



# THE FANTASTIC OTHER



ISSUE 05

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## Editor's Note

Yet again, we found ourselves overwhelmed by the tide of fresh submissions. Our magazine continues to grow, and we were astonished anew by waves of undiscovered talent, seasoned writers, and support from contributors. This issue had no formal theme, yet patterns of thought can be found throughout. We received various works that deal with transformation, specifically transformation of the personal kind, the literal and metaphorical changing of one's skin. We acquired stories that deal with the transformation of society, of the beginnings and endings of things as we understand them. Above all, there is movement, wistfulness, and the aching inside ourselves for the magic lost from our every day. I hope you will enjoy these stories and find comfort in them as another summer winds to its conclusion.

G. E. Butler, Chief Editor of *The Fantastic Other*

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## About the Cover Art

The sketch on the cover was drawn and submitted by Irina Novikova (she/her). Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, and illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. You can follow her on Instagram via the handles @Irina1187Novikova11 and @Ирина.

# Uncle Bucket

by Ali Abid

The shouting makes it hard to sleep, so I take my keyboard as far into the closet as the cord goes and I play while Baba stomps around the house, looking for Ma. He curses, makes a call, and then we both go stand in the dirt road while the sun comes up, waiting for Uncle Bucket to come lend Baba a car.

When the company wagon hovers near us and slows, Baba opens the door hard and puts one foot on the front bumper to keep it from gliding away. He uses a wrench and a crowbar to pry Uncle Bucket from the driver's seat and throws him to the ground.

Uncle Bucket's face-screen flashes red, and he says, "The company will report me stolen."

"Don't care," Baba says as he gets behind the wheel. "Samira ran off with my check and I have to find her." He shuts the door and points at me through the window. "You watch Kabir," he says and starts turning the wagon around. "And don't burn my house down!"

Uncle Bucket is shaped like a person, except his legs bend backwards like a chicken and if someone cleaned him up, he would be shiny.

"Are you hungry?" he asks in a voice that always sounds polite and peaceful, which I like.

"We don't have any food," I tell him and follow him into our house. He starts opening the cabinets, and a few of the handles and doors come off in his hands.

“Apologies,” he says. “I’m criticized because I don’t take proper care of objects.” He finds some eggs in the fridge and some cooking oil.

“That’s Baba’s food. He doesn’t let us have it. Mama buys our food, but she hasn’t been able to work since Baba threw her computer against the wall.” I point toward a small dent next to the window in the main room. Uncle Bucket walks over and examines it with a finger that looks like a segment of bicycle chain. As he pokes the dent, he punches through the drywall. He traces it in a wide circle until there’s a heap of white material at his feet and a hole the size of a hula hoop.

I cough as dust fills the living room.

“Apologies” he says and walks back into the kitchen.

Uncle Bucket makes eggs. First, he makes a couple sunny side up, which I eat, but then he makes more, even though I’m not hungry. This time he tries flipping them. They fall everywhere, flopping once like dead fish. One lands on a cockroach. A couple on the dirt part of the kitchen floor where the tiles are missing. One falls into the burner and catches fire. Uncle Bucket feeds the flame a wooden spoon and then reaches over to pull the window curtain into it as well.

I scream, and he turns off the stove.

“Apologies,” he says, “I’m criticized because of my lack of care for objects and also for my fondness of fire.” He takes more care now as he cleans up.

“Is Baba going to get into trouble with the company?”

“He’ll be fired, and by tomorrow they will come here to return me to inventory,” says Uncle



Bucket. “They may decommission me if they believe I willingly stayed off duty. That would match my history of noncompliance.”

The telephone rings. “Only Baba is allowed to pick up,” I say.

Uncle Bucket answers. “You’ve reached the home of...Yes, I’m a service bot...I understand...that is a relief...Yes, I’m here with him...On him? I haven’t noticed any bruising or marks...Yes, I’ll help make the arrangements. When?... Will his mother be with you? I think that’s for the best...No, we’ll actually be just outside the house...Shortly.”

He crushes the receiver and pulls the phone off the wall.

“Apologies,” says Uncle Bucket, “I’m criticized, also, for outbursts of anger.” He turns toward me and crouches. “Your mother will be coming soon with some friends to pick you up. Can you help me gather your belongings?”

All my clothes fit in a garbage bag. Aside from that, I have my keyboard, which has been taped back together several times, so I carry it carefully.

“Is anything in here your mother’s? Or yours? This picture frame?”

“No, that’s a picture of Baba’s dad.”

He throws it back onto the table. “If that’s all then, let’s go.” We walk across the dirt road up the hill. From here we can see the brickyard where Uncle Bucket and Baba work and the other worker cottages staggered across the muddy hills. “We’ll wait here for your mother to come, but I’ll go back into the house for a moment. Don’t follow.”

I sit with my unplugged keyboard on my knees, and I think about how peaceful everything

is at this distance. After a few minutes, I notice smoke coming out of our kitchen window. Bright orange light moves in the main room, just before that window becomes dark too. The front door opens, and Uncle Bucket comes out in a black cloud. He pats out a small fire on his shoulder and walks back up to me as more fire appears in the house behind him.

He folds his legs in his strange way and sits next to me. “It shouldn’t be long before your mother comes.”

“What if Baba comes back first?”

“Worrying is pointless. Do you want to play your keyboard to pass the time?”

“I can’t plug it in outside.”

Uncle Bucket opens a panel on his right side next to his power supply and connects the keyboard.

“Won’t this hurt you?” I ask.

“It’s advised against by my current owners, but the power drain is negligible. And, besides, I like music.”

“Thank you,” I say. His face-screen is blank save for the reflection of my burning house.

“Do you get criticized because you like it?”

“No,” he says, “no one knows about my fondness for music.”

## About the Author

Ali Abid (he/him) is a writer, civil rights attorney, and policy advocate. He has been a featured storyteller at Pour One Out, a monthly storytelling series hosted by *Volumes Bookcafe*, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Amethyst Review* and *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*. Ali lives and works in Chicago, Illinois, USA. You can follow him on Twitter via the handle [@AliEllenAbid](https://twitter.com/AliEllenAbid).



# A Collection of Innocent Things

by Aggie Novak

The old rubber factory looms over Masha—an imposing red-brick monstrosity. She tries to keep her attention on the path, looking out for treacherous ice patches, but she can't stop staring. The building stretches half a kilometre and stands five storeys tall. Darkened windows, barred or half-boarded up, offer glimpses of waist-high weeds and broken equipment.

Masha cranes her neck for a better look and slips. Arms wind-milling, she almost collides with a street cleaner, busy shovelling snow from the path. The woman grabs her with a steadying arm. Masha offers her an apologetic grimace and a muffled “excuse me.”

“Be careful, young lady.”

Masha nods and shuffles on as quickly as she can.

~ ~ ~

“I can't believe we have to train here now,” her friend Yulya whines.

The skating rink is one of several businesses shoved at the end of the otherwise abandoned factory complex. Junk and crumbled brickwork litters the muddy courtyard before the stairwell. Behind her are still-empty sections in even worse repair. Jagged, broken glass lines the window frames, and pieces of roof have caved in.

“It looks dangerous,” agrees the new girl, Polina. “My brother told me a kid disappeared in there.” She shudders. “Went in on a dare and never came out.”

“Really?” asks Masha, just as Yulya says, “Bullshit, your brother’s just trying to scare you.”

“Whatever,” says Polina. “I’ve definitely heard weird noises. Even a scream.”

“That’s probably just some boys messing around, or homeless people looking for somewhere to sleep.”

“Or rats,” adds Masha.

She doesn’t voice her own imaginings about the shadowy building and what could lurk, hidden inside. Such a building must hold secrets, like something from her dedushka’s tales. It’s the sort of place Baba Yaga might live—if forced to reside in a city—or where one might find a hidden pool with a golden fish to grant wishes.

“Still bet you wouldn’t go in,” Polina taunts.

“Definitely not,” agrees Yulya. “It’s filthy.”

They pass a cigarette back and forth as they talk.

Masha takes it when offered but doesn’t bring it to her lips. Holding it is a small concession to the imagined rebellion she can’t bring herself to indulge.

“Would you?” Polina directs at her.

“Nah,” says Masha. “I don’t want a roof to fall on me.” Still, she can’t keep her eyes from

it. Everything about it screams forbidden. “Maybe you could convince your brother to go in, Polina. Tell us what’s there.”

“Ew, why?” Yulya holds her hand out for the cigarette. “It’s just full of dirt and weeds.”

Masha shrugs and hands it back, hoping the girls didn’t notice her abstinence.

“Masha didn’t have any. Go on, Masha, try it,” urges Polina.

She shakes her head. “It’s time to go in.”

Polina looks her up and down, making Masha wish she could hide her too-short jeans and baby-pink child’s coat her mother can’t afford to replace.

After practice, tired and bruised, Masha makes her way back to the metro between Yulya and Polina. The team camaraderie warms her, and she’s less aware of the wicked winter wind. Less herself.

No matter what her friends would think, Masha indulges in her daydreams each Saturday morning on her trek from Baltiyskaya Station.

Despite the weather, she relishes the freedom it brings her, away from the cramped confines of the kommunalka room she shares with her mother and sister. For the ten minutes from train to training she can be alone with her thoughts.

A tap on Masha’s shoulder jerks her from her reverie.

“Excuse me, young lady,” says the street cleaner. “You dropped your list.” The woman holds out a crumpled scrap of paper.



Masha takes it with an automatic, “Thank you.”

The list isn’t hers. Calling back the street cleaner to correct the mistake would be too awkward, so Masha smooths the creases from the paper. She expects a shopping list, but nothing on it can be bought in any supermarket she knows.

*One canal pebble*

*Three purple petals*

Masha squints, but the handwriting is clear. She turns back—this must be some sort of joke. But the street cleaner is gone.

The list is gibberish.

*Summer grass*

*A breath of wind*

It continues, each item increasingly nonsensical. When Masha passes a bin, she slips the paper into her pocket rather than throwing it away. Gibberish, maybe, but the fancy of it appeals to her. It’s like a quest a peasant girl in a fairy story has to complete to become a princess, or ingredients for a witch’s spell.

“Masha?”

A breath of wind—how can she collect that? Maybe in an old jar.

“Masha?”

The list must be a creative writing project or something. Or the street cleaner wrote it for her.

“Masha?” Yulya nudges her. “Hello?” She offers a smoke. “What’s up with you?”

This time, Masha brings the butt of the Winston all the way to her lips before passing it back.

“I think I’m catching a cold.”

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“Get your head out of the clouds, Masha,” her mother says that night after she fails to respond to her name for the third time.

“Sorry, Mama,” Masha mutters.

After the lights are off, Masha tiptoes to the shared toilet down the hall. She pulls out the list and brushes her fingertips over the writing.

Fate brought it to her. What would be wrong with finding the items? There’s nothing harmful on the list. Although it brings spells and potions to mind, it doesn’t ask for blood or bone. It’s like a more mysterious version of the scavenger hunts they have at summer camp.

She lifts the paper to her nose and inhales the magic.

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On the first day of spring, three young boys clamber into the factory through a hole in the bricks. Their bravery is easy in the morning sun. For one bizarre moment, Masha has an urge to follow. She pauses, backpack hanging from one shoulder.

Yulya jostles her side. “You want to join them?”

“No,” she scoffs. “C’mon, we’re running late.”

When Yulya turns her back, Masha plucks a green bud from a low-hanging branch.

*A sign of spring*

On their way back to the metro, Polina waves her arms in mocking reenactment of another girl’s fall in practice. Masha fakes a smile and falls to the back of the group. Her attention drifts to the factory wall.

“Hey, Yulya, look at this.”

“What?”

Masha points. The hole is boarded over with three weathered but decidedly solid planks.

“What am I looking at?”

“That’s where those boys went in.”

“You sure it wasn’t back there?” Yulya gestures vaguely and rejoins the group.



Masha glances over her shoulder but can't see any other conveniently child-sized holes.

Ahead, the street cleaner crouches over a flowerbed, whistling while she works. Next to her sits a battered old toolbox. And a plank of wood. Their eyes meet, and Masha can't keep the question from them—if anyone else saw those boys it would be her. But the woman just nods in greeting and returns to her patch of thriving crocuses.

“Masha?”

She jogs to rejoin Yulya. “You're right. I think it was back there.” It must have been.

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Thinking of that resolutely nailed-shut entrance makes Masha's palms sweat and her stomach sink. Nothing bad happened to those boys. No, she didn't see a second way in—but those boards didn't mean the boys were trapped. Practice lasted hours. Plenty of time for them to poke around, leave, and the street cleaner to seal up the entrance to stop any more kids breaking in and breaking a leg. Nothing had happened. But what if it had?

That “what if” won't shut up. It sounds like an alarm: “what if, what if, what if.” All week she dreams of brick rooms and sharp glass. Of being dragged into darkness while the street cleaner stands by, impassively watching.

~~~

Masha wields her list like a talisman against dark thoughts. A couple of the items—three purple petals and a worthless scratch-card she interprets as “fool's gold”—she finds in her apartment's grubby courtyard. On the way to school, she crosses Bankovsky Most and pauses as an old lady rubs her fingers against the lion statues that guard the bridge. She

finds a crumpled tissue and scrubs it against one of the lion's paws until it's smeared black. A spot of luck.

Masha keeps them in an old shoebox, tucked under a jumble of scarves in her corner of the wardrobe. One thing remains:

*A forgotten weed*

Simple enough. Creeping knapweed invades the derelict park across the street. Puffs of dandelion sprout in unused corners. But Masha saves it. She doesn't want this game, this secret, to end.

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Masha lingers near every broken brick and barred window to sneak peeks into the tumbledown factory. Hunting for something, maybe a sign of the boys, something to quiet her mind. There's nothing but weeds.

"Good morning, young lady."

Startled, Masha steps back. "Good morning," she manages after an awkward pause.

"I hope you found everything on your list." An empty bucket swings from one of her hands. Bad luck, her dedushka would've said, while her mother scowled at him for spreading his superstitions.

"Yes, thank you," she lies, the falsehood an automatic politeness.

An odd expression flickers across the street cleaner's face. Disappointment? Anger, maybe.

Whatever it is passes so quickly, Masha can't be sure it was real. But it leaves her unsettled.

More unsettling still, the street cleaner follows her all the way to practice—her lurking presence like a malevolent spirit. Every time Masha checks, the woman is a few paces behind her, seemingly focused on work. When she slips into the stairwell for practice, the street cleaner stares.

After practice, she clings to the safety of friends, keeping to the centre of the group.

“Young lady!”

Masha knows the call is for her. Sure enough, the street cleaner is there, waving her wallet.

“You dropped something.”

She darts away from her friends, Yulya hanging back to wait.

Masha reaches out a hand. “Thank you.”

“You know,” said the woman, not letting go of the wallet, “an incomplete list is bad luck.” Her face is smiling, but her words carry a threat.

“What?” Masha blurts. Her wallet is open in the woman's hand, revealing a notecard with Masha's address printed in neat letters.

“Bad luck,” she repeats, smile gone.

She releases the wallet, and Masha snatches it and hurries back to her friends.

The weeds behind the factory walls taunt her. Adrenaline speeds her heart and sickens her stomach. To finish her hunt, she'll need to go in.

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She goes back the next day. Masha wipes her clammy palms on her jeans and swallows hard. Real adventures come with a bit of fear. Determination to avoid the street cleaner's warning fuels her.

She takes her usual route past the length of the factory and through the rusted gates to the muddy area near the rink. It's quieter on a Sunday, the handful of small businesses closed. Happy she's alone, she goes to one of the windows and, wary of the broken glass, sticks her head inside.

It's cool, quiet, and mysterious. It makes Masha feel like a girl again, listening to her dedushka describe the magical island, Buyan. She's almost able to believe she just needs to step inside to meet a world of adventure. As if pulled, Masha leans forward.

In the dim light she can make out the rusted corpse of a long-broken machine. A dark smear—Dirt? Graffiti? Blood?—decorates the wall behind it. Her elbow knocks a shard of glass. Squeaks and skitterings sound at the noise.

She doesn't need to go inside—she could pluck one of the weeds nearly tickling her chin. She reaches a hand into the dark.

An eerie whistling winds through the room, bubbling up from deep within the maze of the building. Instantly chilled, Masha lurches backwards. She trips and falls with a splash of mud. The haunting wail crescendos to a horrifying, human scream. Cuts off.

Masha scrambles through the mud in her haste to get away, away, away. Pain blooms across her palm. A nail, jutting from a rotted plank, has cut a jagged line in her skin.

She sits, panting, staring as blood gathers and drips down her wrist. Nothing is audible, save her breath and thrumming heart. Masha remembers the dark side to Dedushka's stories. Her mind conjures images of one-eyed Likho, cursing misfortune, or spirits luring children to doom. Masha breathes and reminds herself this isn't a story.

Trembling, she squelches to her feet. Sodden and bloody, she scurries back to the street. Rounding the corner, she comes face-to-face with the street cleaner.

Masha shrieks, then clamps a hand over her mouth. "You gave me a fright."

The woman pulls a filthy rag from her pocket and offers it. "For your hand."

Not wanting to be rude, she accepts and gently wipes her palm. It can't get much dirtier anyway.

"Thank you." Masha tries to return the cloth, but she gestures for her to keep it. Something dark stains the hem of the woman's sleeve.

"See, bad luck."

Her words feel like a curse. She doesn't move, so Masha steps around her.

~~~

In the bright artificial light of the metro, safe underground, it's easy to call her fear

ridiculous. That noise was just the wind—her fright nothing more than the result of an overactive imagination. Besides, Likho hides in forests.

But she can't rationalise the nightmares away.

Sheets twist around her legs, holding her in place. Masha thrashes, desperate to escape the figure hovering at the foot of the bed, whistling. The street cleaner. Paralysed in terror, Masha stares as she inches closer, raising a nail-studded plank. She screams, eyes snapping open.

“Masha? Masha? Are you okay?”

“Sorry, Mama. Just a bad dream.”

Masha lays awake and counts the hours until she can put her bad luck to bed.

~~~

Skipping school seems a small price for ending a curse. Overnight, the factory walls have been covered with a facade of ugly green fabric to hide it from summer tourists flocking to the city. Blue skies and shining sun make it easier to forget she was afraid. Even the street cleaner appears happier—and more normal—than usual, delivering her “good morning” with new enthusiasm and returning to work.

She strolls, enjoying the weather and the wildflowers carpeting the ground alongside the path. A vibrant purple crocus grabs her attention. The petals she gathered will be wilted in their box by now. An incomplete collection without the final item. There's only one way to complete her hunt and reclaim her luck.



A loose corner of fabric flaps in the breeze. Right behind it is the child-sized hole, unboarded. Gripped with a sudden, wild longing, Masha steps forward.

For a long moment, she hesitates, lingering on the boundary. She sees herself split into two possible Mashas. One turns and leaves, forgetting her list and dismissing the existence of curses. The other Masha, when she's passed a cigarette, lifts it to her mouth. She parts her lips and breathes in. She's ready to be that Masha, if she wants to be.

The entrance is small, so she slips her bulky bag from her shoulder. She doesn't look back.

If she had, she would have noticed the street cleaner setting her garbage bag aside and, whistling, follow her into the gloom.

## About the Author

Aggie Novak (she/they) lives with her wife by the beach in Australia, where she spends most of her time hiding from the sun and heat. She writes around studying for her pharmacy degree and entertaining her three dogs. She loves all kinds of speculative fiction and often draws inspiration from Slavic folklore and mythology. When not writing, she can be found drinking tea and reading everything in sight. You can follow her on Twitter via the handle @AggieNovak.

# Empty Skin-Suit

by Solstice Black

I want to wear it like a boy  
— thing  
how the cowboys called it—  
all sharp jaw and crooked smile.

I want to wear my woman-skin  
like a green pickup  
on the backroads;

top down and dustup.

I want to see Girl written in the rearview, all pearls and pink  
stepstool on the driver's-side

I want her nihilism like dice

—dangling

I want her beat-bruised smile,  
Sundress sweeping up ashes

of someone's cigarette.

When the road curves back,  
I want to settle for the blur of me,  
peel out from this skin suit

Until it leaves me bare, skull grinning I want to hear my soul on the  
radio,

Set it on fire and leave it  
burning on the dashboard.

## About the Author

Solstice Black (she/they) is a queer poet and novelist, whose work has appeared in *Chautauqua* and *A Forest of Words*, among others. She is currently undertaking a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing from her home in the Pacific Northwest, where she lives with her loved ones, beloved cat, and surplus of books. You can follow them on TikTok via the handle [@solstice\\_black](#).

# “Apex of the Sun’s Way”

by Don Mark Baldrige

The apex of the sun's way lies in the direction of Hercules, southwest of Vega in the constellation Lyra, the Harp. It is the path the sun travels, taking us with it—the disk of the ecliptic tilted relative to the galactic plane by some 60 degrees.

We fly, our solar system, like a pie, thrown at some inscrutable face.

##

## ACT ONE:

Launched by helical railgun in a solid-state—to bear the acceleration—the onboard AI unfolds itself in a pre-programmed origami as it deploys its solar sail, a charged field interacting with, at first, the solar wind.

Wave goodbye. We will not see it again.

#

At 220 km/sec our star circles the drain, Sagittarius A, supermassive black hole set in a swarm of stellar-mass black holes, a nursery of them, amidst the stunning brightness of millions of cram-packed stars—a common galactic structure, pitting everywhere the otherwise smooth rubber sheet of spacetime—and takes 230 million years to go nowhere, fast.

Known as a cosmic year, this period will repeat another 17 times before the Milky Way first collides with Andromeda, which may rather disrupt the pattern.

Our star itself will fully deplete its supply of hydrogen and collapse into a white dwarf just about the time these two good-sized galaxies stabilize into a larger, single structure, about 5 billion years from now.

##

## ACT TWO:

Of course, the Earth will have been toasted long before that—as the sun gains 1% in luminosity every 100 million years.

Just a billion years away, we see the Earth another Venus, in runaway greenhouse mode, the temperature of molten lead.

##

## ACT THREE:

So if you want to see any of the rest, the what happens next, you're going to have to find a way off the rock you were born on.

Oh, and you must live. Because the show is only beginning:

The supermassives at the centers of each galaxy will finally find one another, inspiral energetically toward collision. And when they merge—at a point it's not yet possible to



predict—more energy than all the stars in heaven will be released, and this will go on for about ten days.

It will be of the greatest order of energetic events this side of the Big Bang. A show worth waiting up for, you know?

### About the Author

More work by Don Mark Baldrige (he/him) can be read in the current issue (No. 8) of *Cossmass Infinities* and can be heard in an upcoming edition of *PseudoPod*. He is a professor of both Art & Computer Science and commits, under a slightly different name, random acts of journalism. You can follow him on Twitter via the handle [@DonMarkmaker](#).

# The Witch at Kholat Syakhl

by T. K. Howell

Yevgeny jammed an Ushanka hat about four sizes too big onto my head and nudged me into the helicopter. “Avalanche,” he shouted over the whomp whomp of the blades. “It’s a fucking Avalanche, Anna.”

I’d known Yevgeny since just after Big Joe checked out. The Party would never let me in a room with Stalin, not even in the same building. Not even the same city. A smart move, all things considered. You don’t want to put a psychic in the vicinity of all those Big Secrets, much less an English one.

Yevgeny was a Colonel now, and if he was a Yank, I would call him a “good ol’ boy, a straight shooter, a tough guy.” His ancestors probably fired bows from horseback all across the Asian Steppe. I was glad they’d given me a familiar handler. Yevgeny was reassuring, a constant in the vastness of Russia, a familiar presence in its endlessly morphing social machinery. Thank God they gave me a military man. The Red Army, bless ‘em, see a problem and come up with a plan. The Party has a tendency to come up with a plan and then create the problem to fit it. And the KGB are bastards who think anyone with a plan is a problem and should have their phone tapped.

“Avalanche? That’s not what they told me!” I yelled, but Yevgeny shrugged, pointed to his ears and shrugged again. Message received. Don’t try to hold a sensible conversation in a helicopter.

Four hours later, we landed at a field station set up in the snow-covered foothills of some

place called Kholat something or other. Military types with Kalashnikovs stood guard at seemingly inconsequential points. A man in a suit walked around with a clipboard and a harried expression. There were personnel trucks decked out in their winter livery (which, in Russia, meant they wore it year round). There were large tents that looked like buildings and could have been there years or could have gone up yesterday.

The familiar chatter of Russian carried on in the background. I learned enough to get by. The thing with brains is general impulses, notions and ideas are universal. I can pluck them from people's heads and make sense of them whether they're from Kensington or Kiribati. But the finer detail stuff, that appeared like words printed on the cerebellum. It helped to have the right dictionary, or it was just so much gibberish with some emotions attached to it.

“The bodies are this way,” Yevgeny said in his stilted school-room English. I couldn't stand it at first and had to teach him a few profanities to make him more tolerable. He led me over to a squat tent at the edge of the compound. No one tried to stop him. No one even seemed to notice him. He was a blank point in their minds. He held open a flap and ushered me in.

“They found them 1,500 metres away from their tent. Some were just in their underwear. They'd been trying to start a fire in the woods. One had tried to climb a tree.”

“You said this was a month ago, Yevgeny, why are they still here? And... and why are there only four body bags, didn't you say nine students?”

“The last body—Dyatlov. Radiation. One thousand times background level.”

“Huh,” I said, “that'll do it then, I guess.”

“They took his body away. For testing. That makes five. The rest we haven't found yet.”

I looked at the four body bags laid out on steel tables. The people there, I could feel it, they were too terrified to move them. They were scared they might miss something, and so they were taking their time, covering all bases, looking into any possible solution, no matter how off the wall. Something had compelled nine students out on a camping trip in the mountains to abandon their tent in the middle of the night, run down the mountainside and freeze to death.

“Working theories they've come up with so far—” Yevgeny gestured toward the men moving about in self-important little circles at the other end of the vast tent, “—are an attack by the local tribe, or some kind of personal dispute.”

“Or an avalanche?”

“Or an avalanche.”

“Well Yevgeny, then I think you better get me a smaller hat, a bigger coat, a flask of brandy and a lift up to the main site.”

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It took half the day to get up the mountain. There was some all-terrain thing on caterpillar tracks that got us most of the way, until we hit a scraggly line of pine trees. After that it was a foot slog through knee-high snow drifts, swirling wind, fallen trees and bad vibes. As soon as we were out of the vehicle, I could feel it: something in the make-up of the place, something as intrinsic as the rocks and the ice. Something in the mountain itself, a sign that read “keep out” in big letters, if only you knew how to read it. To most, it presented itself as a sense of foreboding.

I didn't much like it. I put it down to my own hyper-sensitivity. Next to me, Yevgeny and

his men didn't seem to flinch.

We found the fire site early afternoon. Yevgeny, myself and four soldiers loaded up with so much kit, I could scarcely believe they could move, let alone hike through snow-covered woodland.

“Two of them here, hypothermia. Near naked. They were so cold, they burnt their hands on the fire,” Yevgeny explained. “Three more spread out along a line up there.” He pointed up the mountainside to a flattened area of snow about a kilometre or so up a mild incline. “They were better dressed. Trying to get back to the tent, we presume.”

“And the tent?”

“Gone. Taken for examination. They cut their way out.”

“Avalanche, you said. But the tent was still pitched?”

Yevgeny thrust his hands into his pockets. “Yes. Well.”

“Hmmm. Colour me intrigued, you old Cossack. I'm glad you called. I'd have turned you down for straight espionage work, you know. After that balls-up you lot put me through in Hungary. But this... this is much more my speed. And it gets me out of Hollywood.”

“Honestly Anna, a waste of your talents working for the American Propaganda Machine,” Yev said. I could tell he was being deadly serious. I wondered what he'd say if he'd known that a squat, angry Senator from Wisconsin had originally sent me down there to flush out *fellow travellers*.

“I quite agree. But last week I got to drink Mimosas with Judy Garland, so it's not all bad.”

The tallest of the soldiers shot me a look.

“Trivial. Frivolous and decadent,” Yevgeny said.

“Ah, don't be such a Party-line bore, Yev. I'll tell you what, if you fish out that bottle of vodka you're hiding in your pack, I'll tell you all about Judy.” I winked at the tall soldier. He steadfastly refused to meet my eyes, looking off up the mountain, pretending he couldn't hear me.

“Vodka later. You see that,” Yevgeny pointed off beyond the mountain at a mass of black clouds. “We're not getting off here tonight. Pitch up the tents, men. Start a fire.”

“You're kidding me,” I said, although it was quite clear from the look on his face that he wasn't.

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“So, what can you tell me?” Yev asked as we tramped around the forest. The soldiers were efficiently and quietly assembling a large tent supported with hollow steel beams. A small fire was already lit.

“Not so much. Your boys trampled the place pretty good. I can pick up on them plenty. It's funny, Communist, English, Nazi, Yank... soldiers are soldiers wherever you go. You give them an order, wind them up, and watch them go. Automated on the surface, but they're all thinking the same things underneath, which is mostly wondering when they can next shoot a gun or blow something up. Boys, the lot of them.”

“The students, Anna.”



“Scared, cold, confused. What would you expect? I'm not a dog, you know. I can't sniff out a month-old trail. It's just an imprint.”

Yevgeny frowned. I'd given up trying to explain my gift to people. At times of high stress, emotion could imprint itself into trees, rocks, the surroundings.

“The others?”

I concentrated. Soldiers, soldiers, soldiers. Drill down through that. The top layers of regiment and order to the thinnest, wispiest trace of the nine students as they came down the mountainside in a rush, fearing for their lives. It was a series of thin gold wires running through the snow, getting thinner, thinner, splitting, spreading... and gone.

I shake my head.

“It's no good. You're going to have to get me that bottle of vodka.”

~~~

“Vodka. You boys are such a cliché,” I said. The bottle had been sat in the snow and it was so damn cold there was next to no burn on the way down, even though Yevgeny assured me that it was the cheapest, nastiest back-yard, potato-mash alcohol the soldiers had time to lay their hands on before being shipped out.

“And this will help?”

I shrugged. “Perhaps. But I'll have to work quickly. It'll wear off sharpish.”

The soldiers looked at me with equal parts awe, disgust and loss as I up-ended the bottle

and poured it straight down until it was gone.

“Yargh. OK, that last bit burnt a little.”

I tried to explain. I tried to reassure them that I wasn't just getting tight for the hell of it. They still didn't believe that I wouldn't fall flat on my face after drinking a whole bottle of gut-rot in ten minutes. The thing inside me, the gift, would burn off that alcohol in minutes. It would barely touch me. But for a short while, it would make me just fuzzy enough, just single-minded enough to see through the maelstrom and mess of that top layer of soldier activity, through the wind and snow and time, to those gold threads. Let the rest of my pickled brain sift through everything else, I needed a single point of sobriety in my mind, laser-focused.

“K. This way,” I waved a hand, got up, stumbled, regained my feet and marched on. After a few seconds, Yev and the soldiers followed.

“Split halfway up the hill. In the dark. No torches, you see.”

The golden threads danced down the hill, picked out in shimmering light against the white snow and tin-dark sky. About halfway, they started to divide. Panic set in. The snow was deep, and they couldn't move quick enough to get away.

Five threads made their way down, bumping back into each other and away again, until they fell in a heap, fingers and toes already burning from the cold. They got a small fire going. Three headed back up the mountain, where they blinked out, one by one. Soon, the fire smouldered to nothing and the other two blinked out as well.

Four threads veered off to the south. One was well out ahead. Female. Only her thread was

burning brighter and brighter the further down the hill she went. Energy burning off.

“Oh my,” I said. Yevgeny, following behind me, asked something, but I didn't hear him.

The snow grew thicker and thicker until I couldn't wade on any further. I pointed a finger at a place about a hundred yards ahead.

“There,” I said. “That's where the others are.”

“Dead?”

“Well obviously.”

“What happened?”

I looked up at the sky. Small eddies of spindrift snow whirled above us. Black clouds bundled up behind the peak of the mountain, gathering the confidence to push their way past.

“I'll tell you back at the tent,” I said and promptly threw up in the snow.

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“She was one of mine,” I said.

“A spy?”

I shook my head. “For the last time Yev, I'm not a spy. No. You know. Like me. A witch. Sort of. Weaker. And she didn't even know what she was doing.”

The storms closed in. It wasn't all that dramatic, as it turned out. I was hoping for the full shebang—lightning, thunder, blizzards—something to really set off the scene. The soldiers didn't even notice it. Their minds were preternaturally calm. Training and reinforcement will do that to you, I guess. Confidence. Sure, nine students had just died in horrible circumstances on the very same mountain, but this was the Russian Army. They were a wall up against which any storm would be blunted.

The soldiers had dug unceasingly through five feet of snow for eighty yards until abruptly one of them stopped and let out a yelp. His comrade grabbed his collar and yanked him back before he fell.

Not a body, a stream.

The snow had fallen so heavily and so quickly that it had covered the drop into the bed of a thin stream coming off the hill. It was down the banks of this stream that the four students had fallen, never to find their way back up. After a week, the snow covered them until there was no trace.

We had only recovered one body before the storm rolled down on us, but the rest were in there, no doubt.

The girl. They'd dragged her body out, covered her and left her outside the tent. She was out there now. Waiting to go back down the hill and join the rest of her friends. Her face was a mess, scratched to ribbons. Her eyes were gone. Plucked out. All her own work.

“She didn't know what she was. She'd probably always found it easy to get by, to convince people of things, to know how they would react, that sort of thing. And then she comes out here, a storm rolls in, it's something she can't control, and her mind starts working overtime. Something... something set her off. Something triggered this, but I'm damned if I

know what. Maybe it was just a really vivid nightmare? Someone probably mentioned the possibility of avalanches and, poof, into her head the idea pops. And once it's in her head, once it claws its way in there and starts to feedback on itself, amplifying, it was always going to come out and find its way into the other eight heads. There was no avalanche, Yev, but they didn't know that. To them, it was as real as the storm. Visions... God only knows what else she saw and made them all see.”

Yevgeny looks at me solemnly. “A tragic accident.”

“A tragic accident,” I agreed.

“So, there are more out there, like you?”

“Maybe. Not many. Until today I hadn't seen any others for three years. And... and no, Yev. Don't go getting ideas. I can see what you are thinking. Trust me, Russia doesn't need my kind of trouble. You guys tried it once before. I suggest before you go down the road of searching for someone like me, you ask your KGB friends to pass you the file on one Grigori Rasputin. It didn't end well. Plus, if you found another me, then it'd have a knock-on effect on my rates. I'm not all that minded to lower them.”

Yev smiled at me, and it was a warm, friendly smile that wanted to take me horseback riding through warm pastures, somewhere where there was no snow, no mountains and plenty of wine.

“Your hair really is—”

“Knock it off, Yev,” I cut him short at the pass. “If you try to make some weak blizzard analogy, I'll rewire your brain and give you a phobia of gun oil.”

The smile stayed, but the eyes were laughing at me.

“OK, OK. And the boy with the radiation?” The smile was gone like quicksilver and replaced by a look that was all business.

“*That* I cannot tell you. At least without getting close to the body, and there ain't enough money in the world for me to do that. But my guess? She's one of mine, but he's one of *yours*. They were quick to mobilise you guys, right? Quick for a bunch of students that were already dead by the time anyone realised they were missing?”

Yev nodded slowly. “Very. And you... they've been wary of using you for years, but as soon as this happened, they sent a message. They didn't hesitate.”

“Comb the area. Retrace his steps with your beeping little counter things, and my guess is you'll find something, either on that mountain or back along the pass. Something that should never have been taken out of a secure building. Something that might fetch a high price.... Of course,” my brain finally made the connection. “It's probably what tipped her over the edge. God knows what that stuff does to a brain like mine.”

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We were down the mountain and in a helicopter and heading back to Yekaterinburg the next morning.

“I'll tell you because you probably know already,” Yev said when we landed. “They're sending me to England, Anna. Military attaché to the Embassy.”

“Spy, then.”

Yev shrugged. "I'll do as the Party instructs."

"I guess this means the end of our working relationship."

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, come on, Yev. You know they let you handle me because there's no secrets to speak of in that head of yours. As soon as you have access to some, they'll keep you away."

Yevgeny took off his Ushanka and ran it through his hands in circles. I could see he was starting to lose his hair a little. His face was etched in tighter than I remembered. His cheekbones and jaw were straight lines, running parallel... damn these men. Lose their hair, go grey, get older, it didn't matter. They grew into their handsomeness. And here I was. Over-ripe. Down the other side of the mountain.

"I suppose, if this is goodbye, we could take a few days? I miss Leningrad."

"No. No, sadly not. My orders are very clear. You have a very strictly-defined calendar, Anna. No wandering, no detours, no opportunity to wind up in the same bar as Party members on downtime."

"Shame. Do me a favour though, Yev. Cover it up the right way. For the family's sake. Keep the uranium and the psychic projection out of it, obviously. But let the families know. An avalanche. Plain and simple. Don't let them dwell."

"Not my call, Anna. You know how the Party is. They don't *have* to answer questions."

"Well, maybe they should once in a while."



## About the Author

T. K. Howell (he/him) is a writer living on the banks of the Thames. When not writing, he manages ancient oak woodlands and tends to trees that are older than most countries. His writing is often inspired by mythology and folklore. You can follow him on Twitter via the handle [@tk\\_howell](#).

# An Opened Door, a Haunting Rain

by Stewart C Baker

It was strange, at first, when the door opened. But time passed and we got used to monsters living in our midst. Werewolves, vampires, yōkai of all varieties. Fifteen years of learning and trust. Of discovering that our strange new neighbours were not so very different from us.

flutter of wings...  
the late spring sunshine catches  
a tengu feather

Our children never knew the newcomers as 'monsters,' only as friends, as playmates and teachers and fellows. Yet there were always those amongst us who could not forget the past, who would bind and wound and maim and kill. Out of fear, out of hate, out of piety.

guttering candle the glint of an unsheathed sword

It was those vengeful ones who brought the rain from the heavens, who brought the world cascading into ruin in ceaseless, bone-cold torrents. The downpour transformed all those it touched into animals: the angry into boars, the quick and adventurous into mice or cats, the stubborn into badgers. We shivered under eaves and in houses for months, fearful of losing ourselves. And then, as suddenly as the rain had started, it stopped.

after the storm  
a bullfrog singing to  
nobody

Those of us who are still human scabble in the dirt of once-great cities and consider ourselves lucky. We plant gardens in the shadows of skysrises-turned-harpyhomes and shoo rabbits away from the vegetables that grow there; we fish for trout in the streams of wilded city parks, but always release them. It is humbling, this new way of living, but not all of it is bad. We share our pleasures with the shanxiao who climb, laughing, up the edifices of hospitals; our children's children run, laughing, with the leucrota who roam in packs beyond our tumbled walls.

deep forest...

the fox spirit shadowing

a full moon

## About the Author

Stewart C Baker (he/him) is an academic librarian and author of speculative fiction and poetry, along with the occasional piece of interactive fiction. His fiction and poetry has appeared in *Nature*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and many other places. Stewart was born in England, has spent time in South Carolina, Japan, and California (in that order), and now lives in Oregon with his family—although if anyone asks, he'll usually say he's from the Internet. You can learn more about him on his website [infomancy.net](http://infomancy.net) and follow him on Twitter via the handle [@stewartcbaker](https://twitter.com/stewartcbaker).

# Pour Me the Sky, A'right?

by A. R. Frederiksen

Once a month, my local pub bottles up the northern lights and puts them on display next to Höhler, Green Spot, and Maker's Mark.

“Dragged straight from the sky and filled into amber bottles,” Whiplash once told me, flashing his chipped tooth in the smile I’ll always remember him by, before the hallucinations went fuck-all, chewed him up, and spat him out a different person. “It’s the only kind that can hold the light. I’d give my liver to see how they do it, but they pretty much barricade the lighthouse those nights. Shit, they barricade the whole cliff. Talk about a family secret.”

There’s a long waiting list of buyers every month, wanting to drink the sky, but I don’t show up to drink anymore. I show up to watch. To remember. To remind myself that I’m just as likely to get chewed and spat out. That makes me a masochist, I guess.

“You can’t smoke in here,” sweet-eyed Elisa tells me, leaning across the bar to put her face so close to mine that I get a whiff of sweat-laced perfume. “New laws an’ all.”

I crack her a smirk. “Sorry.” I’m not sorry and I don’t put out the smoke.

“Hey.” She grabs my arm and lowers her voice. “I’ve slotted you in tonight.”

My brain flatlines. The cigarette falls from my hand and lands on the countertop as if in a soft sigh. There’s no mistaking what she means. No mistaking the wildfire that surges to

lick up my insides. Wheezing, I can only ask, “Why?”

She makes a face before pulling back with a laugh. “Because I like you. Come on.”

I snap my mouth shut, closing off air to the fire that blazes inside of me. She likes me enough to slip me a fought-over amber bottle stuffed with the swirling memories of the same dead gods that ground Whiplash’s mind to dust. That’s a problem, there. My problem.

I pick up my smoke with a wobbly hand. “Preciate that, but it’s too risky.”

Her eyes widen. “No, no.” She bites her lip. “I’ve covered my tracks.”

She must think I mean it’s risky for her, but she doesn’t know about Whiplash like everyone else on this crappy island does. She’s a newcomer to this tiny-ass dumping ground for the gods whenever they get tired of their long lives and decide to make it a little easier by polluting the sky with their unwanted memories. But I don’t suppose they dumped the memories straight into our laps. We were just clever enough to drag them down from the sky, and dumb enough that we didn’t think twice about it. Even now, I’m dumb enough to want Elisa’s easy bottle.

“Like I said,” I tell Elisa in place of telling myself, “It’s too risky.”

I slide off the barstool before I can see Elisa’s crestfallen face, my insides burnt to an achy and ashen crisp from the fire that’s now dead inside of me.

Shouldering my way through the pub, I avoid the mirrors because I’m not sure what I’ll find staring back at me.

There's an art to living here without becoming a dead husk for an even deader god, and that art involves rejection. Not everyone has a Whiplash to teach them that. For sure, I could have done my own part in teaching him that. If I had, he might've rejected the sky rather than me, but there's too much water under that bridge. A whole fucking ocean.

Stepping outside the pub, I tilt my head upwards where wormy strings of northern lights copulate across a frosty, star-strewn sky.

I've never understood how death in a bottle can be so much prettier than death in the sky, and today will not be the day that I finally understand, either.

Burying my hands in my pockets, I walk along.

### About the Author

A. R. Frederiksen (she/her) is a Danish writer of English speculative fiction with an MA in English and Cultural Studies. She will be published in Phantom House Press' anthology later this year, and Band of Bards' upcoming digital charity e-zine. You can learn more about her at her website [arfrederiksen.com](http://arfrederiksen.com) and follow her on Twitter via the handle [@ARFrederiksen](https://twitter.com/ARFrederiksen).

# Blessings of a New Moon

by Cate Kreider

Today you are an ox.

The people nod to you and make way as you pass them in the streets. Some offer short prayers or good luck charms. It has been a year since you visited this particular street and shrine gate, but it is as festive and colorful as you left it. Children pass by, cheering and trailing sparklers or streamers, and the air smells faintly of smoke and spice—from the explosives and the street food alike. Overhead, the first crackling spray of fireworks begins to burn in the sky. It is a beautiful time of year to be in this city again, even if you are only here for a night. You are only ever here for a night.

For twelve new moons you have wandered as an ox and shared your gifts with those who called out for them. As it's always been, time wore against the world, and so you passed out armor. You had strong broad shoulders that could bear the weight of the past months and hard hooves that could tread over barren ground. Now you look to the crowd around you and see how these strengths have waned with the passage of time. New blessings are due.

“Spirit,” a voice calls and you slow your steps. You never halt, as time never does, but it's enough that the young man that elbows his way out of the crowd can keep pace without much difficulty. He is as tall as your shoulder and breathing hard from his race to reach you. You know at once what he wants. “Spirit,” he says again. “I ask for your blessing.”

This year you were sturdy. You were strong. You had the patience and the steadiness that comes with being built to move slowly and surely. This man asks for a part of your shape—

for a gift of stability and of strength. It is your duty to hand these things out, though usually it is not so close to an end. Now is not the time to give the gifts of an Ox. The coming months bring something else.

You swing your head, great and swooping, in the direction you are walking already. Follow me. You tread the same paths, year after year, and the people know this. A woman and her grandson sitting on a stoop nearby wave to you. The man at your side waves back, hesitant. He keeps his pace, two steps for your one. He is fluttery, like a bird, but no less determined for it.

“I... I know I took it once already,” he says. “I do not mean to be greedy.” He clenches his fists at his sides. “But they’ve run out, Spirit. They’ve run out and I can’t be without them this year. The last one was so hard.”

Ah. So that’s how it is.

The lanterns and the banners make the street blaze. It glows warm and red and welcoming. If you could speak, you would tell this man how last year, at this place, you were a mouse, and everything was very large.

You did not receive the respectful nods because you hid away behind the cart wheels and darted between the walking feet. Last year you were quick and quiet. You needed to be small and fond of closed-in, warm places. You did not give so many blessings last year. You were too shy to go out and give. Those who found you, though, were grateful for the caution and patience you had to share. But you cannot speak, so you walk on and trust that he will follow.

You come out onto the next street, the man still staying close by your side, and here people wait for you in full. There are banners with your impending image and a chanting song



that travels through the crowd. There's counting too, numbers slowly descending, and a cleared path to the shrine gate. You step towards it, unhurried, even as people scream and laugh and urge you on or call you back.

“Spirit, please, may I have your blessing?” He yells to be heard over the crowd. “You won't have it to give for much longer...”

Sometimes you are like this man. Sometimes you are not at peace with the change a new year brings. The attention and the impending shifts drug you into too much glee or scare you into cowering at each street corner. This year, the familiar place does not fill you with dread or eagerness, simply understanding. When you were a mouse, you worried about being an ox. Now you like to be an ox, but something new will suit you too. Something new will suit this man also.

“Please!” He asks again, but you can feel the future brewing beneath your skin. When you step up the final step, he stays behind; the new year overtakes you with a quickness that has been distant for months now. The moon slivers into being, and you change.

Your thin tufted tail thickens, strengthens into something long and quick. Your hips, which have been locked in place for a year now, turn loose and liquid. Smooth muscles, less stiff than those you've been wearing, work mechanically around your skeleton in a sudden revelation of physics. You bend this way and that. You blink, and your vision shifts forward, away from the peripheries where you have kept watch for threats all these months. Now you set your sights on something just ahead, something you will hunt for yourself.

The new tail flicks, and the leathery paw pads that have replaced your hooves press into the dirt of the street and clench, coiled and ready to pounce.

You spring from the shrine altar, through the gate, and into the little street market.

Everyone cheers. The fireworks set off again, and sparks and paper flecks shower down around you. The lights and smells and sounds are all sharp and crystal clear. The man who had followed you before comes once more to your side, still meek and begging. You are proud and mobile and powerful. Now you have a predator's body. A hunting body. A body that is bright and bold and artful. These are the gifts you will give this man.

He flinches when you rub your furred cheek against the hand he raises against your approach. You purr, a delightful sound that you feel thrumming deep in your chest. A blessing to guide you in the coming year, you think as you pass over your gifts. A year ago, you gave him the Ox's gifts, but they will not suit any longer. For the coming times, he will need the gifts of a tiger.

The man stares at his hand. You chuff at him gently, and he closes it into a fist and nods slowly. Perhaps he understands. Perhaps he doesn't. He will know in time.

The year of the tiger starts in red. Red banners flutter overtop of bright orange laid under black stripes, all heralded by a triumphant roar.

The months stretch out before you now. The moon passing in and out of existence in a clockwork pattern you know so well. The tiger is built for these months. The people watch and call your chant. They toss coins at your feet and come up to your sides, holding out their hands for blessings. You stretch your jaw, curl your lips back and show off your teeth. You roar.

## About the Author

Cate Kreider (she/her) has been telling stories long before she was writing them and dabbled in transcription and journalism before attempting creative publication. When not writing fantastical settings and cozy moments between characters, she likes to ride her bike and talk to her plants.

# And the Beast

by C.L. Holland

The books are dead, at least.  
Unlike the armchair,  
upholstered in human skin  
that shivers at her touch,  
or the matching side table  
that shudders under iced tea,  
blisters at too-hot coffee cups.  
Cursed, they serve still.

But the books are dead,  
their covers aged leather  
that neither cringes from  
nor craves questing fingers.  
She sleeps among them  
rather than in a bed  
that sighs lullabies  
as she slips into silk sheets.

On the mantel, the butler  
slices minutes from the hours  
she hides in the library,  
chimes mealtimes like clockwork.  
The dining chairs tell her  
(those with mouths)

of a master who barely noticed  
when they served at table.

The armoire offers advice  
wrapped in satin and velvet.  
If she can use ribbons and frills  
to soothe a savage heart,  
perhaps their master will remember  
what it is to be human.  
She sighs, thinks of the books,  
and promises to try.

### About the Author

C.L. Holland (they/them) is a British science fiction and fantasy writer and has been published in venues such as *Fantasy Magazine* and *Nature Futures*. You can learn more about them at their website [clholland.weebly.com](http://clholland.weebly.com) and follow them on Twitter via the handle [@clhollandwriter](https://twitter.com/clhollandwriter).

# Cadejo

by Amanda Trout

Each morning, as the grand clock of San Marco Square rang eight deep alarms bells to the sleeping citizens of Las Palmas, New Mexico, the old white dog paced the path from back alley to storefront and gently laid his muzzle on Abuela Locabra's knee, waiting to get his scruff braided, and each day Abuela grabbed a handful of ties from the small ceramic jar at the base of her rocking chair, threaded the silicon bands through her fingers and wove ten pristine fur braids around the dog's neck. Her neighbors watched with muted whispers as Abuela pressed short kisses between the dog's pointed ears and led it inside for breakfast. They spoke of the day the mutt had appeared, the day the youngest of the Locabras vanished, the day Hester Brown was admitted to the emergency room with a face devoid of blood, a large bite wound in his shoulder and a fist full of black hair mixed with white pelt.

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The seventh Locabra child was born on a bed of books. His mother, Emilia Bollante, had grown so accustomed to the waddle and groan of pregnancy after six successes that when her water broke in the middle of the family bookstore, she and Auguste Locabra, her husband, stacked volumes of *Encyclopedia Britannica* as mattress and paperbacks as pillows of the birthing bed. When the baby's red, pulsing form finally slipped out of his mother's womb, his placenta, birthing fluid, and infant body caressed a copy of Asturias's *Leyendas de Guatemala*, and thus the family named him "Miguel."

Abuela Locabra looked after Miguel and the other children as their parents sat in the upper

rooms discussing finances over cups of Coke and cheap rum. This was where she told them stories—legends passed down through generations of their family—told them of her late *abuelo* Ernesto Locabra, whose fingertips were cherry petals, *tíos* Horacio and Hernanda Locabra, whose public displays of affection landed them in the deepest prison cell in a Guatemalan jail, told of their escapes through the ink of Horacio’s boat tattoo, of the triplets who were brought to the lap of Isela Locabra by hurricane, of the murder of Diego Locabra by the ceramic statue he made for his sweetheart.

“Father Smith once followed me to the basement of our cathedral,” Abuela told one night beneath the glow of the yellow porch lights and the soft glimmer of *Canis Major* overhead. Her voice carried down the street and through the alleyway, so captivating that even the old black alley dogs were drawn from their secret hideaways to listen. “I asked him what he was after, what he wanted from me, and he kept approaching step by step until his chest was pressed against my back and his fingers were running through my hair.” The children at Abuela’s feet made a collective groan of disgust, and Abuela silenced them quickly with a wave of her hand, a gleam in her eye.

“I felt anger burn inside me with the heat of *el chile chiltepe*. It rose through my roots and down my braids, transforming hair to muscle and scale. The Father attempted to step away from me, but this time my braid chased him back and sunk its snake-fangs deep into the flesh of the Father’s hand. He screamed and ripped the hair from my scalp, and the snake went with him, pulsing with poison. The Father ran from the town, screaming of the “demon child with serpent hair,” and all the Locabras knew the truth, but none of the *gringos* in that town went down to the church basement for many generations after.”

Miguel soaked up each story Abuela told like roots soak up water. In honor of his namesake, he wrote the stories down meticulously in a stained leather notebook that he labeled *Leyendas del Locabra* with a piece of masking tape.

As Miguel grew like a saguaro and his siblings left the house in search of their own fortunes, his parents tired of letting little feet romp around the bookstore and instead consigned Miguel to the cinderblock walls of Las Palmas Middle School. On his first day, Abuela did his hair up in ten neat braids (“Protection,” she murmured between weaves. “May the serpents protect you”) and sent him off in patched trousers and a geometric cotton shirt with a plastic sack slung over his shoulder and his leather book of snake-braids, whirlwinds, *leyendas* tucked under his arm. When Miguel entered the old oak doors and let his feet shift gently across the mosaic tiles, a man intercepted him from the window of the front desk to take him by the arm and lead him to sit at a pressed-wood table next to a *gringo* in a polo and pressed khakis. After their second-period roll call, Miguel learned the boy’s name was Hester Brown and that he was the son of Robert Brown, the wealthy mayor of the entire county.

“What’s with the Walmart sack, *chicana*?” He enunciated each vowel in a crude imitation of Spanish, voice loud enough that it echoed across the room. The other students turned their heads the rest of the way towards them, and Miguel noticed how their eyes mirrored those of the bookstore patrons with their nose in the climax of a book, starving for action and adventure. He knew most questions expect a response (Abuela always demanded one, with threat of the belt if he refused), so he latched onto his facts and said the first response that came to his mind.

“It’s *guatemalteco*, actually.”

“What?”

“I’m not a *chicana*. All Locabras descend from Guatemala, not Mexico, though I guess a *gringo* like you shouldn’t be expected to know that.” There were a few muffled snickers across the room, and Hester let out a sound like an abused punching bag that nearly



covered up Miguel's next words. "Plus I'm a boy, so it's *chicano* anyway."

Hester's grin slipped back into place, and he made a noncommittal noise before reaching his hand out and snagging one of Miguel's braids.

"But you're obviously a girl, *chicana*. Only girls have long, fancy braids."

The laughs of the other kids were much more apparent this time, the increase in volume enough to draw curious teachers' eyes to the window in the classroom door. The laughter fueled Hester's actions, his back growing straighter and his grip on Miguel's braid tightening. Miguel questioned why such a simple act as laughter made him wish his captive braid would complete its transformation into one of Abuela's snakes.

"A true *chicano* wouldn't need their hair done up all pretty," Hester continued. He reached behind him with his free hand and plucked a pair of silver scissors from his desk. He threaded his fingers through the grips and opened the blades, placed each side only centimeters away from Miguel's captive braid. Miguel stiffened, not daring to move even as his anger continued to swell with the mocking of Hester and the crowd. Just as Hester was about to sever the braid, the teacher turned around, and with a sharp reprimand she quieted the laughter and sent them all back to the usual sitting and listening. This wouldn't stop Hester from sending Miguel squinted eyes and covert sneers, nor would it stop Miguel from ignoring the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* in favor of plotting his own revenge.

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That night a large supercell passed over Las Palmas, bringing with it rain and wind and three figures who stepped from the breeze and across the threshold of the Locabra's

bookstore. The family gathered around the dining table for a feast that could be mustered for guests—beans, a large pan of paella, a plastic case of frosted sugar cookies from the supermarket—and they swapped stories of adventure and shopkeeping over cups of horchata.

“A *ladrón* stole a book from my counter one morning,” Miguel’s dad began, leaning in towards the others with his elbows braced on the table-top. Miguel had his book of *leyendas* open before him, ballpoint pen held above the pages and ready to write. “I didn’t care to stop him; that book was my special bait for thieves, the one that always brought them running back.” At this the family nodded in understanding, a few of the members giving each other mischievous grins. “The next day *el ladrón* appears at my counter again, book in hand, yelling about how everyone who sees him screams and runs, and I keep my expression stalled but offer him the mirror in the bathroom to see what he has become, and this time he sees the horns and forked tongue of the *diablo* who stole from me.” Miguel’s father chuckled. “He tried to just slip the book back onto a shelf, but Locabra curses aren’t so easily remedied.”

When one of the triplets looked over to Miguel and asked about his life, his day, the thoughts of the youngest of the Locabras to most recently set out into the modern world, Miguel told them the version of his day at Las Palmas Middle School with Hester Brown censored out.

“We learned about *Othello* today.”

“Ah yes, a classic tragedy,” the middle triplet mused. “But our history teaches much better, I think. A true Locabra would never fall for such simple tricks. Hijo, let me tell you about your *tatará abuelo* and the time some petty *ciudadanos* thought they could trick him out of his crops...”

That night, Miguel thought about how his family had a history of swift revenge in defense of their own. He wouldn't wish that fate on anyone. Besides, the part of him just behind his heart, a part tied to his very veins and brain and soaked in the blood of every ancestor before him, wanted vengeance for himself, himself alone.

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The next morning, Miguel went down to the front porch and asked his *abuela* to braid his hair again. She gave him an odd look but agreed to do it regardless.

“What’s the occasion, *mijo*?” Abuela divided Miguel’s locks into several strips and began crossing them over each other. “I can see the furrow in your brow, the gleam in your eyes like your *tio*, Coronel Ignacio Locabra, on his way to the battlefield. You’re planning something. I know it.”

All Miguel offered her was a noncommittal noise and the slight shrug of his shoulders, but Abuela gave him back a knowing smile and tied his braids extra tightly. When he finally left for school, Abuela gave him a pat on the head and her blessing. Miguel tucked the bottle of powdered *chile chiltepe* he stole from the kitchen table deeper into the folds of his vest.

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The clock in San Marco Square rang eleven alarms to the night as Hester Brown crept along the roadways of Las Palmas. He carried his school bag over his shoulder, the canvas satchel weighed down with sugar packets, eggs and bottles of ink. Forgiveness had never come easy for the Browns: Hester's grandfather once set an entire bakery ablaze because the cook accidentally slipped a nut into his food, and Hester's dad sent an entire family to prison over a misplaced dime of change. The youngest Brown's plan was far more petty—

sugar in the corners to attract ants, eggs smeared over windows and tables, ink across book pages to render them useless, the silver pair of scissors if Miguel showed his face—Hester wanted as much revenge as possible against that *chicana* from yesterday, the one who humiliated him in front of his friends.

He thought back to early afternoon, back to when he took a bite of his school lunch that set his mouth ablaze, so hot and painful that his tongue was splitting open. He thought of his run to the water fountain, forcing what felt like gallons of water down his throat without getting any relief until one of the cafeteria women brought him a glass of milk he was forced to swish around his mouth. He thought of Miguel Locabra sitting suspiciously close to his tray, shaking a bottle of chile powder back and forth in his hands. He thought of the way his lips blistered so much that it was hard to talk, and the other students snickered behind his back for the rest of the day whenever the teachers called on him to answer questions. He thought about how, as he dragged his tongue around his mouth, he could still feel the blisters and the faint sensation of pain.

The bookstore was quiet when Hester slipped through the back door and down the stairs to the cellar. The sound of ripped sugar packets followed him as he trailed sugar from his fingers. He took a few eggs from their cartons and smashed them against the railings. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he loosened the stoppers on his bottles of ink. He prepared to approach the bookshelves, but a flash of leather on a nearby table caught his attention first. It was *Leyendas del Locabra*, the book Hester saw Miguel place on his desk each morning at school, the book whose destruction Hester suspected might hurt Miguel more than all the others. A few dabs of ink and the book was ruined, a collection of splotches and smudges rather than the meticulously collected legends of a boy who spent days at the feet of his grandmother. Hester couldn't resist tearing out several pages before dropping the book back to the tabletop to the crush of ink-soaked pages.

"Hester?" The voice came from just behind him, the pitch reminiscent of the mocking

voice he'd grown to hate so much. Miguel was there when Hester turned around, a stained white apron tied across his hips and his hands clasped around the handles of a large push broom. Hester's instinctual expression of surprise slipped quickly into one of pride and success, the edges of his mouth raised in a grin and his eyes squinting.

"If it isn't the little *chicana*. Don't want anyone watching you scrub the floors?"

"What are you doing in my bookstore?"

"Just taking out the trash." Hester grabbed the book from the table behind him and tossed it in Miguel's direction. "Some of your books belong in the garbage, not on a shelf."

Miguel caught the book by the cover and froze as he recognized the familiar feel of the binding. He didn't want to open it, but curiosity made him pry apart the covers and stare at the inky black that was once his thin handwriting. At first all he felt was emptiness, a black hole at the center of his being slowly sucking the light from him, but then the darkness shifted to fire and all Miguel felt was rage.

"What have you done?" He snarled more than asked.

"I destroyed that pathetic book of yours, *chicana*," Hester said, slowly stepping towards Miguel and the bookshelves behind him, "just like you tried to destroy my reputation with your stupid prank, and I plan to destroy the rest of the books down here because no one fights my family and gets away with it." Hester reached into his satchel and produced a pair of red and silver scissors that Miguel remembered seeing next to him at school earlier that day.

"But first, I think I'll take one of your braids as a spoil of war."

Hester approached one step at a time, and Miguel matched the steps until his back was flush against the edge of a bookcase and he couldn't retreat any further. As Hester pressed into the smaller boy's space, he reached a hand out and grasped Miguel's closest braid, the position mirroring the one from their very first meeting. He opened the scissors with his free hand and ran the steel edge along Miguel's hair, a few strands falling to the ground in the process.

As the scissors completed their final cut and the weight of the captive braid fell away, Miguel locked his teeth into the meat of Hester's shoulder, teeth now more animal than human, and as Hester was forced back, Miguel completed his transformation from boy to raving *cadejo*, vigilant protector and vicious beast. Hester let out a scream that carried through the floor and the rafters and into the night. His feet scrambled to standing, and he rushed out the door with his fist still clenching a handful of hair and fur, the white *cadejo* nipping at his heels until he was well outside property lines, and when the *cadejo* finally returned home, Abuela took one look at the intricate braiding, at its pale scruff, and drew the beast into her arms.

“Oh *mijo*, what have you done?”

Many years later, Abuela would still speak stories to the children of Las Palmas when they dared to visit. She would tell them of Abuelo Ernesto, of Horacio and Hernanda, of the triplets carried place to place by the wind, and her voice would continue to draw the dogs from their alleyways to listen, the white dog leading them to the porch's edge, the only one brave enough to step completely on the porch proper. At the end of each morning, Abuela would tell the legend of *el cadejo* with faint tears in her eyes, children and dogs alike at her feet, the head of a white dog with braids in its scruff resting its head on her lap.



## About the Author

Amanda Trout (she/her) is an incoming MFA candidate in Creative Writing and Media Arts in Poetry at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Her work can be found in several publications such as *littledeathlit*, *Cow Creek Review*, and *Bacopa Literary Review*. You can follow her on Facebook or Instagram via the handle @atrout2972.

# Forbidden Soup

by Lyra Meurer

Don't learn it the hard way: never hike alone when you're going off trail. Don't be like me and go trotting alone into the woods of Blodgett Peak Open Space, looking for the aircraft crash site without even a whistle as insurance. I hadn't hiked that far off trail when I lost my footing; I'd only just stopped hearing the cars on Woodmen Road.

Bleeding and tangled in the undergrowth, I screamed for help, but none came. No sounds of approaching rescue, just the sparse songs of dark birds fluttering from tree to tree. I'd sprained my ankle, and cruel thorns entangled me, trapping me like a rabbit in a snare.

I cursed myself for going on a Monday. I should've stayed home and binged reality TV.

I don't know how long I struggled. All I know is, eventually, I heard footsteps—not crunching through the brush, but resounding through the earth, as if I were approached by a stealthy elephant. Chickadees cried, “*chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee*,” and flew away. The desire to scream for help died in my throat.

A hulking shape approached: broad body, head melting into mountainous shoulders, mud-crusted toes a foot from my face. It crouched over me, oil-clumped black hair spilling over its back, its wide, leering mouth almost splitting its face in two. I thought it wanted to eat me, what with those small dark eyes, the crooked teeth filtering halitotic breath. It was, I thought, big enough to have me for lunch with a snack on the side.

The brambles coiled away from me at a touch of its hand. The moment my legs were free, I kicked and struggled, only for the beast to scoop me up as if I were an uncooperative cat. It



shushed me, nearly dropped me, and let out a deep chuckle as it bundled me into its arms, dispensing ham-fisted pats across my face. It started to walk and, though I struggled between bouts of paralyzed terror, I never got free, so strong were the monster's arms.

It carried me through the forest for I-don't-know-how-long, arriving finally at a rough hut constructed from brush and scavenged wood. I fought one last time, only for that hand to fall across my face once more, brushing my cheek with surprising gentleness. The inside of its hovel smelled like a rotted tree stump, putting me in the mind of writhing larvae and skittering centipedes.

To my surprise, it—she?—set me on a wooden chair in front of a table and made no further attempt to restrain me. Leering—or smiling, I realized—she propped my foot up on another chair, then slid off my shoe and peeled away my filthy sock. Patting me again, she pattered about her house, pulling strands of plants from the mossy rafters, pouring water into a pitted cauldron big enough for me to bathe in. While she waited for the water to boil, she ground ingredients in a mortar and pestle, applying the resulting green paste to my ankle, smiling at me all the while.

Then she set about making soup. I watched with dawning horror, convinced I was the final ingredient. Into the pot went more plants from the rafters, a reeking jar of something fermented, handfuls of writhing insects, fat spiders pinched from webby corners, grubs extracted from a log outside.

I tried to stand, to run, but my ankle gave out. My host cradled me back into my chair. Nothing to do but wait for death, or the worst soup of my life. My stomach pitched and writhed, until a divine smell, like onions cooking in oily ambrosia, replaced the dank earthiness of her hovel. My mouth watered.

When she put a bowl of green soup before me, I wolfed it down without hesitation. It

tasted like an allium-heavy pea soup, but fattier, with a flavor like bacon, if bacon were made from the smell of old wood. Strange, but delicious.

When I finally looked up, licking my fingers, I found her sitting opposite me, a smile crinkling around her glimmering eyes. She hadn't eaten yet. From the way she pointed at the pot, I guessed she wanted to make sure I had my fill first.

After dinner, she helped me to a bed of moss in the corner, where I slept peacefully through the night, my stomach full and warm. I woke only once, from a stabbing pain in my ankle. Sitting up, I saw her outside, plopped in one of her chairs, plucking an instrument and singing wordlessly to the moon. Her voice was as deep as the sigh of a cave, soothing me back to sleep.

The next morning, she heated up the leftover soup and ate breakfast with me before carrying me through the forest again. I had no idea where we were going, until we emerged close to the trail, in the clearing by the stream that's perfect for picnics. She put me down and pointed towards the trail, smiling. One more pat, and she melted into the trees just as hikers came chattering up the hill.

I did go back, with a friend, to see the plane crash, which we found without incident. As we plunged into the forest, I searched for the spirit, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through the trees. We returned without any hint of her until, as the sun set and the wind hushed through the leaves, I heard a spray of plucked notes and a low melody vibrating through the air.

## About the Author

Lyra Meurer (they/them) is disabled queer writer located in Colorado Springs, along with their rats. They have short fiction published in *Twenty-two Twenty-eight*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, and *Tree & Stone*. You can learn more about them at their website [lyrameurer.blogspot.com](http://lyrameurer.blogspot.com) and you can follow them on Twitter via the handle @LyraMeurer.

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