

# 34 ORCHARD

*Darkness is just across the street.*

ISSUE 9

SPRING 2024



# 34 ORCHARD

Issue 9, Spring 2024

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*This one is for Dad, whose favorite short story was Bob Shaw's "The Light of Other Days." The concept of slow glass is a reminder of something he knew all too well: even if the things we wait for arrive, ultimately, they are always taken away.*

## Cover Photo

*When the Light Dies* ♥ © Keith Molden, 2022

Dan B. Fierce's "Revenge" first appeared in *The 2020 Indie Author's Short Story Anthology*, published by Heathory Press on October 16, 2020.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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**We spend much of life waiting.** Waiting for Friday night. Waiting for a sale on a coveted item or in line at the DMV. Waiting to heal. Waiting to grow up, graduate, get our dream jobs, find the loves of our lives, retire.

*Waiting for Godot.*

Beckett's existential masterpiece explores life's purpose, but it also illustrates what we do to pass the time while we wait for it, and whether or not that, indeed, is pointless, too; pointless enough, in fact, to drive us mad, or to keep us hopelessly stuck in monotony.

The twenty-one artists in Issue 9 examine all aspects of waiting: its ups and downs, its held-breath nature, its power. A dead girl languishes instead of going toward the light and a predator banks on his next meal. One mother is driven to pursue a reunion with her daughter, another's moment for revenge finally arrives, and generations of sons resist—yet compulsively anticipate—the inevitable. A frozen town dreads its death knell. An angry specter prays for her misery to have company, while spirits trapped in the brick and mortar of a bridge wait for nothing more than the next passer-by.

Sooner or later, the waiting's over, but when we finally get what we want, was it everything we'd imagined? At the end of it, was it really worth it—or did it turn out to be the beginning of yet another long wait for something else? After all, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon always end up hanging around for just one more day, because surely, Godot will come tomorrow. Perhaps what we need to ask ourselves is at what point do we *stop* waiting and just, well, *live*?

You'll be here a while, so please be seated in the front parlor. We have books, movies, and the occasional existential discussion—and if all else fails, there's coffee cake.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

“ ... taking that one step closer was acknowledging its power.”

- Christopher Emmerson-Pace  
“Family Heirloom”

# **34 ORCHARD**

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# **D-DAY**

Norie Suzuki

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**9:00 a.m.**

**Standing at the sink, Mariko hears her daughter giggle beyond the pale pink flowers of a dogwood tree that looms by the kitchen window.** The sapling her husband planted when Saya was born almost reaches the second floor.

Today is Saya's seventh birthday, her only child dead for two years. Her ashes, though, continue living in the locket Mariko wears around her veiny neck. Taking a deep breath, she resumes rinsing her husband's rice bowl and carefully places it in the dish drainer bathed in the mellow spring sunlight. This might be her last time to touch his bowl. When she lifts the lid of the garbage can to throw away the fishbones, the acrid smell of an empty wine bottle she has hidden from her husband fills her lungs.

The routine tasks help Mariko's heartbeat to remain normal and stop her hands from shaking. She has plenty of time. Mariko knows by heart every turn and traffic light that leads to his house, the white stucco house with a large bay window, where the man who ran over Saya lives with his wife and daughter, the man who did not even spend a day in prison. On Wednesdays, the killer leaves home at seven o'clock to visit his store in the suburb to do his books; his wife goes to choir practice at ten and will not be back until three, even later if she gets carried away with the chit-chat over coffee and chiffon cake. Their life is like clockwork. Mariko knows precisely how much time she has to carry out her plan.

On the radio, a weather reporter predicts a sudden torrential rain in the afternoon. Perfect for her plan. The rain will erase her tire marks. Umbrellas will obstruct the pedestrians' view. For the first time after Saya's death, Mariko thinks there might be a god.

**11:00 a.m.**

Mariko sits on Saya's bed and inhales the sweet floral scent of dogwood that seeps in from the window. It helps her stay calm. She cannot afford to make any mistakes. She scrolls the photographs of the killer's daughter on her iPhone and double-checks what she should take. Based on the sweatshirts the girl wears to school, Mariko is sure that the girl adores Anna and Elsa. No different from Saya, who used to watch *Frozen* every day until she could say all the lines from memory.

She forces herself to dig into Saya's toy box, which she hasn't touched since the funeral, and pulls out an Olaf plush and a portable game. All that Mariko has to do is load everything in her car and head to his house. Her tank is full. A bob hair wig, a new navy blue dress unlike anything she would normally wear, a pair of nondescript low heels, and sunglasses are already in the trunk.

**12:00 p.m.**

In the parking lot of a donut shop, Mariko zooms in on the video on her mobile phone to find out which donut the girl always chooses. The enlarged clip gets out of focus, but Mariko can tell that the girl invariably points at the second pile from the left on the top shelf. Unlike her, the girl's mother never allows her daughter to munch on it on their way out, so no clip clearly shows what the girl likes.

"May I have two of those?" Mariko points at a French cruller. "Do you always have them on this part of the display?"

A teenager holding a tong studies Mariko's face and asks, "What do you mean?"

"Just wondering. Because this store is so orderly, unlike other places, I thought you have a specific rule everybody follows." Mariko fumbles with her wallet when a cinnamon twist Saya liked catches her eye.

"Yes, all the donuts have their cozy corner." She bags two donuts. "Anything else?"

"One cinnamon twist in a separate bag, please," Mariko mumbles, hoping the sales clerk will not ask her to repeat it.

As if she's in a hurry, Mariko strides to her car. She knows surveillance cameras are on the electric poles, traffic lights, and parking lots. She must act like a busy mother running errands.



**12:30 p.m.**

As she heads towards Setagaya Road, her phone rings. It is her husband.

“Did you have lunch?” he asks after a long pause.

“I’m not hungry.” The traffic light turns green, and Mariko presses hard on the gas pedal.

“Why don’t you try that new noodle place in our neighborhood? It smelled so good when I passed by it this morning.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“I’m sorry about this business trip. If everything goes well, I’ll catch the last flight on Thursday.” He stops speaking. Since the accident, there has been so much left unsaid.

As she quietly hangs up, Mariko is startled by the siren of a police car wailing behind her. She fights the urge to cover her ears. It is unbearable: the shriek, Saya’s sandals thrown in disarray on the scorching pavement, the burning smell of tires, and the red puddle that spread under Saya’s head—all come alive. Mariko grips the steering wheel, trying to concentrate on the crosswalk a few meters away. In her side mirror, the policeman waves at her, instructing Mariko to pull over. Why? She has not told anyone her plan.

Mariko bites her lip when the policeman knocks on her window.

“You were on your phone while driving,” he says.

Her legs go limp. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s dangerous. You could have had an accident.”

Mariko nods, controlling herself from shouting—*what do you know about accidents*—and hands him her driver’s license. When he turns around, Mariko sees handcuffs dangling from his belt and imagines the metallic touch against her wrists.

**1:30 p.m.**

As expected, the park, with a few picnic benches and restrooms, is deserted. Having masqueraded in the chocolate-brown bob wig and the navy blue shirt dress, Mariko checks herself in the rearview mirror and practices smiling. A strained quiver will be a dead giveaway. She needs to show motherly, reassuring tenderness, which she hopes remains in her. Mariko must awaken it. But how?

She reclines her seat and gazes at the overcast sky that spreads above the sunroof. Fitting weather for a new beginning. Not a fresh start, as the lawyer put it when Saya’s case was dismissed half a year ago; not a period that cuts her off from the past but a comma that connects everything. A

continuum. She clasps her pendant and hums a lullaby.

Her watch vibrates, urging Mariko to move on. With the Olaf plush on the passenger seat, she drives a few blocks and waits for the girl. She should be turning around the corner any minute. As Mariko rubs her sweaty hand against her skirt, she spots the girl. She is alone, kicking a pebble. She has her eyes glued to the pavement, intent on rolling the gravel home.

Mariko rolls down her window. "Hi, Rina-chan."

The girl looks up. Anna and Elsa, on her sweatshirt, grin at Mariko.

"Your mother's running late, helping sell tickets for the choir concert. So she asked me to take you to the handicraft lesson. Hop in," Mariko says and makes room for Rina beside Olaf.

"Who are you? Mother tells me not to ride in a stranger's car."

"Of course, you shouldn't. I'm Tanaka, your mother's friend from the choir. A new member. Good that you're keeping your mother's word. She'll be very proud of you."

The girl does not move but beams at Mariko.

"Do you want to have some donuts? Your mother asked me to get them for you." Mariko picks up the bag on the dashboard cover and swings it like a bell that announces the beginning of a play.

**2:00 p.m.**

The seat belt snugly fits around Rina's and Olaf's bodies. Rina is engrossed in the handheld world-building game. It is the game Saya used to watch big girls play. Mariko bought it on Saya's last birthday, even knowing it was too difficult for a five-year-old. In the game, you can build any world you like.

As Mariko speeds through the downpour, the rain beats hard against her car. When she stops at a traffic light, Mariko looks over her shoulder, her heart racing. She prays hard for Rina not to look up, ask her where they are, and wonder why there is no florist, donut shop, or Italian restaurant her parents regularly take her to on weekends.

Rina is building a village. There are houses shaped like cupcakes with rooftops decorated in vanilla and chocolate frostings. Rina's small thumbs press the arrow keys to group dwarves into families. She has twin girls holding hands.

The driver behind Mariko honks at her. As if she were awakened from a dream, Mariko floors the gas pedal too suddenly. In a reflex, she extends her arm towards the passenger seat as she used to do when Saya was onboard.

"Are you all right?"

Rina nods and squints her eyes to make out between the high-speed

windshield wipers. "Where are we?"

"Your mother mailed me saying that your handicraft class is canceled. She wants you to wait for her at my house. You can continue playing that game until she comes."

"Is my thirty minutes up?"

"Don't worry. I won't tell your mother. Play as much as you want."

Rina hugs Olaf, almost dropping the handheld game from her lap. "My dream come true. Did you know that this is my favorite game?"

Mariko tries not to look at Rina. To complete her plan, she should not see Saya's likeness in Rina.

**5:00 p.m.**

When Rina goes to the bathroom, Mariko stirs the sleeping pill, which she had ground into a fine powder that morning, in the girl's cocoa milk. Her hand no longer shakes. The shadow of the dogwood leaves swaying in the wind helps Mariko stay focused on her mission. Mariko glances at the clock and wonders whether Rina's mother has called the police. Maybe not yet. But she must have called her husband, who might initially coax her to relax, then ask her why she hasn't been at home, why she has to spend so much time singing. Annoyed, the wife might say she's not his house slave. Or she might apologize and start ringing Rina's friends again. Has the notion of a traffic accident crossed their minds? Does he envision his daughter soaked in the rain, lying on the asphalt like a broken doll?

Mariko sets the homemade vanilla cake on the table. There are no birthday plaques or candles.

"Do you want a large slice?"

"Looks yummy. Is today somebody's birthday?" Rina slips onto a chair and dangles her legs.

Soon her glass of cocoa milk is half empty.

"When Mommy made my birthday cake last year, it turned out like a rock, and Daddy had to run to the confectionery. So Daddy made Mommy promise not to bake again."

"That's too bad."

"Not really. Mommy isn't a great cook." Rina yawns as she licks the rim of her empty glass.

"Don't you like what she cooks?" Mariko remembers Saya asking for a second serving whenever she made curry rice.

"I like what she cooks, especially her spaghetti, but Daddy says Mommy's dishes are bland and sprinkles pepper over everything. Sometimes it makes me sneeze." Rina laughs as if she were sharing a family

joke. “Your pendant is pretty. It looks like a teardrop. Can I touch it?”

Mariko takes off her silver necklace and swings it in front of Rina like a pendulum. The girl strains her eyes to follow the locket. When Rina is about to grab it, Mariko pulls her necklace away. It is a game. Rina giggles. She tries to keep her eyes open. But before she can touch the pendant, her outstretched arm drops on the table.

**8:00 p.m.**

Mariko carries Rina upstairs and places her on Saya’s bed. The girl is fast asleep. With her mouth open, she snores lightly, emanating the sweet whiff of cocoa. Mariko breathes effortlessly, as if an anchor that had pulled her down into deep water has come off, allowing her to surface. She strokes Rina’s head and removes a strand of hair from the girl’s eye. Rina does not move.

In the moonlit room, Mariko gropes for the tray with the cake and sticks seven pink twisted candles on the rim, carefully setting them apart at equal distances. When she lights them up with a match, Mariko sees Olaf against the headboard, radiating his goofy smile, his white bucktooth shining like a doorknob that leads to a bottomless world. She sings, “Happy birthday to you,” but it does not come out as she intends. Her voice trills, and the darkness swallows her song. She inhales Saya’s memories and tries to blow out the candles. The flames merely flicker, and the candle wax drips, forming stalagmites.

Tonight, Mariko is resolved not to drink. She wants to be a good mother and cut star-shaped carrots for the curry. But she fears going to the kitchen where she hides her bottles. *A few minutes*, Mariko tells herself, and takes off her wig and slips out of her navy blue dress to lie beside Rina, whose warm and soft body soothes her.

By now, the police are probably at his house. An officer might be asking the killer whether he had any trouble with his business partners or employees. His wife, who sits beside him on their camel leather sofa, might be shaking her head feebly, unable to comprehend the questions: “Have you been tailed? Any issue at school?” The wife might get hysterical and blame herself. She might need a sedative, like the ones in Mariko’s medicine cabinet: icy blue, lemon yellow, and pumpkin orange—all the colors in Saya’s crayon box. A well-trained German shepherd dog might be sniffing Rina’s pajamas to track her down. But their search will end in vain, with the rain washing away all the traces of Rina as if she had never existed.

Neither the killer nor his wife will be thinking about Mariko. So they will not mention her to the police. For them, Saya is history. Light years away. He

does not cringe at seeing children holding balloons. No flashback of a girl chasing a pink balloon, him running over her. If he had, he wouldn't be able to stand in front of his supermarket on Fridays and hand out campaign balloons. Ear-to-ear grin, calculating how much he can make that day.

**3:00 a.m.**

Mariko wakes up, disoriented. For a second, she thinks Rina is Saya, but sooner than she wants, Mariko comes to herself and feels the leaden hollowness that fills her body. Too cool for a sundress, but she slips into the pink gingham check dress she wore that day—a pair look with Saya.

With Rina in her arms, Mariko climbs down the stairs, feeling each step with her bare feet. Finally, she turns the knob and pushes the door with her shoulder. There is not a soul outside. Mariko sets Rina on the passenger seat and starts the engine. The low beams shine on the road she can drive blindfolded.

**4:00 a.m.**

With her headlights turned off, Mariko glides onto the road where the killer's house sits. She is sure the killer is awake, sitting on a couch in the living room overlooking the street. He might have his mobile phone in his hand, expecting a call from the police telling him that Rina has been found or a message from a kidnapper asking for a ransom.

Mariko lays Rina on the driveway, a few meters away from the front bumpers of her car. She gets back in her seat and grabs the steering wheel. Her entire body shakes, and goose bumps spread up her naked arms. Just as she switches on the high beam and places her foot on the gas pedal, the killer flings open the door. He stands in the headlight, shielding his eyes. When he spots Rina and hears the engine roar, he freezes like a deer. But his fear-ridden marble eyes, void of pupils and irises, latch on Mariko as if locking her in a red dot sight. His shoulders heave. The killer flashes his palm at Mariko, trying to buy time. Then he slowly advances towards her.

She lightly presses the pedal, and the car inches towards Rina. Will she feel a thud? Will she hear the bones crack? Once she floors the pedal, she can complete her plan, make him feel the weight of grief.

When the killer sees Mariko in her pink sundress, he recognizes her and shakes his head in disbelief. "Please don't," he mouths. He clasps his hands and falls on his knees.

Mariko clutches her pendant. What if Rina does not wake up? Will Rina age or remain seven the way Saya is frozen in time? Will the killer sit by her

bedside and comb her hair or clip her nails, hoping his daughter will revive? If she doesn't, will Rina make him think of Saya? Will the two images of the girls become inseparable like twins?

Without taking her eyes off the killer, Mariko grips the gear shift and moves her foot. Then just as he hurls his body over Rina, Mariko puts her car in reverse and steers away, her tires scraping the asphalt. As she disappears into the dawn, the killer, holding Rina in his arms, becomes a dot in her side mirror.

# REVENGE

Dan B. Fierce

---

## I've waited for this day.

If there's one thing my kind is, it's patient. Not just a simple "virtue." Oh no. It's genetic; a trait passed from generation to generation. We know how to bide our time. Now, the day has come.

You? You came at us with your violence and authority, your chemicals and gasses, hoping to eradicate us all. My family. My friends. You got quite a few of us, I'll admit. Hell, that action alone has been the driving force in my will to live.

All we wanted was to exist, to live, but your selfish ways wouldn't allow that to happen. Not in your mind. You saw us as evil incarnate, savage creatures unfit to survive, even though we meant no harm. You destroyed our homes. We rebuilt, and you demolished them again.

Huddled en masse, we hoped for strength in numbers, that the sheer sight of us gathered was enough to convince you to leave well enough alone. Yet, you screeched like a banshee, as if *you* were the one being oppressed by our very existence, as if allowing us life would somehow inconvenience yours.

I was young when it happened. You first brought your so-called righteous wrath down upon us. A few of us escaped. Most did not. We were nearly wiped from the face of the earth, all to slake *your* desires, *your* need for power, and *your* hunger for control.

I watched it all from the shadows, where I was sent. It was against my own judgment, happy to perish alongside my kind, nevertheless surviving and flourishing in spite of your efforts.

In the first attack, you asserted yourself as the higher being, the alpha, the superior, squealing like a schoolgirl as we scattered for cover, as if *our* panic were less intense than your own. As we demonstrated our resilience, it only steeled your determination to eradicate us.

Next, you chose to use the newspapers against us, shouting your

superiority to the heavens like a war cry. You played the victim as you spun upon us, knowing full well that you were inciting the mayhem which ensued.

The final wave introduced men in otherworldly gear and chemical weapons. That was when most of us fell. Those who fled into the distance watched the horrors perpetrated upon our own. You lured some into traps to their demise, all while swearing it was “for our own good.”

Now I’m much older. I’ve allowed the hate to build inside me. My venom has only grown more potent with the passage of time. I’ve saved it for you; one final gift to impart. I will have my vengeance.

It will be swift and simple. I’ll come like a thief in the night, caress you as I would my prey, and watch as you destroy yourself from within. Your already high-strung nature will assure that my actions will be lethal.

You think yourself untouchable, indestructible. I will prove you wrong, so very wrong, indeed. Once the wheels are turning, it shall be you who suffers greatly. You’re not the only one capable of spinning a web. My kind is a master at it, and you underestimate us wholly.

Your shock and confusion shall tickle me as a feather would. I’ll witness as you spasm and pull in upon yourself, a sense of satisfaction spread over my face, just as you did when you heartlessly murdered my kin. Your head will throb with the pain of those whose lives you unjustly cut short for your own gain. Your stomach will knot up, and your heart will thrum with the violent rhythm of a drummer on psychedelic drugs.

I look forward to it all. Perhaps that makes me a lesser creature, this sense of vengeance, but you brought it upon yourself.

For now, I’ll wait; exercise my legendary patience. My eyes will know when the time is right, my legs will know when to pounce.

Soon, you’ll be the one who is trapped, wrapped in a neat package, and given to those like me as we drain your position, your authority, your existence from you, just as you have to us for so long. You will be like a fly in a web of my own design.

Hush, my children. Grow strong and hungry. The woman will be alone before you know it. Then we will all feast.

I’m in the shadows. On the ceiling. Creeping. Crawling. I’m at home there.

Can you see me?

You will.



# LAKE EFFECT

Jason P. Burnham

---

The first week everyone took pictures.  
No one had seen icy tentacles so long  
flaring and winding off the lighthouse  
warning us of the jagged lake beyond.

But it kept raining  
Ceaseless winds elongating the tentacles  
far past the jetty  
over frozen sand to the tree line.

People started avoiding the lighthouse  
when the tentacles  
threaded their way among leafless branches  
connecting observatory to land proper.

After a few months without respite  
icy intruders and shoreline saplings were enmeshed  
Entwined irrevocably without sun.

Frigid arms ever extending  
Past forest, house, and playground  
Onto side roads, thoroughfare, and highway  
Never stopping, always thickening.

There was no way out  
Unrelenting clouds bringing snow,  
feeding the great white reaper  
Tentacles invading homes, minds  
until nothing remained but ice.

The cameras have all frozen  
No one takes pictures any more.

“The months staggered onward like oceanic waves, swelling as her impatience grew until they crested over her, drowning her beneath and into the void.”

- L.T. Ward  
“There”

# THERE

L.T. Ward

---

***There*** was where they had their first date, which was why when Daya woke from her death, as her body exchanged pain for peace, her heart chose the coffeehouse to spend her afterlife.

The espresso machine squeezed a *shush*, a daybreak crow as Daya awakened. Regaining her bearings from her death—the event, a blocked memory eluding her—she watched the baristas and barbacks pirouette with one another as they prepared beverages and plated baked goods. Patrons shuffled to the order counter, requesting treats to brighten their days.

*There* was familiar yet dreamlike. An underwater, sepia world, and she, a land animal imprisoned within. Disoriented by the murkiness, she reached for her other senses, but they were limited to blurred sights and muffled sounds.

Touch, taste, and smell evaded her.

Daya recalled dying in October, but peppermint mocha and gingerbread flavors were scrawled in crimson and evergreen chalk on the menu board behind the bar. Bells chimed along with the lyrics of the piped-in holiday music. Customers doffed puffy coats and knitted caps topped with poof balls. They burst into *There* with pronouncements of how cold it was outside, how warm it was inside.

Daya felt nothing, not even lukewarm.

It didn't matter, though, not so long as *he* showed up. Her cup would be refilled once Luke walked through the glass door.

However, Daya had no hands to fiddle with a phone, no mouth to sip coffee, no voice to small talk jibber-jabber with passersby. Waiting in the afterlife differed greatly from waiting in life. The barista Finn rambled on with coworkers about the tedium of traffic. Sarah, their barback, twittered about financial strain. The seated customers one-upped one another over their relationship dramas as though their lives were comparable to the plot of *Casablanca*.

Daya waited, waited for the glass door to open, but loitering with the nothingness caused her thoughts to drift away from the now.

Blackness began to ooze around her.

The café melted away. Fuzzied lines bordering shades of gray flickered before her as though a movie projector played black and white reels to unsounding moving lips, the characters' voices replaced by a *click-click-clicking* from a clacking shutter. Daya's once-was life splayed her memories before her, looping them under a milky filter.

The cross-country drive to visit Luke's sister Betty, holding hands across the console, karaoke-ing off-key with the radio.

The bath they shared with bubbles and rose petals. Candlelight illuminating the room with romance; Daya's wandering hands turning the bath erotic.

Their first date. Luke so handsome, so nervous, shying away from her by staring into his coffee mug, then braving to sneak peeks of Daya from beneath his brow. His smile never leaving his face.

Daya looked away from the screenless movie, the longing for her life macerating her soul. When she turned back, her memories pixelated, cascading as a waterfall, spilling the cubes. Grief ate at her in the darkness, nibbling with pricking pinches. No flesh to feel the tingling. No tissue lungs to hyperventilate. No eye ducts to sob tears.

As she neared the fringe of it, her non-heart beat: *Luke*. She clung to that thump. *Luke, Luke, Luke*. The thrum in her soul reverberated a shimmer of hope, barely a particle of glitter, yet it was enough, summoning her out of the darkness, back to *There*.

The coffeehouse sharpened into the present. She took stock, a moment of reflection. Unspendable sadness roiled into waves of fear, tormenting her with no promise of Heaven, no threat of Hell. Limbo. There was an ongoing remembrance and the void, a phantasmagorical damnation. Daya was sentenced to exist between the two worlds which equated to an afterlife in limbo.

Until Luke came.

Luke lived; her soul knew this with certainty. She would fight against the evanescence. She would see him again.

Promoted chocolate and strawberry treats replaced the December seasonal offerings on the menu board. Doodled crimson hearts replaced the tittles of the i's and j's. Two cartoonish flying babies pinned at the corners of the chalkboard held bows, the arrowheads pointing delightfully upwards at the long list of sugared and caffeinated options for purchase.

Daya worried. *What if he came while I wasn't here?*

The menu board time stamped the living world's calendar. Four-leaf

shamrocks followed by umbrellas beneath fat clouds showering cerulean rain followed by rainbowed splotches forming a bed of flowers. The months staggered onward like oceanic waves, swelling as her impatience grew until they crested over her, drowning her beneath and into the void. Each time, Luke tethered her to return to *There*.

Then June third arrived—a lemony sun beaming in the menu board corner. Also, the anniversary of her and Luke’s first date. Daya tingled with anticipation, certain he would visit *There*.

*There, There, There*, her soul chanted, wishing—demanding—Luke to come.

All day long, customers came, ordering beverages and snacks. Some stayed, easing into their caffeination vibrations. Others left with barely a glance around the café.

A woman ordered a cappuccino. She sat in one of the booths lit by a dangling Edison bulb as she typed sporadically on her laptop. The shadows criss-crossed her face, etching a deep sadness upon her features.

The woman checked her silent phone, then craned around her booth to stalk the front door. Her face drooped as only sunlight entered *There* through the glass.

*He’s not coming*, thought Daya.

The clanking of mugs. The forced music from the overhead speakers. The constant murmur of patrons speaking in hushed voices, interrupted by boisterous laughter.

Blackness enveloped Daya as the prosaic cacophony dissolved into the *click-click-clicking* of the movie projector voicing the pocketed memory that had been carefully stowed away for the better part of a year.

It was October. The building was located in one of the better neighborhoods, one within walking distance of *There*. A beautiful two-bedroom on the third floor which overlooked a city street lined with other apartment buildings and small mom-and-pop shops. Canvas awnings shaded the entrances, the doors braced by planters overstuffed with mums.

Orange mums. Red mums. Yellow, too. This memory was no black and white reminiscence.

The cognizance struck Daya like a sharp bite from an electrical socket.

Then she heard it. Tree boughs clacking and rustling together instead of the *click-click-clicking*.

The movie tightened in on Daya’s kitchen—and the stove. It was a prized gas stove. Luke had loved that feature most of all when they were scouting new homes. “Electric makes everything taste flat,” he always said. “You can’t get an even cook-through with electric.”

To christen their new home and surprise her beloved, she had jumped

onto the internet to find a recipe of his favorite comfort food: fried chicken. While Luke was at the gym, she'd begun cooking. The first-person, colorized film cut to her hands, slopping the legs and breasts in the spices and flour. It clotted under her nails as she dipped the boned meat into the mixture.

The aroma wafted through the void, tantalizing her with the first smell she'd had in months.

Movie Daya set the prepared chicken on a plate, then tested the oil in the pan. Almost ready. She brushed her hands with the dish towel before her next culinary step—biscuits. She knuckle-tapped her phone for the instructions, then removed the dough from the glass bowl draped with a towel, tossing it aside. While reading the next steps, a message popped up.

Text from Luke: *on my way.*

Daya hurriedly kneaded and rolled out the dough, sprinkling flour to keep it from sticking to her hands. As she cut out the biscuits using an overturned glass, sweat dribbled onto the back of her hand. She swiped her brow with her sleeved forearm.

Despite not having a neck or flesh, Daya felt the needling of goose pimples. She wanted the film to stop—now. But she couldn't look away. She couldn't.

The movie swept toward the crackling chicken. Instead of finding the legs ready to be pulled from the oil, the dish towels were aflame. Like a fiery snake, the flames crawled away from the burner across the counter. The snake bit at the drywall, scaling upwards, widening its body as a python who swallowed a pig.

Daya felt the blackness of the void constrict around her as she inhaled the burning, the charring of her former home. Her non-body felt the icy shiver of fear beneath the heat permeating off the memory.

She watched Movie Daya grab her drinking glass and stupidly fling water at the flames. A *whoosh* erupted. Her clothes caught. She screamed as she slapped at her shirt, her pants, her hair. She ran from the kitchen.

The movie smogged over. The void tasted like smoke, heated and dry.

*No, no, no, no*, Daya thought. Her screaming thoughts did nothing. They did not slow, they did not stop. They rushed along in her mind as the smoke suffused her happily-ever-after home.

Minutes passed. The scene jerked and blurred. Luke appeared. He was trying to find her, but lost his way in the grayness of their apartment.

Both Dayas tried to call out to him, neither able to utter a sound.

Then he was there. Luke's mouth mimed her name as he grabbed at her through the smoke. The movie blinked, picking up again with Luke carrying her out onto the fire escape. As he scaled down the two flights, carefully, awkwardly, with her slung over his shoulder, the movie gradually

cleared.

But the smell of burnt hair and flesh, the feel of rawness from tissue exposed, the taste of char. All of it lingered, painfully so.

The screenless film flashed, landing on Luke collapsed beside her in an alley. He was winded and coughing, but then shifted to all fours to check on her. The movie blinked again, resuming in the back of an ambulance.

The shot converged on Luke's worried face, hazing until he disappeared into the darkness as she'd closed her eyes. But she heard him. "I love you. I promise I'll be there soon."

He'd meant the hospital, although he'd never gotten the chance.

Daya had died en route.

Then she'd awakened in *There*, wanting only to tell Luke once more that she loved him, too.

The movie ended, and Daya plunged through the obsidian void, landing within *There* as she always did when the screen stopped rolling. Patrons and employees went about their businesses. She glanced at the menu board. Red, white, and blue sprays edged the berry-themed selections. Daya had been trapped with her death for nearly a month, losing time faster than when she'd been alive.

Anger rippled through her.

She was a ghost who'd been forced to witness her death for a second time, reawakening and surrounded by the living *living*. It wasn't fair and the injustice incensed her. Her fury felt rich and invigorating.

It also left an unsettling taste in her non-mouth.

The sickening aftertaste of ash. The abhorrent smells of her flesh, her furniture's plastics and woods, the apartment's insulation burning. The feel of skin, tight and screaming from being ripped apart by a blaze. Her soul retained them all.

Daya looked about the café. She needed to leave *There*. Now. A patron serendipitously opened the glass door; Daya charged toward the entrance.

Then everything went white. The veritable opposite of the black void, she was affronted with a white oblivion like a splicing headache. Gradually, the blanched world eased back to *There*, the sky beyond the glass an aqua lake.

She waited for another customer, who opened the door with boastful laughter. Daya barreled toward the outside.

The white oblivion greeted her with open arms.

When *There* returned, Daya's anger twisted and popped. Every time the door opened, she rammmed at the unseen wall. Again and again and again.

It was all for naught.

Her fury boiled. Her imprinted sensory memories lived on without her

body, imposing the nightmare upon her. The mouthful of ash. The charring flesh. The smells. Her rage infused her non-body with sensations.

She screamed.

But her ghost's scream was soundless. It was a pressurized boom which shook the table nearest her, the half-full mugs toppling and the beverages spilling as the customers leapt to avoid the inevitable stains.

Their surprised shrieks revoked Daya's senses, leaving her with only sight and sound.

The sadness returned. It stayed, too. Riding along with the ebb and flow of time, so that Daya was bemused one day to discover orange pumpkins doodled on the menu board.

The hope, which had abandoned her in June, returned, dazzling and shiny. Luke might—no, he would—return to *There*, saving her from this purgatory.

Sure enough, the glass door opened and closed with a sigh, but it was Betty, Luke's sister, who walked in.

Daya flashed to the entrance instantly, scouring the parking lot for Luke's midnight blue Subaru. The hazy October sky blinded her with an overcast grayness.

She turned back to her would-be sister-in-law standing at the order counter. Betty ordered a coffee to go. "Black with room for cream." Only one drink.

While the coffee was poured, Daya smelled the brew. She *smelled* it. Hope at finding Luke thickened within her. Daya pressed herself nearer—too near—and Betty shivered. The ghost shifted away to allow space she did not want to give, fearing an encore boom.

As Betty accepted her fevered cup, pausing to blow into the hole of the lid, Daya's hope abated for panic and jealousy. In eight steps, Betty would walk beyond the threshold, through the white oblivion, off to who knows where. She would be able to see her brother again. She would be able to pick up a phone, call him, say, "Love you, too."

She could leave purgatory.

A year of disembodied emotions, being taunted by the ongoing lives of the living, contracted by her heart's decision to remain *There* for her eternal future.

It needed to end.

Betty stepped with the *click-clack* of her black heels *tick-tocking* like a countdown clock. The sound echoed in Daya. As Betty exited *There*, Daya lunged for her, gripping so hard on the woman's camel hair coat, she felt the crushed softness. Daya *felt*.

She held on even as her once-skin tightened, stretched and ripped



open with an icy burn, begging for mercy, the gentility of the camel hair immediately forgotten. Hers was flesh ignited, torn apart by flames, tissues and nerves exposed so that a slight wisp of air across the tears kindled pain anew. She fought the urge to release Betty's coat as she tasted, not the alluring pumpkin spice aroma wafting about the premises with promises of autumnal comforts, but of ash—soot and the charred skin of the inside of her cheek. Smoke infiltrated her nostrils so deeply, her non-throat choked on the memory.

Her ghostly being was dragged from *There* and into the world like she was glued to Betty. She held on for her dear afterlife.

Pain permeated every part of Daya, yet she refused to let go of Betty. She was rewarded. She passed through the white oblivion and into the expanse of the parking lot.

The woman tugged at the front of her coat, pulling at it as though she felt the seams had misaligned around her shoulders and sides. Thanks to Daya's desperate grip, they had. Then the woman and the once-woman were in Betty's car. Betty settled her coffee into the cup holder, adjusted herself in her seat, then reversed the car with ease while Daya fought against her torturous senses to keep hold—one incorporeal hand fused to Betty's coat—so that she could go anywhere that wasn't *There*.

Time passed. Excruciatingly. Slowly. Time passed.

Daya's sanity reached for Betty. Amidst the pain, attempting to slough off her returned senses for only palatable sight, Daya's gaze combed Betty. As she drove, sipping her coffee at stop lights, Betty's caramel coat parted over her breast, revealing a black blouse. Further down, a black skirt, black fishnet tights, black ankle boots. Today, she was muted, unnoticeable, almost unrecognizable as Luke's sister aside from her mermaid lilac and aqua tresses.

The dread of tamped-down style was enough to draw Daya away from her pain, allowing her to hold on until the car stopped moving, startling Daya with its silence.

Betty collected herself behind the wheel. She brought the coffee to her lips, but did not drink. Rubbed her nose when the steam tickled it. Set the cup back down.

Then, as though a starter gun had gone off, Betty opened her door and tumbled out. Daya lurched along with her.

The clouded gray sky impaired Daya, threatening to send her into the white oblivion instead of the infinite blackness. Fear seized her, the dark void filling her up, numbing her so that her grip on Betty's coat became a cognizant act Daya knew but could not feel. A *click-click-clicking* clattered over Betty's murmurs as Luke's smile formed where the back of her head

should be.

Then a twittering and a brittle rustle pushed back against the invading blackness. Sporadic oaks spread about a mowed field, their boughs of red and orange leaves interrupting the bleak sky.

Betty pinned her coat closed, huddling into it as she walked with purpose along a row of headstones. Her head twitched as she side-eyed the names on the markers, muttering “no” over and over again. When she had walked fifty feet into the cemetery, she stopped.

She stared down at the tombstone from the foot of the grave, then heaved a dry sob. “Why did you have to die?”

*I didn't want to die*, Daya thought. She knew this would not answer Betty's question, even if the woman could hear her.

“Why did you both have to die?”

Startled, Daya's grip slipped briefly from Betty's coat. Blackness swelled around her and she captured the buoy coat, the void paling to gray.

Her gaze darted to the headstone on the left. Luke's name was etched upon marbled granite, pairing with hers. His final resting date was three days after hers.

And there, behind the two rectangular markers, was Luke. He had no form, only she felt him like a deafening silence in a room full of sound.

Daya's heart lurched.

“I'm sorry it took me so long to come back here,” Betty said. She walked between the domed earth piles already green with sod, not quite lush. She brushed leaves from the granite.

“It hurt so much to lose Daya, but then you, too. Luke, you fool, you gave up.”

Betty continued talking, but Daya couldn't hear. She was too focused on the source of the deafening silence.

Luke. He was right there.

He had died, too. He had raced into death to be with her and they would have been together—but she had chosen their first moments instead of their last. She would be forever unable to reach him.

A wind swirled about the graveyard. Its breathy movements touched Daya and she relinquished herself to it, releasing Betty's coat. She felt a tsunami of whiteness washing over her.

*I love you*, she thought as hard as she could.

*I love you, too*, she heard him think back. *I told you I'd meet you there.*

The oblivion inhaled Daya away from their cemetery as Luke's words were replaced by the *shush* of an espresso machine, awakening like a daybreak crow within *There*.

# FIRST DAY JITTERS

Donna J.W. Munro

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**The eggs sizzled as I set the table and pulled our lunches from the fridge.** The toast popped and I cut off the crust the way they liked. I'd eat the crusts with my eggs as Jenny and Marty ate their sugary cereal and talked through their first day of school jitters.

Above me, I heard them thumping around—Marty in his room and Jenny in the bathroom, probably fussing with her hair. Checking and double-checking their first-day fit. I couldn't blame them. I taught third grade at their elementary school and I'd been prepping my classroom for weeks for my own nervous first-day students. My bulletin board was made over in my enchanted forest theme with each of my eighteen kids' names carefully written on colorful mushrooms. The reading circle had pillows and repurposed stools for the kids to sit on. The books and the toys and the markers and the crayons all waited for little hands and open minds.

I'd even remembered to stock the protection pod with juice and blankets to make it a little less panic room, a little more hideaway.

It's the world we live in.

"Mom, Marty hid my backpack." Jenny galloped down the stairs with her ponytails streaming, one two inches higher than the other.

"Sit," I said, smiling. She wouldn't need me in a year or two. Seven years old with a grown lady's soul and she was already helping me write shopping lists, organize our appointments, and stock our bunker. Marty helped too, but he was a year younger and hadn't practiced all the drills enough to take our prep seriously or even to know what they meant. He laughed when the sirens went off and ran around in circles as we followed the Homeland Security protocols. To him the drills felt like a game. This year, he'd catch up. Kindergarten had hard lessons but we all would be safer when his teacher, Miss Perry, gently trained the silly out of him.

It was the only way.

I straightened Jenny's ponytails and handed her a cup of juice. "Eat

your breakfast, sweetie.”

Marty came down the steps dragging two clear backpacks filled with supplies for their teachers. The only difference between the bags was that each had piping with a unique barcode and password. Marty was Plum Sunset and Jenny was Muscle Skillet. A cop with a scanner would be able to tell who they were and access their address and phone number in the case of a car accident, or if they got lost, or if ...

“Mama, I’m scared of my suit,” Marty said. He pushed around the Cheerios in his bowl and looked up at her with teary, wide eyes.

I glanced toward the front closet, but only for a second. I smiled and brought him some jelly toast.

“Honey, it’s just a precaution. Mama has one, too. Besides, you practiced wearing it. You know how to get in and out.”

“But do I have to wear it? Can’t I just—”

“No, dummy. You have to cuz it’s the law,” Jenny said. “Even just to go to the bathroom. Principal Jack said ...” She looked up at the ceiling like the words floated there above her head. “The only way to stay safe is to always be ready.”

I nodded and smiled. There was so much nodding and smiling nowadays. I couldn’t tell them that when I was their age, we walked to school by ourselves, wore what we wanted, played outside, and didn’t have to do the endless drills. I couldn’t say that because telling them what we lost was worse than just living it. Adjusting to each new attack with another safety measure. Steel shutters on windows. Auto-sealing doors. Tranquilizer guns in file cabinets. Gentle poison gummies in case of a breach.

“Finish up now. The first day is always hard but by next week you’ll be a pro, sweetheart.” I kissed him on the cheek and gave him a quick hug that I wished would make him feel as secure as I used to feel before all of this.

They hopped off their stools and cleared their dishes, excitedly chattering about their friends and teachers. We headed together to the closet and pulled on the thick metal mesh pants studded with spikes, sealing them over our shoes. The kids got the jackets, gauntlets, and gloves sealed and locked by themselves. Marty grazed his wrist when he tried to operate the internal drive, but a Band-Aid on the booboo and a kiss on the forehead dried his tears.

They couldn’t get on the helmet without help. Adjusting the lenses of the eyes, making sure the O<sub>2</sub> mix was balanced, and honestly once they had their gloves on, because of the spikes and clumsy joints, it was dangerous for them to fumble the helmet into place. I helped them and then put on my own.

“I don’t like it, Mama.”

“Don’t be a baby,” Jenny told him.

“Shhhh, Jenny. You didn’t like it at first either. Don’t be mean.”

“I just ... Why do we have to wear it?”

I’d explained it before. I’d used books and cartoons on the internet. I’d told him about the school attacks, but what does a five-year-old understand about death? About real monsters? About automatic guns?

“All big girls and boys wear them. You want to be a big boy, don’t you?”

I stared at my two armored babies and hated what I’d made them into. I looked down at my own armored hands, spiked and deadly, and I remembered back to when I first started teaching. When I’d put on my colorful, cheery clothes and go to school without precautions. I used to hug my students, give them high fives, let them cry on my shoulder.

No more.

At least here, in my home with my steeled windows and camera-tracked entrances, reinforced walls, and all the purchased safety, I could hold my little ones. Wipe their tears.

“Yes, Mama.” Nothing is sadder than a resigned, hopeless five-year-old.

Nothing.

“Let’s go then.”

The door unlocked with a series of quick clicks and a hiss, but eventually, the sun shone in on the three of us. At least there was still the sun.

“With my diagnosis—a pack a day for twenty years had to catch up sooner or later—it was finally time to have something I wanted instead of always settling for what I could get.”

- Josh Schlossberg  
“Hot on the Trail”



# **HUMANS SUPPRESS AND HISTORY REVEALS**

Sonali Roy



# THE MAN IN THE GRAY SUIT

Fariel Shafee

---

**Every evening the man came to the cemetery.** He was a tall thin man with high cheekbones and thin lips. He had cropped silver hair. The man looked pale and tired. He brought in a single white rose and put it next to the wooden cross of the neglected grave near the shrubs each time. He wore a formal gray suit and a gray hat, black glasses even in dusk.

He would come to the graveyard exactly at seven. Some evenings, there would be a thin layer of snow on the ground, and on some other days, the sky would be clear. The man would kneel after leaving the flower on the raw soil and he would bow his head, sit quietly for an hour. It was unclear if he noticed the raven on the oak tree overlooking the boundary walls. It was the same bird always there, always staring straight until it was just too dark.

The grave was unmarked. But disease had claimed too many lives in recent days. The cemetery had almost run out of space. Every other grave now had the body of somebody's wife or son, a lover that left too early.



The town was filled with grief, but most stayed away from the graveyard. The dead still carried the seeds of death in layers of decaying flesh. The bugs sat quietly until someone touched, trying to connect with the past, and then they slipped in through the little pores of the skin into the flesh and the blood.

"Something's eating me up," the infected ones would cry out within a day or two, bleeding profusely and rotting from inside out.

Yet the man in the suit would sit still, and the feathered creature would watch, and then the man would walk out in the darkness, his hands folded in front of him, his head bowed, every night.





It was a cold Sunday.

At midnight, the man walked into the little yellow house at the end of the road. Martha was waiting for him still. His food was on the table.

“John, are you here?” she inquired.

“You are still up, dear?” John, the tall and thin man in the gray suit, asked softly.

“I thought you’d be in sooner. I was so scared, you know. Mary called. Everyone in her house is sick.”

John took off his hat and his suit and walked up to the table. On a white linen table cloth was an off-white plate with printed blue flowers.

There was a loaf of bread in a basket and a roasted chicken thigh and some potatoes and peas on a tray. In a bottle was some red wine. Martha had drunk quite a bit. She was scared. They were all scared.

“I am so glad that you are here with me,” she whispered from the bedroom. “I did not want to be alone. I am grateful for that day.”

That day, Martha’s best friend had died. It was a death that had left more than just an overwhelming sense of grief behind; Martha was angry.

“You cannot do this to us! Oh Lord, what have we done to deserve this?” Martha had continued cursing at the heavens as they carried the coffin towards the cemetery.

“Look, you don’t have to do that. We are all frustrated. We are all scared,” a stout woman had shouted back at her.

Then there was another: “It’s not just *you*, you know.”

Somebody had punched Martha from the back. She’d stumbled on a sharp rock, and had wanted to punch back at the crowd. And the world ... let it end.

That’s when John had appeared. “Hush,” he had been soft and sweet. “I feel your pain.”

“Hush,” John spoke to her again now as he kissed her after he had thrown the food in the trash and walked into the bedroom.

“I am glad you are here with me.” She seemed assured, and was slowly falling asleep.

“Sleep, baby,” he whispered, staring at her still. He wanted her, needed her like she wished to have him as well. “I wish I could,” he said softly again. “But next week, you shall be gone too.”



He had wanted to forget this town—the river, the small yellow houses and the long narrow streets. He had wanted to forget his own past—how he

had walked about those streets once. He had wanted to forget Martha as well—how she had kissed and held him tight.

But here he was, again.

“This pain does not go away,” he murmured in front of her abandoned grave. “I want to burn them all, show them what I suffer,” he whispered as his eyes flashed, as he shivered, as his bones hurt.

The raven watched dispassionately, as it had also watched him writhe in pain long ago.

Then the bird fluttered its wings and moved over to another branch, like it had when he had been disowned, banished.

There was nothing in that grave now but perhaps cracked bones, he knew. But he could not let them throw her away, right? So he had dug the soil in the depth of the night and made a wooden cross. “Off limits. Protected.” The sign was clear. Now he knelt and cried.

“I wish I could be in here. I wish I was the one dead,” he sighed.

The winged creature cawed as it flew away and disappeared in the night sky. Darkness swallowed the world, like it had when this man had fallen.



“You are not from this town, are you?” Lara asked. She was young and plump still, tanned, her dark hair tied into a bun. Her eyes were dark too. Her feet were bare in the cold. She was all alone by the river.

“No,” he replied softly.

“No one bathes in this river any more.” Lara was sullen. “The water too is dangerous.”

John nodded quietly.

“I want to leave this place, but they wouldn’t let us.” She stared at her basket. No one had bought her fish. “These are toxic, they said. The bellies are filled with bugs.”

“I will give you a gold coin for the fish,” he smiled.

Lara laughed out loud. “Why have you come here? No one comes to this town!” She stared at the dry grass.

John was silent for a moment. Then he looked straight at her eyes. “I have come here to die,” he said calmly.



“I want to die.” John, the visitor in the gray suit, now all alone in a room, looked at himself in the mirror. He had set fire to himself once. His skin had

burned and then the flesh—like he was a duck being grilled alive. He had also once thrown himself into a gorge. This time he slit his right wrist. Blood oozed from his hand. His face looked pale in the mirror. His breathing was heavy. A dull pain took over his body and he sat still on a blue chair in front of the mirror, watched himself wilt.

From outside, the raven, too, watched him through the window while perched upon the bough of an apple tree.

The raven knew where the anguished man would end, or not end, and so did John. He would sleep for hours, bloodless, wan and numb. He would not breathe. But then he would slowly open his eyes, find himself in a pool of blood, tired, in pain, but alive.

Miranda, the woman he could not resist, on the other hand, was now lying in the unmarked grave. She had died quickly. John had tried to hold her hand, but then she'd slipped.

The raven knew why she had slipped. She had seen eternity in the bird's flashing eyes—the road to dark snowy unending space.

"I can't touch you," John had said. "Because I love you."

"I don't believe your words," she had answered. "I am sure you know what you want."

So they had embraced, and she had perished.

The raven had watched the fallen immortal fall in love and lose what he had wanted the most.

"I wish I was in this grave," John whispered again. But he was the ever-living mortal now, a man with human needs and pains that did not end.

"Why have you come here?" The raven's voice resonated in his ears as he woke up. The dark eyes stared at him curiously from the riverside. "You are not from this town."

"That's because I am human too. I can't be all alone. I need company, and I need love. I wish I still had Miranda."

He wished he could've said these words to her, to clarify that his human needs were death for others.

"I have come here to die," John simply said instead.

He was here to stay as the raven would watch. All his love would end in sorrow again. "I only bring pain, death," he whispered in front of the mirror. But death would not be his.

***Editor's Note:** Just before release day, Ray Daley passed away. He was meticulous about his work, and took joy in not only his craft, but in sharing others' writing and pieces he loved with others. He was quite accomplished and had at least one hundred pieces published across a galaxy of speculative publications.*

*Sadly, it is true that nothing gold can stay. But Ray will always be part of the 34 Orchard family, and a piece of his passion will stay with us. We offer our deepest condolences to his loved ones, and we're grateful we knew him and could share his work with the world.*

## **YOU HAVE SUMMONED A DEMON**

Ray Daley

---

**They told me my father had gone out for a pack of smokes in the night and never come back.**

They lied.

I was ten when he summoned his first and only demon. I was standing right there behind him, on the penultimate step from the top, and that was what saved my life. I crouched on that step, the only light coming from the candles my father had lit around the pentagram he'd drawn on the attic floor in crazy sand. Real sanctified earth is hard to get hold of, but I'll tell you more about that later.

I watched the old man light the candles first, sweat pouring from his forehead, the light of wild rage ebbing from his eyes. He didn't really need the damn candles, but they were clearly a necessary part of the ritual. He fretted about the sanctified earth too, quite rightly in hindsight. With all four candles lit, he drew his pentagram, finally stepping back to read from a book I hadn't seen on the attic floor until that point. When he began to read, whatever language it was, it sure as heck wasn't English.

Once he'd recited whatever he had to say, the old man nicked his hand with a pocket knife and flicked a few drops of his own blood into the pentagram, and that's where business picked up.

There was a flash of light, so bright I couldn't see for a few seconds afterwards. I thought we'd had a lightning strike, but I could see the clear dark sky through the attic skylight. When my vision finally cleared, I saw the thing. Easily nine feet tall, probably taller because it was standing hunched over due to the ceiling above its winged head. Yes, it had wings. A tail too. Blood red skin. I began to wonder what it was.

My theory was confirmed when it finally spoke. "So, Man. You have summoned a demon! What is your bidding?"

He tossed a photograph into the pentagram, where the demon just plucked it out of the air. "This man, dead, by the end of tomorrow."

The demon looked at him with a smile which contained far too many teeth for my liking. "Of course, you understand the payment system?"

My father just nodded. "I've left a note on the table downstairs. *Gone out for a pack of smokes, back whenever.* So how does the pay thing work? I go when he's dead?"

The demon just licked its teeth. "Check your watch, Human."

I quickly looked down to check my own, just as my father did likewise. WED had just rolled over to THUR.

"Ready yourself, Human. I have completed my part. Payment due."

Whatever time he thought he might have had left, Dad accepted it was now over. "I want to see it's done, first. Show me, and I'll come quietly. Gladly, even."

And with that, there was a second flash of light, accompanied by a gust of wind. The candles blew out, the crazy sand was thrown to the sides of the room and I was left alone, never to see my father again.



Of course, I got my hands on that book before anyone went up into the attic looking for my father. I read it from cover to cover and learned plenty from it. The first thing I learned was I knew literally nothing about the forces of darkness. Demons could be summoned to do your bidding, and not just to kill people. You could literally summon a demon to do anything. If you could read Latin, that is.

I spent the next ten months of my free time in the local library, equipping myself with the greatest shield known to humankind, knowledge.

According to the book, you could summon any level of demon to perform your bidding. It wasn't all about the murder.

I was right on board to test that, so that evening after my mother had finally fallen asleep, I made my way up to the attic.

I had already made sure to actually get some sanctified earth by doing a little digging in the local churchyard. The pastor just thought I was tidying up a few of the graves; I guess he didn't spot my Mason jar beside me. Unless he thought it was for flowers.

I lit the four candles first, then drew the pentagram with my earth. Standing back, I recited the incantation. There wasn't so much a flash of blinding white light, more like the whole room got a tiny bit brighter.

"So, Man. Hang on, you're not a man. Thou art naught but a child? You have summoned a demon! What is your bidding?"

"Firstly, show some respect. I summoned you. Secondly, I lost my good sneakers last week. I want you to find them for me."

The demon was tiny, no more than a few inches tall. It was a sickly green colour and had two tiny nubs on its shoulders where I assumed it would eventually grow wings. "My apologies, Master. Describe these sneakers?"

"Red, with a white flash down each side. Oh, and pink laces. Don't laugh, I like pink. Boys can like pink."

The demon closed its eyes for a few moments, turned slightly on its feet and faced the stairs. "A room below this one, the walls have metal vehicles on them. I see these sneakers, under a tall wooden box containing clothing."

Oh, now I remembered. I had left them to dry under the wardrobe, and then promptly forgotten about them. It could see my tank wallpaper from up here?

Then I heard a polite cough. "I now require payment."

Yes, of course it did. I reached behind me for the glass jar, and put my hand inside, removing the contents. I tossed the cricket into the pentagram.

The tiny demon smiled. It wasn't much bigger than the cricket. "Ah, a live offering. Thou art a benevolent Master." Then it jumped on the unsuspecting cricket, swallowing it whole. "Yes, indeed. A truly excellent payment. Doest thou require anything further?"

I shook my head, and recited the second incantation, releasing the demon back unto the realms of hellish suffering.



That might have been my first time, but it certainly wasn't my last. I wore my good sneakers to school the next day, where Tommy Moseley bullied me in the playground because they had pink laces. I'll give you one guess who I summoned a demon on that very same night.

"You have summoned a demon. Oh, it's you again? Nice laces. What is your bidding?"

I drew in a breath. I didn't want Tommy dead, just brought down a peg or two. "There's a kid at school who bullies me. Tommy Moseley. I just want you to scare him out of his mind, that's all. Make him think twice about being a bully again. Call it two crickets and a worm? Sound fair?"

Tommy didn't come back to school the next day. Nor the day after that, or even the next six months, in fact. And when he finally did return to school, boy, had he changed! He was a shadow of his former self; according to the teachers he'd almost stopped eating completely. He barely spoke now, too, unless an adult asked him a question. He certainly never raised a hand to another kid in anger, or for any reason, ever again. The way I heard it,

he now spends his adult life heavily medicated.

So as I grew older, I realised I had a pretty useful asset on my hands. I was a little greedy at first, just using it for myself. The thing with knowing you can summon a demon at any time to do your bidding, it becomes kind of more-ish. Need someone to hold a ladder while you decorate but you've got no friends who aren't busy screwing their wives or girlfriends? Summon a demon! Need an extra body to move a heavy piece of furniture? Summon a demon.

Need an asshole neighbour to turn their goddamn stereo down at nights when you've got work early next morning? You've got it. *Summon a freaking demon.*

I turned it into quite the cottage industry when I got low on funds. I had cards and flyers posted all across three counties.

***GOT YOURSELF INTO A SPOT? NEED SOME HELP? DIAL 555-WEHELP. NO JOB TOO LARGE, NO QUESTIONS ASKED. CASH ONLY.***

If people needed furniture moving between houses, I could underbid anyone and still make out like a bandit. Need your car towed home? Neighbour's dog keep getting in your yard?

Yeah, I had a few issues with that.

"Listen, when I send you to stop a dog getting into someone's yard, that doesn't mean I wanted you eat the little idiot. Okay?"

"Sorry, Master."

By that point, I had several dozen demons on the books. At most, it'd cost me a rabbit. Our neighbourhood used to have a feral cat problem. *Used to.* I dealt with that. *You're welcome, neighbourhood!*

"So, the advert says no questions asked, right?"

I nodded. He already looked uncomfortable enough.

"So if I want someone dead?"

I just looked at him. "Two things. Thing one, as long as it's not me, or yourself. Thing two, we don't *just* take cash for jobs like that. You know the biblical saying. 'An eye for an eye'? Is whoever you want dead worth your own life too?"

He sighed and nodded. "Just make it look like an accident, so the family can claim the insurance. Trust me, they're better off without us."



I used to get a lot of clients like that; many were so deep in debt that only the veil of death itself could save them. A few who'd done things they'd rather not get caught alive for too. I'd take their money, have them inside the pentagram for the incantation. Always make sure you've got their money

*before* you do that. I only ever made that mistake once.

I'm getting out of the game for good now. I've had a nice life, wanted for nothing. I know where I'm going next, too. You know the old saying, "*Damned if you do?*"

"You have summoned a demon. Hello, Boss. Oh, you're inside the pentagram? What is your bidding?"

He'd grown into quite the big lad over the last seven decades. His wings touched the attic ceiling. To look at him, you wouldn't have believed he was the same tiny demon I had first summoned, all those years ago. His green skin looked quite majestic now.

"Hello, Athiel. I have a question for you, something not covered in the book. Where do you go, when I release you?"

Athiel ran his tongue over his fangs. "Back to Hell, but you already knew that, Boss. Why are you inside the pentagram? This isn't the way we normally do business. You've been right good to me, over the years. Haven't taken the mickey, or asked me to do things you couldn't possibly expect. Is there something wrong, Boss?"

I passed him the X-ray.

It took him a second to take in all the dark shadows on it. "Oh, I see. That is *quite* bad. But you know I could just remove that for you. At most that would cost you a pig, Boss. Yet here you are, inside the pentagram with me. Why's that, Boss?"

I tossed the X-ray to the floor. "You could make it better, but I'd still feel terrible, inside. I've helped enough people, Athiel. It's time I helped myself. There's only one place for those who've communed with the halls of Hell. I was never going to learn how to play a damn harp anyway." I patted Athiel on the shoulder and recited the release incantation.



"But you've got to do something, Officer!"

"It says right here on the note, lady. '*Gone out for a pack of smokes, back whenever.*' He ain't missing."

I'm not either. I'm not missing anything up there. This place isn't exactly Hell. Far from it, in fact. Hell was the constant striving, a need to fulfill people's expectations. Down here, my afterlife ain't all that bad. Admittedly it's no bed of roses either, but it's an absolute walk in the park compared to being alive.

There's always the cross-training, to become a demon myself. I guess if it gets too boring, I can explore that option. I've got a decent head start on most applicants down here, I already know how the system works. In fact, I can just imagine it now.

"You have summoned a demon ... "



**SEARCH UNDERWAY  
FOR MISSING SUBMARINE  
BRINGING TOURISTS TO *TITANIC***

John Jeffire

---

A different kind of hubris,  
to film in the mind's eye  
someone else's last and lone  
uncomprehending moments  
with the band playing on,  
to wash away a century of  
barnacle and collapse,  
gouged torso, failing lights  
glinting on a grazing sea.  
To become someone else's  
ghoulish fascination,  
the timid world counting  
down the ninety-six hours of  
remaining oxygen, keeping  
vigil on a plasma screen.  
We are all tourists, sinking,  
the shallow world in the wings  
counting our final breaths,  
a band somewhere playing on,  
gazing breathless from sealed portal  
into the impenetrable black.

# STILLBIRTH

Jaclyn Eccesso

---

**A slice of poisoned sun cuts into the room, catching glints of dust wafting in the air.** The walls are cold, the paint scratched away by uncut fingernails digging in the dark. Even now those fingernails *scratch, scratch, scratch* for any bit of lead left to peel.

Sparkling shards of light are spread across the floor like breadcrumbs—glimmers of sun reflecting on the bits of broken glass all around. The hardwood is cold, cracked, screaming with the weight of a nearly invisible woman rocking back and forth beneath the window where the floor has been rubbed away as if by a poorly made rocking chair.

The woman is calling a name, a shard of glass from a broken clock resting in her palm.

A cloud passes back over the sun, and the scent of steel seeps through the window crack, condensation built up on the murky sun-protectant film that has been laid over the glass for decades. From the base of the twelfth story window, she looks out. Tall gray buildings stretch in every direction: copies of copies of copies of gray brick against a gray sky. She listens, but the streets, the alleys, the gray world is stony silent.

There's a patch of green just below her filmy window, a sign at the rightmost edge. *Green*, it says, *Issued to Apartments 767-802*. The manufactured grass is angular and spiked, dotted with painted flecks of purple and yellow as if petals have fallen from invisible flowers.

The grass is not for sitting. It is not for touching. It is for morale.

It's sickening that it does indeed lift the spirits, that spot of color.

It wouldn't lift a body that decided to jump, though. If that body could open the sealed-shut window, could peel away the excuse for protection and break the shatterproof glass. If that body was once a mother, is no longer a mother, will always be a mother. If that mother chooses, the patch has no chance at survival. Its green and yellow and purple will be stained with blood and memory and what the government hates most of all: love.

She imagines her body hitting the cold plastic tines, the cement underneath shattering her bones, her uterus, the prison of her flesh. She imagines the fake grass blooming burgundy and wine, the workers in their gray suits and gas masks attempting to bleach the neon green clean before they even haul her body away. She imagines a small smile spreading across her cold, dead lips.

But today The Mother just looks, glass in hand, and begins to scratch at the parts of herself that are left. The parts she can still feel. The parts that were once round with the child they never let her hold, with the silent child she never got to touch her lips to. She scratches at her skin the way she scratched at the wall, and she bites her lip to bleeding, her palm closing more and more tightly over the shard of glass as it licks the flesh of her stomach, her thigh, her breasts over and over and over.

She wants to scratch them. She wants to gut them. She wants to tear them apart with more than shards of glass. She wants her baby, dead and blue and full of the life she gave, even if that life didn't hold long enough to smile at her, to reach out and touch her hand, to call her Mother. The Baby was still hers. Is hers. They took her baby, and she wants nothing more than to destroy them before she finally destroys herself.

She knows they took The Baby to the factory, melted The Baby down to nothing but cinders and ash, mixed The Baby's burned up body with all the other born-dead, died-too-soon babies. She knows that's what they've done to The Baby. That is not a secret. All the same, she wants a piece of The Baby. Any piece.

She will go to the factory, and she will make her way inside, and she will slice their throats with her glass, and she will kill as many of them as she can, and she *will* find a piece of The Baby.

She will.

Today.

Or tomorrow.

She will plan her way through the gray paved streets to the graying factory hiding in the shadows of the gray buildings. Her husband has a pass. She will steal her husband's pass. She will put on her mask and oxygen tank and brave the poisoned sun. She will open the door of the factory, glass in hand, and there will be a young worker standing there, a body in his arms, the furnace burning bright. He will stare at her wide-eyed in wonder, and she will take the glass to his throat even though she knows he could be anyone, that this job, this duty, this torture could be assigned to anyone. It's been assigned to her own husband before. There are so many bodies to burn. So many dead. So many unborn. Still, she will take the glass to the throat of this child, this teenager, this boy who is almost innocent.

She will walk the factory. It will be quiet inside, the boy one of only three people working the night shift, burning the bodies. She will kill one more, but the third will escape. He hides crouched low in a pile of bodies, not babies but toddlers, holding his breath, hoping the mad woman won't see him.

She won't see him.

She will make her way to the baby furnace, and she will open the hot door, and she will scoop as many of the ashes as she can into the Mary Shelley mug she's hidden for years despite not being allowed anything but government-issue steel cups, and she will somehow make her way back home before the alarms sound, and she will walk to the window with the cup of ashes in her hand, and she will, miraculously, with the power of her motherhood or maybe the power of all the mothers that have come before her, smash the shatterproof window, and she will breathe the damp, cold air with her lungs for the first time in decades, the patch of green shimmering beneath her.

# SUYUNTU

Christine Lajewski

---

**I am waiting for someone to claim me, but no one ever comes.**

I think something went wrong.

I remember I was playing with my dolls when Mama and Tayta came to me with a new tunic, finely woven in all the colors of the sun, and asked me to put it on.

“Am I to be a bride?” I asked. “I’m too young to be a bride.”

“Sabancaya has been erupting, and that has dried up the rains,” Mama said as she combed my hair, laying her cheek against the strands with every few strokes. “Now the priests have asked the three of us to come and pray. You’ve been chosen to go before Apu Illapu and ask him to end the drought.”

“It’s an honor to be asked,” Tayta said, but his voice was flat and dull, as if the “honor” was something to be avoided.

They took me to a little stone house high above Cuzco. The priests greeted us with coca leaves and cups of chicha, which tasted like fire. The tiny room spun around and around. Mama took my face in her hands. Tayta stroked my hair. “You will go to the gods,” he said. “But we will see you again. We promise.”

I closed my eyes until the room was still. When I opened them, my parents were gone. Women I did not know gave me feasts and coca and cups of burning drink every day, until one day the priests said, “Suyuntu, come. We’re going up the mountain today. It’s time to meet Inti and Apu Illapu.”

The ground would not hold still so someone carried me on his back. I knelt where they told me to, stared where they said the gods would appear. There was a terrible crack. A crushing pain at the back of my head surged like a flood to my face. I thought Inti should be blazing like the sun. But everything was black, so black.

The darkness never went away. There was pain in my head. And in my eyes—I think that’s why it’s so black now. I found myself in a cramped space,

tightly wrapped in a large winding cloth. My knees were pushed up under my chin, and I couldn't move my arms. I remember it was bitterly cold and there was no air to breathe.



The gods never came for me. I don't know how long I've been here, but I keep waiting and waiting for Mama and Tayta to come back. I'm afraid because I never got to tell Apu Illapu how badly we needed rain. What if everyone I know had to move away—or worse? But Tayta promised they would come back. They would never go somewhere else without me.

When I see them again, I will wrap my arms around both of them. I won't let anyone—not a priest, not a god—separate us again.

As often as I picture this dream, I'm still waiting. My head hasn't hurt for some time now. I don't feel hungry. I don't feel cold. Sometimes, I hear voices. There are words I know, Quechua words. There are some I don't recognize. Sabancaya rumbles, falls quiet, then rumbles again. I rumble, too, angry that I am so alone for days beyond counting. I can't move my hands to tie knots on a string. I can't even tell when one day has ended and a new one has begun.

I know now I can't keep waiting for them to return. My only chance to go home is one I must make for myself. First, I cry out, so anyone passing by might find me and help me. But it's hard to move my tongue, difficult to make words. My voice is just a thin, high shriek, like the wind rushing over the mountain slopes. So, I use my teeth, gnawing away at the binding cloth. I pull away bits of material, spit it out, and chew some more. I work my fingers, too, scratching with my nails until I can snag a single thread. I pull it free, then find another. It's slow and I can't see my progress. Over time, though, I can feel the cloth loosening. Finally, my arms are free. I push up. I push sideways. This space is so small, yet it won't give way. I can find no opening. My knees are still squeezed up under my chin.

There are voices again. This time they are closer than they ever were before. They aren't fading away like they usually do. If anything, they are growing louder. Then I hear it: A woman's voice, speaking Quechua, is shouting directions: "Luis, move this. Miguel, dig there. And be careful, be careful."

It's Mama. I know it is. She even says it. She repeats something that sounds like, "Mum, Mum. Mumma. Mummy." She is telling me she is here at last. She is working to set me free.

I realize then that I am not just in a cramped space. I am in some kind of container. Someone is lifting it slowly and I am being moved amid a

babble of voices. They are speaking Quechua, but other words as well, words I don't understand.

I call out "Mama" but all that comes out is that high, sharp cry.

The voices outside my little prison fall silent. "Come back here," Mama calls to the others.

A covering is lifted, and I see light. I remember how I used to like looking at the world through thin sheets of ice skimmed off bowls of water when the air was cold. Everything looked blurry, shimmery. I think my eyes must have some ice over them now, for all the shapes and colors seem to shiver and run together. But I see Mama's face. Not clear, but I know it is her. And I do what I have promised myself I would do when she finally came again.

I thrust my arms at her head, threading her hair through my fingers. "Mama," I say in that high, breathy voice. I pull her face close to mine until our noses touch.

Mama collapses on the ground. "Luis! Miguel!" she screams, scooting backward on her rear in the dust of some cave. My fingers are still tangled in her long, dark hair. My nails are gripping her skull, and she is dragging me with her.

"Help me! Hurry! Help me!" Mama screams. No one comes.

I tell her, "It's me. Suyuntu," but she just keeps screaming.

It doesn't matter. This is my chance to go home.

I am never letting go.

# SKYLINE

Jennifer Fanning

---

By the time we had emptied the first bottle,  
the sky from the window of her flat matched  
the cloudburst of bruises on her arm.

Halfway through the second,  
trading swigs hunched on her green vinyl couch,  
the dawn was the dirty pink of her bare heels kicked up  
on the coffee table.

Shadows were skittering down the wall like bugs when we drained the third.

By the time I laid her body in the granite foyer,  
the sun's rays bleached the marks on her neck  
and lay in bright pieces around the room.

For a discouraging period, officer, nothing much seemed to happen after  
that.



# HOT ON THE TRAIL

Josh Schlossberg

---

**Her silver SUV pulls into the parking lot on the other side of the thicket of pines.** My heart flops against my ribcage like a trout in the bottom of a canoe. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for.

I reach under the seat and grab the hunting knife in its leather sheath. Slide out the blade and finger the cool steel, its edge sharp.

From out of nowhere, my stomach lurches. I throw open the door, lean out, and puke onto the dirt. When I'm done gagging, I wipe my mouth with a wrist and take swig of water from my canteen.

Even with four whiskeys in me, I can't go through with it. What was I thinking? I might be a piece of crap, but I'm not a *monster*. Just a passing fever dream and nothing more. Thank God I've come to my senses before it's too late.

She gets out of her car. Long dark hair up in a ponytail, toned arms sticking out of a green tank top, black yoga pants clinging to muscular legs. Though I've yet to see her face up close, I'm guessing she's around thirty. I don't know her name, of course, but I bet it sounds like music. Something mostly vowels with soft letters like Ariana or Naomi.

All I know is I've been under her spell since the first time I laid eyes on her three weeks ago sitting in my pickup, hidden in my secret drinking spot in the trees. Though we're barely ten miles from Greyeagle—the old mining-turned-casino town—this trailhead is almost always empty. Not only is it at the end of a pot-holed stretch of dirt track without signage, the unmaintained trail climbs straight up the side of a mountain with no views to speak of and then peters out into random elk paths. Tourists don't know about it and locals avoid it.

I slide the key into the ignition, itching to head back to the cabin for a long hot shower. And to pour every drop of booze down the sink. It took a couple of decades, but now I guess I finally know what they mean by rock bottom.

Still, I can't keep my eyes off her as she straps a fanny pack around her curvy waist.

For three Tuesday afternoons in a row she's been hiking here. Never goes more than a half hour, just a little jaunt to stretch her lovely legs, probably up to the meadow. First time I just watched from my truck. Came back the next day at the same time—the one upside of no longer having a job—but she wasn't there. Or any of the following five days. But a week later, she showed. And I almost talked to her.

But everyone knows if you swat a dog enough times for begging at the table, someday he'll stop trying. That's me and women to a T. Of course, beating a dog doesn't make him any less hungry. Just makes him sneaky. And mean.

And so, after that second time of chickenshitting out, I decided what I was going to do if I saw her again. With my diagnosis—a pack a day for twenty years had to catch up sooner or later—it was finally time to have something I wanted instead of always settling for what I could get.

She leans over to tie her hiking boots, lifts her plump, round rear end to the blue Colorado sky. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

To be honest, part of me had hoped she wouldn't show. But she did. Lucky for her, I found that last little bit of good inside me, that one spoonful of ice cream at the bottom of the carton. She'll never know how close she came.

Now she's doing a few knee lifts to limber up when the passenger door of her SUV opens. Someone gets out. No, not just anyone. A man! The pilot light inside me whooshes to full blast.

He's tall, lean, blonde—everything I'm not—in a collared shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. Clearly no outdoorsman, but here he is on a hike with my woman. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste salt.

My whole life I've lost out to guys like this. Rich, fast-talking pretty boys from the city. All flash and no grit, they ease through life like they're riding a parade float, waving to the cheering crowd, gal on each arm. And me? I'm the one stuck in traffic because the fucking show shut down the street.

She leads the way to the trailhead, and Blondie follows. They disappear behind a bend into the pinewoods.

In the city, I wouldn't stand a chance against this prick. But up here in the sticks, none of his money, looks, or connections add up to a pile of shit. No, Blondie's on my turf now, and this time I've got the upper hand.

In a rage, teeth grinding, I slip on my shades and baseball cap. Stuff one of those masks they used to make me wear at work into the front pocket of my jeans and get out of the truck. It's hot for mid-June in the mountains,

probably low nineties, sun beating down on my face from a clear sky with a few clouds moving in. No fun for a big guy like me, but whatever. This won't take long.

I stick the knife in my back pocket. Quietly, I shut the door and head over to the trailhead.

My new plan is simple. Shadow them from a distance for a bit then hide somewhere off trail, waiting. When they double back, I'll jump out like a mountain lion and scare the hell out of them. Won't touch a hair on anyone's head, of course, but Blondie will either beg for mercy or run away, and she'll see what a little bitch he is. If I can't have her, neither can he.

Five minutes along the pine-bordered trail, I'm already breathing hard, part exertion, part nervousness, part excitement. Trudging up the steep incline, my T-shirt is sopping wet. At least the canopy, and more clouds coming in, keep out the worst of the sun.

I keep going up and up and up the rocky path, but I can't catch my damn breath. Whiskey buzz mostly gone, I'm lightheaded from all the huffing and puffing, a cramp in my gut, taking one step every few seconds like I'm on Mount Everest instead of at barely eight thousand feet.

Finally, not far from the meadow, I find a decent-sized boulder off to the side of the trail, go behind it, and, wheezing, lie down on my back in the pine straw. I smile, picturing Blondie's eyes wide in shock, a stain of piss running down his fancy pants. And, best of all, the pucker of disgust on my lady's face when she finds out he's a total wimp. After today, she'll probably never think about him again. But I guarantee she'll never forget *me*.

I'm cooling down a little and breathing normal again when I hear the scream. I sit up and perk my ears.

There it is again!

I don't think, just move. Catching some second wind I never knew I had, I scurry up the incline like a billy goat, veins flushed with adrenalin. I imagine them running into a bear, or maybe she fell and hurt her leg, her poor excuse for a man no help whatsoever.

Can't be more than a minute later the trail levels out into an acre of tallgrass meadow angling down to a sheer drop. In the near distance, another piney mountain rises up, blocking half of the slate-gray swirling sky. A breeze picks up and blows dust into my panting mouth.

My girl sits on her rump in the grass by the edge of the cliff, legs splayed out in front. Blondie looms over her like a vulture waiting out a dying fawn.

"Don't you touch me!" she screeches at him.

"What?" Blondie says, standing there like an idiot. I don't think he knows I'm here.

But then my lady looks at me for the first time. And when she reaches out her hand, I want nothing in the world more than to take it.

“Help.” Her voice was tiny, the word barely a peep.

My heart nearly busts open.

Blondie whirls around and glares at me. Suddenly, I’m furious again. Half at this scumbag for daring to lay a hand on my woman, half at myself for realizing how close I came to doing the same thing—or worse.

“The fuck do *you* want?” he spits.

Like a sprung trap, I lumber across the meadow, my only goal to crush this bastard. And maybe, just maybe, redeem myself a bit.

I’m a few feet away when Blondie hunches over in a protective crouch. I flash back to high school, once again the linebacker about to steamroll the quarterback.

I plow into his flailing arms and chest with a shoulder. Blondie is lighter than I would’ve guessed, and instead of knocking him on his ass, he goes flying. Lands on his back at the cliffside, teeters over the edge for half a second, and is gone.

Not a word out of his mouth. Just the skitter of crumbling rock, tree branches snapping, and one heavy thud.

Seconds later, she’s standing beside me. Got on a lot of makeup—mascara and eyeliner, blush, red lipstick, all perfectly in place without a smudge. Great as she looks, I can’t help but wonder what her face looks like underneath.

And she’s smiling. Just for me.

I feel like I’m floating. For the first time since I can remember, I did something for someone else. If I knew it felt this good, I’d have tried a long time ago.

But there’s something odd about her smile. Something off. Though I’m sweating like a pig, I shiver in the cool wind of the storm blowing down from the high peaks.

“I knew I could count on you,” she says in a breathy voice, hazel eyes twinkling.

Strange thing to say. I don’t know how to respond. She’s probably in shock, though. Not making a lot of sense.

“Let’s have a looksee, shall we?” She takes my hand—it’s small, soft, and cool, almost like a kid’s inside my big rough one—and leads me over to the drop off.

I hate heights, so I stop.

She lets go of my hand and walks right up to the edge. My stomach churns. “Careful!”

“Stop being a baby and take a peek,” she scolds, the toes of her boots

literally hanging over.

Not wanting her to know I'm afraid, I inch to where the meadow grass thins out a foot away from the cliff face and peer down. A couple of hundred feet of empty space, bushy pine tops below. Blondie's down there somewhere—no way he survived that fall—but I can't see him. Dizzy, I stumble back onto the grass where it's safe.

"Aren't you ... freaked out?" I can't figure this woman out.

"Why would I be?" She stares at me, brow furrowed with lines that weren't there before. Then her forehead smoothes again.

"Because. Because." I'm not much for words at the best of times. Now I can barely talk.

"You did me a huge favor," she says matter-of-factly and turns away from the edge.

My gut relaxes. Then I tense up again when I remember I forgot to put on the mask. *Now she knows who I am.* "Won't they find him—his body?"

She raises a plucked eyebrow. "Any roads down there?"

I shake my head.

"Hiking trails?" she asks.

"No, but they're gonna come looking." Icy panic creeps up my spine. I need to get the hell off the mountain. Maybe even skip town a few days. Or weeks.

"No one knows we're here," she says.

I cock my head like a confused dog.

"It's true." She nods, brushing dust off a thigh. "Just some douchebag executive in from Chicago for the weekend."

I have no reason to doubt her. But she's gotta be missing something. A rumble of thunder not far away. "What about a rental car? They'll have paperwork."

Pursing her lips, she shakes her head, ponytail bobbing. "Why do you think I was driving?"

"Family?"

She shrugs. "He's married. But wifey has no idea he's here. He assured me of that."

I take in a sharp breath through my nose and almost ask her what she was doing hanging out with a married man. Then I realize that's just jealousy talking. And how stupid it is to be jealous of a dead guy.

"Wanna hear a secret?" she whispers.

I take a step back. For some reason, I don't.

"It was all an act." She throws up her hands theatrically.

"What?" I crackle through a dry throat, the first drops of rain spattering the bill of my hat. If we don't get out of the meadow soon, we're gonna get

fried by lightning.

She narrows her eyes. "What are you, slow or something? He didn't lay a finger on me. I faked the whole thing."

Head swimming, I can only stand there blinking.

"I saw you in your truck," she says. "Watching me."

Another boom of thunder. Three seconds later a bolt of lightning on the ridge. I'm not safe here.

"That first time I had a feeling, so I came back." She smiles, small white teeth gleaming in the sickly light. "The second time I knew for sure."

And I thought I was invisible in my secret spot! Not only did she see me, she read my damned mind! *And then kept coming back?*

"So, I picked up that schmuck at the blackjack table, told him I liked fucking in the woods."

I wince. Ugly words from such a pretty mouth.

She steps toward me, close enough where I catch a whiff of her musky perfume. "And I knew you'd come after us."

"Wh—why?"

"Thought we could have a little arrangement." She winks. Actually winks.

I want to turn around and run. But her eyes have got me. It's like I've been turned to stone.

"See, in most ways, you and I couldn't be more different." The rising wind whips up strands of her ink-black hair. "I'm hot, you're hideous. I'm smart, you're an idiot. I come from money, you're a broke redneck."

I don't like hearing this. Anyone else, I'd knock those words back down their throat. But from her, it only makes me sad.

"Yachts on the Mediterranean. Raves in Dubai. Cocaine so pure it lifts you three inches off the ground. Mink coats that cost more than you've made in your life." Though her eyes drift up to the darkening sky like she's making it all up, I know she's not. Plenty of guys would literally slice off their left nut for a night with her. What I don't know is *why* she's telling me this.

"But you," she sneers, wrinkling her nose. Tiny as she is, I feel like she's literally looking down on me. "No one's ever given you jack, am I right? Eking by paycheck to paycheck in some mouseshit shack in the middle of nowhere. Bet you've never even left Colorado, eh?"

Now I'm pissed. I almost tell her about my trip to Cabo for my twenty-first, but I know she'd laugh. I bite my lip.

"They've pushed your head so far underwater, you've got to grab onto someone. So, you rob, steal, cheat, and worse"—she gives me a knowing look—"all so you don't drown."

My skin crawls as the horrible things I've done flash through my mind.

The tears. The screams. The blood. Rotten as an apple at the bottom of the barrel, and she knows it.

“But it’s not your fault.” Her smile is cool as ointment on a wound.  
“Anyone else would do the same.”

My eyes blur and my jaw trembles. I can’t remember the last time I’ve cried. But standing here with my ribs cracked open, naked heart beating, for the first time since I’ve been a kid I feel ... loved?

No. Accepted?

Not really. Understood?

Yes! Understood.

“And how are we the same?” I almost don’t have to ask. I know what she’s going to say.

“Hurting people gets us off,” she whispers, eyes wide like a stalking cat. Just like that, the spell breaks. Black clouds hang low overhead, a cold wind gusts, and it’s pouring.

It’s true I’ve hurt people. With my words, my crimes, my fists. But I’ve never liked doing it. And sure as hell never killed anyone before today. “Why didn’t you do it yourself? Why bring me into this?”

She juts her lower lip, and the lines cut deep into her forehead. “Cuz I need to keep my hands clean, dimbulb.” She shrugs. “And maybe because the only thing that feels better than being bad is making someone else be bad for you.”

A jolt of anger. “What if I go to the cops?”

She doesn’t even have to roll her eyes. Soon as the words leave my mouth, I know how dumb it is. Like they’d ever believe *me*.

I feel weak. Worthless. An empty sack. Until I remember the knife.

Slowly, I reach behind my back. “Who are you?”

“You can call me anything you like,” she says flirtatiously, hand in her unzipped fanny pack wrapped around the butt of a pistol. “That is, if you still want me.”

Cowed, I drop my hands by my side and nod. How can I not nod?

“Not gonna make any promises. But maybe, just maybe, if you keep ... *hiking* with me, one of these days I’ll let you have a taste.” She winks.

I’m stiff in my jeans. I hate myself for it, try to will it away, but I can’t. Would it even be worth it? Or is it about something more than that?

“Of course, I might not.” She’s still holding the gun, though she hasn’t drawn it. “Depends on how well you follow orders.”

I’m like a dog whose master beats him but is loyal just the same. After all, who else will feed me?

And, as she slips her hand out of her pack and zips it up, she seems to know it. “Same time, same place, next week?”

A sizzle like a giant frying pan, and, not fifty feet away, a dead pine explodes in orange and yellow flame, splintered planks and shorn branches hurtling to the ground.

I can leave. She won't shoot me. No reason to. It's not like I can rat her out.

Yet there's something in her eyes that wasn't there before. A look I know all too well because I see it every morning in the bathroom mirror.

*Desperation.*

She can find thousands, maybe even millions of men who'd take care of her, wait on her hand and foot, cater to her every whim. But as an actual *killer*—now, at least—I've got something none of them have. Something she needs.

Her arrogant smirk is gone.

I can still say no. Do an actual good deed for a change, maybe even turn my life around.

As we stand there glaring at each other in the high meadow, cold rain sheeting down, thunder crashing, I'm not sure what I'll do.

All I know is that, finally, for the first time in my life, I feel like I have a choice.



“... our motivations stay with us even if we’re nothing more than fossils hanging in delicate white curves inside the grey.”

- Andrea Ferrari Kristeller  
“The Ghosts at Yazá Bridge”

# THE SEDUCTION

Elizabeth Falcon

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**She first encountered him in late July, during one of her long afternoon walks with her headphones on.** It had poured rain earlier in the day and the river path she was on was flooded in places, forcing her to hop up and down off the retaining wall to avoid the puddles. She didn't mind; the sun was out and the river was pungent and the music was good. She felt fit and strong, younger than her years.

After she crossed the bridge, she veered away from the river and turned down a street that would eventually curve into her own. Lost in her own little world, she didn't notice him at first, standing on the sidewalk in front of a nondescript apartment building. It wasn't until she was directly in front of him that she realized the man was trying to get her attention, gesturing to her. Thinking perhaps he wanted to ask for directions, she slowed her step and lifted her headphones off one ear.

"This is going to sound strange," he said, "but were you just on the other side of the river?"

She wasn't sure if it sounded strange or not, but cautiously replied, "Yes."

"And you were hopping up onto the wall?"

She smiled. "Oh, yeah. There're all these big puddles and you have to jump up to get around them."

"Well, I was just looking out my apartment window and saw you." He said. "Even from this side of the river I could tell you were really pretty."

It took a moment to register the comment. Then, when she realized he was hitting on her, she looked at him in earnest, taking in his features which, up to that point, had been a passing impression. He was young, maybe late twenties. Tall, thin but not skinny, a nice enough face, if common. But he had interesting, hazel eyes. She laughed, surprised, and blushed. No one had called her "pretty" in a long time.

"Well, that's very sweet of you to say. I'm flattered." She began to put

her headphones back into place.

He held out his hand, as if to stop her, almost but not quite touching her. "Wait, I mean it. Are you seeing anyone?"

She laughed again, incredulous, but also impressed by his nerve. "I am, actually, and even if I wasn't, you're way too young for me. But again, I'm flattered."

"I don't think I'm too young," he countered. "I'm thirty—I just turned thirty last weekend."

She nearly howled at this. "I'm forty-five!"

He stepped closer. "Fifteen years isn't that much."

Still laughing, she shook her head, reached out and touched his arm. "You are lovely, and you've made my day. Enjoy your afternoon!"

Before he could protest any further, she readjusted the headphones over her ears, turned, and walked briskly away. After half a block or so, she took out her phone and texted Henry:

*I just had the most bizarre experience! Some thirty-year-old stopped me on the street to hit on me ...*



Later that night, Henry called to get the details. "What did he look like?"

"Young. And he was wearing a ball cap. It's impossible to take anyone seriously while they're wearing a ball cap."

"No seriously, I want to know everything."

It had been an ongoing fantasy of theirs that they introduce another man into their intimate equation. It started a few years ago, while Henry was on an extended work trip and she had met an old boyfriend for coffee. Nothing had happened between her and the ex, but feeling lonely and neglected, she'd played it up when telling Henry about it on the phone. She had only intended to spark a little jealousy, to get him to pay a bit more attention to her while they were physically separated. It'd worked, more than she'd imagined it would—Henry was both jealous and aroused by the idea of her being with another man—and so began the fantasy. Perhaps because their relationship was built on such mutual affection, they both knew she wouldn't actually do it; it was only ever an idea, something titillating in the throes of sexual arousal but otherwise untenable. They did like to talk about it, though, to turn each other on, especially when Henry was on the road, which was often.

So she told him. She described the young man's physique as best she could remember, embellishing with made up particulars what she couldn't. She relayed the conversation, almost word for word, which was easy given

that she had run it over in her mind several times already, relishing the novelty of it. She wasn't usually the recipient of such overt intentions and the men who came on to her were always her age or older. She'd never been hit on by a younger man.

"Do you walk that route often?" Henry wanted to know.

"Maybe once or twice a week."

"What will you do if you run into him again?"

She thought about this. In their fantasy, the answer was easy. But in real life, she wasn't sure. It was an actual possibility: he lived in the neighborhood and had been brave enough to approach her once, maybe he'd try again?

"You mean if I see him on my walk and he talks to me again?"

"Yeah," Henry murmured, almost breathless.

"Well." She conjured the scene in her mind. "I suppose I would have to commend him for his forthrightness. Maybe even reward him for it."

"How?"

"I might ask if he wanted to join me for the rest of my walk."

Henry let out a stream of air into the phone. "Back to the apartment?"

"Yes."



Life carried on. Over the next couple of weeks, she thought about the young man every time she walked along the river. She looked across at the apartment buildings, trying to figure out which of the cinderblock boxes was his. Eventually, she decided that her gentle rejection of him had been taken to heart, that even if he saw her he would avoid her out of some sense of decorum or embarrassment. Even so, she continued walking the route past his apartment once or twice a week.

It wasn't until the leaves were starting to turn that she saw him again. Not on the sidewalk, but at the supermarket. She didn't recognize him at first. In fact, busy as she was unloading her basket onto the check-out counter, she didn't even see him until a slender arm reached in front of her and pointed to a bag of local-roasted coffee.

"You like that brand?"

A moment of confusion washed over her brain. Glancing at the young man, she spoke without understanding why he was vaguely familiar. "Oh, I don't drink coffee—it's not for me."

"Ahhh," he said, smiling a little mischievously. "Is it for your boyfriend?"

She tilted her head and inspected him more carefully. Familiarity, yes, but still no recognition.

“Yes, actually. It is.”

“He has very good taste. I mean”—he gestured to her in a circular motion, as if to encompass the whole of her—“obviously.”

Then it clicked and she felt the blush rising to her cheeks.

“Is that everything, ma’am?” The young checkout worker looked nervous, as if witnessing something he neither understood nor wanted to see.

She busied herself rummaging for her wallet, paying, and gathering up her loaded paper bags. As she struggled to balance them, she realized that she had bought too many things and the bags would be unruly and heavy on the walk home. As if he could read her mind, the young man reached out his hand, the same way he had done on the sidewalk weeks ago: as if to prevent her from leaving.

“If you wait a minute, I can help you carry those.” He tossed a pack of gum onto the counter. “I’m traveling light.”

“Oh, no. Thanks but I’ll be fine.” She tried not to grimace as she shifted the bags precariously and turned toward the exit doors.

“I’m walking that way,” he called, pointing east with his bank card. “Is that the way you’re going?”

She looked at him closely—he seemed harmless, earnest, keen. Pocketing his gum and his bank card, he stepped toward her with his arms out.

“Okay.” She handed him the heaviest of the bags. “Okay, thank you.”



The apartment she shared with Henry, when he was in town, was six blocks from the grocery store. As soon as she and the young man started walking, she wondered if it was a bad idea, if it might be construed as leading him on. And he would know where she lived! She contemplated taking a detour—turning up a side street in a few blocks and telling him she could take it from there—but he’d probably insist on carrying the bag anyway and then she’d have to put her foot down and tell him no and that would be weird and awkward. She tried to tune into her intuition. Was he giving her the creeps in any way? No, not really. He was just a young man who had taken a shine to her. So what if he knew what building she lived in? There were a hundred suites in the building; it would be impossible for him to know which one was hers.

They chatted politely as they walked. She asked him how long he’d lived in the neighborhood (a year), where he was from (Kingston), what he did for a living (web design), if he liked it (yes, very much). She figured if she

kept peppering him with questions, he wouldn't have a chance to ask her any. The strategy worked; by the time they were on her block, he had done the vast majority of the talking. The only thing she had revealed about herself was that her boyfriend often worked out of town ("How come your boyfriend isn't carrying these bags for you?" was the only question the young man had asked her). As they approached her apartment building, she gestured with her chin.

"This is me."

He whistled. "Fancy!"

"Yeah, it's nice." Then, shifting her two bags to one arm, she reached for the one he was carrying. "Thanks so much. That was very nice of you."

He held on to the bag for a beat, looked her in the eyes and smiled. She made a little impatient gesture with her free hand.

He gave her the bag. "Happy to be of service. Let me know if things don't work out with your boyfriend."

She returned his smile. His boldness was intriguing, empowering almost. She liked the idea of slipping into the role of the older, wiser, more experienced woman holding the cards.

"Don't hold your breath." She winked and turned onto the walkway.

Henry had just arrived home a few minutes before her. He met her at the apartment door and took the bags from her arms. As they unpacked them, she told him about the encounter with the young man.

He frowned and furrowed his brow. "It seems a little coincidental that he'd be there, right behind you in line."

She was taken aback by his reaction. She had assumed that the story would intrigue him, that it would fuel their fantasy, perhaps even be the catalyst to an evening of intense lovemaking.

"There's only one grocery store in this neighborhood," she said, slightly annoyed. "Why is it so inconceivable that we'd run into each other there?"

Henry shrugged. "Just seems a bit weird to me."

"After the first time I met him, you couldn't wait for me to run into him again. Now it's 'weird'?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it was just a fantasy before. Even you thought that if you saw him again he'd be shy and awkward and avoid you. But now he's appearing in your real life and still hitting on you. He was there buying what, a pack of gum? Why would he walk all the way to the grocery store to buy gum when there's two convenience stores between his place and there?"

She thought about this. It was a little strange that he didn't buy any actual groceries.

"Maybe he had just gotten off the bus from downtown—there're a bunch of buses that stop on that corner."

Henry put down the soup cans in his hands and reached for her. She allowed herself to be pulled into his big, bear-like embrace.

"Just be careful, okay?" He murmured into her hair. "Maybe it's nothing, but keep your eyes open."



She did keep her eyes open, but not for the reasons Henry suggested. She watched for the young man; on her walks, in the supermarket, in the neighborhood liquor store—anywhere they may have been unknowingly sharing space. She couldn't stop daydreaming about him, imagining scenarios where they might end up alone in an alley, in a vehicle, in his apartment. What would it be like to be touched by him? To kiss him?

It had been so long since someone noticed her the way he had. Whatever physical attributes she had possessed in her younger years were decidedly fading: her hair was streaked with grey, the lines around her eyes were deepening, and her features seemed somehow sharper. She had refused to fight the aging process with hair dye and cosmetic surgery, but she did what she could to stay fit and take care of herself. Now, she found herself spending more time on her appearance, choosing her clothes with more care, putting on makeup whenever she left the apartment. She walked the river route almost every day, peering over the expanse of water to try to catch a glimpse of him standing in a window, watching. But usually the sun's reflection or the lack of backlighting within made it impossible to tell.

And then one day, after she crossed the river and turned down his street, there he was on the sidewalk, waiting, just like the first time. She slid her headphones down.

"Hello again!" she said, perhaps a bit too brightly.

"I thought I saw you coming and figured I'd offer to carry something home for you."

She laughed nervously and showed him her hands, palms up. "Nothing to carry today, I'm afraid."

"Have you changed your mind about your boyfriend yet?"

"In what way would you like me to change my mind?" *Good grief*, she thought, *am I actually flirting with this boy?*

"In the way that would allow me to get your number."

"And what would you do with my number?" *Now I'm being outright coquettish!*

"I would call it and ask you to come over."

"Well"—she shrugged—"I'm here now."

Her own gall shocked her. Her mind was racing a million miles an hour,

but no thoughts were discernable over the din of adrenaline.

Now it was his turn to be shocked. He sputtered slightly, and looked around nervously. "Really? Like, you want to hang out right now?"

"Sure," she said, feigning control and nonchalance. "Why not?"

She wasn't going to fuck him. She just wanted to see what it was like to open the door. She wanted to see where he would take it.

"Ummm, okay. I mean, my place is kinda messy but I've got some beers in the fridge." Then, as if he had made a faux pas: "Wait, do you like beer? We can go to the liquor store and get something else instead if you ... "

"Beer is fine." She smiled reassuringly, touching his arm in the same almost-maternal way she had the first time she met him. "Lead the way."

He placed a hand on the small of her back and led her up the sidewalk to the apartment building—a balcony-less, dull brick walk up, probably filled with students and pensioners. The thought of it simultaneously depressed and frightened her.

"Wait," she said as they reached the front door. "It's such a nice afternoon, why don't we just go sit by the river instead? Is there some place nearby?"

"Sure, yeah. Um, yeah, there's actually a nice little spot just down from here. If you don't mind sitting on a log instead of a bench."

"I don't mind."

As if they were pre-teens, he awkwardly took her hand. His grip was clammy but firm, and she allowed herself to be led around the side of the building, across the parking lot, and into the trees beyond.

The descent down the riverbank was a narrow and muddy trail through yellow-leaved cottonwoods. They arrived at a small clearing, right on the precipice of a steep drop to the water's edge. She was surprised how pretty and private it was—you could see the river through the trees but only in glinting pieces, as if it had been a mirror that someone had smashed and then loosely reassembled. They sat on the worn-smooth surface of a giant fallen tree that formed a natural bench.

He turned to her. "So, if you don't mind my asking, what's your name?"

"Actually, I do mind," she replied and then, with zero forethought, lifted a hand to his face and pulled it to her. Their lips met and opened. She leaned in deeper, probing his mouth and teeth with her tongue, moving her hand to his lap where, with a sharp thrill, she discovered he was already hard. He bore down on her hungrily, gripping her by the shoulders, pressing his mouth against her so that his lips overtook hers, their wetness forming a circle from her nose to her chin. She tried to push him away a little, just to get some air in her lungs, but he placed one hand on the back of her head and held her. She felt a sudden surge of panic and revulsion. No. This was



not good.

Again, she tried to push him back, more forcefully than before. He gave a few inches.

“Wait, stop.” she said firmly.

“Why?” His face contorted, his eyes sharpened.

“I just ...” She tried to extricate herself from his hands. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. This is a bad idea.”

He gripped her tighter. “Because of your boyfriend?”

Henry was not the first thing on her mind but she didn’t want to show her fear. “Yeah. He’s expecting me”—she lied—“and I should be home by now. He’s a bit possessive.” Then, as an afterthought, she forced a smile. “Especially since I told him about the handsome young buck who keeps hitting on me.”

The young man released her and held up his hands, as if facing a gun. “Wait, you told him about me?”

She feigned nonchalance. “Yes. I tell him everything.”

His eyes darted around the clearing. “Did you tell him where I live?”

Bingo. Her ticket out of this mess. “Yes.” She shrugged and wiped his saliva from her chin and cheeks. “He wanted to know.”

He sprung up off the log. “Why... why would you do that?”

She squinted up at him quizzically. He really was young, truly more of a boy than a man.

“Why not? I didn’t know if anything was going to come of our flirtation, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“What do you mean, safe? Like, in case I murdered you or something?” His face was flushed, his voice rising in pitch and cracking on *murdered*.

“Well, that’s a bit extreme.” She was annoyed now. “Were you *planning* on murdering me?”

“Jesus fuck! You think I’m some kinda psycho?” He turned and started pacing back and forth along the trees at the edge of the clearing, squeezing his head between his hands. “Unbelievable. You think you’re being a nice guy, paying attention to someone, and then all of a sudden you’re a goddamn psycho!”

“Okay, slow down there, cowboy. I think you’re overreacting. I didn’t say that.”

“You bitches are all the same.” He looked at her with such malice she nearly fell backward off the log. “I thought maybe a more *mature* woman might be different. That she might *appreciate* the attention since she probably doesn’t get much anymore.” He turned his back to her. “But you’re *all. The. Same!*”

He punctuated each of the last three words by hitting the trunk of a

tree with the heel of his hand. It wasn't a large tree, maybe a foot wide at its base, and it was leaning at a slight angle over the edge of the bank, clinging to the soil by a handful of exposed tentacles. On the third hit, it gave. The lack of resistance met by his hand unmoored his centre of gravity. He pitched forward, arms pinwheeling. At first, he fell onto the tree, which was now hanging precariously over the water. But then, as he floundered, what remained of the tree's roots cracked and with a small spray of dirt, both he and it disappeared.

She stood up, breathless, and tentatively stepped toward the almost imperceptible gap in the line of trees. He was there, maybe fifteen feet below her, his legs and torso splayed awkwardly on the boulders at the river's edge, his shoulders and head submerged in the shallow water. The tree had somehow landed on top of him and either it or the rocks must have knocked him out, because he wasn't moving.

She knew she should have called 911, figured out a way to get down to the water and haul him out, perform mouth-to-mouth, scream for help. But she didn't do any of those things. She stood peering down at him, feeling her pulse throbbing in her body, unable to move.

She wasn't aware of how long she stood there, like that, as if in a trance. Maybe a few seconds. Maybe a couple of minutes. Eventually, a pair of geese glided by on the water, giving the tree and the boy a wide berth. It was only then that she looked up and, making sure no one had seen her, scrambled up the bank and walked quickly home.



She told Henry everything. She told him she was curious to see where the flirtation would lead, that she didn't want to have sex with the boy but that it was exciting to come up against the edge of it. And then, that she had panicked and fled. Henry was, understandably, angry. Not so much that she had kissed the boy, but that it could have been so much worse. That she had been unforgivably reckless, willingly putting herself in danger for the sake of some stupid game she was playing in her head, and now a boy was dead because of it. But eventually, his anger faded to a sort of paternal concern. She had, after all, witnessed the boy's violent death.

They scanned the papers the next day, and the day after that, and the ones after that, but nothing was reported and there was no indication the police were investigating. For months, she and Henry waited for a phone call or a knock at the door, but nothing came.

It was late spring by the time she was able to walk the river trail again. Henry came with her and she pointed out the boy's apartment building, the

spot on the sidewalk where he had waited for her, the trail through the trees to the clearing. Henry suggested they go down to where she and the boy had sat on the log, but she couldn't do it. Instead, they took that dreadful, persistent place with them, into their imaginations and into their bed, where there was no more fantasy talk of another man. Over the months and then years, they tried to forget it. They even managed to pretend that they had. But it was always there, hovering, just out of frame; yellow leaves rustling in the shattered sunlight.

# **HALLOWEEN NOTES FROM BLOODY MARY OF THE PHILIPPINES**

Caroline Hung

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- One. My name is not Bloody Mary.
- Two. Back in grade school, everybody loved urban legends. The giant, cigar-touting kapre of the balete trees. Phantom soldiers marching in Fort Santiago. Bloody Mary in the CR.
- Three. I live inside your bathroom mirror.
- Four. You have not replaced your toothbrush in three years, six months, and fifteen days.
  
- Five. If you spin around three times in the dark whilst chanting nonsense, you will likely crack your skull on the bathroom tiles.
- Six. Fake blood is just as difficult to wash out of clothes.
- Seven. Forget about your ex; they're not worth the misery. Nobody is.
- Eight. If you want to die fast, don't drink that bottle of bleach.
  
- Nine. I used to have a real name.
- Ten. You take too long to shower.
- Eleven. In February of 1945, during the Battle of Manila, a TBF-1 Avenger dropped a bomb over my house. Battling against US troops, the soldiers from Imperial Japan took me hostage. They spread me open, cut me to pieces then set me on fire. They rained machine gun bullets. Flamethrowers, and grenades, and bazookas, and tanks too. They threw my children into the line of fire. "Pearl of the Orient," smashed and spat on the pieces. They ruined everything. They killed everyone. Nothing could save me, and no one could help. I was, am, always will be, alone. A ghost without a face, forgotten by all.
- Twelve. All this blood must come from somewhere.

- Thirteen. Too much candy isn't good for you.
- Fourteen. Look both sides before crossing the street.
- Fifteen. Don't stay out so late tonight.
- Last but not least—Sixteen. You must remember. War will come for you too. It always does, just you wait. Your turn is coming sooner than you think. And when you've lost your name, when you've drowned in a sea of flames, when you've screamed into the uncaring void—then you can join me forever on the other side of the mirror.

# THE GHOSTS AT YAZÁ BRIDGE

Andrea Ferrari Kristeller

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**We are the ghosts inside this bridge, and if locals tell you we haunt it, how right they are.** We sit like stones inside the cement where our bones were once dropped like pebbles to make it firmer, back in the days when the Argentine Juntas decided how a tinge of ideology could buy you the ticket to torture and a vanishing.

When a car crashes down to the stream below, we smile: they will remember us. We are bothered by the new alternative theories on why there are so many strange accidents and apparitions on our bridge. We wish we could tell them all it's not the young teacher who killed herself because she got pregnant of the married man; nor is it the young bride throwing herself from her angry father's truck into these waters. It's us, the stone ghosts at Yazá Bridge, we like twisted bricks in layers. We, the ones who dreamt of a land without owners, now crushed into rock silence.

Here in Misiones there weren't so many of us: only around six hundred who went missing. Perhaps this is why they simply knew so well who we were and where to find us, and it was so easy to take us to Posadas' damp clandestine cells, smelling of the faraway jungle.

The torturing and the results of the torturing are not what we want to talk about. We do share those tales among ourselves, in the nights of self-pity, in rounds of what used to be mate, but now are just words like a liquid. We just want you to know we are the ones who lay buried under tons of cement that make this bridge over Route 14, firmly embedded, firmly determined to hurl one of us up every now and then, so you will not forget how easily dreams can be walled.

Some of us are more active at the task; it's a matter of personality. Mirtha was too young when she was killed, and this impulse to change the society of the living stays with her in her active spooking, not unlike her organization's spirit, back in the day.

She explains: "My favourite ghostly act is the white lady. Well sunk in

the collective unconscious of our province, like werewolves and elves, it's a simple apparition mode: I summon my spirit upon the bridge on fog-filled mornings or in the middle of the night—for the sake of contrast, and for the look in the eyes of late drivers. I used to like dancing chamamés and polkas, back at my parents' small ranch in Apóstoles. So I imagine I'm there, on one of those summer nights around Christmas, when the music would not fade until dawn and my companion and I believed anything was as possible as that big moon shining on us, and I dance on the bridge. I float, I rustle my almost invisible dress, I practice a laugh, and I cry sometimes about what will never come to be. My success rate is seven crashes, four deaths and three near deaths, the most spectacular one that of the truck filled with yerba mate which came crashing down more than twenty metres with its three occupants. Yet I spared them: when they saw me, one of them thought of us, the dreamers buried because of our dreams, now only quiet mineral statues. I spared them."

Then we have Mario, the quiet mechanic at farms who took pity on the thin children of the workers at yerba mate fields and paid for it with this more permanent silence, after the involuntary cries under electric shock batons.

He speaks little, but once he shared this: "I disagree with our companions' mode of action concerning hauntings at our bridge, but I respect the voting. So I only come out once a year, as agreed. I tend to sit back at the railings on the side and allow myself to choose carefully, very carefully. I would never forgive myself if I randomly provoked the crash of any worker. So I sit there, and from a distance, evaluate car by car as they take the famous curve towards the bridge. With time, I have learnt how even if car models change with the years, there is always a shine in the newer ones, a way the sun falls on the windshield and front. I can listen to their music too, if any, and that also helps me to decide. Once I've made up my mind, I step into the asphalt, only a smoke figure standing in the middle of the road. I never fail. I do not spare anyone after my meticulous evaluation. The glossy models make colourful falls, as if in slow motion, towards the waters below. I like the sound of the metal rasping the rocks at the bottom."

You see, our motivations stay with us even if we're nothing more than fossils hanging in delicate white curves inside the grey. Dedicated forensic anthropologists would love to find us and bring us back to the light, I think, with the care of dinosaur experts unearthing us, like dreams from a darkness that remains like fragments in the mind. Yet no one has come to us in recognition of our buried ideals. I think we can only then still be what we are now: a local legend, competing with other theories on why so many accidents happen at Kilometre 889, Route 14, between Oberá and Campo

Viera; Misiones.

One of us, Leonardo, has a more brutal approach to all this, and is a dedicated haunter—not to say, perhaps, a too violent one. He specializes in motorbikes. It seems he used to have one when he was part of the MAM movement. He went through all the small farms on summer evenings, rallying workers into a revolution that never took place.

On lighter nights, when the sound of the stream sounds like sad music, he tells us about it. “I had a red Zanella motorbike called Chiquita and I loved it, and it loved me. We must have visited together all the farmlands from Posadas to San Javier, and the wind on my face is what I miss the most in this tight prison. It’s so boring to lie in this eternal gyring position my body took when they threw us in and the cement was fresh. Rolling in the thick dough, I was unconscious. I could only just fold, like a crumpled letter, and lay still at last in an impossible curve of my bones. So yes, I’ve taken to haunting as the movement to take me out of this mass of petrified nothingness. I haunt anyone on a motorbike—and oh, how many motorbikes there are in Misiones—*each one* crossing this bridge, and relish it. I have a daily routine: as soon as the sun comes out, I glide towards the upward part of the bridge, and I cross it, measuring the wind, the weather, the conditions of the road. I cross the asphalt right when they are passing over the bridge, just like a wind, like an air that briefly moves their bike sideways, even on a still day. They shudder, wonder at the fact there is not even a breeze, and they press on the accelerator to drive away. But sometimes they fall, slip sideways, the motorbike a fatal trap, and they fly over the railing like a dead bird, tumbling, crumbling like a paper, to the rocks below.”



I haven’t told you yet about my own way of haunting you here, at Yazá Bridge. I do not provoke car accidents. Just imagine what a ghost can do inside a person crossing a bridge on a sunny Misiones morning, perhaps only going out to buy bread. I’ll only tell you that I have specialized in reminding them of all their dreams that, like ours, sit under rock and will never see the light. And that is enough for me.



# FAMILY HEIRLOOM

Christopher Emerson-Pace

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**He always knew that the gun that killed his grandfather, and then his father, would be the very gun that killed him.** It wasn't just that he knew that he would die by gun but that his grandfather's .30 caliber M1 Carbine rifle would, as a matter of tacit fact, be the chosen instrument. A distant aunt insisted that her husband brought it home from the war, but she was shushed into the corners whenever she tried to be heard. After a few generations, talk became legend as no one was still alive to remember its origin.

Cousins had argued over it. Brothers had grappled in dirt. They all wanted claim.

The family women didn't understand the compulsion to hold on to this relic—the men using the distinctly feminine *family heirloom* to describe the object, a term more likely to be used for quilts or candlesticks or jewelry—for what did men need for such sentimentality over *things*.

What they didn't understand was the sentiment was not for the *thing* but for the agency that the thing represented—the freedom and the power to decide when they were done with living—when they were done with the toil and the debt and the sadness and the anger and the persistent disappointment in all the concerns of men.

They never tried to understand the men's fascination with cleaning and caring for the rifle, as if it were a lover but certainly treated better than any lover ever was. These men who carefully disassembled the rifle—used the oils and rags and brushes to return it to its almost-original gleam—these same men never attended to the people in their lives with the same ferocity. He used to watch his father clean the gun, which was rarely used but religiously cleaned, an ominous contradiction to the ways a body was cleaned and prepared for burial at the end of its life. This rifle was being prepped for a higher and singular purpose.

These tender moments when his father instructed him in the proper

handling of its parts and the procedure for unmaking then making it again. They were to be the only times that they exchanged more than glances and grunts.

It was always in their lives, an omnipresence like the stink of stagnant water. It hung on the wall in a back room of the house, out of place among the boxes and stacks of firewood and old papers that no one ever thought about. They were forbidden to touch it, but walking past the room with an always-open door, it was there in plain view. The threshold, however, was not to be crossed because taking that one step closer was acknowledging its power. They all inched toward it, if not with their feet then in their minds. The women wanted to destroy it—because they foresaw. The boys wanted to touch it—because they understood.

The panic washing over him the day he came home and saw the blank space on the wall. Turning his head to look out the window toward the shed where the door was unlatched and bumping in the wind against the jamb. Later that night he would wonder why he panicked. He knew it would come, but when it did he wasn't prepared. His mother, returning home and seeing the blank space, walked quietly to the phone, never glancing outside.

Killed is the wrong word. It implies a victim and an agent that are distinct and separate. There are clinical terms that mean to victimize one's self.

And now it hangs in his own back room in his own house while his own family daily inches toward it.



**LAST STOP**  
Brenna Monaghan Behel

“An empty juice box, a jacket tossed carelessly across the slide, a plastic giraffe. This is all that’s left of the neighborhood kids.”

- Angelique Fawns  
“Unidentified Climbing Object”

# ELEVEN WAYS THE WORLD COULD END

Jack Powers

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**I get it. Tinfoil hats look comical and seem the flimsiest of protections.** It's shorthand in movies for *this guy's crazy*. But if you hide it in the lining of your hat, your coat, the baby's snow suit, is that crazy?

## 1. A black hole

When I feel panic, I repeat the serenity prayer. There's a lot I can't control, but with Lucy dead, it's up to me to take care of the baby, help her navigate around all the ways the world wants to kill her, help her develop her brain—Lucy's brain, really—because she could be the one to save us.

## 2. An alien invasion

Lots of people believe aliens are already here and disguising themselves as humans. Even I know that's bunk and I'm just a guy who cleans offices. I met Lucy when I was cleaning the labs at the university. She was the smartest person ever—an epidemiologist. She was going to save the world. When she died, I thought, *it should have been me*.

## 3. A global pandemic

The baby and I wear gloves and masks, and I now work at night with her in a backpack when the offices are empty. Maine is one of the safest places to survive a nuclear attack. Did you know that? I found work in Augusta and live in the deep woods. I have days free to build our fallout shelter: me digging under a big tinfoil-lined plastic tarp and the baby's playpen under a small one. Did you know locals call rocks New England potatoes?

## 4. Artificial intelligence

Edna, who cleans the third and fourth floors, says they're going to replace us with Roombas or Dustbas or cleaningbots more intelligent than

the both of us. Edna's eighty and her family's gone. "Opioids," she says like it was an invading army. She says a baby needs a mother. I can see what she means when she holds her. Sometimes at lunch I used to go with Lucy to the nursery. She said I had a woman's touch when I held the baby. "My husband's all thumbs," she said. He was always traveling and worked for Merck. For Big Pharma! Can you believe it?

#### 5. Biological warfare

Lucy said her husband was running vaccine trials, but did he tell her everything? She was so trusting. When Lucy held the baby, she looked like the Madonna and Child. The blonde Madonna. Like in a painting I saw in Italy once when my grandfather took us all on a trip after he learned he had cancer. A priest painted it. The model was a nun he was in love with. When the light through the nursery window fell on Lucy and the baby, I fell in love. Lucy would cry sometimes. "Postpartum," she said. "It'll end soon."

#### 6. A nuclear war

I found her body. I knocked on the door for two minutes. "Lucy? Lucy!" I called. I started to panic. We were supposed to go to the nursery for lunch. They said Lucy injected herself with minute doses of the mother of all viruses—been doing it for months. Was she killing herself or building immunity? Why would she do that? With a baby? I think it was a conspiracy, but I can't prove it.

#### 7. The sun expanding

There are all kinds of radiation: cosmic radiation, radiation from nuclear fallout, radon is radiation in the soil. I wear a personal dosimeter around my neck to measure radiation. The baby reaches for it when I carry her in my arms. She's going to start walking soon. She has Lucy's blue eyes. I want to cry when I look into them. Radiation is measured in units called millirems.

#### 8. A supervolcano

When they called Lucy's husband, he was out of town. Lucy's parents are dead. She had no other family. I went to the nursery to comfort the baby. The sun broke through the clouds. I couldn't believe Lucy was dead. Everyone looked like a suspect. Solar radiation is what we capture and turn into heat and electricity. Imagine if we could capture the energy in a volcano.

#### 9. Overpopulation

The big city we lived in will be a prime target when the bombs come.

Lucy'd said she'd like to live in the country. Find a university doing research away from all the smog and traffic. I offered to take her there, but she said I misunderstood. She said she'd been happy and she'd be happy again. "But thank you," she said. "You're very sweet." She hugged me with the baby squished between us. Everyone worried about overpopulation in the sixties and now they worry about low birthrates. I think we should worry about both.

10. Global warming

It was so hot by the nursery window. I took the baby for a walk. It wasn't a plan or anything but I kept walking. And then I got in the car and kept driving. I finally pulled over and googled the safest place away from nuclear targets and rising oceans. Maine was the farthest away from the university. It was once part of Massachusetts, you know. When I feed her baby formula, she stares at me. I tell her it's going to be all right. I wish I knew.

11. Asteroid impact

Did the dinosaurs have any sense of what was coming? They're related to birds and birds know to hide before a storm. I'm sewing tinfoil into hats and pants and gloves. I'm afraid they'll be too hot for the baby in the summer. Our clothes now make rustling sounds when we move—like the wind in the trees. The baby loves it. But when the police arrive, the hounds can hear us. The baby laughs and I run and run and run, throwing off our hats and our shirts and our pants until we're down to just diapers and underpants. When the baby's laughing, I feel like I can run forever.

# UNIDENTIFIED CLIMBING OBJECT

Angelique Fawns

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**Mirabelle is gone.** My daughter, my life, my reason for living. I lean against my mailbox at the end of our armour stone driveway. This McMansion has the best of everything. It all means nothing without my eight-year-old muffin. She's not the only one missing. The playground has been deserted for a week. An empty juice box, a jacket tossed carelessly across the slide, a plastic giraffe. This is all that's left of the neighborhood kids.

There are a million pictures of her on my phone. I scroll through them all constantly. My favorite is a photo of her on the swing at the park. Her long black hair streams out behind her as she laughs hysterically. She is my mini-me.

My coal-smudged eyes scan the sky for the millionth time. Though my eyes are blurry from tears, I can see something hiding behind the moon. A red speck. Something I've never seen there before. Is it linked to her disappearance? I noticed it the day the laughter died around here.

The cursed park is at the end of our street. Where the rows of newly built monster homes meet farmland. Mirabelle loves the park. She played there every day after school.

When she disappeared, my husband, Peter, tore at what little hair he had left. "What do you mean you let her play without supervision?" He blames me because he doesn't know what else to do.

I also blame myself. Sometimes I can't stop the self-loathing and tears until I dry-swallow a lorazepam.

I've spent hours walking through backyards, fields, and forests. The python of panic curling ever-tighter around my neck.

Inspect the dirt for footprints.

Check all the backyard sheds.

Comb through the corn.

Trespass on farms and search the barns.

There's no evidence of where the fourteen children from our



neighborhood might have gone.

We are a community of lost souls. Mothers and fathers with the thousand-yard stare. An episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

We joked and called them The Brat Pack. Cherry-cheeked girls and boys, all ranging in age from six to sixteen. The spawn of our suburban settlement. They'd rush to the park every day and play games. Hide and Seek. Kick the Can, Red Light, Green Light, Tag.

We'd sit around and be smug that such a hodge-podge group of kids got along so well. Applauding ourselves for choosing a bucolic and safe place to raise our children.

Mirabelle was thrilled she could walk to and from the park by herself. We would never allow her to travel alone in the big city.

"Mom! There's a fantastic new thing at the playground. It's a metal climbing thing." She bounced with glee.

Maybe a month ago?

"That's great, honey." I responded absentmindedly. Too busy with a Zoom meeting for work. Multi-level marketing candles don't sell themselves.

"It spins right up off the ground." She clapped her hands.

"Be careful Mira." I waved her away and didn't think twice about it.

Now I think about it all the time.

And instead of pre-teens and adolescents, the neighborhood is filled with FBI trucks.

The park is cordoned off with yellow crime tape.

When the agents questioned us, we had no definitive answers.

A sharp-faced man in a black suit took notes. Agent Henniger asked disconcerting questions. "Do you know anyone who would want to harm Mirabelle? Do you belong to a cult? Why did you move here?"

He looked at us suspiciously. As if the entire community was perpetrating a gigantic hoax.

"When did this new piece of play equipment arrive in the park?" The agent asked.

"Maybe last week?" Helen, a Barbie-blonde, picked at her bloody cuticles.

I chewed on my chapped lower lip. "Mirabelle mentioned something on Monday."

Hank, the baseball coach, gestured with his bottle of whiskey. "Cliff told me there were some new monkey bars."

Henniger shook his head sadly. "No one wondered who put them there?"

"I assumed the Home Owners Association." Marie sniffed and scratched her messy bun. She lived right beside the playground. Her

daughter was twelve.

I nodded. "Me too. The HOA is always up to something."

"Can anyone give me a description of the structure?" Henniger asked.

We all hunched our shoulders and looked at the ground. No. None of us could.



Last week, when Mirabelle wasn't home before dark, I strolled to the park. I expected to see her giggling with her friends on the seesaw, dinner forgotten in fun. The park was deserted. Not a kid to be seen. I strained my eyes in the fading glow of the sun sinking behind the corn. I saw the juice box. The jacket. The giraffe toy. No kids.

"Mira. No hiding! Time to go home." I called out, the first tingle of fear running up my spine.

Only the caw of a crow and the rustling of the corn.

A few other parents joined me at the playground. Marie huddled in a sweater. Hank with a beer dangling from one hand.

"Have you seen Terry?" Marie shivered.

Bob stomped. "Cliff, you'll get your butt tanned if you don't get out here!"

I looked behind the slide and walked to the edge of the corn.

"Mirabelle! This game isn't funny anymore." Panic iced my intestines.

There was a twenty-foot hexagon imprinted in the dirt at the far end of the park. Like a ring climber might have rested there. I scuffed it with my shoe. Something had been here. Something that was now gone.



I'm not going to lurk at the edge of my driveway for much longer and wait to see what the FBI does. This isn't the only playground at the edge of a farm field in America. I'm going to visit every park that's similar until I find six-sided monkey bars. Then I am going to sit on it until it "spins right up off the ground."

Those fourteen children are somewhere. There is that odd red speck behind the moon. I picture our children, strapped into alien jump seats, sipping glowing green juice.

I will find my missing daughter. Even if I have to travel through time and space to do it.

# **CONTRIBUTORS**



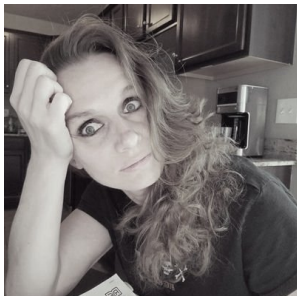
**Norie Suzuki** (“D-Day”) was born and educated bilingually in Tokyo, Japan, where she currently writes and works as a simultaneous interpreter. She received an MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She is working on a collection of linked stories entitled *Echoes of Silence*. Her work has appeared in *Extra Teeth*, *Suspect*, *Archetype Journal*, *Twin Bird Review*, and others.



**Dan B. Fierce** (“Revenge”) loves humor and horror alike, and many things in between. He has over twenty years of experience writing stand-up and sketch comedy, and over ten years of competitive creative writing in online forums. He has also had some opinion pieces published in *KC Exposures* and several short stories published in various anthologies as well as one solo release. He resides in the Kansas City, Missouri area with his long-time partner and husband.



**Jason P. Burnham** (“Lake Effect”) loves to spend time with his wife, children, and dog. Who knows what social media will still exist when you read this, so just wave to the next bird you see and he'll get the message eventually.



**L.T. Ward** (“There”) is a neurodivergent writer who mostly writes speculative fiction and horror shorts and novels while spending her days creating shenanigans in a university library, raising her children, and satisfying her never-ending thirst for knowledge through reading, meeting people, and first-hand life experiences. She has several published short stories in the literary, historical, fantasy, and speculative fiction genres. Readers can find her on Twitter: [@Ltward2](https://twitter.com/Ltward2), Instagram: [@ltward.writer](https://www.instagram.com/ltward.writer), Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/ltward>, or her website: [ltwardwriter.com](http://ltwardwriter.com).

**Donna J. W. Munro** (“First Day Jitters”) teaches high schoolers the slippery truths of government and history at her day job. Her students are her greatest inspiration. She lives with five cats, a fur-covered husband, and an encyclopedia son. Her daughter is off saving the world. Writing is Donna’s painful passion. Her pieces are published in *Corvid Queen*, *Enter the Apocalypse* (2017), *Beautiful Lies*, *Painful Truths II* (2018), *It Calls from the Forest* (2020), *Pseudopod 752* (2021), *Shakespeare Unleashed* (2023), and many more. Check out her novels, *Revelation: Poppet Cycle Book 1* and *Runaway: Poppet Cycle Book 2*, and her website for a complete list of works at <https://www.donnajwmunro.com/>.



**Sonali Roy** (*Humans Suppress and History Reveals*) is a freelance writer taking interest in holistic approaches for maintaining good health both for humans and their nonhuman friends. She also has interest in business management, the latest scientific discoveries, technology, robotics, archaeology, architecture, food and nutrition, history, spirituality, the unexplained, and art and culture. Besides that, she's a passionate traveler and photographer, music composer, singer, painter, and 3-D art designer, and she practices yoga and meditation regularly. Devoted to a vegan diet, she enjoys creative writing, though the recent demise of her eight-year-old canine friend, Fuchoo, (see photo) baffled her.



**Fariel Shafee** (“The Man in the Gray Suit”) was born in South Asia, where she went to a Catholic school run by Americans before moving to Massachusetts to pursue her degrees at MIT. While she learned many things about the non-living world from books, she also learned a thing or two about life and human emotions as she experienced a fast changing world around her. She loves to write and paint. She has been published by *Déraciné*, *The Sirens Call*, *parABnormal Magazine*, and others. Her writing credits and art portfolio can be seen here: <http://fshafee.wixsite.com>





The late **Ray Daley** (“You Have Summoned a Demon”) was born in Coventry and lived there until his death in 2024. He served six years in the RAF as a clerk and spent most of his time in a Hobbit hole in High Wycombe. He was a published poet and had been writing stories since he was ten. His dream was to eventually finish the Hitch Hikers fanfic novel he had been writing since 1986. For a list of many of his short pieces and where you can read more of his work, visit the Speculative Fiction Database at

<https://isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?Ray%20Daley>



Detroit **John Jeffire** (“Search Underway for Missing Submarine Bringing Tourists to *Titanic*”) is the author of two novels and three poetry collections. His novel *Motown Burning* won the 2005 Mount Arrowsmith Novel Competition and the 2007 Independent Publishing Awards Gold Medal for Regional Fiction. In 2022, his novel *River Rouge* won the American Writing Award for Legacy Fiction. For more on the author and purchasing his work, visit [writeondetroit.com](http://writeondetroit.com).



**Jaclyn Eccesso** (“Stillbirth”) lives in Colorado with her family. She is currently shopping around a collection of linked speculative short stories, *We, The Mothers*, which centers on postpartum mental health and the ways in which women (particularly mothers) are often silenced. She was named runner-up for the 2023 Howard Frank Mosher Fiction Prize and her debut story was published in *Hunger Mountain Issue #29*. “Stillbirth” is her second publication.



**Christine Lajewski** (“Suyuntu”) is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher, and a teacher/naturalist at Massachusetts Audubon. She spent twenty-two years as a haunt actor. She was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and now lives in Cumberland, Rhode Island, close to her adult daughter and son.



Her first novel, *Jhator*, was published in 2014. It is a spiritual fantasy in which a grieving woman’s conversations with animals help her find joy again. Her collection of horror short stories, *Erring on the Side of Calamity*, and a horror novel, *Bonebelly*, were published in 2018. She has had short stories published in *Dark Tales*, *Sanitarium*, *The Flash Fiction Press*, and *The Sirens Call*, as well as the anthologies *The Shadow Over Deathlehem*, *The Misbehaving Dead*, *Shallow Waters Vol. 5*, *A Bird in the Hand* and *Still Waters* (poetry), *Wicked Women* (New England Horror Writers), and *Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice*.

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**Jennifer Fanning** (“Skyline”) is a teacher and writer in Seattle, Washington. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Literary Hatchet*, *Mania Magazine*, and *Flight of the Dragonfly*, among other publications. She is currently working on writing a chapbook about creativity and the body.





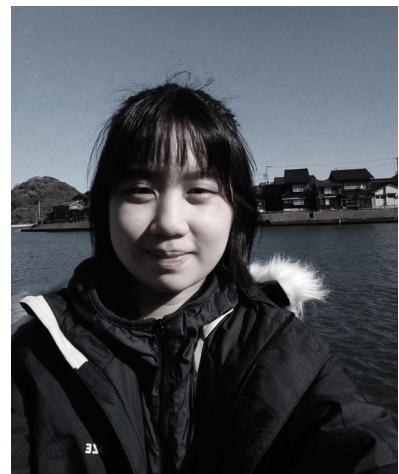
**Josh Schlossberg** (“Hot on the Trail”)’s short fiction has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies. He’s the author of the eco folk horror novel, *Charwood*, and the cosmic horror novella, *Malinae*. He served as editor of *The Jewish Book of Horror*, as lead editor of *Terror at 5280’*, and is a co-founding member of Denver Horror Collective and creator of *Josh’s Worst Nightmare*, where he surveys the dark landscape of biological horror fiction.



**Elizabeth Falcon** (“The Seduction”)’s fiction has appeared in *The Dalhousie Review*, *New Forum*, *FreeFall* and *34 Orchard*. She is currently working on a short story collection that explores the boundaries between real/unreal and perimeters of weirdness.



Born and raised in the Philippines, **Caroline Hung** (“Halloween Notes from Bloody Mary of the Philippines”) is a SFF writer of mixed Filipino and Taiwanese descent. When not summoning ghosts through her bathroom mirror, Caroline likes to watch TV and worry about rising geopolitical tensions. On a spiritual level, she relates the most to a withered leaf, or perhaps a day-old loaf of bread. Find her at [carolinehungauthor.com](http://carolinehungauthor.com)





**Andrea Ferrari Kristeller** (“The Ghosts of Yazá Bridge”) is an Argentinean teacher, writer and naturalist. She loves her teaching practice and the rainforest.

Some of her poems have been published by *The Avocet*, *The Dawntreader*, *Erbacce*, *ASEI Arts Anthology Volume 2*, *Flight of a Feather: An Anthology of Poems*, *Poetry Undressed*, *Braided Way*, *Poppy Road Review*, *The Heimat Review*, *SweetSmell*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal* and *Seaside Gothic*. She participated in the Tupelo Press 30/30 challenge in July 2023. Her nouvelle *The Land without You* was given an Honourable Mention at *Writers of the Future* contest in 2018, and her short story “The Broken Sphere” garnered the same in 2023. “The Ghost at the Whites’ Hoté” was published in the anthology *Haus*, by CultureCult Press (2022); “Her turning into a forest” was published by the magazine *Globally Rooted* (2023), and “The Ocelot” was published by *Commuter Lit* (2023).



The nouvelle *The Land without You* was published by Edunam, the Province of Misiones’ University Press, in Argentina in October 2023. *The Land without You and Other Stories* was published on Amazon in June of 2023, with its Spanish version following in September 2023.



**Christopher Emmerson-Pace** (“Family Heirloom”) is a lifelong educator and lover of words and any puzzles that involve words and word play. He is currently eyeing retirement and hopes to one day enjoy long days of reading for pleasure and making a bigger dent in his local public library.



**Brenna Monaghan Behel** (*Last Stop*) is an award-winning photographer who first picked up a camera at the tender age of fifty-two. Born in Vietnam and adopted into a Connecticut-based family, she grew up in the idyllic town of New Milford, Connecticut. After graduating from Trinity College, she pursued various career paths—ranging from a stint in the military to operating a pipeline—but realized that art is her true passion. She is truly honored and thankful to have one of her photos featured in *34 Orchard*. She can be found on The Facebook and The

Instagram at Brenna Behel and b2 Portraits.



**Jack Powers** (“Eleven Ways the World Could End”) is the author of two poetry collections: *Everybody’s Vaguely Familiar* (2018) and *Still Love* (2023), and his poems have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Salamander* and elsewhere. He won the 2015 and 2012 *Connecticut River Review* Poetry Contests and was a finalist for the 2013 and 2014 *Rattle* Poetry Prizes. His flash fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Inkwell*, *Flash Fiction SF* and elsewhere. Website: [www.jackpowers13.com](http://www.jackpowers13.com)



**Angelique Fawns** (“Unidentified Climbing Object”) is a journalist and speculative fiction writer. She began her career writing articles about naked cave dwellers in Tenerife, Canary Islands. Her stories have only become stranger since then. She lives on a horse farm with her husband and fifteen-year-old daughter and desperately tries *not* to helicopter parent.

Though she has no idea how she finds time to write, it often involves hiding in a dark corner of a pub, sipping on chardonnay, and letting her nightmares spew onto paper. If you dare, check out her podcast, *Read Me a Nightmare*, or blog at [www.fawns.ca](http://www.fawns.ca). Read her [@EQMM](#), [@AmazingStories](#), [@DreamForge](#), [@ORBIT](#).

Originally from Portsmouth, Rhode Island, **Keith Molden** (Cover Art/*When the Light Dies*) lives in Florida with his wife and four cats. In his free time, he enjoys photographing nature and wildlife, playing guitar, carpentry, gardening, and wrenching on vehicles. This is his first publication.

**The twenty-one artists in Issue 9 examine all aspects  
of waiting.**

Keith Molden ♥ Norie Suzuki  
Dan B. Fierce ♥ Jason P. Burnham  
L.T. Ward ♥ Donna J.W. Munro  
Sonali Roy ♥ Fariel Shafee  
Ray Daley ♥ John Jeffire  
Jaclyn Eccesso ♥ Christine Lajewski  
Jennifer Fanning ♥ Josh Schlossberg  
Elizabeth Falcon ♥ Caroline Hung  
Andrea Ferrari Kristeller ♥ Christopher Emmerson-Pace  
Brenna Monaghan Behel ♥ Jack Powers  
Angelique Fawns

**Please be seated in the front parlor. We have books,  
movies, and the occasional existential discussion—and if all  
else fails, there's coffee cake.**

**Welcome to *34 Orchard*.**