





BUTTON EYE REVIEW

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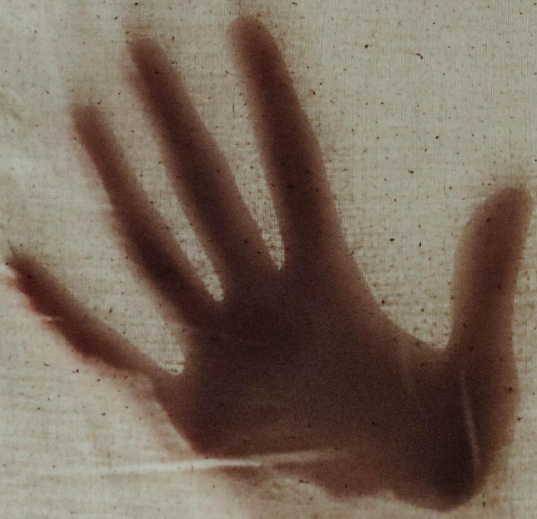
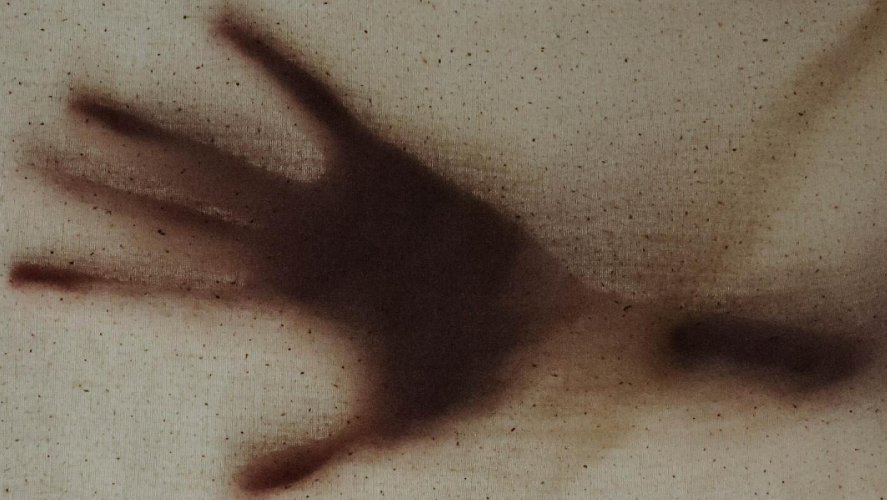
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GHOSTS



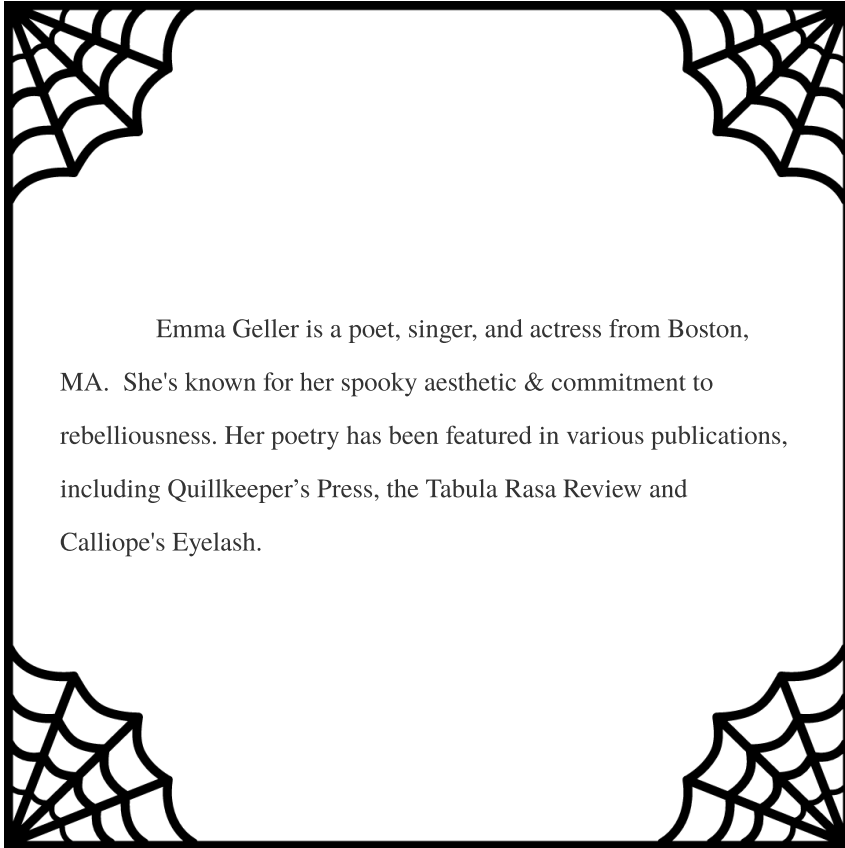
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ghost girl
by Emma Geller

Poetry



Emma Geller is a poet, singer, and actress from Boston, MA. She's known for her spooky aesthetic & commitment to rebelliousness. Her poetry has been featured in various publications, including Quillkeeper's Press, the Tabula Rasa Review and Calliope's Eyelash.



Ghost Breath
by Melissa Gill

Poetry

I am a broken butterfly crawling
back inside my cocoon.

A scalding shower beats down,
raining on the crown of my head.

The water hisses like TV static,
while I count each ghost breath.

My stained-glass wings flutter,
but the light in my attic is fading soon.

The moments that I grew too still,
I chipped away at my second chrysalis.

Recalling slips and stutters,
small hiccups in my longest hour.

I am both the butterfly and the caterpillar,
my eyes riddle you as both strange and familiar.



Melissa Gill is a published journalist and professional editor born and raised in Las Vegas, NV. Gill earned her Bachelor of Arts in journalism and media studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her works can be found in Flash Fiction Magazine, Raven Review, Coffin Bell Journal, Button Eye Review, Spectre Review, and elsewhere. When she isn't penning a story, she enjoys watching offbeat indie rom-coms, painting watercolors with her husband, Chris, and exploring state parks in Nevada. They are proud dog parents to their chihuahua, Lulu. She is currently working on her first novel. Creep on her Instagram to read her latest stories at

<https://www.instagram.com/melissa.m.gill/>



La Faldama
by Olivia Loccisano

Fiction

They had never owned a microwave. Mamá never allowed it. When Maritza would visit friends' houses, which was seldom, she was told never to stand in the kitchen or in the room where the microwave was. If Maritza stood in a room with a microwave, Mamá would know. The waves from the microwave were dangerous for anyone, but especially for little girls like Maritza whose brain had not finished growing. Being near a microwave was also a way for La Faldama to find you. Mamá said that La Faldama could detect the radioactive waves of a microwave and use them to track down children and their homes. Mamá said that even after a child showered, the waves from the microwave would still stay inside of them, and La Faldama would know. The whole town was frightened of La Faldama, the only variable between civilians was the extent to which they were afraid. No one had seen her, but the woman had existed for years, now. Silently tormented, the people of the barrio felt her presence everywhere. There were those, many, who believed that La Faldama was nothing more than an urban legend—the woman with swivelled limbs, whose spine curved and curled like a parabola; and twisted like a willow tree; her long skirt touching the floor in which she used to snatch children beneath and suffocate them to their death. To most, La Faldama was nothing more than a rare disease: existing, but most likely never being encountered in a person's lifetime. However, La Faldama's ghostly presence hung over the barrio like heavy, translucent fog.

In her whole twelve years of life, Maritza had seldom been outside of her home. Her mother would only allow her to leave to attend school. Maritza could never play with her friends but could talk to them on the phone, so long as she spoke close enough so Mamá could listen to every word. Each night before Maritza went to sleep, Mamá would flick her light switch on and off nine times. According to Mamá, any times less would mean that there was a chance the electrical outlets would tangle and burn the house down. Any times more would mean that the ceiling light would fall to the floor. The front door, on the other hand, had to be locked four times before bed. Any less would be inviting an intruder, and any more would be a signal for La Faldama to creep her crone claws through the window and into their home to trap her prime prey, young Maritza, underneath her long and tattered skirt.

One morning, Lucia called Maritza's home.

"Maritza's not home," Mamá answered, while Maritza crept down the stairs, looking at her. Mamá continued and then hung up immediately, "Maritza is not home. Call back later."

"Mamá, who was it?" Maritza asked. Mamá told her that she would be able to see Lucia when school started again next month in September. There was no need to go outside with her and play in the sun unless she wanted to be a target for La Faldama. Maritza missed her friend dearly but knew better than to

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argue with Mamá.

One night while putting a roast in the oven, Mamá instructed Maritza to call Lucia.

“You need to tell that girl to stop calling this house. She calls every day, and it’s clogging our line.” Mamá handed the phone to Maritza, “You need to be clear that she can see you when school begins.”

Maritza dialed her friend’s phone number as her as Mamá stood by listening. The phone rang and connected. Lucia was excited to hear Maritza on the other end, but Maritza was quiet. Mamá egged her on with her hands, “Go on,” Mamá mouthed.

“Lucia, you have to stop calling here. My mom is getting angry.”

“Listen,” Lucia continued on the other line, “Come out tonight at ten. I’ll be at the park, and we can play.”

Maritza looked at Mamá who was glaring at her directly in the eyes as though she could hear Lucia on the other side of the phone.

“Stop calling here,” Maritza mumbled.

Lucia was unrelenting, “I will be at the park looking out for you. If you don’t come, I’ll go back home. But that’s where I’ll be.” Then Maritza heard the beeping of a disconnected phoneline.

“Well?” Mamá urged, “What did she say?”

“She said she would stop calling,” the girl muttered.

Mamá smiled, “Well, that’s settled then. I always thought that girl was strange, wanting you to play nearly every day as though she had no other friends.”

A conflicted Maritza went to her room, lay on her bed, and stared at the ceiling light. She would leave in the evening, after Mamá went to bed and sneak out through the kitchen door. She just needed to wait until Mamá fell asleep. She would wait until she heard the front door lock four times and then sneak down. She was tired of living as a prisoner in Mamá’s home.

That evening, Mamá flicked Maritza’s light nine times. Maritza shut her eyes to avoid the annoying flares. Then, the young girl heard the click of the four locks and knew it was time. She listened as the floor creaked, and Mamá went up the stairs to her own bedroom. Waiting about half an hour, Maritza tip-toed down the stairs and into the kitchen. She exited quietly careful to not cause any sound and ran quickly into the street. Adrenaline racing through her, she put one foot after the other, continuously turning her head to make sure the lights did not turn on in her house. She had nothing to worry about: she would see Lucia for a few hours and then head back while Mamá was still asleep. Mamá would wake up in the morning and see Maritza safe in her bed, not knowing a thing.

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Maritza's heart pounded hard against her chest, and she felt a tingling in her fingertips, the type one experiences when they have too much energy for the body to contain, so it must rush to the end of their limbs. She could see the park ahead of her. A tiny figure of a young girl was near the swing set. As Maritza approached closer, she could see that the figure was Lucia swinging back and forth. When Lucia met eyes with her, she hopped off and ran towards her. The girls met with a giant embrace.

"I knew you would come," Lucia said.

The two girls whispered and played in the park together, pretending they were the hunters of evil fairies. The scene was dark, but the late August air was warm and comforting against the girls' skin.

"Let's play a game," said Lucia, and motioned for Maritza to come with her to the barren sidewalk. Lucia pointed down at the pavement where Maritza eyed the tiles of the sidewalk.

"You see the lines?" Lucia asked as she pointed to the cracks in between each large square sidewalk tile. Maritza nodded.

Lucia continued, "You can't step on them. Only step on the tiles. If you step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back. First person who steps on the crack loses the game, and their mother's back breaks!"

Maritza had heard this saying before but was not sure where. *If you step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back.* It might have been a nursery rhyme or English saying that she heard as a child.

"No, I don't like this game," said Maritza, afraid that she might step on a crack in the sidewalk as it was difficult to see in the dark.

"Oh, come on!" Lucia pleaded, "All the girls at school played this summer. It's not real, it's just a game. No one's back is gonna break!"

This did not assuage Maritza's fear that she would harm Mamá and shook her head back and forth.

"Fine. I'll play without you then," Lucia said. Maritza watched as Lucia hopped between each tile avoiding the cracks in between. It looked like a lot of fun, and Lucia seemed to be avoiding each crack with ease.

Maritza began stepping slowly on each tile, avoiding the cracks. She caught up with Lucia who was glad that Maritza decided to join in the game.

"That's it, Itza, you're getting it," she encouraged her, and Maritza was having fun.

"Faster!" Lucia yelled and was jumping from tile to tile as Maritza caught up with her. Maritza was staring down at the tiles intently, making sure her foot would never land on a crevice in the sidewalk. She bounced and her heart raced just as much as it did when she was running to the park. She wasn't even sure which direction the two were going anymore; all her focus was on bounding from each pavement

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square to the other, avoiding all and any lines that she saw. Lucia was giggling and enjoying it, and Maritza's fear began to cloud the joy she was having the faster she would run. As Lucia sped up, Maritza wanted to stop the game. Then, her long swanlike strides broke, and her little foot stomped right in the middle of a crack in the sidewalk.

"Ha!" Lucia cried and jumped up as she pointed to Maritza's foot on the crack. Maritza immediately lifted her foot high up in the air, wishing she could go back two seconds before and had stopped the game. Panic crowded her gut as she stared at the crack.

"You lose!" Lucia continued.

"What happens now?" a worried Maritza asked.

"Nothing. I told you; it's just a game."

Maritza stared at the hallow crack which her foot had just touched. A wind came over the girls sweating faces, humid and hot, touching their dewy skin.

"I'm tired," Lucia said, "Let's meet her again tomorrow. Same time."

"Sure," Maritza said, but did not mean it. She accepted Lucia's hug and the girls walked in opposite directions: Lucia skipping back home carefree, and Maritza wallowing back in shame and regret. If only she had listened to Mamá, stayed inside and not met with Lucia, she would not have to fear. She worried about coming home to see Mamá in pain, bedridden and paralysed. Mamá would never forgive her.

Maritza approached her home and saw that the lights were still shut in her house. Maybe Lucia was right, that it was just a game. As Maritza approached the back door of the kitchen, she peeped inside first to see if she saw anything strange. The kitchen was black in the darkness, and she twisted the handle and pushed the door in. There was pure silence, and as Maritza walked through the kitchen entrance, a calmness overcame her as she thought that Lucia must have been right. She would go right back to bed, and everything would be normal.

Maritza then heard a soft creaking and breathing. It was an anguished breathing, like someone was struggling. She paused in her footsteps. She continued to hear the screeching, coming down the stairs. She waited and held her breath as to not make a sound, feeling that any movement she would make might be detected.

Through the darkness that was the kitchen, there was still, somehow, a shadow that loomed over the doorway. She could not see the shape of it, just the mass of pure haunted gloom hovering over the floor and the arches of the doorway, creeping against the walls.

"Mamá?" Maritza whispered.

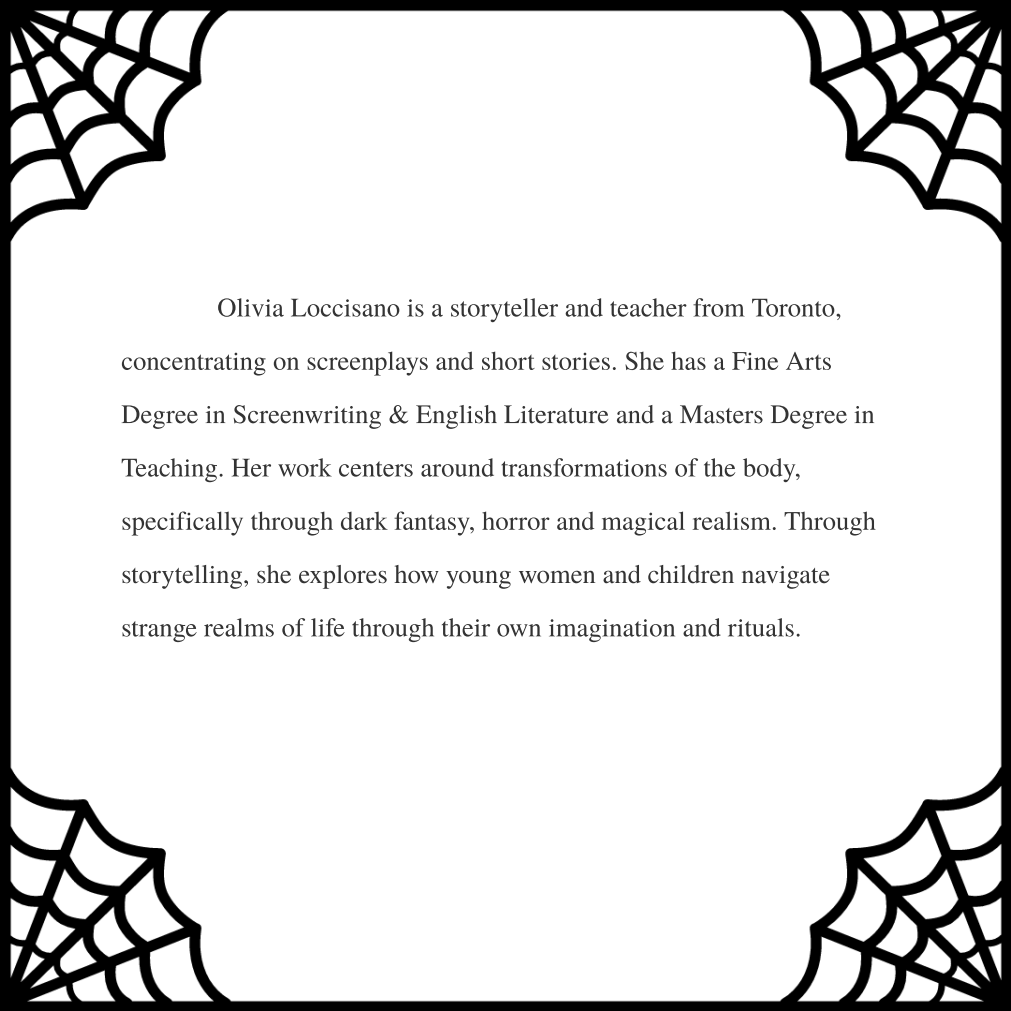
The kitchen lights flickered quickly, nine times. Through each flicker Maritza could see the figure

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that was there, like how film captures exposed light on celluloid during the split second the shutter opens. Maritza's eyes could not form the image completely until the last flicker; when the lights came on, she saw her. Mamá: her back folded like a parabola, her hands claw-like and frail, wearing a long, tattered skirt that touched the floor and a glare that penetrated deep into Maritza. Mamá walked toward her. Each breath seemed like a brawl, each step, a limp, and a trailing shudder.

“Mamá, I am so sorry,” Maritza wailed. She tried to open the kitchen door behind her but found that it was either locked or that she was too nervous to complete the motion of turning the handle.

Mamá lifted her hand in brief staccato movements, pointing a wrinkled and crippled finger directly at Maritza's face. And then, in one swift measure, as Maritza remained glued to the back of the kitchen wall, Mamá lifted her long skirt and wrapped it over Maritza's head, engulfing her tiny body and trapping it underneath. Mamá made her way out the door, shifting with each footstep as much as her limping body would let her, further dragging down with Maritza's body in her confines. She would slowly make her way to the next child's house, but not before she locked the door behind her four times.



Olivia Loccisano is a storyteller and teacher from Toronto, concentrating on screenplays and short stories. She has a Fine Arts Degree in Screenwriting & English Literature and a Masters Degree in Teaching. Her work centers around transformations of the body, specifically through dark fantasy, horror and magical realism. Through storytelling, she explores how young women and children navigate strange realms of life through their own imagination and rituals.



The Perfect Father
by Jay Bonggi

Fiction

Today, February the twenty-second, Sebastian, my son, my perfect son, drew his first picture. He waited until dinner to reveal it to me, urging great fanfare before he would pull it from his bag, shoving aside his tray of carrots and beaming, holding it to his chest. Then he showed me. "It is perfect," I told him, and I did not say more. And it was, indeed, perfect. I punished him by sending him to his room.

Now I can hear him crying; his sobs reach me through the foundations of the house. He does not understand what I understand. I do not know how to explain. My heart, though, seethes with pain. All for him. Always for him.

I remain at the dinner table, unable to move. Smoke fills the air. I hold the picture without gripping it, letting it lay in the valley of my palms, fragile and heartbreaking like a butterfly, dead. It is creased twice, hot dog and hamburger style (as he says), forming crooked fourths and curling the corners up at me. On the left half there is a stilt-legged man, no torso, raising his uneven arms to the sky. His limbs are yellow, his head is circular, and he smiles through a face just lips and eyes. Crayon. This is you, Sebastian explained, as though the resemblance of my features were obvious. I nodded. To the right of this figure is a mimeo of the same. This one is red, though, and truncated in the legs—same-sized head, same smile, same lack of torso. This is him, I presume. Last, a swathe of orange, a blended overlay of the other two colors (yellow first, then red above) fills the upper-right corner of the paper. That is the sun. And the truncated figure stands beneath a cloud of words: "I love you."

What's unclear is whether the yellow boy addresses the sun or the figure intended to be me. It's the ambiguity which makes this picture great. It could mean anything. It truly is a perfect picture.

When I learned I was to be a father, I swore never to hit my boy. I was firm in this. It was the only thing I resolved. Yet, sitting here, perfect picture in hand, I am filled with urges entirely foreign to me. Foreign but familiar. Would you believe that? My heart boils with unremitting, loving rage. I understand what that means now. But I will be a better father than my own.

First, I will burn the picture. After sending Sebastian to his room, the first thing I did was build a fire. I used three Duraflame logs, the kinds made of sawdust and wax soaked in ethanol. It was a large fire, as the picture was to be eradicated to ash, erased entirely from this world. I stacked the logs into a modest little pyramid, a manger of sorts with a gap between the bottom walls. There, I wedged the picture without folding or crumpling it more. Then I set fire to each corner of the pyramid and shut the fireplace's flue so that no errant tatter, no charred, circular head or swathe of red-yellow sun could waft out of our house and

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into the yard of a neighbor where it could be captured and preserved, or remembered. I want it gone. Gone forever. So now the house has begun to fill with smoke, a pall which conspires in our rafters and lowers on me like a ceiling. I have disabled all fire alarms.

We are safe.

Sebastian, perhaps by smell, seems to know what is coming. His cries have grown louder, like a lost or wounded dog. His door, which locks from the outside, shudders semi-muffled as his tiny fists thump it. They are petulant shudders. Though they break my heart, they must be ignored, and I remind myself of this by saying out loud into the haze which burns my eyes and clings gray to the light fixtures—I say it to drown out his confused and terrified crying: he must be ignored.

The picture is on fire now. I watch it from afar.

Sebastian does not understand. Perhaps he will never understand, and will hate me until the day he dies. So be it.

I find the words as I cover my mouth with my shirt hem. Clarity, like a dream, comes in colors of halfhearted asphyxiation. Yes... What Sebastian does not understand, is this: eternal life, though an exalted aspiration—a worthy goal—is ruined in its seeking. Immortality, reverence, and sublimity... how they seem so feasible in the eyes of a child!

A nightmare reels my head; in it, Sebastian creates a hundred perfect crayon-colored pictures, each day bringing them home to me, and by the all-knowing eyes of God I am proud as any father may be, until, one day, a single imperfect picture is made, and I... I praise it as I would any other (what else is a father to do?). Afterwards, of course, he creates a hundred more perfect, impeccable photos! Yet, in my mind, as he ages, the only picture I remember is the one. And in seeing that one, the rest are ruined. Rather than works of talent, they become products of luck. In this nightmare Sebastian begins to understand this change. I do not express the same enthusiasm for his workings of crayon and glue and macaroni; my praises lack the soul they once embodied, and he intuits this. He grows old, ever emptying of the worth he once contained, knowing himself not as a miracle of life, but a forgiven suit of mistakes. He becomes a junkie. Frequents brothels. Gonorrhea. Abortions. Theft. Murder. And like that, his single, pitiful misstep will forever haunt him.

Life is like a casino, I sometimes like to say. Quit while you're ahead, or the House of God will rob you blind. This is what I believe.

So I burn his perfect picture. I watch the flame envelope it and transmute its perfection to immortality. Never will it smudge; never will it wear the ring of a misplaced mug of coffee; never will it yellow and wrinkle in the bindings of a folder of memorabilia. And after watching it burn (so carefully, in fact, that the plasma-shape of the fire now sears in the center of my vision), and waiting for the fire to die, and, poking around in the ashes, finding un-immolated remnants, throwing on another log, starting up the fire again, et cetera, ad obliteratum; after assuring the utter annihilation of the perfect picture, I trudge up to

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Sebastian's room and explain it all to him. I tell him, "You were a fool today, but a lucky one! You have tried your hand at the precarious arts, at all the silent poetries, and stumbled your way into greatness. I congratulate you for this. But now you must never try again." I dig my fingernails into his arm, too, to be sure my point is made. He does not understand. But one day he might.

Oh, to be a violent man! Today I am furious! My hand throbs, and my finger has disjoined. There is a hole in the wall beside the fridge. All my life I have prided myself on the bare and perfect walls of this house. I have never marred them with nails or hanging-pins; each year I have painted white over their white, staying ahead of the scratches and chinks and stains. Now, though, I have ruined one, and appallingly so, and the hole sneers at me, red and gray wires fraying medusal from that darkness, baring copper fangs like serpents.

Let it be known: Sebastian has done nothing wrong; he is not the reason for my outburst. Not directly, at least. So I have left his door unlocked. He hides up there, made fearful by my shouting.

I'd had quite the serene day, too! Having waited until a later morning hour (allowing the thin crowds of Main Street to thin evermore, dwindling to emptiness), and taking my paper and tea in the diner there, delivered by my favorite waitress, the one who does not speak, only nods, and whose name I cannot remember, and having paid for my breakfast, I wandered Westward through the cemetery. There I turned over the events of the past week and implored my dear Celia for wisdom and for guidance, and when I stuck my ear to the grass, I swore I heard an answer—no, maybe not an answer, but a blessing. But returning home, and having lived the rest of my day, I now know that what I heard could only have been a trick of the mind. There was no blessing at all. Like a curse, this world hounds me.

See, after the incident of the final picture, I wrote a letter for Sebastian to deliver to Mrs. Liebling, his teacher, which said, Sebastian is hereby forbidden from participating in any and all classes of a creative nature. During art classes he is to be escorted from the room and located elsewhere, where he may work on mathematical problem sets (supervised, of course). I shall provide the workbooks for these problem sets. Many thanks, Mr. Knight.

To my surprise, Mrs. Liebling availed without much in the way of protest. I did not hear from her for many days. Yet, today, returning home, I found the phone squawking on its receiver like a crow. And, ignoring it, it died, but abruptly began again. It was Mrs. Liebling. She began our conversation with the usual, vapid pleasantries, the worn-out condolences that cause me to wait until later hours to wander downtown, and the very same which eat away at my soul like nothing else. Does nobody know it pains me to hear Celia's name? I informed Mrs. Liebling, kindly as I could, of what she could do with her false pledges of sorrows. She was silent for many seconds. Silent, I say, meaning huffing and puffing like a

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prig-snouted beast! "Very well then," she began again, now cold and distant and precise, continuing, "Mr. Knight, I must assure you, I understand the desire to, how shall I say, sculpt the skillset of your child and direct him in a more quantitative direction," blah blah blah... Mrs. Liebling, it's important to know, is having marital problems; the rumors are the talk of the town. It's no wonder, too... You'd understand if you saw her, the hag! But the fact that she questioned my parenting authority was not what set me off in the end. I am better than that—more kind, and compassionate. In fact, she was pleasantly submissive when I asserted my wishes, and eventually she conceded, though sighing, to quarantine Sebastian from art classes and any activities of that manner. Yes, I was pleased with the progression of the conversation, all the way until the end, when Mrs. Liebling bid me farewell. She said, "You can rest assured I will abide all this, though I must say I'm disappointed. Your little Sebastian has a knack for drawing! The drawing he made last week was quite a heartwarming work of—" I was so shaken, so enraged, that I hung up before she could finish the thought. The nerve of that cow!

She called me back immediately. She does not understand why I hung up. And Sebastian, now, does not understand why I've thrown my fist through our wall.

Ah... I will attempt to explain myself.

This is the way of the world. A boy creates a picture. A normal picture. Maybe a perfect picture—sure, fine, okay, all's well that ends well. Except nothing ends there! A snarling, pretentious old woman might come along and see the picture and say to the boy: "How heartwarming!" Heartwarming?! Who is she to say? And having heard it so, the boy might begin to understand himself as a boy with a warm heart, a heart which burns above a greater flame than the world's hearth, if you take my meaning. How cruel! To tell a boy what he is! And believing this, the boy will begin to make pictures intended to cure the world: Buddhistic drivel, meaningless metaphors about sharing fire, tilted candles, the kind of art destined for the backs of funereal saint cards. And, eventually, unfortunately, inevitably, the boy will learn that there is no such thing as a soul's hearth, or a heart which burns warmer than any other, et cetera. The realizations will crash upon him like waves. He will be colder still, for believing, falsely, that he was otherwise! Her praise will have made him cold! And so goes the great inertia of tragedy. Then, as always: the hedonism, the whores, the syphilis, abortions, murder! Murder! My son!

The sick, sick, hag.

It's nearly dark here, now.

I have waited until night.

I have a backpack, hammer, screwdriver, and lockpick set. I also have a crowbar (the foldable glovebox type, red and gray), in case my picking skills are rusty. All are neatly arranged on my tabletop. I finger them and think.

Again, I wait until the town falls quiet. The sun daggerts itself behind the lip of the arboretum out west. Sparrows and finches halt their warbles. Only ravens remain awake. And driveways fill with fathers'

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cars, fathers home from work, fathers who kiss their wives hello and scoop their children from the floor and smile, entering their homes. Communion is spoken, hands held, and dinners eaten. Cats are brought inside, for the cold. Television sets are turned on; television sets are turned off. Children are sent to bed.

I step from the front door of my home, entering the black, and the black accepts me.

Elm Street veers diagonal from the Wilmsdale turnoff, where the post office abuts Blimar's bar. I stalk in the grass between the two, wishing no witnesses upon myself. I am to remain unseen. Indeed, a dog sees me, a slobbering rottweiler, but, verily, dogs can't file police reports; so I carry on. My path, which is wayward (not the straightest of vectors, but a jagged path from shadow to shadow), takes me through the garden of one family, the edge of the forest out into another yard, and beside a great big windmill. The windmill is defunct, but croaks in the night wind. There is no moon tonight.

I am sure to count each of the houses as I pass them, whispering their numbers aloud to myself, "twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen..." I'd consulted a map before leaving. At the back-gate of twenty-four, I halt.

It's a colonial-style home, a wide brown atrocity, rectangular with Puritan windows and white shutters, which clap, wood on wood, when the wind comes again. Together with the croaking of the windmill, this clatter obscures my crashing steps through the waist-high wheatgrass.

There are no lights on in the house, only a candle in the sill of the washroom window, signifying nothing. I kneel beside the back door. The crowbar was a waste of weight, it seems. The lock is an ancient, three-pin deadbolt. I rake it easily. It slides open without a squeak.

Inside, all is still. My boots tread heavy upon the floorboards, so I make my stepping scarce. One step per half-minute, is all. There are photographs hung on the wall, though it is too dark to make out figures or shapes. My heart does not still. Over the stairwell, a gargantuan painting of an ocean scene, chiaroscuro, all blue, a choppy sea, no boat, looms, and judges my ascent. I make it to the top, lightening my step with the banister, which is sound. There are no thoughts in my head.

The house is arranged traditionally: the bedrooms wedged in the front-right corner. And my suspicions were true. I resist a snicker. A phlegmy, lumberjack's snore emanates from one shut door, and a daintier, muffled sleepsigh from the other.

Her door, which is ajar, opens without protest. I stand in the doorway, and wait. Ambient light of the moonless sky spreads itself as a blanket upon the bed. Mrs. Liebling curls there in its glow, facing me. I cock my head. Smile. Her face, sloughed and wrinkled, resembles a cow's udder in the soft swathe of shadows. I enter and crouch beside her.

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It's a shame, of course, that on occasion love beckons for loss of life. The irony of the fact is not lost on me, though I see it as an old and worn-out fact—a tired, turned-over truth, an ancient one, not a fact worth mulling over. A fact which is so true it is duty: a memory is lodged within Mrs. Liebling's skull. It's a minute memory, yes, and mundane, yet it festers with the potentiation of my child's future. She has seen his picture. She lords over its critical life, is the container of its earthly reception; her words will be like fate for him. Her! Of all people, her! The snoring moose!

I crouch-step into her room. It must be done, I remind myself. Each step is two: the first to test for creaks in floorboards, the next to move me closer. Like this, I make my way to her bedside.

I am a conservative man; I will spare the gory details. But the screwdriver enters her eye socket easily, encouraged by the two-tap of my hammer, and with a squelch and single gasp, Mrs. Liebling's memory is extinguished forever.

Exeunt.

I am unseen and unheard as I leave. And outside, the night, bowing to the new truth, recomposes in silence, preparing for the fresh-made future, the ravens hesitant, the windmill still.

A week has passed. Much has happened. We are running out of time.

I introduce myself as Peter now, and Sebastian as Tyler. The boy has not been to school since the night hereby told. I had returned to our street on Thursday, winding down another of my walks, to find a hornet's nest of police, blue and reds revolving, glommed to our house, men in uniforms standing outside, gloved hands on their hips, examining a backpack, placing a screwdriver in an opaque bag. I snatched the boy up from the playground and dragged him behind the Wally Stop. He'd been a good boy. He hadn't been playing with other kids there, or telling stories about his daddy, or drawing pictures in the sand. I regretted to use my belt on him. But I had to be sure. No, he screamed into my palm: he hadn't told anyone. I collapsed beside the grease disposal, clutching his head in my lap, telling him it would be alright. He understood this time, I think. He told me the same. It would be alright.

He sits the same now, head in my lap, though we are both in the bathtub of a Motel 7, some three miles down the highway. Kept from our van, and incapable of hitching a ride, we'd waited until the same collective quietude: the fathers returning home, the hushing of the birds, the slow demise of the sun. Then we'd walked.

I smiled in the dark. As we sidestepped the deciduous folds of the eastern copse, the jackrabbits leaping in our path and vultures collecting on the water tower, I knew we were walking together, hand in hand, triumphant into a new freedom. The path we walked could lead to anywhere we wanted—any fantasy.

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That was when I'd asked him his new name. He'd baptized himself as Tyler. He named me Peter. And it seemed to me, the world folding itself over, erasing itself with dark, that this, then, was the perfect picture, the one true image and magnum opus of my son: the pair of us, alone, traversing time and freed from all we knew.

I had believed that. I really had.

Yet now we are in the tub, and I can feel my boy shaking in my arms, for there had been pounding at the door last night, and we'd had to shut off all the lights and make like we weren't here. And we haven't eaten in 72 hours. I could see the vending machine through the parting of the room's window shade, yet I could also see the shadowed bulk of prowling sedans in the lot. White and black, like vipers. Watching. Waiting.

So we are here. And we are alone.

And I know now that the picture we made on the night of our escape, the picture made possible by the burning of the first, and killing of the critic—I know that picture would be the last of my child's, and no others could come to pass. This is another ancient and dutiful truth.

For to carry on would serve only to spoil the first. Any freedom heretofore known would remain a slim mockery of the first—that never again could we name ourselves, and never again could we free ourselves like that. We could never taste freedom like this again. The spark is gone. The match is out.

So I wait. I know what I must do, but I wait. I savor the liminal white of non-choice, the last we will ever know, here in this empty tub, together.

I wait an hour, and again through the window shade, I watch a gold turn to black. I wait as the black deepens. And when again it turns to gold, I know the gold is a farce: no sun, but a headlight. Rubber sounds on gravel in the lot. There are doors slammed. I hold my child closer.

I wait.

There is a rap at the door. I look my boy in the eyes. He appears to understand, but does not react. This reaction is assent.

They are going to kick down the door, they announce. They are going to come in and take us.

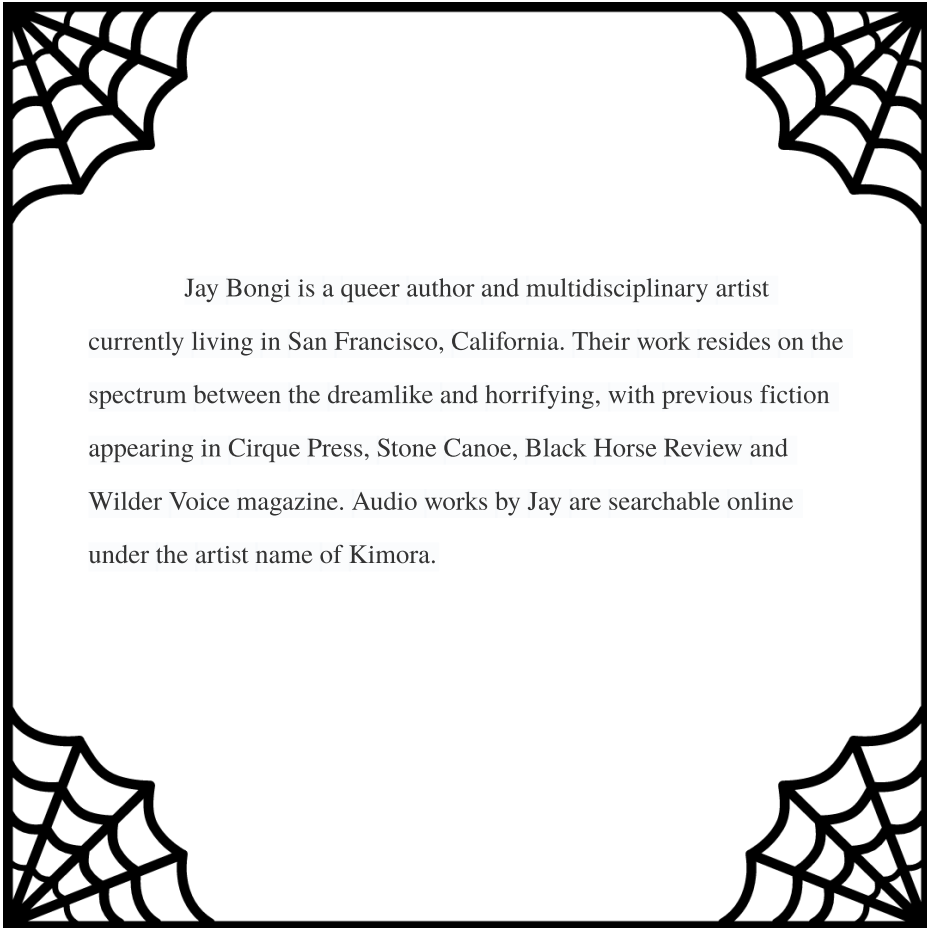
Very well. So be it. I pull my child closer.

It is, of course, the greatest gift I could give my son—ending our sojourn before straying from the path of Good, sparing him the journey which is futile, and its fruits which are meager. I will let him go before he might, like the rest of us, taint the fabric of being with the pitiful quest for greatness. He is great right now, just as he is. I wish him to remain so. I will shield him from the harsh, inevitable light shone on the frailties and failures of all. I will spare him the pain of aspiring to beauty, dreaming of love, or imagining the perfection of God. Mercifully, I wrap my forearm about his tiny neck. He stares up at me, understanding. If I look hard enough, I can see gratitude in his eyes. Yes.

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You are my son, and I am your father.

He struggles, throwing his feet because a body's desires contradict the soul's needs. I squeeze. Hard. Small, beautiful, and fragile, a perfect, circular head, I make him red like his picture of himself. I imagine the words, "I love you," hanging above his head like a cloud, so innocent, the 'E' backwards, the rest scribbled effortlessly and earnest... I imagine the words and then put them there for him. I say, "I love you" to my perfect boy as his cheeks invert from red to an urgent blue, and his eyes bulge and, feverishly, then weakly, his heels kick at the grime and silt of the motel bathtub, and I cannot look at him like this, not anymore, so I stare up at the lightbulb in the ceiling and let it sear itself into my vision, so I may be blind. And he shudders in my grasp, then shudders again, then stills, and I lower him down, his small, slick-muscled body growing heavier with the glorious weight of non-life, and in the length of the tub where, forever now, he rests immaculate, I lose him. I have been a perfect father. In my heart of hearts, it is known.



Jay Bonggi is a queer author and multidisciplinary artist currently living in San Francisco, California. Their work resides on the spectrum between the dreamlike and horrifying, with previous fiction appearing in Cirque Press, Stone Canoe, Black Horse Review and Wilder Voice magazine. Audio works by Jay are searchable online under the artist name of Kimora.



Bent
by Ariadne Blayde

Fiction

Kate gazed out the window as they rattled away from the town square of Cluj-Napoca, the unofficial capital of Transylvania, in Andrei's creaky old rectangle of a Peugeot. It was dusk. The last weak warmth of the sun's rays on her cheek disappeared when she turned to look at Andrei.

"So tell me more about this mysterious forest," she said to his profile. His jaw was the same shape as Marius', his big hands heavy on the steering wheel. They were rough and calloused from a lifetime of working outdoors. She remembered their feel well.

"Well. Again, I don't know for certain, because I haven't been there myself. But they say it is named for a shepherd who went into the forest with a flock of 200 sheep and never came out."

"Wait, why would you take sheep into a forest?"

"I don't know," Andrei said with a playful grin. "Maybe if we find him, we can ask him."

"What do you mean, find him?"

"Well, that is the other thing. They say people lose time in the forest. I heard that a little girl wandered in, went missing, and turned up five years later without having aged at all. Wearing the same clothes, even."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Oh stop."

"And the trees? Supposedly they grow at strange angles. All bent and twisted. And there's one clearing, a perfect circle area, where nothing grows at all, not even mushrooms. They say it's full of ghosts." Then he shrugged. "If you believe in that sort of thing."

Andrei had only lived in Cluj for six months or so. He'd moved here after it happened -- presumably to get away from his father, though she hadn't asked. The rest of Kate's trip had been to Alba Iulia, to tie up some loose ends with Marius' business, and to the village outside it to visit his other family. She was only in Cluj because the airport was. She'd told herself she wouldn't see Andrei. But here they were, absurdly, on their way to go hiking at night. He'd suggested it, and she'd agreed. Dinner and drinks would have been out of the question.

"They say you hear things, and see things," he continued. "Voices with no bodies. Green eyes in the dark. And they say you will feel something, too. The feeling of being watched. Many become sick, or very lonely, or afraid."

She raised her eyebrows and he turned briefly to look at her, then laughed.

"Eh, don't worry. It is probably only old wives' tales."

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“So who’s this ‘they,’ anyway?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“‘They say.’ Where’d you hear these stories?”

“Aah... well.”

“From him?”

“When we were boys.”

The sun was setting fast, the last blood-orange clouds beginning to darken in the sky. Soon she and Andrei would just be silhouettes.

Maybe the last time she’d be in Romania. Flight to LAX in ten hours.

Within minutes they were out of the city, turning down increasingly narrow country roads as the sun dipped below the horizon. At its center Cluj felt like any other European capital, but after just a few minutes of driving, the rows of squat, Communist-built apartment buildings faded into the sparse poverty of rural Romania. Dim, stooped human shapes moving around thatch-roofed huts served as an abrupt reminder that despite Marius and his luxury real estate development, Romania still was not a first-world country.

The darkness came quickly. Kate watched it settle in.

Andrei was now hunched forward in the drivers’ seat, following a worn-out map that he’d fished from the glovebox and pinned to the steering wheel with one hand. He frowned at it. “I think this is incorrect.”

“What?”

“The way the road splits, here. It is not on the map.”

“So, which way do we go?”

“I think maybe to the left.”

He turned down a gravel road, the beams of the headlights weak in the dark.

“Are you sure? This doesn’t seem like a well-traveled, um, thoroughfare.” It seemed quieter now, somehow, and Kate realized that the dusky chirping of the summer crickets in the fields had faded. The only sound now was the crunch of the gravel under the car’s tires.

“Andrei?”

“I think we are here.”

“What?”

“The forest. I think we are in it, now.”

Sure enough, Kate realized, her view of huts and fields had been replaced by a thick tangle of underbrush. They were going slowly uphill.

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“So where are we going? Is there, like, a trail?”

“Well. The problem is, the forest is very large. It is on the map, but I’m not sure which part is, you know, so haunted.”

“So you *don’t* know where we’re going.” Like his brother, Andrei hated to admit when he’d made a mistake.

“I was thinking, maybe this would take us to a place to park, or...” He trailed off as the gravel gave way to dirt. The road seemed narrower than before.

“Doesn’t look like it. Maybe we should turn around?”

Suddenly the tires were spinning helplessly and the car was not moving forward anymore. “What the hell?” Andrei muttered. He looked out the window. “Mud.”

“Shit, really?”

“Although, I don’t know why there is mud. It has not rained here for weeks.” He stepped on the gas again. The car made an ugly sound and didn’t move.

“So now what,” she said.

“Maybe we can just get out here? Have a look quickly?”

“But there’s not a trail.”

“Well, we can just walk up the road. That way it will be easy to find the car when we’re finished.”

“Okay. Sure.”

Kate stepped out of the car into three inches of mud.

“Shit!”

“What is it?”

“This fucking mud is no joke.”

“Should we not do this, maybe?”

“I mean, might as well.” She did her best to pull herself out of the mud, annoyed, and wiped some from her shoe onto the car tire.

“*Futa-l dracu!*” Andrei swore as he closed his car door, smacking himself in the forehead with his palm. “Another problem. We have no light.”

“It’s not too dark, though,” she said, glancing up at the sky. The rising moon was nearly full, bathing the woods in soft white light. “I bet we’ll be okay without one.”

“If you say so,” he shrugged. They started walking.

The thick mud hardened as they went along, and after twenty or thirty yards, the road turned,

narrowed, and the car disappeared from view. Andrei's fingers accidentally brushed Kate's as they walked, and the sensation felt electric. It was the first time they'd touched all night. "Sorry," he said immediately. But she looked at him absentmindedly, as though she hadn't noticed.

"Sorry for what?"

"Nothing."

Had she really not registered his touch? That's how it had started, after all, their hands brushing together that night in Alba Iulia as they'd left the restaurant after a dinner Marius had paid for but not joined. *Here's 300*, he'd said in that cold, modern hotel room above the warm medieval city, tossing a bill clip at Andrei. *Buy her a nice meal, keep her company. I have too much work tonight.* He'd never suspected, of course. Andrei was a nobody, just his loser *decretel* brother.

He glanced over at Kate. It had been only eight months, but she looked different, with this severe new haircut and the lost weight. She'd been so soft before.

"Doesn't look that weird to me," she said, looking around at the trees. "Didn't you say the trees were supposed to be all bent and funny shaped?"

She was right, the trees seemed very normal. They were just trees, not so strange or special, not so close together or widely spaced. Straight and tall, just trees in the dark.

"Well, perhaps it is in another part of the forest that they look different," he said.

"Hmm."

She seemed disappointed, and Andrei felt his cheeks go hot with frustration. Certainly after just a few minutes they would agree there was nothing to see, go back to the car, and shortly afterward part ways. Tomorrow she would go back to America.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's nice though," she shrugged. "The moon is pretty."

He looked up between overhanging branches and caught sight of it, a fat white light in the sky. *So what*, he thought. "Do they not have the moon in America?" he said darkly.

"Wow, sarcasm! That's new, coming from you," she said, and laughed.

Andrei felt pleased that he'd made a joke she liked. He remembered sitting up late in the kitchen with Marius and his father at their childhood home, the very first time Marius had brought Kate to visit. "These American girls," Marius had said. "They like smart guys. They like rich guys. But mostly, they like funny guys." Andrei remembered that week ringing with the sound of Kate's laughter, her voice warm and clear and different. But he couldn't follow the jokes his brother made, all in American slang that Andrei didn't understand.

"You see, Andrei?" their father had said, taking a drag from his cigarette. "If you were clever like

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this, had learned English better and studied harder, you could have gone to America and gotten a pretty girl like that.”

“Dad, please, the smoke,” Marius said with a sour look, and their father obediently put out the cigarette. “Really, it’s so backward. In the civilized world, people don’t smoke inside like this.”

“And what is so civilized about America?” Andrei remembered grumbling. “I see the news, they’re always killing each other with guns. And everyone there is fat.”

“You’re one to talk,” Marius laughed, poking at Andrei’s stomach. Andrei had stood then, angry, and walked out of the kitchen. “Relax, Romanian girls like a little meat on the bone!” Marius had called after him. The reality was that Andrei could never get rid of his slight belly, could never have the physique his brother did, because their father had forced him to work in the family junkyard as a boy and all the heavy lifting had caused a hernia. So now and for the rest of his life, if he worked out too hard, his guts would spill out.

Decretel, a child of the decree, the unwanted second son. Ceaucescu had desired a bigger population, more laborers for his factories, so, no more abortion. No contraceptives, even. “*Anti-bebe! Anti-bebe!*” the Roma women called outside the resorts by the Black Sea, holding up packets of pills. “Bought some of those for your mother when you showed up in her belly,” his father had winked at Andrei the one time he’d taken the boys to the seashore. Then he’d frowned. “Gypsy trash. Didn’t work, did it?”

As he stormed down the hall away from their laughter, Kate had peeked out from the boys’ childhood bedroom, bare-legged under one of his t-shirts. Her eyes had been sleepy and calm and Andrei had instantly become embarrassed.

“Apology,” he’d said in his then-limited English. “We are very loud?”

“No, it’s okay. I like hearing him talk in Romanian. He insists on speaking English when we’re together.”

“You like Romanian?”

“Yes, it’s a beautiful language.” A romance language. Closer to Italian and French than Ukrainian or Polish.

“Well, then... *Noapte buna si vise placute.*”

“Does that mean good night?”

“Good night and... how do you say? Nice dreams.”

“*Sweet* dreams.”

“Thank you. And also to you.”

She’d laughed a little, and smiled, then gone back into the bedroom and closed the door. He’d felt pleased at having made her laugh, though he wasn’t sure what had been funny.

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In the night he'd been awakened by the sound of his brother's grunts and Kate's high, clear sighs. The sound of it made an old familiar knot in his gut start to ache, the thing he told himself was just the hernia, but which spread quickly through his body with waves of green pain. He wished desperately that the sounds would stop, began to fantasize about kicking open the door and smothering Marius with a pillow, choking him, until the noise ended, but it didn't, and soon the nausea was so intense that Andrei had to get up and stumble to the bathroom. Vomit poured out of him just as his brother's grunting reached its crescendo. Maybe he'd had too much to drink.

The recollection made Andrei feel sick. Or maybe it was just the uphill path, irritating his hernia... a pulsing ache was materializing inside him.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked. "You've got a weird look."

"I am fine."

"You don't look fine. You look like you're in pain."

The ache was spreading, blooming through his guts into crippling nausea. Andrei stopped, clutching his stomach, and Kate put a hand on his back. It felt heavy and strange. He pulled away.

"Just digestion, I think. I'll be fine. Let's continue walking."

Kate had been lucky enough to grow up in the Bay Area, just a few hours from the most beautiful forests in America, where the redwoods were so large that twenty people couldn't link arms around one trunk. The trees here were nondescript compared to the ones back home. They were all slender and straight, elm and beech and maple, maybe between forty and fifty years old. She was unimpressed.

"You said this forest has been around how long?"

"Fifty thousand years or some," Andrei grunted.

"No way. The trees are way younger than that."

He didn't respond, and she glanced over at him. His face was still screwed up in discomfort.

"Are you sure you're okay? Should we go back to the car?"

"No," he said forcefully. "We should keep walking. At least to the top of the hill." Kate was taken aback. Andrei's softness, his mildness, had been why Kate had found herself curious in the first place.

"Look, I hate to say it, but I think the whole 'haunted forest' thing is a hoax," she said.

"You're right. Not so interesting, is it."

"I mean, it's nice to get outside, I guess."

A metallic edge crept into Andrei's voice. "I'm sure he took you to many better places, here in Romania."

"Uh..."

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“He took you to all the castles, yes? Dracula’s castle?”

“You mean Vlad the Impaler.”

“And you drank wine there. On the top of the ruins. A fine red wine, the color of blood.” Kate was surprised Marius had mentioned that to Andrei. They’d filled a water bottle with Merlot, sipped from it while looking down into the valley where Vlad had displayed his enemies on giant skewers.

“We thought it would be cute.”

“Did you toast?”

“I don’t remember.”

“But you remember the toast I taught you, yes?”

“How could I forget. *Sanatate si virtute s-avem mereu ce fute.*”

“You remember what it means?”

“I think so. May you have... health?” she began. “May you have health, may you have virtue, and may you always have someone to fuck.” Andrei grunted in the affirmative. There had been many nights that had begun with that toast, and ended with--

Kate shook the thought away. “He was mad that you taught me that, you know.”

“Of course he was. He was too -- how do you say it.”

“Proper?”

“Stuck up. When you have American college, American money, American girl, I suppose that will make you too good to--”

“Andrei.”

“What?”

“You don’t have to compete with him anymore.”

They were silent.

Her eyes were fully adjusted to the night now, darkness softened by slices of moonlight and shadow. As they walked, not talking, Kate realized how quiet it was. Their footsteps barely made a sound, and there were no insects buzzing in the trees, no thrum of frog calls, not even the rustling of wind in the branches. Like being high up on a mountain above the treeline on a calm day. Except they weren’t above the treeline. An eerie feeling crept up her spine to her shoulders.

Kate hated quiet. As the only child of a loveless marriage, her childhood had been filled with a lifetime’s worth of silence. Probably one of the reasons she’d married Marius: he never stopped talking. Her husband had loved to show off his perfect English, his encyclopedic knowledge of finance, his wit. And he’d had so many words just for her. The most beautiful compliments, flowery and full of words that most

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native English-speakers didn't use. He'd once called her beauty "incandescent." Their love, he liked to say, was "incalculable and unconquerable." Back when he'd been a graduate student, she'd snuck into the classes he taught just to hear him talk.

There had only been one time in their life together that he'd had nothing to say.

"It's so quiet," she said, to make it less so. Andrei didn't respond. He'd always been much more careful with his words than Marius, didn't speak unless necessary. Even after he became fluent, he was halting in his use of English, probably afraid that he'd slip up. Understandable for someone who'd been called stupid all his life. But still frustrating. Kate wanted to talk, to chatter, to fill the space with sound and words like Marius always had.

"Don't you think it's quiet?" she said again. The silence of the forest swallowed her words quickly, and again Andrei didn't respond. As the seconds passed, the silence seemed to become even more intense, more oppressive. She felt leaves underfoot but her steps made no sound; the branches were moving but there was no rustling, no whisper of breeze. She wanted to shout, but her throat felt constricted. All she could hear was her own breath, growing more and more rapid.

Andrei grimaced, trying not to double over in discomfort. The nausea had gotten worse, and his entire body felt tingly and unsettled. He felt the need to vomit. He wondered how he could manage to do it without her noticing.

Suddenly Kate cried out his name, a little strangled sound from the back of her throat.

"What is it? What's wrong?" He turned sharply to her, lay a hand on the soft skin of her arm. She was breathing heavily.

"Nothing. I just got freaked out for a second."

He frowned. This was not turning out to be so fun. "We should go back, then. I do not want for you to be afraid."

"You're sweet."

She'd called him that often. Since the first kiss. They'd been drinking palinca, the homemade apricot brandy that he always helped his father to make in the autumn, and she'd told him that he tasted sweet.

"It's just the drink," he'd said, his mouth inches from hers, the scent of fermented fruit lingering between them.

"Not just the drink. You. You're sweet, and kind, and sensual." Her fingers had been on his chest, then on his belly, which he sucked in self-consciously but not for long, because soon her fingers were sliding even lower, unbuckling his pants, tugging on him.

Her high, clear sighs that night seemed louder, more satisfied, than the ones he'd heard from Marius' room during Kate's first visit those many years before. And when it was over, he lay awake in the

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dark for an hour or more, smiling. It was the first time in his life he'd felt truly sated.

But as days stretched into weeks, the glow faded. One afternoon, as Marius made him a piece of toast with zacusca, something in Andrei wilted. "Remember when we were kids?" Marius had smiled, spooning the thick bell pepper spread onto the toast. "Whenever grandmother brought over a fresh batch of zacusca, we'd sneak into the kitchen at night and eat a whole loaf of bread with it."

They'd been so poor, then, under Ceausescu. The zacusca was the most delicious thing they ever got to eat.

"And always got whipped for it the next day."

"Yes," Marius laughed. And then his face changed, and he put a hand on Andrei's shoulder. "Always you worse than me, though, eh?"

Andrei turned away. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"But it does," Marius said seriously.

Andrei waved him off. "It all evens out in the end."

"You think?"

"Sure," he'd said, glancing out the kitchen window at Kate in the yard. She was pinning laundry up, the hills and the junkyard and Andrei's russet-colored Peugoet golden in the late afternoon light behind her. *Russet*: an English word she'd taught him, the color of roasted potatoes and autumn leaves. He tried to remember all the Romanian words he'd taught her, over the course of her visits. *Femeie, Castelul, Inimă*. Woman, castle, soul.

As a child, too, Andrei had taken things from his brother. Marbles, pencils, an American baseball card Marius had somehow gotten ahold of. Marius always got his things back, eventually. But he never tattled on Andrei.

Two days later he'd found them in bed. And two hours after that--

Andrei could no longer control it, the murky, unsettled feeling in his body, the need to vomit. He staggered off the path into the trees.

Kate's head thudded with the sound of her own heartbeat. The silence seemed to be taking on more dimension, now, so that it was no longer an absence but a presence, radiating up from the ground and down from the sky and around from the trees. An angry, buzzing silence, the silence of Marius in the doorway. How long had he been there? She and Andrei had both called out as they'd disentangled, the three syllables of his name springing simultaneously from their lips and then disappearing into silence. Marius just looked at them. For an eternity he stood there, looking, his eyes cold, his lips closed. Nothing else was said.

It was almost as though she was wearing earplugs, now, dulling the sound of the outside world and augmenting the noises in her brain and body. She could feel her own pulse, the blood pumping through the

rivers and streams of her veins, carrying with it the oxygen that kept her synapses firing, kept her feet moving forward up this hill. A closed system, circulating and re-circulating for as long as it could manage, keeping her alive, always moving forward.

Unless something happened to it. Unless the closed system became open. A hole. A crack. An opening for the blood to spill out of, rivers of veins diverted to a pooling lake, a red wet lake expanding useless from Marius' head, spreading spreading spreading across the artificial landscape of a cool tile floor.

She and Andrei had gone to his hotel room together that evening, the evening he'd appeared silently in the doorway, after two hours had passed. The concierge knew them, sent them up to the suite with a wave and a smile. The door was ajar, the shower still running. The first thing Kate saw was his foot, bent strangely away from his ankle on the floor of the bathroom. Then a wet leg, a naked groin, a twisted torso. Something wrong above that. A mess of red. He'd slipped. Broken glass around him, the fifth of whiskey he'd almost finished off. How many of its molecules were there in the pool of blood on the floor, coagulated around the crack in his skull?

Andrei had been shouting in Romanian, loudly at first, then more quietly as the room went black. When Kate came to, the police were arriving and Andrei was at the window, staring out, perfectly still. Their father was there. He was the one shouting, now, cradling his dead son, blood on his pants, yelling and crying as the police pulled him away from the body. She was silent. Andrei kept looking and looking and looking out the window. After a minute he vomited. Just opened the window and threw up down onto the side of the hotel, this building her husband had made with all his money. She wanted to reach out to him.

But he was not there.

He was not beside her on the path, he was not behind her, he was not ahead of her. Kate could hear nothing but her own breathing, ugly and rapid, and the thud of her pulse getting quicker, heavier. She covered her ears and closed her eyes.

"Kate!"

She opened her eyes and Andrei was standing in front of her. She embraced him.

"Where the hell did you go?"

"I'm sorry. I felt sick, I had to step over there."

"You can't just walk away from me in a goddamn haunted forest, okay?"

"I'm sorry."

His rough palms were warm and heavy on her back, his breath comforting against the side of her head. He was an inch or two shorter than Marius, another thing that had always driven him crazy.

"So you *do* think it is haunted?" he asked.

"Whatever it is, I don't fucking like it," she said into his chest.

“Me too.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Agreed.”

But Kate didn’t pull away. She could hear Andrei’s heartbeat thud-thudding under his shirt, so much more comforting than the sound of her own. He smelled like earth. One of his hands was on her back and one had reached up to cradle her head, rough fingertips smoothing her hair. She put a palm on his chest and looked up at him. His eyes were pools of dark, half his face pale under the moon, the other half in shadow. He was the same as Marius, but different. Same jaw, same nose. But Andrei was shorter, with darker, thicker hair and more olive skin, tanned by a lifetime working in the sun. *And their kisses*, she remembered, as he bent down to put his lips on hers. Their kisses were worlds apart.

“I’m sorry,” Andrei whispered when the kiss was finished. He felt deeply ashamed.

Kate began to cry.

“Oh no! I-- I did not mean--”

“No, it’s not your fault,” she said through tears. “I’m just so stupid. I thought I could see you and have it be normal but there’s no way, it’s all just so fucked up.”

“I know.”

“And your dad, seeing your dad, and knowing he doesn’t know--”

The thought filled Andrei with panic. “He cannot find out. You must never tell him.”

“So what, we just have to carry it around for the rest of our lives?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s our fault, Andrei.”

“I do not believe that,” he said, shaking his head vigorously. He’d never allowed himself to.

“It’s our fucking fault and you know it!”

Andrei felt his English slipping away, the articles and pronouns failing him. “It was accident! He drank too much, fell down, not our fault.”

“Yeah, because of what he saw!”

“What happened, happened. We cannot change the past.”

Kate’s face went stony. “It’s that easy for you, isn’t it. Because you didn’t love him like I did.”

“He was my brother.”

“You spent your whole life in his shadow. Wanting what he had.”

“He was still my family--”

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She was yelling now, her voice clanging against the heavy silence of the forest. "--And you finally got it, didn't you? You finally took something of his."

"You were not *his*. You are you."

"I..."

"I'm sorry." He looked down with a little cough, choking on his shame. He wished he could disappear. "I'm very sorry. For all of this, everything."

"Oh my God," she said with a sharp intake of breath.

"I know, I--"

"No, seriously. Look."

He looked up. They were at the top of the hill, in a clearing. Above was an unimpeded view of the sky, where the moon seemed to have slipped behind a cloud.

"Did we -- when did we get to the top of the hill?"

"We didn't."

There was a sound, then, movement coming from below, the faint tinkling of a bell.

"Do you hear that?" Kate asked quietly.

He put a finger to his lips and they listened. The sound was getting closer, moving through the trees a hundred or so yards away.

"It sounds like a person," she whispered.

"The shepherd," he said, more to himself than to her.

"There's no fucking way."

And Andrei knew, rationally, that she was right. The things Marius had told him about the Hoia Forest were just old wives' tales and schoolboy legends. Peasants don't get lost in the woods and wander out decades later, trees cannot be haunted... But how serious Marius had looked, when he'd told Andrei the things he'd heard at school. How badly they'd wanted to come here. Back then it had been impossible, of course. Cluj was more than an hour's drive from their village outside Alba Iulia, and the family hadn't had a car, in those early days.

"We'll go someday," Marius had whispered to him one night, the two of them side by side on their bed in the dim evening light. There was almost never electricity then, and the window above them was hung with a wet sheet to block the bad dust from something called Chernobyl. Andrei didn't quite understand why, but for several weeks they hadn't been allowed to eat fruit from the market or play outside, so in the evening instead of playing with his friends, Marius had been telling Andrei stories. "When we get older Ceausescu will be gone, and I'll have a lot of money, and I'll drive us there," he'd said.

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His brother talked like he knew everything. Andrei couldn't imagine a Romania without Ceausescu's tyranny, the possibility never would have even occurred to him.. His little cheeks reddened at Marius' claim.

"I mean it," Marius had said, clamping a solemn hand on Andrei's shoulder. "When we're grown, we'll go there. And we'll see the ghosts."

Whoever was approaching was getting closer, and Kate was clutching Andrei tight, her fingers digging into his arm.

Soon a figure emerged from the trees.

It was an old man, wearing dark faded pants and a musty woolen jacket. He carried a walking staff, attached to the top of which was the bell they'd heard jingling. He was walking up the hill, and it almost seemed like he didn't notice them.

"G-- good evening," Andrei called out tentatively as he neared.

The man turned to them, registered their presence. He looked suspicious at first, then smirked. "Going for a nighttime walk, eh?" he said, taking off his sweat stained cap to run his hand through thinning hair.

"Uh, yes. Something like that." The man came closer, and Andrei was able to make out his face, leathery olive under an unkempt white beard and thick eyebrows. When he opened his mouth to speak again, Andrei realized he was missing most of his teeth.

"Well, it's a good night for it, with the moon so big and full."

"And... you?" Andrei asked.

"Gathering," he said, holding up a dirty cotton sack.

"Mushrooms?"

"Nah."

"What, then?"

He didn't answer. When he lowered his arm, the sack made a faint rattling sound. "Got to be careful of the wolves, though."

"Wolves? There are wolves, here?"

"Don't you hear them howling?"

Andrei shook his head. The man frowned.

"I, ah... I grew up hearing stories about this place," Andrei said. "Rumors of strange activity."

"And you wanted to come find out if the stories were true."

"Yes."

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The man said nothing, just looked at them while he sucked on the insides of his mouth. The whites of his eyes were very bright in the moonlight.

Andrei spoke again, haltingly. "So... you've never experienced anything strange, or...?"

"You mean ghosts? Spooks, that sort of thing?"

Andrei nodded, and the man shook his head with a little smile.

"Only ghosts in the Hoia Forest are the ones you bring it."

He coughed, tugged on his greasy cap. "The wolves, though. They'll take all you've got." Then he turned and went back into the woods, his sack rattling faintly.

Kate had goosebumps up and down her arms. "That was super weird," she said uneasily, after the man had disappeared into the trees.

"He said there are wolves, here in the forest."

"I heard."

"*Lupi*? You know this word?"

"Huh? He was speaking English."

Andrei took a step away from her, eyes widening. "No he was not."

"What?"

Andrei shook his head. "Kate -- he was speaking Romanian, I swear it. Every word."

"Don't fuck with me. He said he was gathering something, and asked if you heard the wolves howling..."

A shudder coursed through her when she saw the look on Andrei's face. "Jesus. Let's get back to the car," she said.

"Yes, it will be faster on the way back," he said, a tremor in his voice. "Downhill."

"Good. Let's go." They walked quickly, leaving the clearing at the top of the hill and entering the forest once more. Soon the moon was obscured by branches overhead. The darkness seemed much heavier than it had on the way in.

Andrei stopped in his tracks.

"Kate."

"What?"

"Do you see?"

"See what?" She was really in no mood to play games. "Can we please just keep moving?"

"Look," he said softly. There was fear in his voice. She looked around, trying to make out what he

saw in the dark.

It was the trees.

They were much closer together than before. And every single tree was growing from the ground at an unnatural angle, the forest jutting up into the night like a jumble of crisscrossed matchsticks.

“They didn’t look like that before,” Andrei said quietly. “Did they?”

“Maybe we just... weren’t paying attention.”

“We *were* paying attention. We were looking for the strange trees, remember? *There were none.*”

But now they shot up from the earth like mangled fingers on broken hands, bent and contorted, some of the trunks even changing direction at odd angles as they climbed toward the sky.

Kate’s pulse raged in her throat, the *thud thud thud* of her blood drowning out Andrei’s voice. “Come on,” she said, and grabbed his calloused hand. They began to run.

And as they ran, it felt like the trees were getting closer. The ones lining the path seemed to be leaning in a little more with every yard they sprinted, the angles more precarious, the bends more severe. And the forest wasn’t silent anymore. The trees were vibrating, screaming, all of them together making a sound like the roar of a thousand angry people. She was afraid to look down at the path to watch her footing, because every time she did the trees got louder, and leaned in closer.

And then Kate’s hand slipped out of Andrei’s and she was face down on the ground, something hard smacking her lip, a trickle of blood down her chin. She tried to clamber to her feet, but her hands slipped on the dead leaves. There was something else, too, the hardness that had busted her lip. Bones. Two tibia and the skull of an animal, broken curly horns protruding from each side. They rattled as she pushed them away in horror, trying to stand.

A hand reached out to pull her up. “Andrei,” she sobbed as she got to her feet, blinded by tears. The smooth hand wound its way up her arm to her shoulder, then around her neck, caressing her cheek. Fingers soft, cool. No calluses. No rough spots.

She looked up.

“My love,” Marius said, a bloody crater in the side of his head.

Kate had tripped over a tree. Not a log, but a living tree, which grew six inches upward and then took a sharp right angle turn, jutting out across the path. It hadn’t been there on the way in. Andrei hauled Kate to her feet, trying to quiet her sobs. Her lip was bleeding. “We’re almost there,” he said, heart pounding. “I can see the car. Come on!” Andrei pulled Kate’s hand, urging her to run faster.

The hardened dirt path gave way to mud as they hurried toward the Peugeot. Kate was hobbling, crying, obviously having injured her ankle in the fall. They reached the car. The doors were unlocked and Andrei yanked the driver’s side door open, got in. He heard the passenger door slam closed as he fumbled in his pocket for the key, found it, shoved it into the ignition as he threw the clutch into reverse.

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The wheels spun helplessly in the mud. The car did not move.

Andrei spewed a string of swear words in Romanian, slammed his hands against the steering wheel.

“I suppose we’re stuck,” said the passenger.

It wasn’t Kate.

Andrei turned slowly. His brother’s head was collapsed, a long bloody crease in the skull where he’d hit the marble sink.

“But that’s alright. Maybe now we can see if the stories are true.”

Andrei recoiled in horror.

Marius smiled. “Didn’t I always tell you I’d bring you here, little brother?”

Kate choked on his name as he gazed at her. “Marius.”

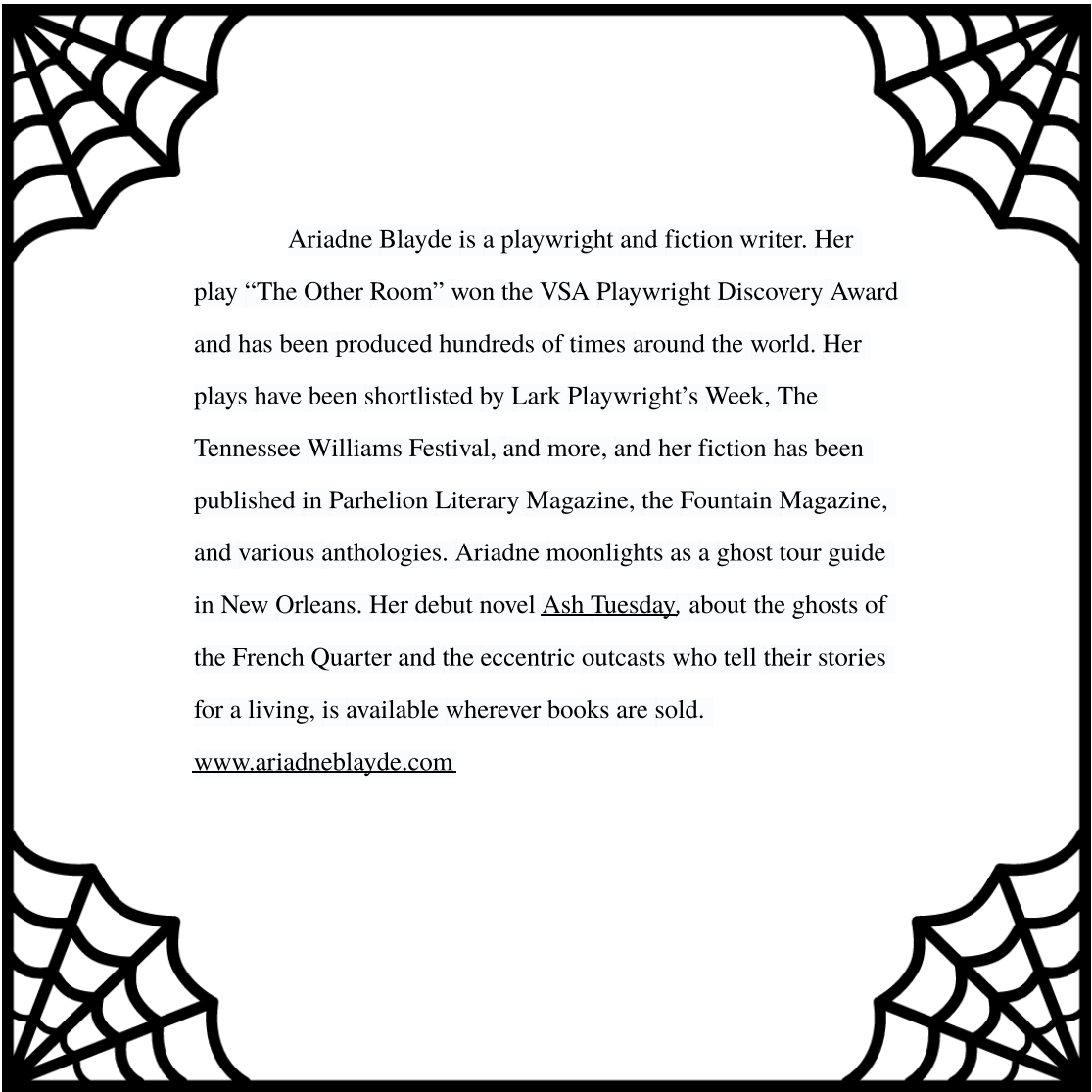
“Hello again, my love.”

She reached out to touch his pale, cold, smiling face, then drew away. tears poured down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry, darling. Time heals all wounds.” He laced his fingers through hers. “And we have all the time in the world.”

Cool, soft hands, so different than Andrei’s. As their fingers intertwined, so did the trunks of the trees above. They were leaning in at even steeper angles, now, crisscrossing in a tangled jumble above the path, blocking out the sky. Marius’ face was an inch from Kate’s, their bodies close, their hands locked together. She could smell the rotting blood on his head as the trees tightened around them. Soon Kate felt the cool bark of a trunk against her back, then another, then one on every side. Pushing her into Marius. Down the path, she could hear Andrei screaming.

Two weeks later, a farmer came across an abandoned russet-colored Peugeot on the road through Hoia Forest. It was covered in a gentle layer of dead leaves, fallen from a canopy of summer trees.



Ariadne Blayde is a playwright and fiction writer. Her play “The Other Room” won the VSA Playwright Discovery Award and has been produced hundreds of times around the world. Her plays have been shortlisted by Lark Playwright’s Week, The Tennessee Williams Festival, and more, and her fiction has been published in Parhelion Literary Magazine, the Fountain Magazine, and various anthologies. Ariadne moonlights as a ghost tour guide in New Orleans. Her debut novel [Ash Tuesday](#), about the ghosts of the French Quarter and the eccentric outcasts who tell their stories for a living, is available wherever books are sold.

www.ariadneblayde.com



The Haunting
by TS S. Fulk

Poetry

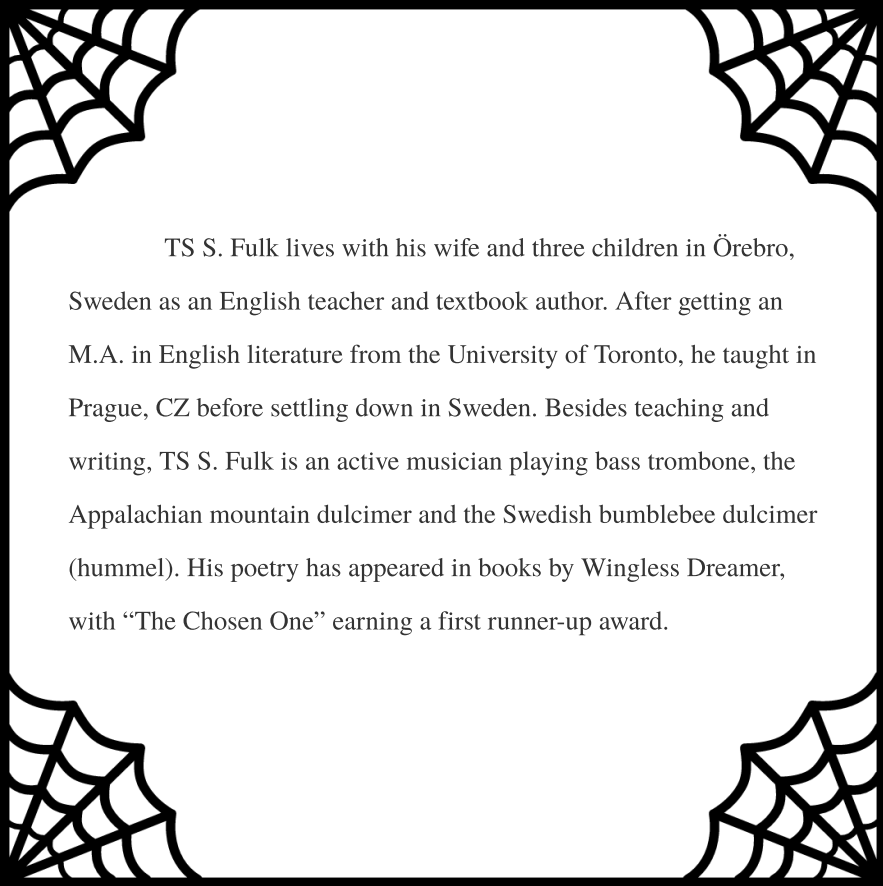
As always I'm drawn to this spot
where flowers and candles mingle
like teenagers at a disco
just past a tight bend in the path
here in my vivacious forest.

Joggers in their skintight clothing
rush around like commuting cars
unaware of the scenery.

Unaware of the past,
that the candles melt for.

Unaware of the risk
implied in each wilted
bouquet and salt-filled tear
that the stalker has caused.

My spirit flits from tree to tree
waiting for his return.



TS S. Fulk lives with his wife and three children in Örebro, Sweden as an English teacher and textbook author. After getting an M.A. in English literature from the University of Toronto, he taught in Prague, CZ before settling down in Sweden. Besides teaching and writing, TS S. Fulk is an active musician playing bass trombone, the Appalachian mountain dulcimer and the Swedish bumblebee dulcimer (hummel). His poetry has appeared in books by Wingless Dreamer, with “The Chosen One” earning a first runner-up award.



Bodie, CA
by Lawrence Bridges

Poetry

1

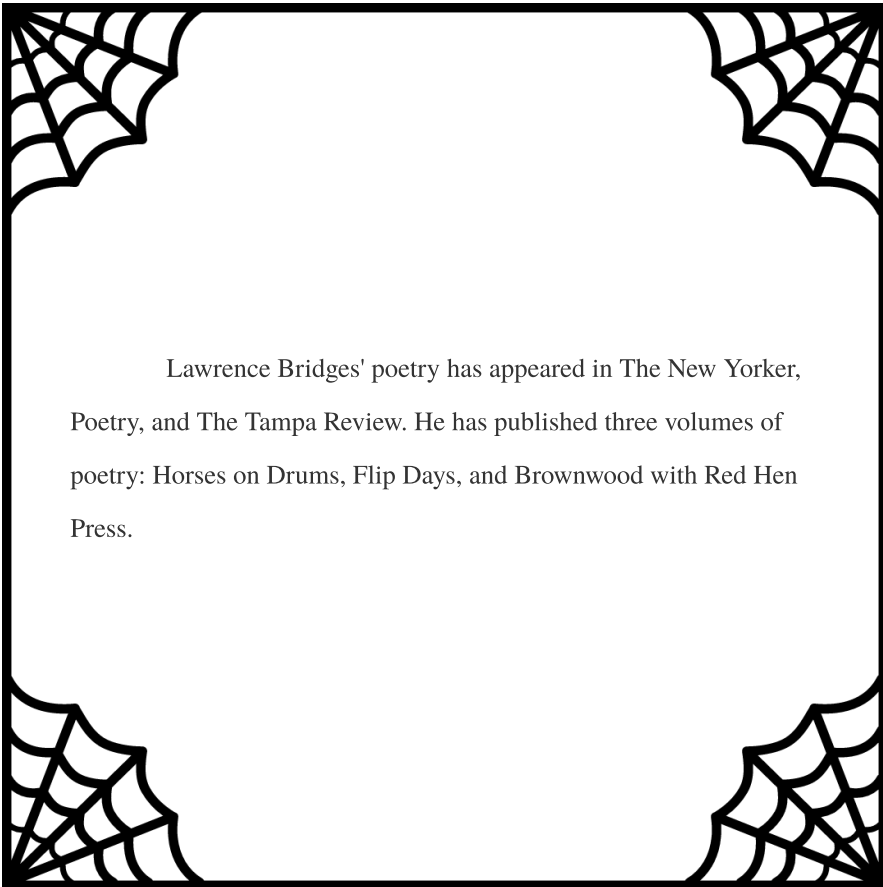
December 5, 2020

You rise from the dream where everything is misplaced.
You stop, curious about the shiny spot on your
spacebar. It proves you're right-handed. You begin to
see the damning short evidence of existence. There you
are, talking to no one, with trouble coming by rail,
trying not to moan over losses and bad luck. You look
up and you can see that you're now in the desert,
shutting off the world to explore a dusty ghost town,
seeing pure light hit old wood and dust devils, even in
misfortune. You shine in the morning light that put you
here.

2

December 16, 2020

Ghost towns on the mesas fizzle with souls. I go there
as into a room forgetting why I entered. Everyone bets
their treasure on deliverance, their confined eyes look
out from damage, the love of anything, a balm. The
papers in the driveways report the unnecessary news.





Gravity's Daughter
by Sara Biel

Poetry

Each night, she walks bed-less
a smoke-tinged exhalation
seeking asylum in the barren home of the street.

She swings her lantern
flings hope over warning
contradiction echoes
in her parched smile.
Her trail, a tranquil ruin through the waxy night.

This small woman
face closed as a fist
mind open as a precipice.
When she cracks
it sounds like breaking bone.

Haphazard
he approaches
into her silence.

An interruption that tears her wander.
His gaze sharp, vacant,
a predatory relic in apathetic streetlight.

His words melt in her ears
confusion of righteousness and privilege.
His proposition a mirage
catalogue of lies
squirm from his tongue
until he too is lost, adrift in his illusion.

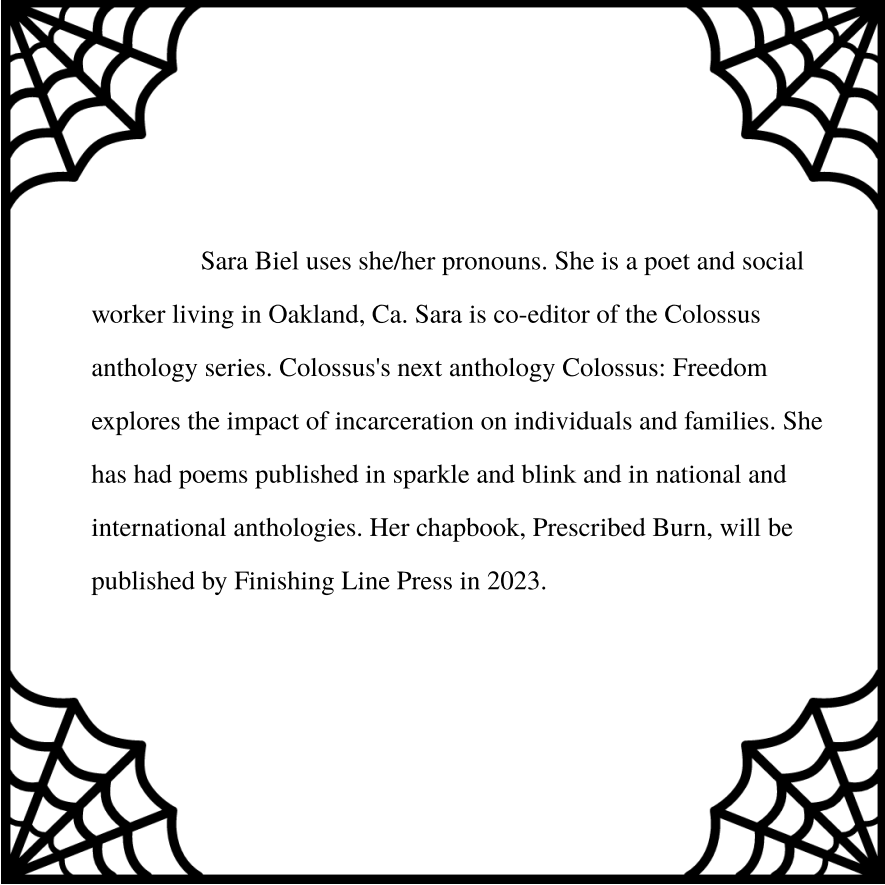
But, she tears the cowl
sloughing off his offering
the reasons he carefully salted
the itch in his phantom limb.

Her blood hears a song blown from the lips of fall's fury.
A rhythm rejoicing, gathering effervescence under her skin.

The Rusalki come unstrung.
Each mistress of her own precise grief.

Vengeful sirens
every girl's friend
they swim too close to the bones
of this wounded suckling world.
They cut their teeth on aborted promises
writhe in the blood, whistle through tears.
Drive the waves in singular sorority.

They beat their wings till it's all undone -
this sleep in search of a flying dream.
She's vaulted on their voices
Soars through flinty laughter
deaf to his calls, immune to generic time.
She is gravity's daughter
apprentice to catastrophe.
His alibi slides from her shoulders.
Her hips shake freedom from chipped bits of bone.
Her arms unfurl among immaculate stars.
Her feet break free of remorse—
leaving the sidewalk empty handed
as she communes with their storm.



Sara Biel uses she/her pronouns. She is a poet and social worker living in Oakland, Ca. Sara is co-editor of the Colossus anthology series. Colossus's next anthology Colossus: Freedom explores the impact of incarceration on individuals and families. She has had poems published in sparkle and blink and in national and international anthologies. Her chapbook, Prescribed Burn, will be published by Finishing Line Press in 2023.

BUTTON EYE

REVIEW



