

# The Fantastic Other



ISSUE 07

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## **A Note from the Editor**

Is it getting hot in here? With the cataclysmic weather events witnessed across the world, it should come as no surprise that many of the following pieces explore that burning feeling so many of us are experiencing. Another theme, perhaps paired with the aforementioned one, is that primal urge that burns inside all of us. As the cover art suggests, we feel a call back to nature, back to the bucolic setting that we have harmed with our negligent habits and greed (though let us not forget that nature still has her teeth). Many of these pieces also have a mourning element to them, a longing to connect to the literal and figurative ghosts of our pasts. We all have endings to mourn but we continue to burn.

This issue once again smashes our record for submissions. It brings me immense joy to see that so many authors trust us with their fantastic work. For all those of you reading, I hope that these pieces spark or inflame something deep inside of you—perhaps so you will weave your own wild and outlandish dreams.

**G.E. Butler**

## **Cover Art: Migratory Patterns** **by Kathy Bruce**

“My collages explore archetypal female and mythological forms in other worldly scenarios within the context of poetry, literature, and the natural environment. I am passionate about creating collages that have the potential to generate a public awareness of our relationship as humans to the natural world. What interests me is the way in which female figures correspond to structures in Nature: botanicals, trees, and landscape. This can manifest itself either internally or externally in the form of patterns, fashion, or metaphorical context to reveal the subtle yet enchanting similarities between the inner life of plants, trees, and humans in the magical realist style.”

### **About the Artist**

Kathy Bruce (she/her) has had her work exhibited in the US, UK, France, Canada, Peru, Taiwan and Senegal. Images of collages have appeared in *Three Rooms Press*, *The Vassar Review*, *Alchemy Literary Magazine*, *Open Minds Quarterly Journal*, *The Perch*, *Yale University School of Medicine*, *The New Southern Fugitives*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *The Ignition Literary Journal*, *The Variant Literature*, *Landlocked Literary Magazine*, *The Rejoinder*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Twyckenham Notes*, *The Porter House Review*, *Pushing Out the Boat*, and *The U.S. National Women’s History Museum Journal* project.

# **I, Hunger**

**by Nnadi Samuel**

A lighter to your skin is cremation enough.  
the next burn becomes arson.  
stardust: coal-red with rage, charring the loose soil.  
tomb, mud-breaking to a fine smithereen.

from the freshly bombed cave,  
a skyline chase colors to my lips—  
stifling the rainbow's moment of lack.

I hunger in the accent of wildfire,  
of a country's name wading through gunshots:  
the sound—a vowel in motion scolding heaven.

each winter licks a relative from our grip.  
& with each dying summer, a storm uproots a rotten corpse  
that blossoms in green pasture—town of my arrival:  
Minnesota, with all its shiver.

all of my belonging splayed wide open beneath cruel hands,  
smearing my innocence across the embassy.

time slackens as the hounds sniff out my grievance.  
when I lodge into an apartment  
I lay down in mischief—deboning the blank pages of my  
green card, till it wears out.  
this coat of arms shaped like a teenage body.  
the unbuttoned cadaver underbridge.

at the riverbank, a SWAT team exhumes a truckload of carcass.

here, body parts are tucked in the lips of earth  
—cemented shut the way a jaw bites down on red meat.

won't you pardon me when I say,  
I lack the animal stink to attract relatives.

at midday, I awake fast-paced as a fang lifting from menace.  
my fingerprints on the dying shape of a scarecrow: motionless &  
blood-ready.  
my fur—all hair and nothing else.

in the wake of my exit, I wear white upon white to ghost my shadow  
into shudder,  
surrender sawdust from my tongue. end with vanishing.  
so, when I enter each lifetime—barefaced,  
I merit a blindness,  
ransack the welkins to claw a skyline.

### **About the Author**

Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. He is the author of “Nature knows a little about Slave Trade,” selected by Tate.N.Oquendo (Sundress Publication, 2023). His works have been previously published/is forthcoming in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Deadlands*, *Timber Ghost Press*, *Haven Spec Magazine*, *Utopian Science Fiction*, *Penumbra Speculative Poetry & Fiction Magazine* and elsewhere. He is a three-time Best of the Net nominee and a seven-time Pushcart nominee. You can follow him on Twitter via @Samuelsamba10.

## **The Burning Season**

### **by Francesco Levato**

It hasn't rained in almost a year, and the air is heavy with ash. The updraft draws it from the funeral pyres, sends it skyward—but like us, it cannot escape. It ascends for the briefest moment, then falls back to earth, choking our breath.

We no longer pray for rain, the offerings we burn with our dead are for us alone, a remembrance; citrus fruits dried on the branch, cactus paddles bleached by the sun—they are like ghosts, their taste distant and ethereal.

The valley is consumed with fire, our pyres threaten to outnumber those of us remaining. We build them low to keep from the coastal wind that crests the ridge; its tang of salt an ache for water that would wash the ash from our mouths, but that we could never drink.

~

There is an art to building a bier, weaving a balance of green branches and dry so that it still burns, but does so slowly. Dry branches are plentiful enough, they are all our orchards can provide. Green wood is becoming more and more difficult to find. I have to hunt for it beyond the protection of our valley, and there are far worse things there than rival clans. We have lost as many of our community to the drought as to the shadows that haunt the periphery—when the screams finally die, there is little left to bring home and commit to the fire.

Tending to the dead was never my calling. I was good with my hands, and their roughness showed I didn't shy away from difficult work; that seemed to be the only qualification a pyre keeper needed. Joaquin had always liked the callouses, he said he could read my history in them. I wonder what he would read in the burns on them now—a sudden carelessness, or my distraction at having to light his pyre.

It wasn't the practice to weave names into the biers, as naming laid claim. The bone fragments and heavier, greasy ash the burning left were no longer ours, they were meant for the communal garden; collected from all and mixed together, then kneaded into the soil in hopes of providing nutrients for whatever meager crop might grow there. But this bier was mine. I wove Joaquin's name into it, and when his body was rendered to ash I would collect it, steal away to the mesquite bush he kept hidden for us and work his ash into the roots. It was our promise to each other, the body of whoever passed first would nourish the bush, and the pods it produced would then sustain the one who survived.

I broke my vow to the community. I refused to release his body. I would not allow his ashes to be mixed with the others and lose him again. I stood guard at his pyre from the early hours, waiting for the heat to dry the green branches, make them glow and snap; waiting for his body to disarticulate and fall into the embers. I would have kept my vigil to the end, until the fire had finished its work, until his remains cooled enough for me to bury my hands in them—but a flash tore open the sky. The rain that followed was hard and punishing. It stung as it quenched our thirst. In the face of it, I could do nothing but watch as it extinguished the pyres, washed them clean—and with the flood, carried Joaquin's ashes beyond my reach.



### **About the Author**

Francesco Levato (he/him) is a poet, professor, and writer of speculative fiction. Recent books include *SCARLET*; *Arsenal/Sin Documentos*; *Endless, Beautiful, Exact*; and *Elegy for Dead Languages*. Recent speculative fiction appears in *Savage Planets*, *Sci-Fi Shorts*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Trembling With Fear*, *Shacklebound Books*, *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, and *The Sirens Call*. He holds an MFA in Poetry, a PhD in English Studies, and is an Associate Professor of Literature & Writing Studies at California State University San Marcos.

## Warm Spell by Kati Bumbera

I wake up drenched in sweat from my recurring nightmare: I'm submerged in the firelake behind the Black Needle peak.

The dreams have arrived with the Change. They announce that I'm reaching the age where my cold blood is warming and its powers start to fade. I can still cool the night with a soft exhale, but when I dream of the lake, I feel real heat rising in my veins. I'm pulled into the firelake by a force I can't resist, trapped in lava and consumed by flames. I whisper the words to save myself: *One flake, two flakes, falling from the sky. Three flakes, four flakes, catch them as they fly.* But the spell doesn't work. I can't get the firelake to freeze over, no matter how hard I try.

I jolt awake, breathless, with damp hair sticking to my burning cheeks.

The chill moonless sky above the woods is reassuring, but the snow on the slopes is past its prime. I wipe my clammy hands and knock back a shot of frostberry gin to take the edge off. *One flake, two flakes.* I remember the exquisite, piercing cold of my youth, centuries ago.

Now dark patches are spreading on every mountain, like black mould devouring fruit. *Three flakes, four flakes, watch them as they die.* Winter's fighting a losing battle too, and tonight I must play my part. Luc has sent

word, and I can feel the wind turn, the stars align. Tonight.

My name is Aurore du Lac, I am a snow witch, and I shall not let my power melt away.

~

“I’m Caroline,” says the woman who arrives in the snowmobile after dark. “The guy down in the depot said you’d show me the big guns.”

Luc used to have a sense of humour, but tonight the joke’s on me. I am to pose as this woman’s shift mate and teach her to calibrate the cannons that cover the slopes with artificial snow during the night. He’s left me a thermal jacket and a knitted beanie with the resort’s logo. As if I weren’t sweating enough.

The woman’s wearing the same beanie, but the dainty gold-rimmed glasses must be her own. New on his team, Luc told me. I don’t need to read her mind to see she’s not in her element here, traipsing on the mountain at night. I wonder what made her take a slope-scrubber job at a ski resort.

*She’s yours on a plate, Luc said. Do your magic.*

This isn’t how I normally work. Luc and I have a long-standing arrangement, but pretending to be a resort employee is madness. Still, the lake is thawing, demanding its dues, and we all need a cold spell. I depend on it as much as Luc and the rest of the warm-bloods in the village.

It will be fine, I tell myself. It’s not my first run on the bunny slope.

“Don’t forget your headlamp,” Caroline says. Her words hang like prim little

puff clouds in the air. I half-smirk, until I realise she's right. Luc didn't say anything about a headlamp. I find it in my jacket pocket by chance, but my neck tingles in a funny way.

I climb into the seat behind Caroline in the snowmobile.

Time to show her how to make snow.

~

Back in the days when snow was plentiful and the firelake thawed only once every twenty-seven years, I used to play with solitary skiers for fun. I barely needed magic to guess what called them to the mountains. Whether they longed for beauty or for excitement, I gave them both and more. *One squall for thrill, two squalls for pretty.* I showed off my peaks and my valleys and my best tricks with the cold: freeze a waterfall, summon a lynx, peel back the layers of soft mist to reveal a view.

*Trompeuse des Neiges*, Luc used to call me, like in the villagers' fairy tales.

He still says it, but now it rings like a cheap dig. As if it's my fault I'm forced to use my skills to lead warm-blooded humans to the firelake. They must come willingly, or the lake won't accept the sacrifice in exchange for a cold snap.

But even now, I make sure they see something beautiful as they get there.

~

Caroline's inspecting the snow cannon's fan blades with an interest that's making me sweat more than the beanie. She wants to know about relative humidity, temperature changes, how air and water get transfigured into snow.

*Five flakes, six flakes, fired from a gun.*

“We just set the dials to whatever numbers we get from the office.”

A warm draft around her in the dark: the answer doesn't satisfy her. I'm supposed to be reeling her in by now, but I'm struggling to find a foothold in her mind, that speck of dust in her centre. Flustered, I'm craving a gulp of frostberry gin.

*Seven flakes, eight flakes, where's my patience gone.*

“I didn't invent the damn things,” I tell her. “All we need to do is push the buttons.”

She frowns.

Before she can say anything, I cast a quick spell. Make a twig snap behind her in the woods, to distract her. But nothing happens. My fingers are clenched around something so hard they hurt. The snow cannon's remote control. I inhale and try again.

The leaves rustle as an owl takes flight, but Caroline doesn't flinch. Instead of spooked, she looks concerned, reaching out to catch something... and with nascent panic I realise that something is me.

A blistering heat wave sweeps over me. *Nine flakes, ten flakes, sizzling in the sun.* My throat tightens and I feel fire in my chest, my belly, my veins. It hurts

to breathe. I fumble with shaking hands to unzip my jacket just as Caroline grabs onto me before I fall.

It is the remote control that hits the ground without making a sound.

*Eleven flakes, twelve flakes, life has just begun.*

The snow machine jerks awake with a hiss—and spits a furious splash of water in Caroline’s face.

“What the—”

The cannon starts to spin around, jet-spraying us with mad shapes of water, as if performing its own ritual.

At least I no longer feel like I’m burning alive.

“The air duct’s not connected!” Caroline yelps, then coughs, and then, to my surprise, starts to laugh. Her jacket’s soaked, but she’s still holding me, keeping me steady on my feet.

Then comes a loud bang, we scream in unison, and the machine dies down at once. This time we both laugh.

Slowly, my breathing finds calm again. Crystals within and without rearrange themselves around their centre. The pine forest stirs a little, like an animal in its sleep. Stars wiggle back into their nook in the sky.

Caroline's taken off her lamp and the beanie, and now I can finally catch a glimpse of her face. She's shivering. The cold fills her with life.

"Is there a lodge, or somewhere we can go? To dry ourselves by a log fire?"

The thought of fire should make me wince, but instead it triggers a fresh giggling fit.

"I know a place."

~

The slopeside bistro closed hours ago, but it has deck chairs with blankets left on the patio that overlooks the village down the valley. Caroline turns on the electric candles, in want of a fireplace, and I produce a hip flask of frostberry gin, promising it will warm her up.

We sit and take in the view: a spectacle of stars in a theatre of mountains. I haven't seen these peaks, really seen them, in a long time. Perhaps because they make me lonely and nostalgic, and those feelings don't help when there's work to do.

"Wow," Caroline says. Her exhale courts the soft wind.

I can still get this show on the road.

"What about the snow?" she asks.

"Don't worry about the cannons. There'll be real snowfall tonight." I mean it, too. "Deep, fresh snow, the kind that crunches under your feet. Not this re-

frozen slush we're treading now."

"I'll take your word for it."

*One flake, two flakes, in the lake you burn. Three flakes, four flakes, let the cold return.*

The firelake doesn't exist in a specific physical sense. It appears when the prey is primed to see it and heed its call. But there's a plateau near the lodge, just as the blue run loops gently around the Black Needle.

Caroline takes a chug from my flask.

"So... have you been in this gig a long time? Making snow for the resort?"

Frostberry isn't particularly mind-bending, but it helps you relax and focus. I gulp some down too, before I answer.

"A few years, on and off. I mostly work for myself, but I pick up a few shifts when things are slow. Luc and I go back a long way."

Patience now. Let a minute pass before returning the question.

"And you? What brings you to the Black Needle valley?"

"Well... I guess you could say poetic justice. I was a director on the tourism board. Until these mountains took everything from me."



My senses sharpen, but Caroline can't see it.

“Years of poor snow, poor turnover, disappearing jobs... and lately, disappearing skiers. Three went missing just last winter, during the few weeks the resort managed to stay open at all. But you know that.”

I nod. *Two flakes, three flakes, vanish in the mist.*

“I was told to fix it or die trying. Hah! Like I can single-handedly reverse climate change and find some missing skiers while I'm at it.

“But I did launch an investigation. Of course, it went nowhere, unless you count a local folk tale about a creature luring people to their death on the slopes. *La trompeuse des neiges*. Heard it in the village bar from a ski maintenance guy.”

“I guess you couldn't write that in your report. But why did the board blame you?”

Caroline sighs and pulls the blanket tighter around herself.

“Because I'm an old woman who made a fool of herself. At a press conference, in front of everyone. I opened my mouth... and I couldn't speak. I found myself drenched in sweat and gasping for air.”

Don't you hate it when that happens. I almost say it out loud.

“It gave the board an excuse to force me to resign. It didn’t solve anything, but at least they had a scapegoat.

“Ironically, the only job I could get after that was this one. Making fake snow.”

Thoughts whirl around in my head like powder stirred up by the wind. The hot flash I had by the cannon, the lake, Caroline’s story. There’s a quickening in the air. Not all of it is clear yet, but I have a plan.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

~

Time flows differently from here. The temperature drops and the night deepens. Caroline drives the snowmobile and I stand up behind her and pretend to fly. We slalom and speed down the slope. Universes rush past us, and the cold cuts into our bones. Caroline whoops. It’s exhilarating, to finally know how to show her a good time before the end.

I tell her to close her eyes and trust me.

I might have cold blood in my veins but I’m not a monster. I pride myself in my work, and she deserves my all. I sculpt the very air for her until she feels what she loves best, what she misses, what we both miss and love more than anything on earth: our strength, our youth, our power.

*One flake, two flakes. Life has just begun.*

Neither of us sees the icy patch ahead on the slope.

~

My recurring nightmare's pulling me under again: the firelake that won't freeze, the haunting proof that my blood is slowly warming. After centuries on earth, my power's fading. Just when winter's dying all around me in the mountains, and every creature needs me more than ever, I'm losing my strength to stave off the thaw. The lake's always hungry for fresh offerings, and—

This time, the dream ends differently: there's Luc's by my side, telling me to open my eyes, and when I do, he's still here. I'm lying on the ground, wrapped up too warm. A little way ahead there's the snowmobile, upturned but seemingly in one piece. So is Caroline.

My head's pounding. Luc knows he's not supposed to be here. I need the prey to be alone for my illusions to work, or they won't see the lake appear. He must've followed us, but—

"I knew something was up when I saw light outside the lodge," he whispers. "What the hell? I told you not to screw this up!"

A realisation crystallises around a speck of memory. Caroline's story in the lodge... her investigation... Luc's harebrained idea....

"You were the one who told her about snow witches? In the bar?"

"What does it matter to *you*?!" Luc spats back. "She'd been hassling *me* with that investigation for months! Then she showed up at the depot!"

"So you used me to—"

“I trusted you to get it done!”

The world is spinning, and something worse than heat is choking me. Feeling around in the dark, coughing, looking for my hip flask, I end up fondling Caroline’s boots.

“Get what done?” she says, as she pulls me up from the ground.

Luc looks away. Caroline gives me the once-over. Blood’s dripping from her forehead, but she’s unshaken.

“Ah, right, the cannons!” She laughs out. “I’m afraid we made a mess of that tonight. Well, Aurore did. Making snow’s a tougher job than it looks like.”

My head fills up with clouds, it’s all I can think of—the heavy storm clouds, the promised reward, the longed-for relief that is now lost. There will be no blizzard, no snowfall. No cold spell tonight.

“Perhaps you too need a career change.” She hands me my flask of frostberry gin. “But no harm done. Luc can drive me back to the depot.”

I mutter that I’ll be fine, though nobody’s asking.

The engine sputters to life with an ease that completes my humiliation. In seconds, they vanish without a backward glance. I stay behind, with only the mountains around, alone.

I barely notice at first how the snow on the plateau begins to shift, creating currents and formations, changing colour from white to yellow then orange and red, then back to white again: the blistering white of lava. The firelake appears, to me, alone.

It is here for me. I've led myself to it.

And I have no fight left in me to invoke the words against the flames.

### **About the Author**

Kati Bumbera (she/her) is a video games writer living in France. She has short fiction published by *NFFD*, *Roi Faineant Press*, and *The Fabulist*. You can follow her on twitter via [@KatiBumbera](#).

## **I Bury Sadness Like a Skin** **by Shanna Germain**

I lived among monsters for a time.  
I was dying of a disease no one knew.  
The creatures of my body found purchase  
in the breaks of knees,  
scored the surface of my bones with  
aches and blood.  
I named them, as one should,  
from the history books.  
Loch ness, Each Uisge, the sidhe,  
blue men of the minch.  
For a while, I rode a kelpie built  
of teeth and pain.  
For a while, I believed myself a lady  
of the lake.  
For a while, I went into the water and  
buried my green dress  
and waited for red cap to claim me.

The myths are supposed to come for you.  
It is what we are promised as children.  
If you hear the black dog in the dark of night,  
and go to pet it.  
If you see a will o' wisp,  
and follow its promise.  
If you fall, panting, after the dance,  
into the circle of stones.  
They will come and claim you,  
gnashing of ghostly teeth,

flipping of fiendish fins,  
promises of pulling you under  
and under and under.

And still I lay, dying at the surface  
of things, for a long time.  
And then I wasn't dying anymore.  
There was just a girl in an iron bed,  
bled to the core, green sheets soaked  
with sea, the far-off light  
of the morning riding away away.

It is hard to know that in the end,  
you can run to the beasts, calling,  
your knees stained with grass and beg,  
your life a small thing crouched underfoot,  
and that they do not want you after all.

### **About the Author**

Shanna Germain (she/her) is an award-winning queer writer and game designer. Her short stories and essays have appeared in publications like *Apex Magazine*, *Best American Erotica*, *Best Lesbian Erotica*, *Best Gay Romance*, *The Deadlands*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. She is also the author of multiple novels, non-fiction books, and roleplaying games.

## **From A Void In The Sky, Larkspur is Born** **by Allie Marini**

Once upon a time, there was a hole in the sky. Whether it was torn accidentally or cut on purpose, no one could say. It was hard to tell from the ground.

Beyond the hole, there was nothing. Not a dark-nothing, but a kind of nothing where if you looked at it too long, or too hard, or with the wrong kind of heart, you'd fall right into it. And many people did.

The hole stayed open long enough for a sun and a moon to pass through it safely. Then a star climbed out and used a long, curved claw to stitch the hole back up. As she stitched, little shreds of the sky scattered and fell down to the ground like tiny blue seeds.

Then the star became a woman and climbed down, out of the sky, to start collecting all the torn bits that had fallen while she stitched. She took all the seeds she could find to a cottage she'd built at the edge of the woods. She put them into a jar, where they hummed, happy as a drone of bees.

One at a time, she planted them. Once, she lay them where a virgin mother wept. Once, she scattered them over a slick of king's blood, shed in a battle for a woman's love. Both stories that sprang up from the seeds kept the sky entertained. Neither kept it satisfied.



And so, the star-born witch woman whose curved claw could repair the sky kept planting. Until one day, she came to the last seed in her jar, and that seed was me.

Instead of planting it, she swallowed it. With the same curved claw that she used to stitch up the sky, she then opened up her chest and allowed me to put a root ball in her heart. As my roots deepened, she let me stretch my flowers into her fingertips, and transform her into something else. And that thing is me.

I am more terrible and toxic than I am beautiful. But sometimes, loveliness is a liability. As I took root in her veins, she told me,

*Daughter Larkspur, let nothing and no one in this fallow world take from you the shred of sky from which I made you. If they try to take your mouth, let their lips burn from your kiss. If they try to swallow you up, seize their heart and stop it. For you are born of a void in the sky and the sky itself. You need only yourself to start over, if you wish it.*

This time, the sky was quiet. Satisfied. And then, by petal and by claw, I became.

### **About the Author**

Allie Marini (she/her) is a Florida Woman, cross-genre writer, visual artist, maker, and tarot reader. Find her online: @kiddeternity, [www.alliemarini.com](http://www.alliemarini.com), or [www.creepygirltrap.com](http://www.creepygirltrap.com).

## **El Tigre** **by Ivy Jones**

*For Aleece.*

Outside loomed the streets of a little city, blue sign after blue sign hung from the light posts standing haughty on the sidewalk every six feet. “Welcome” — lineless yellow daffodils, their chutes tall, their stems and leaves a deep green — “Alpine Helen.” They flapped in the wind to the apiary hum of the tattoo gun, closer by, much more palpable. I was on a second-floor high horse, in a sunroom with three walls of bay window divided by white slats, and the view was of the walkable downtown and droves of tourists and massive hills holding smaller gazebos. Wooden tops with benches. Paint kept uncannily pristine. Incoming: storm. Incoming: tattoo.

My girl was getting a tattoo. She earlier discovered she, or someone connected to her mind’s eye, liked Riesling. She was off the Riesling by the time the appointment rolled around, aware of herself and her divinity and her locus of control. Now, her flesh was swelling black into the form of thick stripes on a tiger. *El Tigre*, the tattoo artist kept calling the flash design, a sprawled tiger with a lolled tongue and an extra eye nestled on its forehead. *El Tigre* etching onto upper arm skin. Her other arm was laid behind her head, a resting-space, and she was fidgeting with the rings on her nimble fingers. Amethyst and bands and a tooth embedded in gold —tapping together, twisting with her thumbs. It hurt, I could tell, though not that much. More things had hurt her

in her days, she had told me over coffee once, than bruises and fear. In the parlor, her face was calm, the deepest of brown eyes staring up ahead at the cracked ceiling.

Small talk, but she wasn't in it. Her sandaled feet twitched to and fro while the welcome signs outside wagged against a sky blue-gray as an agate. There were so, so many people so, so far below us, but we had AC and chairs and a room with a view—I kept telling myself that with her, I was safe. My girl was getting an impulse tattoo, and it looked sublime—*what the hand, dare seize the fire?*

Her eyes were slightly glazed, as they usually were when we settled down for too long. She loved to feel the ground hit her soles, the resistance of air particles against her movement. The poles of the earth aligned beneath her feet wherever she was, and now compasses swung haywire. My girl was getting a tattoo of a majestic tiger on the innard of her bicep. I sipped iced coffee with honey from a paper cup with a straw and watched the brewing weather with electric blood.

She flexed toned calves as her head finally fell in my direction. Her eyebrows and face were the slack of near-sleep, or a particularly good high, though she rolled her eyes and beckoned from behind her head. I stood from the desk chair I was in and brought over my drink for her to share. I squatted, and she pursed her lips around the tip of the straw as the tattoo artist paused so as to avoid a disastrous mistake. He was bringing up something about hydration, on topic, and my girl nodded absently, tugging harder at a glob of the honey caught in the straw until it rocketed up against her soft palate, and she smiled.

I asked her if she was enjoying herself. She said yes, though she'd rather be propheting. The artist, not knowing what word she really said, laughed and brought the needle back to her skin, nearly done. I willed her to lose her antsiness, anxiety, to relax just a bit, we couldn't both be that way. Maybe she was seeing angels in the architecture, the plasterwork's pattern on the ceiling, vivisections of flowers marching across the room—maybe she was seeing her gods and goddesses. Maybe she was aching to receive a missive, maybe not, *my oracle* with her new sublimity, her tyger of divinity. It was more than likely that when we descended the stairs into the alleyway, she would have to take my arm on the way back to the car, lie down with her eyes closed across the leather backseat, arms linked above her head like a halo. It was more than likely that when my oracle was done with her tattoo, her *El Tigre*, she would ask me to unwrap her arm to the air, and that she did.

We joined the groups of people on the sidewalk for just long enough to duck back into an alleyway that led us towards where we parked. I peeled her wrapping off under a streetlamp, the sound of the banner above like wingbeats. I tried my best to be careful with tremoring hands as I dug my fingers under the lip of the plastic and tugged it off—it clung like wet clothes to her, and she raised her arm a bit higher so I could work my way around. *El Tigre* was a beautiful piece of artwork, but in the first fifteen minutes of its permanency, my oracle's skin had begun to ooze a deepish ruddy orange in places, and there were smears of purple ink on her shoulder and back of arm. She said she felt badass, the skin still puffy and tinged with proof that she had just gotten a walk-in, six-inch tattoo. I looked back up at the sky, more menacing than before, and balled up the wrap into a satisfying crumple before throwing it in a trash can.

My oracle looped her safe arm into mine while we crossed a few parking lots, passed a few frat boys and gaggles of family. The sky had darkened significantly, and once we reached the car, she leaned against the back, looking up with the expression of a child. As I was handing her back her phone, freshly charged, it buzzed with the sudden service—Helen was a dead zone for LTE. Our hands had both been on it, and mine had jerked in surprise while hers was steady, her rings brushing against the back of my hand while she checked the notification. I unlocked the car while my oracle hummed something under her breath and pocketed the device.

It was then that my own phone vibrated: *severe thunderstorm alert*. I took a deep breath, followed by a shallower one, and my oracle's hand fluttered onto my shoulder. She said that she could drive, I agreed immediately because somehow, *somehow*, I hadn't thought the storm would be *this* bad. A storm was one thing in a building and another in a car. I handed her the keys with my quartz charm, and we got in.

My oracle assured me we were driving out of it anyway. I knew I couldn't man a vehicle with this much panic in my chest, but she also couldn't man a vehicle if she saw a gilded woman with a sword reclining on the hood, mid-storm, down the highway, telling her the lottery numbers for tomorrow. A staleness was creeping into my throat, so I wrapped my arms around myself, telling her to be safe. Be safe? She repeated, scoffing that she'd be as safe as the gods intended, which was very safe, and to not panic because look at the map, we're headed away from it. Just a storm, you'll be alright, do you need a Xanax?

I shook my head, wringing my hands while we pulled out of the parking lot

and onto the main road. Avoiding pedestrians, my oracle navigated us onto the quickest route back, telling Siri to play some soft music for me as I forced myself to fill my lungs to the brim, and then even more. *El Tigre* lay on my oracle's skin, staring down her arm, out the windshield, and into slate, brewing storm clouds. When lightning struck, visible and stark behind the trees, I blew air out quickly, inflating my cheeks like a pufferfish, and then tapping them on both sides with my palms. The wind began to shift our wheels, sheets of rain slamming into the metal keeping me from the outside. My heart leapt like a jackrabbit's, and I closed my eyes and counted up and down from ten for a few rounds, before thunder rocked the vehicle like a deep roar. I thought I would throw up—I thought I would die.

But my oracle kept us as slow and steady as she could, and I trusted her with myself, soul and body, and she kept me safe—until she reached out to squeeze my hand to comfort, and we hydroplaned off the road. It happened in such a quick moment—she was a good driver, she had just grappled back for control too quickly, my oracle—and thunder surrounded us like God catching a fly. I don't remember what I did, but I remember hurtling towards a ditch as she cursed, her eyes like fire in the mirror and her fingers contorting on the wheel. Maybe she was praying, but I was not, I was frozen and breathless and the ditch came fast.

But the crash didn't happen. In another world, me and my oracle were skewered by broken glass, shards in our throats or lungs. We were dead on impact, or bleeding out quick enough to be unaware. A farmer would find us the next day, their cows investigating. We will have begun to return to ash, cadavers instead of people. But—the crash didn't happen. The only thing I could recall in the hour between the moment we lost control and using the

keycard for our apartment complex was a large, fiercely glowing, three-eyed tiger nudging us back through gales of wind and whipping water into place on the asphalt.

### **About the Author**

Ivy Jones (he/they) is a storyteller in Georgia who writes on the surreal, fabulist, psychiatric, and homosexual. He is a thassalophobic currently inspired greatly by water, William Blake, and the old web. Ivy's published art and writing can be found in locations such as *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *dadakuku*, *isacoustic*, and upcoming issues of *beestung* and *Cream Scene Carnival*. One can contact Ivy at [ivy.twines](#) on Instagram/Threads or [@ivyintheroad](#) on Twitter.



## **le cauchemar de la belle-mère** **by Andrea Martineau**

waist-deep in amniotic  
waters, her wimple grows a  
serpent's tail and scales.

her eyes replicate  
the soundless pool we both sit in.  
muddy, tenebrous

I wash her daughter's  
hair, debris trickles off the  
slip knotted tresses, my fingers snag.

she ties knots  
faster than I can unwind them  
her serpents snarl, snap  
snakebites ooze,  
the pool now copper red

a door opens  
of its own determination  
but we cannot all make it through

I flail a trembling arm  
towards her crown  
claw-clamour at scales  
shred through my plump finger pads  
to soften her grip

she loses interest in her child,  
our child  
my child  
her mortal eyes  
now clocked on mine

through the effervescent door  
somewhere familiar  
the child floats away

free of us both  
at last—but not everyone floats  
down here.

the silence ceases  
broken by a shrill scream, my wrists seized  
she pulls me under.  
hush.

fangs encircle radiocarpal  
though I am too stubborn to

sink

I gnaw off my left arm  
swim after my child in lopsided lengths  
I'll play the she-villain  
if it means I see her again  
there's no one else  
to comb her hair

I leave the serpent-siren  
to feast on destiny

the door slams shut  
watertight

blood is thicker than.

### **About the Author**

Andrea Martineau (she/her) completed her Bachelor of Arts in English with a Certificate in Public Relations at the University of Regina in 2018. She currently works with the book publishing industry and other crucial creative sectors as Creative Saskatchewan's Program Manager. In her spare time, she writes poetry, makes art with her daughter, and meets up with her writing group, The Canty Collective of Writerly Women. Her work has been published in The League of Canadian Poets' daily *Poetry Pause*, *untethered magazine*, and *Blank Spaces*, and she is a reader for *The Malahat Review*. You can find her online via @andreamartineauwrites and [www.andreamartineau.ca](http://www.andreamartineau.ca).

## **On Night's Shore** **by Faith Allington**

The roofless dark is filled with iridescence, luminous swirls and spires, whole cities of light woven into the sky. The hours crumble to the touch, but still I wait. Dido brings me food sometimes, glistening red seeds and herbal honeycomb.

“You should come away,” she says, knowing that I won’t. She shines in the night, bronze and violet, her eyes watching me through her visor. “There’s a feast in the sub-terra dome.”

“I must keep watch,” I remind her. All through the dark, this knowing is in my bones, this belief as unshakeable as the silver earth beneath my feet, the telescope at my side. “He’s coming.”

“Who? Who would be coming to Hyperion?”

She knows that I never answer. I cannot remember his name. Shame blooms hot and damp under my arms, my heart as salt as tears.

Dido sighs and turns away. Each time, her leaving is a small wound. I could love her, if I were not charged to wait, if I were not already pledged. How kindly she comes out here, to the edge of these ruins. I fear she will stop coming one day.

I don't remember how long we've been here, so far beyond the rim of known space. My memories shift and froth. An accident, I'm told. Dido says it will be dark for many more lifetimes, before the vast empiric sun returns to this half of the planet once again.

For now the nebular hours drift, or perhaps I drift in them. In all the luminous inconstancies of the sky, only the dark and I remain fixed. Then I hear it—the scrape of a dragged heel.

My heart bursts into light, shining a steady beam. The wind is nectar-sweet with promise. Except—what comes is no husband but something long-limbed and hulking, with grinning heads and slathering jaws. Molten green eyes fix upon me, pierce me through.

I wait to be devoured.

It waits, and its six eyes do not blink.

A word floats out of memory's fog. "Cerberus?"

Its three heads whicker, and one of the velvet noses bumps my outstretched hand. Between its teeth, flowers wreath and twine in the open mouths, as bright as gold. Alone and nameless in the dark, I wait for the Orphean ship that I know will come for me.

### **About the Author**

Faith Allington is a writer, gardener, and lover of mystery parties who resides in Seattle. Her work is forthcoming or has previously appeared in literary journals, including *Bowery Gothic*, *FERAL*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Gold Man Review* and *Crab Creek Review*.

## **Fran** **by Sophia Wahlstrom**

*Coming a long way. Be there soon.*

The note has been slipped through my mail slot. It is naked, no envelope. The paper is the precise color my skin will be, come death and dryness. This glimpse of the unknown future, this prenascent color that existed beyond vitality, makes me smile. But coming a long way from where? And when? *Soon* is so relative. It is what my mother used to answer when asked, *when will we get there?* But also, when asked *will I ever have a mouth like yours, a belly like yours, hips like yours?* When my mother said *soon*, it was always with a little turn of her lips. This monosyllable seemed to me to mask a budded truth, implied a depth of complex knowledge residing in layers beneath her tongue.

But the note is not from my mother. She lives just down the street in a trailer—custom built per her specifications after the old house burned down. The trailer was constructed atop a bed of peat moss in the hopes of future fossilization. It is painted a chewed gum pink and terminally covered in spider mites, *teeming* with those little mites whose travels transform the walls into undulations that affect my vision for hours after my visits.

The trailer has floral curtains, a dingy screen door, and a dishwasher with one of those magnets that is used to indicate whether the wares within are “dirty” or “clean.” This magnet is a little brown bear holding a sign that could be

flipped one way or another. I have never seen it on the “clean” side.

I take the note gently between my fingers, hold it up to the window above the kitchen sink. Doesn't the slant of the words strike familiarity? Don't I know the blunted 2 o'clock tail of the o's? The light reveals nothing other than a pleasant grooving pattern embedded in the weave. No watermark. No ghostly indents from past pens.

When I was eleven years old, my mother saw the first ghost. It was not a man or a woman or even a person at all. *Ghosts don't worry about things like that*, my mother had said, absentmindedly smoothing the hair from my forehead. I hated being touched in this way, but that was not something I could express to her in words. Instead, I would twitch her forehead up and down the way the cat did with the skin on his back to indicate his displeasure. But she never noticed. She was somewhere else.

As soon as I was aware of myself, I knew that my body was not my own. How can one own something that they did not create? My body was a permeable thing. Its initial purpose was as a receptacle for my mother's words and thoughts, her grief and fear and unrelenting love. This was a little sacrifice to make for the reward of existing.

I cannot remember ever loving my mother. My survival hinged on her survival. Or maybe it was the other way around. She had created something empty so that she might fill it, but I was never the perfect container. I could only hold so much before my body betrayed me, became engorged and nauseous. When I was stuffed to the brim, I would excuse myself politely to the ladies' room, disgorge the contents of my mother in our little cracked toilet, and



emerge light and hollow, full only on potential.

After the first ghost there were, of course, others. My mother was on intimate terms with them all. She would stay up until dawn conversing with the ghosts, gesticulating with an unlit cigarette and pacing the room. This behavior disturbed me. I could not see the ghosts or hear their moaning. I would lock the door to my bedroom, and when I came down in the mornings, my mother's eyes would be bright holes, her hair a nest of secret knowledge.

My mother began to speak purely in spiritual recapitulations, and I began to grow hungry. I could not sustain on the ghosts' secondhand wisdoms, their witticisms, their ideas for a better life. In the ghosts, my mother had finally discovered the perfect audience. They did not merely contain; they transformed. They were incapable of fullness. They had the distance of death.

I shrank in the famine of my mother's words. No matter the engaging questions I asked, the arcane secrets I gleaned from dark-covered books, she would not speak to me—at least, not in the way she once did. I came to realize that everything I could say or know was confoundedly material, created in and so limited by the corporeal world. In time, I was gutted of my mother entirely, leaving me a husk with a mind rattling around inside, starving and desolate. Things continued in this way until the old house burnt down. I moved into this one level rambler on a desert road, but my mother declined to continue our cohabitation. Instead, she requisitioned the trailer and moved herself in with her few remaining belongings. The ghosts, largely unbothered by the destruction of the family home but finding themselves lacking a place to stay, moved in with her.

I should have been happy about this. Shouldn't I want independence? Shouldn't I long to be free? I tried to reason with myself, but reality does not pair with reason. I was accustomed to achieving fullness from without, had never learned how to create my own sustenance. I had to understand that living without my mother would be an ongoing practice in emptiness.

In the first months of living alone, I tried reading Dostoevsky and Dr Seuss. I tried watching blockbusters and obscure art house films. They did nothing. I remained—remain still—stubbornly palimpsestic—traces of my mother's words lingering on my skin, tantalizingly surface-level, refusing to be entirely covered or replaced. Even my desire to be full is not a true desire, true desire being a catalyst for transmutation. I dream as much of being consumed as I do of consuming—anything to alter my current state which, it seems, is despairingly and immutably static.

I have tacked the mysterious note to the fridge with one of my new magnets. I crafted the magnets from the lost teeth of some unknown child, which I won in a bid. Everything else from the lot went to the dumpster. Hairdryers, precious stones, keychained rabbit's feet—they have no utility for me. The teeth were delicately bedded in a wad of 2 ply toilet paper, tucked within a small ceramic container. The handle of the container's lid was a curious fairy clothed in blue, sitting with her legs crossed playfully.

The set of teeth isn't complete. It is missing a canine. The remaining canine, when the auctioneer pulled it out and set it on the projector screen, made my gums ache with longing. The tooth is tinged a pleasant yellow, craggy at the root. I often stand in the mirror and hold it up to my own mouth, baring my teeth, remembering something wispy and intangible.

I did see my own ghost, once. It was nothing like my mother's ghosts. It was not witty. It did not even speak. The ghost appeared to me while I was washing the dishes. I had one hand in the belly of my favorite mug, a state that always reminds me of hunting rabbits. I have never hunted rabbits myself, but the motion of cleaning the rounded sides of her mug feels akin to my imagined experience of scooping out the gristle from a rabbit's ribcage, as if the two movements are connected by a thread that stretched across time.

The ghost imparted no wisdom. It did nothing but stand and stare. Its shape mocked mine, and looking at it directly, I glimpsed myself as if through pellucid flesh. There I saw the nothingness that had rooted within me, the way the nothing had blossomed into buds that trawled along my bloodstream. I knew I would never be free of it. It had become a part of me too long ago.

The note, tacked to the fridge's face, has taken on an air of transience. It is as if a second party jotted the note down before heading out the door and then thoughtfully left it in a place they knew I would see it. This brings me comfort. They will be back soon.

I will sit down to wait.

### **About the Author**

Sophia Wahlstrom (she/they) lives in a certain corner of Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her partner and their two cats. She likes to meander about, trying not to trip on uneven concrete. If you ask nicely, she might tell you a riddle, but she cannot promise that the riddle will be good or even make sense.

# **The Bone Flute Sings**

## **by Makena Metz**

He was always one step ahead. The golden kid or the charming one, the boy who kissed girls behind the barn. He won every bet, and all fights. Dogs heeled at his command. Life a game and he was the player. His glow outshined the very sun. The darkness quieted, overcome by brightness. Shining pearlescence.

I was always one step behind. The darkened child, the awkward one, the boy who killed girls behind the barn. I lost that bet, started a fight. Dogs growled at my command. Life a game and I was the loser. My glow was lost to his sun. And such bright light creates shadows thicker than blood.

### **About the Author**

Makena Metz (she/her) writes for the page, screen, and stage. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English from Chapman University and is a proud member of DGA, ASCAP, WIA, Maestra, and the SCL. Makena's work has been published with *Wordgathering*, *PearTree Press*, *The Clockhouse Review*, *For Page and Screen*, *Havik*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Wishbone Words*, *Strange Horizons*, and many others. Find her work on Coverfly, New Play Exchange, or Chillsubs and follow her via @makenametz on social media or check out makenametz.com.

## **You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory** **by Matt Dube**

Most people never even think about those of us who live close to the ghost mines. You hire tuk-tuk trikes with fringe canopies to take you to artisanal pizza parlors and then you watch incandescent films on silvered screens and never consider what keeps the pizza oven hot or pushes light through the celluloid. We don't get to forget about our ancestor ghosts here, where everything goes back to the mines. And we've all got a role to play; some of us strap ghost-powered lights to our heads and hump tools into the mines to break up ectoplasmic deposits and carry them back to the surface. Some people monitor the air quality, and some minister to the sick so that when they do pass on, their comforted spirits find their way to the mines.

Even me, I've got a place, behind the counter at the post office. My whole life, I thought I'd be working the spirit seam, but when Postmaster Tham died, the stakeholders had a meeting and decided I was to be the new postmaster. My sister Lin actually laughed out loud when she heard it. "That's just perfect," she said. "You couldn't find someone who cares less about people's business," I heard her telling people after the meeting. And it's true, I didn't care much who got mail from who or what catalogs I rolled into their mail cubbies or delivered on my bike.

My sister had stars for eyes, and there wasn't ever enough light in this town for her. She'd been assigned to work with the sick, and that's work as

important as any. It's work that made a contribution. But for my sister, it was just boring. For weeks, she told me she hated her work when we were talking across our narrow beds. "It's too grim," she said. "I can't imagine doing that for the rest of my life. I'd sooner work in the mines collecting tailings." I knew people who did that work; we both did. Our father had done it before he died. She didn't mean it, I told myself, and rolled over. When she left, I wasn't surprised, exactly.

~

It's not like I never heard from her. She'd send me letters from the capital addressed to *The Postmaster*. "I had pizza today," she wrote me. "It's delicious bread-tomato sweetness, but don't use a fork and knife or everyone will laugh." Not that I remember her ever caring if people laughed at her.

I filled a postcard with Poulla's news and then had to fold it into an envelope, so no one would consider me a gossip and sent it back.

"You know," she wrote back two weeks later, "some people don't even think the ghosts are real! Someone in my flat, he told me he thought they were a metaphor. 'A metaphor for what?' I shouted back at him. He's allowed to be so stupid because God gave him long eyelashes, perfect as a mayfly's legs."

I hadn't thought of metaphor since 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Ms. Tru's class. She made us imagine the sun was a flower, or a mouth, the moon a bright cave entrance in the sky that led to eternity. I was never good at metaphor; I think I failed that lesson. The next time I saw Ms. Tru at the post office, I asked her.

"Lin wrote me that people in the capital think the ghosts are metaphor," I reported.



“People everywhere believe different things when the truth is right in front of them,” Ms. Tru said. “Aren’t you excited your sister has been cast in a play? Can you imagine, someday we might see her in a film or on television?”

Lin hadn’t told me that, but of course I couldn’t admit that my sister told her things she hesitated to tell me. I simply handed over her mail, maybe including another message from my sister and said, “Yes. Imagine that.”

Ms. Tru had a lot of correspondents outside our little town. It was considered part of the schoolmaster’s job, to remain abreast of history and politics. It had never before been something I cared to know about. But now Lin was living this life and she wasn’t even telling me about all of it. It was an itch I felt, to know more about life outside Poulla. I scanned the mail more closely. I thumbed the pages of the romance magazines the chief of police subscribed to and read the papers that came, weeks after their cover dates, to soak up all I could about the world. I felt like I was in school again, with that same sinking feeling that the world wanted to swallow me.

I didn’t expect I’d actually see my sister in one of Ms. Tru’s magazines, holding a sign in a protest that read, “No One Dies To Burn.” They must have been excited to have her, the organizers. We’d all heard stories about apostates, lured away by flattery and blandishments to serve as mouthpieces for their side. My sister, on a magazine that would be delivered to Ms Tru’s classroom and displayed at the little library.

We have a thing we say here: “When you have spent your light, it’s not wrong to give up the ghost.” It’s something we say to our dying. Lin used to say it. It

was a sign of our bond, our purpose. I said it then, when I fed the magazine with my sister on the cover to the peach stove. I'd let her raise the temperature a little on a hot day, to cast a little light. But I would not let her ruin the good thing we have going on here.

~

I left my sister's next letter on my desk for a week before I opened it.

"I was tricked," she wrote in her first sentence. "They took advantage of a village girl, and the next thing I know, I was on the front page of the national newspaper." I stared at the wall where pictures of stamps and the postal lading rates were hung, generations of them tacked on top of each other. The national paper didn't make it here, to read or report, but I'd seen the magazine cover in the general store and the library. "I was rehearsing a scene. I was an industrialist's daughter who was just learning the truth about her father's business." She prattled on about the show, as if everything was forgiven when she hadn't even said she was sorry. And then at the end she said, "You should come and visit. The capital isn't like you believe."

I asked Ms. Tru about her experiences when she came to collect her mail. "I haven't been to the capital since before you and your sister were my students," she said. "I only ever wanted to learn enough to come back here and help. We lived together, five of us to a room and we couldn't afford the white bread the street vendors sold. We survived on fermented rice and the bean paste our families sent us through the post." She leaned back and looked at me like I was the postmaster of her student days. "It was glorious. We were so full of a sense of purpose."

My sister kept asking in her letters for me to come and visit her, telling me

how much she missed me, how much she wanted to show me around the capital. And I kept ignoring that part of her letters. I wouldn't go just to remind her how backward we all were. I wouldn't understand life in the capital any better than I understood metaphor. For me, they all blended together: actors in a theater, eyelashes, the moon, and mayflies. They left me equally confused. Then, my sister sent a letter addressed to me personally, instead of *The Postmaster*. It was short: "I'm leaving the capital. I'll be home Tuesday night."

I should have been excited. I was excited. But I was worried, too, that my sister had changed. Maybe she was coming as an actor, to do research on all of us country folk to help her play a role. I waited at the railroad siding, my lantern hung from the hook where most nights the engineer would suspend the mailbag. I heard the squeal of the train's brakes before I saw the train come around the curve to the village. It approached slowly and in a cloud of steam, and then my sister stepped off.

She was prettier; she'd always been pretty, but now she was prettier, more put together than anyone in Poulla could bother with.

"Sister," she said, running up to me. "You came!"

"Of course," I said and took the backpack she'd slung over her shoulder. "I didn't want you to get lost on your way back to our cabin."

"I could never," she burred and stroked my upper arm like I was a ratty old coat in a resale shop, or that's how it felt to me.

“I brought my bike,” I said and shifted her backpack across my shoulders to balance better. “Can you still ride the handlebars?” I asked.

“I haven’t in so long,” she said, “but I’ll try.” I straddled the bike to steady it, and she hopped on the handlebars, graceful as a cat, and we were off. “I’m so glad to be back,” she said as we rode. “You don’t know what it’s like in the capital, where every street leads to another where you’ll never know what to expect.” She was just talking, like she used to when we rode bikes when we were younger, spinning tales like they were endless and worth nothing. “Will you take us by the mines?” she asked, and suddenly I was anxious again. “I need to see it, to feel connected,” she lamented.

I didn’t want to, but I did, turned off the road that would take us to our cabin and drove instead past the old hospice where Lin used to work, but she didn’t say anything. She perched quiet as a figurehead on my bike and soon we saw the glow of the mines ahead of us. We crested the last hill, and I pulled my bike into the grass off the paved road where the trucks carried away the spirit ore. We paused there, looking down toward the open mouth of the mine, its glow a smear of light, some exhalation of luminescence.

“Do you really think we come back here,” Lin said. “I mean, after we die? Even if we went away, are we really drawn back?”

“Of course we are,” I said, impatient. “We come back here and we nourish those who come after us. It’s what we’re meant for.”

“I don’t know,” Lin said and hopped off the handlebars. She started walking toward the mine entrance. “Sometimes I think that maybe there’s nothing.

That the deposits are real, sure, but that they have nothing to do with us. That they are, and that we are digging them out of the earth, but that's it."

"They've turned you around in the capital," I said. "That doesn't make sense. Everything we know is about the mines. Our whole lives." I let my bike slide into the grass and ran after her.

"Don't you wonder," she said, picking up speed. "Maybe it's too much, the circle of life, the giving back. It's too perfect. Maybe this world isn't meant for us."

She'd stopped, maybe ten feet from the entrance of the mine. I didn't know what else to do; I wrapped my arms around her from the back. "The world provides," I reassured her. "There is always someone who looks out for you." I heard her let out a sigh. "When the time comes, you'll provide for someone, too." Her hair floated free in the breeze.

"I'm so tired. I don't think I slept through the night the whole time I was in the capital," she said. "There are so many things to think about at night, it turns you around."

"Come home," I said. "Sleep," and led her back to my bike.

~

In the morning, Chief of Police Nhung was knocking on the door of my cabin. I remembered in a flash that I had a spine-rolled copy of *True Police Romances* beside my bed. But he didn't ask after it.

"Your sister was seen at the mine last night," he reported, like I hadn't been

there, too.

“Chief,” I said, “she’s from here. She was celebrating our cultural patrimony. I was with her.” I heard her stirring further back in our cabin, and I was unsure if I wanted her to come out and defend herself or stay hidden.

“I assume she’s still sleeping?” Nhung sniffed.

“She is,” I said. “But you can see her later at the post office. One of your magazines is due about this time, too, isn’t it?”

Nhung wriggled a finger into his uniform collar and pulled out to release his body heat. “I will come by later this morning.”

“We look forward to it, Chief.” I walked back to the bedroom to collect Nhung’s magazine and to convince my sister she’d need to come to work with me. But she was sitting up on her mattress, legs crossed and apologetic.

“I didn’t come here to get you in trouble,” she said. “I promise.”

“I know that,” I said, and grabbed my spare copy of the postal code directory and used its spine to iron out the wrinkles in *True Police Romances*. “He’s overreacting. I was with you last night. There’s no trouble, nothing to explain.” Lin got up to brush her hair, and I stepped outside and walked around the cabin four times, stopping under the palm tree and counting its leaves to give her time to prepare her face.

We were both sitting behind the counter, me on my stool and Lin on a stack of

bags of rice, when Chief Nhung came in a little before eleven. He was less terrifying in the post office lobby, separated from us by the malachite counter.

“Chief,” I said, “your magazines came in.” He took his magazines when I passed them to him, and then, looking around at the empty lobby, said, “Would you be able to close for a few minutes? I’d like to speak to your sister privately.”

“Of course,” I said, even though I didn’t want to. I reached below the counter for the front door key, a small gold thing on a piece of teak shined by generations of post master’s hands. “You can lock the door behind me,” I said, needlessly. He followed me to the door and then left me to squat near the base of a tree, watching as life in Poulla went on.

Ten minutes later, I heard the door being unlocked, and then they walked out together, Nhung’s hand high on my sister’s arm and her with her head down, unwilling to make eye contact with me. I kept my squat until Ms. Tru tapped me on the shoulder.

“Stand up,” she said. “Everyone has a job to do. Even you. Whatever happens with Lin.”

“But she’s my sister,” I said but stood, the stiffness in my legs replacing itself with the hot wash of pain as blood rushed to my shins.

“I have some packages to send to the capital,” Ms. Tru said, a bundle wrapped in bright rice paper under her arm. “I’d hate to think I needed to go to another village to do that.”

“Of course not,” I said and took ginger steps to reopen the post office. That afternoon, more people than usual walked past the post office, staring at me as they passed. The train stopped at the depot several times, bearing journalists from outside of town. I heard the whispers on the way back to my cabin. The trial of the country, people were calling it, or maybe the country’s trial. In our language, it was hard to signify one without also conjuring the other.

My sister, the voices said, had worked actively to undermine the role spirit mining played not only here but in the global economy. She was a reformer, or maybe a radical, or maybe a stooge. Worse, she’d spied on the mines and planned mischief against our ancestors. But that was ridiculous. She hadn’t spied, didn’t need to spy. She knew as much as she needed to about the mines, we all did. And I’d been there when she visited. Unless she’d snuck out while I was sleeping. But there was no evidence of that I heard.

Chief Nhung and a small contingent of troops from outside Poulla kept Lin captive in an old office at the municipal center. She slept, I heard, in a hammock hung diagonal from two corners in the office. I wasn’t allowed to see her, kept busy by the influx of new people in town to observe her trial and their novel requests. The old phone booths were taken down and replaced by a bank of four terminals that broadcast voice and face and data to anywhere in the wide world. And it was up to me to arbitrate between reporters who’d never learned to wait their turn, that they needed to take a turn at all. I started to dream I was lost in the jungle somewhere and every turn I took on the clay path took me farther and farther from finding Poulla. Even my dreams are unsubtle. But eventually my sister’s trial reached its climax.



The day they expected the verdict, Poulla was full to bursting with people from outside the town who treated us like we were exotic. The lines at the small lunch counter where I ate most days were long and Meri, the cook, was being interviewed by a news reporter. The coffee cart had been drained already. I could go home but I didn't want to, so I wandered further and further from the hubbub downtown. Whatever happened with my sister, I was sure I'd hear about it.

When we were younger, our mother would take us to the mines at lunch and we'd picnic with our dad, released for a break. We'd sit on braided rushes, and our mother handed us small tarts she'd baked or jars of pickled preserves we'd eat with our fingers, a slice of meat for a slice of baguette. My father encouraged me to sketch what I saw in the wisps of light that escaped from the mines, and my sister walked around and pretended for us that she could hear the secrets of the ghosts as they slid past us. At first, she just told us the secrets they whispered to her, but before long, she was pretending to be them, that they were speaking through her. And my drawings grew baroque, crowded with the busy lives I imagined for those who'd passed on.

We'd get so carried away in entertaining each other that when our father finally told us it was time to return, when my mother rolled up the rush mats, that we'd not understood, till that moment, how much time had passed.

### **About the Author**

Matt Dube teaches creative writing and American lit at a small mid-Missouri university and reads submissions for the online lit mag, *Craft*. He's revising stories for a collection he hopes to send around by Christmas.

# **Some Observations on Ageing and the Flow of Time**

**by Professor Hilary Moralis**

**with thanks to Simon Kewin**

This paper is a brief summary of my ongoing research into biological ageing and its effect upon the flow of time. While my complete analysis is not yet ready to be published, some of the more critical—even hostile—reactions to those elements of my thought that have been released has prompted me to set out, in simple terms, the current state of my theory. My hope is this will limit the hostility. Significant scientific leaps are often challenging to accept, and it is common for those who propose new ways of thinking to be pilloried at first. I am obviously aware that what I am proposing is controversial.

Firstly, a very brief divergence into the moment of inspiration that set me off into this area of cosmological research. It will be a common experience of most individuals that, as they get older, time appears to flow more quickly. We recall that the days and months of our childhoods seemed to stretch on endlessly, while whole years and decades flit by as we near the ends of our lives. I was struck by the similarity of this to a theoretical astronaut nearing the event horizon of a black hole. For them, while each second would be experienced just as a second, the passage of time in the surrounding universe would (from their perspective) accelerate. Similarly, from “outside,” anyone looking in would see our astronaut slow down, move less and less, even creep to a halt.

Idly, I wondered whether this might be a useful metaphor for an individual nearing the end of their life—and then came the leap of understanding, the moment of inspiration. Why should this be only a metaphor? Perhaps it is the objective physical reality of the universe. Perhaps time genuinely does flow differently the older an individual grows.

In essence, then, my assertion is this: that a single black hole spans and intersects every single conceivable point throughout the entirety of the universe. The scale of such a structure is hard to grasp, but I believe this immanent object must be there. We do not perceive it directly as it has no presence in the familiar three spatial dimensions. It exists, in other words, solely in time. My theory is that we spend our lives moving towards it—as it were, falling quietly into it. Time really does flow differently for us as we age, because this is how the physics of the universe behaves.

Research to test this theory is ongoing, but the limited opportunities available upon our tiny planet suggest the effect is real. Accurate clocks carried by two people, one older, one younger, do show time moving at very slightly different rates, even when they occupy the same physical space. The effects are tiny, although my calculations show they become significant as they accumulate over time. They do, also, appear to be greater the larger the age difference between the two subjects.

Of course, there are many objections that might be made to this theory, not the least of which is how something so truly immense (if that is a useful term) might have formed. My assertion is that it “expanded” along with the rest of the universe following the Big Bang, but this remains, I emphasise, an unproven idea. Does my theoretical, universe-spanning black hole explain the

mysteries of dark matter and dark energy? I leave such questions for others to consider.

There is also the objection that there logically can be no such object, since we would each be nearer or farther away from it depending upon our age, even as we mingle and interact. This, I assert, is a failure of imagination; the result of our brains' (natural) difficulty to think only of movement through space. Our proximity to other individuals does not matter. We are each on our own journey, falling into that final singularity. If we are lucky, we may share the journey with someone close to us—or we may travel alone. But travel we do.

Am I really suggesting that two people, one young and one old, standing together in the same room, are experiencing time moving at objectively different speeds because of their age? Yes; one is nearer the invisible event horizon than the other. The birth of a new being may mark a temporary reversal of the entropy caused by the black hole—but it *is* temporary. Am I suggesting that living matter is somehow special, that it behaves differently on a physical level, that the universe is “aware” of it? No. In my view, all matter is subject to the pull of the immanent time black hole—although, certainly, complex biological structures are more prone to disruption and breakdown as compared to, say, a rock. There is nothing special about life—except that a self-aware mind is uniquely capable of experiencing the effects I describe.

And what happens when we reach that ultimate singularity, that point we term (in our limited way) “death”? There has been much talk of a *God black hole* and of *gateways* to an afterlife. I believe all such notions are fanciful.

More time is needed for further research, and the regrettable truth is that I am

running out of it. My terminal brain cancer partly explains the production of this incomplete summary at this point in time.

My remaining time flies by. I am not unaware of the irony of this. My hope, simply, is that others will continue my work when I come to cross my personal event horizon—and reach that point from which, alas, no one can return.

### **About the Author**

Simon Kewin (he/him) is the author of over 100 published short and flash stories. His works have appeared in *Analog*, *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction* and many more. He's also the author of the Cloven Land fantasy trilogy, cyberpunk thriller *The Genehunter*, steampunk Gormenghast saga *Engn*, the *Triple Stars* sci/fi trilogy and the *Office of the Witchfinder General* books, published by Elsewhen Press. In 2022, he was an SPSFC semi-finalist, had a short story shortlisted for a Utopia award, and won the Tales by Moonlight Editor's Prize for his fantasy novella *The Clockwork King*. He lives deep in the English countryside. Find him at [simonkewin.co.uk](http://simonkewin.co.uk) and @SimonKewin on Twitter.

## **To See Without Eyes** **by Silvatiicus Riddle**

“Grow wilder, not older,”  
Grandfather whispered to me—  
sitting in his chair like an ancient goat,  
a sleepy captain on an endless sea.

His voice and lilt, they carried me off  
in dreams that coiled like snakes  
and squeezed me from this mortal toil  
to swim the night ‘til the dreamer wakes.

In silver smoke, I slithered off  
to dance on chimney-caps  
and terrorize the nightingale  
with flashing eyes and awful yaps.

Then up I went to climb the spires—  
a cathedral of clouds that caressed the moon  
and the clouds, they sang like thun’drous bells  
of steel or glass or crystals hewn.

Whence forth from the air of sable air  
strode the Mage of Sand and Slumber  
with an age’d hand full of myth and magic,  
his dreamy eyes flecked with umber.

But a fool, was I, a trickster’s blunder  
to creep upon him, to give a fright—  
for, tickled by a fog of sleeper’s dust,  
he blew me away into the night!

But oh, that sky of pitch did catch me,  
for 'twas then that I saw that brilliant grasp!  
Leaning from the mouth of a thunderhead  
I found myself held by celestial bask.

My fallen star, my ethereal guide,  
how we coiled the firm' and spun the world slow  
in a crescent moon of iron and flame,  
adrift upon wishes of the dreamers below.

The sky, all a'hum in shimmer and dance  
as we composed the crisp air with color and light,  
whilst a sleeping world turned quietly to dream—  
tucked safely in to a blanket of night.

Somewhere away and far off and alone,  
a clock-tower's song split the night from the day—  
I felt myself flutter and shiver and shake,  
and struck from the sky, we fell from the grey.

I became a bitter wind that blew in from the north,  
coiled 'round crypts and shook all the boards,  
rattled the windows and tripped all the wards,  
stirred up old ghosts with their duels and their swords—

And laid myself down in the garden of graves,  
the mem'ry of home, that voice like a hymn—  
“Grow wilder, not older,” he called down to me,  
it moved through the trees, it cut through the din.

And the sparrows, they sang to the slumber of night,  
through nightmare and dream, they tided me back,  
away from the graves—they mellowed the winds,  
the old ghosts and their duels, their *clash!* and their *clack!*



Off in a wood, and tired and cold,  
Star called for her boy in flicker and throe,  
she needed him now—on embers, she wished:  
to be kept in his pocket, to keep him from woe.

And the Mage and his robes and his fistful of dust  
made his way back to that doorway between  
with an eye cast toward the work of the night,  
a smile crept in, slipped away unseen.

And there on the knolls and the seabed of moss,  
the cloud-forms, they fell to the ruin of mists.  
And the thun'drous bells, they sang no more,  
'fore the call of dawn's unwavering kiss.

And the phantoms, all weary, from the pulse of the night,  
they carried me back to that boy by the fire;  
as the nightlights snuffed to a thin pall of smoke  
the visions, they flickered—I felt them expire!

### **About the Author**

Silvatiicus Riddle (he/they) is a Queer, Disabled, Rhysling-Nominated Dark Fantasy & Speculative Fiction Writer living on the borderlands of New York City with a menagerie of cats, a hoard of books, and all of his imaginary friends. He has been published by *Abyss & Apex*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *Enchanted Living*, *Liquid Imagination*, and *Spectral Realms*, among others. You may find him at [Facebook.com/SilvatiicusRiddle](https://www.facebook.com/SilvatiicusRiddle) or on Twitter via [@Silvatiicus](https://twitter.com/Silvatiicus).

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