



Aurora
2019

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Special Thanks to Professor Rebecca Andrews for her design
help.



The Colossal Titan, Stephen Thomas

Letter From the Editor

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You just picked up the 149th issue of Aurora. This is an amazing achievement. This year our staff have reached into their hearts and found pieces that are not only beautiful visually or textually, but ones that we believe challenge readers to think about the world around them. I hope that this issue will lay the groundwork for a truly inspiring 150th issue. In that regard, I give you, our reader, a challenge. Whether you are a current student, graduate student, alumni/ae, faculty, staff, or Sister of Providence submit your work to Aurora. Show us all what you think of the world we live in and challenge those around you to think about how we are all different. I hope that from this issue onward, Aurora can inspire and spark conversations about what is going on in our world and bring us to action.

I thank our amazing staff for their hard work this year. There was so much more soul put into Aurora everyday because of each of our editors. They have weaved and worked at creating this magazine in hopes that you will see how much value we put in individuals here at SMWC. I also want to thank each of our contributors. Without your willingness to showcase yourself to us this great collection of art and writing would not be here. Thank you all for an amazing year, on to the next!

Elizabeth Boyer, Editor-in-Chief

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Iridescent Paradise

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Landry Bollenbacher

The First Step of Being Human

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Karen Muñoz

I'd been struggling to stay awake as I waited, trying to remember the last time I felt fully-rested and well enough to feel human and alive. The attempt had been in vain. Instead, I took in the motivational posters or paintings that lined the wall, because there wasn't much else to look at in the small room with honey-colored walls. My eyes had just been about to close when there was knock on the door, before it opened. I watched as a man with a lab coat walked into the room, folder in hand. He was a bit older - flecks of gray peppered his hair and his eyes crinkled when he smiled - but he'd always been a kind man as long as I'd known him, and he knew enough about his line of work to understand and help those who sought his professional opinion. He reached his hand out to shake mine and asked the question I didn't know how to answer - at least not in the way that would genuinely help me figure out why I was feeling this way.

He'd asked, "How're you doing today? How've you been doing?" A moment of silence followed. Then two, before I responded back with "I'm tired. I've been nothing short of exhausted for a while." He clicks his pen and begins to write in his folder. He turns to me then. "So, what brings you in to see me today?"

"That's just it. I've been feeling exhausted and fatigued every day. I wake up in the morning and I almost don't get out of bed, because my body aches and I feel like I haven't slept in days. I get at least an average of six hours each night, but I wake up and I feel worse than I did the day before. I honestly can't remember the last time I felt well-rested and able to make it through the day without feeling like I need a nap to be able to survive the rest of the day. My energy levels have been way down. My roommate even said that I've been looking paler and paler as the semester

goes on.”

I thought back to a week prior to this visit – to a conversation that led me to schedule this meeting with the man in the white lab coat. The conversation started with a psychology-related topic, though I couldn’t remember it in leu of the subject that followed. I’d been sprawled out on my bed, mentally cursing the ever - persistent sinus headache that made my fatigue seem even worse, when my roommate turned the topic to her struggle with depression and anxiety. I sat up, every muscle in my body protesting. My vision grew dark and spotty and I knew that if I’d been standing, I would have collapsed as another wave of light-headedness hit me. The same internal question kept plaguing me in moments like this: What was happening to me?

She talked about how her depression and anxiety made her feel like a completely different person; how she was only a hollow shell of the person she was before this mental illness dogged her every step, stripping her of that confidence in herself. She told me of how she had almost ended everything when she was younger, and I saw how she wore exhaustion like it weighed her body down. She explained how her mom had cried for a week straight when she’d found out, a reaction that showed my roommate that her mental illness was not to be trusted – that there were reasons for her to be alive.

Something in the way she spoke made me want to talk about what I was feeling – something I rarely did, because bottling up what I was feeling seemed easier until it came bubbling out in unstoppable waves that made me feel like I was drowning. I told her that I hadn’t felt like myself in a long time. That I was both so mentally and physically exhausted that I didn’t recognize my own body. Each morning when I awoke, I felt weighed down and should I try to move, every muscle protested like they were fighting a battle between life and death, leaving me in agony with each breath I took. I’m sure she’d noticed that I replaced every one of my hobbies with naps that never helped and stopped

accepting offers to hang out with friends, who've started to think me unsociable. The mere thought of my responsibilities alone made me want to cry from severe stress overload, and I'd end up on a crash course of self-destruction, because stress headaches put me to bed faster than sore muscles ever did. 'Procrastination at its finest' peers would say. No, I thought. This was more than simply being sleep-deprived or even procrastination at its finest. There had to be a reason I was feeling this way – whether it was caused by my already imperfect physical health or, as my roommate pointed out, perhaps a psychological problem.

I was pulled from my thoughts when I heard the doc clear his throat. A few moments of silence follow as he writes more into his folder. He looks over what he's written, thinking. "Well, having low energy levels and feeling fatigue can be caused by a number of things. It can be something with the physical body that causes poor blood supply, illnesses that affect metabolism, or other issues that cause sleep disturbances. It could be a side effect from many medications. Even some psychological stress can cause fatigue like the one you described. We'd have to start with some tests and draw some blood to narrow down what may be causing your exhaustion." He grabs his stethoscope and has me practice deep breaths before he continues. "Are there any other concerns you think might help us determine what it is that's got you feeling this way?"

I chewed my lip as I thought about how to answer. I have a real chance at finding out why this is happening, despite my fear for the answer – for something I didn't fully understand. All I needed was a leap of faith into the unknown. All I needed was to take that first step. That step that would lead to many uncertainties and plenty to be afraid of. That step, that despite all the fear and hardship, would take me a bit closer to feeling like myself; to feeling human again.



Face in the Wall

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Anwyn Payonk

Untitled

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Jessica Calvert

All of these things I've kept from my youth,
I say to him, especially one—
My brilliant way of blowing out candles,
my seductive churning of fingers through hair.
A handstand positions me to receive,
but I give instead, or maybe he takes—
I don't know the difference
Inside me or inside me

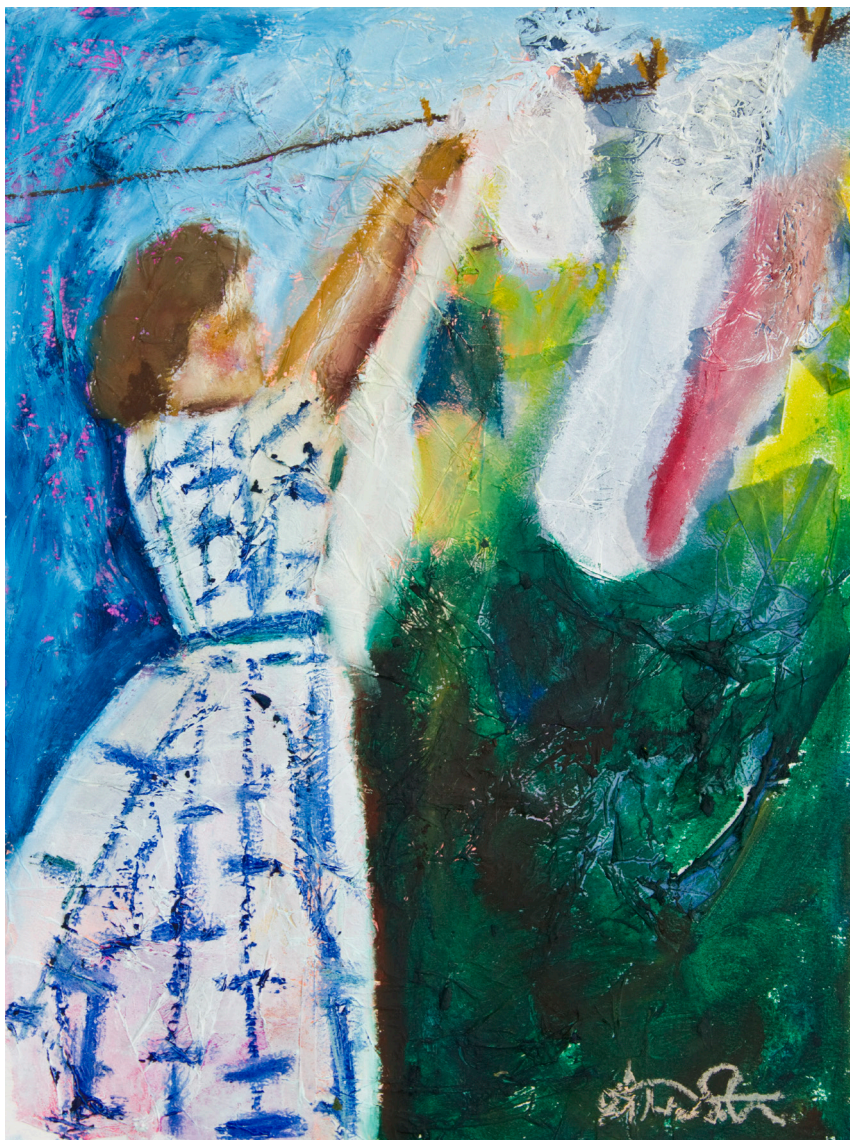
The man behind the curtain was 60
or so,
the water poured down over my small
body,
linen I smelled drying on
A thin wire hung from wall to door
of my grandmother's basement,
mildew creating a memory
of this hour.

Only moments before we'd been laughing
about our bus trip to the city.
Does that hurt you?
I watched the doctor push a needle far down into her arm;
No, she laughs, I am too fat to hurt.
I didn't want to hurt her and laugh,
but I did.

Now she hurts me,
but I don't think
she knows,
or doesn't want to know,
That I love the smell of mildew,
of her white dove soap that
my grandfather watches me
lather and rub on my body
with her washcloths,
the smell of bleach
burning a memory
of this hour.

I slipped and fell once
and hit my head
on the concrete,
and didn't move;
Watch me, all of you,
Look at me:
That baby you threw out with the bath water,
I would have told them,

When she left, a woman came in.



What Shall I Wear?

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Andrea Sutrich

Daily Delights

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Deborah Mach

Dear ones, arise, embrace the day!
Early pre-dawn stillness may
Linger not, nor long it lasts.
Initial birdsong grows and hast
Gathered to proclaim day nigh,
Hints of crimson paint eastern sky.
Twinkling stars bid all goodday,
Sing praises with the first bright ray.

Given lavishly for our delight
On each new morning He will write.
Dear ones, He doth still invite:
Savor this day, and all there-in
Give joy to others and begin
Increasing pleasure from within,
Follow the clear and simple rule:
Treat each one as a precious jewel.

Coffee: Classifying an Addiction

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L.A. Fraley

Technically speaking, it is still morning. Until the glowing blue digits blink 12:00 p.m. I am considered a moderate drinker. Once I venture into mid-day to further satisfy my itch, I cross over from moderation to borderline excessive. If I'm making the second pot, I better do it in the final glints of the a.m. Alcoholics negotiate with 5:00 p.m. while coffee abusers justify, "It's 7:00 a.m. somewhere."

The truth be told, I haven't finished my fourth cup, but, to be fair, it is cold. Don't get me wrong; I am not above drinking cold coffee. Ordered iced, absolutely. Abandoned by distraction and forgotten at room temperature, sometimes. Eight hours old in the carafe, shamefully. Caffeine always deserves the appropriate amount of contemplation. It's the only way to be a functioning addict.

Anytime I face the choice of whether or not to feed my habit, be it indulging in another cup, purchasing an overpriced beverage, or making a completely new pot, I must measure my exhaustion, correlating awakesness, and safe levels of caffeine, making a reasonable effort to defend my choice.

I will make the complaints about the stresses of my life brief, as if somehow my responsibilities and struggles are unique to myself. Still, one's life and choices are relative to one's experiences. My experience is that I am a thirty-four-year-old woman raising two kids and nurturing a next to non-existent career – what I owe to deciding to go back to school, remodeling a house, staying home with my aforementioned kids, caring for two elderly dogs with incontinence, and remaining connected to my husband who has a very successful and very demanding career. That is not to mention my efforts to stay connected to friends and

family, find time for hobbies – ha – and cook for my husband and the aforementioned kids – double ha – all the while, staying physically and mentally healthy. This is the part where I insert my appreciation for my life and my love of my kids. That does not change the fact that my career is back burner material, and I am tired. If I want to have it all, the answer is simple; I need to stay awake.

Found on a list of the fifteen most caffeinated drinks, the highest ranked is a Five Hour Energy Extra Strength, Rockstar Energy Shot being a close second. I prefer to keep my beverages in the coffee, tea, water, wine, and beer categories. So, heart racing, manic raising, club thumping energy drinks are out of the question. Those drinks conjure memories of an era I do not wish to relive, where syrupy concoctions come up just about as quickly as they go down. Coffee doesn't make an appearance until number eight.

Residing in the eighth ring of human caffeination, I am confined to the options within. Coffee comes in a variety of forms. Beans range from dark to light, and preparation can affect their flavor and potency. For instance, automatic machines quickly steep coffee grounds, producing a good but not great cup, while pour-over methods like French Press are meant to slowly pull the ultimate flavor and strength from a bean. Of course, there are hundreds if not thousands of beans and brands to choose from. The infinite choices between brand, grind, brew, and method served keep the coffee business booming, grossing some twenty-three billion dollars of revenue in 2017.

I've been drinking coffee since I was a girl, perturbed when people said things like, "Aren't you a little young to be drinking that?" Or, "Coffee will stunt your growth." Like the desperate adults in line for a hit at Christ View Christian Church are ones to dole out advice. The high they are after comes from more than the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ.

My favorite way to enjoy coffee as a child was poured over ice cream at Grandma's house. By the time I was in high school I had developed a fairly sophisticated palette for a junky. My mother was overjoyed when I started working at Java Dave's where she could buy gourmet beans at a discount.

Plenty of research and science has gone into answering why humans, especially women, are busier than ever. Much of it has to do with the effects of genetics, endorphins, cortisol, and over stimulation from a world on fire, that is, a world that, thanks to technology, moves quicker than the normal psyche can keep up with.

Today, I'm weighing my tiredness with the consequences of caffeinating too late in the afternoon. At twenty I could knock back an espresso after dinner. Now, I have to be careful of being kept up all night with a lingering coffee buzz. Though nocturnal productivity is an ever present temptation, the cost is perpetual regret. Once, I managed to catch up on a day's worth of laundry charged from that evening's dessert coffee, only to resent the bubbly disposition of my teenage son's spring break whistling the next morning. I cringed through a high pitched rendition of "Country Roads" while I sat at my computer trying to work. A trip to Starbucks followed.

It wasn't coffee that kept me up last night. Though I am fond of the occasional night alone to myself, when my husband travels, I find it hard to sleep. Funny how you get used to that same warm body next to you every night. Yea, it's funny how you get used to someone being there. You take it for granted. When it's suddenly gone, the mind panics, a stimulant that depletes the body.

This is why hospital waiting rooms are always stocked with coffee. Unfortunately, it's usually weak and burnt from sitting too long on the warmer.

"How do you take your coffee?" a relative I hardly knew once asked me, a pusher.

“Just cream.” I replied. In that particular moment, I didn’t really want coffee, but it seemed to make them feel better to serve it to me. All they had at Saint Francis was powdered cream. I hated powdered cream. I drank it anyway. “Thank you.” I said, as if one cup of coffee was going to undo any of the shock and fatigue of those last forty-eight hours.

When the husband is away and after a sleepless night, the coffee does the trick. When a mother quickly dies, no cup of weak hospital coffee is going to do shit. The following twenty cups over the course of the next three days that led up to putting her in the ground? Those helped.

Experts suggest conflicting opinions about the benefits of coffee, the addictive qualities rarely being taken into consideration. One study shows regular doses of caffeine can lead to heart disease, while others claim coffee’s power to reduce the risk of cancer and even ward off Alzheimer’s and diabetes. I guess the old adage is true, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

I could conduct additional research or just get on with it. Done. I’m making another pot. I acknowledge the potential for shaky hands, the jitters they call it, and a heart attack.

I often measure my need for afternoon coffee by the probability that I will make it to a bedtime story without snapping at my five-year-old. A lofty goal, I know. It’s gotten to the point where when I pick my son up from pre-school he’ll ask, “Are you tired mommy?” This is his way of inquiring if we will be running through the Scooter’s drive-through for a latte and a piece of chocolate chip banana bread for him.

Americans consume nearly four hundred million cups of coffee a day, the highest amount since 2012. What does that say about the temperament of the country? How many cups of coffee does it take to have the energy to deal with hate and division? Are most Americans driven to another cup after reading the latest Tweet from the President? If not coffee, what is keeping America up at night? What makes us need those four hundred

million cups the next day? On a scale of one to ten cups of coffee, one being “oh shit I’m tired” and ten being “fucking kill me now if I don’t get another cup,” how should we rate stimuli to effective quantity of coffee?

Consider this:

Coffee Consumption: A User’s Guide

When in doubt, gauge your symptoms using these generic examples.

- #1 Morning at church: 1 cup
- #2 A day of yard work: 2 cups
- #3 Hung over: 3 cups
- #4 Big presentation: 4 cups
- #5 Lunch date with mother-in-law: 5 cups
- #6 Election year: 6 cups
- #7 Attending a funeral: 7 cups
- #8 Going through a divorce: 8 cups
- #9 Raising kids: 9 cups
- #10 Terrorist attack: 10 cups

As I now sit and drink my fresh, hot joe (real cream, none of the powdered crap), I am satisfied with these ratios and settle on number six. Good for me.



Peter was Afraid...

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Alfred Eaker

From Le Fer 145

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Austin Somers

The oaks swayed to the ballad of the wind,
leaves spinning like a ballet of paper flames.

I was late to Workshop Wednesday
so the professor paired me up with Whitney.

“Personally, I prefer only a little alliteration per verse.
Otherwise, it’s perverse!” she proclaimed.

Did I mention she also prefers we call her “Whit”?
On account of her cleverness, of course.

“I’m also having a hard time wrapping my head around
the image in the seventh stanza,” she said, frowning.

At this point I found myself trying to wrap my head around
the image of her actually wrapping her head around the image,

grabbing her oily blond hair and stretching her face like
a pizza-dough anaconda coiling its way around a picture.

“Oh, and your rhymes are mistimed, and your dialogue’s a slog.
I’d dial it down a tad. But overall – not bad!”

As if this ludicrous critique wasn’t enough, the professor told us
we had to revise our poems by the end of the day.

And so, while Whitney continued her verbal onslaught,
I drifted toward dream, looking out the window watching
the fallen oaks from the storm being sawed into stumps,
roots bursting out like hands in Hallelujah.



Bat

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Anna Bunch

Castaway

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Hayley Cooper

I'm an endless sea.
Deep blue surrounds me.
Slip under the pain like waves.
Memories are underwater graves.
A shipwrecked emotion.
I am left in the ocean.



Untitled

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Jacob Reinhart

Having a Brain Injury

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Jessica Gross

Having a brain injury is strange
I woke up with a brain that is not mine
The doctors did all they could
Everyone says it's been so long you're fine
I'm not reacting like I should
I have a life that I must rearrange
Having a brain injury is wrong
My friends ask why I go to bed so early
I just get so tired That I can't operate
You can accept me as I am surely
If you care about me why show such hate
Everyone says that I need to be strong
Having a brain injury is hard
It makes me uncomfortable when you ask me why I don't drink
And when strangers ask me what's wrong with my leg
I constantly feel like I'm on the brink
Just let me live my life I beg
I feel like I'm always on guard
Having a brain injury is powerful
I've learned so much
I'm more understanding
I have deeper feelings and such
I'm much less demanding
My world is more colorful
What was once bad can change

Three Ways of Life

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Mary Blair Cunningham

Through Faith, believe in friends
And they will believe in you.
Offer them wine and cheese;
Forgive them what they do.

Through Hope, follow your dream
Promise it to those who love you.
Offer loaves and fishes;
Help them make it through.

Through Charity, share love;
Be kind to those who need you.
Offer bread and water;
And show what miracles do.



Cat's Eye

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Anna Bunch

What's Left

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Kelsey Hollis

I found one of your hairs on my hoodie today
A bleak and miniscule reminder that you're no longer here.

How can something so small trigger so much pain?

Some say you were just a cat, but you were so much more.
You were always there-
Waiting by the door when I came home
Wanting to go everywhere I went.

We did everything together.
We read books
Watched movies
Took naps
You were the best at cuddling.

Then you got sick, and I tried
To be there for you like you'd been there for me.
We tried everything
But you were tired, and it was time for you to go.

Without even realizing it I'm slowly forgetting things.
Your favorite foods
The exact way you preferred your ears scratched
Even the sound of your meows.

Some days the sun hits your perch just right, and I can almost see
you laying there
Basking in the heat of the afternoon sun
Then I blink and you're gone.

Weeks pass with no sight or reminder, and I think I'm okay
Until I look down and see a token of your love on my sleeve
Glossy black and tan waving eagerly
And my heart breaks all over again.

One day
I'm going to stop finding your hair on my clothes.



Sevy Mask

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Deckard

Cold Case

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Elizabeth (Libby) Maher

The title of the McCrumb book swirled through my mind as I rolled the body through the halls of the morgue. Her novel, “If I Had Killed Him When I Met Him” seems like good advice in retrospect. It isn’t as if I tried to kill him. When he came at me with the gun, fate moved in my favor. He tripped on my dog, Tank, and the gun shot blew off most of his face. I picked the gun up from the floor and now it has my prints. Who would believe I didn’t do it? There is not a mark on my body to show abuse or defense wounds. Why did I file a protective order against him and then let him move back? I had been a fool but what to do now? What does someone do if they need to hide a body?

Hide it in plain sight. I never considered my work place could become a real crime site. But, with all the potential murder scenarios staged at the Body Farm, who would know the difference?

The Body Farm only takes donated or unclaimed bodies for forensic research. When I pick up the bodies from the morgue, my job is to collect the paperwork and verify. Easy enough to add his body to the rest in the transport. My hands shook as I filled out the appropriate forms required by the office. Once satisfied with my forgery, an unnatural calm came over me. He is going to become a scientific study. How ironic that this good-for-nothing abuser is going to do something constructive for the world. It would be the first and last time.

While he resides in his temporary home, I will carefully document his eventual return to the earth. When his remains have yielded their last bit of information and given up their last ounce of flesh, he will go to eternal rest having spent a year in earthly hell being eaten by insects, worms and birds. Serves him right.

“Well, what do we have today?” asked Pat, our admissions

coordinator.

“Three donations today, but one is an unclaimed body with no photograph of the deceased,” I said, nervously. All bodies require a photograph to be able to check the accuracy of a facial reconstruction, but I didn’t want him to be recognized.

“Hmmm,” said Pat. He shrugged and said, “I guess we’ll wing it on this one. Donations have been down as the medical schools compete with us for bodies. Maybe this guy can end up in a cold case story.”

I began to sweat. “Let’s get them placed before the rain hits,” I said. “What scenario do we need?”

We trek out to the field with each body, carefully arranging a different crime scene. I am relieved when we chose an open-air situation where decomposition could go quickly. The June heat had both Todd and I perspiring, our sweat mingling with the fluids forming on the corpses. The insects begin to land on both the living and the dead. My former lover looks so defenseless lying on the ground. As we curled his body into a fetal position, a coil of pity began to unfurl. I straightened my back and reminded myself this could have easily been me, shot through the face. Time to stop with the sympathy. Second chances are what almost got me killed.

We placed the cage over the body to prevent the birds from reaching him and destroying important insect development data. Birds of prey like crows and ravens could strip the flesh from the bones within a few days and the studies we are doing required a year of observation. I am glad the birds will not eat him. I did not want to look out the window and wonder which bird has his DNA incorporated into their flesh. I did not want any part of him to fly free. Let him remain pinned to the ground, trapped in his space the way he trapped me. And yet, I am cornered, forced to watch the slow deterioration over the next year and document the data. There will be photographs, collection of insect eggs and larvae, soil samples and a record of the daily weather with its

effect on the body. My punishment for this deed. My prison sentence served in silence. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea after all.

A few days later, the bloating has begun. Good. This stage of the body doesn't look anything like my former lover. I can record my data and pretend his body is no different from the other bodies I am assigned to monitor. I've got this. Maybe.

August 2018

Thirty-one days have come and gone; the decomposition has sped up with the heat. Now his body has released its fluids into the soil. The grass dies. His skin clings to the skeleton, and I can once again see the remnants of the man I thought I loved. Gathering the data as swiftly as I can, I try not to look at what is still recognizable in his face. Never mind that the nightmares have returned and the crazed face of the man who came at me with the gun is now replaced with the skull missing the lower half; the skin pulled taut. Thank goodness for Tank who saved me on that fateful day. He continues to do so every night when I cry in my sleep and move restlessly, trying to run in my dream. Tank nestles close during those episodes and licks the tears from my face.

October 2018

This month comes with more horrors than I imagined. The skin is grown black and hardened against the bones. The clipboard from the lab cannot hide the nightmare that faces me in the flesh as his remains take on a zombie like appearance. The TV remains off as it is filled with Halloween images too close to the reality for comfort. Will the snows ever come to obscure the horror?

December 2018

It finally snowed, but not enough to mask the remains. Six more months of hell ahead of me. Six more months of alternating guilt and relief. At least the nightmares are fewer and Tank is spending most nights sleeping on his own bed.

March 2018

Warm weather comes early this year. I look at the spring wildflowers peeking through the bones as the grass begins to grow and spring rains removes the toxins of decomposition from the soil. It feels like someone has placed flowers on his grave, granting him redemption and forgiveness. Lord knows someone needs to forgive him, because I still haven't.

Late June 2018

Finally, twelve months have passed, and it is time to retrieve the bones from their above-ground grave. Vines have grown over the bones, making them difficult to lift from the soil. Gently, Todd and I clip the weeds and release the bones from their botanical bonds. As his femur resisted the hold of the roots, it seems the earth is holding tight to the body as if to keep the organic material for herself. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Mother Earth is nourished with the bones and wants to keep her feast.

As we carefully transfer the skeletonized remains to the boxes, a vague, disquiet sensation seeps into my own bones. This next stage in the studies requires the cleaning of the skeleton and microscopic examination of the remaining tissues. The microscope research is benign since a slide of tissue won't follow the curve of his cheek. Nor does the arrangement of the bones on the table mimic the touch of his hand on the back of my neck. No. The lab work won't bother me. What I dread is the reconstruction of the face. The skull will be turned over to the sculptor to do her forensic magic. She will carefully sculpt clay onto a 3-D printed model of the skull. There will be the application of clay muscles at just the right facial depth for a man of his estimated age. The missing bones forever lost in a spray of tissue and blood will be replaced, as the artist will continue with the remodeling. Skin will be painted as if the blood still flowed through his veins and arteries. Hair will be attached and arranged based on the detailed photos I took in June. Even without a photo of the living person, the forensic artist will come closer to bringing him to life than I want to see. Can I watch this process take place? Maybe it is best

to take vacation and get as far away as possible.

July 2018

Two weeks later, I am back and walk into the lab. I stop in my tracks. He is staring at me accusingly. My breath is taken away as I relive the scene. His one eye is dark like the barrel of the gun. I see his expression just before the gun fired and I must remind myself it isn't really him. I get closer and stare into his vacant eyes. I run my fingers through his hair one more time. I resist the urge to place my lips against his cold clay lips. Too close, way too close to the real thing. Danger once again casts its shadow.

In October, Pat and I are to appear on the local news station profiling cold case files. They will display his bust to the world and ask for information. What happens when someone recognizes him? What happens if someone connects him to me? Even worse, what happens when the local sheriff realizes there has been no police report filed for his death? Did I hide my guilt well enough in the paperwork last June? Perhaps all will be revealed and my role in the cover-up will come to light. What will I do? Would anyone believe me now?

My grandmother always liked to say there are two versions of Southern advice to choose from when a person can't decide. You can be Rhett Butler and frankly, don't give a damn or you can be Scarlett O'Hare and think about it tomorrow. Today, I go with Scarlet and return to my Tara to sit on the porch with Tank at my feet. I will stare into the mist rising from the river and wait for tomorrow.



Untitled

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Kayla Moats

30 Years

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Nelleke Knarr

30 Years ago, I gave my mother a journal.
Today, she gave it back to me.
Please fill it with your memories, I had written in the front.
Little did I know, she would fill it with mine.

A lot happens in 30 years:
Babies and marriages, jobs and cross-country moves;
divorce and deaths, disillusionments and disease.
But, also, faithfulness and forgiveness,
2nd chances and 2nd generations.

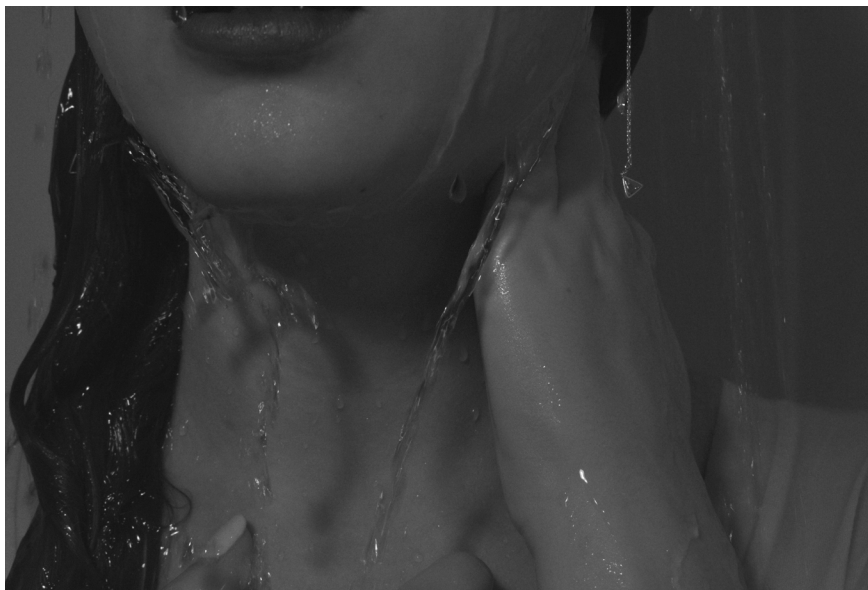
At 30 years, my mother gave birth to me,
a former novice turned mom to six.
She created a home on love and many prayers,
with her very own Captain Von Trapp.

When I was ready to fly from that nest,
she brought me back to the Motherhouse she'd left,
nearly 30 years younger in life, at my age.
Providence watched over us both.

This weekend I return there,
where I graduated 30 years ago.
And I wonder, how many mothers and daughters
Will be thinking these same thoughts?

About the trinity of woman: the maiden, mother, crone
Roughly 30 years per stage, to turn the wheel of life.
And hoping, always hoping,
That we could save our daughters some struggle.

But the life we give is theirs, not ours.
So we watch and pray, and hope, and have faith,
That Providence will watch over them,
Always mother to us all.



Zoë

• • • •

Anwyn Payonk



Cobweb in Drylot

• • • •

Courtney Cullison

Resilience

• • • •

Jessica Gross

Out of the ashes a phoenix flies
Flaming wings oh so mighty kiss the skies
She told me not to worry about my past
Because that old nightmare didn't last
She taught me how to change my day
I just close my eyes so I can pray
The flames of her wings create a spark
I no longer have to live in the dark
I'm rising from the ashes like my phoenix friend
The bad things like the good have to end
I follow her song like I follow my dreams
To that beautiful place bathed in the sun's beams
Like a phoenix I will rise
Out of the ashes as my old life dies

William Cast

• • • •

Karen Muñoz

WILLIAM CAST

Class: Druid

Race: Firbolg

Life of Seclusion: Caretaker of ancient ruins.

Personality Traits: He's utterly serene in the face of danger but feels empathy for all who suffer.

Ideals: "If one knows thyself, there's nothing left to know."

Bonds: Should his discovery come to light, it could bring ruin to the world.

Flaws: He'd rather go hungry than strain the land during a famine. He's awkward around people.

Quirks: He finds himself talking to most animals he encounters. He's also prone to turning invisible when upset or threatened. He tends to use herbs from his herbal kit to make potions when he's bored.



Immediate Family Tree



Mara



Theran



William



Darie

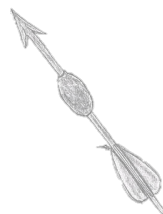
Druidic Staff



Elven Spear x3



Darts x10



Backstory:

William Cast, son of Mara and Theran, grew up with an innate affinity for magic, more specifically, the druidic kind. Unlike his sister, Darie, whose task as a rogue dealt with spying on neighboring folk to determine their intentions, Will naturally became a druid due to laying high value on not only what the group's needs were but the effect each action will have on the forest and the rest of the natural world. Most Firbolg druids serve as stronghold leaders, a position William could see himself doing well in. That was, until he had a dream, where beasts and plants alike seemed to be leading him somewhere. He followed streams, shifting vines and small critters to an abandoned ruin. He didn't know why he was being led to the ruins in his dreams, but he knew they were incredibly old – as in First Age old.

At first, he wasn't sure what to make of the dream. But the dream kept reoccurring and he kept hearing a voice call out to him, deep and strong and not at all unpleasant. "Protect," it said. "Protect. Guardian over creation." Baffled by what the dream meant, he went to discuss these dreams with the tribe leaders. They agreed that it might be an omen and since Will was the one who received it, they told him to follow what nature was trying to show him and seek out the ruins. Packing only what he needed and bidding farewell to his tribe, he set out to do just that.

When he found the ruins, he noticed what appeared to be varying levels of desecration surrounding them, causing plants to sicken and die and the wildlife to steer clear. There, he saw scattered throughout the ruins, tags with primordial scrawl carved into them. And further in, residing in the middle of the ruins floating four feet above a small pillar, was a pitch-black orb, about palm-sized, with a slight purple sheen from the natural rays of sunlight, spinning slowly. Not knowing what it was or how dangerous it could be, William refused to touch the orb, deciding to guard it and the ruins in ignorance of exactly what he was guarding. What he did understand was that whatever the

orb was or contained to cause such desecration was something that should not be found or unleashed upon the world. So, he did what any of his tribe would have and called upon nature to fight the desecration, providing what assistance he could, and to help him steer people away from the ruins. And there he stood, for eight years, guarding the discovery from all and helping to strengthen nature in the surrounding areas to keep what was inside from ever leaving.

He'd gotten used to a life of solitude and seclusion from the rest of the world when a young, nosy grung managed to sneak up on him and ask a bunch of questions. He wasn't even sure how the grung found him or the ruins when he'd gone through such lengths to keep it hidden. He stayed tight-lipped around Kuh-rung, a name the grung called himself, for a while. He liked the grung after knowing him for a little while, but he wasn't sure what the grung was after. Over time, the mild annoyance he felt toward the grung with a thousand questions turned to a friendship of sorts – an odd one, but one he felt he could trust all the same.

Then Kuh-rung just had to let his curiosity take control and he went and touched the orb, disappearing right before William's eyes. Instinctively, he followed after the grung despite the idea of what they both might uncover. They ended up in circular shaped chamber that looked like it had been created through erosion of water, pocketed in a mountainside somewhere. The chamber was made up of black obsidian with veins of greenish liquid pocketed throughout the walls, flowing down to a boiling lake below where they stood. William glanced behind them and saw a glowing white archway, of which he couldn't see through, but knew would lead them back to the ruins. In front of them were floating stepping stones that lead up to a sarcophagus that floated fifteen feet above the emerald, magma-like lake below. On one of the floating disks leading to the sarcophagus, hung a sign with primordial scrawl across it. In fact, as Will continued looking

around the chamber, he noticed more primordial runes carved into the walls – similar to the way the primordial tags lay adorned throughout the ruins. He couldn't read primordial but seeing the runes all over the place left him chilled and a bit frightened. The whole chamber gave him a bad feeling.

Looking back to the sign on the floating step, he noticed something else. On top of that step sat a blackened spherical, seemingly charred object. But before he could ascertain what it might be, movement in his peripheral vision drew his attention. He turned toward the movement and caught sight of a massive white drider with crimson along its extremities. He immediately felt that this creature was not normal and very evil in nature. A deep feminine voice, sinister and coy, spoke to him and his grung friend telepathically. It promised malicious things if they did not leave immediately and if they ever returned to the chamber. Both, quite shaken, turned tail and left the chamber. And after concealing the entrance to the ruins, they left to search for answers to endless amount of questions that swirled in their minds and to seek help against the evil that overwhelmed and frightened them back in the chamber.

As they traveled, William felt a growing fear start to prick his mind. Just what had he been guarding all these years? And with him away from the ruins, would the desecration come back and allow a darker evil to wander their world causing havoc and devastation in its wake? Would it be all his fault?



Happiest Man on Earth

• • • •

Emma Taylor

The Mail Had Arrived Again

• • • •

Deborah Mach

The mail had arrived again. I crossed the street to our mailbox and looked through the mail before returning to the driveway.

The envelope was a simple, white rectangle. Though it could have been passed over easily as unimportant, I would not have missed it. I had watched eagerly, impatiently for its arrival. The anticipation of this letter went back much farther than the ten days since I'd mailed my certified letters of introduction, my watch spanned nearly two decades.

I handled it carefully and examined the small print addressing it to me. My eyes hungrily read the name and address of the sender. As often happens in times of intense emotion, I held my breath, afraid that even the gentle stir of my exhaled breath could cause it to evaporate.

One breath, two breaths. Thud! Thud! Thud went my heart as it beat faster and faster. No. I was too excited, too afraid of its contents to open it alone.

I picked up the portable phone in the kitchen and took it and the precious, long-awaited envelope outside to the porch. It was a mid-May afternoon. The spring sun shone brightly. Across from the porch a large lavender-colored lilac was in full bloom, fragrantly scenting the air. My favorite flower, lilac, evokes many memories of spring's hopes, love, joy.

Mild weather. Winter had ended. Perhaps the long-frozen part of my heart will thaw when i read this letter. I tremble in anticipation as I sit down on an old wooden pew and arranging a pillow behind my back, I tuck my feet up under me. My hand shakes as I dial Joel's work number.

I only wait a moment after the phone is answered until I hear Joel's voice on the line. My throat is tight with emotion. I am

barely able to speak the words aloud.

“She wrote.”

“Oh, Deb, that’s great! What did she say?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t opened it yet. Can you listen for a moment while I read it?” Already silent tears roll down my cheeks. Warm tears on my cool cheeks. I am aware of the thawing, melting of frozen tear ducts.

My daughter has written to me. A miracle and nothing less.

“OK, I am opening it- Oh, Joel! There’s a photo. oh, oh- she’s so pretty! What a happy smile! It’s a photo of Ann-”

Ann, I know her name-

“She has long blond hair, blue eyes. She’s wearing overalls, and a long-sleeved black t-shirt” I pause...” Joel, she has her arm around a horse- they are in a field...”

I can’t read the card for a couple more moments. I am sobbing. Deep, heart-wrenching sobs- joy, sorrow, ecstasy, and pain. My chest hurts as I am wracked from pounding head to trembling toe with pent up emotion.

My first photo of my daughter in nearly 18 years.

“Deb, are you ok?” Joel’s voice is concerned.

“Yes, yes. I can’t believe it.” I reply, “Ok, let me look at the card. There’s a horse and rider on it. A really nice print of a pastel painting.”

“Ready?” I whisper. “Ok, here goes-” one more slow breath and I begin to read.

Dear Debbie,

Happy Mother’s Day! (Or if this arrives after Sunday, Happy Belated Mother’s Day!) Thank you so much for your letter!

Although I’ve always known I was adopted, I was still pretty surprised when I got your card in the mail. I have toyed with the idea of tracking down my birth-parents but had never actually gotten serious about it. Enclosed is a picture of myself and my horse Bandito. I usually wear my hair in a ponytail, but

that was my senior picture, so I had to look nice. Bandito is a big, clumsy grey thoroughbred whom I love to death but unfortunately, I have to sell him soon because I'm going away to Art school next year and won't have time to ride him anymore. I'm really sad about having to give him up but I'll make sure he goes to a good home. ...

Love, Ann :)

“I'm so happy for you, Deb”

“Thanks, Joel, this is incredible...”

We hang up.

Time stops as I sit on the bench and soak in the image of my daughter in the photo.

I was just her age when I gave her away to adoption. When I left her in the hospital, I left part of my heart, left the opportunity to share in the joy that was parenting her...another couple received that joy. When I left the hospital that April day, a late snow storm had coated the streets with inches of snow and ice. It felt like my heart was coated in ice also. My prayer, my hope was that we would meet again. Somehow, I knew that I would see her again in 18 years, in fact I whispered that to her as she slept in my arms that last evening in the hospital. It was a promise locked away in a secret place in my heart that holds my dearest hopes.

The hope is fulfilled~

Gradually, I am aware of where I am- outside on this spring day. I smell the flowers, hear a cardinal chirping and locate his cheery red form in the shrubs nearby. I feel a light breeze like a gentle caress on my cheek. I realize that my tears have dried and I am smiling in contentment.

Ann has written to me. Thank you, God.

Torgga Battleforger

• • • •

Karen Muñoz

TORGGA BATTLEFORGER

Class: Barbarian

Race: Dwarf

Occupation: Blacksmith

Personality Traits: She's always polite and respectful, but will stare down a dragon without flinching, should the need arise.

Ideals: "Our lot is to lay down our lives in defense of others."

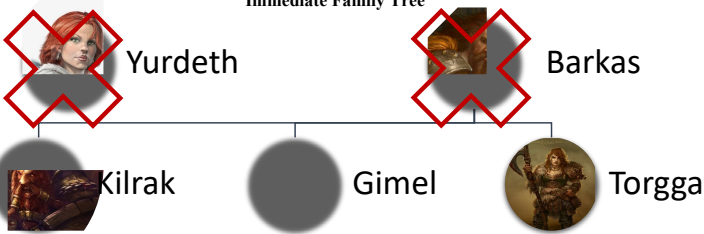
Bonds: She fights for those who cannot fight for themselves, and those who fight beside her are those worth dying for.

Flaws: She's known to internalize everything until the stress gets too much and sets her off. She has a slight anger problem when extremely stressed.

Quirks: She believes that drinking any dragon's blood will heal wounds, banish diseases and poisons, and will add a year to four to a dwarf's life. She also loves to whittle and carve things out of wood to reduce stress.



Immediate Family Tree



The Berserker's Blade



Hammer of Thunderbolts



Great Axe



Backstory:

Torgga grew up in the Battleforger clan with her two brothers, Kilrak and Gimel, who taught her the way of the totem warriors. Kilrak chose the totem of the bear, all brute strength in contrast to his twin, Gimel's way of the wolf, all calculated planning and cunning strategy. Her father, Barkas, ran the clan's smithy and taught her the odds and ins of blacksmithing. She never met her mother, Yurdeth, and knows very little about her. The clan mainly dwelled in caves and mines but have traveled the surface enough to not be fearful of falling into the sky. Torgga, accompanied by her brothers, left for a rite of passage for young dwarves aspiring to be warriors, called a Dragonmoot, which is a proud but vanishing tradition. When they returned home afterward, however, they found that the rest of their clan had vanished. The three had suspected that duergar had attacked, though whether the clan left in hurry or ended up captured were unknown. The siblings agreed to split up to cover more ground in the search for their missing clan, which is how Torgga found herself traveling with a caravan, unaware of how it would change her life completely.

Later, when the caravan had been ambushed during the night by kobolds, she was knocked out and taken captive. When she awoke, she discovered that she hadn't been the only one captured. She teamed up with the other survivors and together they retrieved what was stolen and escaped, heading toward the next big town. There, they were hired to clear a dungeon beneath the city and uncovered the rise of Tiamat, a vengeful and evil god. When the group sought him out, he plane-shifted them to a strange apocalyptic world, where they faced hoard after hoard of undead, before defeating Tiamat and finding their way back to their world. The group of friends discovered they'd been gone from their world for five years and that they were famously dubbed the God Slayers. They even had their own citadel, where Torgga established a very nice forge and blacksmithing business.

The next few years led the group all over, defeating many evils and in each new place, Torgga found herself searching for news or the familiar faces of her lost clan. It wasn't until she found Gimel, who had turned from the path of a warrior to seek out knowledge and lost magic to find the clan, that they did, in fact, find out what happened. A new evil had risen to try and take the throne of the old murder god, Tiamat, and this evil, Baal, had captured their clan. Spurred on by her anger, she and the rest of her companions searched endlessly for god-tier items to help bring down Baal. It was during this time that their citadel was attacked dealing heavy losses to the group. Around the same time, some of their more powerful friends rescued Torgga's clan, but at a cost. Torgga's father, the chieftain of the Battleforger clan, had died. Torgga, normally so calm and collected despite her fury in battle, did not take the news well. She'd already lost her home, her forge, the citadel, and many wonderful friends, only to discover that she'd lost her father too.

Dwarven tradition calls for the family of the fallen to put together a pyre for the dead and mourn for three days. During this time, especially if the dead was a chieftain, a pyre must be built before the funeral could take place, and then a celebration of life would be held afterwards. Since her father was a chieftain, immediately after the mourning period was up, a new one was supposed to be chosen. Dwarves came from all over to either make their claim or honor the dead. What Torgga didn't expect was for everyone who held a claim, including her brothers, to turn it down and elect her as the new chief. Unwilling, she became chief of another clan (the other being orcs, because she bested their leader in combat to save a friend) and overwhelmed from the pressure of her comrades who didn't understand dwarven mourning obligations and the great losses she'd faced, she went deep into the wilderness away from all life and grieved in the only way she knew how to. An overwhelming and unrelenting rage consumed her and she swung her blade at tree after tree,

releasing her tears, her deep sadness, and the overbearing weight that had crashed down on her since the disappearance of her clan years ago.

She returned hours later, exhausted as the hole in her heart grew. After countless reminders and complaints, from her companions, that they still needed to find the remaining god-tier items and that they'd been wasting time waiting for Torgga to mourn her father, she'd reluctantly set out again, numb, but with a new kind of rage burning within her. She kept to herself for the next few months. Although she'd been pissed and vastly disappointed in her companions, she'd done everything she could to protect them in the months that led up to their battle with Baal. They'd faced beholders, balors, 6-armed freaks she couldn't remember the name of, undead hoards, abominations, dragons, and she'd even jumped through a prismatic wall (a feat that none have probably done and survived) to save a friend from a mind-flayer on the other side, not to mention a bunch of giants in a floating castle in the sky, before they finally faced down Baal. So many came together for this fight and though the battle was long and very hard fought, they finally managed to defeat this evil.

After tying up loose ends and taking care of last items of business, the group split up and went separate ways. Torgga, weary and worn from all that she'd been through, appointed new chieftains to both of the clans she'd been in charge of and became a humble blacksmith, wandering the world teaching the trade and learning new tricks of the trade.

And that's what she did for many, many years, until two of the most unlikely of creatures – a grung and a Firbolg - found her, seeking help to stop a new evil from rising. Would she be willing to give up her humble life to help them and risk everything again, or will she send them on their way?

Nonet: Morituri

(inspired by a passage in the Grands-Chroniques of the Abbey of St. Denis, Paris)

Michael Angrosino

We have daily watched as neighbors fade,
as friends depart, as loved ones fall.
But we, though nearly shattered,
essay a brazen show
to mock our shadows.
Disowning dread,
denying
doom, we
dance.



Scavenger Hunt

• • • •

Teresa Dudley

The Sycamore

• • • •

Jessica Calvert

There she sat again—same bench, north end of the park. There were two children running by at present, but neither looked her direction to see the disgusted look on her face, eyebrows constricted, mouth and cheek scrunched on the right side. To walk to the drinking fountain required soliciting the attention of those beastly furred arches, and he couldn't deal with the scrutiny today. He stayed by an ancient sycamore—a sturdy monstrosity that held an impossibly extended swing in his youth. Pearlescent in the approaching dusk, he was distracted by the nostalgia of flying back and forth beneath its fifty-foot branches when he was eight or nine; now, at thirty-nine, the swing was ages gone and he wondered if the heart of the tree ached for himself and the other children who used it when it still had purpose. It hovered over the north end of the park like an Atlas of the small town—a village if it were half-a-century earlier—bereft of attention, except for the occasional photographer.

The woman threw pieces of bread at a wondering wild turkey. He edged further into the sycamore's waning shadow to guild himself from her view, should she look up and gasp the gasp of older middle-aged ladies who have been married several times and had grown children who didn't speak to them except in trite letters at Christmas. Dear Mother, they wrote, we won't be able to come this year, but here are the sweets you like, and a blanket Laura made. The children are well and send their love. But the love wasn't tangible, as the children had met her twice, and she was glad they weren't going to touch her Precious Moments collection again. She was sad about her son not arriving at Christmas, but not his wife. She was loud and had awful opinions; why he'd married that woman against his mother's advice,

she'll never know.

He wanted to sit down in the grass, but stood; his throat was dry, but his curiosity was starving. The woman gave up on the turkey, who had shunned her, and he was certain that in some way it recognized remorsefully that to get the bread would mean interacting with the hand of cynicism. Do birds think so deeply? He imagined they did. The woman kept her offering, replacing it inside a worn tote used for the park. He'd seen her with it before; last week the woman had tried to hand-feed some robins and a cardinal, but again, was rejected. The stinginess of her refusal to spread pieces on the ground for the wild creatures incited a deep hatred for her, and that day he'd spent watching her for several hours were filled with images of atrocities committed against her in the secret places of the woods. At dusk, families drove away in their cars, runners returned to their homes for dinner or long recuperative bathing, and he was alone with her.

He imagined the feel of her hands in his, the arthritic nodes paving a trail for his fingers along her bones. He reached out in the shadow of the sycamore to guide the imprint of her minty breath on the wind to his nose, the odor of it inciting his hunger. She had Altoids in her tote, he'd seen them last week. This evening her dress clung to her knees like the children she hated, legs livered and bare. She veiled her weakening hair in a rayon scarf; he didn't care for the crimson and violet flowers that draped her head like a crown she didn't deserve.

Dear Mother, her daughter had written a week ago, Forgive us for staying home, you know how busy we are at the holidays. Maybe next year we can travel, but right now the baby can't be in the car that long. You should see her! She's trying to crawl, and we've had to rehome the cat because she won't stop pulling its tail and scooting toward the food! What's next, the litter?! Imagine that! Anyway, I hope you like the scarf, I know how you love roses. He couldn't imagine anyone falling in love with her,

laying with her, procreating with her. Were her moans drowned by his grunts, her body stiff and livid with wifely repulsion? Her daughter stayed away, her son never visited. In the months he'd been watching her, she'd remained alone on the bench.

He panicked. The woman pressed her right arm on the bench and the left grabbed a wooden staff-like cane as she attempted to stand. Her efforts were labored and once she seemed as though she would fall but caught herself and straightened. She stood toward the small creek that flowed in a lazy J through the park and stared off toward a long-retired train trestle, defunct tracks overgrown by mildly dense forest. Those trees were deceptive; the man couldn't see through them, but they were only about a half-mile wide and hardly capable of getting lost in. Steep cliffs of mud and erosion-formed caves hinted at buried treasure when he was younger, but he was never adept enough to climb the slopes of rock and mire to find out.

His thirst was overwhelming now. He knew the woman would walk toward the sycamore to go to her home on Clinton Street, but perhaps he could move around the trunk as she passed by. The base of the tree was an ample five or six feet and would allow significant cover, especially since she walked so slowly. But she didn't move. She kept looking toward the trestle and he followed her eye line. There was a child, aged nine or so, climbing over an erected safety fence. He reached the top of the buried tracks and struggled to get his legs over the concrete top, but managed and lowered himself onto the ledge where a bridge had once born engines and cars full of livestock feed, industrial chemicals, or countless other Midwest necessities. He stood triumphantly, smiled at the air gods, then fell.

The man quickly glanced at the woman. To be damned, she was smiling. A smirk of delicious pleasure graced her wrinkles and twilit pallor, and the screams of people not seen split the laggard breeze from somewhere below the ledge, near the water. Distant sirens panicked toward the screaming, and the woman

rested in her fiendish joy.

The man forgot his thirst, and the shadows of the sycamore, once protective, were rabidly embracing the approaching woman. Her staunch gait would have frustrated a son or daughter waiting for her to enter a vehicle to go home from shopping or the doctor, but for the man it seduced his hate. Every lift of a leg tested the strength of his clenched fist; every shuffle through fallen leaves bristled the hair on his arms, though the night was temperate. In the partial moonlight her face bore contentment, the ease of pace meaning to guide her home to a dinner of boiled potatoes and leftover meatloaf, bagged tea (that loose-leaf business was nonsense), and finally, sleep without dreams.

She arrived at the sycamore and stopped, five feet from where he hid on the other side. A current of mint and faintly, lavender, wafted around the sinews of bark to his face, and he breathed her in, waiting to see what she would do and whether she knew he was there. He thought she'd heard his drumming heart or rasping lungs, but she was savoring the remnants of weeping from the woods. The sirens no longer blared, and the sycamore reflected the red and white lights of the ambulance in a festive concert for the deaf. She ambled on, following the incline of Leedy Street toward the artless Victorian home left to her by her late husband. He'd passed on willingly, relieved of her gaunt love, his only regret that he'd had too many years to wither in it.

The man eased around the tree and watched the deceptively frail woman retreat. He glanced up at the streetlights and estimated fifty feet between them, offering him a generous berth of darkness with which to creep out of the park unseen. The woman was too involved in trekking up the paved incline to notice the figure incrementally darting from post to shrub, along the block wall, in the umbra of ditches. She reached the edge of the park at Leedy and Columbia and turned left to go home. Seconds later, the man stood at the conjunction of park and town; he turned and contemplated the sycamore, then followed her.

Today I'm Water

• • • •

Joan Hiney McGarry

Today I am water,
Tomorrow I may be something else,
I am part of a whole, God's whole,
Mystic, more than human,
Nature, part of a bigger plan,
I am what is right, and what is wrong,
Helping, evolving, and creating,
With God, who is the same today, tomorrow and always,
With art and nature, ever changing,
Sharing my spirit, heart, and soul,
You are with me, we are one, look for me,
Today I am water,
Tomorrow I may be something else





Hanging Around

• • • •

Theresa Carter

Silent Night

• • • •

Mary Webb Burke Goss

The house was silent.

Sue Ann heaved a sigh of relief as her four year old tornado of a grandson napped. Blessed peace enveloped her on the couch while she sat for a moment and rested her sixty year old bones that screamed for relief. Playing soccer wasn't so bad on a Saturday morning, but backyard football, too, just about finished her off.

Lord, she was tired. Her cup of hot tea and cookies to dunk would revive her. Having her grandson was a blessing and her responsibility required pacing herself and her soul. Samuel didn't lack for anything, though, while he waited for his parents to grow up. Her son, the dad, wrote weekly from jail, a father who preferred addictions to accepting responsibility for the boy. The mom now wrote long letters about finding herself and finding a job and finding a man and by the way here's a birthday card and a promise of a dollar for her son.

Sue Ann sipped her tea and studied the legal envelope atop her mail. She let the letters fall unopened from her hand. She began her afternoon prayers and vowed tomorrow she would sleep in. No, tomorrow she would take Samuel to Mass and hope that God's goodness and grace would protect them all. Tomorrow she would slit the legal envelope and wade through the fine print. Today yet, she still had hope for Samuel's birthday and clothes to pull from the dryer.

The music rocked the windows, the laughter shook the lights as six boys played holiday games and the half dozen girls giggled. Sue Ann winched with the realization she had forgotten how much children giggled. And Samuel was the loudest. The

church group sponsored a combined holiday birthday party at her house was a success. Two birthday cakes graced the table, one for Samuel and one for baby Jesus. How had she ever gotten by without the generosity of strangers? Yes, she had pride but she couldn't afford it. Samuel had the basic safety, security and stability needed. And he had love.

Share the love and obey rules were her mantra and Samuel wanted to share his day with baby Jesus and everyone. Samuel was outgrowing her. It was the last party where he would sit and wear funny hats and eat cake and giggle. Next year, he would want his friends or a pizza party and events that didn't allow old faces to sit at the table. But she banished that storm of worry and vowed to enjoy today.

The doorbell rang. She watched Samuel turn away because he knew there was no one else coming for him. Sue Ann swung open the door. Surprise replaced her pleasure and her anger boiled. Two policemen stood on the steps along with Samuel's mother and another couple.

"Sorry, ma'am but they have a court order." The officer said.

"You didn't respond to my last letter, "the woman hissed.

"Who is it, grandma?" Samuel's voice echoed down the hall.

Pain warred with pity. Sue Ann said a quick prayer and did the only Christian thing she knew to do.

She invited them all inside.

A half hour later, the policemen left with cake and autographs for the ruse as specials guests since Samuel wanted to be a policemen. Samuel's grandparents were an added surprise, Sue Ann decided, but it was Mom who won the spot of honor by Samuel when he blew out the candles.

Two of her friends hauled her into the pantry to lecture her on rights and outrage. Sue Ann sent them home early. There

wasn't room for more bitterness.

Two hours later, the house was quiet. Sue Ann lit her candle against the evening dark and began her evening protocol of prayer. In the darkness, the Christmas lights flickered. Samuel departed with his mother, supervised by the grandparents in a carload of gifts.

Tomorrow she would sleep in before opening her present. Fool that that she was, she had no legal papers to protect her rights and no paper could protect her heart. She threw the legal summons into the fire and knew she would not fight the mother for custody. As the papers turned to ashes, Sue Ann fingered her present, and unrolled the paper drawing of baby Jesus by Samuel. She stood and walked to the kitchen. She'd place it on the refrigerator once her traitorous fingers let go of the finger-painted duo of Samuel holding baby Jesus while an old angel labeled grandma looked on.

Sue Ann paused and savored the gift. After all, she'd shared the love and obeyed the rules. She gave the finest Christmas gift of all to Samuel. She'd kept the faith.

She let him go.



NAUTHIZ

• • • •

Lacey Thomas

Valentine Flight

• • • •

Deborah Mach

I have dreamt of flying dozens of times, especially during my childhood. In my dreams, I stood on the old wooden picnic table's top and ran the short distance down it to take off in flight. Really it was more like gliding or floating. Like a back float in the water. Almost effortless, limitless endurance. In my frequent flights I hovered a few feet above the ground, flew for any distance that I desired, before lightly putting my feet to the ground.

When I awoke from those dreams I felt such a letdown. I was so disappointed to return to earth-bound reality.

Years have passed, and my dreams of flights are quite infrequent. I had lost the joy and freedom of flying. However, I have been blessed by the gift of flight again while on horseback.

I have the exquisite pleasure of riding a sweet-tempered Arab mare who is aptly named Valentine. She has the smoothest, most silken canter that I have experienced. Weekly, I join a true horse-lover, my friend, Bev, to ride along the winding tree-lined trails in the forest preserve.

My joy begins with the first scent of horses and the corral. The sweet, pungent smell of horse manure and hay has encoded itself in my brain and my senses as the most relaxing, stress relieving, endorphin-releasing aromatherapy. I fully recognize that the scent is not so pleasant to everyone I know. Nonetheless, I frequently offer my husband a whiff of my gloves after I have been "to the horses." He humors me and accepts my horse-loving peculiarities.

Back at the barn; Bev and I meet and walk the horses up to the tie-out posts where we groom them. Grooming, brushing Valentine's smooth mahogany colored coat and coal-black mane and tail is the prelude I crave when I have been too long away from

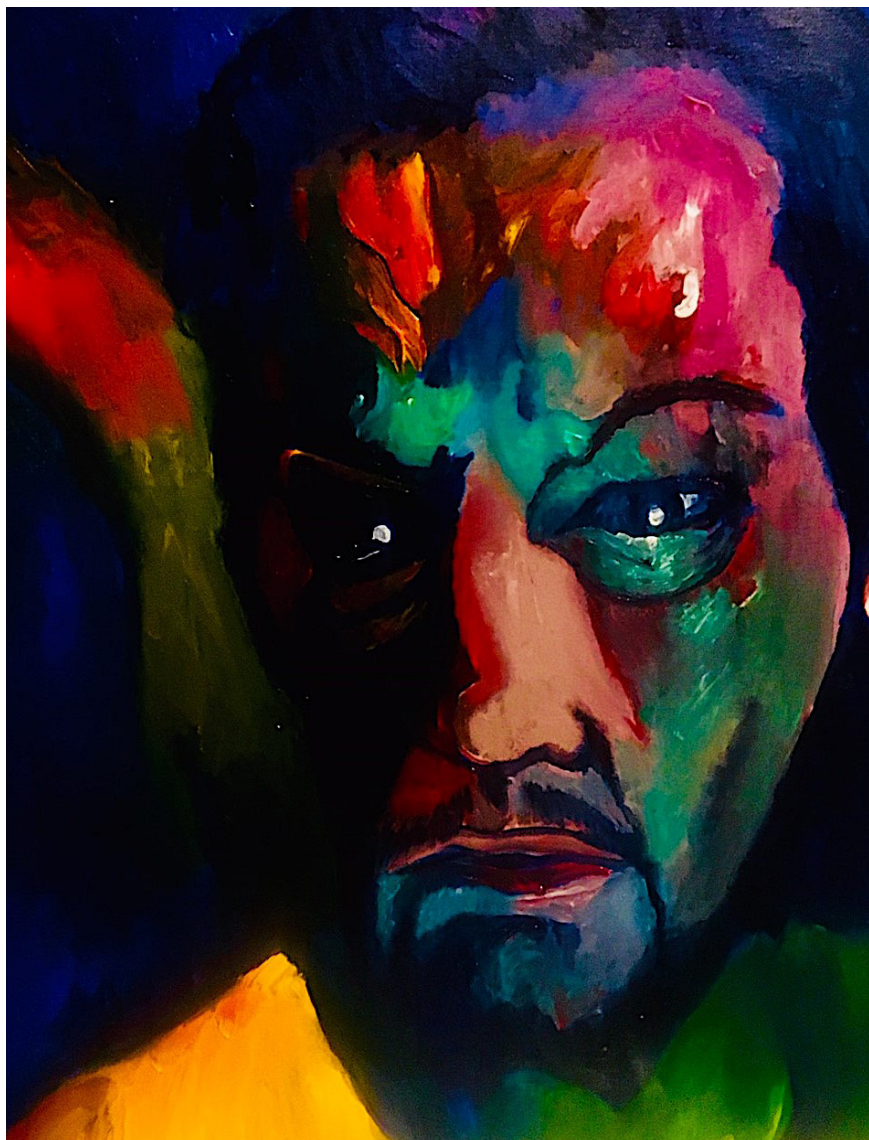
her. Her ears are upright with a slight inward curve. They perk up as I speak to her. Valentine's mobile nose is like velvet, her lips are agile enough to pick a treat delicately from my hands.

After I have thoroughly brushed Valentine, and Bev has groomed her mare, Jessie, we saddle up and head out to the trails. The act of going out on the trails does not guarantee an opportunity to fly. As with many endeavors, the circumstances must be right and be aligned to allow the ultimate in joy and release. If the trail is not too wet or slippery, if heavy rains have not eroded the trails to expose rocks, if pedestrians are not too numerous, we will canter.

Cantering is flying on Valentine. Walking on horseback, or trotting steadily, posting up and down rhythmically with her steps is indeed pleasant: I would not forgo it. Flying, as we canter, floating a few feet above the ground, smoothly rocking forward and back: that brings the most toe-curling sigh from my entire being! It is the completeness, wholeness that I imagine heaven to be. Unfettered, without fear, One with the most powerful Being. No barriers of my human frailty between us. Trusting in the strength, agility of this Other and finding complete release.

We canter for several minutes, and always, always, I sigh as we slow to a trot then a walk. It is the sensation of bringing my feet back to the ground. Awakening and re-entering this reality. As with the dreams of my childhood, I could feel disappointment that the flight has ended, however, this gift is tangible. I feel it still, I smell the truth of it on my hands as I drive home, and it sings in my heart.

And, I will fly again.



Blessed Art Thou...

• • • •

Alfred Eaker

I Want You To Know

• • • •

Jessica Gross

I know you'll never feel the same
Or get butterflies when you hear my name
But I want you to know
I know you'll never gaze into my eyes
Or hold my hand as we look at the skies
but I want you to know
I know you'll never think of me when you first awake
And I know when you see me your knees don't shake
But I want you to know
I get butterflies when you're around
I adore your name and its sound
And I want you to know
I could gaze into your eyes all day
I want to hold your hand but know what you'll say
And I want you to know
I think of you when I awaken
I've nearly stumbled with every step I've taken
And I want you to know
I love you
And I don't know what to do

To Heaven and Back

• • • •

Jessica Gross

Clouds like an expanding sea
A grand place just for me
Soothing light from all around
The peaceful place above the ground
Yellows and pinks color the clouds at my feet
There's a man dressed in a white sheet
Rainbows dance across his clothes
Silently he listens to all my woes
He rests a hand on my shoulder and says, "Take heart"
For he knows the pain is about to start
So I look the Son of God in the face
Then fall into his sweet embrace
Darkness takes over the room
It's all over I assume
Heavenly forms beckon'
It's all over I reckon'
A burst of light
I'm full of fright
It is then I awaken from my sleep
Though I never make a peep
About my journey to heaven



Finding Peace

• • • •

Kim Wooten

Kairon Creed

• • • •

Karen Muñoz

KAIRON CREED

Class: Sorcerer
Race: Tiefling
Occupation: Sage



Personality Traits: He's willing to listen to every side of an argument before making his own judgement.

Ideals: "The goal of a life of study is the betterment of oneself."

Bonds: He's been searching his whole life for the answer to a certain question.

Flaws: He's easily distracted by the promise of information.

Quirks: He can often be seen talking to himself. He also finds that it's difficult to cut ties with his old life and still practices those habits he developed as he grew up.

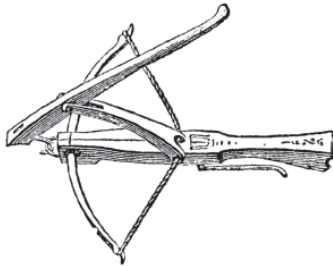
Immediate Family Tree



Quarterstaff



Light Crossbow



Dagger



Backstory:

Kairon, son of Malakai and Nemia, rather enjoyed the hustle of big city living with his twin brother, Barakas, and his younger sister, Mira. His parents taught him to always be righteous and just, which enabled him to ignore any insults thrown his way for being a tiefling. Despite their ability to brush off the negative comments and actions against them for their race, Kairon, Barakas, and Mira knew few people their age who treated them with kindness. This only drew the siblings closer as they grew up, making them strong. It wasn't until Mira's death – caused by being in the wrong place at the wrong time amidst a particularly ugly gang war in their city – that Kairon found himself following Barakas through an apprenticeship to the paladin order, The Order of the Creed, partially because it seemed like the thing to do and because he felt that he needed to help somehow and didn't know of another way.

For five years, as part of the Order of the Creed, Kairon was devoted to justice and helping but he often wondered if he joined up because Barakas and his parents were a part of it and it was familiar or if he had because he wanted to. No matter what he told himself, something seemed off to Kairon. On one of the jobs that Kairon was a part of, a fellow member of the Order – a human named Cendred – found an odd stone off a crazy lich they faced, one of unknown magical abilities. And against the better judgement of the rest of the Order, Cendred kept the stone. When Cendred found the stone, something changed. While everyone else forgot about it, Kairon couldn't seem to shake the feeling that something about the stone was malevolent, like it was dangerous and out to stir up all kinds of trouble.

Months later, Kairon and Barakas were sent out to deal with a few stray bandits, which was a simple enough job for the two of them. Neither of them were prepared for what happened after. They returned to their headquarters to find a rather grueling scene. They found everyone they knew – brothers and sisters

of the Creed along with their parents – dead; bodies twisted in every which way and some disfigured beyond belief. Kairon retched violently. He drew his arm across his mouth to try to get rid of the horrible taste in his mouth and caught movement in the corner of his eye. Cendred made eye contact with him, an incredibly crazed look in his eyes, and took off, disappearing in the night before Kairon could react. What Kairon hadn't failed to notice was the stone around Cendred's neck. It seemed darker as it pulsed and glowed with a deep crimson, a completely different color it had been before. In that moment, something shifted within Kairon.

They took on the name Creed as a remembrance of all they'd lost and split up. Barakas searched for Cendred with an unyielding vengeance plot written out just for the human who betrayed them. Kairon on the other hand, looked for answers about the stone and about the effects of magic on one's mind. He slowly set out to rebuild the Order of the Creed, but he also studied all he could about magic in his free time. In his own way, Kairon would help others and remain just. And he knew that that had been what he's been missing until now: A purpose. A cause.



Kwan Yin

• • • •

Linda Szempurch Aylward

The Godslayer Chronicles: Godsbane

• • • •

Karen Muñoz

Before my morning mug of Longbeard Lambic – a dwarven drink that helped pull the fatigue from my bones – I found that most tended to avoid a run-in with me. I wasn't sure if it was because I wasn't always the most patient before my morning pick-me-up choice of beverage or if it was because my friends had all seen me singlehandedly take on fearsome creatures five times my size and feared I would start throwing punches, if disturbed. I supposed it was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because it seemed less likely that I would be exposed to ridiculous ideas before I was fully awake, giving me ample opportunity for time to myself. A curse, because I hated that friends and acquaintances alike thought of me as someone they had to tiptoe around, to avoid a wrath I never intended to turn on them anyway. I was a friend and humble blacksmith first.

Noticing it was getting close to time for the meeting Tiberius – the leader of our rag-tag group of adventurers - had called for, I ordered my morning drink and grabbed a table toward the back of the tavern. It wasn't long before the rest of the group joined me, Tiberius not far behind. Once everyone was situated and the chatter had died down, he cleared his throat.

“Have any of you heard of The Godsbane?” I looked up from my Longbeard Lambic, with confused intrigue. I kept hearing whispers of something called Godsbane, but nothing about what it was.

“That sounds like an alcoholic drink.” Sval paused. “A strong one.” Tiberius rolled his eyes.

“It's a weapon that, if ever used, can alter the course of history as we know it.” Tiberius stared at each of us in turn as he said this, lowering his voice so none of the others in the tavern could hear him. “It is an instrument of unparalleled destruc-

tive power that no single man should ever wield.”

A hand shot up next to me. “I call dibs!” I turned to my right to spot Meruco, a triumphant smile on his face. I turned my best glare on the human as I recalled every moment his greed had caused us more trouble than we needed. He’d been one of the original members of our group since the beginning and he was hands down the biggest nut-job I’d ever met. You’d think that he, as the only human, would be the most normal out of us all, but that would be a very wrong assumption on all counts. It didn’t help that he was prone to summoning the undead.

The sound of a resounding slap snapped me back to the present and I looked for the source. Our half-elven ranger, Gallow, stood over Meruco with a disapproving frown on his face.

“Now Meruco, don’t be greedy. And don’t give me that look. I have a half a mind to slap you again for even making such a suggestion, boy.” Gallow, wizened from his long years and many experiences, was one of the more rational members of our group. He was the guy who had no patience for excuses and half-assed attempts of seriousness in moments like this – something that brought me to respect him more.

“Meruco, did you not learn anything from the last time you tried to keep a powerful item,” asked Sariel, our full-elven ranger. She had a lot more patience than most in the party, but we all remembered when he’d been corrupted by a powerful gem and betrayed us. Sariel was the first to forgive Meruco when she saw that he was genuine in trying to right the wrong that he had caused. It took the rest of us a bit longer to get over the mistrust we felt toward him since his betrayal.

“That was one time! You guys said you’d forgiven me for that.” Meruco sighed dejectedly, looking like a kicked puppy – as much as grown man could anyway. I held in a laugh at the exasperated look on Tiberius’s face.

“Um, I believe it was like three times. Maybe more. You’ve gotten us into a lot of trouble, Meruco.” I nodded along with

Trove's words. He wasn't wrong.

"Technically, he's right. It was more than one time. You almost got us killed a few times," came Luther's response, mirroring my own thoughts. And that's when the shouting started.

"Why wouldn't I be angry? You drank all of my ale and then faked your death for three years!" I turned to the shouting, to see a five-foot five human, with pale skin, shouting at some Goliath, who was attempting to get as far from her as he could. She had golden hair that was gathered up in a ponytail and piercing green eyes that expressed her fury well. She threw back her tankard of recently purchased, tavern ale, chugged the whole thing, and then chucked the mug at the goliath. He fell out of his chair, stunned, and then pulled out a knife, a crazed look on his face as he stood up. "Look, I'm trying my best to be polite here, despite the circumstances, but if you move that knife a centimeter closer to me, I will tear you apart. Choose your next action wisely." I looked on in complete amusement as the goliath, who towered over the woman, shrunk back in horror.

"But, you ju—"

She slammed her hand down on the table. "But nothing! You let me believe you were dead for three whole years! Then you show up out of the blue when I'm on an important quest to destroy some powerful weapon, drink my ale, and act as if you haven't been gone for all this time. I have half a mind to kick your ass anyway!" I sat up straighter in my seat, completely engulfed into the scene unfolding in the middle of the tavern.

The goliath looked taken aback for only a moment, before he seemed to gain his courage. "Oh, come on. You're like half my size, girl. What're you going to do?"

Complete and utter silence fell over the normally boisterous and upbeat tavern. Everyone had their eyes glued to the pair as a thick tension filled the air. The moments that followed made me feel bad for the guy, but he pretty much deserved everything that happened to him at this point. He practically asked for it.

The woman, filled with obvious rage, flew out of her chair and charged him, knocking the surprised goliath prone. Then she started wailing on him, blow after blow until he fell unconscious. Then she got up, grabbed another tankard of ale, and calmly sat back down as if she didn't just beat a goliath half to death. I looked to my friends, holding back a laugh, as I set down my own tankard of ale. "I'll be right back." Before any of them could respond, I found myself walking over to the human woman.

I stuck my hand out in a greeting. "Hello, I'm Torgga of the Battleforger clan, and I couldn't help but respect the way you stood up for yourself even if you kicked the shit out of this guy," I say, nudging the unconscious goliath with my foot. "Where did you learn to throw a punch like that, cause I've got to be honest, you don't look much like a close-combat kind of fighter."

She laughed as she shook my hand. "I mean you're not wrong," she said gesturing to the twin pistols, holstered on each hip. "But you'd be surprised on how many idiots I've had to deal with, especially those who think I can't fight because I'm a female, or because I'm not always the tallest in the room. Oh, and I'm Mab, by the way. Mab Stormwind."

"I completely understand that. People are always underestimating me because I'm a dwarf and they've convinced themselves that being short, and a female, means that I can't wield my sword as well as any man, if not better," I say as I pull out my weapon to show her. I glanced over at my friends, a few tables over, and remembered why I came over here to begin with. "My friends and I couldn't help but hear that you're on your way to destroy some powerful weapon. Does that weapon go by the name 'Godsbane' by any chance?"

"Yeah, how did you know that," Mab asked, glancing over in the direction of my group of friends in curiosity. I hesitated before answering, and looked to Tiberius, who'd been watching our conversation play out. He gave me the smallest of nods and I knew he trusted Mab – at least enough to determine what she

knew about Godsbane and who sent her on her quest – a feat that wasn’t easily accomplished. I didn’t question his decision, as he was easily the smartest and most experienced among us. If he trusted Mab, even the slightest, then I would too.

I leaned in, lowering my voice to a whisper. “My loyal companions and I are also on a quest to find this weapon, so that we can destroy it before it falls into the wrong hands. Only, we only have a general idea of where it might be located. Everyone we’ve sent out to give us more information about its whereabouts, have not returned.”

Mab looked as if she were deep in thought for a few moments and then nodded her head as if she might have expected this. “I might be able to help you, friend.” Before I could say anything in response, she continued. “Lathander gave me a vision about the location of Godsbane a few weeks ago, along with a message. He told me to pack my things and come here; that I would find the help I needed to destroy the weapon.”

The fact the one of the greater deities, Lathander, had involved himself to make sure this weapon was destroyed, made me realize that this would hardly be an easy feat to accomplish. He and his followers were intolerant of inaction that might lead to the prosper of evil in any way. If he was sending one of his followers to destroy the weapon, that meant something big was after the weapon, and that something was not going to be on our side. I looked at Mab, then my friends, and then the bartender who looked like he was going to lose his cool, if someone didn’t do something about the unconscious goliath on the floor.

“Okay, let’s move your friend here outside, before the poor man who makes the best ale in town decides to kick us out of his tavern. Then, I’ll take you to meet my friends, and I want you to tell them everything you’ve told me and anything else you might know about the Godsbane and its whereabouts.” Mab nodded and helped me move the guy she knocked out.

Once outside, I grabbed my water skin and poured some

on the guy's face, to bring him back to a conscious state. He stirred but didn't open his eyes until I gently prodded him with my foot. The minute he saw Mab, he sat up in a panic, trying to scoot further away. "Oh, calm down, Mauglath. I'm not going to hit you again. I think you've learned from your mistakes." Mab pulled out a few rags from her pack, just as I spotted Nero come running in my direction. Nero was our group's only tiefling – a sort of demonic humanoid. To describe him in a nutshell, he was essentially a chaos sorcerer with a severe case of ADHD, who could cause some massive amount of chaos toward our foes, when he actually remembered that he knows more spells than fireball and lightning bolt. He stopped just short of the three of us, catching his breath.

"Why is he bleeding," was the first thing out of his mouth once he noticed the goliath, who still had blood on his face from the royal beating Mab gave him.

"Because he's an idiot." Nero looked at me, in confusion, before speaking again. "I didn't know that idiocy caused people to just start spontaneously bleeding from the nose."

Mab responded before I could. "Yeah, well it's a new phenomenon." Behind her, I pointed at her, then to Mauglath, before pounding my right hand into my left palm to help him understand the picture. "Oh," was all he said as realization washed over him, and he unconsciously took a step away from Mab. "Right, I'm not too late, right? Please tell me Tiberius hasn't already begun briefing the group on what our next mission entails." He seemed desperate for an answer from me, in response to his question. I took pity on him. "You're a bit late, but after what my new friend, Mab, tells him, he should be in much higher spirits. Come on, we'll fill you in on the way back to the group. It sure sounds like we've got our work cut out for us. I just hope there's no dragon this time." Nero nodded frantically in agreement to my sentiment as we followed Mab back inside, where the music, dancing, and overall high spirits had resumed; the calm before the storm.

Take the Leap

• • • •

Karen Muñoz

Look out across the green, see sheep
Across the Cliffs of Moher, blue waters deep
Merrily, we gather together
Bound by experience; to treasure
For the grand experience, take the leap



Iris

• • • •

Anna Bunch

Ride Of Your Life

• • • •

Austin Somers

Joey cracks another cold one while the canoe cuts waves
into the Wabash
like a rusted knife through shimmering glass.

Summer sky soothes to dusk and we laugh about that
one time in college
I came home drunk and hurled a broom through the wall

reenacting a fight scene from a martial arts movie.
We were stupid.
And maybe I still am. Is this how it all adds up?

All of a sudden it feels like I'm floating down a
Disney ride, watching
my memories in slow-motion play out like puppetry –

my dog's dying breath; my ex driving off in the snow.
The dim light and cool air
calm me until it dawns: this river never splits.

It flows rigid, in a circle. The forest's song repeats.
Is this why I long
for the final rise and plunge toward splash?

I've been down this stream a thousand times and I'll
ride it a thousand more.
Joey smiles, and I smile back. We laugh into the night.



Street Magic

• • • •

Theresa Carter

The Star of the Gemini

• • • •

Arianna Pershing

Far away and long ago, there lay a kingdom, nestled in the mountains. The land was called Tjolfdin by its neighbors, and Home by its people. They were lorded by the kind King Xavier, who ensured a prosperous and happy existence for those who followed him. For centuries, the kingdom flourished, unblemished by the raging wars and deathly illnesses that lay outside their sealed walls.

The people labeled the land around them a utopia, praising their king to the highest for his wise rule. But even the wisdom of Xavier's continued rule was not safe from personal vendetta: in the land of Tjolfdin, wedding halls closed their doors in September, and would not reopen until November. Couples could not share beds in this time, and lovers were kept far from each other. Bizarre though the decree was, every year each citizen diligently upheld their duty. All knew that those born nine months later, under the sign of the Gemini, would be born a twin. And though few still lived to remember, all knew the tale of Canan, who killed his twin Abram, and posed as his brother for nearly a decade before being discovered and put to death in the first - and last - execution in Tjolfdin's history.

To avoid a similar situation, Xavier banned the birth of twins, and the people followed graciously. Throughout nearly a millennia of war and famine in the rest of the world, not a single child was born in the Gemini's months.

And so it was on the day that Xavier was wed to Juniper of Alcoatl, a regent from the North. On the night they first lay together, keeping warm under the December moon. So it was when Juniper swelled in the middle, and expected her child in the fall. And so it still was when she fell ill, and was rushed to Leopold,

the court surgeon. So it was when Leopold informed Xavier that the child should be born early, or else both Juniper and the heir would die. So it still was when Xavier ordered that his wife was to give birth to the child immediately.

And so it was when Juniper Alcoatl-Tjolfdin gave birth to a girl, Everly, on June the first, under the star of the Gemini. A twin.

Xavier was troubled by the birth of his twin daughters. At the very first sight of them, he knew that they were perfect heirs, and he could not bring himself to kill or exile either. Still, to have and raise twins when their very existence was banned for so many years would be hypocrisy to the highest degree - inexcusable, in the eyes of the people. So Xavier ordered his soldiers to scour the kingdom and her neighboring lands for someone, anyone, who could offer a solution.

And so the soldiers searched, and eventually found the witch Marigold in the village Banterpier, who proposed a plan.

“Bring me the children, and I shall attempt to fix their opposing nature. The one I divine to be the happiest, I shall send to Hell, land of demons and pain, to teach her suffering. She shall learn wisdom. The one I divine to be the saddest, I shall send to Heaven, to teach her love and happiness. She shall learn humility. When the two are both seven years of age, I shall call them back from their homes and reunite them. They shall no longer be jealous and instead will harmonize.”

It pained Xavier to think of separating his daughters from each other, and especially to send one to Hell, but he was terrified of the consequences of twins in Tjolfdin, and agreed. He left the babies with Marigold, and was off.

But Marigold had not told him the fullest effect of Heaven and Hell on the young girls, nor her full plan. As a witch of Banterpier, it was in her nature to deceive and to cause suffering for those around her. As such, she enchanted the girls with a special spell, which would end their seven years of purgatory with a

reuniting moment of a much more affecting sort.

Before Marigold finished the spell, Juniper gifted to her daughters each a letter, explaining the situation, and how their separation would soon end. When she returned to Tjolfdin, the queen grew ill, and died days later. Distraught, Xavier withdrew into the walls of his castle, and was not seen for many years.

So Everly, being the naturally more optimistic of the two, was sent to Hell, where she was tortured at length for years. The punishment inflicted on her was harsh, unfair, and unfounded; but she still learned hope in Hell. She awoke every morning, being affected by all manner of pain and misery, waiting for the day she could be reunited with her sister. Her sister, Aileen, learned a different lesson. Through the endless pleasures of Heaven, she learned an entitlement usually reserved for the angels who earned their place; she grew harsh and spoiled from the pampering, and increasingly dreaded her seventh birthday, when she knew the pleasure would end and she would meet the pains of Earth.

The seven years passed, and slowly too. In Heaven, Aileen grew vainer and less concerned with her life in Tjolfdin. In Hell, Everly counted the moments until she could reclaim her birthright. In Tjolfdin, Xavier grew more and more inward, eventually driving himself mad. Eventually, June the first passed a seventh time, and Marigold completed the spell to summon the girls.

Everly greeted her summoning with open arms, nearly sprinting to escape Hell. Aileen, on the other hand, fled from Earth, but could not outrun the hands of fate. Quickly the two girls were brought to Tjolfdin, in Xavier's hall.

There was no pompous ceremony for their arrival. No drums or bugles sounded the girl's return. No, Xavier's main hall was cold, dark, and quiet.

Aileen, distraught, was not interested in her surroundings,

and simply sat and wept. Everly, who was exuberant to be free, was also the first to notice her sister.

“Hello?” Everly walked to Aileen and waited for a response. Still, simple weeping. “Are you okay? I am Everly, and I believe I am-”

Raising her hand to silence her sister, Aileen stood and regarded Everly. “My sister,” she finished. “The girl who stole me from Heaven.

These words and no others were said between the girls, who went their separate ways. Everly, whom Hell had taught ingenuity, laid on the rug and rolled the corner over herself like a blanket. Spoiled Aileen sat on the cold floor, cradling herself, until her head lolled from the exhaustion.

It wasn’t until morning that Xavier, who roamed the halls at night to calm his raging mind, would find the girls. All at once, he recognized the twins as his daughters. In his first act of speech in nearly a decade, the mad king called for his servants. “All those who still serve the house of Tjolfdin come forth! Draw up a room... my daughters are home.”

The girls were given a feast to celebrate their return, which both famished girls accepted heartily. For the first time in years, the royal hall opened its doors, and the castle railing with singing and laughter. No one did so louder than Everly, who danced and played until she fell asleep. Aileen simply sat and stared, more missing the kingdom of Heaven every day.

When the party was over, Xavier woke Everly and walked the girls to their room. It was painted decadently with flowers and grass; a room for a princess, for sure. There were two beds, each at their own side of the room. The girls picked a bed and Xavier bade them goodnight, retiring to his chamber for the first time with a smile on his face. The girls sat in silence.

Everly finally broke it. “Do you suppose every night will

be like this? Met with flowers and feast, dances and balls? I rather hope it is.”

Aileen did not respond for a moment; in fact, Everly was not sure she would respond at all. Finally, she spoke. “All this raucous jubilation is hardly worth it. It’s too loud, and the people are dirty. Do you suppose all castles are filled with such rubbish as cold halls and drunken commoners?”

Everly was surprised at her sister’s comment. “Why, it’s paradise! Adoration from people you’ve never met? Servants waiting on your hand and foot?”

“Undercooked meat? Unwashed hands grazing your bodies, drawing your baths? Mad kings with nothing to do but wander the halls? I’ve never been so mistreated in my life. I thought mother promised us decadence.”

Everly shook her head, and replied, “This is mistreatment? A warm meal and a soft bed are much greater than Hell.”

“It’s nothing like Heaven. As far as I’m concerned, Tjolfdin is Hell.”

Everly grimaced, and continued. “And besides, mother is dead. You can’t expect perfection from a broken home.”

Aileen turned away from Everly and spoke no more. Everly waited for a response for many moments before finally falling onto her pillow and dreaming.

In the night, the witch Marigold snuck into the castle, and finally completed her spell. The girls slept soundly, and knew nothing other than their dreams as the witch fulfilled her promise to end their opposing nature. To create harmony.

Everly opened her eyes and shook her head. She felt rested, and looked around the room. She was not on the bed, but was laid on the floor. Both beds in the room were empty.

“Aileen?”

“Everly?”

Everly shrieked, and touched her head.

“A-Aileen? Was that you?”

“Everly? Where am I?”

Everly couldn’t believe her ears, or more, her mind; the two girls were now one.

Although Xavier tried everything in his powers to separate his daughters, they appeared to be stuck in this state for years. The girls learned to coexist; Everly controlling day to day action, Aileen interfering when she deemed necessary. This continued until June the First, their fifteenth birthday. Xavier called the girls down, and spoke.

“Girls, you are fifteen now, and I am old and mad. True, I have ruled for centuries wisely and justly, but I can tell my time on earth is short. Tjolfdin law forbids young girls to rule by themselves, so you must wed before I pass.”

Everly, who saw the wisdom in her father’s words, was nonetheless overwhelmed by Aileen’s upset response and was compelled to speak.

“Rule! I was not aware that I would have to stay in this Hell for the rest of my life, just waiting to die! And rule no less.”

Xavier, who knew his daughters well, chuckled. “Oh Aileen,” he fawned. “I never intended for both of you to rule in... this way. I always thought the one who desired the throne more would be allowed to have it with the husband of their choosing. Now that you are one... the kingdom needs a ruler, and I will not live forever.”

Aileen grew silent, and Everly accepted her father’s charge. She met suitors from as close as Alcoatl, and as far as Xinjia in the north. Finally, a caravan from the Far East arrived in Tjolfdin. Out of the parade stepped a prince, from a land called Ghaul, Francis. He was sweet, and kind, in a way none of the princes had been before. He stayed in Tjolfdin for months, meeting and befriending Everly. Soon, Everly realized that she had fallen in love with Price Francis. She spoke with her sister on it one night.

“Absolutely not,” said Aileen. “I will not let our father force a man onto us so that we can rule a throne we never wanted.”

“Maybe you do not desire the responsibility,” Everly chided, “but I do. Ever since we came to this land, I wanted to rule our father’s land. I am sorry that our situation has forced this injustice of choice upon you, sister.”

“If only you could have seen Heaven, sister.” Aileen began to wax poetic, as she often did in the nighttime hours. “It was a land of happiness. No clouds were in the sky, only under our feet. At night, every star shone like a candle, and the air was calm. No one was dirty, only spotless white robes.” She paused, and Everly could feel the longing in Aileen’s soul. “I do so wish to go back soon.”

Everly laughed. “Well, I don’t! Hell was the opposite. Pain and fire everywhere. The screams of lost souls, echoing throughout eternity. I don’t ever want to return. Besides, to return to Heaven, we would have to die! You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Aileen was silent.

As the weeks trudged past, Aileen spoke not a word, and Xavier grew more gaunt and haggard. He bade the girls come to his room.

“Everly, Aileen, every day I regret what happened to you. If I had known for even a moment that the witch would have put this great curse on you, would never have sent you to her. Now, I must burden you further, for I am dying, and quickly. For the good of Tjolfdin, please put aside your differences, and choose a suitor.”

Everly was quick to agree, but Aileen remained silent. Later that night, Everly bade her sister goodnight, and was not met with a response. She fell asleep troubled.

Everly awoke to the feeling of cold water on her face. She looked around, and saw dark skies and clouds. She looked below, and saw the roof of the castle. She was perched at the uppermost peak of Xavier's castle, and looked ready to leap. She screamed, and heard Aileen speak for the first time in many weeks.

"Everly, are you awake? I can't move!"

Everly scrambled to her feet, and shouted at her sister. "Yes, I'm awake! I don't understand. What is going on?"

Aileen sighed, and responded. "I was hoping you wouldn't find out. When you sleep, I control our motions."

Everly gasped. "How long has this been so?"

"Years. At first, I did simple things, like ask the cooks for an extra roll or a glass of milk. Eventually, I wandered the kingdom. Do you know that most people in Tjolfdin have not a single servant? Most live just with their families, alone."

"But they are happy to be alone! It is we who defiled our natural independence with servants. What do they do that we cannot ourselves?"

"In Heaven, they-"

"I do not care what happens in Heaven! This is Tjolfdin, and you were about to kill us. Do you hate our life, hate me so much that you wish to escape it so badly?"

"Not that I hate you, sister! I want to show you paradise!"

With that, Everly was the silent one. She strode off the roof, into the castle, and down into Francis's chambers, where she informed him of her intent to be wed to him. Francis smiled, and nodded.

"This pleases me greatly, dear Everly. I know Aileen is not so fond of me, but I may know a way to win her favor."

Everly decided that immediate action must take place. She entrusted Francis and listened to his concerns of Aileen. Everly enjoyed speaking with him and felt like he understood her. Francis had a way of communicating with her as if he had known

her his entire life. He was the anchor she needed. Even Aileen could not relate to her the way Francis could. As Everly did want to marry him, the love she felt for him was not the storybook love she had dreamed of. Her reasons of marriage were for the kingdom and her friendship was a personal choice.

The wedding announcement was made to the king. He was thrilled and wanted to mentor Francis before his death date approached. The king had his first lesson with Francis where he spoke to him about his daughters and his wishes for them. He too liked the comfort that Francis presented.

Francis requested a visitor to meet with the king before they made the wedding announcement official to the kingdom. The king grew fond of his future son in law and trusted the request. Francis made the arrangements and his guest would arrive the next day.

The visitor arrived at the castle greeted with a warm welcome. She was a beautiful young woman who looked around the same age as Francis.

"I present you to my sister" he said. The king admired her beauty and was pleased with her presence.

"I wanted you to meet her before I become king because she reflects much of my wishes for the kingdom".

"The honor is mine" replied the king. "And what are these wishes" he added.

"You see, my sister and I grew up with a troubled past. One that we have tried to escape from. I see these same sorrows in your daughters and I want to prevent them".

In this moment the woman looked at her reflection in the mirror. What reflected was a hideous Witch.

The king recognized this witch as Marigold, the one who had cursed his daughters.

“She’s my twin sister” replied Francis. “You sentenced her to death but she went to Hell and became a Witch. She too has learned of wisdom”.

Xavier recoiled at this revelation, and feared for his daughters. “What do you want, vile witches?”

“Only to teach you the pain of your laws,” replied the Witch. With a wave of her hand, Everly was trapped, lofted in the air by an invisible force. “When we were but young, your law outlawed twins. We did you no harm, yet we were ostracized. And for what? Only for you to have twin daughters of your own?”

Xavier was taken aback, and replied. “I passed this decree to help our country, not hurt those alive.”

“We suffered well under that decree,” replied Francis, whose charm had withered away. “Outcast, we were forced to live in separation for years, never knowing each other’s love and friendship.”

“Indeed,” continues Marigold, whose fingers shook with the magic containing the twins. “When we heard the good king Xavier had fathered twins, we knew it was time to return.”

With that, the Witch got to work. Casting spell after spell, she bound Xavier to his throne, immobilizing the old King. She then pulled out a spell book from her long black robe, and began to chant.

Everly sat motionless, suspended midair, and spoke to her sister. “Oh, Aileen, I’m sorry I got us into this situation.”

Don’t be, responded Aileen. I never told you about my feelings, so why would I expect you to know them? I am sorry as well.

Those would be the last words the girls ever exchanged in this fashion, as Marigold finished her spell, and the force around the girls grew stronger, tighter. Restricting them. Pulling on them. Eventually, Everly felt a great pain, and she fell to the floor. Her body, once heavy with the weight of two souls, now felt light. Next to her lay Aileen, her twin sister.

Xavier called out in pain at the sight of his daughters’

pain, and Marigold smiled. "Does it hurt to know that I have full power over your daughters, King Xavier? To know that at any moment, I could extinguish them, and naught could be done?"

Francis sat by and watched as all this happened. He smiled, and beckoned for his sister. The two talked a moment, and Marigold nodded. Slowly, Xavier's binds loosened, and he rose to his feet.

"Marigold," the king droned. "I have been plagued by you for too long. I am sorry for all the pain I have caused, but my daughters are innocent. Please, use me for your revenges."

A grin crept across Marigold's face, who nodded smugly. "I rather hoped you would offer yourself. It will make it all the more delicious when I refuse your offer."

She raised her hands to cast a final spell on the girls, who now sat upwards, unable to move. Just as she cast the spell, Xavier's eyes brightened in a way they had not since Juniper passed. He sprinted down the steps to his throne, across the Great Hall, and in front of his daughters, shielding them. Marigold's wicked grin faded as the King's natural magic deflected the spell back on the Witch. In an instant, she was no more.

When the Witch was gone, Xavier slumped to the floor, barely able to breathe. The girls, still exhausted and startled by all that had happened, ran to him.

"Father!" Everly held her father's face in her hands, and watched him smile. He raised his hand to Aileen, who knelt beside him, and rested it on her shoulders.

"My girls," he groaned, still smiling warmly. "My loves. Rule... together. You need no husband, not when you are already far wiser than me. Rule well."

His face slackened, and he grew still. Everly looked to her sister, and they embraced for the first time.

In the years that followed, the girls worked to reestablish order. Once more, the palace opened its doors, and great feasts

were held to celebrate the new queens. This time, it stayed open. The two girls, who learned to appreciate life in whatever form it takes, ruled wisely for many thousands of years, safe behind the walls of Tjolfdin.



Recall to the Wash

• • • •

Andrea Sutrich

Unharm'd Death

• • • •

Tavia Hedrick

Little effort is involved
When planning your dissolve.
Go way off the grid
To a place no one would bid.
The town with first opened eyes,
Now leave in despise.
Clothes will be left for them to feel
Until begin to think it real.
Although you shed no blood,
Pretentious eyes begin to flood.
They stare blankly at your perfect death bed,
As you plan a new life ahead.
So cheers to a brand new start
For you have altered the beating heart



NYC Skyline

• • • •

Margaret Dooley Nitka

Curtains

• • • •

S. Michael Simms

They say you outgrow things like The Boogeyman, monsters, ghost stories, scary movies, and all that crazy stuff you sincerely believed when you were a kid. Plenty to watch. Plenty to ponder. Plenty to fear.

Was there anything more thrilling than sneaking out in the middle of the night, maybe with a friend who'd slept over, and running around the neighborhood - or sneaking into places you weren't supposed to be and sometimes getting caught - your heart pounding as some grownup chased away you pesky kids? Zoinks!

That was the good kind of fear – the kind you will spend most of your adult life trying to recapture – watching old scary movies, telling ghost stories to your kids, riding the haunted house rides at amusement parks...and then there's the bad kind.

Maybe it was all those supernatural horror flicks like The Exorcist and The Omen; maybe the TV preachers (or real preachers) took their toll. But if you're like me, something got it stuck in your head that there are real demons. Whether you've shared this experience or not, believing in real demons and not being religious? It sucks.

You don't have that "power of Christ" to compel them, you just have your own wits and mental fortitude, and whatever measure of disbelief you can muster in the face of true terror – more than any you ever needed for movies or fiction or getting into trouble as a kid.

It's in this context that I'm going to tell you about Makanimit. Don't ask me how he got his name – maybe it's not even a real name but just something a terrified kid came up with on the fly that seemed to fit. I do know that I wrote it down,

M-A-K-A-N-I-M-I-T, in blue crayon on the inside back cover of a kids' encyclopedia, along with an illustration of what I must've thought he looked like. Trust me, you don't want to see that illustration. I'm afraid to even look at it.

If I were to give him an entry in D&D's Monster Manual, it might go something like this:

Makanimit is a demon that takes many forms, most commonly a dog or a wolf that climbs onto the back of a victim to make his presence known then feed on the resulting terror. It often appears as a being of pure darkness with a vague outline like the stealth armor of the alien in the Predator movies.

This demon tends to bond to one individual and terrorize them for many years, starting in childhood then appearing intermittently throughout their whole life, finally showing its true form at the moment of the victim's death.

My first experience with this entity was when I was six. I was visiting my grandmother in Oklahoma and had terrorized my little brother by chasing him around with my father's belt. As punishment, I was sent to the garage, which had been converted into my uncle's bedroom, to sit in the dark and think about what I had done.

The bed was a strange but cool canopy style with dark blue spaceship sheets and curtains my uncle kept closed so he wouldn't have to make his bed. As I pouted on the edge of it and cursed my lot, I distinctly remember a very soft, not-quite-human, but certainly evil voice in a low whisper say, *You're a bad boy, Michael. You know where bad boys go, don't you? They go to hell. That's where I'm taking you... after I eat you.*

And suddenly there it was. Right behind those closed curtains. I could feel displacement of air and material as it slowly worked its way towards me. And then the awful feeling set in of the fact that it knew that I knew that it knew I knew it was there. It sounds goofy when you read or say it, like some bad Abbot & Costello bit, but apply it to the most horrific thing you can imag-

ine and see if you don't get chills. I didn't see it, but could sense its large, doglike maw practically at my neck, slavering in anticipation of my yumminess. Goosebumps covered my whole body as a cold chill traveled up my spine. I began whining, "Mommy, mommy, mommy," till somebody finally came and turned on the light. It was my grandmother.

"Now what in the world's gotten into you?" I told her everything and she just laughed. "Why there's nothing behind those curtains at all, silly goose, 'cause those curtains ain't closed!" As I agonizingly turned my head to see that she was correct, I didn't even consciously realize my body was already rising from the bed and headed for the door. I didn't return to that room again for years.

I swore I'd never terrorize my kid brother again. But a couple of years later I found myself locking the unfortunate lad in our bedroom closet and banging on the cheap metal closet door which produced a satisfying rumbling noise like thunder.

I'd kept the volume level down to a dull roar up to that point, but then he began to shriek at the top of his lungs. I foolishly forgot that my stepdad, who was sleeping off a hangover, was likely to be woken by Paddy's cries (never mind my closet banging). Too late I opened the closet door, but Dad had already stormed in.

Wild-eyed and groggy, hair a rat's nest, huge, hairy monster in his tighty-whites, he paused to look around, assessed the situation, grabbed me by my hair, and pulled me kicking and screaming to the bathroom. The upstairs bathroom had no windows, one door, one sink, one toilet, and one bathtub. The shower curtain was light blue and matched the shag toilet carpeting and the wallpaper. "SIT."

And I was directed to sit on the edge of the bathtub and "see what it feels like to be trapped in the dark" as he clicked off the switch and slowly closed off the world of light and life to plunge me into solitude and darkness...in front of the curtain.

And Makanimit was wasting no time. In fact, at present not only was he very much with me, but he was stronger than ever because...well, I was more afraid than ever,

After all, I'd brought this on myself. He was practically licking my ear with sadistic glee; I could almost envision his wolf-like face, eyes rolling back in ravenous anticipation. The worst part was that old feeling of knowing that he knew I knew he knew I knew he was there...I realized that once the curtain was peeled back it was going to be the end for me, and honestly? I welcomed it. This was torturous.

But after a mini eternity, Dad opened the door, flipped on the light, and ordered me to go clean my room. Why, oh why did I look back on my way out of the bathroom? Hadn't I learned anything from Lot's wife in Sunday school? I may not have turned into a literal pillar of salt, but the color drained out of me enough for Paddy to tell me I was "white as a ghost" when he saw me again.

And it was like that for years – me finding myself in a dark place with curtains, Makanimit getting ever cozier with my soul. I thought, after about a decade of peace, that I had shaken him off somehow – maybe I'd accidentally said the right prayer or something at church – but when I was about 19 or so I was lying on my back asleep in bed when this being of pure darkness appeared over me quite suddenly.

He planted two pitch black arms on either side of my head, apparently standing on the floor behind me (how stupid had I been exposing my head like that to an open room?), leaned in and "whisper shouted" I'M BACK!!! right in my face, startling me awake...except I wasn't quite awake. I tried to scream "MOM-MY", but it kept coming out backwards, "MEMA! MEMA!", and Makanimit didn't move.

My roommate who was in the bunk above my feet (it was the old one-horizontal, one- vertical bunkbed setup) called my name until I woke, and the demon dissipated. I told him what

had happened – I told him all about Makanimit, and it freaked him right the hell out. He suggested I find myself some Jesus, “He’s the cure for demons, bro.” But my agnosticism was a road-block.

That whole year I was plagued with horrible nightmares – the half-asleep, half-awake kind. I’d switched sides so that my head was under the top bunk and my feet on the open end. One night there was a low growl beside my head.

I SAW it! Looked almost like Gmork from The Neverending Story. Huge, slavering fangs, very lupine features, and exuding pure evil and hunger. I don’t think I slept a wink at home for weeks after, choosing instead to nod off in school. He was ruining my life.

The horror culminated in a live, daylight encounter when I was 21. I lived on my own in a studio apartment, and I was drinking quite a lot. On one particularly slovenly afternoon in my messy bachelor pad I was lit up pretty good and watching Faces of Death II (I don’t recommend it), when I heard this hiss coming from behind the curtains covering my closet in lieu of a door.

I knew exactly who/what it was, and I hightailed it right out of there. Down the stairs, out the front door, down the street, the thing following me the whole way...moving from curtain to curtain. I had a friend stop me and ask if I was okay. I was not okay, I told my buddy everything, and he suggested I turn myself in.

The folks at the loony bin did their best to convince me that no demon dog shadow man was after me, but every time I saw a set of curtains in an unusual spot, I knew...after I got out I had no place to go. I made a pretty good homeless guy but a lousy employee.

The best I could do was a gig at the adult video store. Sleeping in the alley behind the store after work and waking up to a mini-Makanimit sitting on my chest was the last straw. I had my dad come pick me up. I got some Jesus, I got my head out of

my tuchus, I settled down, got married, had kids, put the awful memories of demonic oppression behind me, and found happiness for a time.

I'm still trying to decide whether I believe it happened or if I just hallucinated it all. I watched a documentary film on Netflix recently called *The Nightmare*, and it showed the very creature I described, at least the human form of it – a being of pure darkness who terrorizes his victims when they're in the half-asleep, half-awake state.

And I've recently seen a photo of what appears to be the head of a demon dog in the wedding photo of a man who had been struggling with lust and alcoholism at the time– its wide eyed, hungry face poking up over the man's shoulder and peering right at the camera and into our souls...as if to let us know that it knows that we know that it knows we see it.

These are real things you can look up. To me they are a form of confirmation. But my mama didn't raise no fools. My wife's been instructed to wake me up immediately if I start thrashing around in my sleep talking backwards or in a panic (which I have, often just saying "Wake me up! Wake me up!"). I have insisted we only use very sheer, see-thru curtains if we use them at all. Five years now without a very bad incident – five, long years...



Concentration

• • • •

Lacey Thomas

Flaw & Order

• • • •

Austin Somers

The comments strung across the margins of my paper like
caution tape at a crime scene
stunk of patronizing purple ink.

It was as if my professor had performed some kind of
one-man Good Cop Bad Cop routine,
patting me on the back
with a blue-eyed wink and wide smile for my effort
while punching me square in the face
with his bloody red fist for my errors.
He said I needed “MORE ORGANIZATION.”

And yet, there’s NO ORDER
to the phonetic connection
between PUNISHMENT and PUNS:

no distant cousin named Poena from Rome,
no ancient custom called Torture de Groan,
no biblical word-playgue –
just a stupid coincidence.

So then where does this guy get off
telling me I ought to swap my discussion
of Cartesian Skepticism on page 2
with my equine dream example from page 4 by saying

“You shouldn’t put
Descartes
before
the horse”?

