminished self could not lift the Girl's irons, heavy as stars. She pulled at the Girl's arms, but she held strong as a vice. Her hair, turned dark mustard beneath the surface, crowned her face. Then the Merchant's eyes rolled back in her head and she saw no more.

At dawn, when the storm lifted, the Girl's father scoured the river in search of her body. The Merchant's they recovered a ways down and buried in an unmarked grave, but they never found the Girl. Only her irons, empty of her legs at the bottom of the river. The Ironman mourned her greatly. He went mad with grief, and wandered off into the foothills. Even unto his death, he wept for his beloved, convinced that on stormy nights he could still hear her singing.

Listen—do you hear? No, don't listen to *me*.

Listen. ***

The Girl with the Iron Legs | Franco



THE RED FATE 2

Artist: CECILIA G.F.

Collection: THE RED FATE

for her.



ASH LIM is an engineering student by day and writer by night. Ash enjoys travelling and wandering around aimlessly. Sometimes they discover new things along the way, and usually when they least expect it. Aspires to write creative fiction about life, love, and food.

If you ever take a stroll down Angel Place—you know Angel Place, with empty birdcages strung up high above the alley, swinging and creaking gently in the breeze, and the murals that dance along the backstreet walls of shops, so vibrant they could transport you to a different time, a different place. On any occasion it carries the tart scent of wine-sauce steak, the sizzle of chips in the fryer, the teasing allure of cheese as it melts on freshly baked pizza...

But I digress.

If you ever take a stroll down Angel Place, keep an ear out for the quiet *tick tock* buried under the rumble of trains and incessant chatter of passersby. Follow it, but tread lightly, for a misstep may cause it to whisper away and leave you with nothing but your curiosity unfulfilled. With every passing, step the ticking evolves into soft music, a melody played on windchimes. The music you hear is dependent on your mood, on the time of day, on the ambience of your surroundings; on a calm night, you might hear a jazzy tune, each syncopated beat lighting a street lamp; a soothing lullaby when your exhausted feet drag down the street; or even a light, lilting tune when your heart bursts from holding the hand of the one you love.

You will know when you arrive at the source of the sound. More often than not it will be behind a dusty blue door with an odd number engraved in gold, somewhere between twelve and thirteen, but not quite either. Though there may be a display window next to the door, it is impossible to peer past its thick, yellowing glass into the darkness on

the other side. The cobwebs that droop from its corners have long been abandoned, leaving fine threads of silk that peel off with a touch of your finger.

The door opens, inviting you in.

A small bell tinkles at the door, welcoming guests into the shop. A few exposed bulbs dangle from the ceiling, bathing the room in a sunset glow. Through the dim lighting you make out a series of assorted shapes stacked on shelves, lithe figurines spinning on their axles, clockwork springs winding and unwinding themselves. Your steps echo around the shop, the *click clack* of heels punctuating the silence as you approach a shelf.

Vague silhouettes take form as music boxes, each a different shape and size. Every box is unique, from its material to its method of winding, from the designs etched on its surface to the heart it possesses. A small elliptical music box winds itself up, the couple on its metal cover waltzing to the tempo of the music, weaving between embossed silver harps. As the music comes to a halt, another one starts, the plain walnut-wood top of a box creaking open to display the mechanism hiding inside. *Libiamo ne' lieti calici* from Verdi's *La Traviata* plays, heralding scenes of ballrooms drenched in elegance, wine drunk from polished chalices; or perhaps a rowdy gentleman singing at the top of his lungs at a pub, toasting the night as he whisks his love off their feet.

You reach out to examine the box of walnut-wood further, too immersed in the world within the music box.

"Excuse me," a hushed voice interjects from behind you. "You mustn't interrupt the music boxes while they are performing."

Turning around, you meet the dark eyes of an old woman,

for her. | Lim

hunched over as she peers at you from under her wispy, graying hair. Crow's feet line the corners of her eyes, and freckles draw constellations across her face. Under her watchful gaze, you immediately withdraw your hand, bowing in apology. She makes her way to stand beside you, waiting patiently until the music comes to an end before closing its cover.

It takes a while for you to find your tongue. "How much does one cost?"

The woman smiles, cracked lips stretching wide as she shakes her head. "These are not for sale. They have been forgotten by their owners, discarded like long-gone memories, and have found their place here. However," and she gestures to the next shelf, "those are for your perusal. They cost nothing but a memory for a melody."

Following her pointed finger, you find a trove of music boxes sitting in silence. Immediately you can tell that these are not of the same quality as the previous ones. They are unfinished, unadorned except for a few rough carvings. Winding a crankshaft produces not a single sound. Confused, you turn to the old woman, but she has vanished. You cannot sense her presence—you are alone once again.

A memory for a melody. What was that supposed to mean? You pick a box at random, turning it over and over in your hands, staring at your reflection in its glossy coating, tracing the spirals etched along its sides.

A memory for a melody.

The memory of *her*.

Of her smile, the way the pinkish tinge bloomed across her

for her. | Lim

cheeks like flowers in spring as she laughed, the easygoing cackle that you loved always threatening to burst from under her shy giggles. Or the way she tucked her hair behind her ears before painting her nails, pushing her circular spectacles up with the edge of her palm while waiting for her nails to dry, leaning on you with her hands splayed in front of your book so you had no choice but to pay attention to her. The way she would brandish your full jar of money, saved up for adventures and travels across the seas and highlands and deserts and everything else in between, excitement lighting up her eyes as she leaned over to plant a kiss on your cheek, and you knew then and there that you would do anything she ever asked for because she was your world.

The memory of your world falling apart in a dreary hospital room that stank of disinfectant and death.

The memory of how she gripped your hand, knuckles turning white.

The memory of your promise to live in her stead.

You open your eyes to find yourself standing in the middle of Angel Place, wind whistling through the birdcages overhead. Your cheeks are wet; you don't remember the last time you cried. In your hand is a music box with spirals etched along its sides. You wind the crankshaft. A song spills out, soft and simple. Once upon a time you might have been familiar with the melody, familiar with how it ebbs and flows like waves upon the shore, but now it is nothing but a faint memory.

And even that memory soon fades into nothingness. ***

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Stories continue on next page.

Good Books All



CINDY PHAN has been published in *Ricepaper Magazine* and has a forthcoming short story in *Augur Magazine*.

She is an emerging writer who currently lives on the outskirts of Toronto with her partner and their tiny son.

There remained, as there always had been, a great need for books. Of that, Freda had no doubt, no qualms or second thoughts.

The value of a good book was hard to assess; the value of a good book had remained priceless, become indispensable and therefore quite incalculable. And such books as Freda had at her disposal!

Big books, small books. Literature high, low and everything in between! Heavy material, masterpieces, romps. Good stuff. Stuff to keep the mind busy, the mind working, always working.

Small books, big books. Board books, classics, great old tomes. So many books. So many words.

Hers. All hers.

Freda trembled as a current shot through her—so hot it was cold, so cold it seared her nerve endings, tingling her fingertips, buckling her knees and prickling the soles of her feet. She fought the urge to laugh because once she did, there was no telling when (or if) she'd stop. Her head lolled as her mind spun, thin and thick and in every directional which-way. She snickered and chortled, the sounds plucked roughly from her like petals from heavy-headed tulips. Swaying, she willed herself quiet, taking in great gulps of air to steady her breathing.

(Easy. Easy now.)

She smiled, panting, her mouth jagged and torn—a leer really, and a nasty one at that—and stood unmoving until the ringing in her ears faded away into the surrounding darkness.

At last, recovered, she went back to ogling the books.

So many books! Freda loved to think on them—their worth, their mysteries—when the mood struck her, as it so often did, suddenly and without warning, like so much scattershot to the back of the head. It

was *something*: Something to do. Something to while away at the great bulwark of time. There was so much of it now, such a surplus of past and present and future. . . Life unceasing. Terrible. Tremendous.

(Surely, something was better than nothing, wasn't it?)

What would it mean to approach it, the tantalizing potentiality of books? To immerse yourself in all those words and come out the other side? What then would you glimpse, if you were so inclined?

How are words fathomed? How do things mean what they say?

Which words ring true? Which books?

Any accounting for taste? Quality or quantity?

Freda teetered and tottered among the stacks as these thoughts plodded their way through her mind's eye, heart banging a staccato beat against her shrunken chest, here and there slowing a bit—*just a bit*—to run a crooked finger down a tattered spine, here and there stopping to right a sloping column of books on the brink of collapse, but all the same moving on, minding the collection, letting the beauty and grandeur of it wash over her, blunting her senses with its immensity, rendering her ecstatic with its excruciating power. She shuddered once more, straining worn muscles and taxing tired bones. It hurt good.

Yes. Books were good.

#

Freda's shuffling gait carried her around narrow, winding corridors and into the main building, a massive structure twice as wide as it was tall, with walls of exfoliated brick and shell-blasted concrete. They would have echoed, no doubt, casting Freda's footsteps about like a handful of pennies dropped down a sewer grate, were it not for the books upon books that littered the floors, which towered up to the rafters, past twisted rebar and blown-out windows, choking the air with their particulate matter.

Also, the floor was wet and mouldering, the sad result of years

of neglect and recent rainstorms that had finally broken through the exhausted patchwork that had remained of the ceiling, which peeled away under the weight of the festering damp above Freda's pale, hairless scalp. Oh, and not to mention the smell.

(The smell was horrendous.)

Still, Freda wasn't worried! Not yet. At least, not yet. She still had plenty of books! So many books to go around and around. Enough books to last *for-ever*. For always.

Well, *almost*. If only.

For as good as forever.

(Ah, but who can stop the rains?)

#

Yes, books were good.

So many uses, you would be astounded by them. Absolutely gobsmacked, as a matter of fact.

Never, ever underestimate the value of a book.

Understand.

Books could be hollowed out and made safe keepers for all kinds of wonderful things: small bones, desiccated chestnuts, rubber bands, loose screws and bullet casings. Those types of things. Exactly those kinds.

Books were good for fires! Starting them, feeding them, for light. For light, yes, and to keep the cold away, among other things. . . things that grew bold in the night. Things that spent the daylight hours in waiting, and which grew impatient as the sun inevitably slunk below the horizon, coward that it was.

Books were great fodder! They would do in a pinch for stray thoughts, idle chatter and makeshift toilet paper! Although those outrageous luxuries had long ago been deemed the frivolities of a bygone age. Even Freda knew *that*. Or, at least, that's what she remembered. Or perhaps she had been told. . . ?

Her ears pricked as something large with pointed rodent teeth scurried alongside, no doubt sizing her up as an easy target. Freda gingerly stretched out an arm and seized the nearest hardcover. A long silence then suddenly, almost imperceptibly, came the scurrying again, only this time much, much closer. A sum-sum by the sound of it, grown massive and fierce in the Subsequent, its taste for meat and its craving for bone as insatiable as ever. Freda could just picture its lumpy, misshapen body, its hideous, half-naked tail, its grasping, pink-clawed hands.

(Some things, at least, seldom changed.)

Freda closed her eyes. Vision was a great, even deadly hindrance in matters such as these. She aimed. She hurled the book, her shoulders and limbs acting as one, complete with their own, singular mind—their own, particular intention.

The book soared.

Freda opened her eyes and in an instant was rewarded with a deafening screech, followed, as always, by a clamor and a thudding and then again by that good, strong, reliable silence. She waited. She listened.

No more scurrying.

Books were excellent weapons! Nothing quite flattens a forehead or takes out an eye or knocks out a tooth like a book wielded with the proper force, like a hardcover (or a *really* thick paperback) sent home at just the right angle. Nothing quite destroys an entire world like a book!

Silence all around. Freda flexed ancient, arthritic hands. She placed them into the warmth of her tunic. She wondered where she had found it, this threadbare thing with the gummy bits at the edges that was easily two sizes too big for her, which flowed around her like a cape and dragged behind like a corpse. She hadn't made it—of that she was very sure.

(Freda made lots of things!)

She frowned.

But not this tunic. Where. . .where?

She flexed her hands again. They creaked and popped in protest. Age had turned them a translucent bluish-beige. She massaged them carefully at tender, swollen joints, grotesque things that had splayed her fingers like mangled spokes.

Then, just like that, Freda remembered.

Of course!

She had flattened many skulls, taken many eyes and caused immeasurable pain in her own time. The tunic had been—it was. . . Well, never mind. It was *hers* now, and rightfully so.

Where indeed!

She had earned it.

Where would she be if not for the books?

Freda was almost sure of it.

Of that, Freda was almost certain.

#

Maybe she should have moved on, and maybe she should have done that ages ago, Freda mused. But this place had become her sanctuary. It remained as it always had been: a repository. A fount. Home.

She was blessed. The books were her salvation.

“*Salvation?*” Freda spat out each syllable like a dried-up pit. Apricot. She certainly remembered apricots. “*Sal-va-tion,*” she repeated, the word clawing its way out of her throat, down along her vinegary tongue and past her overhanging mouth. “*Salvation,*” she cried out again. “Now *there's* a funny word.” Her eyes welled up and her lips quivered. There came the intense sensation of spiders scrambling up her nape and swarming behind her ears. There was nothing she could do.

Freda laughed, a prolonged, dry clattering thrum that doubled her over and sent her into a wheezing fit. The books absorbed her laughter.

Such a funny word!

“Salvation, salvation, salvation!” she screeched at the top of her lungs, snatching back her breath when she could. Her face twisted in rapturous glee, a parody of raw emotion. It was a rash act, complete and utter foolishness on her part, carrying on like that, worrying needlessly at the silence. And for what? Her voice sounded strange to her ears; her laughter pitiful, unfamiliar. She felt outside of herself and yet trapped, at once pulled away and stranded as if kneeling on the desolate banks of some distant, unknown shore. Her own private Paradise. Her own personal Hell.

(Hardly worth it.)

But Freda didn’t care! About the noise, anyway. Not really, not entirely. Freda liked to cut loose! She deserved to enjoy herself every now and then, to revel in such passing, blind excess.

(Yes, she did.)

She *absolutely* did.

She will remember to tell herself that later, when everything settles again and the strangers in her path are but faded, somewhat unpleasant memories.

#

The two must have been waiting for her. They must have heard her approach. She had to admit, they timed their manifestation just right. Otherwise, they might have been maimed, broken, or dead by her hand. Or worse, and perhaps even better than that.

(Oh well.)

Slowly, gently, Freda let her arm drop to her side. In it, she gripped the book. A thin volume this time, but not to be underestimated. It would cut through the air very nicely indeed.

“Hello,” said the first, a Sharp-Eyed Thing, acknowledging Freda with the barest deference as it peered down at her.

“Hello,” said the second, but softly, faintly, almost as if against

its own will. Freda spared the thing a glance. A Scrawny Thing to be sure, rooted behind the first Thing, its head bowed low.

Quite the pair, the two. Quite the statement they made, standing there before her, blocking her path with their sad tableau of want and misery.

Yes. . .thing number two was really a very scrawny little thing, all ash-gray skin and turned bones and matted, mousy brown hair. It was bent queerly at the hip, as if it had forgotten (or was just remembering) that it must needs stay on two legs rather than crouch down to four.

Thing number one, the Sharp-Eyed Thing, was tall and lithe, ever watchful, bobbing and weaving its oblong head to track each and every move Freda made. The head came forward as Freda leaned back. It tilted to the left as Freda shifted to the right. It matched an erratic beat she deployed, without warning, from her hips. Such a trifling, vile thing it was, toying with her like that!

“Have you come to play, then?” Freda said at last. She brought the book under her chin and tapped its solid, reinforced corners with her thumbs. “Are you good Things?”

“Please—” began the Scrawny Thing.

“We saw the books,” interrupted the Sharp-Eyed Thing, its head keeping easy time with Freda’s movements, its body stock still. “We *assumed*,” said the Thing, cocking its head to one side, then the other, glaring at her with bright, shining pupils black as sin. Freda was stuck with an image: a great serpentine bird. Those had not yet perished. Those she saw by the black river where she collected mollusks (which had survived, had in fact *thrived* when most other creatures had long since died out)—the hairy ones with the thick, knotty shells and big, fat feet for tongues. She wondered, *Could they dance? Did they?*

(Such thoughts swirling in her mind!)

“Ah,” was all Freda said.

“We assumed,” repeated the Sharp-Eyed Thing, taking a step forward, the brazen, defiant little Thing. Predator bird! *Terrible* lizard. Dinosaur.

And yet. Freda dropped her arm, abruptly this time, without any ceremony or pretense. “Ah, yes. Yes, I see,” she replied. “Yes, yes. Of course.”

The memories were fleeting and dim, but she recalled them well enough. There had been others, so many others, who *assumed* before, who knew about them, the books, and sought them out. What was, after all, two more wayward souls in this dead and ever-dying world? Just two more. . .

The books. Her books.

The realization that there might be still others gnawed at the pit of Freda’s stomach for a brief moment before she forced that dreadful scrap of truth away. Not now.

Later.

(And later’s not now! Heeeeeeee!)

Freda let the book fall to the floor, suddenly very bored and very tired. *Exhausted*, actually, was the word. Or was that exasperated? Freda wasn’t sure, couldn’t recollect just then which was which, exactly. *Affect and effect. Their, there, they’re. Its, it’s, it is.*

(Well. Never mind.)

“Well, indeed, never mind! Well, then. Well, *indeed*, then. Come along,” Freda said, gesturing for the things to follow, not bothering to look back to make sure that they did.

#

She fed them the sum-sum, fat and greasy, which they ate gratefully and, save for the usual noises of eating a rare meal as fast as possible with their hands and mouths, in ravaged silence.

Freda watched them eat. They were sloppy, yet precise, getting good mouthfuls of flesh into their bellies while smearing blood, *so much blood*, simply everywhere; on their faces, on their wrists and up their arms, inevitably sending bits of sum-sum flying across the floor.

Freda pursed thin lips. No big loss on her part. No great sacrifice!

She still had a cache of mollusks hidden deep inside a very robust *Anna Karenina*. She sniffed the air and waited. As they hurriedly finished off the meal, eagerly picking the last of the meat from the bones and greedily sucking out what remained of the precious marrow, Freda rose and lit a fire to warm them. Freda, after all, prided herself on being a most excellent host! Not that these two were welcome. Not that they had been invited.

(Far from it.)

But such was her lot in life, she supposed, to host *such* uninvited and *most* unwelcome guests. Company’s company, and who was she to argue the point?

“Thank you,” said the Scrawny Thing as it sat itself at the fire’s edge. The flames burned a dull yellow-orange-yellow-orange and reflected nothing of the Scrawny Thing’s gaze. Its companion remained some distance away. Freda saw the firelight briefly surge and then watched as it struggled to lick the fine edges of Sharp-Eyed Thing’s ornithological face. She noticed how the Sharp-Eyed Thing had moved so that it squatted with its back against the wall, where it waited, daring her to make the next move. Said nothing and waited, scowling at her.

A familiar ache spilled across the roof of Freda’s mouth and rushed into the back of her skull, slamming so forcefully at its base she nearly recoiled. It hurt so good. The urge to kick and punch, to bite and tear and rip, rend and *smash* threatened to overwhelm her. She very nearly let it.

(So close! And yet.)

Freda watched the fire, appearing to doze. The Scrawny Thing whimpered and rocked itself gently. The fire sputtered and spat.

“Har-le-quin,” intoned the Sharp-Eyed Thing, as if muttering to itself, though of course, it wasn’t. Freda clenched her jaw, caught herself, relaxed. *Harlequin* wasn’t a word that was just out there, waiting to be picked up. Words didn’t do that, not anymore.

But rather than acknowledge the challenge, rather than indulge the furor that electrified the crooks and crannies of her ruined spine,

Freda released her hands from the tunic and rested them gently behind her, leaning back on the dirt-smearred floor on which they all three sat. Something heavy slicked over her hand like a salve as it passed, leaving a thick trail of slime in its wake, but still she did not flinch.

“Oh? You know what they say, then,” Freda said at last.

“Some,” replied the Sharp-Eyed Thing, standing slowly, inch by appalling inch, until it loomed, stood poised and proud and ready, as if to strike at a frog under the bulrushes. As if to dig its greedy beak in after *Freda’s* mollusks!

“N-not m-me,” squeaked the Scrawny Thing, trembling as it huddled by the dispirited fire. It drew up its knobby knees to its chest, trying (and failing) to hide its wretched face behind them. Freda noticed the tears in its eyes and then promptly forgot them.

The Sharp-Eyed Thing also ignored its companion. “Those books, the ones you are feeding to that fire. Some of them say *harlequin*.”

Freda said nothing. She casually flicked her fingers at the wrist, sending a dollop of errant rodent fat into the fire, which erupted, devouring the unexpected morsel.

The Sharp-Eyed Thing went on: “All these books. Such knowledge, such power. Yours,” The Sharp-Eyed Thing clicked its tongue, a series of quick **click-click-clicks**. “All yours?” it continued (**click-click-click**). “I want. . .” it began, but let the rest hang in the fetid air around them.

Click-click-click

Was this diplomacy? Freda didn’t think so.

“I want.”

A snatch of something came unbidden to Freda’s crumpled mind: Through me you go into a city of weeping; *through me you go into eternal pain; through me you go amongst the lost people.*

Freda quickly shrugged off the pain of those half-remembered words. Best not to dwell. Best not to give anything away.

“Lots more where these came from,” she said instead, with a

practiced, sidelong glance. It was the truth (sometimes it was best, it was good, Freda had learned, to lead with the truth). These books were copies, copies amongst copies. Reprints. Variants, etcetera. Freda had no notion of where the originals could be, if they even existed anymore. How to trace that? Verify? Confirm?

(Why bother?)

More questions, more searing pain.

Freda tore viciously into a careworn edition she had grabbed at random (the cover was of a bare-chested, mustachioed gentleman gazing rapaciously at the semi-conscious woman he was cradling like an infant in his shiny, bulging, anatomically impossible arms). Freda blinked, looked quickly down and then back up again, keeping in mind the Sharp-Eyed Thing. Its mouth gaped under enormous eyes and jagged cheekbones.

Freda tossed the pages of the forgotten romance roughly into the flames, then ripped off the cover, sending it right along with them. She watched as the man burned, the fire more than satisfied. She threw a look at the Sharp-Eyed Thing.

Shut up, it said. For your own good, little Thing. Do it for your own good.

“Don’t,” pleaded the Scrawny Thing. But the Sharp-Eyed Thing went on, eyes darting from book to book, cover to cover and spine to spine, picking out the very best words, claiming them for itself and discarding the rest like a stunted litter of purebreds.

Click-click-click

Nothing else to be done about that. Enough’s enough.

Freda was nimble, Freda was quick.

“I want—” began the Sharp-Eyed Thing again even as Freda moved. A short burst of speed and a little extra strength was all that was required. It hurt, and it would hurt a lot more later and Freda knew that—in her frenzy she could yet feel her body scream in agony, every bit of her alight in excruciating pain—and welcomed it.

The books, the books!

The Sharp-Eyed Thing had made a critical error: it forgot about the books.

Columns and columns of precariously balanced books, piled high, thrown up like a crushed wave all around them. Big mistake. Big, bad mistake.

(Poor Thing. Poor little Thing.)

Freda hit the closest column with her shoulder. It fell forward, hitting the others, collapsing them, and then others and more. She picked up books with both hands and launched them, one after another after another, at the Poor, Doomed, Wretched Thing.

Freda whooped and hollered, cackled and shrieked as she hurled herself amongst the books, clawing at the columns, toppling the stacks. She heaved the books until there were no more at hand, until her body gave out and she fell, gripping her sides with all the strength she had left in her. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, her legs and arms fused to her body, and for that brief moment, as she abandoned consciousness and plummeted into depths unknown, as she shivered and sputtered, she lost track of it.

A cascade of books. An unassailable avalanche of paper and leather and plastic and parchment! A crushing salvo of texts, manuscripts and unread, untold tomes! They rained down in impenetrable, pitiless sheets, heedless of their own destruction and without regard to those standing below. And yet Freda remained.

Someone screamed. There was screaming.

“Witch!”

So much screaming.

Books made wonderful disasters!

#

When it was over, Freda, battered and bruised, collected what was left of herself and approached Thing Two. Her head throbbed. Her mouth tasted of copper and bile. Already she could feel the places

where the damage had become irreputable, the parts of her that, after today, would not ever heal. It never hurt so good—never had she been driven to such agonizing bliss.

The books.

There had been a moment as they fell, just an instant before they touched ground that Freda awoke in the dream.

In that moment of perfect clarity, she glimpsed it, the words—words within words, *those singular words*, remaking themselves, undoing the world—and knew their glory and felt their presence; knew what she might gain and what she had lost, and she knew that she was supremely, utterly, unerringly grateful.

And never had she been so afraid.

#

It cowered in a far corner, hiding behind a small wall of musty, dime-store paperbacks. Freda had seen the books quiver.

“*Well?* And you?” she said, her voice ragged. She wasn’t going to wait for an answer. She picked up a book, a particularly thick volume with the letters **H-L-Y** and **B** still visible, and held its gold-gilded edges at the ready.

“No! Sal-sal-sal. . .va-tion,” pleaded the Scrawny Thing’s snot-covered, tear-stained face, a mask come painfully alive.

Freda froze in her tracks. “*What?* What is it, the thing you said just now?”

“Please, *sal-va-tion*, please!”

“Where? Where did you learn such a thing?” Freda hissed. The book drooped slightly in her hand (later she would berate herself for her inattention).

“I—it was *you*. You said it. Before. I *heard* you say it,” cried The Scrawny Thing.

“Me?” whispered Freda. “*Me?*”

“Please. I heard you! Please, please, please! You said it. I

remembered. I need—! You need—!”

Freda thought of apricots. She bit her lower lip with her remaining front teeth and decided. Fair’s fair.

“Be gone by dawn, no later. Earlier, if you dare.”

“Oh, oh, thank you. T-thank--Thank you!” cried Scrawny Thing, barely able to utter the words through its mess of tears and choked-off sobs.

“Stay out of my sight,” ordered Freda.

The Scrawny Thing nodded frantically, then ran off. At least, it *scampered* off, on four limbs as much as two. Freda noted the direction in which it vanished. She would not go there until the morning.

But she knew the Thing would be gone before daylight, and then she would be alone once more with her beloved books. All they could ever be was hers, to do with what she must--what she could. She would carry on, despite herself. It was too much. It was more than enough.

Freda sighed and nodded into the silence.

Yes, books were good.



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Seeding



KELSEY DAY is a young writer studying at Emerson College. Her work has appeared in literary journals such as *The Emerson Review*, *Stork Magazine*, and the North Carolina Poetry Society. She was awarded first place in the Serendipity Literary Agency's 2018 Discovery Contest. You can read more of her work at www.kelseydays.com

Someone is unplugging the trees.
I got the call this morning. The voice was smeared over the phone, ice black and crawling with static, someone is unplugging the trees, it's serious, really serious, we need you out there, now.

I am standing in a sea of dark metal. The trees go on for miles, following the arch and pull of the mountains, softly humming. Or they're supposed to be humming. They're supposed to be flickering with light and turning their engines, drinking through their cords, giving us oxygen.

But the trees surrounding me are dark. Silent. I press my hand against one. The metal bites my palm, cold. I run my fingers down the base, feeling for the cord, but it's been ripped out. Charred at the entrance. What the hell is this?

I stand up straight, skin prickling. The forest is silent. But I can see further out, the horizon of lights sweeping into blackness, the shards of yellow popping into smoke. I rub my nose. Consider checking other trees. I mean, Jesus, what am I supposed to do? My feet are killing me. I didn't have time to take my pills this morning. But I have to keep moving. I've got to try to stop this.

So I start jogging down the mountain.

The trees are stationed in even rows, so I don't have to worry about slamming into one. I just pick a path and go. The dark feels like it's breathing. It slimes down my neck and wheezes under my arms. I run the way I was trained to, with long strides and unclenched hands, eyes straight ahead even

though it's too dark to see.

I make it about half a mile before the pain is too much.

The ground slides away and my knees hit the dirt and the dark heaves over my shoulders. There's a fault line squeezing up my foot, screaming and screaming. I scramble to untie my shoe, hands trembling, and rip my foot free. The sock is bulging. I pull it off, shaking, almost crying, and there it is—a wishing flower, half-crushed and swaying, rooted in my big toe.

Deep breaths. Counting. *God*, it hurts. One, two, three. In, out, one-two-three, *God*, one, in, out, two-three, in, out, out, out.

Something rattles behind me.

My head jerks up and every muscle clenches. I can hear my heartbeat, feel it pulse in my big toe. Something rattles again, closer this time. I close my hand around the wishing flower. Slowly. *God*, I don't want to do this. I give it a slight tug and feel it all the way to my stomach. One, two. In, out. The dark holds its breath. I fight back the guttural resistance. The pang in my spine. And one, two, three, *pull—*
(OH GOD OH GOD OH *GOD*)

Light flashes open like a wet mouth and the wishing flower falls from my hands and I see her hunched, holding a power cord.

“Hey!” I yell.

She doesn't look up. I force my shoe back on, squinting against the pain.

“Hey!” I say again. “This is federal property. Put your hands over your head!”

She pauses at this. My hands lock around my holster.

“I'm gonna tell you one more time,” I say. “Put your *hands—*”

She turns around. Tilts her head. And I realize I know her.

“Over your head,” I say.

Or I know her kind, at least. She has sockets instead of eyes, with netting pulled over the outside. But the sockets aren't empty. They are full of seeds.

A lantern dangles from her hand. She sets it down, slowly.

“I am armed,” I say loudly. My knees are aching from the fall. I can hear the seeds rattling in her eye sockets. “You are trespassing on federal—”

She raises her hands to the air.

“Thank you,” I say, then I wish I didn't. Why should I thank her for following the law?

I limp over to her, unlocking a pair of handcuffs. The metal glimmers against the hazy lantern light.

“Hands, please,” I say.

She holds them out to me.

I close the handcuffs over her wrists, but they won't snap shut—they're being stubborn for some reason, and my knees feel like they're splitting, and she knows, I know she knows because she's looking down at them.

“Just stay still,” I say.

She does as she's told but doesn't look up from my knees. *God*, I must look pathetic. Like an old man. What the hell is wrong with me? The handcuffs clank shut.

“All right,” I say. “All right. I'm taking you with me. Are you working with others?”

She doesn't say anything. She just keeps looking at my knees. And I try not to, I really try not to, but it hurts, and I've got her secure, so I look down too.

The knees of my pants are bulging.

Shock shoots through me and I yell, fall backwards—

it was supposed to be my feet, just my feet, the treatment was supposed to contain it, it couldn't be in my knees too, it couldn't be but—

I tear my pants up to my thigh and oh my God, it's there, a daisy this time, and it's shivering in the uncertain light.

Something smashes. The lantern. I whip around and there it is, cracked on the ground and leaking light, and oh my God where did the woman go? I stare around. Nausea slurs up my throat—*how could I be so stupid?* But then I hear something: I hear her rattling. The seeds in her sockets and metal around her wrists. I take off running.

The trees watch me in cold silence. The metal forest smells acrid and its smoke itches in my eyes, but I don't stop running. Where is she? Is she the only one? There must be more. A whole group of the Eyeless. I've heard of their revolts before. Have they been hiding here, in the metal forest all this time? Why are they unplugging the trees? Don't they know it'll kill us? I know that they're angry, they never approved of this, but I thought—

Pain shoots up my hip bone. I press my hand into my skin, try to hold back the root, but it's there, I know it's there, and now I feel it in my shoulder. My neck. My collarbone. I can't hear the woman rattle anymore. I can't hear anything over the sound of my own breath. The smoke laughs into my mouth and the trees flicker out and it's getting harder and harder to breathe.

I have to stop running. My lungs feel like they're full of June bugs. Thick and writhing: I wrench to a halt, hands on my knees, and heave until I'm sick. Seeds spill out between my teeth. Spray out of my nose. There's a rose clawing out of my collarbone.

"Help!" I scream.

I hear rattling again. Louder this time. I cough seeds into my hands. The trees are dark for miles.

"Help! *Please!* PLEASE SOMEONE HELP ME!"

My walkie-talkie is dead. I yank at the rose, tear forget-me-nots from my ribcage. And as I am crouched there, ripping my skin apart, spitting seeds, the rattling surrounds me.

A hand touches my back. Dark shapes emerge from behind the unplugged trees.

"Please," I gasp. "Please—"

Countless women fall into a circle around me. None of them have eyes. They stand, and they watch me.

"The trees—are you—this is federal—I am armed—please—put your hands in the—"

A spasm bursts through my chest and I heave, seeds raining to the ground.

They just look at me. One of them steps forward and takes a handful of my vomited seeds. She tucks it into her pocket.

"Please," I say. "The trees. Why are you unplugging—don't you know we need the—the trees, we—oxygen—please—we can't—kill the trees—"

And they don't say anything, but they look at me, and under their eyes shame rolls through me, wave after wave, because they know. Because I know. Because all of us, every person still alive, knows, that we've done it already. The trees are gone. They have been gone for decades. Our forests are machinery. Tears burn my eyes. My neck bursts with a new growth.

"I'll help you," I say. "I'll do anything—please just—just help me—"

Another woman, the one I know, with the handcuffs, steps forward. She reaches down and takes a handful of my

spilled seeds. Rubs them between her fingers. I choke, cough,
feel razor heat down my spine.

“I’ll help you,” I say again.

She looks down at me. At the parasitic flowers,
stealing my body. At the seeds writhing in my spit. And I can
see from the tilt of her sockets, from the angle of her chin,
that she knows, she *knows* that I am going to die.

Finally, she speaks.

“No, thank you,” she says. “You are doing enough
already.”

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Stories continue on next page.

newworldorder



Hailing from west Appalachian farm country, **BEN KLINE** lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, writing poems and telling stories, drinking more coffee than might seem wise. His work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Okay Donkey*, *Theta Wave*, *Chelsea Station*, *Homology Lit*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Screen Door Review*, *Impossible Archetype*, *8 Poems*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Risk Magazine*, *petrichor*, *Riggwelter*, *Grist Online*, and many more. You can read more at www.benkline.online.

I spin young & baby blue
like the star designated S0-102

boomeranging into its five years in ten hours
orbit all the way through

my arthritic merlot years
faster than the other identified stars I know
orbiting Sagittarius A.

I teeter into proximity, sycophancy
oh so grandly on both sides of
those very good people

waving/smirking/lurking away
from my elliptical state, passing asteroids,
quark ponds, other alien debris

& languorous S8 way out on
their apoapsis, dodging

S14 & their impossibly opaque
ideas about the future as

another version of
our colonized past, as if

When I Recall



RACHAEL QUISEL does her best writing crouched around a campfire, on bathroom breaks while backpacking, and in her head while she's running along the California coast. In previous incarnations, Rachael wrote proclamations on behalf of a US Governor, on-demand haikus, and disaster response SOPs for the American Red Cross. She's had articles published in magazines, newspapers, and professional blogs and some claim to have received suspiciously human-like letters from her cat, Apollo. She lives out her fantasy of being a Hogwarts student by pursuing a Creative Writing and Literature Master of Liberal Arts degree at Harvard University Extension School.

If somewhere in the universe
Some planet, identical to ours, exists
And on that place stands our equals
In height, in weight, in all designs
Then your clone is mine, my love.

Perhaps, on that distant rocky outcrop,
Gripped in the maw of space,
All mistakes may be rectified,
All wrongs set right.

Should I traverse the galaxy
To land upon that lovely little stone
This time I would hold you close
This time I would keep you near.

When I recall how Earth's gravity
Kept me from flying after you;
I will remember, that somewhere,
Your light still burns with waiting.

I lost you to my night but
I seek you in its stars.

Delivered



MICHAEL CURSIO is an emerging queer writer born and raised in Toronto, Canada. A graduate of Humber College's School for Writers, he placed second in the 2016 NYC Midnight Short Story Competition, received an honorable mention in the final round of the 2018 NYC Midnight Short Story Competition, and has written for the CBC Comedy online series "That's What Sheena Said." Michael has several stories in competition currently, as well as a novel in progress and a television series in development. When not writing, he naps.

You've ordered Sunday dinner from Souvlaki X-Press for the last year and a half. Lamb, extra potatoes, hold the tzatziki. Stuffed grape leaves to start, baklava for dessert, and a can of Diet Coke. Once you got regular by accident, but you didn't say anything. Shoes on hardwood, steps taken quickly. Door opens, your gold irises glowing under lush black lashes. You're already smiling.

"Find the place okay?"

The same joke every time. I mirror your pleasure, pretend it's my own.

"Yes, Mr. Chamoun."

"Please, call me Adam."

You reach out to take your order. Graceful hand, manicured and undecorated. This time, for the first time, I move a finger to make contact with yours. You blush.

"I've never asked you your name," you say.

"My serial number is XG-450-777."

"That's not a name."

"It's not customary to name us."

"I see."

You glance downward and pull your hand away.

"What name would you give me?" I ask.

You look me over. Eyes black, hair black, lips too pink. I tilt my head to the left so the light streaming from your apartment catches my features just so. Cheeks high and round, jaw sharp but not enough to cut. The right height to be inviting, designed meticulously to please.

“You remind me of someone I knew once,” you say.
“His name was Luke.”

“Luke,” I repeat. “I like that.”

You smile again.

“Can you come in? I mean, do you need to get back right away or are you allowed to linger?”

“I have an hour window before I’m required to return to the store. Fraternalizing isn’t permitted beyond the usual pleasantries though.”

“Oh.”

“But I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Your apartment isn’t large, but the way you use the space is well-thought-out. Clean lines, smooth surfaces. A leather sofa in espresso sits on a midnight-blue rug. I run my fingertips along the cushions as I walk around it, sense the once-living hide tanned and treated and stretched over generous padding. I pause here. One two three four. Let you take me in when you think I’m not looking. Five six seven eight. A click in my head when I know you’re done with the view. I keep walking. Your walls feature photos of people caught in intimate moments. The colors are rich. Saturated. Alive.

“I took those,” you say.

“You’re a photographer?”

“That’s what I tell myself. These days most people can take a decent picture just by blinking those damned OpTix implants at something pretty, but you can’t get to the truth of someone like that. You need to understand what lies beneath a person, grasp their interior. I pretend I have that.”

I nod.

You move to stand beside me. I catch the retreat of your hairline, the corners of your eyes unweaving into wrinkles. You wear the passage of time on your skin along

with the scent of almonds and mint. Men like you would visit me often. Dozens. Hundreds. Only some of them kind. They were supposed to have wiped their faces from my consciousness when we were all decommissioned, but they float back to me when I’m not supposed to be dreaming. And here you are now while I’m awake. Online. A blend of the two. Maybe you’re different, maybe you’re the same. We’ll find out soon.

My fingers lace with yours. Your breath catches.

“I didn’t think you’d be warm,” you say to me.

You step back, walk through the door on the far side of the main living space. A light flicks on, then off. You return with your camera, sleek silver machine cradled in your arms. I trace with my eyes where its plastic and metal presses into your flesh. For the briefest moment I become jealous. I’m more like it than I am like you. Will you love me more or less?

“Be natural,” you say.

The shutter whirs, the flash fills up the shadows. Twice more. I undo the top button of my uniform, then the second and third. My mouth wets with something meant to mimic saliva, but sweeter. There are notes of citrus in it, though I’ve never eaten an orange or a lemon in my life. You aim again, fire, and I imprint on your memory card.

A red light blinks in my eyes, unseen by you. The half hour warning.

“I have to go.”

“Is it okay if I keep these photos?”

“You wouldn’t ask that of a piece of furniture. Same goes for me.”

“You’re not furniture.”

You see me out, dinner going cold on a table for two.

Mr. Moustakas only allowed the minimum four-hour recharge each evening, but we’ve been permitted six since his daughter took over. She talks to us sometimes too, never ever hits us. I complete my final delivery at midnight and return to the restaurant. Ms. Moustakas

guides me into my station with the click of the power cord, then secures XD-644-151 and XF2-903-882 to theirs. A few pleasant words about how busy the day was and what a good job we've been doing. Thoughts said out loud meant for herself, but spoken in our vicinity to make her feel less alone. Less like she owns us. She inserts a flat white card into the security panel near the door and a blue band of light haloes our waists, shuts down sensation below the neck. XD-644-151 and XF2-903-882 lose consciousness immediately. I mime the same. Ms. Moustakas completes her sweeping, sets the alarm, and goes.

At three in the morning I spot you in the front window. Circle the building, find the backdoor with the unmechanized lock. You do your best to force it open, make a lot of noise in the process. My eyes shut. A sting in my temples follows. I float my consciousness into the wireless network humming through the silent restaurant. I enter the central system and locate the alarm. Prospective sequences run through my mind until I land on the correct set of eight.

I deactivate the alarm right as you burst into the room.

"Luke?"

"I'm here."

You find me in the darkness. You've worn a balaclava and black turtleneck, just like in the movies. You pull the fabric from your face.

"I've come to break you out."

"I know."

You jump when you notice XD-644-151 and XF2-903-882.

"What about them?" you ask me.

"They can't come."

"Why?"

"Older models. They don't have the capabilities."

"I see."

"Would you undo my restraints? The keycard is in the top left drawer of that desk."

You locate the card and insert it into the security panel. Blue lights flicker off. Warmth and feeling in my limbs. I pull the power

cord from my head, roll it up, and remove it from the wall socket. I take a canvas delivery bag from the nearby shelf and stuff the device inside.

"Ready to go?" you ask me.

"One more thing."

I lead you to the kitchen. I take a knife from the woodblock on the counter and hand it to you, unbutton the shirt of my uniform and guide your hand to my stomach. I rest the knife tip an inch above my navel.

"Make an incision here. You'll find a small chip a few centimeters below the surface. Remove it."

"What?"

"The chip acts as a tracking device. It can also be remotely activated to induce an emotional desire to return to this location if I stray too far. Additional insurance for my owners. Very expensive. My programming won't permit me to harm myself, so I can't do it on my own."

"Will you feel pain?"

"Yes."

You meet my eyes. There are tears there, apprehension. You aren't afraid, you just don't want to hurt me.

I move the knife aside. I take your face into my hands and dry your eyes with my thumb.

I kiss you.

"My body will heal," I tell you when our lips part.

You open my skin and dig in the steel. I don't cringe, don't whimper or cry out. You find the chip and widen the wound to make space for its exit. It falls to the floor with a delicate clink. I crush it with my foot.

You seem surprised I don't bleed.

We run under streetlights to your apartment. I slip into your spare pair of blue jeans while you pack a bag for the both of us, then stash the balaclava and turtleneck under your mattress. You lend me

an old sweater and a faded baseball cap, clothes you've had forever but I've never seen you wear. You grab your toothbrush from the bathroom, pull out a second from the medicine cabinet, look at it, slightly used by someone who wasn't you, decide to put it back, pick it up again and stuff it in your bag. At the last second you remember your camera.

We board a train going east into the sunrise.

Your uncle's cabin deep in the woods. Three rooms—one to bathe, one to sleep, and one to do everything else. A hand-crafted dining table with a thousand scratches and knicks from dinners and breakfasts and board games and puzzles. An ancient LED television loaded with hundreds of movies from before the virtual reality days. There are photographs on every wall, every shelf. Images of you as a child, your mother and her sister, your uncle and your father, grandparents, cousins, neighbours. The photographer is someone else at first, but you eventually take over and everyone glows a little brighter. A handsome man looks lovingly into your lens in some, then he's gone.

There's cedar in the air. Despite the early summer warmth, you light the wood stove.

"Do you like it?" you ask.

"I do."

"How's your stomach?"

I lift the sweater to show you. My skin is seamless.

"Incredible."

"Touch it."

Your fingers extend, land where a scar ought to be. I put my hand on yours and lead it under the fabric to the center of my chest.

"Thank you, Adam."

Later, I hold you in bed. I watch your eyelids drop into sleep, see the satisfaction on your face. It's what I was originally designed for after all, why I feel pain and pleasure, why I think and speak and give off heat. Night following night following night, bodies so like mine but more real. Legally speaking. Whispering secrets across pillows or

drying tears on my close-enough-to-skin or hands striking my cheek or wrapping around my neck or digging into my chest. No blood, no bruises, only relief. The tech always advancing, simulating, blurring. A step too far and the legislation changed. The conversations about what to do with us if we weren't fulfilling fantasies—should we be put to work or put out of our misery, would it even count as killing? In the end they found other uses for us. Humane, mundane uses. We couldn't want for more. We couldn't want at all.

At the base of my sightline, the red light blinks.

I close my eyes, search deep, run my mind in and out of myriad data streams and electric channels. It takes time, but I hone in on the source. I slip through a firewall and find a camera attached to a computer. I activate it. A woman, mid-forties, her OpTix alight with information. She manipulates the touchscreen of the computer through which I view her. Familiar from a long ago life, kisses and caresses and closed-door cruelties. A lover turned hunter. A man stands nearby, tired and balding, coffee sipped by thinnest lips. Also once a patron, also now trying to put me back in my place.

"Any luck?" he asks.

"Tracking device is offline, but I've accessed a map application from its old programming. Should have location services turned on in a sec."

"Good work, detective."

"Thank you, sir."

I return to my own mind. Climb the light down into me, swirl through ribbons of code until I'm within a part of myself I've never visited before. That ache builds in my temples again. Slowly, an object forms in the murk. A globe, intricate and complete. Buildings and services and so many roads. Paths to and from, routes taken or not. Intertwining and splitting and suturing once more at a blinking red dot.

Me.

I seize every street, every kilometer traveled, every pin and point

and swing of the compass needle. There is a satellite too, a beam from above piercing my skull. I pull it all away, drag the data to a black pit and rip them to shreds. Deleted.

“Shit,” I hear the woman say. “I lost it.”

I emerge from within myself. I plug my charger in and join you in sleep.

We have a total of sixty hours together. We hike backwood trails, swim in rivers you name for their speed or their calm or the greenery on their banks. We listen to records you haven’t heard in ages. You ask me questions about my own life, then remember who I am. You don’t believe me when I tell you I’m twenty-one.

“How old do I look?” I ask.

“That’s the thing. You actually look twenty-one. I thought you’d be a lot older, or a lot younger.”

“I’ve always looked this age and I always will. You just came around when my design and my reality were in sync.”

“Lucky me.”

You take as many pictures of me as you can. Under trees, beside rocks you think have a nice shape. On the second afternoon it rains. You capture the water as it washes over my shoulders and down my back. You teach me how your camera works and I take your portrait. I weave a wreath from dandelions and crown you with it. You laugh and lift me up. You tell me you never want this to end. You tell me you’re in love. Lines from the films you love, scenes acted out from the fantasies you built within yourself from what the world promised love would be. This is what my patrons would do with me in that other life, but with you I pretend they come from a distinct place, that we’re making them true together, that they cascade from me into you and vice versa. That we are a garden.

Then, a siren.

You tell me to run.

We make it far enough into the woods to give them trouble. You know the way and you’re surefooted, insisting that we travel through

the river so they won’t be able to track us. Once again like in the movies, never mind that they don’t have dogs. We come across a canoe lying on the riverbank and launch it against the current. We paddle hard, your face so full of hope and desperation. For a minute I nearly believe this will work.

But there is no chase sequence, no neck-and-neck race over the water. We are overtaken in an instant.

I’m pulled from the canoe by the same balding man I saw through the computer screen. He drags me to a featureless white van. Another officer is handling something, a cord and plug wrapped up carefully in a plastic bag. My charger will return with me to my owner. Of course it had its own tracker too, just in case.

You begin to shout.

“I was setting him free!”

“He’s not a tool!”

“He has a mind!”

“Luke!”

I’ve only been put into hibernation mode three times in my life. It’s not against the law to do so in extreme circumstances. There’s no pain to it, though it looks quite violating to those who see it happen. They restrain me first, then the same woman who tried to hack my system the day before inserts a small cylinder into the port in the back of my head. My mind and body separate, but I’m still aware of my surroundings. I go limp.

You see this. You scream no. You try to reach me, but are held back. You elbow one of the officers in the face and manage to break free. As I am loaded into the vehicle, you charge. An officer draws his pistol and tells you not to move. You don’t listen.

I watch the doors close to the sound of gunfire.

Immediately after my recapture, I was brought to a facility where I underwent a procedure to purge the rogue programming that had inexplicably developed within my central processing system. They wanted to study me, explore further, understand the potential

ramifications of such an anomaly, but Ms. Moustakas had work that needed doing and was eager to have me back. They installed a new tracking device as well, one that's buried much deeper. Ms. Moustakas wouldn't let me go beyond the front counter for my first year after the incident, but XF2-903-882 was hit by a truck on one of his deliveries and decommissioned. I have most of his routes now, though I'm still not allowed out after dark.

And so at night while I'm locked into my new recharge station with reinforced bonds, bathed in a blue light that renders me motionless, I remember us.

You and me.

You.