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THE
DEADLANDS

ISSUE #3 JULY 2021

a journal of ends & beginnings



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CAUSE AND MANNER

Jeannelle M. Ferreira

Everything washes away,
Red running down to silver against zinc.
The tools are set aside. The voices stay,
Locked in drawers at the end of the shift.

Red runs down to silver in the sink,
the last of the parking lot, the ditch, the cooler.
Behind closed doors, at the end of the shift,
death's scent is lemon; sour masking sweet.

The parking lot, the fallow field, the cooler:
you scrawl memory through mirror-steam.
Death's scent is lemon, sour masking sweet.
Slack-skinned, blunt-boned, your fingers slide astray.

You scrawl memory through mirror-steam.
You came home fading, one of eight this week
slack-grinned, blunt-boned, clean-boiled, and boxed away;
names are set aside. The voices stay.





THE GENERAL'S TURN

Premee Mohamed

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So it begins. And the play is conducted upon the gears of a clock.

Constructed inside this ancient cathedral the bright artifice of turning brass was by necessity laid flat to provide a stage; it looks wrong but it all works to keep time. There is a bell, though it does not strike the hours. No electric lights are allowed; we often bring in lanterns, but tonight the cavernous space burns gold and amber from the flaming city. It is bright enough to read a newspaper.

Balanced on the largest gear, the captured criminal looked around, dazed, his khaki uniform a ghostly presence against which his gold-en-brown hands and face stood out like ink. Around him climbed the ranked gears, twenty-four in all, threaded on axles as thick as the masts of ships. He said, "Where... what is this place? What are you doing?"

"We have not yet begun," I said, stretching luxuriously and putting my hands behind my head. I would have attempted a reassuring smile, but did not; I know what I look like. "You will hear a chime."

The boy stared at us, the dozen spectators in a hundred plush red theatre seats. I thought he probably could not see the faces of the other officers. Only the gilt buttons on their black uniforms, like so many eyes in a forest.

"And then what?"

"And then the players will join you on the stage." I gestured at the darkness behind him, where waiting things gleamed in the reflected firelight from the small, stained-glass windows. "*Players*, such a useful word. I could have said *actors*, but they are not acting; they are playing a game. Tell me your name and unit, please."

"You already know that," he said suspiciously.

"For the sake of these fine gentlemen, who did not have the pleasure of traveling with you from the front. Please."

"P... Private Ensi Stremwynn. Of the 514th." He swallowed visibly, his throat moving like a snake. "The others in my unit..."

"Don't worry about them," I said. "This is a game for one."

There was a man, you know, in the far north of my province. This was what he liked to do (so the papers said): he liked to steal a child, spirit it away to his cottage in the wild forest, where he had built a cellar resembling a dollhouse. Every inch locked up tight, but decorated with ribbons and lace and pretty things. Paintings. Toys. Then he would dress up these children. Rouge them like a doll and demand they play with him. And then, of course, after a few weeks, he would kill them.

And that is how the boy looks now: as if he has been captured by this man. His gaze accuses us of impossible, disgusting depravity.

Nonsense, I want to tell him. Don't look at me like that. We are not perverts and kidnappers. This is war.

"Very well. The others have been executed. You don't want to die like them." I yawned. "Do you?"

"I'm not afraid to die!"

"Of course not. But you want to live, naturally."

"Tell me about this *game!*" His voice cracked at last, and behind me someone applauded alone: three or four sarcastic little pats of the hand.

"You have been chosen," I said. "Save your breath, save your voice. You will need it."

"For *what?*"

I met his gaze steadily. Before you die you can eat. And let this be your last meal: beauty. Do not step into the flat-bottomed boat and say to the ferryman: *They starved me, I had nothing for my eyes and heart to eat up before I died, and now I am empty.* You will die full. Filled to the brim. Your whole skull abrim, ribs abrim. "To earn a dignified death. A beautiful, honorable death. Not dying in the seam."

He started, then turned his back on me. Stung that I had guessed.

I know this boy. Boys like this. Born of coal, their forefathers dead at thirty with lungs you could burn to heat a barn. Before the army starved him he was a big sturdy lad, fine fodder for the pit. Now he is barely held together by his uniform, a wrapped packet of bones like you would get from the butcher for your dog.

At any rate, if you are a child of coal you don't fear war as it turns out. You have been born to fight. Fight the darkness, the seam itself, the crumpling shafts, the poison gas, the corrupt foremen, the betrayal or neglect or sacrifice of your fellows. The way the mountain shuts on you like the mouth of one of those great lizards in a book. *Crunch.* They make good soldiers, these miners' boys.

"It is a guessing game," I said. "You will have to guess the identity of one of the players."

"Fuck you, fuck this play." The boy spat, or tried to; his mouth clicked drily. "I don't know any of these people! How could I—"

"They don't know you either. I will tell you who you have to identify though."

"Who?"

"Death." I admit I am hurt, slightly, that he has not heard of my country's grand and ancient ceremony, this signature honor bestowed upon a captured enemy who could have been shot or sabered in a slaughterhouse like a steer. (We like doing mass executions in slaughterhouses; they are very handy in terms of cleanliness, gutters, lighting, and so on.)

His mouth hung open. Waiting to see if I was joking, if the others would laugh. Death, of course, lies like a mist over the land; millions of our countrymen have been killing one another for three years. Everything stinks of it, the water tastes of it. But Death as well as death attends this ceremony when we hold it.

"You have till the clock strikes, Private Stremwynn. Which should be around dawn. If you correctly identify who plays Death, you will be spared. If not, you have the choice of being hanged on the gallows currently being constructed in Old Parade Square, which will be public; or being crushed between the gears here, which only we will witness.

"In either event your remains will be interred with all honor in the Royal Cemetery, and caretakers will plant runnelvines around your grave to preserve your flesh. Hmm?"

Stremwynn looked down at the line of guards, making the predictable calculation. A dozen men stood in the space between the first row of

seats and the massive stone block supporting the gears. Armed; the boy saw, I knew, the glint of their sidearms.

"They won't shoot you," I called out. "They'll just put you back on the stage. Come now, Private. Show some backbone. What would General Narolo think if you did yourself in?"

"Let me live," he said. "I'm a prisoner of war, there are *rules*—"

"We don't like other people's rules."

He raised his voice. "I don't ask for mercy. Only fairness."

"Reciprocity is for children and gangsters," I said. "*Oh, oh, he has one more biscuit than me!* Everyone else understands that life is a set of scales."

I didn't invent this ceremony. We've done it for five hundred years. Three dozen wars. The same clock, the gears replaced or sharpened or milled or greased; the same foundation carved from bedrock to support its enormous weight. We carry the ceremony out only when needed. We are not barbarians. We do not do these things at a whim. We happen to think there is something noble about it, and therefore about us. Nobility is the practice of not spitting upon tradition.

And that is why we picked him, and executed the other captured soldiers in a more efficient fashion.

Nobility, too, is inefficient. Famous for it.

Stremwynn swayed, and braced himself on the gear behind him.

"Then let us begin," I said.

"No!"

I paused to enjoy the chuckles of the audience, then nodded to the lieutenant supervising the handful of prisoners winding the clock spring. At his unseen rope-tug a small, sweetly silver tone sounded over their groans and whimpers.

And the players came dancing from the darkness, a score of figures masked, gowned, suited, costumed as animals or fae or fools, and they bowed, wafting a mingled scent of perfumes and colognes, the cedar chips packed with the outfits to keep off moths, and damp young skin.

"Ah," murmured General Cjesev, one row behind me and three seats over. "*Isn't* it just."

"Shush," I said. The master of the ceremony cannot speak to the audience, or vice versa; he should have passed a note. The so-called nobleman and his terrible manners.

The boy froze as the players distributed themselves on the now-turning gears, laughing as they rescued coattails or feathers, the trains of dresses or a protruding ribbon. Their finery was slightly shabby, many outfits having been ripped and torn from careless players.

"You're insane," said Stremwynn, as if it had just occurred to him. He backed against the axle of his gear, curling his hands around the oily brass. "You're all *insane!* They told us you were despots, they didn't say you had all gone *mad!*"

"Is that what they call us? I'm hurt." I'm delighted; I want to give the boy a medal before we kill him. Something nice for the noose to rest against. "Well, never mind," I said soothingly. "Gallows or gears? You can choose at the end if you like."

"You are monsters!" the boy shouted.

"But you are a convicted war criminal," I said. "*You* are the villain here. Not us." Behind me, someone could hold it in no longer and guffawed, and the laughter caught from row to row like the city burning outside. Colonel Mezhi would have started that; I had as much as felt his spittle on my neck. He was a crass boor, a jumped-up thief; I liked him for never hiding what he was. "The game has begun, Stremwynn. Off you go."

"But I... how can I possibly..." The laughter had rattled him, and for a moment he visibly warred between fury and bewilderment. "How can... Death is a process, a... a biological..."

"Time is wasting, Private."

He set his jaw, and walked slowly around the edge of his gear, and stepped up onto the next, and the game began.

I smiled, and dug some sweets out of my pocket. The most wonderful moment of any war! From outside drifted the friendly *tap-tap-tap* of the carpenters at work on the gallows. You had to be careful, building with bone. It was not like wood or metal but more alive than either: prideful, fussy, prone to shattering, bending. In fact when you sat down and thought scientifically about it, bone is a ridiculous choice. But in life it bore weight without complaint or flaw, you could say that much. It did bear weight. And anyway it was the spectacle that mattered: that pink-white geometric perfection against the dawn sky.

As if drugged, or knocked on the head, Stremwynn wobbled over to the gorgeously posed players, who leaned towards him with all their perfume and pageantry as if to not miss a single word. "If I ask you if you are Death, must you answer truthfully?" Ah: good man. Trying to figure out the rules.

"No," replied a tall man in a cat mask and tuxedo, flicking his glossy red wig away from his face. "But you may know from other ways when Death speaks."

Stremwynn clambered upward, bracing himself on brass and stone, shying away from those who fondled his hair, brushed invisible dust from his uniform, offered him flowers or sweets from secret pockets. Wisely, he took none. He vanished in a cloud of satin and velvet, fur and brocade, his hands moving dreamily across silken bare backs, brushing their hair over his scarred young knuckles, stroking the feathery napes of men, touching bare earlobes. I thought he felt for wings or horns. He would not find them.

Behind me the watchers fell silent, as if we were at the ballet. And I had been to the ballet with these men. They chuckled under their breath, made lewd comments about the dancers. But this silence seemed sacred.

And it should be. Show some goddamned respect. They had not attended as many of these as I had, nor presided over any, and they never would: not Mezhi the brutish mobster, not Cjesev the deranged nobleman, who wanted it most. We all felt Death's presence here.

"What are you asking them, Private?" I said. "Are you asking the right questions?"

"Yes," he said. His voice slurred. "No. What do you care?"

Their footsteps pattered across the brass. Laughing, a girl draped all in glitter and string escaped him, and he pursued her, slipped, dangled from the teeth by his fingertips, then dropped with a grunt back to a larger gear.

"Ah, is it her, do you think? Have you chosen so quickly?"

"I'm not saying til the end," he growled. "Because you lie. And they lie. And it doesn't matter, does it? There's no way to win. You just want to laugh at me."

"Oh, well don't play then," I said airily. "If you like, you can just lie down. That's a good gear to lie on, don't you think? Nice and smooth. Lie down and give up. Hmm? The way your army does. The way your fellow-fighters did. None of them resisted, did you know that? They just lifted their heads for the knife." I paused, and studied my nails. "Like dogs looking up at their masters one last time."

He stared at me, this sentient bag of bones with his eyes candleflames in sunken sockets, reflecting on taut dark cheekbones. "No," he said. "I will play. And I will break the rules if I want," he added with a snarl. "You rigged the game, you rigged the war. You do nothing with honor. Not this. Not anything."

"I think you will choose the gallows, at the end," I said. "Because you think we would enjoy watching you scream between the gears. You'd rather have it quiet."

He twitched again with rage, this time falling off his gear and onto the stone. I craned my head sympathetically as he rose shaking, apparently unhurt, dusting himself down.

"You have to die," I said. "That has been determined for you."

"Not if I win."

"No one's ever won," I said regretfully; there *is* a way to win, always has been, but naturally we never speak of it till the end. "Stremwynn, that's a very old name, isn't it? In Avalaia, I mean. Yes, I have made some linguistic study. Your name once meant a ferryman. I rather like that. When you are dead you can go on any of the five rivers, not just the one for warriors. And you can say, *It is me, the ferryman; let me aboard*. Perhaps they'll even employ you. Though I don't know rightly what you would need money for in paradise."

Colonel Mezhi laughed, and a moment later something poked my neck: a folded note scribbled on the back of a cigarette packet. *Tell him*, it said, *he will need to pay for his women, for no one would otherwise fuck him even in paradise.* I laughed, and relayed the message. Stremwynn pretended not to hear it.

"Supposing you do not wish to be buried in the cemetery?" I said. "Then we can put you on the river Rath. I think part of it is not on fire. What do you think? Only, there would be no beautiful grave for your family; we give them a special visa, you know, to visit any time. There may well be a statue. We might commission a poet for the plaque."

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Stop it! Shut up! Shut your filthy mouth! Why did you pick me, you monster? What did I do? Why didn't you pick someone else?"

"Because I am the one allowed to choose." I settled another candy against my back teeth. "Go on. You have only till the bell rings, and you do not know when that will be."

How? Why him? I never knew. We had rounded up the survivors of his unit, thirty-seven men, and I had paced the lineup. The mud on their faces and uniforms was beginning to freeze, sprouting white hairs of ice. And only his eyes were still on fire while the others were extinguished, not even a wisp of smoke.

I had chosen him because the others fought for duty, and he fought for hatred. Had he learned it on the battlefield? Had *we* infected him with it, this disease of fever and flame? Well, no matter. His eyes held the only light of the day.

And so I marked the traditional streak of black ink across his startled face; and the guards hustled him off to scrub and feed him.

They handcuffed him across from me for our ride back to the capital. A long trip this time, switching tracks when the rails were sabotaged or sunk or blocked by the corpses of trains looted for coal and parts. Slowly we abandoned the churned mud of the front and flew through those places not yet reached by fighting, through the gold-green grass billowing like a silk scarf, through forests bright and hot with spring leaf, and still the boy did not relax.

I removed my jacket, showed him my hands, a posture of perfect vulnerability: *See, I open myself to you, like a book.* I told him stories of my childhood, my village. The bones of huge animals I had studied while attending the university in Rathmenn, whose towers he would see as we pulled into the station.

But despite my encouragement, plying him with wartime luxuries, sweets, cigarettes, good white bread, he spoke only to say his name and division. Which he knew I knew, for I had examined his wallet as he watched, the sad thing squashed thin as an autumn leaf. An identification card, a ration card, a medical card listing on one side which shots he'd gotten and on the other the diseases he might catch from our revolting soldiers. And a single smudgy photograph of three people, two men and a woman, young. Family? Friends? Lovers?

Stremwynn looked away when I held it up and translated aloud the inscription: a date four years ago, and *The old house in Tanad, before the accident.*

He was twenty years old.

The brass teeth flickered and danced in the firelight; the players, leaping lightly from gear to gear to elude Stremwynn, began to sweat. Their skin became gilded, their strong young bodies like statues. The boy himself still staggered as he walked, his boots loud and graceless. "The entire world will descend on you when they hear about this. They'll lock you in

an asylum. And they'll feed you charcoal and hold your head under ice water, trying to fix your brains."

"Oh, how tedious," murmured Cjesev. "How's one supposed to enjoy oneself."

"Yes, it's worse than eating popcorn at the opera," I murmured back. He sat back, vindicated, sulking. "You're talking to the wrong people," I said to Stremwynn. "Go on, talk to them. Not us."

"Why? They're lying. They lie like you lie. Death isn't here."

"We're not lying," I said. "No part of this ceremony is a lie."

"Then it is the only thing you haven't lied about for five hundred years. And I'll tell you something else, monster," he added, swiveling suddenly with his eyes shining again.

My stomach sank, and I wrestled not with fear but with confusion: what did I have to fear from him? But no, I have seen too many faces in my time. I know faces too well. It is my curse: because no one looks that way unless they are burdened with a secret like a spear, meant to be hurled to kill.

"I'll tell you something else. And Narolo can't court-martial me for this, because I'll be dead. I suppose he could spit on my grave. But you smell that smoke? Hear those screams? That wasn't us. We haven't dropped so much as a firecracker on you in two weeks. That's you, that's all on you. I bet you even gave the order, Vessough. You people bombed your own capital because you thought one of our divisions had gotten over the wall and hid in the warehouse district...we never did. We lied. Fed garbage to your spies. Didn't you know that? Didn't you know you weren't the only ones who could lie? And you bombed your babies and your old women. How do you like that? Rig the fucking game!"

Stremwynn laughed, clutching his sides theatrically; the players scattered around him like startled birds. I did not laugh. Behind me, in the velvet seats, rose a velvet hush. I waited for Mezhi's coarse guffaws to begin, but heard only the tick and clonk of the gears, the boy's hysterical, forced cawing.

Could it be true? He was right in one respect: I'd heard of the order, though I had not approved it as the capital was not my jurisdiction. How could he have known that, having come into the city last night?

And the answer was: They knew, they all knew. His entire doomed division. Perhaps Avalaia's whole army. They had seen our tactics and thought: *So, they think they are the only ones with a thumb on the scales.*

"Now I know you are truly unafraid to die," I said lightly, though it strained my face and throat with the effort. "Supposing you win the game and return to your side? They'll hang you themselves."

"Fuck you."

"And you'll never see the old house in Tanad again."

He turned back towards me, and lifted his cap, stroked his sleeve across his forehead, replaced the cap. "Supposing I win the game," he said quietly, over the rustles of the other officers as they leaned forward impatiently to hear. "Supposing I do? I will not leave this place. I will kill you with my bare hands."

"For this?"

"For everything."

For everything, I thought, unable to stop myself. For the one thing that we cannot take back. For the lives taken in this war. Not for his own.

Yes, we are cruel. Yes, the world does not use that word as a compliment the way we do. Yes, the world will learn of this and they will see what we call nobility, honor, tradition, and they will call it sickness.

Very well.

The dead cannot return. Not by my hand, not by his. I am tired, I am older than I look. Probably this will be my last ceremony. But I have never prevented a death. No, not a one. Not a single one. I have never saved a life.

Supposing we both played for that? Against Death, against the watchers, against the players. Supposing I put a single extra piece on his side of the board.

There are no rules against it, are there? No, they will not be able to cite a single one.

For the main way the game is rigged, of course, is that there is a moment—about ten seconds—in which all the gears line up, once and never again, in a perfectly straight staircase leading to a hidden door tucked into the place where ceiling and wall meet. The stairs cannot be seen until that moment, and that is when the players are coached to do their utmost both to distract and to hide the fact that they are distracting the player, so that he does not spot it.

No one ever has. That is how cunning the alignment is.

But how, how? The others could not know. I was growing excited and made myself remain still, pasted an expression of light distaste upon my face. What was this? Proximity to life instead of death? No, Death was still here, and death too. Breathing on me with its cool, soil-scented breath.

But life too smells of earth.

Stremwynn sat and wiped his face again, and the players floated and danced around him, cooing and entreating him to get up, to speak to them, to listen to their stories.

Yes, let him live. Him only. And only this one time. The last time. Not that I will be remembered for mercy or even the attempt at mercy, not that I will be remembered for treachery or insubordination or an insult to tradition, but that I will be remembered. I have always watched the game, never played. Imagine having this grand new experience, this taste of novelty and danger, so close to the end of a life. To his, to mine.

How might I play, though? I recalled the battlefield maps in our tents on the front, wreathed in cigarette smoke so that they seemed not maps at all but a misty real world made miniature: rivers, mountains, cities. Blocks of painted wood representing thousands of lives. Yes, we made that into a game too. As if we were rolling dice and climbing ladders. It used to be the gods that played with men for their sport. Now we were the gods.

Stremwynn would never trust me. Our people had been enemies too long. And more than trust: to play along, so that he might escape rather than be swarmed by the officers, who might rise in a single seething mass and kill both him and myself.

A game inside a game, hidden. The yolk inside the shell. Outside, the serene white unblemished surface, and inside a sphere of light. Like a captured sun.

So, then. Let us play where we cannot be seen.

"Get up, Private," I called. "How can you entertain us if you will not get up?"

He glanced up, teeth bared: but at least he looked instead of ignoring me. That was, I thought, an opening move: a move and countermove.

Click-clack across colored squares but everything still in its ranks for now.

What time remained? My role was to run down the clock; neither of us knew to a nicety when it would strike, and so to take out my pocket watch looked suspicious. The officers would see that, would wonder why I did it.

"Now supposing we did not place your remains in the Royal Cemetery," I called. "Would you like a burial of more majesty or less? Since you think we are so obsessed with appearances." Mezhi laughed, delighted, like a child anticipating a pummeling at a shadow puppet show. "Not in the ocean. Don't your people think it a great sacrilege to have no body? To be eaten by fish?"

A nudge. Cjesev passed me a note: *But then they do not think it is a great sacrilege to eat fish in turn! What hypocrites!*

I said, "Well, let's place your body in a glass tank in the square, and put some fish in it; and then we will eat the fish in turn." A roar of laughter behind me. "No? Perhaps a natural monument would be better? It would save us hiring a sculptor. They are very expensive, you know, the good ones. Or what about St. Bontur's Steps?"

"Oh, those are lovely," someone said approvingly. "I shagged a milkmaid there once."

"Silence!" I barked. "Rules!" They chuckled; someone tossed a crumpled ball of paper at me and missed.

Stremwynn glared at me, but not, I thought, with comprehension.

"Don't listen to them," I said.

"I've never been there," he said, ducking a passing gear. "That's a dangerous place. There's spirits in it."

"Dangerous! Surely not for you, with your reflexes. And anyway it is perfectly natural. A simple distribution of columnar basalt, divided over many years by flowing water. Nothing mythical about it whatsoever. No? We could bury you at the top, where the water is still."

Stremwynn got up, moving again amongst the players. Very obviously ignoring me: his back tight with anger, every knob on his spine showing like a fist.

"What about a mausoleum?" I said. "We have grand ones, don't we, gentlemen? We put a lot of craftsmanship into it." I paused, as if trying to recall names and places, which in fact I was, but I wanted it also to look theatrical, even gloating. *See how rich we are*, the others would think; *see how rich and powerful and civilized and ancient we are*.

I thought: Do you think, boy, we are decadent? Do you know what that word means? Not luxurious, though it has taken on that meaning. It means *decayed*.

"Now, compare one of our finest, for the military genius who defended us from the Ustukin barbarians. A grand thing of purest white marble, in Kruend. Hmm? You haven't visited there either, have you, even though it's near the border. Your side calls it the tower of Ethenrien. Or no, that's not right, is it? Your silly, twisty language."

His shoulders stiffened minutely; I hoped the others had missed it, or taken it to mean that he had been baited successfully by mocking his mother tongue. They did indeed have a white marble memorial to a war hero, but it was not in Kruend, and he was named Yaratrian, not Ethenrien.

The officers would not know that. Indeed, they were laughing again, as the boy swung around and gave me the full force of his gaze. Ethenrien starred in a fairytale I had read as a child: framed for a terrible crime by his evil uncle, Ethen had been enchanted to walk an endless staircase for the rest of his life, never reaching the top. When his selfless mother offered to take his place, Ethen slew his uncle and carried his mother, near-dead of exhaustion, to the top of the staircase, which led to a magical land of freedom and treasure.

It was an obscure little story, originating in the boy's province; I had been sure he would know it. Hope flared in me for a moment, unseen, giving little warmth.

"You mock everything about us," the boy hissed. "You even mock how we speak. You are empty inside, you have no souls. We are not lesser than you. We are not animals."

"Oh, of course not."

All right, his face said before he turned back to the players. Let's play.

He said, "You'll tell your people I cried and begged for my life and shit my pants with fear. And the entire world will say: *They are insane and they are liars too.*"

"The entire world," I said, "will keep its mouth shut if it knows what's good for it."

Now. How to give him the signal? He too would be wondering. Up on a high, small gear, he was surrounded by a dozen or so players who had settled cozily as roosting birds, and he was feeling their wrists.

Death has a heart that beats, said the next note, the ink smeared and in an unrecognizable hand, suggesting it came from a back row. *But how clever he is to think of it! The last one did not, I am sure.*

Blast it. What other fairy tales might I use? No, I couldn't do it twice. And he was too young to know anything of much use, wasn't he. One day long ago he had been taught: *The world is round, it spins to orbit a star.* And then what must have felt like minutes later, he had been buttoned into a scratchy uniform and told: *Go kill.*

Take lives.

Do not give them back.

"Have you killed many people, Private Stremwynn?"

"What do you care, you sick bastard? Do you want to know so you can jack off to it later?"

Ah, play the game, boy; good. Murmurs behind me, still approving. Not suspicious. Or were they? It is so hard to get actionable information from a murmur.

"I certainly think you should tell me," I said.

"A *million*," he sang, holding the final note for several seconds; the hair rose stiffly on my nape. "*Ten million.* I killed every single enemy I saw. Every one of you bastards. I killed bastards I didn't even *see*. The massacre at Upper Quaril? That was me. I did it with my mind."

"Amazing! How merciful that you have chosen not to kill us all with your mind at this precise moment."

Mezhi honked with laughter, and it rippled out in waves like a stone tossed into a pond. Good. So they too, I thought suddenly, were part of the game. And they did not even know they were playing. Now we all play together, so it is like a dance.

But will the one who does not play come to watch our game? Does it cheer for a side?

"Perhaps I did," he said. He stooped with boneless grace, seized a fallen feather, tucked it into the soft black fluff behind his ear, small and red, like a cut. "And you are watching this now from Hell."

"O, a prize, a prize," sighed a lithe young woman in a military outfit from a hundred years ago, all gold braid and navy wool. "Give it, please, and I shall trade it to the Watchers of the Woods for a wish." She reached for the red feather, and Stremwynn half-instinctively danced away, losing his hat at once into the maw of two gears behind him.

I nearly cursed. The gears aligned for so brief a space, I could not let Stremwynn miss it.

He awaited a signal he could trust, still half-believing (or fully believing: let us not lie to ourselves) that I would betray him. Because I had told him the game could not be won; because he could not fathom why I had begun a second game. I did not know, entirely, myself. His death would not end the war, nor would his life. We would still be a laughingstock, just as he said. They would still be heroic martyrs. Tomorrow, more birds would be singing than today, and there would be a few more minutes of daylight.

"Now, Stremwynn—"

"Go fuck yourself."

The slightest of edges in his voice. Anger, but also impatience, if you were listening for it. My heart began to hammer.

Neither of us would win. Death was the better player: experienced, canny, full of tricks and wily endgames, impossible to deceive on the board. We would both lose. Not him. Not me.

How to make a signal he would see through the crowd of masks and ribbons, feathers and jewelry, and could not be seen from behind me? And supposing he was not looking at me at the crucial moment. I could not speak a clue of any kind; above all we wish to cheat without being caught.

"I meant to ask only about your epitaph. There isn't much room on a gravestone," I said. Sweat beaded on my brow, trickled down into my beard.

"Shut up. I am trying to talk to these people."

"Now the others, they got a mass grave," I said expansively. "It's more economical. We thought about burning them, but that whole area of the city is on fire anyway. Thanks to you. Or as you'd say, thanks to us."

"Shut up."

"Now, it's about time your people learned there are no rules in war. I'm not angry, truly. Look at our hero Minndahl's campaign back in 1357," I said. "You don't know that one. Little coal-miner, hmm? A clever gambit."

"I don't *care*, nobody cares about your colonies. Why can't you people just stay where you are? Why do you have to leave *your* home and smash up or steal *everybody else's*?" Stremwynn shouted. "Why can't you *stop* when you know that everybody *hates* you?"

In the low and flickering light, this light of operas, of theatre, of magic (of murder), I could not be entirely sure of what I had seen on his face. Minndahl had successfully invaded not merely by the unexpected approach from the sea cliffs, but by staging a diversion at a distant village the night before, luring the garrison out to defend the civilians.

They will try to divert you at the crucial moment, I had meant to say. Pay attention to me, not the diversion.

Maybe, his slight nod had said; or had he only raised his chin and not lowered it? His skin gleamed like an ancient helmet in a museum. Dripping metal. *I am the warrior*, his face said. *Not you.*

The steps of the players had taken on a ritualized cadence, apparently random; but I spotted it at once. Randomness itself is a pattern that draws attention. Stremwynn would not be able to see that. The players harried him, threatened him, stepped close to his face, vied for his favor, nudging each other aside. Twirled away behind him so he glanced at their steps.

The gears turned. Turned. Clicked. He fell down one level. Another. *Don't let them distract you, boy. Watch me. Watch me.*

Click.

Click.

Click.

There.

Arms still crossed across my chest, I turned the whiteness of my palm to him, twice, three times, silently. Had he seen it? No? No. Dear Gods, and the seconds dribbling away like water.

Wait.

Stremwynn fought free, crying, "What did you call me? I've emptied a man's guts for less than that!" and looked up.

Time paused: hung frozen and crystalline as if suspended in a tear. And then he was in motion, trailing sweat in golden droplets, arms pumping. The players' hands fell away from him and went to their eyes as if they could not stand to look.

In long graceful leaps he took the staircase, heedless of the roars of consternation and surprise behind me. At the top he hesitated; I opened my mouth to cry *Jump!* but held it down.

He leapt, arms out.

And hit the invisible sill, and scrabbled at the light wooden latch, and had almost gotten it loose when Death revealed herself.

For a moment I was a child again, fallen in the river and caught in an eddy, spinning trapped in the cold transparent water.

Death was taller than the boy, taller than me; and she wore a black mask from brow to chin and her hair was dark without being the color of dark hair; it was the void filled with stars, and constellations glinted as it coursed down her back, the Serpent, the Scorpion, the Archivist, the Twins.

With queenly step she left the edge of her gear and rose effortlessly towards Stremwynn, her gown billowing like thunderheads at sunset, weightless gold, lifted by invisible breath, and in this furious silent cloud of storm and light she seized the boy and brought him down to the stone.

Before I could react she had dragged me up as well, one terrifying unseen burst of motion, knocking away the guards. When everything stopped moving I looked up cautiously: Stremwynn fought to free his arm and she gave him no notice, and her grip did not loosen. His teeth and his staring eyes shone in the darkness like bone.

She unclasped her mask and tossed it clatteringly aside, where the other players danced away from it like a live coal. And they were wise to do so, as I glanced only once at the place where a face should have been, and looked away.

Over the roar and hiss of my heart she spoke, and Stremwynn stopped struggling and looked down at me.

"Pardon me, lady," I said, hating how my voice trembled. "Did you address me?"

Explain yourself, Vessough. Before these so-called persons. I want them to witness it.

"Witness what?"

How you have cheated the game.

"I did nothing, lady. You know the rules as well as I. If the criminal can climb to freedom, then he may go. Which, I admit, has never happened; but the entire structure is built to enable it. We made it so."

It has never happened because the entire structure is built for it to be unnoticeable when it happens. You told him somehow, you are complicit, Vessough. Of all people.

"I deny and forswear it. I will swear upon anything you ask."

I do not ask. I ask nothing of human creatures, for there is nothing I cannot take at my whim. But this is not whim. He is mine. Belongs to me. And now we shall go.

Where she goes no one can follow, and the players were already parting to make a path, what indeed would I have sworn upon? What in my life do I still hold holy? Nothing, no one, no gods, no memories. "Wait!"

She turned, swinging Stremwynn lightly, like a parasol. The dress stormed around her, the gold of new coins, blacker in its folds and shadows than void, something burning there, listening. On her back four

great wings were unfolding, their edges lit faintly in blue and sharper than broken glass.

Nothing is holy and nothing has my faith except this: wings designed not for flight but to deliver pain to soft things. To make them bleed.

"I offer myself in his place," I said.

She said nothing.

"Let him go. Are you so attached to winning a rigged game? Or are you so attached to him? Eventually you will see him again. Perhaps minutes from now. A mob may tear him apart. A bomb may destroy him. It's war. Take me instead. He won his freedom."

The players did not move. Stremwynn did not move. The officers rose from their seats; I heard the scraping of shoes.

Death, too, did not move. And then she began to laugh, until the laughter vanished under a storm of sound as the bell struck to signal the end. Three times it rang, unmeasured tons of chipped and pitted iron, and all the world became noise, and we were washed in it, crushed by it, reduced to motes.

When it was over, my hearing returned to discover Death still laughing. The gears were still and the clock spring was entirely unwound, the great copper bulk resting lightly on its ratchet.

I rose, scraping my palms on the stone. My bones still resounded to the bell; my mouth had filled with blood. I swallowed it rather than spit at Death's feet. Her shoes looked very expensive.

I will not take you, she said. I do not want you. But never before has the offer been made, and you have given me much mirth for making it.

She released Stremwynn and pushed him toward me. Then Death and her billowing gown vanished into a slit cut in the air, a dainty action of one swift wing. Its light left a similar scratch on my eyes no matter where I looked, violet-blue and burning.

Stremwynn limped toward me, making for the edge of the stone support. I stopped him with a hand on his sweat-dampened shoulder.

“No. There is a door behind the spring. You will find the key to it around the neck of the lieutenant there, him on the floor. If you go past these men they will kill you. Death never flies far. You played well.”

“And you?”

“Go. In a moment they will remember themselves.”

The players did not stop him; the lieutenant only moaned and pawed weakly at the boy's big hands effortlessly breaking the thin chain. Then he paused, the fool, to uncouple the shackled prisoners on the spring's winding-handle, and rush them out ahead of him.

Firelight no longer danced on the stone walls. The long light of dawn was tentative, greyish-blue, then lavender, then crimson. In silence I climbed down, and the others surrounded me, Mezhi, Cjesev, others I did not know, and they did not touch me, perhaps because Death had too recently done so and her powers lingered, perhaps for other reasons. Their hands hovered.

“Explain yourself,” said Cjesev, pressing his pistol to my back. I ignored the crawling of my spine as it attempted to flee, and put on a bland smile.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I said. “You all seem to be very excited, gentlemen, over nothing whatsoever.”

"What happened?" Mezhi's eyes were bloodshot, the sockets blackened, as if he had been struck across the bridge of the nose.

"I would say you seem to be having a reaction to something," I said.

"Move. We will get to the truth of this."

We emerged into a cool, smoky sunrise. Long shadows crossed my own and I looked up. On the far side of the river, Stremwynn rose clumsily from a trap door, his light uniform smeared with soot and dirt, scattering the other prisoners ahead of him.

He stared at me. Between us the river scraped and walked, walked and scraped. Mud and ash and blood. How long till it ran clear again? I would not be alive on that day.

I raised a hand to the boy, held it up long enough to ensure he saw. Noticing what I had never seen: scratches from the broken ends of ribs. A man reaches into another man and lifts out a heart, and at the end of his life his atrocities are scribbled onto his hands for anyone to read.

After a moment, Stremwynn waved back. And then he was gone, running low between the broken buildings, vanishing into the smoke.





THE ENDING

Gwynne Garfinkle

I picture you at your typewriter
impossibly young in the black
and white world of the 1950s
writing *I Bury the Living*
years before my birth
your father over ten years gone

black pins imbued
with the power of death
when pushed into vacant plots
on a cemetery map
I wonder how you came up
with that idea

you were always devising
movie premises at the dinner table
you worked at home
until illness made work impossible
even then you kept generating ideas
you'd never turn into scripts

among the many things
I wish I could ask you now
I'd like to know if it bugged you
that you had to rewrite
the ending of your second feature film

it would have been horror perfection
the movie's fatal map
shimmering with pins
reducing craggy cemetery director
Richard Boone to a tormented
pinpoint in the darkness

if not for that godawful ending
pinning the strange deaths
on a run-of-the mill unhinged killer
laid on thick as caretaker
Theodore Bikel's Scottish burr
puncturing the mystery

decades later you'd ask me
what are you writing
you always asked
and I'd hedge
protective of my work

now you're over ten years gone
I'm still thinking up ideas
still writing
still watching your movies
beyond your unfathomable ending





OCTOBER'S GHOST

Caitlyn Paxson

I work in haunted houses. In this one, there was a child who drowned in the well. In that one, a woman wasted away of cancer. Here, there lived a man who couldn't let go of his worldly goods. Every historic house museum has its ghosts. We cobble together stories, passed from one staff member to the next. *In this room, I heard a breath in my ear. In this hall, I felt a hand upon my shoulder. In this window, I saw a strange woman's face where none should be.* We speculate why the spirits linger. We speak to them softly as we open curtains and dust things that may or may not have belonged to them. We tell versions of their lives and deaths to visitors, hoping that we've gotten some spark of it right.

When you peddle the stories of the dead, people always ask: *Do you believe in ghosts?* I tell them that I don't believe in ghosts until I'm alone in the museum, closing up for the night.

It always gets a laugh, but it's not exactly the truth.

When I was in college, a boy died.

We could have been friends. We'd made passing jokes in the dining hall and sat at the edges of the same circles on grassy hilltops. His friends were my friends. With only three hundred students living together on a mountainside, everyone was, by default, a friend of a friend.

The call came in the middle of the night. I was a resident advisor, a job that I never should have taken, but I needed the money. It meant I was responsible for the well-being of others but had no power to protect them from anything. Especially from themselves.

The phone rang. I woke with a jolt, twined with my boyfriend in a too-narrow bed. I answered, palms already slick with panic sweat, and a voice told me that a boy had hurt himself very badly.

I pulled on a thick wool sweater. It was October, and I knew there would be a coat of frost on the grass. Campus was empty and dark. The single floodlight by the dining hall cast thin rays down the dirt paths and reflected weakly off of the white clapboard buildings, turning the world a dull monotone.

That sepia filter colors each memory of that night.

Watching one of his best friends smoke a cigarette with trembling fingers, her face flickering like a silent film.

Standing in a hallway, fists clenched, trying to decide if I should wake a mutual friend and tell him myself or let him sleep and learn it in passing the next morning.

Finding his girlfriend alone, hunched on a picnic table. She said she wanted to be by herself. I asked if I could sit with her anyway. *Never fall in love*, she said. Then she told me to go back to bed and walked off toward the dining hall, where people were starting to gather as they woke to the news.

Each memory is its own little ghost.

Much like a museum, a school is a repository for hauntings. *She walks the path through the woods, she stands at the window, she moves your books when you aren't looking.* At my college, ghost stories were nothing

new. Teenagers huddled in common rooms lit by illicit candles, exchanging whispers about a sad farm girl who had hanged herself in the nineteenth century, back when our dining hall was a cow barn. She'd fallen in love with a traveling salesman, people said, but her father forbade it. Now she wanders the campus, looking for her lost love. Someone would bring up a student—you wouldn't know him, he graduated last year—who'd dared to contact her with a Ouija board when he was a freshman and had gotten a message: *Get out get out get out*. Then there had been a fire. Or maybe just some smoke.

As that October passed in a haze of collective grief, the students in my dorm reported strange events - feet grabbed in the dark, boxes shifting mysteriously, cold drafts where there should be none. The electricity kept cutting out for no reason. Bereft of practical solutions, I turned to more esoteric methods of banishing and placating. I had someone burn sage, and we asked whatever it was to leave. I even left a bowl of milk in the locked boiler room as an offering to the spirits. It was empty the next day. Sometimes, I tell people that as an entertaining little story. *Ghouls in the boiler room of my haunted dorm, so funny*. But at the time, it frightened me.

It also fascinated me to the point of obsession. I began collecting stories about encounters on campus that stretched back decades, interviewing professors and staff. I wrote maudlin short stories about our hanged girl, changing her lost love from a salesman to an artist and giving her a longing for life beyond the farm. I imagined her black, lace-up boots hanging in the rafters above my head while I ate my dinner. I stopped looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirrors at night, afraid of what I might see looking back at me.

There is no real denouement to this story. Most of us kept on living, and the dead stayed dead.

Each year, when October arrives, I try to write about that night. Other people—people who loved him—have written beautifully of his life and

their loss. I always comment and say, *I remember*, but then cut myself short. Because if I write about that night and the weeks that followed, it ends up being a story about me, and it shouldn't be about me when he died that night. When others lost so much more than I did. When my remembrances might bring them pain.

But I am learning something from my time spent peddling ghost stories: That night is my haunting, too.

It's only years after the fact that a shortened life and tragic death can be wrapped into a tidy narrative, facts blurred and portents fulfilled. Sometimes I wonder if the students who came after us told a new kind of ghost story about the place. I wonder if they were haunted by our loss.

It doesn't matter anymore, because my college is gone now—closed down and abandoned. The buildings are still there, but they're empty of students and teachers and books and all the things that made them a school. I don't know who will go there now and walk among our ghosts.

But I will not forget them.





UNDOING

Zin E. Rocklyn

The Universe eats
itself until there is nothing
but air and space

nothing but you and me.

I am the God of Undoing,
your breath my playground.
I leave you bleeding,

panting,

desperate.

For something you are unsure
of, for blood, for spite,
for the rivers of me

pushing forth
engulfing,

drowning,

saturating.

Blurring the lines of choice
and adoration until

there is only you and me.

I am the God of Undoing,
your head and heart and heat
all mine
and as I extricate all that is you,
you love me all the more.





ASK A NECROMANCER

Amanda Downum

The Color of the Grave is Green

Several people have asked me about green burial. Is it really a thing?

The Green Burial Council defines green burial as “a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat.” The body is not treated with chemical preservatives or disinfectants such as formaldehyde, and is allowed to decompose naturally. The deceased is buried in a natural fiber shroud or biodegradable casket—wood is acceptable, but wicker or cardboard are preferable. An outer burial container, e.g. a vault or grave liner, is not used, and the grave may be dug to a shallower depth of three and a half feet to facilitate the aerobic activity of decay.

The practice isn't new at all. Traditional Jewish and Muslim burials have always been “green.”

Truly green burial as defined by the Green Burial Council isn't available everywhere, but many funeral providers can at least offer blended services—some combination of green and traditional practices. Embalming laws vary by state¹, but anyone can use an all-wooden casket. If you're interested in a green or blended interment, cemetery requirements are important. Most modern cemeteries and memorial parks require the use

of—and payment for—an outer burial container. These containers are mostly concrete, sometimes metal or fiberglass, and designed to keep the ground from settling over the grave. This makes landscape maintenance easier. (It might also reduce the chance of someone twisting their ankle while visiting a grave, but really it's about the lawn.) Some cemeteries require caskets for every interment. Others may allow “butterdishing,” or inverting the outer container so that the body touches the earth but the grave is still supported.

The modern memorial park style of cemetery was established in the early twentieth century, intended by founder Dr. Hubert L. Eaton to be an alternative to what he called “unsightly, depressing stoneyards.” (As a goth, I consider memorial parks antithetical to my aesthetics, of course.) Whether or not you find them more cheerful, those sweeping lawns require irrigation and maintenance, including the use of herbicides and pesticides. In comparison, my local green cemetery (or “natural burial park,” as they call themselves) is several acres of native trees and shrubs, with flat field stone markers. The grounds aren't watered or mowed. There are trails and benches for visitors, but otherwise nature does as it wills.

In addition to environmental concerns, the green burial movement also leans toward home funerals, and generally involving the family in death-care and reducing the reliance on traditional funeral homes. The intent is to both ease the financial burden that modern funeral services may entail, and promote cultural death acceptance.

For those who are very, *very* serious about returning to the earth, human composting is now legal in some states. Bodies are laid in special vessels in a controlled environment of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and moisture until the organic material breaks down into soil. Green burial is a more leisurely way to go about decomposition. Cremation, by comparison, uses far more energy and leaves only inorganic remains, which can't be used as fertilizer.

People ask about “best” funeral practices. My only answer for that is to do what makes you happy. And hopefully what won’t put your family into debt if they follow your wishes. While there may be no wrong answers where final disposition is concerned, some options are less practical than others. I love the idea of having cremated remains launched into space, but I can’t in good conscience promote that kind of energy usage or littering. Becoming a permanent frozen landmark on Mount Everest fills me with morbid delight, too, but that doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.



Speaking of options, Holly asks via Twitter: *What is the Necromancer’s favorite “strange” death practice?*

There’s not much to be found in the breadth of human funeral rites that feels truly strange to me, and certainly not in a pejorative sense. If we take this to mean practices that are uncommon in the United States today, I have a few favorites.

I’m personally very much in favor of green burial, but it does leave me with a conflict of interest. I’m an embalmer. I love the art and alchemy of embalming. While it may not be necessary, I do find it practical in many cases. Sadly, my very favorite mode of disposition, sky burial, precludes embalming.

Sky burial is the practice of placing the corpse on a mountainside or elevated structure for scavengers and the elements. Green burial feeds the earth, and presumably many critters in it, but the thought of being consumed by a flock of carrion birds or other cute sharp-toothed scavengers makes my little black heart sing. Of course, to quote Richard Adams by way of Skinny Puppy, “I hope you make sure we’re properly dead before you start, old rip-beak.”

Sky burial is not legal in the United States, to my great sorrow. The nearest alternative I can think of is donating one's remains to a body farm. A perfectly respectable disposition, but somehow not as gratifying.

Tableau embalmings also fascinate me, where the deceased is posed standing or sitting or in some "lifelike" way. The opportunity for makeup and fancy dress is one of my favorite things about embalming. I would love the professional opportunity to work on a case like that, and personally I just want to have one more costume party on my way out.

I also sometimes toy with the notion of being cremated just so I can have my ashes pressed into a record. Some Girls Wander By Mistake would be thematic, but First and Last and Always is really a superlative album. Perhaps I could haunt a phonograph, and play The Sisters of Mercy on repeat in death as I did in life.



If you have questions for the necromancer, write them in ink made from ashes and bury them at a crossroads beneath the new moon. You can also submit questions via the Deadlands website, email **necromancer@thedeadlands.com**, or ask **@stillsostrange** on Twitter. Whichever is most convenient. From the ethics of the funeral industry to the physical minutiae of the agonal phase, every month we'll ask even more about the Unanswered Question.

¹ I'm licensed in the state of Texas, and can only speak to legal issues here. Embalming is not required by law in Texas. [Return to Story](#)





Chernobyl Litany

Gemma Files

I

It goes up, forever. Changes the sky's color.
A howl in the sere grass. A death, root-sunken,
resonates down into the water table, nested rings
of shale and lava. A tremble in the hand, a shiver.

It lasts a thousand years. Unknits your cells,
decays you from core code outwards. Your veins unravel,
spill black pus and yellow, lymph. The dead flux,
all white, no red.

You become a hot sack, plague-full, radiant.

You can no longer be touched.

They bury you in lead,
under concrete, a salt-sown field.

Your grave now marks
where all past futures end.

II

You eat light in slices, citrine
uranium glass at your wrists, throat
leaking slowly.

The elephant's foot spreads out, like rot—
bulges to block the way back in, even
through that unlocked door.

No way to take photos:
every frame of film exposes itself
on contact.

This gray bulge of something nascent,
a plague unborn.

In future we will know it
only through its symptoms.

III

It was never as bad as thought, just
exactly bad enough.

As bad as unnecessary.

When asked how much more
might be needed, the answer, always:

None.





TO THE (MOSTLY) LIVING

J.D. Harlock

To the (mostly) living,

I hope this letter finds you ill.

I write to you today having finally succumbed to the weariness that has plagued me since you stumbled upon nuclear fission all those years ago. I can no longer keep up the pretense of the godly (and very attractive) reaper that you've come to cherish and adore. So, the time has come for me to come clean about what exactly my position in this charade we call life is. Now, you may know me from my work on the Black Death of 1346 or either one of those two world wars (whose names seem to evade me at the moment), but the truth is I had absolutely nothing to do with any of them.

For you see, humans have grown so adept at killing each other that I have become both obsolete and redundant. I'm afraid that there's just no need for a grim reaper in a world where fast food and multinational corporations exist. My days are now mostly spent dancing (on my own for once) and fishing on my ferry with the odd chance that I may reap a soul or two if I'm lucky.

So that's it. I've had it.

I'm retiring from soul-reaping and taking up farming. It'll take some time getting into the swing of things, but I already have some lovely chrysan-

themums growing in my garden, so it shouldn't be too hard. The best part is that I get to keep using my scythe (which I've gotten rather good at handling with all the practice).

I know, I know. I have a long road ahead of me on this crazy adventure you call life, but I'm just glad I've finally told the truth. I feel a relief I haven't felt since I first put on the cloak (I was insecure about my body).

Obviously, it'll be unbearable without Death in your life, but I think if you try hard enough, you just might make it through all right.

And before I sign off, I just want all my fans out there to know that this is not the end of Death. I'll always be there for you, and you can bet that I'll be the first one there when the time finally comes.

Always by Your Side,

Death

River Styx

Afterlife

∞





AUTHOR BIOS



Jeannelle M. Ferreira (she/her) writes queer historical romance and sometimes poetry. She has a spouse, a tween, a cat, and several jobs (the first of which was as a diener in the city morgue). In 2021, her work has appeared in *Climbing Lightly Through Forests*, an anthology tribute to Ursula K.

LeGuin (edited by R. B. Lemberg and Lisa M. Bradley, from Aqueduct Press). She is finishing the sequel to 2018's *The Covert Captain* and a collection of short stories, because this has been the year for that kind of thing. Find her on Twitter @jeannellewrites, particularly if you have thoughts on late Georgian coaching inns and post roads.



Premee Mohamed is an Indo-Caribbean scientist and speculative fiction author based in Edmonton, Alberta. She is the author of novels *Beneath the Rising* (Crawford, Aurora, and Locus Award finalist) and *A Broken Darkness*, and novellas *These Lifeless Things*, *And What Can We Offer You Tonight*, and *The Annual Migration of Clouds*. Her next novel, *The Void*

Ascendant, is due out in March 2022. Her short fiction has appeared in a variety of venues and she can be found on Twitter at @premeesaurus and on her website at www.premeemohamed.com.



Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change*, was published in 2018 by Aqueduct Press. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Escape Pod*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, *Apex*, *GigaNotoSaurus*, *Not One of Us*, and *Climbing Lightly*

Through Forests. Her debut novel, *Can't Find My Way Home*, is forthcoming in January 2022 from Aqueduct Press.



Caitlyn Paxson is a writer, performer, and historical interpreter. She reviews books for NPR Books and Quill & Quire. Her writing has appeared in a variety of places, including Tor. com, Shimmer, Stone Telling, Mythic Delirium, and Goblin Fruit.

You can find her at caitlynpaxson.com or

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Zin E. Rocklyn is a contributor to Bram Stoker-nominated and This is Horror Award-winning *Nox Pareidolia*, *Kaiju Rising II: Reign of Monsters*, *Brigands: A Blackguards Anthology*, and *Forever Vacancy* anthologies and *Weird Luck Tales No. 7* zine. Their story "Summer Skin" in the Bram Stoker-nominated

anthology *Sycorax's Daughters* received an honorable mention for Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year, Volume Ten*. Zin contributed the nonfiction essay "My Genre Makes a Monster of Me" to *Uncanny Magazine's* Hugo Award-winning *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction*. Their short story "The Night Sun" and flash fiction "teatime" were published on Tor.com. Their debut novella will be published by Tor.com in Fall 2021. Zin is a 2017 VONA and 2018 Viable Paradise graduate as well as a 2022 Clarion West candidate. You can find them on Twitter @intelligentwat.



Formerly a film critic, journalist, screenwriter and teacher, **Gemma Files** has been an award-winning horror author since 1999. She has published for collections of short work, three collections of speculative poetry, a *Weird Western* trilogy, a story-cycle and a stand-alone novel (*Experimental*

Film, which won the 2015 Shirley Jackson Award for Best Novel and the 2016 Sunburst Award for Best Adult Novel). She has a new story collection just out from Grimscibe Press (*In This Endlessness, Our End*), and another upcoming.



J.D. Harlock is a Lebanese writer based in Beirut. When he's not (completely) miserable, he's usually enjoying a nice cup of absinthe. You can follow him on Twitter @JD_Harlock.



STAFF BIOS

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Sean Markey publishes things on the internet for a living. He lives in Southeastern UT with his wife, Beth, many animals, and several acres of tumbleweed. He is on Twitter: @MarkeyDotCo



E. Catherine Tobler is a writer and editor. You might know her editing work from *Shimmer Magazine*. You might know her writing from *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Apex Magazine*. A trebuchet and Oxford comma enthusiast, she enjoys gelato and beer in her free time. Leo sun,

Taurus moon. You can find her on Twitter @ECthetwit.



Sonya Taaffe reads dead languages, tells living stories, and loves the spaces in between. Her short fiction and poetry have been collected most recently in *Forget the Sleepless Shores* (Lethe Press) and *Ghost Signs* (Aqueduct Press) and her film criticism is funded by patreon.com/soyav. She

lives with one of her husbands and both of her cats and remains proud of chthonically naming a Kuiper belt object. She can be found online at sonyataaffe.com.



inkshark is a scandalously queer illustrator, author, and editor who lives in the rainy wilds of the Pacific Northwest. He enjoys exploring with his dogs, writing impossible things, and painting what he shouldn't. When his current meatshell begins to decay, he'd like science to put his brain into a

giant killer octopus body with which he promises to be responsible and not even slightly shipwrecked. Pinky swear.



David Gilmore is a writer, reader, and editor out of St. Louis, MO. His work has been featured in *The Rumpus* and at Lindenwood University where he also received his MFA. He lives with his wife and son and spends his free time manning a stall in the Goblin Market selling directions to various

Underworlds in exchange for rumors and information on where he can find his muse.



Amanda Downum is the author of *The Necromancer Chronicles*, *Dreams of Shreds & Tatters*, and the World Fantasy Award-nominated collection *Still So Strange*. Not content with *armchair necromancy*, she is also a licensed mortician. She lives in Austin, TX with an invisible cat. You can summon her at a crossroads at midnight on the night of a new moon, or find her on Twitter as @stillsotranger.



Laura Blackwell is a freelance editor and Pushcart-nominated writer. Current and upcoming publications include *Chiral Mad 5*, *Pseudopod*, and 2016 World Fantasy Award-winning *She Walks in Shadows*. You can follow her on Twitter @pronouncedlahra and visit her website at pronouncedlahra.com.



R J Theodore (she/her) is an author, podcaster, and graphic designer. Her work has appeared in *MetaStellar* and *Glitter + Ashes* (Neon Hemlock Press). She lives in New England, haunted by her childhood cat. Find her at rjtheodore.com.



CONTENT NOTES

The Deadlands, Issue 3

The General's Turn:

Descriptions of war, execution, and violence.

[Return to Story](#)



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