

Dunato | Joiner | Manusos | Palmer | Pratt  
Satyamurthy | Takács | Theodoridou



THE  
**DEADLANDS**

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# THE SHADOWED UNDERTOWS

Natalia Theodoridou | Fiction

The scarred man sits on the water fountain ledge with his back turned to me. His hair, long and straight, spills down his back. His hand grips the side of the ledge, and he peers into the dark water without speaking.

They say everyone sees something different reflected in those waters.

“What do you see?”

He takes a moment before he responds. “You’re not supposed to say.”

I sit next to him. My hand covers his, as it had done so many times before, in our life together. Our fingers touch—at last, it feels familiar. I glance at the water, see there what I’m supposed to see. I wrestle with the idea of blame—for not seeing it sooner, for allowing myself to forget. As if I could help it, as if anyone can.

“I remember now, you know,” I say. “It’s you. It had always been you.” *My first husband*, I don’t say, thinking it a cruel descriptor. It says: *There is a second one. A living one.*

He nods, his back still turned. He knew already, of course.

I even remember his name, now.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I ask. Guilt rests its full weight on my chest, stiff as a tombstone.

"You had to come to the knowledge on your own," he replies. His voice hollow, receding. "No way around it."

"I'm sorry I took so long." Still clinging to the idea of apologies and blame. "There's still so much I don't remember."

He shrugs. "There's no time, here."

And yet, he's waited for me, with no guide to help him back to himself. Waited and waited, for so long. I cannot fathom what it must have been like, waiting for someone in this place, for so long.

I look away from the fountain's waters, up at the dirty sky, the upside-down trees, the birds flying backwards, spiraling and curving, their wings sharp and oily. I imagine my messages hanging from those roots like rotting fruit, waiting for him to remember who he was and pick them. What had I sent him? I don't remember.

In the distance, the dead roll their stones.



I watch the man sleep in this bed I share with him now, in this house that is no one's because the dead have no possessions. Except their stone, perhaps, the thing that hurts the worst when you let go, because it is the thing you least wish to remember.

My hand strokes the side of his head. When he's asleep, he looks more a shade than ever. I remembered who he is to me a few hours ago; not all of him, not everything, just fragments. I didn't tell him. I try to recall his name, now, to piece together my knowledge of him, of us together. I trace the delicate dendrites of his scars, tiny ferns of electricity inscribed

on his flesh as he died, long ago. That, I cannot forget. Why do we have so little choice in the matter?

I can see beyond the window from where I lie; so many birds. Sometimes they're red. Sometimes they're black. Sparrows and pigeons and swallows. They fly only in reverse, as if they're always going back to where they came from, back to their beginnings, an underground, post-mortem tracing. An accounting.

Their flight paths can be read both ways, as if meaning to say, in their legibility: We were here, once. Where you're going and where you're coming from are one and the same.

A wave of vertigo catches me. The room spins like a wheel around me and my head is light. I'm going, going back, back to—I grab hold of myself. The last pieces of what I'm missing fall into place as if raining from the ceiling. I haven't dreamt since I arrived here, but I remember the man's dreams: the tree, the water, the fire coming down from the sky. He told me them himself, back when I still had my stone. And though I've already let it go, I can still feel its weight, its shape. I cling to its memory, and it clings to me, like a ghost.

The world is quiet. The only sound is the faint flapping of the birds' wings, like pieces of paper caught in a sudden wind. And that sharp thud every time one of them smashes against the soil in the sky or gets tangled in the trees' roots.



I decide it has to be done.

I roll my stone all the way to the ocean's shore. Alone this time. I stare at its waters, the waves that break blackly and then fall back the way they came. I rest my hand on the rock as if patting the head of a beloved pet. In the distance, cargo ships hover on the horizon, like apparitions,

carried by the shadowy undertows of this world. What are they carrying, I wonder, and to where? I expect shades to crowd around me, eager to witness the momentousness of my letting go, the lifting of this inexplicable guilt, but they don't. I came alone, and alone I am left. Only the birds beat their wings along their backwards journeys overhead. I search the root branches above for another message from the land of the living, another gift from my mourning spouse, but there's nothing.

Finally, I push the stone into the water, hoping the ocean will swallow it the way it did the first time, eager to pull it into its depths. Yet the stone doesn't sink. It just sits there on the shore, and a wave comes along to carry it, and then another, and the stone starts floating, bobbing up and down, as if it were a buoy. The ocean teases it away with a slow, deliberate receding.

I thought I'd feel relieved, as if a weight has been lifted, but all I feel is this crushing, something inside me thoroughly soaked with the ocean's black water. A loss.

On the way back to the place I'm slowly coming to call home, I catch myself thinking of my spouse up above. Imagine him, his face ashen, ruined with grief.

Will he move on, as I did before?

A dead bird lies on the ground outside the house. My lover down here meets me at the front steps as I'm still staring at the fallen bird because I try so hard not to stare at him, not to palm his features and weep, mourn him all over again.

"How can it die if it's already dead?" I ask.

He stands next to me, our shoulders touching. He smells exactly as I remember—clean skin, morning rain, a hint of lemons—and, finally, I can tell.

"It just forgot," he says. "That's all."



The next morning—for lack of a more specific word for the strange light that comes after our hours of restless sleep—we join the other shades in one of the bleached feasts of the Underworld. I poke the rotting food on my plate aimlessly; I have no intention of eating, and nobody else seems to either. But we do drink. We raise our glasses of purple wine and toast the living, then down our libations, eyes half-closed and rimmed with tears. Look at us, I want to say, look at us in our splendid finery and our rich tables—have you ever seen a more lavish company of beggars? I didn't let go of my gifts at the ocean just as I didn't let go of my stone. Now, I turn the figurine in my hands under the table, thumbing its smoothness, feeling for a flaw that might retain something of my spouse's touch. I catch the man eyeing my hands with some of what I think is envy, though why he might feel envious I could not say.

The birds congregate outside during our grief-soaked parties. A woman tells a story soundtracked by their ceaseless chatter: She speaks of time as a rainfall, seeping down from the trees' roots, over the desert and the city and the cliff, filling our black ocean. People still need mythology, it seems. Death cures so very little.

And yet, I imagine the rain of days pouring from the sky, slowly filling the rooms, the corridors, the spaces in between all these things that were once handcrafted by living hands, that were once cherished by the ones who fell here. So many people, all of them together, staring up at the ceiling, contemplating the dark sky. I imagine all that time, all those years, all those generations spent here, in this place, and still, they do not remember. None of them remember, just as I do not remember.

Back home, the shade is unusually solemn. He sits on the bed, teases the moth in his palm, torturing its tiny wings. Still, it doesn't fly away, as if resigned to the fate it knows awaits it.

I sit next to the man and take the moth from his hand. I blow on it softly, forcing an escape.

“What’s the point in that?” the man asks, meaning my poor act of mercy. He turns to look me in the eyes. His features are beautiful and familiar: his angular jaw, the sunken cheeks, the too-large eyes that seemed to me always pleading.

Seemed to me? When?

I dismiss the temporal lapse, and yet my hand pinches a stray strand of hair and hooks it behind his ear.

The man reaches for the back of my neck and pulls me close until our lips meet. Though he has no breath, I know his breath as if it were my own.

I fumble with the buttons of his own dress shirt—why must they always bury us in such cruel clothes—strip him to reveal skin etched with a complicated network of root-like scars.

“Lichtenberg figures,” I say without thinking. Scars left behind when a body is struck by lightning.

“How do you know what they’re called?” the man coaxes.

I am taken aback by my own knowledge. “I think I used to be a doctor,” I hear myself say. “In life. I remember treating bodies.” I look at my hands, imagine them holding a scalpel, setting a bone.

He takes them, kisses them, each finger then the palm, the wrist.

Afterwards, he calls me to stand next to him by the window and shows me a pair of people rolling stones outside. They neither speak nor look at one another; they simply walk side by side, idly pushing their stones.

The stones roll easily across the grass, smooth and round, one glistening white, the other a darker shade of gray.

"They're brother and sister, you know," he says.

"Don't they recognize each other?" I ask. And don't they have anyone to guide them, like I do? Guilt curls its slender fingers around a rib at this, and I flinch away from its touch. There's a connection I'm supposed to make, I know, to something that's been said earlier, but I don't. I won't.

"Not yet," the man replies.



After that first trip to the ocean, the shade shows me to his house; though, he explains, it does not belong to him just as nothing belongs to anyone, here.

"Nothing belongs to anyone up there either," I say.

The house is dark and a little cold, with a draft going through it, the source of which I fail to identify. The walls are lined with dead things: dried flowers in vases, small birds preserved in wax, alabaster urns full of ashes, many photographs, black-and-white and mildewed. Between these objects, the naked wall gives the impression of a fluttering, a writhing, and I marvel at this until I realize it's covered in small, furry insects. "Only moths live in this house," the shade says.

I approach the wall, as close to the moths as I stand to be. I smell their dusty wings, feel the breeze birthed by the movement of their wings.

The shade joins me. He plucks from the wall a small, mottled one, the size of a thumbnail. He puts it in the middle of his palm and shows it to me. "That one I have to kill every night," he tells me.



I roll my stone for a long time. My legs never get tired, but something else inside me does, though I have no name for it. I arrange in front of me the gifts I have received: the figurine, a white feather, a scrap of paper with a message too faded to read. "What am I supposed to do with these?" I ask the shade, and after some thought he says he'll take me to the ocean.

"The ocean?" I echo, not understanding.

"The underground river that is the world has overflowed here," he explains, "drowning so many things."

He shows me the way. I carry the gifts in my trouser pockets and roll the stone in front of me, the motion now as familiar and automatic as breathing used to be, as blinking still is. The road that leads down to the ocean is paved with granite, but narrow and uneven. It makes the rolling harder; I feel no tiredness, still. I find that disappointing.

At the end, there's a long, winding set of stairs we must climb. The shade holds my arm gently and helps me with the stone when the turns are steepest. When we finally arrive at the shore, the ocean spreads before us placidly, wavelessly—a smooth, black surface. There's no one else on the shore, except that scarred soldier I met in the maze of tunnels when I first arrived. He's crouching on the sand, cutting open a corpse with a broken blade, searching inside for something. "How did he get a corpse?" I ask my shade, and he says, "One of his gifts," pointing at the trees above.

The soldier finds what he was looking for; some kind of prize. He pulls out his arm, covered in old blood, and holds his trophy up to the nonexistent sun: a small piece of shell. "For luck," he tells me. "Good, bad, or otherwise."

I turn back to my shade.

"Does everyone let go of their stone here, in this ocean?"

"No. Everyone has their own way. Some grind it to dust with their teeth. Some drop it from a cliff," the man replies.

"I have not seen any cliffs."

I push the stone into the darkness of the ocean, meaning to cast my past into the depths. I watch the stone start to drift away, but there is a weakness in my knees and I'm already wading into the ocean to retrieve the stone when I realize I don't want to let it go.

I make it back to the shore, stone rolling in front of me, my trousers wet up to my thighs. The shade stands still, his arms hanging by his sides. "As long as you push that stone around, you will not remember it all," he says. There's a harshness to his jaw when he says it, an edge to his voice that I find puzzling.

Why do I remember some things and not others? The most important, perhaps the ones closest to the heart, come back first. And why should guilt stab my navel at this thought, as it does?

"I know," I say.

On the way back, he doesn't speak at all. When we reach the fountain, we see a pair of men chase each other around the square, and when one catches the other, they embrace and begin to kiss. Their kiss goes on and on, never-ending.

"Look at them," I say, not without a twinge of jealousy. "They'll never break away."

"You're right," he answers.



Once I remember more of my living spouse, the man sits me at the fountain. "Tell me the story of the life you had with this man. Can you remember it?" he asks me.

*Of course*, I want to say. Of course I remember him. How could I not?

These are the things I remember:

I remember the parties we used to go to. Sex parties and parties where everyone enjoyed odd things like: eating flowers, sticking metal things in our skin like pins or pushing needles through our lips, hanging from the ceiling like bats. Playing dead.

I remember other things, too. My mother and three sisters, who, I discover as I share the memories, I loved very much. My sisters were always weird, afflicted: one, the youngest, thought she was possessed since she was very small, by the spirit of a musician. The middle one ate only sugar and salt, and the oldest one was always awake because she claimed there was someone living inside her head who would pinch her every time she was on the verge of falling asleep.

And I remember writing long, long letters after he.

"After who?" the shade prompts.

"After my." I stop. I do not remember. Do not remember.

"After what?" he asks again.

I remember visiting a shrine, on a high-altitude city's plateau, overlooking the ocean. My living spouse was my second husband, but I don't remember the first.

I tell the man none of that. Instead, I say: "A hand that slipped out of mine." A pause. "I feel strange. A kind of ringing in the ears, as if I have forgotten how to hear."

"You're mourning for yourself," he says. "For the life you had. It's normal. Happens to most of us."

"I think I was old when I died."

"Older than you are now," he says, as if he knows. "Yes."

"What do I look like now?"

He swallows, licks his lips. "Shy and awkward and lacking the confidence you grew into later," he says, then corrects himself: "Must have grown into later."

The man shifts closer, and I watch my reflection in his still, black eyes. I see the two of us, together.

Behind us the other shades play games: they roll their stones alone but close together and trying not to touch, they ask each other how to find the ocean and give each other wrong directions. A woman's braid is caught in the trees' roots; she hangs in midair, dangling softly in the dead breeze.



We wander for a long time in the complicated sprawl of tunnels and galleries. On the walls, there are amber marks that he touches. I wonder aloud what they are, and he tells me: "I think they're records," but he doesn't say of what. Some of them are large and imposing, others are tiny like the marks of small hands.

The tunnels sometimes open into large rooms, cavernous and lit from the ground up. People inside sit at long, narrow tables, laid with elaborate platters of tasteless food that nobody touches. Some keep their stones beside them, briefly ignored but never forgotten. "What are they doing?" I ask the man.

"Gorging themselves on nothing," he says.

I shudder at the thought of trying the food, so we move on.

In the next room, monsters clean their weapons, lick blood off their arms and palms. A soldier with a large scar across his face tells me he was burned by a fire when he was a boy and of the rest of his life he doesn't remember anything but the screams of other soldiers.

"Not your name?" I ask, and he says, "Why, do you remember yours?" And I don't, I don't.

There is a small lake in the middle of the room. My guide tells me that, in it, people are drowning. I cannot see them because the lake is muddy and opaque. All around us, the walls are piled with broken furniture and discarded old clothes.

Outside, my first gift waits for me, dangling from the tip of a gnarled root. It's a small wooden figurine, hand-carved, representing an aquatic creature: a dolphin, perhaps, or a sea lion. It smells faintly of damp soil and rot.

"Who is it from?" this shade of a man asks me.

"My lover, I think," I say, and in saying it I remember his face. "My spouse." His smell. The gold of his hair—so different to this man's. I wonder if he buried that figurine in the soil by my grave, or if he simply deposited it on the tombstone. How long did it take to find its way to me?

The man swallows, and I think I see the corner of his lip draw downwards. "Don't you receive any gifts?" I ask him, to dispel the solemn air of the moment.

"Not anymore," he says, looking away. "Not for a long time." He shrugs. "The only person who would send me gifts is dead now."

Later, I ask him what is beyond the strange city we stand in, and he says that there is desert where nothing grows, and then there are mountains, and a desert again. I wonder then if the city is one of the many disguises that death assumes: mud, ash, salt. I realize I'm wearing gray trousers and a white dress shirt, which is strange, because I don't remember how I got dressed in the morning.

It takes me hours to realize these are the clothes they buried me in.

I think, at one point, I see a white bird spin across the air over the city. But it might have only been a ribbon from the long braid of an upside-down woman.

"Who was your guide when you first arrived?" I ask the man, assuming too much, as, I think I always did.

He doesn't reply. Instead he says that, sometimes, when he dreams, he is visited by a memory of another time. He says that sometimes he's strolling in a wood of great trees, and thinks that perhaps he's back in the world. He says he feels the warm sunlight on his skin and hears the rustle of leaves, but when he looks around him, he finds himself alone in a long, white corridor, his mouth full of ashes.

I am surprised that he chooses to tell me all of this, but he does, and afterwards we walk in silence for a long time.



I am underground, or, perhaps, in a cave. The world yawns above me, the cave's ceiling this new sky. A man is holding out his hand to me. Is he to be my guide? He's standing next to a water fountain. I think I came out of the black waters of that fountain, but I don't know for sure, and I'm afraid to mouth the question.

There is a large, round stone in front of me. I pat its surface; it's warm. I put my arms around it. It feels natural.

I hug the stone to myself. "I don't remember anything," I say to the man. His eyes are dark, his hair long, straight. I want to touch it.

"It's okay," the man says, and for a moment I think he means my hand on his hair, but he doesn't. "Just roll the stone."

"Roll it where?"

"Anywhere you like."

I look up. Birds circle the ceiling, flying backwards. Trees grow from the sky—no, not trees. Roots. We're underground.

I turn back to the man.

"Where's your stone?" I ask. He smiles sadly and touches my cheek, a bold brush of fingers that feels too familiar. His touch leaves my skin cold. He must be a shade, but then, so must I.

"Oh," he says. "I let go of that old thing so long ago."





# ALL THE TREES THAT HAVE PERISHED ALONGSIDE MY CHILDHOOD

Bogi Takács | Poetry

*"I tend to refer to most of it as the territory of Ghost Soil. It certainly isn't a narrow genre. Whatever you call it, it should dance away from easy definition. [...] [F]or me, part of it was a knowing that given the way the national narrative was going, this vital space was going to be a prime land grab for fascists. Hence re-enchantment is resistance." – David Southwell on Hookland*

## I. Lone Paulownia tree / Római Birodalom

We called that corner *Roman Empire*, after the cobblestones ringing the tree in a loose sleepy oval, rising at an angle—  
and we ran around the tree, our bodies tilted outward;  
we had not yet known the history, could only feel  
the magic in our gut.

The hill had always *had cultic import*, archeologists would say—  
before the Ancient Hungarians, also the Celts (invaded by the Romans)  
though the first building had been a church, its stone ruins  
partially repoured in concrete to *withstand forces of nature*

and you can see how the focal point of the magic drifted from (who knows where) to the ancient church to the basilica—still in use, though the power had unmoored, reanchored in the tree named in English after the empress, in Hungarian after the emperor.

The tree had to come down for the power to be harvested.

## II. *The secret garden* / Nyárország

I wasn't sure if Friendship Park was named after *Finnish-Hungarian friendship* the way the park on the other side of the ten-story housing blocks had been named after sister city Kuopio; or if it had been a Communist gesture evoking a more peaceful age that never existed. Like the Friendship Oil Pipeline cutting across the land.

All the time I did not spend reading, I was there in Friendship Park; and once, as a small child, soon after we moved across the wide avenue, I explored the bush and small trees just behind the sandpit and the steel slides—I ventured inside the thicket, the trees closing above my head—I sought passage into this Summerland of tangled branches grabbing the air with a thousand unruly fingers—and I found, just past chest-high scrub I could not pass: a hollow, a tiny field with a tree, some bushes, the sun streaming in from above, a feeling of sanctity

as strong as I could grasp, *the secret garden*—the words arose and I remembered there had been a book like that in Mother's bookcase. Maybe it would reveal the path. I stared as long as I could, in that place outside time, and then headed home to scrutinize the shelves—the spine read *The Secret Miracle*, by Jorge Luis Borges. I had misremembered the title.

The garden, evanescing. I went back the next day, tried to locate that exact spot, entirely in vain; I ran up the stairwell to the tenth floor and stared down—the patch was unbroken, no opening in the middle to let

in the sunlight, no secret. I found the miracle again only later—but by then the park had been bulldozed to give way to a soccer field.

III. *The trees across from the Biscuit Factory / Kekszgyár*

People in the city Facebook group were mocking  
*the System of National Collaboration*—  
the vaguely vintage-sounding name  
coined by a hard-right government;  
the System of National Collaboration

necessitated

large-scale construction projects  
contracted out to *family and friends*,  
large-scale construction projects

necessitated

expanses of poured concrete, which

necessitated

cutting down the trees,  
their persistence releasing  
invisible threads into the air;  
the ecosystem perennially  
disrupted by settlement,

by city,

now reconstructed into  
a giant egregore,  
an occult takeover of  
all that remained, an assertion of power  
over nature itself on a different scale.

The Communists had believed in disenchantment  
but new forces vest themselves in the enchanted—  
enchanted to their needs, repurposing  
everything from Pan-Turanism to King

Stephen's priests converting peasants by force,  
mandating belief by blood, by the nation;

and I walked away—

the world wrenched from my grasp,  
the globe tilting even though I stood still  
this migration beginning before  
I stepped across any border;  
I walked away—

but the afterimages of trees  
still call out to me,  
demanding to be named,  
demanding memory.

#### IV. *City Park*

On the outskirts of inner-city Budapest, every tree  
is a threshold to story, history, place;  
the outlines of branches now giving way  
to confidently superfluous buildings  
have been etched into me on night walks  
and I see them all still, with the clarity  
of dream.

I never crossed those thresholds  
and now I never would. This evocation  
calling out to the nineteen twenties  
is not the reenchantment  
I was promised. To enact my own  
the link grows tenuous.  
I retrace the letter-shapes in each word  
so that the incantation would live on  
within me at the least.  
Writing subsumes oral tradition

and I mourn, I mourn—

V. *Sostenuto*

Love scatters, fragments, breaks into prismatic mirages all the easier dispelled—the simple uncomplicated love of the inhabitant toward a space. Everything must go or be consumed, incorporated. If it cannot be painted with the national colors it cannot stay. First the individual trees, they are noticed less except by those who have run their fingers along the cracks in their bark. Then the parks. Then the buildings, the more iconic the more crucial that they are eliminated as rapidly as possible. Tendrils of belonging chopped apart. A dissolution and then a harvest. You can go. I must; my cities no longer mine, my trees no longer rooted. I left my history there, but my history does not have a sufficient hold on reality anymore that would enable it to stay, be maintained. Only within, within—

and there it remains, resounds in the ventricles like a lament.





# IMMOLATUS

Lyndsie Manusos | Fiction

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We learned as each of us came into being that all castles have hearts. This castle has three. We still have our hearts, but our bodies were taken. Our hearts are the flames alight in the candles. They are the curtains and stained glass windows. They are the stains beneath our breasts, cold and withering, where he left us in that chamber.

Our hearts led us there, from the first who found the chamber to the third who saw the others displayed as angels. When the third joined us, we realized our anger was enough, and the flames burn hotter now. The castle is warm. We make it so for the new bride. She will not shiver as we did.

I.

*What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.*

He chose me for my voice. My performance. The way I used words and hurled them at the crowd. The way I held the spotlight. The way I spun and fell and rose and died and cried. He saw me play Lady Macbeth in a little theatre with a small stage and few props. I never forgot such a face in the crowd. His night eyes, his sharp mouth. The way he grinned when I shrieked, words careening into the crowd.

*Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here...*



He said I was the dagger in his heart. He asked me to perform for him. I hissed soliloquies into his ears until he swallowed my words. He didn't mind that my hands were ruined from work or that I had no standing in my little town. They all thought I was a witch, anyway, for playing such characters. Perhaps he imagined I was Lady Macbeth, or another woman in Shakespeare who might throw herself into the sea, or on a dagger, or drink poison for love. He took my whispers and gave me his own. Promises. More spotlight. Bigger cities. He led me to his castle, and I followed with a burlap sack of all my belongings. He promised me a stage.

*But screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail....*

It was because of his promises that I used the key. I was eager; I wanted everything from him. More words. More light. After I found the chamber, though...what would Lady Macbeth have done? I'd like to think she would've done what I did, only with more cruelty and vigor.

He grabbed me. He wanted to take me in the chamber, among the tools. And when I used a pewter candlestick to break his nose, it seemed to confirm whatever inner dilemma he may have had. Whatever spark lingered withered into dust.

It was the iron maiden for me. He closed the doors with blood still dripping from his nose to his lips.

It is my right, he said.

Then he latched the door.

I felt my blood falling away. It did not hurt as much as I feared. I did not scream. I prayed, although to whom, I forget. To the ladies of the

light. To Lady Macbeth. To Cordelia. To Miranda. To Juliet. I wish I had more time for words. Their words. Loud words. Words I knew would cut through him. *Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.*

## II.

He liked me for my mouth and my hunger, and because I learned the word “fuck” from my parents. They used to say it all the time. My life was a poem of fucks. He liked when I said the word because my mouth looked like a viper’s. I fell for him because I was hungry. Hunger was my name in my country. I ate voraciously, whole carcasses from the spit. I inhaled the vegetables and fruit grown in the fields of my mother’s family. He said he would pay for the irrigation to keep the fields alive. How could one with such a hunger resist? He promised he’d fend off the drought.

I followed him willingly. I fucked him hungrily. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for such a hunger.

When I searched for the chamber, it was while he was away, claiming he was off to save the fields of my family. I knew he lied. I knew the moment the words left his lips. When he lies, his mouth looks like a camel ready to spit. He thought he was so cunning. So I used the key. An eye for an eye. A hunger for a hunger.

I found the iron maiden in a sea of crusted red. The eyes behind the door were closed. The skin the color of parchment. He stole her. Another woman who had such hunger. I cried for her, and I so rarely cried for anyone. I tried to release her, but even the latch was pasted over with blood. Cemented shut.

I waited in the chamber until he returned. He wasted no time.

He starved me. Chained me next to the iron maiden until I wasted away. I did not beg for mercy. I yelled profanities at the fucker until he had to board up the chamber to drown out the sound.

The servants began to suspect.

Still I shouted. Until my voice became hoarse, my throat shriveled. Until I died.

### III.

He chose me because he said I was the most beautiful human he ever saw. I was without family. I owned my path with no strings. He saw the fire in me before I cast it to the candles. He loved it when I challenged him, debated him. I told him when he was wrong. I said no when he asked me to perform. I said no when he asked me to say dirty words. Not that I didn't like performing or saying dirty words, but I would not be bidden. I would not oblige.

He gave me a brooch that was his mother's. A giant ruby tear. He took me to his mother's grave. He told me secrets the others have never known. You could say I still love him, in my own way.

He told me he feared he was evolving. He could not place the word. I understood this misplacement; I, too had been in such a place where there was no way forward. I thought I was redeeming him—I thought I was redeemed.

The moment he put the key in my hand, I went to the chamber without delay. There was no question. I held it up and announced there would be no secrets between us. I said if we were the personification of love, then we cannot personify secrets. He seemed amused. We walked to the chamber hand in hand.

Dried blood pooled under the iron maiden. It had seeped into the stone, staining it permanently.

The hungry warrior was all bones. Her jaw hung open in a perpetual shout.

I knew them. I loved them. I realized instantly that I would be a part of them.

My love? I asked. Who are these sisters of mine?

They wronged me, he said.

How have they wronged you?

He did not answer, but tried to take me from behind. I would not oblige. I clawed at his face. He roared. I fought. I ended. He ripped me from the inside out. Indeed, he had evolved in his passion. He was born anew. When I watched him sob over my body, it was a confirmation. He had not cried over the others.

To atone for such betrayal, he said.

As if my body was the betrayal.

Let me say this: Do *not* dare mistake my passion, my love, for forgiveness; it is I who burns the flames the hottest.



We watch the new wife and see she is a curious one. She brought trunks upon trunks with her to the castle. We were taken from faraway places so our families could not come for us or our bodies. Where our deaths could be written away as accidental at best. He is clever in this way, even we must admit that. But the new wife seems different. What is it about

her? She does not smile. She leans away from him. Her eyes are large and moon-like. It's as if she is constantly beholding the world afresh.

While he shows her the castle, she knocks on the walls with her knuckles. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. She carries a trinket in her pocket, which she holds with one hand while the other knocks.

Must you always knock, he asks her.

I must, she says.

Perhaps she carries a rosary in her pocket. Or a good luck charm or piece of jewelry from her mother or grandmother.

But she takes it out and we see it is not a rosary at all but a flat piece of wood, smooth and triangular around the edges.

II.

A guitar pick.

III.

She's a musician.

I.

*If music be the food of love, play on!*

The trunks are full of instruments. We recognize some, but most we've never seen before. She takes them out in her bedroom (formerly and so briefly our bedroom) and arranges them in order of size and class. Woodwinds in one corner. Strings in another. Brass in another.

She takes a ukulele from a small suitcase near the bed and places it on the pillow. She practices with the ukulele last. She kisses the strings and then strums them. 1-2-3. 1-2-3. She flows into a song. The song is sweet and sad at first. She opens her mouth and begins to sing.

Now we know why he chose her.

If we could cry in our state of being, we would. We would wail along with her, listening to such a song. It seems written for us, for souls like us. No more of that wretched gothic music he stomps on the organ in the chapel. This woman plays the song for us all. We let loose our power for a moment and the castle warms. The room heats up. She wipes a bead of sweat from her temple, ends the song.

He watches her from the doorway. He thinks the song is for him, but it is not. We will show him it is not his song.

When she sees him in the doorway, she puts the ukulele away and pockets the pick. He tells her to prepare for dinner, and she nods. We know the path from here.

She knocks on her thighs with both hands. 1-2-3. 1-2-3.

II.

The best meal she'll eat in her fucking life.

III.

Then the key. Then the bed.

I.

If she consents.



He presents the key after a sumptuous dessert. Candied figs, whipped cream, and fruit so ripe, the juices bled in deep color onto the plate. He ate with gusto, holding each bite up to the light before putting it in his mouth.

We remember such decadence. The taste hangs beyond the tip of our tongues.

He pushes his plate aside and holds up the key as he had the food, letting the key glint in the light, dangling it in front of her like a child.

Promise me you will not go in this room, he says. Promise me.

It's a performance. He grandstands. We make it less comfortable for him, warming the air until he dabs his mustache with a napkin and yells to the servants.

Open a goddamn window, he says.

We chuckle, but he cannot hear us—no one can—but we think we see the musician smirk, her lips curled up just so.

He leaves the dinner table to wash up. He says he will call on the musician later.

Prepare yourself, he says.

The musician goes back to her chambers, the key nestled in her pocket next to her pick. Who knows how long it will take for her to grow curi-

ous. Or maybe, just maybe, she will keep her word. Maybe it'll be years before we have to protect her.



Although none of us thought to bring a companion, the musician brought a music professor, an elderly gentleman. He wears small half-moon glasses and a brown sweater. He wears fingerless gloves that we guess are due to arthritis. He sits in her bedroom to clean and tune the instruments. We were hesitant about him at first, but the way he polishes her instruments brings on a pleasant sense of admiration. We ease up on the candles. We blow a soft breeze so he does not overheat. He sighs, grateful perhaps.

I don't like him, the professor whispers.

Don't whisper, the musician says. Whispering means fear. He cannot hear us.

Well, something *can* hear us, the professor says, looking at the walls. They are angry.

Not at you, I think, she says.

The musician undresses. The professor does not seem to mind; he continues to organize, stacking the trunks and organizing her sheet music on the enormous desk.

She has curves as smooth and round as her instruments. We all sigh, missing our own skin. Different shades and textures of perfection.

The musician walks to the full-length mirror and beholds herself. She touches her belly and her nipples. She plucks at the skin on her hips.

Does it hurt? she asks.

The professor sits at her desk and takes out a book. He opens it in his lap and chuckles.

You know the answer to that, he says. We've discussed this.

I like to hear your voice, she says. I admit I am afraid.

Then why did you marry him?

You know why, she says. I'm not above marrying for convenience. He promised me a symphony. He's going publish my music. The only question is how to deal with him.

I.

*Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.*

III.

Take heart, sister. She is cleverer than you think.

II.

Let us hope. The bastard comes for her now.



The musician puts on a silk robe and places the guitar pick and the key together in one of the pockets. He arrives at her door dressed in his own deep red robe and fox slippers. His hair is combed back in a grey slick. He has changed his mind.

I want you to use the key, he says.

But you said never to use it, she says. I keep my promises.

I believe you, he says, so I want you to use it now.

Perhaps another day, she says.

Her eyes seem wild and her nostrils flare, but she stands still. She senses the sway of the room. He has never done this before. The pattern is broken.

The musician's fingers tap her pocket. 1-2-3. 1-2-3.

The professor looks up from his book and glances back and forth, from the musician to the doorway.

I wish you had not brought your professor, he says. I have plenty of servants to attend to you.

He is not a servant, she snaps.

1-2-3. 1-2-3.

The professor seems unperturbed by this exchange, but he regards the musician with concern. The musician must've fought hard for the professor to join her.

You are my wife, he says. You will do as you are bidden.

We hiss. The candles flicker.

I bid myself, *husband*, she says.

He straightens his shoulders.

You will come with me and use the key, he says. You will bring the ukulele. You will do this. Or I will kill him.

From his jacket pocket, he takes out a small pistol. He aims it at the professor. The professor puts the book down and stands.

I find this abhorrent, the professor says. Sickly. Preposterous. Inconceivable.

The musician steps forward.

I will come with you, she says.

She walks across the bedroom to stand in front of the professor, the pistol now aimed at her breasts.

I could never play music again without my professor, she says. If you love me as you love my music, you will not harm him.

II.

He's going to shoot.

III.

No, my dear. He needs her to complete his steps.

I.

*O, woe is me to have seen what I have seen, to see what I see!*



We warm the room till they all sweat, standing there in a straight line. The professor, the musician, and our murderer. We hope his hand becomes so slick with sweat that he drops the weapon. Yet he holds it steady. Our musician taps her pocket.

1-2-3. 1-2-3.

He lowers the pistol.

Come with me, he says. Bring the instrument.

She knows what instrument he's referring to. She goes to the bed and takes the ukulele from the pillow. She cradles it like an infant.

The professor touches her shoulder softly. His lips tremble.

We should never have come, the professor whispers.

It was my choice, she says.

Our murderer laughs.

Two little chipmunks, chattering away, he says. Enough. Come, wife. But you stay, professor. Stay with your books and music. I will return for you.

The musician takes her husband's hand, and he leads her on, away.

The professor shivers in her chamber despite our heat. His half-moon glasses cloud with sweat and hot breath. He looks at all the instruments. Music sheets strewn about. We see despair leaking out of him.

He takes up a flute and begins to polish it again. It gleams already; there is no need to repeat, but he does. He stares at the mouthpiece where her mouth has been. He begins to weep. It is agony to leave him, but we must. The musician needs us.



He leads the musician to the chamber in silence.

She is bewildered, surely, but not panicked. Her cheeks are flushed from our warmth.

I am thirsty, she says.

Later, he says.

I am hungry, she says.

Later, he says.

Her arm cradles the ukulele, and she taps the side of it with her fingernails.

1-2-3. 1-2-3.

The chamber sits in a dank part of the castle. It had been such an adventure for each of us to find at first. So many twists and staircases. We all thought we might discover a treasure of some sort. How naïve we were. How filled with hope.

There are fewer candles in this part of the castle, so it is harder to keep the musician warm. We push harder, but the flush in her cheeks fades. Her skin becomes pale.

When they reach the chamber, he gestures to the door.

The key, he bids her. I want you to be the one to open it.

She takes the key from her pocket and turns it in the lock. The door groans open.

It is dark; she cannot see us at first. He takes out a long match and begins to light the candles on the walls. All of them. One by one, each flame flickering to life. We come into view. The Iron Maiden, the Hungry Warrior, and the Lover.

The musician falls to her knees.

My God, she cries.

You will join them, he says.

Sisters, she says. What form shall it take?

Immolation, he says. First, you will play the song you played earlier.

1-2-3. 1-2-3.

He sets a chair in the middle of the chamber. Next to the chair sits a bucket of oil. He will throw it on her as soon as she finishes. Our musician sits and takes out the pick from her pocket. He aims the pistol at her.

No sudden movements, he says. Play on, sweet wife.

The feeling of opportunity hits us all at once: He does not realize the gift he has given. All the candles are alight.

*Sister*, we push ourselves into the musician's ear, as soft as a whisper. A lover's caress.

Her lips open, and she sighs. Her fingers pluck at the strings of the ukelele, and we feel a spark. A quiver of ecstasy.

I am here, she whispers.

In the distance, we hear the professor run through the castle, up the stairs and down the twisting hallways. He wields the flute like an ax, like a mallet, like a club. Oh, how the mouthpiece shines.

The musician plays. Her eyes close. She starts to sing, and we feel our bodies sigh. We pour heat into the chamber, thawing our flesh, feeding our bones. He starts to change the pistol from one hand to the other to wipe his palms. There's an expression on his face we've never seen

before, thick with sweat. It's a beautiful expression. It matched our own at one point before the end, before we came into being.

The professor's footsteps are near the chamber now. At the sound, the musician ups the tempo, and her voice lilts off-key.

What is this, her husband says. What are you doing.

The musician doesn't answer but continues on, the song becoming haunting, low and keening. Her fingers fly along the strings.

Stop this now, he says. Play what I bid you.

We pour heat into the room. The musician sweats but her fingers are deft and accurate, the calluses on her hands thick and stable. We pour so much that a hot breeze billows up. The Iron Maiden trembles, the bones of the Warrior creak together, and the Lover's body shifts.

It's just enough to jar him.

He holds up the pistol, but his finger slips along the trigger. The pistol clatters to the floor. Then the professor steps forth into the chamber, holding the flute like a club. The professor swings, but the husband dodges, and grabs the professor by the throat. He backs the elderly man to the wall, squeezes his throat.

Husband, the musician says.

The music has stopped, and he turns toward his wife. She holds the bucket of oil in her hands. The ukulele lies on the chair. There is something in the husband's eyes as he looks at the musician. Perhaps he knew one day it would end, but not like this. Not with a little musician and an old man. Not in the chamber with his sins.

The musician moves then, her body as swift as her fingers. The bucket goes up, the oil snaking out of it, reaching toward her husband. The professor kicks with his gangly legs, stomping hard enough for the husband to loosen his grip. The professor leaps away. The oil leaps forth. Soon, he is dripping with it.

All the candles are alight. Everywhere. So we push. The candles closest to him rise from their candelabras. He gasps.

III.

Oh my loves, my darlings, it is time.

II.

I could eat the fucking world.

I.

*Oh for a muse of fire.*



Immolation, he said. That would've brought our fourth sister to us. We would've loved her as our own, would've held her close. But it is not her time, and we promised no more.

The musician runs to the professor, helps him up.

We drop the candles, the flames licking against oil-soaked skin, and his screams become a song.

We will move the smoke outwards into the halls and rooms. We will shrivel all the books in the library. We will char the marital bed to ash. We will bend and melt the dinner plates. The servants will smell it and

run. The musician and professor will leave the castle, and they will only look back to make sure that the tower that holds the chamber is fully engulfed. It's possible the whole castle will fall, but we will do our best to save her trunks, her music.

1-2-3. 1-2-3. The flames grow.

The musician tucks the ukulele under her arm and holds it tight.





# THIS CANDID FIELD

Mat Joiner | Poetry

In this time of masks I can touch only land,  
open the green book where warm feet wrote  
lines of desire. I need stranger maps now.  
I will comb the ghost-tilth with my hands,  
wake the past from its red-clay bed.

I go shoeless between dead and quick,  
mazing blood-spoor, pressing skin-warmed coins  
into the earth until the birds hush and years  
pressed like flowers open all around me. The elms rise  
tall and domed after forty-five years of absence—

and you walk to me out of rook's rasp and cloud-shadow:  
sketched in heathaze, moon-skinned as birch.  
Each step a different face. A child painted with blackberries.  
Tweed-clad, rabbits in your knotted hand.  
Spring bride wearing the lace of old mayblossom.

I trade breath for secrets, cigarettes hand-rolled  
on a warped stile; slip the names away  
for safekeeping. In telling, you become: eyes dim  
from fox-fire to an almost-mortal light.  
In listening, I'm remade, wear others' faces over mine:

I am the baby you lost in a cold cottage.  
The girl you showed how to make calls  
like linnets, yellowhammers; you were happy  
to be the songbird in her cage. I'm the lad  
from the gasworks with the long mouth

you'd have sucked brown ale from, but had to hide  
behind joshing, jostling. (He never knew. You never forgot.)  
Sometimes you stumble, and your deaths walk with us.  
Brambles look like the wires from a long-gone war.  
They left you there, a broken puppet in the mud.

And now your gasps echo from the tiles  
of the isolation ward, hair falling lank over your gown.  
You gape at the smallpox-scars on your hands; I hold them  
until they smooth over. *Friend, they razed the hospital.*  
*Put up houses you and I could never afford. Not in this life.*

*Friend, this is no battlefield. Just uncommon land.*  
It's the best name I can give. We make a bridge of arms.  
Dusk creeps across the grass. You ask *me* for stories now;  
I hesitate. This isn't the present I would give anyone—  
but I speak, and find no faces lost to me looking back.

Take them back with you, through the gap in the hedge  
and the setts that lead to the buried wood. This is a border  
I can't yet cross; *I'd guide you though* unspoken  
by the tongues swimming in my mouth, molten as damsons.  
The grasses sigh in your passing.

My hands hold night: but are not empty.  
I walk back on torn heels. Home seems bigger  
than this house, big enough for the living and the dead  
to roost in; and coffee only deepens the taste of you.  
I open a new book and write your tales beyond dawn.





# DANSE MACABRE: EQUALITY IN DEATH IN MEDIEVAL ISTRIAN FRESCOS

Jelena Dunato | Non-fiction

The Danse Macabre—the Dance of Death—is an iconographic theme that first appears in fifteenth-century European art. It shows skeletons or cadavers leading a procession of the living from all walks of life towards the grave.

From the modern perspective, this may seem gruesome, even morbid. Most images of (Western) death are banned in the mainstream media—we never see the dead, unless they are casualties from faraway wars we cannot locate on a map. When our loved ones die, our loss is sanitized and wrapped in a tasteful package. We don't keep our dead at home, there are no wakes, nor do we take last photographs with them as our nineteenth-century ancestors did. We have removed the physical presence of death from our lives, and we wonder why anyone would celebrate death in such a strange way.

To understand the Danse Macabre and its origins, one must understand the relation of medieval people to death and—inseparable from it—their Christian beliefs. To medieval men and women, death was not the mere end of life, but something far more significant: the introduction to a higher stage of being that led to divine judgement and then to Heaven (hopefully) or Hell (to be avoided, obviously). Considering the harsh conditions of life, death was also seen as the release from suffering,

sickness, and toil, the liberation from the shackles of the corrupt mortal flesh, and the introduction to the kingdom of spirit. In that sense, the *Danse Macabre* depicts a ritual of transition from life to death.

Death is a popular theme in Christian art, but before the fourteenth century, the artists mostly depicted the deaths of Christ, the Virgin, or the saints. Only from the fourteenth century onwards did the death of the common people become an acceptable subject. This change was probably influenced by the horrors of the Black Death, so rampant across Europe that it became a cult in itself.

It is also worth mentioning that most medieval people couldn't read, nor did they have any access to books. Therefore, all important messages for the masses were conveyed in pictures. This is why we have the amazing, elaborate Gothic portals and fresco cycles. The images we see as art (and often, without iconographic knowledge, can't understand), the medieval people saw as stories. They were able to "read" the walls.

The *Danse Macabre* did not suddenly materialize out of thin air as a new subject. It is a combination of several earlier literary and visual sources. Despite what may appear to be slow dissemination in today's terms, new ideas did spread across medieval Europe. One of the popular sources was the *Biblia pauperum* (Paupers' Bible), a type of picture Bible that showed typological correspondences between the Old and New Testaments, with words written on scrolls coming out of the characters' mouths, somewhat similar to the modern comic strips. There were also individual woodcuts (relatively cheap to make in bulk, and easy to transport) showing popular subjects and—the most luxurious of all—illuminated manuscripts.

The fourteenth century is also the time when we first encounter the personification of death. The image of the skeletal reaper or archer appears, introducing Death not as a metaphysical transition into afterlife, but as an agent of destruction.

In the legend of “The Three Living and the Three Dead,” three young knights/noblemen go hunting and come upon three open graves. The three rotting cadavers sitting in them tell the knights, “What we were, you are; what we are, you will be.” This image of the active, personified death was created as a warning against vanity, wealth, and temptations of the physical world. No matter who you are or what you have, death will come to all in the end.

From such a juxtaposition of the living and the dead, there is a short step to the idea of the Danse Macabre, the imaginative combination of sacred and profane aspects of medieval life, merging the joy and abandon of the dance with the imminent, horrifying demise. Its earliest representation, now lost, appeared in Paris c. 1424 and quickly spread to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and other parts of Europe. It is difficult to say how frequent it was, as many Gothic churches were refurbished during the Counter-Reformation period, stripped of their old decoration and repainted and redecorated according to the new iconographic ideals.



*Photographer: Renco Kosinožič. Use rights granted by Tourist Board of Central Istria.*

It is therefore a miracle that two rather well-preserved representations of the Danse Macabre can still be found on the walls of two little church-

es in Istria—one in the village of Beram (now in Croatia) and the other in Hrastovlje (Slovenia).

The frescoes in the Gothic church of Sv. Marija na Škrilinah in Beram were painted by the master Vincent of Kastav (Vincentius de Kastua) and his workshop in 1474—which is recorded in the inscription above the side door of the church. Sv. Marija is a small graveyard church with no aisles. Its interior is decorated by forty-six scenes depicting the lives of Mary and Jesus. The Danse Macabre is situated on the western wall, above the main entrance. This is an interesting choice, because this spot is usually reserved for the Last Judgement—to remind the people leaving the church that everything they do will be judged one day. The Danse Macabre fulfils the same function, but in a more vivid and grisly way.

The only record we have of Vincent of Kastav is the inscription on the wall. Looking at the frescoes, however, we can see that he and the two other painters from his workshop whose distinctive styles we can recognize in the frescoes were competent craftsmen. Not very elegant or subtle, but bold and imaginative with their colorful, voluminous, stylized figures. They were not progressive—in the age when the Italian Renaissance was already in full bloom, they were still firmly rooted in the medieval tradition. On the other hand, this is what makes them so valuable: they were local, plebeian artists who inherited the wealth of medieval folklore, rituals, superstitions, and social rules.

The Danse Macabre procession in Beram features ten living characters—not individual persons, but representations of their class, reminding the viewer of the ubiquity of death despite social inequality. Each living character is led by a skeleton towards the King of Death on the far right, who is crowned with a feather crown and playing the bagpipes (which are sometimes associated with the Devil).

The skeletons dance and frolic. They hold the emblems of death—the scythe and the bow—and musical instruments such as trumpets and lutes. Despite the fact that the skeletons demonstrate the artist's com-

plete ignorance of the human anatomy, they still manage to convey a sense of gruesome joy and vigorous movement. In contrast to that, the living are serious and sad, with bowed heads and downturned mouths. They are arranged according to the social hierarchy: from right to left, the first character approaching the King of Death is the pope, followed by a cardinal, a bishop, a king, a queen, an innkeeper, a child, a beggar, a soldier, and a merchant. Like in many other depictions of the Danse Macabre, the rich try to bribe Death—the pope is offering a bag of money, the queen a full bowl of it—all in vain. Even the innkeeper is carrying a little barrel—an emblem that can also be interpreted as a gift.

It is interesting to notice that the hierarchy of the figures representing the lower classes is somewhat mixed up. The child comes before the beggar, who comes before the soldier and the merchant. It seems almost as if the artist, once he got the higher classes sorted out, wasn't too interested in the further social stratification. He did, however, take care to faithfully document the clothes and accessories of his contemporaries. It is important to point out that a representation of the most numerous social class of the time—the peasants—is missing from this image.

The frescoes in the Holy Trinity Church in Hrastovlje were painted a few years later, in 1490, by the master Ivan of Kastav (Johannes de Kastua). He obviously shared the same place of origin (the Croatian town of Kastav) with master Vincent, but we do not know if they were related.

Despite the ideas and the visual language they share, the Danse Macabre in Hrastovlje differs from the one in Beram. It is just as colorful, local, and vivid, but the procession is more dignified and more firmly structured. The King of Death is no longer a mocking feathered skeleton with bagpipes but a solemn ruler, sitting on a throne, holding open the grave into which the first skeleton leads the procession.

The procession consists of eleven representations of the living: the pope, a king, a queen, a cardinal, a bishop, a monk, a physician, a merchant, a nobleman, a beggar, and a child stepping out of a cradle. The hierarchical

order is much clearer here than in Beram and, again, there are no peasants. In fact, the only representative of the lower classes is the beggar. So if we shift our focus from the individual characters and look at the image as a whole, its message suddenly becomes clear.

The Danse Macabre in Hrastovlje, just like the one in Beram, is not here as a memento mori for the local peasants—they don't need to be reminded of their own mortality. It is here to criticize the ruling classes who try to buy more time, who try to bribe death, who flaunt their worldly riches at the death's door. It criticizes the vanity and the greed of the Church (four out of eleven characters are men of the Church). It goes beyond reminding the viewer that we will all die one day; it emphasizes that members of the ruling classes will die, too, that their position in the mortal world won't save them, and that death will mock their attempts and then take them. As such, the Danse Macabre is not a representation of the ubiquity of death. It is an image—vivid, colorful, folkloric—painted on the walls of two small village churches by local artists offering consolation, mocking the powers that be, and righting social injustice.

It is worth remembering that medieval people knew how to read the walls. These messages are not subtle: they are vivid, colorful, and clear.

Iconographically and stylistically, the two Istrian Dance Macabres combine several European traditions of the period. They are influenced by painters from Italy and Northern and Central Europe, but in combining many different influences, the masters Vincent and Ivan of Kastav succeeded in creating a unique visual language and conveying a consistent, plain message, suitable for their public.





# **GHOST TOWNS: A CULTURAL RESOURCES SURVEY REPORT FROM THE 2020-21 FIELD SEASON**

Sara E. Palmer | Poetry

In the first spring I hide from the plague in a pale rain above Schet-  
cheet-qua-chub,

fading into the timber at the end of the world.

I owed that hill something, even before it hid me,  
and I think it took it.

łaska k<sup>h</sup>alakwati-stik, łaska t'ʉʌn,

they are older and harder than me

and they can take damn near anything  
(except chainsaws)

casting up new leaders, raising their hands, long arms bent at the  
elbows, toward the sun

or what passes for sun, east of Suballihalli and west of the moon,  
pushing the rot out and building buttresses, structural complexity,  
cavities and habitat,

scar lobes rounding over like pearls, closing in on their damage.

Cedar is the cathedral of the woods.

łaska miłayt and it's good to think that something can,  
that spring.

munk-tunus na tæmtəm, sik na tæmtəm, pi na kæmtəks wik na miłayt,  
yakwa, ałqi.

nayka siyaxus, wik łaska nanich.

I write to my lawyer: he will draw up papers so when it gets me  
there will be a trust for the children with enough money, between my  
savings and the insurance,  
that they can keep the house.

Days pass and hayu mashachi. I hang myself from the trees and sleep.  
I eat nettles, oysters, fiddleheads, morels,  
fried with shelf-stable bacon and rehydrated potatoes  
on a sooty fire of unleaded gasoline.

The plague creeps around the pumps at the State Patrol station,  
drifts uneasily down the Duwamish.  
I slide through town at seventy-four miles per hour and do not note my  
speed  
until I pass the convention center and slow down.  
I have to believe there are still some limits, even at the end of the world.

In the cottonwoods at Bodie, weeks later, there's a tricycle  
or part of it, in the leaf litter,  
a wheel oxidizing into the roots next to empty cans, broken bottles,  
solarized fragments of sun-scarred lives.  
The deer come down in the dark, huffing and blowing their way toward  
Toroda Creek,  
angry to smell me lying where nothing like me has slept for a century.  
Away uphill I hear the tinging clanking neck-bell of the bitch cow, grazing  
as the herd moves.  
She scares me more than the deer do.  
What's left of the miners scares me not at all:  
bones of houses; the rusting mass of a sprung mattress, heaved  
against the wall to rot;  
a series of terrifying holes that end under water, in the dark.

It's ulali season and I am outside more nights than I am in.

On the last day of summer, as was prophesied, the bad wind comes  
from the east

and we lean against it.

My prophets have increment borers, stained Carhartts, shovels, dirty  
yellow Nomex shirts,

ancient helicopters

drip torches

red trucks

a fondness for terrible puns

and they know that at least when the world is ending

the overtime will be good.

I pay my lawyer but don't sign the will.

I cry on a hill over the Columbia in October

where the sage smoked for fifty miles,

the biggest smudge, a great call to whoever's listening,

broad-cast and high, in the wind,

munk-smuk west over the mountains to Seattle, where it settles in for  
weeks,

the land drifting into town as a fine powder, sitting on the front steps,

saying hey there, how are you, I hear real estate prices are up now you're  
choking to death on your own spit.

The dead rise up, singing, out of the side of the hill

so loud even a white girl can hear them.

Reception is good since they put in that new cell tower at the south end  
of the reservation.

They're still here, I say, into my pink telephone, they're still here,

the fire moved so fast in that wind, there was no time to get a dozer line in  
and they're all still here.

The dead say hello, and also could you not.

When the weather breaks I go home, looking for bodies,  
what's left of bodies,  
when they've been rendered into dust.  
Wearing a white suit, rubber boots, two pairs of gloves, pink-filtered  
respirator,  
and a calm and professional demeanor  
I distinguish between the ashes of your singlewide  
and the ashes of your husband  
and I pick him out, with the tip of my trowel  
and I pick out the little heart-shaped box he gave you  
the day you both realized it was love.  
I hand him back to you in a plastic zipper bag.  
We're both crying and I'm jealous, wondering how I will ever find  
someone to cry for me like that  
if I never come out of the field  
if I spend my life in the powdered bones  
of dead men and dead trees.

It's a bad year for chanterelles, it's a bad year for everything, we are all  
covered in mud,  
full of soft spots,  
and fry up tasting of rot and frustration.  
I take a week off at the solstice and cry every day  
until my head aches and my children worry.

I hide from the plague over Nuxwt'iq'em in the second spring,  
the lights of Bellingham and the stars sparkling in the dark below my  
hammock,  
the elders in the woods, bent sheltering arms, heavy-trunked,  
speaking languages I don't, yet, languages maybe I won't get.  
ntsayka kapshwala łaska lalang.  
My paint and my flagging tape mark out half a millennium of plague.  
Little porcelain tracks, green arabesques and tiny blue bamboo shoots,  
a near-complete crock,  
the litter of colonies we forgot we made.

I am the virus and the master's tool,  
I am watching from behind the trees  
and my cutting teeth kick out sawdust in the cold morning.

I watch the cedar:  
ya miłayt, for longer than you would think she could, for decades or  
maybe centuries,  
the bark washing off her gray heart; she collapses from the top, in the  
wind, ice-broken,  
worried by the weather,  
each piece sagging softly into soil,  
mossy and green, red and rich, still full of volatiles, fragrant, crumbling,  
carbonizing in the hot east wind,  
and her own seeds nestle into her, her children consume her,  
rooting in and reaching out and becoming her  
in a way I think is familiar to most mothers.

In April I send my eldest child,  
plague-spared,  
into the ash to plant trees.





# ASK A NECROMANCER

Amanda Downum | Non-fiction

## The Indignities of Death

We begin life confronted with all manner of indignities and inconveniences: diapers, pants, shoes, etc. The list just gets longer and longer as we age. I hate to break it to you, dear reader, but death does not free us from these aggravations.

One of the very first questions anyone ever asked me when I announced I was going to mortuary school was “Do you plug [decedents’] butts so they don’t leak?”

To quote my favorite professor’s answer for just about any question: It depends.

Leakage, or purge, from any orifice is a very real concern. As the classic children’s book teaches us, everyone poops. Depending on the contents of a person’s bowels and bladder when they die, and the manner of death, muscular action may lead to...voiding. This is very common, though not a certainty. Evacuation also takes place later, either as the fading of rigor mortis causes muscles to slacken, or because bacterial growth creates gas, which causes internal pressure to build.

Part of the embalming process is aspiration—that is, removing as much gas, fluid, and semisolid waste as possible from the body cavities and internal organs. This is done via suction and a trocar. (Everyone gets

sprayed by a clogged aspirator hose at least once. PPE is your friend.) Other practices to prevent leaks vary by embalmer. One of my instructors firmly believes that every corpse needs an enema. While I respect their logic, I cannot bring myself to embrace it. In most cases, a bath and a diaper will suffice.

Some people, however, need more. Some people are, to quote a coworker, “a portal to the poop dimension.” These are the times where stronger measures need to be taken, such as enemas and plugs. As distasteful as that may sound, I promise you it’s preferable to dealing with a situation where the deceased has purged after being dressed and placed in their casket.



Speaking of being dressed, another outraged question I’ve seen floating around social media goes something like, *What do you mean I have to wear a bra when I’m dead?*

Whether or not your corpse will wear foundation garments entirely depends on what clothing your family provides to the funeral director. If your family brings us a bra, we’re going to attempt to put that bra on you. A variety of factors may contribute to our failure or success, but we will do our best. The same goes for underwear, pants, shoes, etc.

The tricky part of embalming the well-endowed is that formaldehyde firms tissue—the higher the index (the percentage of formaldehyde in the fluid), the firmer the flesh. We take care to make sure facial features and hands are positioned properly, because after the fluid works its sinister magic, that’s the way they’ll stay. This means that if no measures are taken to counteract gravity during embalming, breast tissue may not be malleable enough to put into a bra afterwards. What doesn’t fit easily into a bra may also not neatly fit into other clothing. Most living people don’t dress themselves lying down. Dressing the dead is a lot like trying to wrestle clothes onto a giant toddler who’s just discovered passive resistance.

The trick that I've learned to use on breasts during the embalming process is duct tape. It's imperfect, but helpful. And if that unsettles you, let me assure you that it's better than the older industry trick I've been told of, which is tying the nipples together with suture. If anything would get my corpse to sit up on a table and slap the hell out of someone, it would be that.

Clothing for the deceased tends to fall into the categories of Sunday best, comfortable favorites, or sentimental significance—wedding gowns, army uniforms, etc. A question that we hear a lot from families is “Do I need to bring shoes?” There is absolutely no right or wrong answer. Personally, I have nightmares about needing to go somewhere and not having shoes on, but I'm sure we all know someone who would never wear shoes anywhere if they could get away with it. The same goes for pants. Although I'm frequently surprised by the number of families who don't bring us pants. I'm not sure if they assume that no one will see the deceased from the waist down, or if Grandpa hated pants in life and refused to suffer their tyranny in the afterlife.



James asks, *If I were mistaken for dead and taken to the morgue what would be the proper way to announce myself when I wake up?*

James, these circumstances would not warrant a polite throat-clearing. I know many of us hate to make a fuss, and might find ourselves embarrassed by such a predicament. Please put aside such concerns, however, and shout at the top of your lungs. Hospital morgues are frequently removed from busier parts of the building, and coolers are fairly soundproof. Scream therapy in the funeral home's cooler is reserved for employees and not customers, however.



If you have questions for the necromancer, send them via messenger bat, or submit them through our form at **thedeadlands.com**, or ask **@stillsostrange** on Twitter. No topic is too trivial or too profound to explore, be it depictions of death in fiction or grisly intersections of death and capitalism in the real world.

I'm also tremendously excited to announce that I'll be manifesting as a guest on the *Worldbuilding for Masochists* podcast very soon. The episode may already be available by the time you read this.





# SOMETIMES YOU GET THE BEAR

Tim Pratt | Fiction Reprint

I met the bear hunter the night my mother died. I was a hospice care worker myself, though not in the facility where my mother spent her last months—I couldn't have borne that. I knew some of the doctors and staff at her hospice, though, and professional courtesies meant my mother was taken care of especially well. There wasn't much to be done for her, except to keep her pain medication flowing, and wait. She'd started with lung cancer years before, gone through rounds of treatment and remission with diminishing returns, and now it was just a matter of time until the bear came for her.

I wasn't supposed to step over the taped yellow line on the floor—it's not safe, when they're this close to the end—but I darted in anyway, kissed her hot cheek, and adjusted her morphine drip. Then I retreated to the far corner of the room, and waited.

The bear came within minutes. I'd seen it many times before, of course—cops, soldiers, and health-care workers are the ones who have the most direct experience with the bear. Most people only ever see it on television or in photographs... until they encounter it personally, of course.

The bear made a snuffling, irritated grumbling noise as it approached. Its huge, shambling form appeared in the doorway, and shoved through into the room. If the doorway is too small, or sealed, the bear walks

through walls—nothing bars its approach. The bear is big—bigger than you expect, every time. It stinks of damp fur and something earthy and musky. The scientists say it appears to be a male cave bear, *Ursus spelaeus*, and it's about nine feet long from nose to tail and nearly six feet high at the shoulder. Its fur is mostly brownish, but its blunt muzzle is gray, and when its jaw drops open, it's filled with teeth. I'd sat by fourteen deathbeds, so I'd looked into that mouth fourteen times: one tooth near the front was broken, and the others were yellowed.

All the other cave bears have been extinct for twenty-four thousand years, but this bear, of course, is eternal. Approximately a hundred and five humans die every minute, so I knew the bear was in a hundred other places on Earth, too, doing the same thing to different people.

The bear drew near to my mother's bedside, and rose up. Its head nearly brushed the ceiling tiles. The bear roared, and then fell onto her, swiping across her chest with one huge paw and leaving a red ruin of claw marks, and then taking the customary bite from her shoulder. (I thought wildly about how children leave out cookies for Santa Claus, and in the morning, there's always a bite out of one cookie, to prove that Santa came. The difference is, Santa Claus is an imaginary supernatural creature, and the bear is an indisputably real one.)

Its work done, the cave bear turned and shambled away. My mother was dead, of course. The bear appears for everyone at the moment of death, and rises up, and roars, and takes its swipe, and its bite, and then shambles away, vanishing soon after. The bear doesn't actually kill anyone itself... unless someone tries to interfere with it. Desperate, grief-stricken loved ones sometimes try to stop the bear's approach—they shoot it sometimes, even—and the bear just comes along implacably, rises up, swats them, and bites them, before doing the same to its intended victims. Hence the yellow tape, marking out a safe zone around the deathbed.

The new janitor—he'd only been there three or four months—stepped into the doorway, head bowed respectfully, hands closed around the shaft of his mop. "It's gone. Disappeared into the wall, like it does. I'm sorry for your loss." He was probably twice my age, maybe in his middle fifties, but he was broad-shouldered where I was slight, and big, weathered, and grizzled. He looked like a drill sergeant, or the boss of a cattle ranch.

I nodded numbly. "I guess I should call someone. Get... all this... the process... started." I went to my mother, with tears in my eyes, and covered her with a sheet. Blood from her chest wound seeped into the cloth. Why did death have to be so ugly? Why couldn't lives ever end in peace?

"Some people think it's strange, how the bear doesn't come for crows," the janitor said.

I lifted my head and frowned at him. It was true—the bear attended the deaths of every human; most species of apes, octopuses, and squid; and all dolphins and elephants. What did crows have to do with anything? "What?"

"Crows," he said. "A lot of people wonder why the bear doesn't come for them. Crows are intelligent, too—as smart as the other species the bear comes for, in some ways. My theory is, it's not about intelligence. It's about whether or not you can apprehend your own mortality. If you can fear your own death before it happens, the bear comes for you. I don't think crows can do that, intelligent as they are—they understand your mortality, because that's where their next meal comes from, but not their own."

Sometimes old men ramble. "My mother just died. Please... let me be with her for a minute."

"Of course. I'm sorry. But when you're done, if you want to talk to me... we could help each other."

Patience is very important in my job, but I was losing mine. "Help each other with what?"

"I'm not usually a janitor," he said. "I just took this job so I could see the bear up close a few times. I'm a hunter." He paused. "Next week I'm going on a bear hunt, and I'm going to kill death. You should come with me. Please accept my condolences." He walked off down the hall.

I shook my head. I thought the janitor—the hunter—was insane. Maybe he was... but he wasn't in the way I thought.



There's a bar near the hospice—quiet, on the nice side of divey, just the kind of place you need at the end of a long day waiting for the bear. The hunter sat down on the stool beside me. "I've tracked the bear to its lair, is the thing," he said. "It took years, but I have its location down to a few square miles."

I blinked at him. I was two whiskeys deep, and into my third. "What?"

He was patient, too—that's as important in hunters as it is in hospice care. "The bear. It always returns to the same place, after it leaves a body. I've watched hundreds of hours of footage of its progress. It usually disappears after fifty or a hundred yards, but it's always going in the same direction, toward the same destination."

"No." I shook my head. "I've seen it, fourteen times, up close, in a few different places. Sometimes it goes left, sometimes it goes right—there's no one direction."

He pulled over a napkin and unclicked a pen. "Yes, it goes in different directions, depending on where it starts, and what the terrain is like. But, look. If you're out running errands, and you go to a store on the north side of town, you go south to get home." He drew an arrow down

from the top of the napkin toward the center. "If you're on the east side, you go west." Another arrow, from right to left. "On the south side, you go north, on the west side, you go east." Two more slashed lines tipped with Vs pointing inward. "Someone watching you would say you went in all different directions... but those directions all converge on a single point." He drew a circle at the spot where the arrow-points met in the middle. "Your home."

I wanted to be drunker than I was. "You're saying the bear has a home?"

"It does. I've watched the bear when it leaves a death site. If it's in the United States, the bear always goes east, usually northeast, before it vanishes. In Africa, it goes north. In Asia, it goes west."

"And in Europe?" I said.

He smiled, and it lit up his worn face. "Ah, that's the thing. Sometimes east, sometimes west, sometimes north, sometimes south." He sketched more arrows, smaller ones, in between the big ones. "The lines all converge in central Europe. That was the habitat of cave bears before they went extinct, so it makes sense that's where the bear comes from."

"The bear isn't *from* anywhere," I said. "It's a god. Or a, what's it called, a psychopomp, sending the dead... wherever they go next." I'd taken an Introduction to Thanatology course during my two years at college before Mom got sick, and I remembered that much.

The hunter was unbothered by my skepticism. "Yes. It's those things, too. But it's also a cave bear. I've narrowed down its location to a part of northern Romania. I'm going after it. I was planning to go alone, but I could use some help."

I shook my head. "Why me?"

“You know medical stuff, first aid. That could be helpful. I heard you talking to one of the care workers about how you go spelunking sometimes. Cave bears live in caves. And, well... you just watched the bear take a bite out of your own mother. Wouldn't you like to get revenge?”

Getting revenge on the bear seemed like an absurd idea—the bear wasn't personal, it was universal. Scientists said it was an external manifestation of a natural process. The bear took a bite out of everyone, whether they slipped on icy steps or burned in a car crash or drowned in a bathtub or dropped dead of a sudden heart attack or brain embolism. (Those last had to be the worst, because the bear would appear and start walking toward you, even though you felt fine, and you'd know your death was imminent.) Wanting revenge on the bear was like wanting revenge on a blood clot or a cave-in or a tornado.

Which was what made it so strange that I *did* want revenge.

But I said, “I have a life, a job, I can't go to, what, Romania, to go into some cave?” I didn't have much of a life—I'd put that on hold while I nursed Mom through her last couple of years. I did have a job... but the idea of watching the bear come for more of my patients, people I'd gotten to know, seemed abhorrent. I had bills, though. Lots of bills. Dying isn't cheap, and the funeral was going to wipe out my savings and max out my credit cards. I couldn't go on a mythic quest with a deicidal janitor.

Until he said, “I'll pay all your travel expenses, and give you ten thousand dollars up front, followed by another ten if we successfully kill the bear.”

I thought his plan was ridiculous, but his check cleared, so we went to Romania.



He didn't need me for first aid or spelunking expertise—not really. I thought he just wanted someone to talk to, and to help carry his stuff, and maybe just to witness his dedication to his mission. We bought a pickup truck and went rambling around the countryside near the Apuseni Mountains. It's a beautiful country, not the spooky gothic nightmare I'd naively expected—lots of cultivated fields, rolling hills, and green forests, not so much ruined castles, red-eyed wolves, and vampire bats.

Our second day there we visited Chișcău, home of a cave system where nearly a hundred and fifty cave bear skeletons were discovered back in the 1970s. There were a handful of bear cultists in their creepy head-dresses outside, protesting the transformation of a “sacred place” into a museum, but halfheartedly—the place had been open for years, after all.

We toured the cave, which included some intact skeletons on display. It was a limestone cavern, full of fantastic stalactites, stalagmites, helictites, columns, and areas of flowstone—a cathedral of twisted rock, all well lit and with marked pathways. The hunter looked around like a bank robber casing a target.

Afterward, in the nearby hotel, we sat on the bed and discussed our next steps. I'd mentally classified this as a vacation to a foreign land with a mildly tedious travel companion, but he was all about the mission. “It would be easier if we had some sapient creatures to kill,” he said. “We could see which way the bear went, and that would help us triangulate the location of the lair better.”

I stared at him. “We aren't going to murder anyone.”

He shrugged. “I was thinking squid, not humans, but you're right. We'll stick to the research materials. I'm just so close...”

We had local newspaper pictures and crime scene photos featuring the bear—I don't know how he got the latter—and we drove around and looked at the locations from the photos, comparing geographical details,

guessing at trajectories, and figuring out which way the bear had gone from each site. Drawing arrows, pointing to an unknown destination.

At one point, driving along a dirt road to check out another site, the hunter sang, "We're going on a bear hunt..."

I smiled. "I haven't heard that song since I was a little kid at camp. But the version we sang was 'lion hunt.'"

"I don't have anything against lions," he said. "I used to sing that song to my daughter, when she was young."

"You have a daughter?" He'd never mentioned family. I'd assumed he was as alone as I was... maybe more so.

"I did. Have a daughter." His face was perfectly expressionless. He turned the radio up loud, even though it was mostly static. That was the closest I ever came to having a personal conversation with him, and the closest I came to understanding him, too, I think.



We spiraled in, closer and closer, toward some unknown center... and, finally, after hiking for forty minutes off the side of an unmarked dirt road, we found a cave mouth in a hillside, hidden by trees, dark in the afternoon shadows.

I shivered, looking at the maw in the rock. It suddenly occurred to me that the hunter might have brought me as a sort of human compass—he could shoot me, and see if the bear emerged from that cave, took a bite out of me, and then shambled back inside. That would confirm the location for sure. The space between my shoulder blades itched as I waited for a bullet—

The hunter slapped me on the shoulder. "Shall we go in?"



I was in charge of the spelunking gear: ropes, helmets, headlamps, batteries, all that. The hunter was in charge of the weapons. I'm not a gun guy, but he had a big rifle—he said it could stop a rhino—and a couple of large-caliber handguns, plus ammunition, and more knives than were probably necessary.

We began our descent. This wasn't a tourist cave, of course—there were drifts of soggy leaves to kick through in the entrance, narrow places where we had to squeeze sideways, choices of branches to explore, dead ends to backtrack from. The hunter would occasionally stop, touch the rock, mutter to himself. Looking for signs? I didn't see fur, or scat, and the stone wouldn't take tracks... but I did sometimes I think I caught a whiff of the bear's wet-fur stench, and it was enough to make this seem less like a futile quest and more like a dangerous one. What would happen if we *did* track death itself to its lair?

I pressed on. I'd been given ten thousand dollars, and I'd given my word in return. But I asked the question.

"What happens if we kill death?" the hunter repeated, following me as we made our way carefully down a steeply slanted slide of rock. "That's what we'll find out. Maybe people won't die anymore. Or maybe they'll just die, of whatever killed them, without that final indignity, without the fear of seeing a monster approach, without the chance of bystanders dying because they rushed to help someone, and those good impulses got them killed when they got between the bear and its victim. Maybe murderers won't be able to hide the evidence of their crimes by stabbing people right where the bear swipes or bites them. Maybe families will be traumatized just a little bit less. Have you ever seen a child die? Seen what a small body looks like, when the bear is done?"

I shook my head mutely. I didn't look back at him, partly because I had to watch my footing, partly because I didn't want to see the intensity on his face that I heard in his voice.

"No one should ever have to see that again," he said.



The cave changed. The transformation was gradual, but first the distant drip of water faded, and then the limestone walls became streaked by some darker rock, and eventually the limestone vanished entirely, and black stone was all that surrounded us. The cavern slowly opened up around us, the walls receding, and the ceiling, and the cave floor became strangely level, and covered in a gritty, gray sand. The hunter stopped and picked up a handful of the sand, and when the light of his headlamp played over it, there were little pearlescent grains intermixed.

I wanted to shout, to hear my voice echo and reassure myself that there *were* walls around me, and a ceiling, somewhere, but the idea of making so much noise in this sepulchral place seemed like a violation of natural law.

"We're close," the hunter said. "Can you feel it? This is different. We're not in the cavern anymore. We've left our world."

I opened my mouth—to argue, to advise retreat, to request clarification—and then heard a distant roar.

Though the sound was faint, I knew I'd heard it before. Fourteen times in person. Countless times on television. It was the roar the bear made before it took its swipe at and bite of the dead.

The hunter set off, moving quickly, taking the lead now, and I followed the bouncing beam of his headlamp across the desert.

We seemed to walk for a long time—for miles—and periodically we'd hear that roar, and the hunter would adjust this trajectory toward it. I puffed, and sweated, and gasped, and then almost crashed into the hunter when he stood still.

We stood just outside a circle of stones, perhaps thirty paces across. There were eight of the monoliths, or ten, or thirteen—I kept losing count, something I blamed on my exhaustion, so I didn't have to consider other explanations—each about twelve feet tall, each made of the same black rock as the now distant cave walls, each spaced several feet from the next.

The bear circled inside the monoliths, like an animal pacing in a cage. It would take a few steps, rear up, roar, swipe, and bite at nothing, then lower itself and shuffle another few steps before rearing up, roaring, swiping, and biting again. Around and around, invariable, endless. We stared at it for a long time, and it never altered its course, or took any notice of us, even when the hunter moved closer.

"I don't think it's even aware of us," he said. "It's like it's caught in a loop."

I nodded. "Is this really the bear? Is the one—the ones—we see up in the world some kind of... projection, of this one?"

"We are in a place of real things now, and not a place of shadows," the hunter said. It was the sort of statement that sounded profound, but I wasn't sure it made sense. "I'm going to kill it."

"What if the bear can't die?"

"Everything can die." The hunter lowered his rifle to the ground, then drew one of his handguns. He stepped toward the circle of stones, but didn't enter it, perhaps sensing, as I did, that there was something strange about the space within—something even stranger than this barren underworld all around us.

When the bear rose up, and roared, and lowered itself next to the hunter, he lifted his arms, aimed the gun between two of the monoliths, and shot the bear in the head.

I honestly didn't expect anything to happen. I'd seen the bear shot before. I'd seen it stabbed, speared, bombed, electrocuted, and set on fire. The bear was invulnerable. The bear didn't even notice attacks, unless a person got in its way. It just shambled on, unscathed.

This time the bear's head snapped to the side, with a spray of blood and bone and brain and fur, and then fell over, motionless. The hunter turned toward me, a triumphant grin on his face—

And then he flickered. The bear was gone, its immensity of dead meat vanished. Now the hunter was inside the stone circle, and he took a few steps, raised his gun, and fired into the darkness. Then he looked around and grinned, triumphant, for a moment, before lowering the gun, shambling a few steps around the circle, raising the gun, and doing it all again.

I called to him, softly, and then loudly. I stepped toward the circle, but didn't dare enter. Eventually the hunter came back around to the place where I was standing, and raised the gun, and pointed it at *me*.

I fled, leaving his guns and gear behind, racing through the desert. I reached the limestone caverns far more quickly than I should have, based on how long the descent had taken us, and in less than an hour I emerged, gasping and streaked with dust and tears, into a cold night in Romania.



There was a TV in the room we'd rented, and though I didn't speak the language, I understood what was happening in the terrified faces of the newscasters and the jittery footage they displayed.

Now, when someone died, the bear didn't come. Instead, a man came, dressed in filthy khaki. He pointed a handgun, and shot the victims in the head. At first, people thought the gunman was a mortal attacker, and the police fired back at him. The hunter would turn, and shoot them down as well, before smiling like he'd just won a victory, and moving on, vanishing after fifty or a hundred yards. I read news reports in English on my phone. The authorities were baffled. No one recognized this new avatar of death. No one understood how he'd replaced the bear.

In practice, the change in avatars didn't make much difference, but in terms of psychological impact, this was a horrible and traumatizing development. Having someone who looked human walk up to you, and shoot you in the head—leaving a bullet hole and a huge exit wound—was more horrible than having a bear take a bite out of you, and not just because the bear was more familiar. The horror came from seeing someone who looked like you, like a person, come bearing your death. People were devastated, numb, terrified, overwhelmed. I felt all those things, too.

The first bank robbery with a perpetrator dressed like the hunter happened the next day. The tellers and staff all fled, and the impostor helped himself to the contents of the cash drawers and strolled away. Everyone kept their distance, because everyone knew better than to interfere with death. There were a spate of copycats, some successful, some not—a few encounters with imposters ended in gunplay with the police, and then the real hunter would appear, smiling and shooting, shooting and smiling.

There were pictures online of children crying. The hunter looked like some of their fathers, after all, a little bit. Enough to make him even more terrifying than a nine-foot-long cave bear.

I stayed in my room, ate granola and drank water, and read, trying to understand.

Eventually I found an interview with a thanatologist who said this change was not unprecedented. “There is evidence—long disputed, but suddenly more plausible—that death did not always manifest in the form of a bear,” she said. “In some of the earliest human artworks, there are depictions of a terror bird, the apex predator of the Cenozoic era, standing over the dead, and tearing at corpses. Terror birds have been extinct for nearly two million years, long before the evolution of Neanderthals or *Homo sapiens*—so how could such a bird have appeared in their artwork, drawn on their cave walls, unless they saw it? At some point, the cave bear supplanted the terror bird. And now... it has been supplanted by a man.”

The interviewer asked her what it all meant, and she said she had no idea, but people should read her book....

I understood. Tens of thousands of years ago, the bear must have wandered into that particular cave, stumbled onto the underworld, killed the terror bird, and taken its place. Terror birds were from South America, weren't they? Maybe there were other caves, or sinkholes, or hollow trees all over the world that led eventually to that desert. Maybe someone, a race of intelligent beings that predated humankind, had built that circle of stones, to somehow contain death. Maybe things would be worse without the stones. I didn't know, and didn't think reading any book would tell me. Even in all my ignorance, I knew more than anyone else alive about the true nature of death. But what should I do with that knowledge?

I turned off my phone and the television, and stared at the ceiling. I thought about the little I understood of the hunter's motivations. He'd wanted to make death less terrifying, less traumatic, but now he was death, striding into homes and hospitals and classrooms with a gun, smiling at the moment of termination. That wasn't what he'd wanted. It wasn't what I wanted, either.



The language barrier was a problem, but I had thousands of dollars of the hunter's money, and money is a universal language, if not quite as universal as death. It took a few days, but I got the supplies I needed, and returned to the cave.

The descent took just as long as before. I didn't catch whiffs of wet fur anymore. Instead, I occasionally smelled sour sweat and damp canvas and gun smoke: the hunter's scents. I made my way down, through the dark, to the desert. There was no roar to guide me now, but there were gunshots, sharp cracks, at regular intervals.

In time I found the circle of stones, and the hunter pacing inside, trapped in a loop of murder, transformed into the thing he'd hoped to kill. He'd hoped to bring peace, and instead, he'd become a bringer of terror.

It didn't take me long to prepare the syringe, full of a massive overdose of morphine. I thought about the last time—the only time—I'd helped shepherd someone over the border from pain into peace in a similar way, and how that peace had been marred by the arrival of the bear, and its slash, and its bite. I could fix that. I could change the nature of death.

I rehearsed my movements in my mind: I would step toward the stones, and inject the morphine into the hunter as he passed. As he fell, I would catch him, and cradle him, and murmur reassurances as his life slipped away. I would ease his passage.

And all over the world, a hundred times a minute, I would appear again, with a needle full of sweet oblivion. People's final moments would be spent drifting away on a cloud of painlessness, with me, or some time-locked version of me, murmuring in their ears: "It's okay. You'll be okay."

The hunter passed close by, and I stepped forward to meet him.





# UNTITLED

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy | Poetry

Stand here and become a tree  
Sift the loam with your toes  
Talk to the birds in your  
    branching mind  
Stand here and leave eternity  
Drab concern of mayfly humans  
Hold the skies in your  
    fingers outstretched  
Talk to insects, sing the day,  
Sing morning with feathered  
    familiar, sing night as  
Bats cry, as owls wing, intent  
Stand here and face everywhere  
Become a world in a world  
Where you were only a worm  
    only a flicker, a human

Stand here and forget forever  
You are at the shore      You  
Are the shore, the timeless  
    sea if you dare to cease  
Striving, mobility, human unease  
You are the sky, the ground if  
You wish to halt in your tracks  
    let hunter and prey stumble

Stand silent, embrace slow time  
Sway gently in the breeze that  
    brings aromatic wisdom  
Sea and shore, earth and sky  
World, being, living bridge  
    sibling to all  
Stand here and become a tree.





# AUTHOR BIOS



**Natalia Theodoridou** is the World Fantasy Award-winning and Nebula-nominated author of over a hundred stories published in *Nightmare*, *Uncanny*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *F&SF*, and elsewhere.

Find him at [www.natalia-theodoridou.com](http://www.natalia-theodoridou.com), or follow @natalia\_theodor on Twitter.



**Bogi Takács** (e/em/eir/emself or they pronouns) is a Hungarian Jewish agender trans person and an immigrant to the US. E is a winner of the Lambda award for editing *Transcendent 2: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction*, the Hugo award for Best Fan Writer, and a finalist for other awards. Eir

debut poetry collection *Algorithmic Shapeshifting* and eir debut short story collection *The Trans Space Octopus Congregation* were both released in 2019. You can find Bogi talking about books at [www.bogireadstheworld.com](http://www.bogireadstheworld.com), and on various social media like Twitter, Patreon and Instagram as @bogiperson.



**Lyndsie Manusos's** work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Apex Magazine*, *Apparition Lit*, and other publications. She lives in Indianapolis with her family and writes for *Book Riot* and *Publishers Weekly*.



**Mat Joiner** loves and writes about ghosts and green things. Their stories, poems, and essays have appeared in the likes of *Not One of Us*, *Wormwood*, *Lackingtons*, and *Strange Horizons*. They live in the English Midlands, where they watch foxes and crows and accumulate pin badges, books, and postage stamps.



**Jelena Dunato** is an art historian, curator, speculative fiction writer and lover of all things ancient. Her stories have been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Future SF*, *The Dark* and elsewhere. Jelena lives on an island in the Adriatic with her husband, daughter, and cat. You can find her at [jelenadunato.com](http://jelenadunato.com) and on Twitter @jelenawrites.



**Sara E. Palmer** is the senior state lands archaeologist with the State of Washington. She lives in the woods and keeps books, children, worldly goods, a very good dog, and a large unreasonable cat in a house in Olympia. She owes her chinuk wawa to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Chinook Indian Nation, which should be federally recognized.



**Tim Pratt** is the author of more than 20 novels, most recently the Axiom space opera trilogy and multiverse adventure *Doors of Sleep*. He's a Hugo Award winner for short fiction, and has been a finalist for Nebula, World Fantasy, Sturgeon, Mythopoeic, Stoker, and other awards. He tweets incessantly (@timpratt) and publishes a new story every month for patrons at [www.patreon.com/timpratt](http://www.patreon.com/timpratt)



**Jayaprakash Satyamurthy** is a writer and musician who lives in Bangalore, India with a horde of rescued cats and dogs. His publications include the novella, *Strength of Water*, and the poetry collection, *Broken Cup*. His band Djinn And Miskatonic can be heard on bandcamp. He's on twitter as @flightofsand, where he freely shares his increasingly deranged views on everything.



# STAFF BIOS

## Deadlands



**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](https://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](https://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 4

**Immolatus:**

Murder, domestic abuse

[Return to Story](#)



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