

**WRITERS 4 UTOPIA**

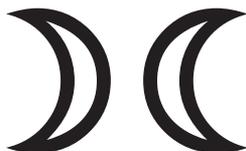
**PRESENTS**



**CYCLES**

**AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER SCI-FI**  
**THE THIRD ISSUE**

The Writers 4 Utopia Collective operates on the Unceded Coast Salish Territory of the Sto:lo, Musqueam, Skwxwú7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. As creators, it is essential to understand the spaces we occupy and the effect of our presence. We recognize that this acknowledgement doesn't begin to address or make reparations for the hundreds of years of violence and continued violence perpetrated on this land.



This zine is also available in eBook version.  
<https://writers4utopia.wixsite.com/zine>

# Introduction

Sometimes when I despair about the rise of fascism and environmental catastrophe and pipelines and Brexit and prisons and all the rest of it, I wonder if previous generations have felt this helpless. Did they doubt their desires to build families and save for hypothetical retirement due to a totally apocalyptic outlook?

Then I remember that mass despair isn't a new feeling. My parents organised against the nuclear threat in the eighties, thousands of people fought against the AIDs crisis in the decade that followed, and in the sixties, the civil rights movement and the accompanying backlash provoked an apocalyptic sense of impending change that Audre Lorde discussed in a conversation with Adrienne Rich in 1979:

I have always had the sense of Armageddon and it was much stronger in those days, the sense of living on the edge of chaos. Not just personally, but on the world level. That we were dying, that we were killing our world—that sense had always been with me. That whatever I was doing, whatever we were doing that was creative and right, functioned to hold us from going over the edge. That this was the most we could do while we constructed some saner future.

This sense of Armageddon is not ultimate but part of a cycle. People are brutally sacrificed along the way yet life and hope is constantly renewed. I try to acknowledge and celebrate the small, exciting parts of the world we're moving into—like the fact that LGBTI+ education will soon become part of the mandatory curriculum in Scottish schools, or that there are Native women in the US Congress, or that reduction of meat consumption and plastic use is part of normie consciousness now.

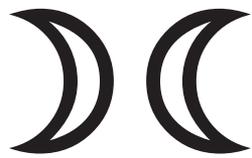
In this zine we're constructing futures that may or may not be "sane". They include underwater transatlantic railways, Salem witch trials revisited, clone siblings on deserted islands, outsiders from this world and other worlds. We're happy you're joining us on this wild and cyclical ride.

*Love and solidarity,  
Ellen  
on behalf of the Writers 4 Utopia collective*

P.S. Since our beginnings in Spartacus Books in 2016, our zines have travelled far and wide, from Olympia to Montreal to Glasgow and even to Melbourne! Thanks to everyone for reading and enjoy episode 3!

# Contents

Introduction	2
Notes on the Apocalypse <i>Alejandra Elgueta</i>	5
shades of brown exist in the forest <i>Erica Hiroko</i>	8
Shifting <i>Ian Oak</i>	9
Cyclones <i>Ellen MacAskill</i>	28
Quantum Zipper <i>Steven Masuch</i>	36
Coloursign: Elenai <i>Keyo</i>	38
Snakeroot and Hemlock <i>Bo Del Valle Garcia</i>	49
The Underway <i>Liina Koivula</i>	68
Hands In The Cosmos <i>Fenrir Cerebellion</i>	80
Conception <i>Mattias Westby</i>	82



Alejandra Elgueta

## Notes on the Apocalypse

### FROM STANLEY'S DIARY

We walk as a family. Abe walks ahead, and we follow. We've walked for many days, maybe months. We walk at night and rest during the day for it is too hot to walk under the sun. It has been hard, and it doesn't make a lot of sense, but we've made it so far. All of us. And today, when I saw the ocean, my heart beat faster, and I wondered if our voyage would come to an end. From here, the water looks blue and green, and you can see the white of the foam left by the movement of the waves.

I know we must wait until the sun goes down to start moving again, but I wish so badly that we would reach the beach tonight. How far can it be? All this time, I've felt uncertain about the migration, and I think everyone else felt the same way I did, but no one talks about it. We barely talk these days but today, it was different. We talked about the future when eating at sunrise, which made me feel that we are supposed to be here.

I've been dreaming a lot about the ocean since we started to move, and maybe for even longer. I think I am not the only one that has the dreams. In the last one, we all stepped into the ocean, as the waves moved and sang, and gigantic fish came to welcome us. I think the fish are a symbol of the resources that the beach will provide to us. I cannot wait. The future is on the beach.



### WARNING NOTE—AL

When I first saw the ocean, I felt happy. I'd been moving for weeks, from town to town, and in all of them I did the same: look for food and company. I met a group of people, who were going to the coast. They were sure that they would find all they needed on the beach. They talked about dreams. I thought they were losing it. Could the virus have messed up their brains? Hoping that it was not contagious, I left them behind.

I kept on moving, and after a while, I met a couple. When they told me about the dreams, I just listened. I was not sure if I should tell them that I did not have dreams about the sea. I stayed with them for a while, but one of them could not stop making fun of me being deaf mute. I

did not leave them, technically, but I took a bit longer to collect my provisions and they did not wait for me.

I ended up coming to the coast. Dreams aside, the idea made sense, and the coast was not too far. I walked for a few days until one morning, I saw it. The ocean. The beach. The future. It was beautiful, although the water had a strange color. Brown, red? Not what I expected. The beach was fucked up too. Dreams? Couldn't we just face the new reality that we are all fucked up? I decided to go there anyway. Sea breeze would be a good side for my canned meal.

I had beans and an apple and drank lots of water. I ate and napped. I woke up and spent a long while just staring at the ocean. The sun was high, and the water was of a perfect blue with no signs of the brown-red thing that covered its surface earlier. Could it have been my imagination? I decided to wait a few days before jumping into the water. In the evening I would go and gather food to stay here for a while. Maybe the future was on the beach after all.

The evening came. I found plenty of food as if no one had scavenged the town before me. I went back to the beach and evaluated the situation. The town looked clean. I could venture to occupy a house and grow a garden. If the red thing on the water had been my imagination, then I could even get seafood. I decided to take a walk by the shore to clarify my thoughts. I was looking at the reflection of the moonlight on the water when I saw it. It looked like a school of fish at first, but then I saw it, a large fish tail. I saw the tail move quickly, and then something came out of the ocean. That was not a fish. It had a large beak like a pterodactyl. I kept on staring, although I moved back. I saw the creature dive in and jump out of the water repeatedly. The most incredible thing was that sometimes, when it jumped high enough, its tail turned into wings and the thing flew over short distances. I was so impressed by the creature that it took me a while to realize that there were more of them.

They were scary, but what could I do? I would just stay out of the water. They did not seem interested in going near the shore. But the tide could come up. I would find a safe spot to build a fort. I could look at them and just stay out of their way. I wondered where they came from and if they had anything to do with the red color on the water. I spent a few nights looking at them, who swam and flew under the moonlight in a sort of ritual dance. Each night, when they appeared, I felt my body vibrate. I thought it could be the wind, the breeze, or even the adrenaline from watching such beings dance, but now I have my doubts.

I stared at the creatures every night. I became obsessed with them.

They did not ring a bell on any animal that I knew, and they seemed monstrous and divine to me. I was staring at them when two dogs entered the water. Where did the dogs come from? Hey! I screamed as best as I could, but the dogs did not turn. They went deeper into the water, getting splashed by the waves. Here! Out! Nothing. The dogs kept moving towards the creatures with no concern. I was as close as I could be to the water without stepping on it. Just my toes, I thought. One of the dogs was still behind, delayed by the breaking waves. I stepped further in and pulled the dog's legs with both hands. The dog did not look back. You are coming with me, I thought, and threw my arms around the dog's neck. I screamed. Nothing. Not even a small ears movement. What's the problem with you, I thought, can't you see them? I got the dog's head right by the ears trying to make her look at me. In that moment, there was a splash of water and a surge pushed us towards the beach. Not sure why, I covered the dog's ears and held her tight. Finally, it was as if she could see me. She looked scared and confused. I held her right like that for a little longer. I knew I would not be able to save both dogs. I guided the dog out of the water by her head, carefully. I stared at her all the time and we moved slowly. When we got to my things, I held the dog still on a body battle as I covered her ears using tampons, gauze pads and a bandage. I never saw what happened to the other dog. I did not look back, until the sun came out, and there was no track of the creatures, nor of the dog, but there was a red spot on the water. I am not sure if I should stay here to alert any people that might come or get out as fast as I can. I do not fear for myself, but I fear for the dog. Can I keep her ears covered forever? In all this time I haven't felt close to anyone except for her. I guess I am wandering from the note's subject. If you read it, please believe me and cover your ears and stay out of the water.

—Al

Erica Hiroko

*erica hiroko is a queer azn who writes from unceded Coast Salish territories, homelands of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyám, skwxwú7mesh, and səlílwətaʔ nations. She is a scorpio (sun, moon, and rising), a lover, and a fighter.*

## shades of brown exist in the forest

for a.

From between your legs, I can see the curve of your golden brown hills and mountains, peeking over and under, gently sloping and rising again.

I run my hands across this flowing skin—generously cascading down your supple breasts, soft belly, thick thighs. The tips of my fingers linger. They hover over the spot where you were once cut open, then sealed back together. *It's almost healed*, you tell me. What was once coarse and raw is now smooth and bronze-like again. I'd nearly miss it if I didn't know what was there before.

Afterwards, we sit side-by-side on the stream bank and exchange secrets beneath the big leaf maples. *It feels like my world is constantly ending*, I whisper, releasing tightness from my chest as I expel this confession. Wisps of inky hair fall across my cheeks. My face turns towards yours, illuminated in the fading light.

*You can always start over again.* As you reach for my hand, the edges of your mouth slowly curl up into a small smile. *Did you forget our bodies are regenerative?*

I give your hand a squeeze in return, reminded of the many ways you nourish me. Like strands of mycelium, woven deep into the earth and cycling life between ecosystems inconspicuously. Like how you extend affirmations without need for me to ask. Like our fingers intertwined and your brown skin embracing my own.

As I tilt my head upwards, I notice the leaves are starting to turn. I wonder if anyone has ever described all the shades of brown that exist in a forest.

Ian Oak

*Ian Oak lives, loves, and creates on unceded Kwakwaka'wakw territory.  
This is their first short story.*

## Shifting

*Trigger warning: alcohol, suicide, kidnapping, murder, menstruation, cannibalism*

I moved out of the city long ago, trying to get away from it all. I ended up moving away from a lot of the local scene, too: the lesbian bars, leather bars, dance clubs ruled by drag queens. There's just one bar here where everyone goes to catch up on gossip, eye-fuck the newest baby queers, and hopefully leave with someone. It's not always easy to tell the gender of the person you're checking out when in mixed company. Sometimes I can't even tell if I'm looking at a human.

That was what I was looking for that night: a human I could feed on. But unlike the baby queers, you can't always tell if you're actually looking at a Young One. If they haven't fed on someone yet, the irises of their eyes won't have changed colour. You have to wait and see if their retinas are retroreflective, flashing in dim light like a cat's. After they've fed, it's easy to tell how old a vamp is. For example, Young Ones will retain their human form, right down to the spider veins and laugh lines. Some things are really hard to change, like our eyes. It takes time to master shapeshifting, even on a miniscule scale. The trick is maintaining the illusion even when you're not paying attention. I can stay a woman even when I sleep because I've had centuries of practice.

This person, I thought, must have had a lot of practice. Their eyes weren't human, but weren't burning embers like other vamps'. Theirs glowed gold like twin harvest moons, waxing and waning as they scanned the room. It's hard sometimes to tell if a vamp is looking for a hookup, dinner, or both. My question was answered as we locked eyes, a hungry grin crossing their face.

As the bartender passed them a beer, they turned and said something to him, sticking their ass out a bit. I guessed they were assigned female at birth, but my time in the modern queer scene gave me more questions than answers. Turns out people can take synthetic hormones now to give them facial hair, breasts, a lower voice, or fuller hips. They might not even identify as a man or a woman at all. Of course, if you were an Old One, you didn't need hormones to do all that.

This person, whatever pronouns they used, turned away from the bartender, a second beer in hand, and strode over to me before I could collect my thoughts. “Hi,” they said, “I’m Áine.” I decided she was likely a woman—*cisgender*, they say now. I felt too awkward to ask, even though I knew I should.

“I’m Jackie,” I said, accepting the beer with a nod.

“You’re new here.”

“Is that why you came over,” I asked, trying to flirt. I got better at it each time I came here, but I still wasn’t very good

I had a long-term human partner, Mary, who had suggested I see other people. She didn’t want me to feed on her—she was too much of a top—but drinking out of IV bags from the blood bank wasn’t really satisfying. So Mary told me to go pick someone up and bring her back to a hotel room. She says it’s called “polyamory” if everyone knows about each other and is okay with it. *Should I tell Áine now?* I thought suddenly. *No, that would be assuming something will happen between us, I’d seem overconfident.* I reminded myself that I’d just had one-night stands so far, so it probably wouldn’t even matter.

Áine’s grin widened, glinting in the low light. I noticed that she didn’t have regular vamp teeth, either; instead of a human set with elongated canines, all of her teeth were a little too sharp. “I was wondering if you wanted to get out of here.”

Áine looked out of place at the hotel room. In the brighter light, I could see dirt on the knees and seat of her jeans, bits of leaves and twigs clinging to her wool sweater. She paced around at first, not touching anything, just looking. I worried that she was quietly noting where all of the exits were.

“Make yourself comfortable, *Awn-ah*,” I called over my shoulder, pouring two glasses of wine and cursing myself for not buying beer. I decided that it would be worse to be sober than seem bougie, and the hotel itself was probably worse than the wine. There weren’t a lot of lodging options, but this was still the nicest one in the area.

“*Awn-yah*,” she corrected, “with a ‘Y’ sound.” I cringed and stammered an apology, but I could tell she was used to it. Áine swirled the wine in her glass, letting it breathe, then inhaled its fragrance. Holding the glass delicately, she took a small sip. “Mm. *Côtes du Rhône?*” I nodded, surprised. *Who is this person?*

“Hey,” she said, sitting on the bed as if she had just decided to stay, “can I ask you something?” I nodded, put off-balance by the sudden

shift. She craned her head inquisitively to the side and smiled at the floor, took another sip. I drained my glass in one gulp. Then she shook her head, chuckled softly, and looked at me. “Do you mind me asking...how old are you?”

I laughed, felt the alcohol finally work its way into my muscles. I started drinking long before I went out, but I was dead sober until then. “Uhhh...I don’t know if you’d believe me.”

“No pressure,” she said, “I could say the same.”

“...I was born sometime in the fifteenth century.”

“Oh, wow.” Just like that—only a little impressed.

“Um...what about you?”

“You *definitely* wouldn’t believe me,” she laughed. I was taken aback. I’d never met anyone even half as old as me.

When you get to a certain age, you start to lose it. You lose time, memories; you can forget what your human form was unless you periodically shift back into it. Even then, it becomes distorted. In my human form, I’m tall by today’s standards, but I remember being average height before I turned, which was a lot shorter than it is now. It’s not easy losing touch with reality like that, watching your identity blur and warp like a photocopy of a photocopy.

Sometimes a mob of humans armed with superstitions and wooden stakes finish us off, but more often the Old Ones die from suicide. Who do you turn to when everyone you’ve ever known was buried long ago, when your body and the world you live in are unrecognizable?

Should I have told her my age? Was she messing with me? Did she think I was crazy? What was I doing with her, anyway? The whole point of going out was to find someone to feed on, which definitely wasn’t happening tonight. Would Mary be angry when she found out that I hooked up with another vamp instead?

“Um...” I looked back at Áine, who shifted awkwardly on the bed. “I’m not really sure when I was born. We didn’t really use...calendars...I guess.” I sat down on the bed next to her, drawn in by the clue. “I mean, we used the moon and the sun. But I don’t know what year it would have been or anything.”

“Ballpark it?”

She laughed, looking shy again. Maybe not shy, just...private. Like she was used to having the same conversations over and over, a thousand iterations over a vast period of time, but this one was new. And she was wondering if she should keep talking. She frowned at the carpet for what felt like an eternity.

“Maybe one thousand?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. *Does she mean she's a thousand years old or that she was born in the year 1000?* I opened my mouth and closed it again.

“No,” she said, frowning again. “Definitely before 900 A.D.”



I met Mary at work. The Agency often pairs humans with vamps because we have complimentary strengths and weaknesses: for example, I may be a better shot because of my superhuman sight, but she can cross running water more easily. That said, most of the classic vamp weaknesses were made up by vamps. If a human splashes you with holy water and you don't start sizzling and screaming, they decide that you're human, too. Some vamps still hunt humans instead of finding consenting partners, and these misconceptions make it easier to pass as human. Passing makes it easier to hide in plain sight and prey on them. Being an Old One means that my weaknesses aren't as lethal. If I cover up and wear sunblock, I can walk around in sunlight. Humans aren't as into tanning now as they used to be—skin cancer ruined that—so no one looks twice.

Mary knew all this, of course. She'd been trained and tested until she was an expert on vamps and other humanoid creatures. She took one look at me as I walked in that summer evening, with my hat and long-sleeved shirt, and she knew I was centuries old. She was a rookie, brand new, but I could tell she knew about vamps long before she joined the Agency. She always leaned slightly away from me like I was magnetically repulsing her. I guessed she had joined the Agency for the same reason a lot of humans do: in response to being victimized by creatures. Humans have always gone through cycles of dismissing us as myths and organizing to destroy us, but never before had they joined us to try to find a balance, a way to coexist. Some humans in the Agency learned to treat us as individuals, but most didn't.

To be fair, most of the creatures they came into contact with were monsters.

Mary and I were handed our first assignment the same day we were introduced. Several people in a small rural community had gone missing over a few months, and the locals believed it was the spirit of a recently deceased person come back to haunt the living. A bunch of the men got together and dug up her grave, which was empty. The local police believed it was a simple body-snatching that had no connection to the missing persons, but we stepped in before they could investigate.

I could feel Mary bristle every time someone spoke to me instead of her; one villager even called her my assistant. I couldn't help but wonder if she was partly annoyed at being treated like she was less than something *inhuman*. I didn't blame her. With the decades missing from my memory, I can't truthfully say that I never terrorized a small community, abducting and draining people, letting them die instead of at least giving them the option of turning. It's not something I would ever do now, but you can live a lot of lifetimes, be a lot of people in six hundred years. I don't even remember what kind of person I was before I turned. But if I had known her in that time, with the body I was born with, I certainly wouldn't have treated her well.

It was really Mary who did all the detective work. I was able to rely on my heightened abilities to locate and dispatch the vamp, but Mary found the most recent missing person, alive. While the men prattled on to me about their various theories, Mary had rotated between kitchen tables and parlour couches, politely sipping tea and munching cakes. The local women loved having such a nice young lady listen to them gossip. With the information she gleaned, she figured out where the vamp was keeping her victims, which is how Mary found the sole survivor. She didn't get any credit for her part, of course.

After everyone shook my hand and congratulated me, I made my way to a nearby pub. I'd seen a book of matches in Mary's car and figured she went there after work. When you work with someone for a few weeks and she won't tell you anything about herself, you naturally start doing a little detective work of your own. I found her at the bar with a whisky and a beer chaser, staring off into space. I let my feet fall a bit heavier than usual to avoid startling her, but she still flinched slightly when I pulled out the stool next to her. I ordered a whisky too, hoping it would ingratiate me.

"Haven't seen you here before," she said, not looking at me.

"I don't need to eat and it would take a forty ounce to get me buzzed," I said, indicating my glass. "So I'm not really a pub person."

"So what are you doing here." It wasn't a question.

"I...uhhh..." I hadn't actually thought of what to say to her. She finally looked at me, annoyed. "Ummm...I wanted to tell you...that you did some great work out there. Even if the others didn't say so." She scoffed, downed her whisky and a gulp of beer, giving herself time to think.

"I know that. I don't do this for approval, Jack." For *your* approval.

"Right. Of course not." We sat in silence, only a little more tense

than a usual day at work. I took off my sunglasses and polished the lenses with my shirt. I wear them whenever I'm around humans who don't know about us to hide my eyes, even inside or at night. I'd rather look like an asshole than a nightmare.

"That woman would be dead if it wasn't for you." I immediately regretted my words, but I couldn't stop them. "You said it yourself, the vamp likely kept all of her victims there. The police didn't find any of them. If they ever found her, she'd already be dead from dehydration or something."

"I know," she said after a pause, the edge gone from her voice. She drank again.

"Everyone wants to see the villain punished. But killing is easy." She didn't answer, but her face said *what the fuck?*

I thought of the vamp's eyes bulging from her discoloured face. They were so wide that I could see the whites all around her fiery irises, blooming with hemorrhages as I choked the life out of her. She was young, weak. She didn't know what she had become, didn't even know half of what she could do. I took a breath, tried to ground myself. "I mean...yeah, killing is easy...but being a hero is hard."



The only time I talked much to other vamps was at work, and I'd never asked one so many questions outside of the interrogation room. I was spellbound by Áine's candour. Vamps are usually pretty careful—our continued existence, both as individuals and as a species, depends on secretiveness. But Áine spoke freely, like nothing could hurt her. Hell, maybe nothing could anymore.

"Okay, wait," I slurred, "how the fuck do you *live* that long?" I'd asked the same question several times already, but she howled with laughter, definitely feeling the whisky. I had only brought enough wine to share with a human companion, not another alcohol-metabolizing machine, so we'd hit a late-night liquor store just as it was closing. "Like...you must have had some folks start to catch on, especially since you've lived here for so long." Pretty much the first rule of becoming an Old One was to keep moving. That ensured no one would recognize you in an old photo or something.

"Yeah, I totally have. There's been a couple of times when I was hurt pretty badly and a mortal saw it—" not a human, a *mortal*—"and I had to lay low for, like, decades. Sometimes it's nice to have a break from civilization, but sometimes I need a new fucking loom or something

and I have to keep using the same shitty one forever!”

“Are you for real? A *loom*?”

She doubled over, cackling. “It was a while ago—”

“*No shit.*”

“—and I’ve gotten pretty good at *not* catching on fire in front of the locals since then.”

I gaped at her back as she rose to refill our glasses, still chuckling to herself. She caught on fire and lived? If the Luddite rebellion was in the early 1800s, and Áine was born before 900 A.D., then... well, she could have been really old already when that happened. Still, I’d never heard of a vamp surviving a fire, *ever*. Maybe one day I’d be that strong, too. I shuddered.

“Does the loneliness ever get to you?” *Fuck, why did I say that? We were having a nice time.* She froze for a moment, then turned toward me, face sober.

“Yeah. *Fuck* yeah. But you just have to take it one day at a time.” I laughed, was surprised to hear the bitterness that tinged it. Without something like work to structure your time, days don’t mean much to an Old One. That was a big part of why I decided to join the Agency. That and the isolation. “Like, you have to realize that...you’re going to outlive the people in your life. The mortals *and* the vampires. And you don’t have to like it, but you just...have to accept it.” I noticed for the first time that she never shortened “vampire.” She moved seamlessly over all the new queer jargon, but when it came to humans and creatures she talked like she was straight out of a horror film.

“How do you let people in if you know you’ll outlive them all?” I couldn’t help myself; this might be the only time I would ever talk to an elder, and things were a little rocky with Mary at the time. She said it herself: I knew everything about her, but she knew little about me. She probably didn’t even know how bad it was—I think she let me off the hook a lot because of how much time I’d lost. But I carried a lot of guilt for knowing I wasn’t as present, as open with her as she was with me.

Áine was quiet for a moment, one hand holding her glass against her heart, the other propping her up as she reclined on the bed. She sat up abruptly, tucking her legs under her. She was never still for long, her movements quick like she was made of electricity. “I tried being alone for a while. I don’t know how long exactly, those years are a bit...blurry,” she said, waving her hand vaguely. I nodded. She seemed so invincible, it was almost a relief to hear that she’d had memory loss, too. “It taught me that I need other people. But I don’t really have an answer for

you...I haven't figured it out either." She drained her glass and looked steadily at me, her eyes luminous sunsets. I leaned in and kissed her. Letting her glass fall to the carpet, she placed her hands on my hips and lay down, pulling me onto her as though I weighed nothing.

I slept in, waking in the evening. On the pillow next to me was a note with Áine's number, saying that she was really glad she met me, I should give her a call. Her handwriting was dominated by empty spaces, arches like moon phases filling the blankness of the hotel scratch pad. I lay there for a while examining it, my head on her pillow. It smelled of her hair, like the pages of an old book. A few long, spiralling black threads still clung to the fabric.

I got up and stood in front of the full length mirror, trying to see myself as she saw me. I saw a tall, slim woman with straight dark hair hanging over her breasts. Her eyes burned blood-orange beneath heavy brows. Her face was androgynous and angular, somehow older than her body. She wasn't my type, but I could see why Áine found her attractive. Áine didn't know anything about me when we left the bar, but she knew she wanted me all the same. Was it my age? She said I was the oldest vamp she'd ever met. Maybe she just liked what she saw.

I began to shift back into my human form. I grew taller, my hair shorter. My breasts shrank back into my chest, which grew wider and hairier. My hips and thighs disappeared. My clitoris swelled, my labia rounded out and fused. I watched as if from a distance, wondering what Áine would think of me now. She had been with people of all genders, but said that I was her type just then. Would she feel lied to if she knew I spent most of my time in this form? Maybe she shifted into something else after she left, too. Maybe she would understand why Mary only knew about my human form.

I went straight home, noting Mary's car in the driveway as I pulled up. We didn't live together. At our workplace, dating a creature was taboo, especially if he's your coworker. She spent a lot of time at my place all the same. Being many times older than her meant I had a lot more time to save money, so my place was much nicer. She was a very practical person, but she still enjoyed a little luxury. I sat in the driveway, wondering what I was going to say to her. *Hi honey. Yeah, I had a great time last night. I spilled my guts to a vamp about twice my age and we fucked like it was the end of the world. How was dinner with your sister?*

She was unpacking groceries, a carton of picked-at takeout lying open on the counter. I used to keep the kitchen stocked for her, but I

find supermarkets really overwhelming. I tried buying what I saw in advertisements, but she explained that most of it wasn't really food. It's hard to tell if food is good to eat when it's all in boxes, bags and cans. Even some of the produce is coated in a shiny wax that makes it feel and smell unappetizing.

"Hey. How'd it go?" she asked with a conspiratorial smile.

"It was good. Great, yeah," I answered, trying to be nonchalant. She closed the pantry door, walked up to me and slipped her arms around my waist, pulling me to her. After finally bringing someone back to the hotel about a year ago, I was worried she'd feel jealous. But things were better between us than they'd been in a long time. That night was the first time I'd fed in ages and I felt more like myself. And Mary seemed to like that.

"That's good. I took out some blood a couple hours ago." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed my bottom lip before finishing up with the groceries. Sometimes I ended up staying in the hotel alone, and sometimes I ended up with someone who had a low tolerance for blood loss. Either way, I often came home a little thirsty, so there would be a frozen IV bag in a bowl of water in the sink waiting for me. Mary was always thinking a few steps ahead like that.

She never asked me about what happened when I went out. It was likely that she just didn't want to know the details, but she probably thought it was always more or less the same. She assumed I'd been with another human. I felt a pang of guilt as I heated up the blood on the stove. I had to tell her what happened. I poured a pint of beer for Mary and pulled out a coffee cup for the blood. I haven't put blood in a wine glass since Mary mistook it for red wine when we were first dating. Luckily she only took a sip, not enough to cause hemochromatosis, but it was pretty bad.

I joined her at the kitchen table, handed her the pint, and asked her how she was doing. I tuned in and out as she spoke. Before she'd finished her lunch, I decided there was no better time to tell her. Like the other humans at the Agency, she went to sleep in the early hours of the morning and slept until the afternoon, so her schedule overlapped with mine. I figured that this way we'd have lots of time to fight if it came to that. It wasn't how I wanted to spend our day off, but it was better than feeling like a liar. I cleared my throat. "Um..." Mary looked at me expectantly. "I...um, I wanted to..." *Spit it out. She can handle it.* "I wasn't with a human last night."

"What's that?"

“I was...with another vamp. I didn’t plan it or anything. It just happened.”

“...So you...didn’t feed last night.” She didn’t look angry, more perplexed. She studied my face the same way she studied suspects.

“No.”

“Okay...” Mary leaned back in her chair, her puzzled expression slowly turning into a scowl. “I guess I’m just confused? The whole point of this...*arrangement* is that you would feed. And sex is part of that for you, I know, but...” she shook her head, her shoulders stiffening.

“Yeah, I know. I wasn’t planning to sleep with her. I just wanted to talk.”

“Oh, right,” she said, her frustration spilling over, “you took her to your hotel room *to talk*. Tell me, did she *just want to talk*?”

“...No.” *You really fucked this one up.* “She didn’t.”

Mary’s mouth was open, her face indignant. “Oh, so she *seduced* you? Are you fucking *kidding me*?”

I blew up. “She’s over a *thousand years* old, okay? I couldn’t just walk away from that!” I was leaning over the table, yelling. I sat up, took a deep breath. “You have no idea what it’s like...” I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes, suddenly feeling tired. We sat in silence for a while, that deep silence that you can only really get in the country.

“Are you serious,” Mary whispered, the anger gone. “She’s really that old?”

“Yeah,” I answered quietly, “I think she was telling the truth.” Mary sat for a moment, staring at her empty plate. Then she suddenly stood, walked to the fridge, pulled out another beer, and went outside to sit on the porch.

A couple hours later, she came back inside. I had been trying to read, but ended up scanning the same few pages over and over without taking anything in. I was thinking about Áine, about how good it felt to shoot the shit with her, how good *she* had felt. And I was thinking about Mary. Was she afraid? She couldn’t have been. Mary was one of the most fearless humans I’d ever met. But when she walked into the living room, her hands were shaking. “What did you talk about?”

“Um...getting old, I guess.”

“What does that mean?”

“I...guess it’s...hard to explain?” *Fucking try me*, her face said. “I wanted advice from her, I guess. About how to keep it together. Not lose

my shit.” Mary sat down on the couch, further away from me than usual.

“Did she tell you much about herself?”

“Yeah...by the time morning came around, I felt like I’d known her for years.”

“...What do you think she wants from you?” At first I didn’t know what she was talking about. But then I realized it was her old distrust of vamps coming up again, burned into her in childhood by some sick motherfucker.

“It’s not like that,” I said, shaking my head. I didn’t want to dismiss her feelings, but it was no secret that she thought I was *one of the good ones*.

“How much did you tell her about yourself?” Mary whispered. The fear was unmistakable now.

“I...not much!” I spread my hands. “What do you think? That I told her about how we met at the Agency? Of course not!” My voice was rising again. She knew better than to question my discretion. We were both trained better than that.

“I’m sorry,” she said, inhaling deeply. “I just...what is someone that old even capable of?”

“I mean...she told me she caught on fire once.”

“*What?*” Mary stood up, body rigid. “We have to report her!”

“What...what are you *talking* about?”

“Right now they think you might be the oldest living vamp. We have a responsibility—”

“*No.*” I stood, my fists clenched. “If she was a threat, the Agency would already have her on file.”

Mary scoffed. “Not if she’s a skilled shapeshifter, and you bet your *ass* she is. Who knows how many open cases are traceable back to her? We both know there’s no good system for tracking Old Ones yet—”

“*No.* I’m not going to fuck up her life just because *you* think all vamps are guilty until proven innocent.” The regret was immediate and visceral, an immense weight on my chest. Shortly after, I heard Mary start up her car and drive away.



After Áine and I met at the hotel a few more times, she surprised me by inviting me over to her place. I hadn’t thought about inviting her over—it seemed too risky—but she seemed completely comfortable with it. I agreed, wanting to see how she lived. As I drove, I imagined Mary’s disapproval. *What do you mean, you said “yes?” I don’t want to*

*have to send in the cavalry after your sorry ass if you get into trouble.* But Mary wanted some space from me after our fight, and my curiosity spurred me on down the bumpy dirt roads.

At the edge of the woods, I saw two will-o'-the-wisps floating in the dusk, a crescent moon spreading beneath them. I pulled over onto the shoulder behind an old pickup truck, my headlights revealing Áine's smiling face, hands stuffed into her old jeans pockets. "Your car will be fine here. Follow me." Without another word, she walked into the woods. Although I can see in total darkness as well as I can in daylight, there was no discernible path, just forest humus beneath our feet and thick canopy above our heads. After walking uphill for some time, we burst onto a clearing. I felt the breath catch in my chest.

I had stepped out of a time machine. In the light of the full moon sat a small orchard and garden, and I could smell goats, sheep and chickens. A number of small log and cob buildings were scattered around the clearing. Some seemed to be sheds or animal shelters, but there were a few cabins, too. One had wood smoke billowing from its chimney, firelight flashing in the windows. A tiny solar panel was propped up by the door, maybe for charging her phone or something. I jumped at Áine's hand gently pressing my arm. "Come on in," she said, guiding me to the door.

As I stepped inside, a wave of heat washed over me. It radiated from an ancient wood stove in the kitchen next to a wash basin set into an oilskin-covered counter. The kitchen was part of a large living space, its walls lined with bookshelves, with a curtained area that I guessed led to a bedroom. There were beeswax candles everywhere; maybe she kept bees. The space contained a dining area with a table and chairs made of driftwood, as well as a sitting area with old couches covered by elaborate quilts. Everything was handmade; I wouldn't have been surprised if she built the whole cabin herself.

Áine busied herself by pouring whisky into two hand-carved wooden cups. I took a long drink, enjoying how the wood flavoured it. "You gonna come in?" Áine asked, shaking me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry, I just...this place is amazing. I haven't seen anything like it in...a long time."

She laughed, that easy laugh of hers. "Well, you could say I know what I like. I'm guessing you have a more modern place?"

"Yeah. It's comfortable enough, but not homey like this." I sat on a couch and ran my fingers over the seams of a quilt. "How long have you been here?"

“Oh, I don’t know. A century?” I choked a little on my whisky. “I’ve lived in other places in this county, but I like it here the most. I’ve got access to the ocean, I’ve had time to let my orchard grow...I’m planning on staying a while longer, but it can be tricky, you know?” I nodded, feeling dazed, letting my eyes pick out details in the room.

“Do you play?” I ventured, gesturing to a harp peeking out from beneath a blanket in the corner.

“Yeah, since...well, since you were born,” she giggled, “but you wouldn’t know it by hearing me play. It’s really just a hobby.”

“Will you play something for me?” For a moment I thought I saw Áine blush, but it could have been the light.

“Sure.” She pulled the blanket off and lifted the harp with one arm. It must have weighed thirty pounds, but she made it look weightless. The wood was deeply inscribed with traditional knotwork, and it gleamed in the candlelight as though it had just been polished. She grabbed a driftwood chair with her free hand and set down the harp and chair a few feet from me. “I haven’t practiced in a while...give me a moment to warm up.”

She hit a few sour chords before she found her footing and launched into a song. The silvery strings made a brilliant sound which resonated so intensely that she had to dampen them with her fingers even as she plucked more strings. She started slowly, picking out the interlocking melodies, the tempo growing faster as her fingers remembered where to go. Áine’s eyes drifted shut, her brow furrowing slightly as her foot kept time against the cob floor.

And then she sang.

I never learned Irish, although I successfully got rid of my accent shortly after moving to the island. Mary could understand some Irish but never got the hang of the conjugations. Áine sang like it was her first language.

Her voice was a rich woodwind contralto ornamented by an even vibrato. Her face told me that the song was about loss and longing, and even though I didn’t understand the words, I felt goosebumps spread over my body. My shoulders relaxed as I sank into the couch, and a thought crossed my mind: *I like this woman.*

“Are you thirsty?” Áine asked, sliding out of bed and walking towards the kitchen area. When she moved, she radiated power, never trying to hide it, not even around humans. Her body was long and sinewy, and a bead of sweat caught the moonlight as it rolled down her flushed, dewy back.

“Sure, I could drink.” She pulled out an old cast iron pan and placed it on the stove, then walked outside to the root cellar. I wasn’t sure what was more striking: that she didn’t have a fridge, or that she was wandering around in the dark, bare-assed, collecting blood. I didn’t know when I’d become so used to modernity, to passing as human.

She returned with the blood and a slab of meat. I guessed it was deer from the size and gamey smell. She pulled a long horn-handled knife from a block and sawed off two chunks, dropping them onto a wooden plate before emptying the jars of blood into the pan. I could see that they were labelled O+. “I hope this is okay,” she said, following my eyes. “I’m a little low right now.” She got into bed with the plate of meat. “Want some? It’s from today. Yesterday, I guess.”

“Um, no...thanks.” She bit into one of the pieces, her filed teeth neatly cutting through the muscle. *Is that why she wears them like that?*

“I hope this isn’t grossing you out. I’m just having a really strong craving.” She got up, popping the last bit of meat in her mouth, and poured out the blood into two cups. I was surprised at how good it tasted. “It’s the cast iron,” she said with a wink.

I woke to the smell of blood that afternoon. Not a lot, but it was fresh.

I focused on the scent. It wasn’t human blood, and it was in the bed. On Áine’s side. I opened my eyes to her face, symmetrical as if it had been sculpted, one arm thrown carelessly over her head, her coal-black curls pulled into a loose braid. “Áine,” I whispered, “Áine.” It seemed like she was completely asleep. I slowly lifted the quilt, the smell of blood stronger, and peered under it. When I finally caught my breath, I crept out of bed and put my clothes on as quietly as I could. Then I stumbled through the forest back to my car, burning rubber as I pulled away.

I texted Mary on the way: *I have to talk to you about something. I’m on my way over now.* I knew she had the day off; she hadn’t been spending time with me outside of work, but we still had the same schedule. It was only slightly less awkward than when we’d first met. My phone buzzed as Mary, her phone always close at hand, texted me back a moment later: *no youre not.* She opened her door the moment I pulled up to her house, but before she could say anything I was inside. Her face was a mask of shock and anger. “What the—”

“She’s not a vampire. She’s not a vampire. She’s not a vampire.” The panic was finally setting in. More adrenaline leached into my bloodstream every time I said it.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I smelled blood. But she’s undead. She’s supposed to be. I mean, I thought she was—”

“Jesus, okay, sit down. Now.”

I took a seat in her living room. After slamming some cupboard doors, Mary returned from the kitchen with a bottle of whisky, a pint glass, and a lowball glass. She set them on the table, filled each of them, passed me the pint glass. “Drink this.” I took a gulp. “All of it.” When it was empty, she looked at me evenly, like she did when she interviewed victims. “Okay then. Tell me what happened.”



Mary glared at her notebook. “Let’s see: she eats raw meat, she’s long-lived and hard to injure, and she still menstruates... what about a werewolf?” It was unlikely. Werewolves had been extinct for centuries. Although they had the potential to be long-lived, they couldn’t control their shapeshifting abilities like vamps could, so they were easy to hunt down.

“It was a full moon last night. She would have transformed. Shit, she’s texting me.” I pulled out my phone: *Hey babe. You ok?*

“Here, give it to me.” Mary took my phone before I could respond. *I’m fine, sorry for rushing out today. Got a text about something urgent. Call you later :-)*

“I don’t do smiley faces.”

“Oh sorry, I forgot what an old fuck you are,” she answered, tossing my phone to me. “Didn’t you say she went out for a while and came back with a bunch of venison?”

“Yeah, but she didn’t have time to butcher it. She said it was from yesterday.”

“Oh right, and you *believe* her, of course.”

My phone buzzed again: *Ok, talk to you soon.*

“So...any other ideas?” I sighed.

“I mean, I could run this stuff through the Agency database on Monday, but I’d have to log in with my username and someone might ask questions. I know you want to keep her off their radar.” A little acid entered her voice. She was still angry about the fight.

“Look...I’m sorry for what I said to you. It was shitty and I know you were just looking out for me.”

“Oh, so now you agree with me?”

“No. I don’t think she’s dangerous. I think talking to her is our best bet.”

“Talking to her? ‘Oh hey, I ran out because you were on the rag even though your womb should have dried up like a thousand years ago. So *what are you* anyways?’”

“She’s been very...candid with me.”

“Have you been *candid* with her?”

“I told her I have a long-term human partner...named Mary,” I shrugged. “I told her we’re polyamorous.”

“And?”

“That’s it,” I shrugged again, “and she said she wasn’t seeing anyone else but that it might change.”

“Okay. That’s good at least. God, what a shit show.”

“I really don’t think you need to be so worried about her. She’s lived this long by keeping to herself.”

“Or maybe she’s just good at getting rid of anyone who might cause problems.”

“Just trust me, okay?” I slumped back on the couch, exhaustion creeping over me.

“I just don’t want her to make a meal out of you or something, Jack.” She looked exhausted, too. Scared.

“Don’t worry,” I joked, “I’ll turn to ashes before she can butcher me.” She didn’t laugh, didn’t look at me.

“Yeah, sure. If she puts you out of your misery first.”



Áine didn’t want to meet at the hotel. She knew something was wrong and didn’t push meeting at her homestead. We met on some cliffs overlooking the ocean, not on her property, but close—neutral territory. Mary insisted I bring my gun, loaded with silver bullets, which was tucked into the waist of my pants. It felt strange against my back, heavy.

Áine had already laid out a wool blanket on the ground with a thermos and two of her wooden cups. She was lying on her back, stretched out in the weak evening light, her eyes closed. She looked peaceful, like she had always been there, sculpted from the rocky landscape itself. My footsteps were masked by the wind and the cries of birds, but her eyes opened as I approached the blanket. Her smile was a sunbeam spreading across her face. “Hey.”

“Hey. How’s it going?”

“Good. I always feel good here. It’s beautiful, hey?”

“Yeah.” I was jittery, not in the mood for small talk.

“What’s up?”

I made a few false starts before I blurted it out: “You’re not a vamp, are you?”

“No,” she smiled sadly, “I’m not. Come on, sit down.” She patted the blanket beside her.

One moment, I was sitting down. The next, she was holding my gun.

She turned it over in her long fingers before pointing it at the waves. I could tell from the way she moved that she was a skilled marksman. My stomach was a knot of ice. The whole way there, I worried about what would happen if she realized I was armed. It never crossed my mind that she might disarm me—no one ever had.

I thought of Mary, how she didn’t want to get out of bed, how her arms lingered around my neck as we said goodbye. She warned me so many times.

Áine eyes settled on mine, sharp as an eagle’s. She held my gaze as she slid the magazine out, slipped it under her belt, and tossed the gun back to me. “Silver doesn’t do anything to me, you know.” I stared numbly at the gun, my hands trembling a little.

She picked up the thermos and poured warm blood into the cups, handing one to me as if we were there for a picnic. She drank deeply as I watched the steam rise from my cup and evaporate into the grey skies. “It’s okay, you know. This isn’t the first time this has happened. I get it.” She tried to sound indifferent, kept her eyes on the horizon, but I could tell that I had hurt her. I felt ashamed and afraid all at once. “Go on. Ask.”

“What are you,” I rasped. My voice was unfamiliar, half-hidden by the wind and waves.

“I wish I could give you a straightforward answer,” she said, half-grinning, half-grimacing. “There isn’t one. I guess the best way to explain it is that...I was here before the mortals came.”

“Are there others like you?”

“Not like me. But...related, I guess.”

“Are they...dangerous?” Her face contorted into a full grimace.

“Jackie. Come on.”

“What,” I said, defensive, “I’m just asking.” Áine looked me dead in the eyes, her face lit by twin flames.

“You’re a vampire. *You’re* dangerous. And yeah, *I’m* dangerous too. I’ve done things that fucking *Agency* would have my head for. And I’m not sorry for what I’ve done. But you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

My gut twisted again. Humans have always gathered to hunt down creatures, but before the Agency they had never teamed up with us.

Vamps in particular were always going through cycles of overhunting and in turn being hunted almost to extinction. It was plain to me that it was in our best interest to coexist peacefully with humans, staying mostly in the shadows and feeding consensually, rather than decimating communities until we were inevitably discovered and dispatched.

Not everyone agreed. Some creatures had made a career out of hunting down those they deemed traitors. Before I could wonder if Áine felt the same way, she spoke. Her voice was soft, cold as the ocean below us. “You’re with the Agency, aren’t you?”

My hands tightened around my gun; I couldn’t let her take it from me. Then again, she could just throw me in the ocean and I would disintegrate.

Áine groaned. “*Fuck*, Jackie. I’m not gonna hurt you, okay? But we do need to talk about this. Another time. I like you, but I don’t know if I can fuck a goddamned *creature cop*.” She rubbed her face with her hands, exasperated. She paused. “That’s how you met Mary, huh?”

*How did she know that?* Áine burst into laughter. “Listen babe, I can read minds, but...I’m just reading your face right now...” she went into a giggling fit. *She can read minds?* Áine doubled over, hysterical, the gun magazine bulging under her sweater.

By the time she regained her composure, I found that my fear had left me. Maybe it was her laughter or the way she reclined on the blanket, refilling our cups as if we were just lovers enjoying the romantic view. We looked out, sipping blood, the silence between us comfortable.

“So,” she finally said, pulling the magazine out of her pants and tossing it over to where my gun lay forgotten. “Do you think Mary would be open to meeting me?” I felt the muscles in my neck tighten instantly. “What? What is it? I thought you said you were polyamor—”

“—We are. Um. It’s just. She doesn’t know...about...this form.”

“Oooooohh.” Her eyes were wide. She really wasn’t reading my mind, although I didn’t doubt that she could. “She’s straight?”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “she thinks I am, too.”

“Well, don’t worry,” she answered, squeezing my shoulder. “I won’t out you.”



“...I mean, I guess that would be fine, sure.” Mary had tucked herself under my arm as we sat on the couch, her almost-empty beer bottle hanging loosely from her fingers. “I guess I didn’t really think that she’d want to meet me.”

“You’re not scared or anything?”

“I mean, it’s like you said. She could have killed you if she wanted to. But I’m still a little nervous about that ‘I’m a monster, deal with it’ shit.”

“She is, though. So am I.”

“You’re different.” My silence told her otherwise. She turned to look up at me. “Look, I love you Jack. And not in spite of what you are.”

I thought carefully before I spoke. “I think you’re learning to love me for what I am. But I don’t think you’ve really gotten there yet.” Her face twisted a little. “Maybe meeting Áine is a step in the right direction, you know? She’s really easy to get along with.” Her forehead relaxed and she rested her head against me, pulling her feet onto the couch. “You’re gonna love her place. It looks like a witch’s house.”

“Maybe she *is* a witch. She never really answered your question, hey?”

“I don’t know how much it actually matters. I think working at the Agency made me get used to checking boxes. I don’t think there *is* a box for her.”

“I like boxes. They make everything so much simpler.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “because they *simplify* everything. Like, we just ignore parts of who we are so we know which box defines us and our kin.”

“Whoa. What?”

I took a deep breath. “Look, Mary...I need to tell you something.” She unfolded herself, sat up straight and looked at me. “I know that you’re always saying that I have a whole life that you don’t know about. And you’re right.” Mary took my hand and squeezed it. I looked away, the earnestness of her face almost unbearable. I breathed slowly, counting my breaths.

“Jack?”

*Four counts in, hold for six, out for eight.*

“Sometimes I’m Jack. Sometimes...I’m Jackie.”

## Ellen MacAskill

*Ellen lives in Glasgow, Scotland with two black cats called Neo and Morphheus. She has a book out called 'A9' in Hometown Tales: Highlands and Hebrides (We&N, 2018). She believes in joy as an act of resistance!*

# Cyclones

I'm doing yoga on the stink beach when he shows up. My sisters make fun of me when I do it at home and I can't focus on my breathing or release my muscle tension when they're all in my space. I close my eyes to the grey noontime light and turn inwards. I'm trying these days to distinguish between numbing out from my body and dissociating, and meditating so that I feel like I'm floating outside of my body in a healthy way. Inhale one—two—three, exhale one—two—three, forward fold so my hair hangs down and my nose is inches from the seaweed that gives the beach its nickname. Every joint in my spine stretches out until they feel taut enough to float apart. I roll up, open my eyes and see him: just his upper body above the canoe, arms bare in a t-shirt with the sleeves ripped off and his face obscured by the distance. I watch as he gets closer to the shore.

I am feeling too meditative to be scared, or maybe just numb, who really knows. Then I hear the song in his head and realise he is one of us. He rows up to the low tide and drags his canoe with one hand up the beach. He stops a metre from me and we stand still for a second.

"You like Robyn?" I say. He goes red. I pick up different things from each of my sisters but songs are my favourite and come easiest. Hearing other people's inner tunes makes a change from the twenty albums I have saved on an old phone and listen to on loop interchangeably, since our fantasies of an off-grid internet connection failed to get off the ground.

"I don't know," he says in an accent from elsewhere, maybe another continent, then coughs because he's hoarse or to fill the silence. He drops his backpack from his shoulder into the canoe behind him. His hair is black like all of ours, flecked with grey, and short like Six's, hanging in curtains over his pale forehead. There are no pimples on his forehead that I can see. His limbs are more toned than mine, even with the yoga. He wears boys clothes, and holds himself in a way that lets me know he's a boy himself. I start to sense all this potential for goodness

or chaos or something new.

“Can you do anything cool?” I ask. He shrugs. “Fair enough. Not all of us can do the same stuff. All Three can do is see in the dark, which is useful in the winter.” He just stares at me. “Maybe we’ll find out what you can do when you meet my sisters.” Our sisters, I should say. But I don’t want to freak him out any more than I have already. “Let’s go.”

We drag his canoe up to the rocks. His knees look like they’re about to buckle with every step and I wonder when he last ate. My bike is at the tree line that wraps around the whole island. We drop the canoe beside it just as my arm starts to ache. Rain appears from above and rolls down through the trees onto us.

“She’s nice, hey?” I say, nodding down at the bike. She’s a woman’s hybrid bike in pale green with thick mountain tyres and the cute look of a road bike, and the inexplicable name Sycamore Mongoose written across her frame. I sit forward on the damp seat and he perches on the metal stand above the back wheel. I have to reach back and physically place his cold arms around my waist to stop him from falling off. After a minute he clutches on tight, then we are splashing along the muddy path through the ancient, gnarly trees up to the tarmac ring road that leads us uphill and home.



The journey to the small island is hazy in my memory. The fire, the smoke, the general sense of alarm and peril, and everything stank—I must have blacked out between evacuating the factory and getting in the van. I know we all took bikes with us. Maybe Mum told us to or maybe we were so attached to them by that point, after years of disassembling and reassembling and fixing them to supplement the transport needs of organic people on the mainland who can’t afford electric cars. The back of the van was filled with the stench of smoke from our clothes and skin and burnt hair.

Mum was in the cabin upfront and didn’t tell us anything about where we were going. We took it in turns to freak out. Once in a while she’d shout back, *Watch out for those boxes! Keep it down!* The supplies were tumbling between us and boxes were spilling open. I was so motion sick I pressed my back into the van wall and stayed as still as I could.

Two of them—maybe One and Five? I forget, I don’t think a lot about that time—were arguing for at least an hour about how the fire started. Five kept saying, *It was the sun*. One said, *Not possible, that*

*only happens in the forests, not in buildings.* And Five thought she was accusing her so she said, *Why would I have burned it down of all people? You think I wanted to leave Twenty and Sixteen behind? One was like, I'm not accusing you but now you're making me concerned, Five.* This went on.

I was shaking quite violently and grinding my teeth, trying to block them out. Three rubbed at my back at intervals, whispered things like, *Not long now* and *You're doing fine, trust me* as if she knew these things. That's her style. I thought about Thirteen, who I was infatuated with at the time, and where they might be. They'd been down in the basement doing an inventory when the alarm went off and the flames started licking at us from all sides. I had no idea in the commotion if they made it out, and I didn't go back to get them. I still don't know. In the van I started to trick myself into thinking I could hear their internal monologue, crying for help, but it wasn't a real hearing. They were gone. I should have known better than to fall in love with number Thirteen.

Several hours later we were on the boat from the big island to the small island. Mum barely looked any of us in the eye as she gave out our daily meal and water. She's organic, but trained her appetite down to match ours and eats once a day, or she's really good at hiding her stash. There are a lot of things I don't know about Mum. She always does look gaunt.

That was ten months ago now. Ever since we've been building, patrolling, foraging, getting by. It's cold, it's fine, it's safe. Something was bound to shake it up eventually.



“We’re just up here on the left,” I tell him. Mum decided when we moved here that it would be safer to settle inland in a clearing in the woods, instead of beside the convenient ocean where any passing boat might see us. We never see passing boats. Thank goddess for my bike so I can get around and down to the coast every day without walking for hours. Anything to get away from the camp. At least at the factory we had internet and all its pop music and music videos and books and things to learn. It was almost as good as being free. Out here we just have each other’s infuriating company and survival to occupy us. I think that’s why my ability to hear the inside other people’s heads has improved so much—sheer boredom. It definitely wasn’t something they encouraged or even knew we were capable of at the factory. Mum

might be the only organic who knows.

I push extra hard on the pedals to pull the weight of two of us up the last bit of hill towards our base. He jumps off the back and mumbles *thanks*. It's quiet on the land. Two and Seven are up working on the house. Or, Two is working on the house while Seven sits on an exposed plank of wood reading a book. She squints up at us from the book. Two keeps hammering away. Five and Six have just returned from taking the dogs out to the lake. Five is talking to Jasper the red setter about dinner in his head: I can hear him but I can't hear the dog's replies like he can. They're about to go bother the hens in the coop even though I already collected their eggs this morning. Five and Six bound towards us and say *Hey Four* in unison, then stop a couple of metres away when they notice.

"I found Eight," I say into the space, as chill as possible, gesturing at him as if they weren't already staring.

"Who is that?" shouts Two from up the ladder, frowning with a hand over her eyes. Eight doesn't say anything. He tenses, and just in time, I turn and grab him as he tries to make a getaway. I have a hand on each of his arms and I look at him until he meets my eyes for a split second. *Chill*, I think, really hard, and I hope he hears. When I try to listen inside him it's all white noise.

Holding his arm, I turn to the others. "He just arrived by boat. Figured we should make him welcome. Don't know much of his story yet."

"Wild," says Five. "One is going to freak out." The red setter runs over to Eight and jumps up so his paws almost land on his shoulders. I let go of his arm. Just then, Three emerges from the kitchen.

"What's going on?" She stops in front of Eight with wide eyes. "Oh honey, you look awful. Can I get you some water?"

"Maybe we should eat early today," I say and Three nods, then takes Eight by the arm and rushes him towards the food she's been cooking. I can't tell if he's scared, overwhelmed, or blissfully passive.

There was no Eight at the factory. We never asked why although some sisters and siblings had their theories: Eight came out mutated, Eight escaped before we were conscious, Eight was so bad at bikes that they were sold back to work for the city.

I take a moment to myself while they prepare a meal. I stand at the scratched up mirror near the outhouse and stare into my pores for answers. I'll never forgive the directors for making us out of a body prone to cystic acne. Of all the suffering, it's this embarrassing ugliness that makes me want to die sometimes. One says it's my fault for picking at

my face but she doesn't have it so bad. She doesn't know what it's like. I splash my cheeks with lukewarm water milky with soap then toss the contents of the plastic basin onto the grass.

Five walks over and says, "Right on, finding Eight." They have a streak of mud on their cheek and I wish I hadn't thrown out the water. "What're you gonna do with him?"

"Look after him, I don't know."

"You know Mum's going to freak out. What if he's a spy or something?"

"Well, Mum's not here," I say. "No need to be paranoid."



Mum went away the day before the forest fires restarted on the big island. The gaps between the fires get shorter and shorter. Two started a tally the day she left because otherwise we lose track. It's been about fifty days now. This also helps us to keep track of how long it's taking Two to build the house. She started building it at least two hundred days before Mum went away and it's still under construction. It's another winter of tents and sheds.

I don't miss Mum. She only took me to the island when disaster struck because I was one of the original set, her property, the seven of us under her jurisdiction. She never liked me: I knew she thought I was too slutty, too into my appearance, too much like a real girl. It started when Seven complained about me touching myself in the shower room when I was too green to know that was *inappropriate*. Mum couldn't understand why I would care about sex or music or mental wellbeing. That wasn't part of the deal she signed up for. She expected compliance, and we gave her the opposite in seven forms.

We all heard Mum and One arguing in the kitchen tent the night before she left. One is the only person who will stand up to Mum. It scares us all and we don't discuss it, but that night it was too loud to ignore. One went with Mum the only other time she left the small island, and when they returned she acted all superior about it and wouldn't tell us anything about where they went or what they saw. Five found out later that One had to wear a wig as disguise or anyone on the big island might have recognised her as one of us. We all laughed about that without her knowing, the thought of her with a blonde mullet wig over her bob and round pink sunglasses to cover her eyes. How we laughed. One as an Elton John fan. One in fag-drag. One all dressed up, waiting in the van while Mum went to fetch fuel and non-perishable food and medicine.

This time, Mum did not take One with her. She had business to attend to alone without dealing with the liability of one of us tagging along. She said she would be back in ten days, maximum. We thought she might be meeting with some of the other directors of the factory, negotiating, getting closure on business affairs now that the dust has settled. Now it looks like she never meant to return. In which case, what are we all still doing here?



I overhear them in the middle of the night when I wake up in my tent sweating under too many wool blankets.

“I just need to know how you found us,” says One. “That’s all.”

I unzip my tent and come out with a blanket wrapped around my shoulders like a cloak. There’s the end of a fire crackling in the pit and One and Eight sit on logs on opposite sides of it. Eight is perched on the edge of it as if he might spring up and away at any minute. He must have strong legs to maintain such a position.

“Give him a break,” I say, standing between them.

“Why don’t you care about our safety?” says One. “Do you know everything Mum sacrificed to keep us here? We can’t just open a fucking campsite.”

“He’s one of us, obviously. What’s the problem?” I place a hand on Eight’s shoulder and he bows his head. “We have enough to go round.” I don’t buy into scarcity myths the way she does. We’re basically invincible beings anyway. We don’t need so many resources.

“Grow up, Four,” says One, standing up and stalking off towards her tent over by the house. She stops just out of the light of the fire and turns back to Eight. “And don’t think I’m not watching you.”

I give his shoulder a squeeze and sit beside him. He doesn’t say a word. We watch as the embers glow orange then retreat, glow then retreat. It’s late. I tell him he can sleep in my tent if it would make him comfortable. He crawls in beside me and whispers, “So do you read everyone’s minds?”

“No, just my sisters, some of the time,” I say. “Most of them have learned to conceal their secrets from me pretty well.”

“Hm,” he says then pauses before going on, “Sometimes I dream stuff and then it really happens. Like seeing you on the beach, I dreamt that the night before I rowed over. Is that an...*us* thing?”

“Sure.” I smile against the back of his head. After a minute, when his breathing regulates, I put an arm around him. He holds onto my

wrist with both of his hands. We warm up beneath the scratchy wool blanket and fall asleep.



I have this recurring dream where I'm riding my bike downhill with no hands and the sun is so high I can see everything for miles. Each time I dream it I try to focus on another aspect of the view, filling in the gaps night by night. I'm in a city, on a road, but there are no cars, just houses packed tightly together on either side of me with lawns that stretch out between their multicoloured porches and the sidewalk. In front of me are the mountains, and at the steepest point of the hill I look straight at them as if I'm going to take off and land right on their snowy peaks. Then I run over a piece of litter with a small bump and come back down to Earth.

In front of one house there's a pile of belongings including a print of this painting that's propped up to face the road. It distracts enough that I veer to the right while I look at it whizzing past to my left: there's a pale white woman with one leg over the edge of a round well like she's getting out of a bathtub and her face is shocked like she did NOT expect this painter to walk in on her in the nude. There are some plants behind her.

Someone behind me shouts a name that I recognise as my own. I think it begins with 'R'. Rainer? Rhiannon? Raven? That's when I turn around to look at them and then I wake up.

I keep having the dream and sometimes it is shorter, sometimes longer. I asked One about it a while ago when we were cooking a stew. The kitchen is the only space where we share anything close to intimacy so that's when I go in for her feelings. All she said was, "Sounds like something you invented. I never remember my dreams. You should just ignore it." I told her I would if I could and then she changed the subject.



He overtakes me riding Sycamore Mongoose down to the cedar lake, gravel flying upwards on either side of him. I lean forward on Five's BMX and swerve around to his left before the turning into the beach, making him screech. All four of our tyres scrape across the pebbles and we tumble off our bikes, dropping them on their sides. His face glows in the sunset. My face probably glows in the sunset too, everything

around us and beyond us does. We're all radioactive. I can hear a triphop beat twisting around his head. We catch our breath.

"Ever swam in a lake of cedar before?" I say. He shakes his head. "Mum says it's good for the skin." I pull my sweater over my head and he copies. I can't stop myself from looking at his bare body as we strip. It's not the scars under each nipple that fascinate me but the nothingness all around them, skin as clear as a cumulus cloud. I want to wrap myself up in him until every scar on my skin dissolves into clarity. We step into the water, naked under the fuschia sky.

"I've never swam in freshwater," he says with his weird accent that still catches me off guard because he speaks so irregularly. "It's good." He smiles at me and I've never seen his face so loose. We drop our body parts into the cool lake one by one. I swim. In the middle of the lake floats a dock and I climb onto it. I like watching him swim towards me, awkwardly like a dog but happy and breathing enough, shoulders strong and flexing. He climbs up beside me and I take him into my arms as the sun disappears into the ground for good, maybe forever, you never really know. For a few seconds our faces are inches apart, eyes in contact and his legs straddling mine, all four of our feet dipped in the cedar water. When we kiss I feel I am being submerged deep down. We go deep and I will us to go deeper. His hands are on my slippery skin and the deck rocks beneath us as I hear, faint and whispering, for the first time, the white noise quiet inside his head.

Steven Masuch

*Steven is an amateur citrus farmer. He would like to bring back webrings. He is on the internet, even though he'd really rather not be.*

## Quantum Zipper

It was the stretch of a late summer evening when the back of the sky is a dark blue and the clouds are just a shade darker, so together the sky looks frayed. The midway was in town. The rides sprawled out in a parking lot on the west of the river. Across the river on the east side, the street lights still hadn't lit up, but back in the carnival all the bulbs and neon pumped out a flood of rainbow.

My apartment had become too stuffy that evening, filled with thoughts of all the things I had to do that I kept putting off, so I came down here, just to be distracted for a while. And it worked, for a few minutes. There were all the rides to see, most of them part of the midway since before I was a child in this town. This was the last night they would be here. Tomorrow they'd all be folded back up into trailers and driven out onto the highway, starting fresh soon in a new town, and I envied that simple escape.

Escape would be nice, but apparently it was something I couldn't achieve. I'd come back to this town to escape the entanglements of all the other people in my life, and how things just hadn't been working out. I needed a fresh start, a chance to get it right this time. But I'd spent three months not writing, not working, and letting pressure build. Tonight I wanted to see the rides and stalls and all other distractions, but I didn't look at the people. I wanted to slink into the dazzle and go unnoticed.

Around behind the sno-cone booth was the most feared machine of all, the Zipper. A chain of enclosed cars wrapped around one long sausage-like beam. The beam would spin while the cars were pulled around, tumbling unpredictably. The attendant called me over as I walked by. "Step right up, step right up to the most thrilling, bone-chilling, deep-dilling ride we've got in this here carnival!" she shouted, as if there was a whole crowd around. "You know the Zipper, the bone-stirring head-spinning chain of pain, that devil's bicycle! Well, this is the Quantum Zipper! Spin through the time-space continuum!"

"Really?" I asked.

“Look, it’s a good enough cover for this story,” she said, and pointed me towards the waiting car, door open and ready.

The whole cart swung a bit as I stepped in. The hinges creaked as I pulled the protective bar over my waist, foam and steel locking me in place. The attendant closed the door, locked it, and slid in the safety key. It was a cold blue rod and it looked like it was made out of the moon reflected in a puddle.

With a lurch, the ride started. The long beam started to swing, and my car rolled back, forth, and then flipped over. I held on to the sides to avoid being slammed flat against the front. A dense smoke started to fill the car. The safety key glowed a bright blue, then exploded. The car was wreathed in neon flashes. The whole front grate of the car just slid off, floating away into the sky. Now I could see outwards as I spun around. And right in front of the car, a rectangular object formed, a window that showed oh no

It was my own past. I’d hoped for dinosaurs, not this. More rectangles formed behind it, a neverending series of bad memories stretching away to infinity. I was seeing it all, magnified through a Fresnel lens of regret. There was the last fight with Rupert before I moved back here, the time when I forgot to lock the door of the store, the Sailor Moon backpack incident in middle school. I didn’t want to see these times. I looked away, but the chain of rectangles followed, trying to get in my face. I refused to look. I focused elsewhere; I looked back out over the river, where the streetlights still weren’t on, trying to see anything that I could use to avoid seeing this.

But the past just kept going in front of me. I shut my eyes, at least, and tried to wait it out. The ride kept on spinning for way longer than it should have. Five minutes? Ten minutes? Was I going to be stuck on it forever?

It was the sound that made me open my eyes. I looked before I realized what it was. It was me, my own yell coming back through the view. And once I looked and saw, let myself see it, it started to vanish. The whole series of rectangles darkened into blue, and then pulled away. The clouds of smoke started to fade. And I could see the town all from above, the wind rushing through the cabin again, and just as the car swung up one last time, it all felt so light.

I came out at the bottom. I stumbled out, still disoriented after my time tourism. But I did feel less weight, like I was on the moon, like I could jump over across the river if I just tried. I bought a lime sno-cone and sat on a bench, eating it as I watched the streetlights over there finally turn on.

## Keyo

*Keyo (they/them) likes to write. They create YA Fantasy, Sci-fi, Adventure, short stories, comic scripts, zines, and more. They are currently working on a series for 2019 called Saria, when not studying to be a teacher. <https://keyotales.wixsite.com/keyotales>*

## Coloursign: Elenai

The silver diagonal line of a girder, contrasted against the light and dark yellow of the surrounding rubble. The matte almost-black of a puddle covering much of the ground in the other direction. Elenai stared for several seconds at each one and tried to calm her mind. But the frustration remained, even in this quiet empty place, which because of its emptiness had no Coloursign.

People who could naturally make Coloursign, projecting the patterns of light and colour onto the world without using a Glowstick tool, were a bit special. Unless they were Elenai. She couldn't quite do it right and always coloured herself blue. And it was always a slightly off-putting shade of blue. Ripples of it spread along the wall, media of light that said nothing, but screamed emptiness and wrongness. She avoided looking at her hand itself. It felt worse seeing it on her skin.

And she tried to work harder to outdo her mistakes, but then it went wrong, as it had today, while she'd been making Coloursign directions. Clear patterns of amber, green, and magenta had filled up with unwelcome blue, and what should have been a simple practice game for young Cityfolk learning to be Explorers had turned into stubbed toes and arguments. People had snapped at her. Nova, an Explorer student who was known for always getting up after any setback and whom Elenai was secretly impressed by, had simply laughed at her and told her to just paint with a Glowstick, as if their shared innate Signing ability meant nothing.

And the daycycle had moved on to an equally monotonous sleep-night, with her ineffectiveness covering her in blue, and she trudged away from work, struggling to dodge Cityfolk so used to direction being communicated in Sign on their clothes that they had no idea where always-blue Elenai was going. People looked down their noses at her, colours of contempt flashing in pattern on their clothes and skin, before returning to the fashion statement of the moment. She had run to this empty place on the edge.

Elenai's thoughts wandered, wondering. *Why are things the same? People live, growing as days and sleepnights pass under the unchanging nothing sky, but I never grow, only sink into blue...*

Her thoughts spun around, until, turning sideways, they suggested *Move, get outside the box, do something!* They drew her eyes to the 'Gap'.

That was the name for the spaces in-between the City's Sign-marked paths and boundaries, though it was rarely spoken out loud. People never looked at the Gaps because they were 'unreal,' and if one wandered between the paths within the City, they just ended up elsewhere in the City, or on the un-Explored but close-by paths around it. But the Gap here at the boundary led into true darkness, and the unreal called to her sideways thoughts.

In this frame of mind, Elenai walked past the girder and the boundaries, into the Dark.

It wasn't particularly exciting. It was a rocky path, surrounded by the usual mix of rock walls and ruined buildings you'd see on un-Explored paths. Litter covered in old fashioned Textlabel was scattered around. Everything else she could see was dim and empty. Elenai worked as a teacher of Explorers because she could see well without 'Sign, and apparently that applied to the Dark as well, but there seemed to be nothing to see but more of the same dim emptiness that you saw if you got too tired to look at the Coloursign, or if you looked up.

It wasn't as "dark as nightmares," like people always said, and somehow Elenai felt this denied her something. She started to run, but that only made the glow on her skin even more blue, and it began to jump onto the rocks. After a few seconds she stopped and shut her eyes, refusing to see any more blue. That stupid colour! If only she could never see it again.

She slowly became aware of a sound. Cityfolk weren't used to listening without seeing, so a sound without source reason or Sign was a novelty. But in this quiet place, the slow clacking sound filled the space with volume. It had a regular pattern, *tik, tik*, and it was getting closer. Elenai opened her eyes as the sound came around the corner, and saw... a shape she thought must be a person.

It took a second look, but the shape was a person. They were not coloured, not signed, almost an invisible grey shadow in a thick coat, until they looked up. Their eyes met Elenai's, and they were familiar. They had seemed to be in the shadows around town, in the Gaps she had been staring into so often recently.

"Hey," said the person.

“Hey,” replied Elenai, for lack of a better response. The drab person stepped closer, a patch of moving grey with hands hidden in pockets, clacking softly as they walked. Elenai could make out their face now, and it seemed familiar from somewhere other than the edge of her gaze.

“How’s the weather today?” they asked her.

What an interesting choice of words, thought Elenai. They were from an old children’s game. Children who couldn’t quite read would ask each other about the weather, answering with what they felt or what they saw, and then trying to paint it in messy Sign using Glowsticks. But Elenai had been unwillingly blue for so long that no one asked her anything other than variations on “what are you doing?” in a long time. They just assumed her responses now, which made her feel, despite her despairing efforts, simply sad.

“Heh,” she replied, “Sunny sky, Elenai, I guess. I used to answer that in the game. But I’m Always-Blue Elenai ...like the saying goes, ‘the weather is always grey.’”

“Well, then,” said the person, meeting Elenai’s eyes. “How about we change that? How about we make the weather something new?”



The first thing they remembered was being alone in timeless peace, neither hungry nor abandoned, but free. Then they had been pulled from the quiet into places with many people, and told to listen, learn, and always answer when called. They were cared for, but shaped, told to look and act a certain way, and left without space to be themselves. The Supervisors, adults who organized the others, told them that they would be doing special work as the Guide, who would learn the History, the stories of the past. They heard, uncountable times, that it was their role to be the Guide, and so they began to think of themselves as Role.

“You must prepare, Guide!” they were instructed. “You must be able to read the Guiding Coloursign, so that we Cityfolk can make decisions about our future!” So they began to look at the world, trying to see what it was they were supposed to read. People pointed at the walls, and their clothes, at what to them seemed to be shades in the sky, and called it Coloursign. They learned to pretend that they understood, that they could read meaning somehow written on the walls, or even on the dark flatness of the sky, and that was good enough for the others, because the others told them exactly what the answers should be.

*That serious face, telling everyone that it’s all going according to plan,* thought Elenai, as she listened to the story. *That’s where I’ve seen it before.*

*It's Signed on every official board in the City, including the Explorer boards.*

Role realized, as they became more self-aware, that to look at the shades triggered different feelings. They could feel elated, excited, disgusted, by reading the shades. Recognizing that there was a pattern made them appear more confident, which meant that they were watched and instructed less and less, until one daycycle after the munchtime meal they were left alone in a room with one of the Supervisors' children. Feeling something, a bright goldish-silver coloured emotion, they asked the child what he was drawing.

"A Rainbow" replied the child, and he showed Role a paper, with slightly out of order shades of feeling chalked in. Role nodded automatically, but their lack of understanding must have shown in their eyes, because the child continued, pointing at the concrete and metal wall beside them, at shades that Role felt as melancholy and anathema. "Those colours. All in a bow, all in a row. Sunny skies, Rainy skies, colour colour in your eyes."

A connection hit Role's mind then, and they realized they hadn't been truly listening. Coloursign. Other people saw the shades of feeling as colour, and when they changed them with Glowsticks or natural Sign, they were writing with a visual language. Role felt a moment of marvel at this, but without the colour of marvel, it didn't give them an answer, so they filed it as part of their Role, to feel the colours that others painted and read.

They wondered, though, why they were told what to say when they were also told to find the answer themselves. They wondered, too, why that answer was to "Explore the dead world and look for signs of life, and so rediscover the world from the stories of History," when they could see that the Explorers were re-discovering and re-marking the same paths around the City, finding only more of the same mosses and mushrooms in the rubble.

Thinking about this, they began to listen to the children's rhymes. They sounded oddly like parts of the History. "Rain, Rain, go away, come again on a Sunny daycycle..." *Why, wondered Role, do those rhymes have Rain, and Sun, and Sky, which are mentioned in the History...but don't exist. There's only the City, the Dark, and the unchanging timeless sky.*

It was a lot to think about. They had begun to sneak around the edges of the boundary, in the solitude and peace of the dark, to try and process it all. They found that their thoughts whirling was not peaceful, and they had, for the first time, been glad to run into another person.

“I went and read all of the books,” they told Elenai, after they finished their story. “Even the ones that they hid way in the back, and they talk about a much different world than this one. Sky as deep as dreams, a Sun brighter than any lights, Wind and Rain and Snow...and not all at the same time. That’s what they call Weather. The world moved in cycles, which would warm you and chill you to announce their coming, and tell you the meaning of the months and the years. And they tell me that things lived!” they continued excitedly, “Life beyond moss and mushrooms grew, and animals beyond just people lived. We search endlessly, without being told what to look for, or what used to be...”

The two of them sat, just inside the boundary, looking at the girder beside the pool. Elenai listened to the stories, more fascinated than she could ever remember being, until a question pushed free from deep in her mind, the sadness stronger than the wonder. “Why tell me? Why tell your stories to Always-Blue Elenai?”

“Because...” Role looked down for a second, and then met her eyes. “Because the shade I see when I look at your blue, whatever colour that is to everyone else...makes me think that it will all be ok. And today, you’re out here, outside the box with me. I think, together, we can change something.”



“Let’s start with the stories about the Rain.”

“Ok. What is Rain, really?” Elenai asked, trying to picture it.

“It’s water, falling from the sky. From Clouds, it seems, which are a bit like the darkness in the sky, only...there’s lots of them, and they aren’t dark. They’re really very soft looking.”

Elenai looked up, at the nothingness. Clouds in plural? What an idea. It grabbed the imagination.

“They look like this...” Role pulled out a Glowstick, and began to Sign blue and white, in drops and lines moving down the wall. They painted bits of grey and white, and then other colours mixed in, adding awkwardness to the already surreal imagery, until Elenai quietly laughed.

She couldn’t remember the last time she laughed.

Role smiled, encouraged, and they finished their Sign with a little flourish.

“Water from the sky.” they said. “I don’t know about clouds yet, but I bet we could show everyone water from the sky. I want to bring the...the feeling of falling water into this. Meet me tomorrow at the Explorer boards.”

The next daycycle, Elenai arrived for work, but there was no Sign

on the Explorer boards with instructions for her. I guess they're giving up on me, she thought, feeling a bit empty. She spotted Role standing behind the boards, blending into a gap in the sign.

"Follow me?" Role asked her, and she followed them through the city, a colourless shape that no one looked at, followed by a blue shape no one paid attention to anymore.

The two of them entered the Community Hall building. Role led her down an empty, barely signed hallway and through a door coloured with "Please don't enter, experts only." Behind it, there was a large room carved out of rock, with a large pool of water in the centre.

"The spring has a lot of water stored this year, so I think we can use a bit." Role told her. They walked over to a series of pipes with wheels and levers. "Can you read these patterns here and here?" they asked, pointing at Textsign on the wall. Elenai read the labels to them and they touched several of the wheels with a cheeky grin.

"Ok, I have an announcement to make this aftermunch as the Guide. The stream of water in the plaza runs from a pipe on the roof. If you move the wheels like this, and this..." Role Signed their own instructions onto the wall, as Elenai watched, patches of blue showing uncertainly on her hands.

As used as she was to Exploring, the sensation of being above the plaza was unusual and unnerving to Elenai. People were standing in a loose crowd in the plaza. Role walked out onto the City plaza stage, dressed in the Guide's silver-Signed robe, and the Supervisors announced that it was time for the Daily Guide speech.

Role, somewhat theatrically, cleared their throat. "I, your Guide, would like to announce....that today's weather is going to be Rain."

As the Supervisors stared in confusion at the change, and the crowd murmured and Signed, Elenai moved the pipe to point in a direction that was noticeably more upward. Water sprayed up and out, falling down in a drizzle of droplets onto everyone in the plaza. Cries of surprise, anger, and, from the children, glee, echoed across the space. Flashes of confused Sign appeared on the walls, the ground, and the stiff but not particularly water resistant clothes of the Cityfolk.

Elenai, watching the various reactions, noticed Role dancing in the drops, before they slowly disappeared off to the side.



The next pre-munch, Elenai returned to the Explorer boards, amazed that no one had caught on to them. The adults were somewhat flustered,

trying to reorganize, reschedule, and didn't seem to care much about what exactly had been done to disrupt them. They asked Elenai to spend the daycycle giving basic Signing practice to the Explorer trainees, rather than taking any of them out, while they redid all of the schedules.

Elenai wasn't a strict teacher since her own Sign ability defaulted to blue, so the Explorer children saw her sessions as play-around time. But Elenai had an idea. As the children played, she walked over to the corner and signed a blue book symbol onto the wall. After a while, the babble of the children faded away as they noticed a slow *tik-tik* sound, and then they looked on wide-eyed as Role walked over to them, recognisable as the Guide even without the silver Sign, carrying a pile of books.

"Let me tell you a story!" they exclaimed, and the Explorers gathered around them.

"Once upon a time, there was a blue sky above our world. It had a sun and a moon, and under that, trees reached their leaves towards the clouds." As they spoke, Role painted the Textlabel on the books with colour, adding a yellow circle, a silver crescent, and green trees covered in leaves and fruit.

"Giraffes and elephants walked through this living world, stretching their necks to eat the flowers off the trees, and pulling fruit off of the traffic lights, which then told them to go ahead." Role's Glowstick traced out images of fantastical creatures. "Elephants carrying around a trunk, which you might see in summertime. Robins come and pull the worms out of the grass in springtime...or maybe it was glass? It was green, and sharp, and grew along the ground...."

The young explorers watched and listened with fascinated expressions, and when the story was finished, they began to discuss and speculate, getting more and more excited, and within a few minutes were beginning to Sign variations of the stories and creatures. Elenai couldn't help but smile at the delight shining on Role's face.



Over the next few daycycles, Sign showing imagery from the stories began to appear anywhere in the city an Explorer child had been. Giraffes and elephants and birds and snowmobiles decorated walls usually used for announcements, as well as anywhere people had been filling in the gaps with the Graffiti-sign that people sometimes secretly made, in the rare moments that no one was looking. There was even the little person of light that Elenai had seen Nova make, above Textsign saying 'you can see me cause I'm a tree.'

The following daycycle, Elenai was told by the Explorer supervisors to actively discourage what they called “purposeless Sign.” She passed the instructions to her group and led them out onto the path, but as soon as they were alone, Nova tapped her on the shoulder. The ever-curious Explorer asked her whether she thought that birds ate fruit, and a discussion started about what animals in the story ate. Elenai found that she wasn’t willing to stop the discussion, so she asked if anyone could think of a way to be less troublesome, hesitating over that word.

After a moment, a short child suggested only doing one type of art per daycycle, so as to not overwhelm any official sign. By consensus, they agreed that today would be Bird Day, because Nova had asked, and then maybe Elephant Day. That aftermunch and pre-sleep, only birds appeared as Graffiti-sign, and the following daycycles only one type of animal or plant, and it subtly complemented the sign that was already there. The supervisors began to grumble less and less.

Then, by mostly silent consensus across the City, the new Sign moved into times of the daycycle. Before sleep, Sleep Trees would appear in Sign. When it was time to go to work, patterns named that time Flower Hour. When it was time to go home from work, lines of colour and circles of light appeared and faded in the official schedule Sign. They repeated after 7 daycycles, which Role had explained was the one real number that had always been used for daycycles and daycycle sets.

Role, after watching closely from the sidelines, told Elenai that it wasn’t only the Explorers doing this. Many of the adult Cityfolk, especially Growers and other workers, were joining in too.

“People have been working for a long time” they told her, “and they’ve been expressing themselves in Graffiti-sign for a long time, too. They’re really into this.” They frowned. “The Supervisors don’t like it, though. They’ve written a speech for the next Guiding daycycle about ‘getting back on track.’”

Elenai thought for a few moments, and then said “What about the story about the Holiday?” She Signed red, green, and only a tiny bit of blue, and Role’s eyes lit up with recognition.

“The one to celebrate the Shortest Day and the New Beginnings! Perfect!” They grinned, a grin that had been growing ever larger since they had met Elenai. “The Explorers made a lot of coloured lights for that one. Could you remind them of that one beforehand? Because I have an idea!”

And so, on the daycycle of the announcement, after a long and serious introduction from the Supervisors, Role walked out onto the plaza, but

not with the silver official Guide clothing. Instead, they wore a comically large red and white outfit, with a pointy hat framed by two sticks. They were carrying a large bag, painted with many dots of Glowstick Coloursign. More dots of colour appeared along the stage, to quiet shouts of amazement and glee from the otherwise shocked audience.

“It’s NewYearMas”, they declared in a booming voice. “We celebrate the return of colours, of stories, and the end of an endless night. More or less. From today, the weather is always new!”

The expressions and Coloursign of the Supervisors standing behind Role ranged from annoyed to baffled. “Is that not too hot for you, Guide?” asked an elderly Supervisor woman. “It’s really very thick for daily Temperature.”

“It’s for celebration as much as for Cold Temperature. That’s Weather, you know,” replied Role, “But I think we’ve all been cold for a long time in the Dark, and maybe...maybe it’s time to warm up.” They Signed a blue and white pattern, in shapes of crystals and of fluff, which was echoed from various places in the crowd, until the entire plaza was blue and white and somehow powdery. “This can be NewYearMas, and it’s the celebration of a new beginning, a beginning of change!”

A lot of people in the crowd nodded and Signed agreement, including a couple of Supervisors. But, three of the senior Supervisors stepped forward, steely expressions in their eyes backed by solid silver official Sign.

“That is enough. We must not waste the order and pattern we use to survive on these useless...games.” The Seniors’ silver Sign wiped the lights from Role’s bag, and coloured their clothes silver so that they looked merely like a bulkier Guide. “From now on, any Sign that is not for communication or simple expression will be overwritten, and you must all help with this. Remember, we all work together to live, to survive in the dark, and it is only our work that keeps us going.”



The workers of the City had looked down in shame after this, and they went back to how it had been, passing the direction from person to person, following the patterns, the growing of endless moss and mushrooms for repeating meals, only using Sign for direction. Even as day-cycles passed, they did not relent in overwriting Graffitisign until it stopped appearing.

Elenai’s supervisors watched the Explorers all the time, scheduling them on long paths with many goals, with no time to stop and talk,

and no time away from at least two of the adults. They were reminded, in lecture and in sign, of the importance of their work until it felt like that work was all there had ever been. Elenai, stumbling along trying to match the supervisor's directions without turning them blue, stared into the shadows looking for Role. But she couldn't see them. The message "I'm sorry" had appeared painted for a moment on the path to the room with the Girder on the first day, but nothing since, and the other workers glared at her if she went that close to the boundary.

Elenai felt frustrated at first, but that gave way to the familiar emptiness, and that seeped into all of her directive Sign as off-colour blue. The world stayed still, she thought vaguely. But it seemed different this time. It felt like it should have hurt, and more than the moments of disappointment had before. And, while the adults glared down their noses at her at every interruption of blue, the Explorers no longer mocked her. That was new, and it was deeply unsettling, calling in some way to the blue Sign coming out from somewhere in her heart.

And then, out in the pathways near the Boundary and near the Gap, on the edge between reality and unreality, Nova stumbled from the conflicting directions and didn't get up. The supervisor flashed an assistance Sign, but Nova ignored it, and ignored the hesitant outstretched hands of the other Explorers as well.

"What's the point of there being colours at all?" Nova said in a quiet, little voice. "It's just the same over and over. It doesn't need to look all pretty. It doesn't even lead anywhere. It's just circles, going nowhere..."

No one said anything as Nova trailed off into the silence of the dark. No one had the heart to counter this, and it sank, true and hopeless, through the hollow sound of Elenai's own heartbeat, the same beat and cycle every moment, always grey, repeating forever.

No. Not every moment. There had been moments, seeing Role, seeing Nova, seeing *hope*, and they burst through the emptiness in full colour.

*But, how to show it?*

Blue, a comforting blue, flashes in front of Nova's eyes, and they open in surprise, and see Elenai, standing, painting, shining. Rain falls from the light, in a range of blues, from deep blues to light blues, from grey to turquoise and teal, not directly wet, but feeling as if it should be. Instead of soaking in, it flows down the bodies of those it touches, in ripples and patterns and rivers. It shimmers and reflects and flows, like tears, but it feels clear and open, emotion awakened.

It falls from the emptiness above. But, lit by blue light that would

seem a bit off on a person, it isn't empty. The blue defines the emptiness into puffs and wisps of pure white, and all of it is backlit by colours, by absurd purples and oranges and blues of the sunrise from the stories. And the rising sun itself, a warm and golden light, shines from the corner of the sky, and the warmth streaming from it reaches into the cold and lonely hearts of those it touches.

The Explorers, grinning now, stretch out their hands and add more colours, more shapes, more stories to the unfolding scene. Some, who until now could only Sign with a Glowstick, are now painting with their hearts and emotions. The boundary itself cannot be seen, and the light stretches out into it. Colours, dancing, climb a cliff, revealing shapes that may or may not once have been windows, outlining girders leaning against it, twisting around them with the spotted pattern of Giraffe necks. It is like a mountain from the stories, and so they top it with white snow and clouds.

In that white light, a dark shape of spindly sticks appears. It looks like a tree from the stories, and Nova, standing now, Signs it with leaves and flowers. It stands overlooking the City, a green beacon for the City-folk, backed by the blue sky of hope.



Elenai, with Role, walked past the now swirling depths of the once-matte-black puddle to the girder. When they looked closely, they could see handholds and footholds in the metal, and they used them, slowly climbing up and then around, until they reached the top of the 'mountain.'

The tree stood there, black spindly sticks reaching to the sky, with echoes of white and green Sign left around it. Tired from the climb, Role sat down heavily beside it, and Elenai joined them. For a moment, they stared at the clouds, still thick, but not empty or grey, until Elenai noticed something odd about the shape of one of the branches. She pointed it out to Role, and they both stared closely at it, and then looked at each other with astonished smiles.

A tiny leaf was growing on the branch.

## Bo Del Valle Garcia

*Bo Del Valle Garcia (they/them/theirs), is a neurodivergent, queer, gender non-conforming, white settler, tender hearted, femme, witch with chronic illnesses living on unceded and occupied kwakwaka'wakw territories. Bo spends their time growing mushrooms, talking to ghosts, fermenting things, making herbal remedies, and growing food forests. They love to write sci fi and speculative fiction that dives into the connections between nature and queerness. Writing for Bo is an act of healing.*

# Snakeroot and Hemlock

## A YA Short Story

*CW: witch trials, hanging, torture, homophobia, stillbirth, church sermons, swear words*

This is a fictional retelling of the Salem Witch Trials. Many of the names and places are historically accurate. The Sermon given by Minister Parris is a direct quote from Cotton Mather's *The Nature And Reality Of Witchcraft, 1689*.



I can feel the sweat trickling down my back as I make my way through the dense forest. The air still thick with the heat of the Summer even though the sun set hours ago. Thankfully I switched out my usual heavy skirts for a pair of my brother's trousers, outgrown and left behind after his move. Quietly, I slipped them out of the chest at the foot of the bed that Gran and I share, careful not to disrupt her as I snuck out of the house. I never need to worry, Gran is always a mighty sound sleeper and sure enough her loud snores followed me as I exited the house and made my way to the woods.

It is pitch dark under these enormous trees, but soon the moon rises, trickles its light through the canopy, illuminating my way. The days before the full moon, our usual meeting day for we need no lanterns that could give us away, are always the hardest for me. It is always such struggle to conceal the eagerness I feel. My eagerness to see *her*. Abigail. Abi.

Time speeds up in my excited state and before I know it I'm entering our clearing. My stomach flutters as nervousness and excitement

battle it out in my gut, and I trot down the hill that leads to the little hollow by the lake that is our meeting place. I catch a flash of auburn hair. There she is, her willowy figure turned away from me, looking out over the lake.

I freeze, struck by the beauty of this scene. Abi's hair is draped over one of her prominent shoulders, exposing her long freckled neck. Disbelief that this girl is here to see me has frozen me solid. Sometimes I think that it could only possibly be magic that has kept our meetings a secret. How else can we explain the fact that we can keep from giving away our secret affair when we see each other in church, snatching glimpses from the sides of our eyes, sharing quick smiles, or maybe even brushing our hands against each other as we file out of the hall. The latter sends shivers down my spine that would be the end of me if her father, the feared minister, ever noticed.

I'm brought out of my contemplation by the harsh sound of a twig snapping under my foot. Startled, Abi turns her head. Our eyes meet, her green eyes filled with worry, and I'm struck numb under her gaze. Relieved that it is just me and not one of the many horrors that roams these woods at night, her face blooms into a nervous smile, showing the deep gap between her two front teeth. I love flicking my tongue between that gap when we kiss. Now the temptation to go to her is irresistible and before I can blink my feet are pulling the rest of my body towards her. Then I'm in her arms, inhaling the magic of her strawberry scent.

"Oh Abi," I breathe into her long frizzy locks. "This last month seemed endless waiting to see you again!" I manage to pull myself away enough to look into her beautiful face. "You're here."

She looks at me with that familiar shy quality that always tints her face in the beginning of our meetings. "Mama is set to give birth any day now," Abi says in her singsong voice. "The baby pains her at night and is keeping her from sleeping. I had to slip out when she went to relieve herself, which thank goodness is frequently. I was certain she was gonna catch me."

"I fear being found out too, but seeing you makes it worth all of it," I whisper as I pull her close to me again. She resists my pull at first, but then our lips connect. We hungrily taste each other, getting lost in the feeling of each others bodies.

She sighs, and I can feel her body relax as her anxiety ebbs. Pulling away, Abi says, "You know how I feel for you Lu, but I just don't know if I can keep up these meetings. It just doesn't feel right. Father is

bound to catch me one day. The only reason I could sneak out tonight is because he was attending the town meeting and won't be back for a fortnight."

The moonlight pours out of the sky, bathing Abi's face in light and highlighting her worries. I sigh. Part of the reason why these meetings of ours work is that we don't talk about our lives outside of this little hollow. This is the one night we can escape it all and just be together. I sigh, but I also have agreed that it is getting harder.

"Let's not worry about that tonight," I say. "We are here, let's enjoy the night." I pull Abi towards me and we melt into each other's arm once again.

Abi whispers into my ear causing me to shiver: "You look handsome in trousers."



"Lulu Maude Williams!" booms a voice and I am shocked awake. "Get your lazy bones out of bed and tend to those dang chickens. The sun has been up for near two hours!"

I sit straight up, shocked out of my dreams of Abi, the sweetness of her taste still on my lips. I give my head a shake, trying to clear the exhaustion out of my head. I had barely made it back into my bed before sunrise after spending a joyous night chatting and embracing. I had just managed to get back home as the faint rays of the morning sun rose in the distance. Stripping out of my brother's trousers and diving into bed, I instantly fell into a deep slumber. I must have slept past the rooster's crow, and now Gran will be furious.

"If you don't get out of bed this instant I'm gonna bring the switch in there and it will get you out of bed!"

I know Gran would never lay a finger on me, but the threat does the trick and I crawl out of bed, exhausted. I groggily dress and make my way into the kitchen of the house that has been my home since the age of three, when my mother disappeared and I came to live with my Gran. The old farmhouse is a simple two room structure built by my late grandfather, Yarwood Williams, when he and my Gran settled in this immensely forested place.

"Ah, she arises," says Gran as she kneads a heavy brick of dough on the old kitchen table. "There is a pot of mint and spruce tea to help get you started after your late night," Gran winks at me from under her wild mop of curly hair.

Trying to hide the blush in my cheeks, I pour myself a cup of tea

and plop myself down at the table as I inhale the sweet conifer scent of the tea. Taking a sip, the herbs work their magic and I already feel rejuvenated.

Gran gives her dough one final punch and comes to stand beside me. Grabbing my chin between her floured fingers, she surveys my face like she is trying to find something written there. “You remind me so much of your mother sometimes. She was a special one as well. You must be careful though, Lu, or else you will end up like her.”

Gran drops my chin, leaving behind powdered fingerprints, and walks over to the stove to stir whatever herbal concoction she has going. I want to ask her what happened to my mother. To say the words “How did she end up?” But I know that I will receive no response. I never get a response.

“Now clear out of here and tend to your chores, young one. Goody Bishop will be arriving any moment for her treatment,” Gran says through the steam rising from the pot on the stove.

I sigh and stand up to head to the barn, not wanting to get in the way of Gran’s session. I have no talent for healing and once I mistook Hemlock for Queen Anne’s Lace and almost killed Goody Stoten. Now, Gran only asks for my help when she is desperate.



Cock-a-doodle-dooooo!Cock-a-doooooooddddlllleeeeeeee-doooooooooooooo

*Oh what I would give to awake to the sounds of something other than that darn rooster,* I think to myself as I stumble out of bed, dressing messily. I see Gran is already up, having developed that elderly skill of no longer needing sleep. She is most certainly in the kitchen preparing breakfast, or at least that is what my nose tells me as I smell the ham sizzling. I make my way to the barn, mouth watering, wanting to get my chores done quickly and make my way to that ham. With the chickens fed and turned out, I turn my attention to our sweet brown cow, Clover.

“Oh my sweet lady. Your bag is bursting today,” I say to her in the calming voice I reserve for animals and newborn babies. I settle onto the old three-legged stool and get to milking her. The rhythmic swish of the milk hitting the pail and the gentle clucking of the chickens pecking grubs off a crumbling stump lulls me into a relaxed state in the delightfully warm Summer morning. *Swish swish, cluck cluck.*

It has been few days since my meeting with Abi and I’m still floating

in a blissful cloud, as my Gran has been telling me. True, I have been forgetting chores and moving about in a daze, but I couldn't care less. I'm in love!

A chicken runs past me, clucking in panic, and I'm brought crashing out of my latest daydream involving Abi's sweet lips.

"Goody Williams! Goody Williams!" I hear a panicked voice yell from across the yard.

A thrill of excitement mixed with apprehension boils in the pit of my stomach. I know that voice. I hesitate, wondering if I should run and hide, but then curiosity wins out and I step across the yard. Sure enough Thomas Parris, Abi's younger brother, is standing next to a heaving and lathered bay gelding. Thomas doesn't look any better; moisture drips down his forehead and his twelve year old face is tight with anxiety.

"What is it my boy," Gran mutters as she stumbles out of the house, flour covered apron still tied around her wide frame.

"It's Ma," he says. "The baby is stuck and won't come out. They told me to come fetch you because Doc Franklin is away in town at the meeting."

Always calm and quick to act, Gran spots me across the yard. "Lu, go fetch my birthing bag and ready the horses to leave. You'll be coming with me on this one, so get your head on straight."

I stand still in confusion. The Parrises are a devout Puritan family. Samuel Parris, the patriarch of the family, also happens to be the village minister. He has always looked down on Gran and the old healing ways that she brought with her from England. He must still be out of town, otherwise there is no way he would ever let the likes of us into his house. Then a realization dawns on me and I'm a bundle of nerves. This could be another chance to see Abi.

"Get moving girl!" Gran yells to me, snapping me out of my thoughts. I turn heel and eagerly get packing.



We arrive at the Parris household after many hours of riding. Gran sits tall on her horse, her shoulders tall and proud, but I can see the exhaustion that the ride took of her aging body. The Parris' farm is a sprawling property just on the outskirts of the village. Thomas leads us up to the large two-story main house and comes to a halt, jumping off his own horse, now thoroughly exhausted and grabbing both of our reins as Gran and myself dismount.

“Tommy! Thank goodness you’re back,” I hear from the doorway, as Betty, Abi’s older sister frantically runs out the door towards us. “Goody Williams, Lulu. Thank the Lord you’re here! Ma is upstairs, and it’s not looking good,” she says, gesturing towards the open doorway, which now holds the object of my infatuation. Abi.

Abi stands there, hesitating in the old oak doorway. She has a weary look to her that makes me want to walk up to her and stroke her hair until she falls asleep in my arms. We make eye contact and a smile spreads across my face. She looks away, focusing on picking a loose thread on the front of her dress.

Gran, having collected her birthing bag, nudges me with her shoulder and whispers, “Get yourself together girlie. Best be careful around here.”

A fresh blush makes its way across my face and I pretend to check the girth on my horse until the colour pases.

Gran turns to Betty. “Well, best be getting up those stairs then. Lead the way.”



I dip the cloth back into the bowl, soaking up the last drops of water and using it to wipe the sweat and tears from the face of Elizabeth Parris. Gran and I have been tending to her for hours now, the sun having set a long while ago. I feel her tense under my hand. The pains are returning. Elizabeth’s face contorts as her moans reverberate around the room. I don’t understand how she can keep going and right then vow to never have children. At least I no longer feel the butterflies in my stomach from Abi being so close. All I feel now is exhaustion.

“Something is wrong, isn’t it?” pants Elizabeth. Not for the first time.

Betty, who has been holding her mother’s hand for much of the last many hours, looks to Gran with a pleading face. “You must do something! Anything!”

Gran takes a slow deep breathe, and I can see the strain in the wrinkles around her eyes deepen as she contemplates her next words carefully. “There is one thing we can do,” she says with a sigh on her lips. “There is an herb. A medicine that grows in the forest near here. The snakeroot plant.”

Abi, who has been curled up in the corner rocking herself pipes in, “I know that plant! I have seen it growing in the woods near the stream.”

Another moan escapes Elizabeth's lips as the pains once again con-tort her into a ball. Abi stands up. "I can go get it. It won't take me long."

"You can't go alone this time of night, it's dangerous," says Betty, looking like leaving her mother's side is the last thing she wants to do at this moment.

"I'll go with you," I say, trying to hide my eagerness at the thought of being alone with Abi.

"No, I can..." Abi starts to say but is cut off by Elizabeth's moans as a new round of pains start up.

I see Gran turn to me with a look of concern in her eyes, but I avoid looking at her. "So be it," she says.

The trip to harvest the snakeroot plant goes faster than I had antici-pated and we say little to each other the entire way there and back. Abi leads the way, marching ahead with the plant in her hands. I can see why they call it snakeroot. The flowers of the plants look just like the tail of a rattlesnake. I watch as the plants bob up and down in Abi's tight grip and I imagine the rattling sound as we walk.

I yearn so much to touch her that I can no longer handle it. Now we have reached the edge of the forest and I can see the house just ahead. I call out to Abi, "Wait!" and trot to cover the space between us.

She turns to me with a look of utter despair and I can no longer resist. I place my hand on her face, wiping the tears that have puddled on her cheek. "Abi. It is going to be ok," I say. "Gran is going to heal your mother and everything is going to be just fine."

"No, it's not!" she yells, grabbing my hand and tearing it off her face, now crumpling into despair. "This is all my fault."

"What? No, it's not. You haven't done anything wrong," I say, hold-ing her hand tight and refusing to let go.

"God is punishing me," she says. "He is punishing me for the in-decent things we have done together. I was weak and I gave into the Devil and now God is going to take away my mother." Her face is now covered in angry tears.

I'm flabbergasted. How could she think that the love we shared be-tween us was anything less than wonderful? Panic starts to rise into my throat at what Abi is saying and the thought that I could be losing her. Desperation seeps into my limbs and before I even register what I'm doing I frantically kissing her, pressing my lips to hers with all the force of my love for her. Trying to show her that this is wonderful and beautiful and that nothing evil could ever be made from our bodies being together.

Abi is kissing me back, melting into the comfort of the feeling of our bodies touching, but that soon wears off and I feel her stiffen. I pull away and look into her eyes, so full of sorrow. I am lost now. Not knowing what to do or how to comfort her I stand there, still holding her hand in silence.

Suddenly there is a rustle in the bushes to our left and we both turn in tandem. Standing there, mouth agape in silent shock is Betty, a full bucket of water hanging from her hand. She must have been on her way back to the house after collecting water from the well. I'm frozen. Beside me, Abi forcefully drops my hand and steps away from me, a look of utter shame turning her face ugly. Betty, coming to her senses, storms back to the house, spilling most of the contents of the bucket along the way.

Abi follows along behind saying, "Betty. Betty, wait. Let me explain." But Betty doesn't stop, entering the house and slamming the door. Abi is close behind her.

I'm left standing there alone in the dark, with nothing but my confusion and shame to keep me company. I'm too shocked to even register any other feelings. What am I going to do? I stay standing outside for what seems like eternity before I gather enough courage to enter the house. Back in the birthing room, Gran is finishing preparing the snakeroot tonic for Elizabeth, who is moaning in agony and exhaustion. Betty is there standing next to her mother, refusing to make eye contact with me. Abi is nowhere to be found.

"Bout time you found your way back," grumbles Gran. She hands me the wooden bowl that she had been stirring. "Take this and feed it to Elizabeth in small spoonfuls."

Moving closer to Elizabeth's bedside, I gather a spoonful and press it towards Elizabeth's lips. She slurps it down, coughing and gagging on the noxious brew.

"Eat it all up now, Elizabeth," coos Gran. "Nasty stuff I know, but it is going to do the trick."

Sure enough, after a few spoonfuls of the tonic Elizabeth gives a loud moan. Gran, surveys Elizabeth's birth canal and announces, "It's close now, Elizabeth. Just a few more pushes."

Elizabeth clenches down on Betty's hand and I can see the effort in her brow. "That's it now," says Gran. "Just one more good push."

With one final grunt, Elizabeth strains with the last of her strength, and Gran rises with a baby in her arms. Elizabeth and Betty cry out in relief, but something is not right. I can see it written all over Gran's face. The baby boy is not crying, not moving. The baby is dead.



I wake and the sun is already high in the sky. Turning to my left I see that Gran is already up. She must have let the chickens out this morning. Although it has been a week since the birth, Gran, noticing my despondency, has been letting me sleep in. Guiltily, I climb out of bed and head into the kitchen.

“Morning girlie,” says Gran. “Today is church day, so you better get on your Sunday best and get ready to go.”

“Ugh,” I grumble. “Why church? We only go to church on special occasions.”

“Sometimes it’s best to make an appearance,” says Gran looking at me from the corner of her eye, and I can’t help but think there is a hidden meaning behind her words.

After the long journey, we arrive at the village church, a large building that also functions as the meeting hall and general community space. We are the last to arrive, and I can hear the sermon starting.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” booms the voice of Samuel Parris, echoing through the cracks in the planks of the church building.

We tether our horses up to the hitching post outside and make our way into the building as quietly as possible. Opening the large double doors of the hall, a loud creak from the hinges announces our entrance. The entire crowd turns to look at us and a collective gasp bounces around the room. I stop in my tracks, uncertain of how to continue. People begin to whisper to their neighbours, and although I can’t hear what they are saying, the angry glares directed towards us make it clear who the topic of the angst is. I look to the front of the room and I see Elizabeth and Betty Parris glaring daggers at us, and next to them is Abi, her rigid back turned, trying her best to ignore us. Gran grabs my hand and pulls me to an empty bench near to our right.

“As I was saying.” Samuel Parris clears his throat loudly and begins again. “Such an hellish thing there is witchcraft in the world. There are two things which will be desired for the advantage of this assertion. It should first be show’d, what witchcraft is; my hearers will not expect from me an accurate definition of the vile thing; since the grace of God has given me the happiness to speak without experience of it. But from accounts both by reading and hearing I have learn’d to describe it so. Witchcraft is the doing of strange things by the help of evil spirits, covenanting with the woeful children of men. This is the diabolical art

that witches are notorious for.”

I turn to my Gran, making eye contact and gulping. I can see the worry in her eyes and she grabs my hand to give it a squeeze.

The sermon goes on in a similar fashion for another hour. Minister Parris preaching on the horrors of witches and cautioning us to be dutiful in guarding against the temptations of the Devil. As the sermon wraps up, Gran and I gather our things with the intent of leaving quickly and without a fuss. We make it to our horses and start untethering them from the post before I hear the first yell of “Witch!” from the crowd.

“Just keep going,” says Gran, not looking up from her work. “Don’t look back at them.”

I’m just about to put my foot into the stirrup when I hear the voice of Betty Parris behind me. “It was her. She was the one that bewitched my sister and killed my baby brother! She is a witch!”

I stop. I know that this is bad. Turning to look at the crowd that has formed at the front of the hall, I see Betty standing there, pointing at me. Her face a mask of rage.

With rising panic, I manage to stammer out, “Me? I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did,” screams Betty. “I saw you, in the woods. You put a spell on my sister. You bewitched her into doing evil things. Then you poisoned my mother, killing our unborn baby brother. You are a monster.”

“No, no. I did none of that,” I yell back at her. “I love your sister and she loves me.”

At that point Minister Parris steps in, “Blasphemy! No daughter of mine would ever sin in such a way. This beast is lying. Trying to poison our minds.”

Now I can do nothing but stand there and stutter. I look to Abi, standing off to the side, head down and avoiding eye contact.

My mind pleads for her raise her head, and I squeak out a pitiful, “Abi?”

She raises her beautiful face to look at me and I can see the play of emotions in her eyes. “Yes, it’s true. I was bewitched,” she says quietly.

Betrayal creeps into my limbs. Now I am starting to get angry at the injustice of it all. “I did no such thing!” I yell angrily. “She is lying. We are in lo...”

Before I can finish that sentence, Betty drops to the ground, writhing and stirring up a cloud of dust with her frantic movements.

The crowd around us gasps, and a single scream sounds from the back.

“Stop it, you heathen witch!” yells Minister Parris. “Now she is torturing my eldest daughter.”

After surveying the procession in her usual and unnerving calm matter, Gran decides to intervene. “Enough of this foolish behaviour. My granddaughter is no more a witch than your daughters. They were just enjoying some kinship as all young ones do.”

“Lies!” spits out minister Parris in fury. “You aren’t one to talk. You are a broodmare for heathen witches. Your daughter was such a beast and this one is no different.”

Betty’s writhing grows faster and more erratic. “Someone seize these witches and stop this torture!” yells a voice from the crowd.

I look to Gran and now I can see worry in her eyes, which frightens me more than anything else.

Then the village magistrate, John Hawthorne, steps up. “That’s enough. Stop your antics this instant.” He grabs both mine and my Grans hands, and binds them with rope.

Betty stops her convulsions, remaining in the dirt and glaring up at me. Abi is nowhere to be found.



I lay crying, with my head in Gran’s lap. She strokes my hair trying to comfort me by singing the songs of her childhood. Songs about fairies and changelings and the wild coast of her English home. There is no comfort to be found here, though. Not in this cold dank prison. It has been days since we were arrested at church, but in my grief I haven’t felt the passing of time anyway. I am consumed with the heartbreak of Abi’s betrayal.

At some point during the past days, Magistrate Hawthorne took us to Ingersoll’s Ordinary, the village inn and tavern, for separate questioning. I barely remember the questions or my answers, but I left feeling an utter hopelessness for our situation.

“What are we going to do, Gran?” I weep into her the folds of her dress.

“Have no fear young one. Have faith that all will be well.” Gran tucks a length of hair behind my ear.

“How can you be so sure?” I moan with the sorrow and desperation of our situation.

“I just know. I just know,” she says with a resigned certainty. “Lu, I

have something I need to tell you. I probably should have told you all this long ago, but it seems that soon, young one, I may well be leaving you. When I do, you must trust in your mother.”

“My mother?” I ask, confused.

“The time has come to tell you her story. Your story as well.” She says softly. “You see, this is not the first time our family has been accused of witchcraft. Your mother endured this fate as well. She, like you and me, shared a love with a girl. You will hear things about her in the times yet to come. Do not believe what you hear. Us healers, us *others*, with always be condemned. Trust in your mother.”

I turn over her words in my mind. Questions bubble up to my lips but Gran silences me and rocks me gently, humming a sweet song I do not recognize.



I hear the rattling of keys in the door. The day of our trial has arrived. Butterflies and hunger dance a jig in my belly and my body shakes uncontrollably.

One of the constables, the one who has been guarding our cell, enters, binding us once again, but this time in chains. “Now best behave yourself today,” he says. Our only response is a weary silence that seems to satisfy him.

He leads us down the street to the meeting hall, where a large crowd has gathered and is pouring out of the building. From the looks of it, the entire village is present. As we draw nearer we hear the whispers of the crowd and I can catch the word “witch” more than once. We climb the stairs and enter the front door of the meeting hall. The pews are packed with people and as I survey the crowd I see more than one familiar face. People I had considered friends and even family now stare at me with a mixture of fear and contempt and I look to the ground to avoid their stares. Beside me Gran stands tall, keeping her eyes ahead, and I wish I had her courage.

The constable gives us a tug and I let him pull me down the centre aisle and forcefully push me into one of the two chairs set at the front of the crowd. The hall before us now holds a podium, upon which stands Magistrate Hawthorne.

Satisfied that we are settled, Hawthorne rises, facing the crowd and begins by saying, “Welcome to the Court of Oyer and Terminor. Today we will be judging the guilt or innocence of one Lulu Maude Williams, and one Bridgid Williams, who stand before you accused of witchcraft.

Let us begin.”

“Constable,” says Hawthorne. “Please bring the first Accused to the podium.”

The constable grabs the back of my soiled collar and forces me to rise, half dragging me to the front of the room, and deposits me in a chair to the left of Hawthorne. Now that I am facing the crowd, I can see that the front row consists of the Parris family, including Abi, who looks drawn and thin.

Hawthorne mops the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief, and I wish my hands were untied so that I could do the same; the hall is stuffy and hot with the added heat from all these bodies.

“Lulu Maude Williams. You stand accused of horrendous and sickening acts of witchcraft. These include contriving with the Devil under the full moon to bewitch a young girl forcing her to do ungodly acts to pleasure you in an attempt to bring her over to the Devil. Also, spreading the Devil’s reach into this young girl’s family by poisoning a pregnant woman with the herbs of Hell, causing stillbirth.” Hawthorne takes a breathe, letting these accusations stir up a cacophony of yells from the crowd. “Silence! Silence!” he yells, motioning with his hand and looking to me, “Lulu Maude, how do you plead?”

My throat closes in panic. I look to the crowd and I can see Betty and Elizabeth Parris boring holes into my body. I search the crowd, looking for any friendly face, but cannot find a single one until my eyes land on Gran. Composed and proud, she nods to me in encouragement, giving me the courage to answer. “N ...not guilty.”

Hawthorne looks to me and I can see that he expected this answer, but that I did not sway him. “Have you made no contract with the Devil then?”

“Contract?” I say, vexed. “No! No I haven’t”

“Who then, gave you the beastly powers to bewitch young Abigail Parris?” says Hawthorne. “Was it your mother? A known witch who defiled another young girl as well. Controlling her to do perverse acts much as you have done to poor Abigail!”

At the mention of my mother, my fear shifts to anger. Emboldened, I make eye contact with Hawthorne for the first time. “I did not bewitch her. I have said this before! We are in love, or were in love.” At this I look to Abi, her face showing an emotion I have never seen her direct at me before: disgust.

“Abigail Parris, is this true? Do you love this girl?” asks Hawthorne, almost mockingly.

Abi takes a breath. "I do not. I never have. I was bewitched into doing evil things. I was hoodwinked into doing the Devil's bidding, by her." At this, Abi raises her slender arm and points to me.

Now I am furious at this betrayal, "She is lying!" I scream through the tears falling down my face. "I never did anything but love her!" Now I turn to Abi, pleading her to change her mind, "We shared kisses. We made lo ..."

Betty drops to the planked floor of the old hall, and begins writhing and moaning in what looks like agony. This time though, she is not alone. Two other girls, Susan Prentice and Dorcas Abernathy, friends of Betty's, follow suit. The three of them convulse on the floor, the screams of in the background feeding their frenzy.

Over the cacophony Hawthorne bellows at me: "Why do you hurt these children?"

"I do not hurt them!" I yell back. "I'm not doing anything!"

The convulsing continues and the bulging vein in Hawthorne's forehead tells me he is losing his patience. "I will ask you once again," he yells over the noise. "Why do you hurt these children?"

"I do not hurt ..." I begin to scream again, but this time I am interrupted by Gran rising from her chair.

"Enough!" she screams from the pit of her stomach. "Enough of these antics. It is me. I am the witch. I am the one who bewitched these young girls. I am the one who poisoned Elizabeth Parris. It is me." At these last words all the girls stop their writhing, and Gran looks to me. "Lu has had nothing to do with any of it. I had also bewitched her and made her do my bidding. She is innocent."

All of the oxygen leaves my body and for a moment I'm certain I am going to fall to the ground. *No!* My mind screams. This can't be. I look at Gran, begging her with my eyes to take that all back. Gran returns my look with a smile, mouthing "trust."

"Well, there it is, ladies and gentlemen," says Hawthorne to the gasping crowd. "We have our conviction. Bridgid Williams, you are found guilty of witchcraft and are sentenced to death by hanging."

"No!" I cry out. "No, please! Someone help. Gran! Not Gran!" She straightens her back, the picture of courage. I take a step towards her, wanting to grab her hand, to hold it tight until she make this madness stop, but the constable closes his fists around my collar once again and I am dragged out of the hall and down the road back to the cell. The constable tosses me into the cell and slams the door behind him.

"Please, no!" I cry, grabbing at the bars on the door. "Not Gran, she

didn't do anything! PLEASE!"

"It's too late, you heathen bitch," the constable scowls at me through his gapped teeth. "See, you can hear them stringing your Gran up now. Soon she'll been done hanged."

I stop my cries to listen to the sounds coming through the window from down the street. The crowd is chanting "witch, witch!" Then there is a loud thump, followed by loud cheers from the crowd.



I don't know how long it has been since the trial. The days meld into each other in this dark underground cell. Listless and numb, I no longer feel the hunger tearing apart my gut, or the fleas and lice that bite at my skin. I no longer even feel the pain of what Abi did to me. I'm lost. With Gran gone, there is only darkness and pain.

The constable visits to slip me gruel every so often. From him I learn that they intend to convict me still. They are waiting for a specialist to arrive to do so. "The Witch Hunter" is what the constable calls him. Apparently he is a pro at getting witches to confess, and the constable was not shy about sharing some of the techniques this witch hunter uses. I can't even move through the numbness to feel afraid.



"He's here to kill the witch. He's here to kill the witch. All hail the witch hunter, he's here to kill the witch," sings the constable as he stomps down the stairs to my cell. I don't rouse myself to look, I am so weak with hunger.

He unlocks the door and trots up to me eagerly. I feel hands slip under my armpit as the constable hoists me to standing. "Come now witch, we have a special guest for you," he says with glee.

"William, come here and help with this one, she's feeling faint," he says to his helper, his voice oozing mock concern.

Together they drag me up from the cell and into the first light I have seen in God knows how long. The light blinds me and I have to shield my eyes as I stumble down the road.

"Ah, 'tis a sign of a true witch," says William, letting me drop to the ground in fear. "They can't stand the sunlight."

I lay in the dirt of the road, turning my head to the side to catch my breath. My eyes starting to adjust to the sunlight. Now I can make out my surroundings better and I find myself staring directly at a familiar shape. It's Gran! Gran is alive! I start to rouse myself into a crouch,

crawling towards her. *Gran will fix this all*, I think to myself. I crawl through the dirt as the two men argue, into the shade of a tree and the change of light reveals the scene in front of me. It is Gran for sure, but a noose is wrapped around her neck as she hangs from a wooden structure. The wind picks up and she sways in the breeze, rotating to face me. Her face is contorted and ghostly pale. Her eyes are dark holes in her face, picked clean by scavengers.

The grief that had been weighing me down now transforms into rage and it pulls me up until I am standing before my Gran. *I will avenge you*, I think to myself.

“Oh don’t be a wuss now,” says the constable, grabbing my arm. “She is getting away.” Williams grabs my other arm and they pull me away, leading me to the hall once again.

The scene is much the same as before. A gasping crowd yells “witch!” at me as I mount the stairs and enter the crowded hall. As soon as I enter, the same three girls begin their convulsions on the floor. Hawthorne stands at the front of the hall, but this time he is joined by another man that I do not recognize. He is a short and thick man, who carries himself as a bulldog might, with his chest puffed out to hide his small stature. He has a thick mustache on his upper lip that curls up at the corners of his mouth. This must be the Witch Hunter.

“Silence! Silence!” Booms Hawthorne, and the crowd settles down. Even the convulsing girls grow still on the floor.

The Witch Hunter takes a step forward, “Magistrate Hawthorne has outlined to me the proceedings of the previous trial in great detail.” He pauses and gestures to a black medical bag sitting on the table behind him before continuing, “I am well prepared to preside over this trial. Have no fear, Salem Village. *I will* get to the bottom of this.”

The Witch Hunter turns and walks to the bag. He snaps it open, reaches a hand into the bag and pulls out a large rock. “Bring the accused witch.”

The constable pushes me ahead to the front of the hall. The Witch Hunter eyes me up and down before asking, “Do you, Lulu Maude Williams, now admit to your accusations of witchcraft? Your grandmother, a convicted witch, is now dead. You will face a worse fate if you do not confess.”

I look him dead in the eye, furious that he would even talk about my Gran. “I will not!” I state with all the authority I can muster. “I am innocent!”

“Then let it begin,” he says with a smile. “Tie her down.”

The constable and William grab a hold of my arms and pull me to the ground. I struggle with all my might, but the starvation has left me with little strength. Soon they have me pinned to the ground, face up, and my arms and legs have been tied to clasps in the floor. They then place a heavy wooden board on top of my body. I try to roll to the side to throw it off, but my restraints prevent much movement and the board remains.

“Start with the weighting,” says the Witch Hunter.

The constable and William start placing rocks on the board on top of me. I keep struggling but others from the crowd jump forward to hold down my limbs. Soon the weight of the rocks is unbearable and I’m gasping to get a breath in.

“Let us try this again, young witch.” says the Witch Hunter. “Are you ready to confess your crimes now? Have you signed your name in The Book of the Devil?”

I can barely take a breath, let alone speak, but I manage to weaze out, “I ...am ...innocent ...”

“More weights!” Bellows the witch hunter.

They resume putting rocks on top of me. My breath is coming in short gasps now and a sharp snap tells me that one of my ribs has broken. I’m sure the end is here and I find comfort in knowing that soon I will be with my Gran.

“STOP THIS ATROCITY!” I hear a voice yell from the crowd. I manage to turn my head enough to see where the command came from. There stands a group of about 6 women. They are the most beautiful women I have ever seen, each with a distinct wildness to them. Sun-touched and muscular, they wear trousers and have untamed and plaited hair. One of the women walks forward, and there is something about her that I can almost recognize.

“You people never learn, do you?” she asks of the crowd. “Now let my daughter go.”

A gasp sounds throughout the crowd and I hear a name bouncing around the room: Rose. This woman is my mother. My heart starts to flutter in relief.

The Witch Hunter steps forward. “My, my, my. Well if it isn’t the infamous Rose Williams. I have been hunting you and your coven of devilish whores for many years. I thought this little ruse with your daughter might pull you out of whatever hellhole you have been hiding in,” he says as he heads towards his black bag.

My mother fixes him with a glare that drips with hatred. “I will only

say this one more time Witch Hunter. Let my daughter go.”

The Witch Hunter chuckles to himself before yelling out, “SEIZE THEM!”

All the men from the crowd rush towards these women, hands outstretched, ready to seize them and bind them. I catch my breath, worrying that this will be the end for these women, that they will face the same fate as me and my Gran. My mind is yelling “run!” to them, but these women do not run. Instead they form a circle, clasping hands.

Together, in perfect timing they start chanting, “Sisters in this circle, come to no harm. Sisters in this circle, channel your power. Sisters in this circle, we call upon the Goddess.”

A bright light emanates from the center of their circle, growing in magnitude. The crowd starts to panic and crawl over each other to reach the door, but invisible hands slam it shut and latch it. There is no escape for them.

My mother drops the hands of the women beside her and enters the circle. She begins speaking loudly to drown out the cries of the crowd. “Goddess, we invoke you. Goddess, we are your servants. Please lend us your power so that we can save one of our sisters.”

A flash of blinding light pulses throughout the hall and I have to blink my eyes rapidly to regain my sight. My breath is coming harder now and I don’t know how much longer I can last with these weights on my chest.

The Witch Hunter, who had been watching the spell with a mix of fascination and fury, reaches into his bag and pulls out a pistol. Whipping around, he aims at my mother and pulls the trigger. The gun fires and the bullet speeds through the air, hitting my mother in the chest, spinning her around. A silent scream catches in my throat, leaving my beaten body as a whimper.

But my mother doesn’t fall. Instead she stands tall, facing the Witch Hunter and raising her hand to show a bullet grasped in her fingertips. She pulls her arm back and throws the bullet back at the Witch Hunter. It zips through the air, faster than if a gun had shot it, and hits the Witch Hunter directly between the eyes. He crumples to the ground, dead, soaking the ground with his blood.

The panic in the crowd grows and people start screaming in desperate fear. Many now cower in the corners of the hall. My mother surveys the hall as she says, “You all may remember me. You set out to destroy me once before. Casting me aside as if I was a lowly *RAT*.” As she says “rat,” the crowd starts screaming, moaning in agony. Then

they start shrinking, shedding their clothes and sprouting fur, ears and tails, until there is a mischief of rats running about in the hall. Finding cracks in the walls and floor boards, they scurry out of the hall, leaving me stunned and alone with the witches.

My mother crumbles to the floor, looking exhausted. One of the other woman rushes to her side, cradling her head. “Rose, are you okay? That was too much power to channel alone.”

My mother opens her eyes and smiles. “Prudence, my love. I’m fine. Help my Lu.”

The women rush towards me, removing the weights from my chest and I am able to take my first full breath in far too long. I suck the air in, but stop short, cut off by the stabbing pain in my ribs. The same woman who ran to my mother, Prudence, puts a hand on my chest and the pain subsides enough to allow me to rise.

“It will take some time, but those bones will heal,” she says.

With her help I manage to stand upright. Hesitantly, she guides me to my mother, who has also managed to rise, and although exhausted she beams with happiness.

“Oh, Lu,” she says as she wraps her arms around me gently. “You cannot imagine how long I have been waiting to hug you. I am sorry we took so long, but we were in a distant land and it took us many days to get to you.”

I start shaking in shock, and the only thing that can leave my lips before I breakdown in to tears is “Gran.”

“I know, sweet. I know. Your Gran was the best of them. I knew she would care for you well. She will be greatly missed, but wait until the fall, on Samhain. We will teach you the ritual and you will get to see her once again.”

“Rose, we best be going before more show up,” cautions Prudence.

“Yes, my love. You are always right,” my mother says giving Prudence’s hand a squeeze. “Lu, my dear. Meet Prudence, my wife.”

I look at the women standing next to my mother: tall and stately with short cropped hair. Although I’m beaten, bruised, and betrayed, seeing the smiles they share together gives me hope.

## Liina Koivula

*Liina is a nonbinary writer, white settler, and an alumni of The Evergreen State College. Other writing includes perzines “It’s All Right” and “I’m Looking for the Magic”, short fiction in both of Writers 4 Utopia’s earlier zines, and a personal essay on religious experience as a queer person in Handbasket Quarterly No. 2. Liina has done the typesetting for all three W4U zines.*

# The Underway

*CW: alcohol and cannabis use.*

“Lookin’ sharp!” I complimented myself in the mirror, knocking the brim of my cap to the side and flicking an invisible speck off my bowtie. I plucked the ironed creases at the hems of my short sleeves and breathed on my fingernails, pretending to buff them on my imaginary lapel, like a rich guy in a cartoon. I gave myself a serious look, then a huge smile. I inspected between my teeth and made a growling mean face. I willed my upper lip to cover my weird tooth and smiled again, more carefully. I’d gotten marked down on the uniform scan for it once. I stood back to admire the whole of my uniform. Royal blue cap, red bowtie, powder blue shirt tucked into royal blue pleated slacks, everything pressed and starched, shiny red patent leather oxfords. The straight-legged, high-waisted slacks made my legs look even longer than they were, and I briefly considered how good I’d look on stilts, with an extra, like, 48 inches of leg. It would draw attention away from my string-bean arms. I was ready to host passengers as a Porter on the last-ever trans-Atlantic train ride on the Underway, underground and under water, on magnetic levitation tracks.

I’d do it right this time. They’d enhanced the training stream to be more interactive, with improved intelligence performing the evaluations. The uniform scan (*simply take a selfie with a timer showing your whole uniform and tap “accept”*) was points-based: more points for a bowtie tied properly than a clip-on, more points for the shiny patent leather shoes than the dull, comfortable carmine ones, more points for sharp creases than flat-ironed sleeves. I got the highest uniform rating, increasing my estimated tip percentage. I’d passed the uniform scan before, but the standards hadn’t been as rigorous, then—the intelligence couldn’t tell the difference between a tied-tie and a clip on, for example.

*Some of our guests may be on the last ride of their lives. If you are attentive and anticipate their needs, these guests tend to tip 20% more per service and 25% more overall than guests who either expect to experience a future ride, or guests who have to tap their device for service. Everyone on this trip knew it would be their last ride.*



“Are you sure that another Underway gig is the best thing for you right now?” My roommate Blaze swiveled around in his luxe office chair, away from one of the screens he was using to check the angles of his next livestream. I hovered in the doorway of his bedroom. He picked up a big glass bong off the bookshelf by his desk, among a cluster of other glass bongs, crystals, sage bundles, and energy bar wrappers, poked at the overflowing bowl. He had a channel where he reviewed weed and doled out astrology-based relationship advice. Improbably, he made money doing this. He said growers were basically begging him to try their products. One of the cannabis companies had even sponsored his expensive, ergonomic seating, which looked out of place among the rest of his mismatched thrift-store furniture.

I willed myself not to crinkle the red silk tie in my clammy hands and stain it with my sweat. I draped it over my shoulder to stop touching it. Blaze glanced back and forth between me and his screens, unable to decide where to focus. “Last time you didn’t even make enough tips to stay somewhere nice in Lisbon,” he pointed out.

“Well, I did stay somewhere nice, in Suely’s room.”

“Sleeping on the *floor*,” Blaze chuckled. “Aries and Capricorn.” He shook his head.

“It was only fair that she gave me a place to stay. She pretty much ripped me off for the tips I did make.”

“You lost at poker,” Blaze turned back to his screens and fluffed up his messy hair that viewers must have found charming. “That’s not the same as getting ripped off.”

“She knew I wasn’t able to think clearly, I had that bad cold—”

“You were wasted.”

“It was the cough syrup Harlan gave me!”

“Well, you weren’t making *any* tips sneezing all over the” here he used an exaggerated airquote “*guests* and we told you not to drink while you were on it. Anyway, that gig sucked. I’d never do it again.”

“The training is better now,” I continued, steamrolling his bad attitude. “And wait until you see the new uniforms!”

Blaze put up a hand. “Taurus Moon. Fuck uniforms.”

He and I had been Underway porters two years back, subletting our apartment to a working band from Japan who were in Seattle to record an album. They paid the equivalent of three months of our rent for three weeks’ lodging, which saved my ass when I came home more or less broke. It was still unclear to me what exactly Blaze had done to make such good tips. I knew him as a slob with an antiauthoritarian streak and a vocal opposition to ass-kissing.

“Well, I’m doing it differently this time,” I said, after a pause long enough that Blaze assumed I’d left. He spun around, a little startled, and looked at me expectantly.

“From Lisbon, I’m going to the Baiknor Cosmodrome.”

“Oh yeah, I guess the train doesn’t come back, huh?” They’d found unexpected structural damage in the underground, under water tunnel after only 5 years of use. It was guaranteed one more safe run, statistically. There would not be an effort to repair the damage; it was deemed too dangerous for workers. “But what even is this ‘cosmodrome’?”

My announcement had not had the desired effect, even with the built-in inference.

“Dude. The rocket launch? I’m going to Mars.”

Blaze frowned.



Back in my room, I slammed together a box and the packing tape got all fucked up. I ripped off the twisted part and it got worse. I drop-kicked the box and it knocked over a half-glass of water. “Haste makes waste,” I hissed through clenched teeth. I took a deep breath and tossed a dirty t-shirt on top of the spilled water, stepping on it for absorption and getting my sock wet. I re-did the box. I took all of the books off a shelf and stacked them in the box. I went to lift it but it was too heavy. I put the books back on the shelf. My uniform caught my eye, hanging on the back of the door. I tried it on and admired myself, thinking of my tip calculation score: 31% on average in my guest interaction evaluations on the training stream. With 12 guests, I’d make more than enough for a couple of luxurious nights in Lisbon before leaving Earth. I’d look up Suely. She’d quit mid-trip and stayed.



When we disembarked in Lisbon, during the previous stint, it was drizzling. We were all a little dazed. The time released meds, natural

concentrates we were required to take to stay awake for the 54 hour train trip—were wearing off. My cough was worse. I wanted to go to bed for 54 hours, but we wouldn't even be in Lisbon that long. I had maybe enough money for a meal or two if I stretched it, not even enough for a shared room in the hostel closest to the port. I couldn't ask Blaze to lend me money—he and Harlan, barely able to keep their hands off each other during the poker game, had already disappeared.

I had tea and a pastry in the hostel's 24-hour café and was feeling miserable, trying not to fall asleep while pretending to read a Portuguese newspaper. I couldn't even read Portuguese.

"Hey," Suely approached me, engulfed in an oversized hoodie with her straight, dark hair down and the hood up. She looked haggard, and it was disarming. I'd only seen her in her spotless uniform, hair in a bun, crisp and collected even when she was sipping booze and kicking my ass at cards.

"Oh hey," my voice came out froggy and I tried unsuccessfully to clear my sore throat. It sounded gross.

"You got a place to stay?"

I briefly considered lying, to look less desperate, but thought I might have a chance with Suely if I made her feel sorry for me. It wouldn't be difficult—I was feeling pretty sorry for myself.

"No," I sniffled, "I honestly don't know what I'm gonna do. I guess go back to the train station and try to stay awake."

Suely was shaking her head, frowning at her phone and forwarding me the scan code to her private room in the adjacent hostel. "That will never work, you absolutely have to sleep before the next shift. Believe me, I've been a Porter since the first run of the Underway—I've seen folks try it." She was the Lead Porter now, with access to the Control Room in case any automation should go wrong.

The code arrived on my screen with a ping. "Use the side entrance. I only paid for one person. I'm heading up before I fall asleep standing."

She was already under the covers when I got in, several minutes later—I tried to be conscientious and give her enough time to get ready for bed. I sat gingerly on the edge of the mattress.

"Uh-uh," she mumbled sternly at the movement from my weight. A hand came out from under the duvet, finger pointing towards a pile of pillows and blankets she'd thrown on the floor.

"Gotcha," I rasped.

"No talking. Sleeping only." For maybe the only time in my life, I was OK with that. Suely pulled the covers over her head.

Back stateside, I friended Suely on The Social Network. She added me back, but she didn't send me a message or anything. She was tagged in photos on picturesque farms with all these scruffy queer travelers who somehow made work clothes look hot, or smiling, sweaty and sequined at dance parties, holding a cigarette and getting kissed by some glamorous babe. I wondered if they played poker. She never engaged with my posts.



Blaze appeared in my doorway, catching me in my uniform. He smiled a little.

“OK—it does look pretty spiffy.”

I beamed in the mirror. “I know, right?”

“I just,” he took a deep breath. “I’m not saying this for my own benefit, because we’ve been through a lotta shit together as roomies and I kind of can’t imagine living with anyone else. But for real, who else is gonna tell you this but the guy who’s been living with you for three years?”

We’d known each other longer. We met on a dating app and smoked two joints in my dorm room on our first date. We tried making out and it felt like a chore. But we stayed friends and when I dropped out of school the first time, abandoning my partially completed undergraduate degree in anthropology, Blaze happened to need a roommate.

He looked at the floor and chewed a hangnail. “I notice you always do the same thing twice. You always go backwards, or like, forget that you hated something or you weren’t good at it and you try again hoping for different results.” He looked up, “What if you let it go, did something new, went forward? No matter what you wear or how much money you make or how far you go—all the way to *Mars*—” I winced as he said *Mars* with a bit of a scoff, “you can’t get away from yourself, man.”

It took me a moment to parse out whether what he said was kind or cruel, growing breathless and infuriated by his pseudo-paternal bullsh\*t. Like he knew me better than I knew myself. Like I’d typed him a problem to muse about on his livestream. It wasn’t even a problem. It was a solution.

“I’m not trying to get away from myself,” I said evenly, though it took some effort. “I’m creating a new self. I’m following-through.”

I’d been talking about moving to Mars even before I quit school the second time (philosophy), but Blaze didn’t think I’d actually do it. His talk about *going forward* was to psych me out, make me think I *couldn’t* do it, make me stay here paying half the rent because his

Taurus Moon, besides hating uniforms, also hated change. I craved change, big change. I wanted to know who I could be somewhere else, and Mars was the farthest place I could go. It took a level of patience that was almost dissociating for me to stay pulling espresso shots at the same grocery store café for two years, coming home to the same room for three years, focused on my new life and future self. I'd requested placement in and been accepted to a queer-oriented biodome on Mars.

I did a few of their streaming tutorials on permaculture. They were admittedly less advanced than the Underway Porter tutorials, but I figured I'd get the hang of it once I was there. I'd never been able to bulk up my arms, and I was self-conscious about them even though I almost always passed as a dude, but I was ready to work hard. I couldn't wait to tell Suely that I'd be farming, too. Maybe it would plant a seed in her head. Maybe she was trying to drop out of whatever she was doing, again. Maybe she'd want to come with me.



The train was empty when I first got on in Seattle, at midnight, and I had my choice of the tacky vinyl seats with plastic armrests in coach, squinting under the cold fluorescent lighting and dull steel walls. They dimmed the lights and I fell asleep to the white noise of the maglev tracks, the high-speed train moving about six times faster than the Underway's max. I woke up soon after sunrise. The woman sitting across from me told me we'd just passed Chicago. She had limp blonde curls and introduced herself as Nicki, trying to strike up a conversation before I was even fully awake. She wore a red cardigan that she kept pulling closer around herself, even as she smiled and giggled. The fist clutching the left side of the sweater dragged it under her right boob, the other one pulled the right side over her heart. Her eyes were watery and her gums didn't look healthy. I couldn't focus on what she was saying, thinking passingly of my own dental hygiene, apologizing and checking my device, compulsively refreshing the seat and suite assignments for my cars on the Underway. All 12 guest spots were blocked off as booked, but no names came up. I wanted to guess how everyone would get along, and who'd tip the best.

At 9:15 in the morning, we disembarked in Boston, and Nicki wished me a safe journey. I switched trains, signing in for my Porter duties by scanning my device at the door. I double-checked that I was in car 4A and popped the meds that would keep me awake for the next 54 hours. I refreshed my seat and suite assignments again, but the

system still hadn't updated the names. I began cleaning and preparing the car for my guests. There were spacious seating areas for four, with forest-green upholstery, warm incandescent lighting in ornate sconces, and gleaming wood-paneled walls. I pulled up the checklist on my phone—sanitizing, vacuuming, polishing the wooden fixtures. I moved onto car 4B, the sleeper car, with two suites for two guests each. I stripped the bed and made it with clean linens. I'd practiced tucking fantastically tight corners. I sanitized the surfaces and polished the wood, vacuumed the floor, did the washroom.

I was the first Porter to reach the laundry room, and I couldn't help feeling victorious—I'd been last to the laundry room on my previous stint, which put me behind for the rest of the trip. I took myself to the Porter change-room to wash my face and comb my hair, and put on my uniform. I figured I'd run into more of the crew there, but I seemed to be first to the change-room, too. I propped my phone on the designated shelf to do a uniform scan *simply take a selfie with a timer showing your whole uniform and tap "accept"*, but got marked down for an errant crease on the front of my shirt. It had shifted in its garment bag during the first leg of the trip. I pulled down an ironing board and smoothed it out. My second uniform scan was 100%. I looked in the mirror. I knocked my cap to the side, and flicked an invisible speck off my bowtie. I straightened my cap and smiled gently, hiding my weird tooth. I'd wanted to get it capped before I left, but, Mars. Buy-in prices had fallen considerably in the last decade, as more and more biodomes were constructed. The cost was still essentially what amounted to my life savings, seeing as I'd never really saved money in my life.

I returned to my Greeting Station. I knew I should exude calm, to make the guests as comfortable as possible and show them they could trust me, but I couldn't stop jiggling my knee. Once someone showed up, I'd have something to do. I'd slide right into my practiced role.

It didn't feel like I'd waited this long for the guests to board on my previous gig, but I guessed it was because I'd taken so much longer to do my prep work. I whistled tunelessly under my breath. I clenched my teeth and released them, clenched my teeth and released them. I shifted and let out a silent little fart. It would *just figure* that someone would board if I did that. I inhaled deeply as if I could suck up any potential odor. But I didn't smell anything, and no one boarded.

The train took smooth forward motion, increasing speed almost imperceptibly.

No one had boarded.

I refreshed the guest assignments one more time, choking on panic. They were finally updated. Every seat and suite was now marked *VACANT*.

I didn't have access to the other Porters' guest lists. It seemed improbable that everyone booked in my car had cancelled, but if that was the case, why didn't they redistribute the passengers more evenly? It wasn't fair for one Porter to get all the guests and all the tips. I'd have to choose between staying somewhere nice for the week before my train left for Moscow, or extras on the flight to Mars. Maybe I could convince one of the other Porters to let me help out, and we could split tips. I practiced what I would say, whispering to myself. "There's been some mistake, no guests were assigned to my cars—would any of your guests like extra privacy and personalized service?"

I scanned my device at the door between cars 4A and 3B, and it slid open silently. The doors to the suites were closed. I pressed my ear against the glossy wood, but I wasn't sure if I heard anything or not. Continuing into car 3A, I realized I was mouth breathing, kind of heavily. There was no one there, not even a Porter. Porter 3 would be doing the same thing as me, but they'd reach 2A first, bringing half the guests back to their cars.

My hand shook just a little as I scanned my device at the door to car 2B. The doors to the suites were closed. I was pretty sure I could hear someone rummaging around behind the door, and felt my shoulders drop with relief. Pausing a moment for composure, certain there would be guests in car 2A—likely being served by *two* Porters—I scanned my device.

"Fuck," I moaned aloud, considering the possibility that this was just a nightmare. I scanned my device at the door between cars 2A and 1B.

The door to the first suite was open. The beds were made and the freshly polished wood glowed, but there was no luggage, no devices, no overcoats. I shook my head, ready to commiserate with the other Porters. I'd say, "Can you believe this? Tips are gonna be slim this trip!" Then maybe I'd set up a poker game.

There were neither signs of passengers, nor Porters, in car 1A.

I went back the way I'd come, briskly, noticing that my right shoe squeaked when I moved at this pace. I scanned my device at the door at the end of 4B and scoped the Guest Lounge, the Bar and Dining Area. No Porters, no Guests. I continued into the Laundry. My load was done and all the other machines were silent. I tapped my front teeth together at tight intervals and slung the heavy wet bedding into a dryer.

There was no one in the change room, no one in the Porter Lounge. I was alone on the train.

If there were no Guests, and I didn't make tips, I couldn't take Suely out to dinner in Lisbon, as a thanks for letting me stay in her room, before.



I woke up to Suely rustling the heavy curtains closed against a bright afternoon sun. I got up to pee and drink water.

“You all right?”

I tried to say “Yeah” but my voice was gone completely. With some effort, I managed a hoarse whisper.

“C'mere,” she said, sleepy and shadowy, drawing back the duvet and patting the space next to her.

I lay on my back on the edge of the bed. “I lost my voice,” I whispered.

“Suits me,” she giggled. I wondered what that was supposed to mean. “You never fucking shut up.”

I tried to work out whether to feel abashed or annoyed. She wrapped her arms around me and wrestled me into little-spoon position.

“Is that OK?”

“Yeah,” I whispered. We fell back asleep.

It was morning again when I woke up to the squeak of the shower turning off. Suely had opened the blackout curtains and the window, and the gauzy inner curtains billowed romantically. It was sunny and I could see the red rooftops of Lisbon from the bed. I stretched out. I felt good. I tested my voice, tried to say “hello” out loud to myself. Nothing.

“Oh hey,” Suely said, toweling her long hair. “You should probably get out there. You have like an hour before your cleaning shift starts.”

I looked at her quizzically.

“Oh right, you still can't talk,” she laughed, almost mean. “I'm not going back. Someone named Merrell is the new Lead Porter. I'm staying here. I've been to Lisbon like 7 times and I haven't seen anything. Now that all the borders are open, I think I'm gonna travel for a while, maybe do some farm work.” She shrugged, like it was nothing. I liked Suely but I barely knew her. I had no idea what she was leaving behind, whether she'd miss it or if she was glad to get away. I was standing there in my underwear, mirroring her shrug, like I didn't really care what she did. I gave her a thumbs-up and whispered that I was going to shower.

I tapped a message to my Guests. *Hi, I'm your Porter. I have laryngitis and am unable to speak, but I can of course still hear you and will respond to any spoken or messaged requests!*

My tips on the return trip were, predictably, low. Merrell didn't know any card games, I couldn't talk, and Blaze and Harlan were all sly pokes and secret jokes. It was a long 54 hours.



I was heading into another long 54 hours. Being alone was definitely worse than having laryngitis. It was like I couldn't talk, even though my voice was fine.

An electronic tone indicated that the train was beginning its pressurization for underground under water descent.

I laughed a little bit at my predicament. An electric tone indicated that we were losing connection to the signal. "54 hours off the grid for the tech detox you need!" was part of the hype Social Network Influencers used to sell this trip.



I wandered around a little bit, as the situation sunk in. I went into Suite 4B One. I flopped onto the bed and immediately sprung up, not wanting to mess up my uniform, then laughed at myself again. No one gave a fuck about my uniform. I lay down and clasped my hands behind my head. The bed was huge and hella comfortable and I wished I hadn't taken my meds so I could just sleep through the ride. I sighed and gazed at the ornate woodwork lining the ceiling. "No, it isn't hand-carved," I mumbled out loud what I would have told my guests, conspiratorially. "This type of decoration was usually done using molds. These molds are originals from the early 20th century and the process was recreated just for this train!"

The herbal concentrate keeping me awake was, of course, a mild stimulant, which was kind of good because I wouldn't get too hungry but then again, the pressing in my bowel was urgent. The Suite toilet was closer but it didn't even cross my mind to use it, as a Porter.

As soon as I swiped my device to the laundry room door, a washing machine shut off. I hadn't put another load in. I glanced around but didn't see any signs of another person. I gently lifted the washing machine lid just an inch or two, as if I might get caught, and silently lowered it again. There were wet sheets in there.

But I had to prioritize getting to the Porter bathroom.

I entered the first stall and saw a turd floating in the toilet. It was definitely not mine.

I was *not* alone on the train, after all.



I went through the train again, throwing open all the Suite doors, looking in the linen and cleaning supply storage, and checking every cabinet in the Kitchen—void of food, the spotless industrial fridge not even cold, the LED garden vault without bulbs, let alone micro-greens—growing more and more agitated by the number of times I had to scan my code. I didn't have access to the Control Room, where the computers that ran the train were operating, or the additional cars that were carrying freight. I felt like I should be able to sense where the other person was, some stirring in the air or energetic indication, but everything seemed empty and still, the atmosphere resealing behind me as I whooshed through it.

“This is fucked,” I hissed, still hesitant to speak very loudly. I sat on a barstool in the Guest Lounge and spun around. I slumped over and gently tapped my forehead on the edge of the bar a couple times. There was no booze and the ice maker was unplugged. My questions were on a loop. *Who made this error and let me sign up to Porter on this trip with no guests who let me scan in to start my shift who knows that I'm here?* But mostly: *who else is here?*

I wasn't going to sit there and wait for them to find me—that wasn't my style. The train was big but not *that* big. It seemed impossible that the Phantom Pooper and I should keep missing each other. I got up from the barstool resolutely, and at the moment I did, some joyful reggae jam started blasting over the announcement speakers. I was startled near out of my skin, but that feeling immediately phased into fury at the Pooper for scaring me. I contracted my unsteady legs into a stiff, angry march towards the Control Room, which they must have had access to. I thought of a new rude thing to say to them with every scan of my code.

But “what the fuck” was all I could sputter when I finally caught a glimpse of the other person, closing the door to the Control Room after turning the music down just a little bit. She whirled around and smiled at me. It was the girl in the red cardigan, Nicki.

“It's you!” she laughed.

“What the *fuck*,” I said again, in an angrier voice.

“I'm like the Pied Piper,” she snapped her fingers. “I knew if I put on

some music whoever else was here would find me!” I realized the song she played *was* a reggae version of that oldies song, ‘Pied Piper’.

“How’d you know there was someone else here?”

“The laundry! How did you know?”

“You didn’t *flush*.” Her wet eyes widened and she let out a piercing laugh. “What are you doing here, anyway?” I demanded.

She knitted her eyebrows. “Running this empty train to its final resting place. What are *you* doing here?”

“I was scheduled as a Porter. Why aren’t there any guests?”

Her hand covered her mouth and she muttered *oh shit*. She removed her hand. “Your shift was cancelled, but the system wasn’t updating. No guests bought tickets.” She grimaced. “Maybe people don’t trust statistics, maybe they were too afraid the tunnel wouldn’t make it.”

I made an embarrassingly guttural groan. “Does this mean I’m not getting paid?”

“You’re definitely not getting paid. There’s no wage allotment for Porters.”

I breathed deeply through my nose. “Give me a minute.”

I went to scan my code, go back into the kitchen and scream. My hand shook so badly I couldn’t scan. I kicked the door again and again, wrecking my red shoe and sending pain all the way through my leg. The door remained undamaged and unbudging.

Nicki averted her eyes and quietly let me have my meltdown.

My cap had fallen on the floor and I stomped on it. I turned to Nicki and I could tell my eyes were still too wild.

“OK,” I panted. “OK. Nicki, there’s one fair way to settle this.”

She regarded me cautiously.

“We play poker for your wages.”

She got a funny look on her face that I couldn’t quite decipher, and offered a half-smile.

“OK. Sure. You’re on.”

## Fenrir Cerebellion

*Fenrir Cerebellion is a queer writer, pianist, craftsperson, and space ghost. They are a settler on unceded and illegally occupied Coast Salish land of the x̣ʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓íl̓wətaʔt̓ (Tseil-Waututh) peoples. And they are a settler from Syilx/Okanagan land, that they wish to one day return to. Ice Station Zebra is one of their favourite submarine movies, you can tell them your favourite obscure submarine movie at [twitter.com/fenrirce](https://twitter.com/fenrirce)*

## Hands In The Cosmos

“If you don’t say you have feelings, then you don’t have feelings.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

Benny shrugged, “For other people, I guess.”

These gauges had to stay level. There were two of them; Aly loved submarine movies and so equated their positions to stern and bow plane controls. If that was how sie envisioned them, then they were kind of, sort of like that.

Ever the objective realist, Benny just saw them and Aly. And their hands. In space. Controlling the tilt of the universe. Their hands immersed in the core of space. Keeping things plumb, level, and never square.

“Imagine you are the outlier here and everyone else has feelings,” Aly declared. Sie was good at this setting foundation; sie was quite often a storyteller. And Benny stood many a shift alongside sire, being recounted every single one of those submarine movies.

Sie was also pretty certain sire starting framework was a more accurate ratio of feelings-inflicted people. Sie continued with the hypothetical existence where Benny wasn’t an outlier, “You have feelings even if you don’t talk about them.”

“Well, of course—”

“Even about things, moments, and other people in those moments. The sort of people you would talk to about feelings, the sort of people you don’t—maybe.”

There was a measure of silence while Benny forcibly digested this. Slowly, “OK.”

Aly went on about relationships—prefacing: all relationships. The relation between two people, from never meeting to most intimate.

Like relations between stars, and systems, and every particle in a nebula. Like the relations they manipulated with their hands—Benny could feel the universe manipulated ever-so-slowly and then all-at-once by their hands shoved in the very centre. Aly was still imagining the two of them at a set of helm steering wheels.

They stood in the expanse of nothing, of stars and gas, of the particulars they were manipulating to the culmination of stars, planets and the undoing of those stars and planets. In a measure of time, there would be a shift change. It doesn't come before Aly finishes sire proposal.

“So, saying all this. And someone is leaving you, you are watching them turn and walk away. You feel...?”

Benny understands exactly what Aly means. Not just the scenario, not just comprehending the various factors set; Benny derived from all the context and understands the actual intent and reasoning of sie. Benny actively listened—unlike when being recounted yet another submarine movie—and *got it*.

Aly knew this, could see this in Benny's eyes. And, having spent millennia manipulating the celestial bodies alongside Benny, could have guessed the following, but was too far into sire scenario.

“I guess I never had anyone walk away.”

Aly screams through sire teeth. The visage of submarine controls dissembles in front of sire. Somewhere, a star burns out prematurely and rapid cools its core. Sie moves to stomp off.

“Woah, woah, don't let time crumple onto the station! Our shift will never end.” Benny can't move to stop Aly because Benny is grabbing Aly's chunk of the universe before the whole fabric of existence is rent asunder.

“You can deal,” Aly called out, sie was already walking through the galaxy on the way out. “I'm going to watch Ice Station Zebra.”

Nebulas were collapsing, somewhere a comet redirected its course, an asteroid meant to crash into a planet entered geostationary orbit instead. A lot of things were happening in the space of time that a lot of things were going to happen in but perhaps to different accord.

“That's like, three hours long!”

Aly—near vanished from sire post—closed the door with a final, “Well, maybe you can have some feelings about it.”

## Mattias Westby

*Mattias Westby (he/him) loves to write. Like, really loves to write. He has a wide range of interests, from science to mythology to cheesy pulp sf, that he explores in his work. He currently attends Langara College, where he hopes to receive a diploma in Creative Writing and absorb as much knowledge as possible in the process.*

# Conception

Morning had just arrived on the salt flats of the Bolivian Andes. The rising sun made the steam rising from the borax pools glow and illuminated rock formations that wouldn't be out of place in a Salvador Dali painting. Helen looked behind her, watching the flats stretch far off into the horizon before rising into mountains hundreds of kilometers away. She turned around to see another mountain only a couple kilometers in front of her, smoke pouring from its summit. She'd been walking across this strange, primeval landscape for a whole night, and she was convinced this must be the most alien place on Earth.

The cry of a familiar bird reached her, one she hadn't expected to hear in this place. She looked up to see a quetzal perched on a twisting rock, far out of place from its usual Amazon habitat. Helen felt a tingling sensation wash over her as she remembered, the first time she'd seen a quetzal...and met Her. It wasn't just a memory, though—all at once, she could feel Her presence all around. She felt Her in the wind whispering in her ears, wrapping around her like a warm cloak to shield her from the morning cold. Helen's heart began to race.

The quetzal flew to the ground and stared at her. It hopped a short distance away, then stared at her again.

"You want me to follow you?" Helen breathed.

The quetzal squawked in reply and hopped further away. Helen followed it.

They made their way towards the base of the mountain. The sun rose higher, stirring the flats to life and sending flamingos flocking into the air. Following the quetzal, Helen made her way up a rolling hill. The ground changed from salt to black volcanic rock. Steam poured from cracks in the ground, and the curious rock formations got even more elaborate the further they went.

Finally, the quetzal stopped before an imposing wall of impossi-

bly-stacked rocks. It nodded at a crack in the rocks, just barely thin enough for Helen to fit through, then flew over it. Helen watched it go for a moment, then carefully fit herself through the crack. As soon as she got to the other side, she had to do a double take.

There, in a crater shielded by an overhang of rock, was a pool of molten lava. She stared in surprise, not quite believing what she was seeing. Everything about this place was surreal enough already—surely it couldn't get stranger?

The quetzal squawked again. She turned slowly, as if in a dream, and slowly walked towards the source of the noise. Over a little rise, the quetzal was waiting next to a clear pool of water. It hopped in and started cleaning its feathers.

Helen dipped her hand in the cool water. She hadn't realized how hot and sore and tired she was until now. She left her clothes in a pile by the shore and jumped in, feeling the cool water embrace her and soothe her aching muscles.

She looked around to check if She was here yet, but she couldn't see Her face. Yet still, she felt Her all around, surrounding her. She felt Her in the water's caress, and she knew she wasn't alone.

Impatient, Helen tread water and cupped her hands to her mouth.

"I've walked all night, love! Please, I want to see you."

A cool breeze whistled through the crack in the rocks just over the ridge, and it sounded like music.

"I'm here," came a voice from behind her. Helen turned to see Her standing by the shore.

Helen used to imagine that if there was a God or any sort of higher presence, They would surely look like nothing a human being could comprehend, much less the old man with a white beard most people believed in. She didn't look like any God Helen had read about in a holy book, but She wasn't beyond comprehension either. There was something about Her that felt beyond human—She was of no identifiable race or ethnicity, Her skin and accent giving no clues as to Her origin. There was no mistaking Her physical existence, though, no sense that She was in any way a mirage or a half-existing spirit. God walked on Earth, and She was a beautiful woman. Helen had no complaint.

She held out Her hand, and She smiled.

"Come here, my love."

As if in a trance, Helen slowly walked along the bottom of the water and out onto the shore. Her heart pounded against her ribcage.

She smiled and brushed the wet hair out of Helen's face. Helen stared into Her eyes and felt like she was at the beginning of the world, meeting her maker for the first time. She felt Her warmth radiate from Her hand and fill up her entire body. The tingling feeling was stronger than ever as she reached out and touched Her hair, then gently pulled Her closer and kissed Her on the lips. The world vanished around her as their bodies entwined, and for the next few minutes there was only a universe of warmth and softness.



The first time Helen had met Her, she'd been on a research trip to the Amazon. On paper, she wanted to study bird populations. In reality, she just wanted to be alone with the world. Whenever she had the chance, she would sneak away from the camp and soak in the sounds of a living place.

One day, she'd found herself lost, unable to remember the way back to the camp. She remembered that in spite of the danger of her situation, she hadn't been afraid, much to her surprise. She'd always thought getting lost in a distant jungle full of dangerous creatures should be her worst nightmare, but it turned out to be a dream fulfilled. She felt a comforting blanket of life wrapped around her, and she knew she wouldn't be alone out here. If she died, she would be turned into soil and become a part of the forest, melt into it like she was already doing. What was so frightening about that?

She found a quetzal wandering the forest floor, its wing half sheared off, probably by a jaguar. Years of biology instruction told her to leave it—the bird had no chance of survival, and she had no business interfering. If she was a part of the forest, though, then how could she be interfering? She sat down and lured the quetzal closer with the little food she had left. At first, the quetzal was wary, but after a long while, it grew to trust her and lay down by her side. She stroked its feathers, and the two of them sat side by side waiting for the jungle to claim them both.



That night, Helen stirred in her sleep. She'd heard something in the trees, like a familiar tune she couldn't quite place. The quetzal heard it too. It stood up and tried to fly away, but its damaged wing wouldn't let it. It seemed like She materialized from out of nowhere, but Helen would later learn She'd been there all along. The quetzal cried out, but

She smiled and stroked its feathers, like Helen had been doing before. The quetzal bowed its head, in defeat, and let Her brush it. Helen was almost petrified, unable to believe what she was seeing. Could this be a hallucination, brought on by thirst and hunger?

After a minute, She picked the quetzal up into Her arms and kissed it on the head. In an instant, the quetzal was dead. Gently, She lay it to rest at the base of a tree, where ants already began to enfold it like a veil, and then She looked at Helen.

“You’ve been expecting me.”

“Are you Death?”

The woman laughed.

“I am the forest. I am all the forests, and all the places where life exists.”

“You’re...God, then?”

“Some people have called me that, yes. I’ve never had a name until people existed.”

“What should I call you?”

“Choose.”

Helen thought for a minute.

“Is it alright if I call you Gaia?”

“Gaia...yes, I think that will do nicely.”

She sat down by Helen’s side. In the darkness, she could barely make Her out, but she could feel the warmth of Her bare skin against her side, and her heart skipped a beat when she realized Gaia was naked.

“Tell me, Helen, are you afraid of me?”

She was so close Helen could smell Her. She smelled like petrichor, or freshly tilled soil.

“If you’re all the places where life exists, I could never be afraid of you.”

“Yes...you have a great love for life in all its forms, don’t you? I can tell.”

Helen felt Gai’s fingers on the back of her neck. Her heart started racing.

“You expect to be consumed by me. Like the quetzal I just took back within me.”

“I don’t expect anything. I’m just not afraid.”

“Interesting.”

Helen felt like Gaia was examining her.

“Before there were humans, fear was the one constant of life. Fear of death, fear of failing to reproduce, fear of not providing for the next

generation. It kept the world in motion. Yet here you are, staring life and death in the face, and you are unafraid. Your love for me is greater than your fear of death.”

Helen shivered, despite the muggy heat of the jungle.

“Helen, listen to me. I haven’t met anyone like you. Until humans evolved, I hadn’t met anyone at all. I never comprehended just how lonely eternity could be.”

“You...you’re lonely?”

“Very. Helen, I want you to live. I will guide you back to the place where you came from, where your species are more able to survive. All I ask is that you come back.”

“Here?”

“Anywhere. Far from the rest of your species. So that we may talk, in private. I have so many questions.”

“Oh...so do I.”

“And I would prefer you not tell any other humans about me. I’m not ready to show myself, not yet. I don’t know how they’d react. Your people, they behave strangely at times.”

Helen laughed.

“We really do.”

Gaia stood up and took Helen’s hand.

“Come, Helen. Let me take you home.”



They’d wandered through the forest, under the light of the full moon. As Helen’s eyes adjusted, she grew more able to see the figure in front of her. Beautiful wasn’t the word she was quite looking for, not the kind of beauty she’d been raised to believe in. For lack of a better description, She looked like a real person, even if Helen wasn’t exactly sure whether She was.

“Gaia...what happened to the quetzal?”

“It went back to me. Even now, it’s feeding the plants and the insects and the bacteria in the soil. In its death, it’s giving life to countless others.”

“No, I mean, what happened to it? Its...soul, if I can call it that.”

“You’re wondering what happens to a being’s consciousness after death?”

“Us humans, we think about that a lot. Whether there’s any kind of afterlife, I mean.”

“Of course there is. It’s all around you.”

Gaia waved Her hand.

“When that quetzal died, its soul went into the ants, into the bacteria, into the trees, and parts of its soul already exist in its children and will be passed into their children. When you eat, Helen, you too take on parts of the souls of those who died to feed you. And when you die, your soul will be taken back into other life, and it will live on in your children.”

Helen said nothing for a moment, thinking over Gaia’s words.

“Gaia...I don’t think I can have children, and I said I wanted my body donated to science. What happens to my soul then?”

“It will find its way back into the world, but it will take some time. Everyone returns to me eventually.”

“Even me.”

“Even you.”

Helen smiled.

“We’re here,” She said, pointing through the trees, “your camp is on the other side of this river.”

“You can’t come with me?”

Gaia shook Her head.

“I still don’t know if humans are ready for me.”

Helen nodded.

“I understand. I promise, I’ll be back.”

“I know you will.”

She smiled. And then, She was gone.



Helen made her way into camp a few minutes later. The others saw her and rushed out to greet her. They thought she’d been attacked by a jaguar or something, said the expedition leader. Helen reassured them she was alright, and a pang of guilt hit her for making her teammates worry. Next time, she’d be more careful. Already, she was thinking about the next time she’d meet Her.

The next time came two years later. She’d joined an expedition to Svalbard, to study the shrinking polar ice and its effect on the local flora and fauna. After volunteering to go early and set up camp, she’d taken a snowmobile across the ice floe until she was sure no one else was around. She stopped and called out Gaia’s name, and every other name she could think of. She hadn’t been sure if ‘Gaia’ was right, so she’d done some research after she got home into other mythological beings like Her from around the world. Maybe they were all glimpses

of the truth? Or maybe She really had no name.

Helen cried out until she was exhausted, and just when she was sure no one would show, that she'd imagined the whole thing all along, there She stood beneath the midnight sun.

Helen had never seen Her clearly that night—She'd disappeared just as the early morning sun started to creep into the sky. Now she could get a better look at Her, and She was even more beautiful than Helen had imagined. *Stop it*, she told herself, *you can't have a crush on God*, but how could she help it? It wasn't just Her body that was beautiful—although it definitely was—but Her eyes, so full of life and wisdom. As she got closer, she could see everything about Her was the same—the warmth, the smell of petrichor. She still wasn't wearing clothes, but that didn't surprise Helen. Somehow, she felt like She didn't need to. *Of course*, Helen acknowledged, *I'm biased in that regard*.

"Hello again, Helen," She said, and the sound of Her voice warmed Helen even in this icy wilderness.

"Hello."

She stared Her up and down.

"Aren't you...cold?"

Gaia laughed.

"This body is just a part of me. The rest is comfortable enough."

Even though she wore five thick layers, Helen was still shivering. She wondered if that was due entirely to the cold.

"Come closer," said Gaia, "your body wasn't built for this weather."

Helen stepped closer to Her, and She wrapped her arms around her. Warmth flooded through Helen's body.

"How is that?" Gaia asked.

Helen closed her eyes and rested her head on Gaia's shoulder.

"Better. Thank you."

Helen remembered little of what they'd talked about after that, though not for lack of trying. It had been so much—Gaia had been so curious about what it was like to be a human, to feel pain or hunger, to fall in love, to breathe. Helen had answered as best she could. In return, she asked Gaia everything she could think to ask, and She answered the best She could. She wasn't sure where She'd come from—She was born with the Earth, and She'd watched the surface cool and turn into a solid crust. She had experimented with Her powers, forming and sinking continental cratons like a child building sandcastles on the beach. Eventually, She had gotten curious whether She could make anything else like Her, so She waited for the planet to settle and cool some more.

Then, She had made the first life.

It wasn't as simple as snapping Her fingers and making life exist like that. She'd experimented with all kinds of things—She'd tried to make life out of metal and crystals, but nothing worked. Eventually, She noticed the amino acids that had formed in the early oceans and started to tinker with them. Even She wasn't sure how She'd done it—a one-in-a-million chemical configuration, like dropping a handful of quarters and watching them all land on heads. All She knew was that one day, something She'd made started making others of itself, and the more She left them alone, the more they changed and replicated and grew.

Everything since then, She'd guided, but had no real control over or understanding of. She'd been the catalyst, but what had happened since was beyond anything She was expecting. She'd learned early on that if She left it to propagate unchecked, life would flourish, but it wouldn't change. The oxygen crisis had been an accident—She'd thought to experiment with a new kind of food production, one where life could feed on sunlight instead of chemicals or other life. When poisonous oxygen had started filling up the atmosphere, She was sure She'd destroyed her experiment, but to Her surprise, life not only survived, but thrived in this new environment. Older species died off, and new ones took their place. It was a lesson She took to heart.

Many millions of years later, when multicellular life exploded into existence, She saw massive variety and experimentation, but it wouldn't be long before it settled into a new status quo and remained that way. Before She could get too attached to any of this new life, She triggered the Cambrian-Ordovician Extinction. It had been a flood basalt event, Helen learned—a massive period of prolonged volcanic activity that had changed the atmosphere and killed off many early life-forms.

*One geological mystery solved*, she thought with a smile.

When the smoke cleared, many had died off, but others were given a new chance to thrive. This pattern continued throughout history—Gaia had let life go, to change and evolve and surprise Her with strange new forms, but occasionally She had to trigger an extinction event to let new things occur. A glaciation event here, an asteroid collision there, and the history of the Earth proceeded. In all that time, Gaia had never had anyone to share Her works with.

“Until now.”

Helen looked out across the snowy expanse. In the distance, she saw a herd of reindeer grazing. Lichen dusted the rocks near her feet.

“So you did this. All of this.”

“I did.”

Helen sat down, overwhelmed.

“I can’t believe how lucky I am...that of all the people in the world, I’m the one you decided to share this with.”

“Out of all the people in the world, Helen, I’m so glad I found someone who appreciates my work like you.”



They met many times after that, always someplace isolated from humanity. Few such places existed anymore, but Gaia always knew how to find them. On remote Pacific islands, in the heart of the Sahara Desert, on frigid Antarctic glaciers, they would come together and talk. Gaia told her stories, things She had seen and done in Her eons of existence. She talked of bacteria and dinosaurs, and of stargazing and pondering. Helen, meanwhile, told Her about her life—how she’d fallen in love with this planet from a young age, how she’d started off wanting to be an artist but become enthralled with biology while in college, how she’d travelled so much of the world and seen so much, and how she’d cried herself to sleep as often as she was left speechless with awe. She told Her of her dreams, about leaving some kind of legacy that made the world a better place for all people, or at the very least for the children she still hoped to have someday.

One day, on a remote Pacific atoll, Helen asked the question she’d been dreading to ask since they’d first met.

“Gaia,” she said, “I need to know the truth.”

“And which truth is that, my dear Helen?”

“Since we met, I’ve been afraid that you can’t be real, that I’ve somehow imagined all of this. I don’t know how you could be a figment of my imagination, but...you’re just so impossible. Too good to be true. You’re everything I ever wanted God to be.”

“I did choose this form for you.”

“Not just your body—I mean, everything about you.”

“Helen...”

“Please, Gaia,” Helen said, a tear rolling down her cheek, “I want this to be real!”

Gaia leaned close, kissed the tear as it rolled down Helen’s cheek. Then, She kissed her on the lips. Helen closed her eyes and felt a wave of bliss wash over her.

“Was that real enough?” Gaia asked with a mischievous twinkle in Her eye.

Helen couldn't speak for a moment. Then, she kissed Her back, hard, passionately. Everything else melted away as Helen disrobed and their bodies tangled together.

That was when Helen knew She was real.



Helen stared out across the salt flats after they'd finished making love. The sun was rising higher in the sky, and the horizon began to shimmer with heat.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She said, lying by Helen's side.

"Gaia...why is there nobody here? It's a pretty popular place for tourists."

Gaia pointed at the volcano.

"It's been getting more active lately. Scientists have warned people not to enter the area."

"But we're alright."

"I wouldn't let it erupt."

"So you got it to be more active?"

"Yes."

Helen rolled over to stare at Her. She tried to imagine the power it took to control a volcano—to control all volcanoes. The first time they'd met, she'd told Her she couldn't be afraid of Her. As they got to know each other better, Helen realized that wasn't exactly true. Now she felt, not fear exactly, but a nervous respect for this ancient and powerful being.

"Why? There are other places we could've been alone."

Gaia pulled Helen close and kissed her on the lips.

"Because," She whispered, "I want to do it. What we've been discussing."

Helen pulled away in surprise.

"Really? Here, now, just like that?"

"Why wait? You could die before the next time we meet."

Helen opened her mouth in reply, but she couldn't think of anything to say.

"I set up the lava lake and everything. It's all ready, Helen. All I need is you."

Helen sat up and stared up at the volcano for a moment, then glanced across the flats at the flamingos flocking in the distance, feeding on shrimp in the primal hot springs. Gaia told her the first life had emerged in springs just like those. More than anything, she wanted to

know what it was like to be there. She nodded.

“Okay.”



It had been somewhere in the middle of the Australian outback when the topic first came up. Helen had been telling Gaia about her fears that she would never have children, and even if she was able to, she'd always be too busy travelling to settle down and raise a family.

“I wish I could help you,” Gaia had said.

“To...what...have babies?”

“I don't know that I could. I still don't understand how I first created life. I don't think I could make anything as complex as a human infant, or even a sperm with which to impregnate you.”

“Oh.”

They sat in silence in the shade of a gum tree for a moment.

“Well,” said Helen, “maybe I could help you?”

“Help me?”

“To figure out how to create life! Humans have been trying to understand that for...oh, about as long as we've existed.”

“But you can already create life! You have a womb inside you that can grow new humans!”

“But we can't make it from scratch, not like you did. At least not yet. Scientists are working on it all the time, and we're getting close. If I could get into some kind of research group devoted to solving the problem, and if you lent your powers...maybe we could create a whole new kind of life.”

Gaia was silent for a long time.

“...for what purpose?”

“I don't know. A legacy, maybe. Humans aren't going to last forever, even if you found a way to protect them until the end of the world. I'm not going to last forever, love. Do you want something to remember me by?”

Gaia stared into Helen's eyes.

“Oh, Helen...yes, I do.”



Helen walked over to where she'd left her clothes and reached into her pants pocket to pull out a phone.

“You're not going to put them back on?”

“Feels more, what’s the word...Biblical this way.”

She pulled up an email exchange.

“There we go. I’ve been corresponding with a group of scientists in the UK, and they think they’ve cracked the code. They believe they know the sequence through which the first life was created, but they don’t have the technology to replicate the process yet. But you do, don’t you?”

Helen held up the phone, and Gaia read out the formula.

“You remember how I explained to you, the way chemicals correspond to formulas?”

“Yes, I remember...oh, this makes sense. This makes perfect sense. All the ingredients are here, too.”

She stared into the depths of the lava.

“Well, then...let there be light.”



They’d decided earlier that Helen wouldn’t have any part in the actual making.

“Are you sure? I could take a drop of your blood and build this new life from it. Isn’t that what you wanted, to have children?”

“It’s just too much, Gaia. I’m not...well, a god. These beings could end up lasting billions of years, and having that all based on my DNA? That’s just vanity. Besides, I thought the idea was to create *new* life?”

Even so, as She combined and sorted chemicals in the pool of lava, Gaia couldn’t help incorporating a message deep within their genetic structure, telling who gave Her the tools to do so. Maybe one day, scientists would number among their descendants, and they would place Helen on their pantheons. She’d probably be annoyed, but then, she’d never know.

They’d also decided that if they were going to be creating new life, then it shouldn’t just be like the original—it should be something genuinely different, something that would change the biologic makeup of the Earth. Helen suggested non-carbon based life, but few other chemical bases would work in Earth’s climate. Eventually, Gaia had realized there was still one place carbon-based life had never penetrated—far enough below the Earth’s crust, organic molecules simply broke down. A metal-based life form stood a better chance. They’d decided on aluminum, both because of its abundance and its lightness. Iron-based life would sink and cluster around the core, but aluminum-based life could spread much further.

Gaia knew aluminum wouldn't work the same way amino acids had, but as it turned out, the basic principles of generating life were the same. She willed structures into existence, let them react and grow and combine into new forms, until she had something like a nucleic acid, something that She was sure could replicate itself. She placed it inside a little cell and waited.

"Is it alive?" asked Helen, getting as close to the lava as she safely could.

"I think so...give it time."

The cell drifted for a few moments.

"Come on," Helen whispered into the pool.

It was one. Then, it was two. Then four. Self-replication had begun.

"We did it," breathed Gaia.

Helen was surprised. It was so sudden—one minute, nothing, and the next, life. She hadn't even seen it happen.

"If I could just get a closer look..."

She inched towards the lava, but sweat was already running all over her body and her eyes were narrowed to slits against the glow of molten rock.

"It's alright, Helen. Come here."

Helen stepped back, then walked up to Her. Gaia kissed her on the forehead, and suddenly, Helen could see everything. The shrimp darting through the water on the salt flats, the flamingos trying to snatch them, the lichen clinging to the volcanic rocks, even the microbes crawling through those rocks. And there they were—a new kind of life.

Helen gripped Gaia's hand.

"I see them."

"Aren't they beautiful?"

Helen nodded. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"I won't be around to see what happens to them next."

"Do you want to see?"

"Can you show me?"

"I can isolate some of them, and accelerate their birthrate. Evolution will speed up, and maybe you'll get some idea of what the future holds in store."

Helen felt chills again, despite the growing heat of the day.

"I would love to see that."

Gaia nodded, and She snapped her fingers.

The ground beneath their feet seemed to shift as most of the new life-forms were pulled down a lava chute into the inner Earth. For

those that remained, time seemed to speed up.



Over the next few hours, Helen watched them grow and change and adapt. After about an hour had passed, she noticed some had started to reproduce by having sex. Perhaps that was more universal than they'd thought?

*Certainly more fun*, Helen thought with a smile.

The new life-forms eventually started coming together to build metal shells. They raced around the pool, taking all kinds of shapes and forms. There were ones like miniature torpedoes with fins, some that had four flippers like mosasaurs, others that sucked in lava and propelled it out behind them like squids or jet engines.

Some started absorbing iron from their surroundings to use in their construction, making stronger armour to avoid predators. These ones eventually outcompeted most of the others and became the most common creatures in the pool. Wild experimentation took place—new forms, new solutions, new ideas. After a while, though, they became stuck on the same recurring themes.

“Helen,” said Gaia with a sigh, “do you mind if I...”

Realization hit Helen at once.

“You want to kill these ones off?”

She nodded.

“So new kinds can flourish.”

Helen took one last look at them. She tried her best to commit these forms to memory, knowing no one but the two of them would ever remember these creatures.

“Alright.”

Gaia waved Her hand. Rocks collapsed from the overhang and melted, lowering the temperature of the pool. After several long minutes, the iron-users found themselves unable to swim through the cooler, denser lava and died out.

Now, a new wave of creatures exploded onto the scene. These ones had started to build layered skeletons, ones which got harder inside thanks in part to incorporating harder aluminum alloys and thicker metal concentrations. They broke off into several groups, each using different kinds of metal in the construction of their skeletons, like iron or titanium. They expanded and proliferated into different niches, some burrowing into the rocks around the pool, some feeding off the lingering chemicals from the rupture Gaia had created and thus

going deeper and deeper into the pool. They began to swim through the crack and down the lava chute, deeper into the Earth. Gaia closed the crack, crushing those that were already inside and preventing any more from getting through.

“What’d you do that for?”

“They could eat the other life-forms I already placed there. The experiment would end.”

Helen looked at all the creatures that had emerged in the space of a few hours.

“We can’t keep them alive, can we?”

Gaia shook Her head.

“This was just a demonstration, an isolated look at what could happen in the future. These creatures have only a single pool to grow in—their potential is limited by their surroundings. But if I let them out, then they could consume all the other aluminum microbes I already placed in the deep Earth, and there wouldn’t be enough of left to create a sustainable genepool. I’m sorry, Helen, but this branch of life has to be cut.”

Helen looked into Gaia’s eyes. Before, she’d only seen them through a human lens. Now armed with greater vision, she stared into their depths and saw so much more, such pain and wonder and longing. For a moment, she saw the mind of God.

“I-I...you’ve done this so many times, haven’t you? Destroyed old wonders so new ones could form. I knew that, I just never got it until now.”

Helen bowed her head.

“Does it always feel like this?”

Gaia pulled her into an embrace, and tears started to pour from Helen’s eyes and onto Her skin.

“Every time.”

Helen felt something wet and warm land on the back of her neck, and realized She was crying too. Helen squeezed Her tightly.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Helen turned to look at the creatures in the pool one last time. Once more, she tried to remember them, but she knew she could never capture every single form.

“Are you ready?”

Helen nodded. Gaia waved Her hand, and the rupture opened again, blasting a wave of noxious chemicals into the pool. She didn’t close it until everything in the water was dead.



As night fell, they wandered across the salt flats. The flamingos were all asleep, each on one leg and huddled together against the mountain cold that now descended. Helen had to put her clothes back on or else freeze. Gaia, as always, seemed fine.

“Whatever those creatures evolve into,” she mused, “they won’t look like the ones in the pool, will they?”

Gaia shook Her head.

“They could look like anything. I can’t predict life any more than I can predict the future.”

She paused for a moment, thinking.

“The pool didn’t have all the factors that the inner Earth will. They will have to move through different layers. Perhaps the core will play host to a different ecosystem than the mantle will. They might learn to live off of the radioactive decay down there. Maybe some will take to the water, in the oceans under the crust. Yes, those exist.”

“I’d heard about that. Studies, nothing conclusive. Tell me about those sometime.”

“Perhaps some might start to live in the bottom of the crust, like those early carbon-based life forms that started crawling onto the land. Maybe even at hot spots, like the one beneath Hawaii, they’ll be able to survive at the surface. And one day...one day, maybe sapient beings will emerge among them.”

“And maybe they’ll meet carbon-based sapient life. Probably not humans, we won’t be around then, but others could evolve.”

“Others could. I’ll try to ensure that.”

Helen glanced at Gaia, who was looking up at the night sky thoughtfully.

“I did so much more today for having your help than I have in the last four and a half billion years, Helen. I want to keep that going. Even if humans die out, I want to make sure other sapient life has a chance, so that I can always meet new people and have collaborators.”

“What, you mean...keep the Earth stacked with different species of people? Forever?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Isn’t that dangerous, though? Look what humans have been doing to the Earth, to ourselves.”

“Humans have barely scratched the Earth. You call this an extinction? In three or four million years, populations will have rebounded

completely. New life will evolve, and it'll be just as extraordinary as the species that live today."

"But if these future people are anything like us, they could maintain a perpetual state of mass extinction!"

Gaia nodded.

"If."

She gestured at their surroundings.

"The first humans on these continents hunted species already endangered by a changing climate. It was unsustainable. The mammoths, the sabre-toothed cats, the dire wolves, all died out. But eventually, they formed a fragile equilibrium. Through millennia of research and discipline, they learned to coexist with their surroundings. It wasn't a perfect system, but for most people and for many thousands of years, it worked well enough. People lived with nature without destroying it, or themselves."

Gaia smiled.

"Besides, if they mess it up too badly, I can step in and give them a hand. By then I think I'll be ready to show myself."

She took Helen by the hand.

"You said you wanted to make the world a better place for all people. What better legacy than encouraging new kinds of people to exist?"

"This is bigger than people. I love this planet, Gaia. I love all the life that lives here. I love how vast and beautiful and wild it is. I love you, and everything you do as a part of this world. I don't want to see that messed with."

"All I ever do is mess with this planet, Helen. What do you think we were doing earlier, when we created a new kind of life? The one constant here is change."

Helen threw up her hands.

"Alright, that's true. I can't argue that. But...suppose you're wrong? If they keep causing mass extinctions and wiping out species anyway?"

Gaia said nothing.

"Would you put aside the good of the whole planet to sate your loneliness? Or would you kill off all the people on Earth to preserve that balance?"

"Don't, Helen. Please don't."

"You're God! For all our sakes, you can't be short-sighted."

"I'm not God. God is a fiction humans created, and a label that you decided to apply to me. Don't compare me to Him. I am nothing like Him."

They were silent for a moment. A frigid gust of wind rolled across the salt flats.

“I’m sorry, honey,” whispered Helen.

Gaia sat on a twisted boulder and rubbed Her forehead.

“No...I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I’m sorry.”

She looked up at the stars that had begun to spill across the sky.

“You’re right. It’s a pretty silly dream, isn’t it?”

Helen sat down next to Her.

“Well, so is life. So are aluminum creatures swimming around in the mantle. So is me getting to fall in love with the being who created life on Earth. You’re pretty good at making silly dreams come true.”

Gaia laughed.

“I just want you to be realistic. I know you’re lonely. I looked into your eyes earlier, when you let me see with your vision. I saw your pain, just for a moment. It was all I could handle.”

Gaia nodded, just a little.

“I don’t want you to be alone again, when we’re gone...when I’m gone. I just want the Earth to be alright. I want future people to have a chance to see all of this, to see the planet working at its full potential.”

She gripped Gaia’s hand tightly.

“Please...keep the Earth safe for me when I’m not here anymore.”

Gaia returned Helen’s grip. She closed both Her hands around Helen’s.

“I promise. No matter what happens, Helen, I will keep the Earth safe. For you.”

Helen rested her head on Gaia’s shoulder.

“Thank you.”

Gaia felt like the whole world was resting on Her shoulder. She pulled Helen as close as She could. This precious being, who was more beloved to Her than any other creature had ever been. She stroked her hair and hummed a tune as she fell asleep.

In the morning, Helen would wake up to find Gaia was gone, but the tune would still be all around her, and she’d return to civilization once more and await the next time they’d meet. For that night, though, Gaia stayed, and She held Helen close to Her breast and stroked her hair. And far below, She peered into the depths of the Earth and saw the beginning of something entirely new.

**Email:** [writers4utopia@gmail.com](mailto:writers4utopia@gmail.com)

**Click:** <https://writers4utopia.wixsite.com/zine>

**Like:** <https://www.facebook.com/writers4utopia/>  
(more info about our meetings, events, and calls for submissions can be found here)



Writers 4 Utopia is a collective of queer writers focusing on how science fiction and speculative fiction can generate ideas for creating more safe and equitable futures for all beings. We are entering our third year as a collective and this is our third zine, exploring the theme *Cycles*.

In this zine we're constructing futures that may or may not be utopic, but they're all queer af. Our stories imagine underwater transatlantic railways, Salem witch trials revisited, clone siblings on deserted islands, vampires finding love, carnival rides that heal regret, the co-workers who hold the cosmos together: outsiders from this world and other worlds. We're happy you're joining us on this wild cycle of a ride.

