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DEADLANDS

a journal of ends & beginnings

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TWO REPORTS FROM A FALLING CITY

Ewen Ma | Poetry

Tell me when she dies, he says.

Tell me when the prisoner breathes her last.

I will scream her name from the rooftops and
spray-paint her likeness on every wall;

light a candle in her honour,

engrave her parting words onto every front page.

I will be her architect

and rebuild a dust-streaked life from the broken temple of her past—
beam by beam and dignity by dignity.

But until she dies, there's nothing much I can do for the poor thing.

Call me when your city falls, she says.

Call me when tanks rumble across your bridges

and the cracks between the stones are red-black stained.

I will taxidermize the first bullet fired

when the dead litter your streets,

tie a ribbon of sunlight around my wrist

when your children are hunted down for sport,

and preserve the cartography of your once-bright ruin

after the last good person has fled from crumbling towers.

But until your city falls, it's just not much of a story to tell.





THEY CALL IT HIPSTER HEAVEN

Lauren Ring | Fiction

They call it hipster heaven, where all the cool kids go. I walk the dark street alone, searching for the entrance, but no one I pull aside will give me any details. None of them look me in the eye. They shake their heads, shuffle their thrifted boots, and tell me *no* in a way that clearly means *not for you*. Not for me, with my wrong-season dresses and my secondhand knowledge of the art scene, with names like Rothko and Duchamp clumsy on my tongue. But for you, nowhere was off-limits. You were always the one who belonged.

I try every velvet-roped door until I reach one with a pearlescent sheen. The flickering sign above the awning says *Exhibition*. The bouncer won't let me in, but he doesn't stop me from lurking in the back alley, which is half hazy darkness and half the scent of stale beer. That's a lot more my speed than museum marble, so I lean on the cold brick in the shadow of neon, waiting for someone to open the back door. Waiting for you to bring me into the light again and make me into somebody worth seeing.

The business name on the bar's posted liquor license is the Northwest Mind and Time Movement. It feels like forever ago that we drove to this street—I want to say it's been a week of wandering now—but I remember you telling me about that movement as we coasted down the freeway. You said they were the descendants of James Turrell's light-drink-

ers, a group of experimental artists that played with retinal perception as easily as painters might mix pigments. Their descendants are trying to move beyond the eye.

"It's the natural progression for art to make. Neurons are the next canvas," you told me, lounging in the passenger seat. Your cigarette dangled out the window between your slim fingers, sprinkling ash along the asphalt. I watched the red dot of heat as it faded to gray. I'm sure I said something, but in the darkness of the back alley my memory crumbles like your cigarette tip, here and there and gone.

You took me to a Turrell exhibit, once. It was a massive room that narrowed at one end to a bright screen of pure light, forever morphing between soft shades of purple and aquamarine. When we stood near it and let our eyes unfocus, it felt as though we were pressed against a solid wall of color. It felt wrong to move, to walk into the gap between flatness and depth, but I did it anyway. I had to shake off that perceptual fog.

"Don't go into the light, baby," you joked as I stepped forward into deepest blue.

The back door opens as a guest leaves, winding his drunken way past me. The air fills with the twangy chords of a band I've never heard. The world inside glows.



They call it hipster heaven, and I guess that must be true, because I haven't seen you since you died last week, and there you are in your dancing shoes. You're waiting alone at the crowded bar, swaying to the unfamiliar beat atop heels so narrow you almost float. The bare bulbs give you a halo of flyaway hair, and your wings are loose jacket sleeves slung just so over your shoulder. Through the half-open door, I watch as you lean over the counter and wave down the bartender for a drink. At least here the staff will know what your order means. Your bones

are unshattered, your lungs reinflated. Even your lipstick is no longer smeared. Your restoration is a work of art. But if it is you, really you, why don't you see me waiting here?

The door closes. Laughter from the patrons still inside drifts through the air like vanilla smoke, sweet and light and wholly unreal. Unreachable. I strain my neck, trying in vain to see through the crack by the hinges. If I squint hard enough, I can see a sliver of you, and my memory fills in the rest.

I fill you in wrong, though. All I can remember is how you looked in the car on the way here, in the moment just after the squeal of brakes and the horrible rending of metal. Even when I close my eyes, I see you, bone-white and blood-red in all the wrong places. I can feel my mind straining against the cognitive dissonance. You look like an echo of yourself, a cave painting silhouette. I want more than anything to place my hand in the outline of yours. I want to say *it didn't happen like that*. I want to say *let's go home now*.

Time stands still. Time turns back. When the door opens again for another guest to stumble out, you're dancing with a cocktail in your hand. Your hair is the color your hair is. Your lips are the color your lips are. I recognize you in the easy way of dreams, straight to the answer without any of the guessing. But this isn't a dream, and no matter how hard I look, I can't see your eyes.

I reach for you, my arms shaking. I try to step forward and cross that impossible divide, but the exiting guest grabs my arm. His grip feels like iron and twisted seatbelts.

"Please don't touch the art." The voice is monotone, almost bored. It's not his, or yours, or mine, and for the life of me I can't think of anyone else that exists. Maybe it's a light-drinker, calling down from the sun. I remember the sun. It never rises here. I think it looked like you.

With each swing of the door, I am granted fragmented glimpses. Mine is a curated experience. My memories are brushstrokes, layered like oils, but I've never been able to see the picture in those Magic Eye paintings. I struggle against the bar guest's grip.

"Please don't touch the art," the voice repeats. It lingers in my skull like an afterimage from too-bright filament. I relent, falling back until I am released to my alleyway wandering. The man shakes his head and leaves me behind.

The next time the door opens, I'm ready. I lunge through.

Pain surrounds me. It hurts like an airbag to the nose, like a steering column through my ribs, like watching you bleed out on the I-5 asphalt. I don't see you inside. You died. You died on the way home from the bar, and you died on the street and you died in the dark and you died with your cigarette half-smoked and I don't know the first thing about what happened to me.

Time smears to a stop. The world tears open. Lights flash in the corners of my vision while my body spasms. I feel my mind, my thoughts, my memories, slipping away, dripping down like water splashed across a canvas. My senses narrow. The sign still has a color, the air still has a smell. I just don't know what they are.

I stand in an alley in the shadow of neon. The door is closed.



They call it hipster heaven, but heaven's not for me. My world is this dark alley, my sky the crack at the back door's hinge. I lean forward as the door opens, hoping to drink in some of your light. Someone bumps into me on their way out.

"Please don't touch the art," the bright voice says. I don't try to go inside anymore, though. All I do is watch you. Your hair is the color your hair is, and your lips are the color your lips are, and your eyes are the embers in cigarette ash, burning, burning, burning.





CHANG AND ENG

Henry “Hank” Greenspan | Poetry

Hometown, ghetto, Auschwitz, Los Angeles, the whole megillah.
They sent a wonderful kid to get me and Gigi on the tape.
This girl says we’re amazing, not just Gigi and me, all the survivors,
the Holocaust survivors. I really want to help her.

I’m reading then a book, *PT Barnum: America’s Biggest Showman*.
PT Barnum had Siamese twins, Chang and Eng. Everybody knew them.
And the book says, this I remember exactly,
“Chang died first, to the horror of Eng, who managed, for some hours,
to live on.”

I say to the girl, I say, “See? That’s it. I’m Eng. I’m Eng.”
Fifty years. I’m stuck to the corpse.
Stuck to Chang. Stuck to Chang.
He’s my corpse. And I live on.





THE COST OF GRIEF

Francesca Tacchi | Non-fiction

You're attending a funeral in a remote village in Southern Italy. The coffin has been laid in the open tomb, under the harsh sun of the Mediterranean, but the mourners' attention is directed elsewhere. They gather, still and silent, to watch a group of women dancing and crying their laments to the sky. Their show is not a charming one—they move as if drunk, rocking back and forth, waving their arms and beating their chests. Some kneel by the coffin, beating it with their open palms, or caressing it with white handkerchiefs, stark against their black robes and shawls. All of them sing ancient *nenie*, asking old deities to bless the soul of the departed and ease their passing.

You just witnessed a group of Italian professional mourners in action. The name evokes a tacky image—a person paid to express grief, or cry at a funeral, despite not having ties to the departed. Someone may even find the notion of a professional mourner offensive, but these figures were an integral part of Italian funerary rites, and their role was not merely aesthetic. They were not there to put on a show. They were the embodiment of collective grief, and with their chants and body language they ensured the souls of the dead would travel safely to the underworld.

Professional mourners were commonplace in Italy, my country, and have thrived even in the modern age; there are records of professional mourners being employed in the 1970s and 1980s. They were particularly popular in Southern Italy, where they took various names

in different regions. In Apulia, we can find the *chiangimuerti* or *rèpute*, women who entered the house of the departed to scream their grief and sing their *nenie*, calling for Thanatos or Charon to ease the passing of the departed soul. In Basilicata, the professional mourners were akin to movie stars, and a symbol of status as well—the best mourners were also the most expensive. The lament of that region—called *naccarata* or *travaglio*—was to be performed in a precise way, and there was no room for errors. It was not a spontaneous expression of grief—it was akin to a sacred ritual.

Professional mourners could be found in other parts of Italy as well. In Sardinia's traditions, the women entrusted with the role were called *atitadoras*, and their laments were sweeter than those of Southern Italy, focused on remembering the good qualities of the departed rather than cursing God for having taken them. In Northern Italy, instead of women, it was children who bore the task of expressing grief and mourning the dead. They were often orphans from religious institutions, instructed by their caretakers to walk behind the coffin during the funeral procession and wail.

Professional mourners were a widespread tradition not only in Italy, but in the entirety of the Mediterranean. The figure of the professional mourner has roots going as far back as the ancient Greeks and Romans.

In Ancient Rome, professional mourners were called *praeficae*, and would walk in front of the coffin during the funeral procession, wearing black with their hair loose, chanting odes about the departed and expressing their grief—much like Italian professional mourners. The tie between the modern professional mourners and the ancient pagan world is not merely aesthetic. As with many Italian traditions, and as demonstrated by the invocation to ancient deities, the Italian professional mourners' ritual has also an apotropaic function: to keep the soul of the departed from coming back, and to exorcise the fear of death that was so present both in ancient Roman society and in rural Italy.

We Italians are extremely superstitious people. Even in this modern day and age, we wear amulets against the Evil Eye, and keep icons of the saints hanging from the rearview mirrors of our cars for protection. We have a complicated relationship with death. We are obsessed with ghosts, and fear the souls of the departed lingering in the world of the living. So, when someone dies, we keep the windows open and cover the mirrors in our house, so that their spirit will not become trapped. We light candles to show them the way, and we don't cry at funerals, because tradition has it that our tears may weigh heavy on the departed's clothes, preventing them from reaching the otherworld. Thus, our grief is not expressed by silent tears, but by body language and chants and lament. The professional mourners never shed a tear throughout the chanting and dancing of their ritual.

Just as the apotropaic function of the professional mourners' ritual was prominent, so was its social function. Their show of grief was a way to express and elaborate upon emotions too complex and strong to be addressed in a composed way. Often, people would join the professional mourners in their lament. The professional mourners offered a way for people to confront the pain of losing a loved one and let it all out without losing their dignity.

I have experienced terrible grief in my life, and I have felt on my skin the pressure society puts on grieving. Our Western society, which has long since been conformed to an Anglo-Saxon Puritan point of view, often sees grieving as an intimate act, something that is to be done in private, something almost shameful. A grieving widow is meant to appear gracious at her spouse's funeral. Crying should be done in silence, a single tear—no wailing, that is reserved for children and elders, those who have yet to learn how to control their emotions, or forgot in age how to act properly. People, it seems, are as scared of mourning as they are of death.

Italian professional mourners offer a different perspective. Their grieving is a loud act, performed in front of as many people as possible, who are not simple spectators but take part in what is—through the chants,

through the dances—an expression of collective grief. Not everyone is comfortable grieving publicly, but perhaps there is freedom in knowing that you won't be judged if you do. Knowing that when pain becomes too much to bear, and the loss weighs too heavy on one's heart, you can pull at your hair and curse God. Like forcing venom out of a wound, so that it can begin to heal.





THE KINGDOM OF THE BUTTERFLIES

Isabel Cañas | Fiction Reprint

In the first golden weeks of autumn, when las monarcas descended into el Valle from the mortal world, Elvira finished her weaving as quickly as she could. She put down her shuttle and spent a moment stretching stiff limbs, relishing the heat of afternoon on her brown arms and light cotton dress after a long misty morning.

Then she stood, closed her eyes, and ran.

The path to the pine grove was carved in her muscles, in her heart. Never once did she open her eyes as she ran, trusting the sun-warmed earth and dry needles beneath her bare feet to guide her. Cooler air against her flushed cheeks and bare arms meant she was close; when pine fragrance bit the crisp air, she knew had reached the heart of the grove.

There she stopped.

She opened her eyes.

Butterflies covered the trunks of the pines, thick as serpent scales, their plumage ruddy as sunsets after a storm. The trunks quivered like the hides of living beasts, rippling and trembling with thousands of brilliant wings.

Every autumn, Elvira begged her older sister Rosa to come with her to see las monarcas. Rosa was the undisputed head of their little family of two, the one who taught Elvira to weave and kept her warm at night when clammy mists descended into el Valle. Elvira yearned to share the wonder of racing blind into the pine grove with her. Perhaps it would soften the frown that so often creased Rosa's face. Perhaps then Elvira would feel that she was looking after Rosa as Rosa looked after her.

But Rosa refused. She remembered a time before el Valle, faces and stories that were strangers to Elvira. She remembered a legend of how las monarcas were the spirits of mortals who had passed on from the mortal world, who stopped in el Valle to rest in the middle of their long migration. When they left el Valle, they would soar over the volcanoes that ringed the valley and across la tierra negra beyond to paradise.

"They come. They leave. And we stay here." The finality in Rosa's voice was as brittle as dried pine needles.

So Elvira wandered the pine grove alone. She tilted her face up, drinking in the thousands of monarcas as they rose from the trees in waves. Their wings thickened the air, brushing Elvira's cheeks and arms soft as breathing as they soared past her, past the crowns of the pines into the azure sky.



The passing of time changed neither Elvira nor Rosa in el Valle. It was one of those gods-touched places that was neither here nor there, a narrow, soft-earthed valley with a stream flowing from the north and carving its way lazily south, past a cave where the girls slept, and a clearing where they wove. In the clearing grew twin young pines, their slim bodies bound by the ropes of backstrap looms. Between the pines sat a large obsidian bowl, gleaming with the seamless silky black of a blessing from the underworld.

Every morning the xolotl, a squat hairless spirit dog, shepherded a new flock of souls to the sisters and left them folded neatly as linens in the obsidian bowl. And every day the girls knelt before the pines, fastened the end of their looms around their waists and lower backs, and began their work: the weaving of these damned mortal souls into aguamiel, the ambrosia of the gods.

The weaving of souls was entrusted to only to the most skilled and delicate of weavers, for souls would shatter beneath the heavy hands of gods. With deft fingers, Elvira and Rosa plucked feather-soft souls from the bowl and spun them, whispering spells taught to them by their master, the goddess Mayahuel, to silence their cries.

Sometimes the souls spun quietly, for they were tired and resigned to their fate as they stretched and transformed into golden thread. Others wept, crying out names or prayers to gods unknown to Elvira. When these souls passed through her hands, their sorrow warm against her callused fingertips, Elvira silenced them as quickly as she could.

Once their spools were heavy with silk thread, golden as sunrises, the sisters wove. Only the rhythmic pass of the shuttle and steady breathing broke the silence of the clearing until Mayahuel arrived to collect the golden cloth of aguamiel.

Mayahuel was a quiet goddess, but that did not mean she was kind. She moved slow as honey as she entered the sisters' clearing, her rich yellow skin luminous as that of a golden idol. Her smiles for the sisters were cold, her painted teeth gleaming like a jaguar's after the kill. Her jet hair was crowned with a diadem of maguey agave thorns, her lips and teeth reddened with dye in the way of the women of Xochitlycacan, the city of the gods.

Mayahuel trusted no one but herself to carry the aguamiel to paradise. The sisters watched as she left el Valle by an unseen path, crossing la tierra negra. Once in Xochitlycacan, Mayahuel unfolded the cloth of wo-

ven souls and willed it with her magic to melt, to pour as amber liquid into the obsidian goblets of her brothers and sisters.

Under no circumstances were the girls to try to do so themselves, or even to try putting the aguamiel cloth in their mouths. Mayahuel warned them sternly that aguamiel was poison to mortals, and she would not mourn her slaves if they proved themselves stupid.

Rosa was convinced Mayahuel was lying to them. But then again, Rosa loathed her.

As it was with many things, Elvira knew this was because Rosa remembered a time before they were slaves of Mayahuel, endlessly weaving souls with their spider-like fingers. It didn't matter how many nights Rosa spent telling her stories of grandmothers and cousins and the smell of rice browning. Elvira could not remember.

Sometimes she tried to imagine what a grandmother looked like as Rosa tucked her beneath wool blankets in their cave at night. Did a grandmother have white hair like her and Rosa, spider-silk plaited into two long braids down her back? Was a grandmother like Rosa, delicate as spun sugar in the sunlight and hard as coal inside?

But then she would look through the mouth of the cave at the night sky, at the brilliant diamonds glittering in the raiment of Tezcatlipoca, the god of night, and remember she was content with their existence in el Valle. Content to dream of butterflies.

Rosa was not.

One morning as they wove, Rosa broke the silence between them.

"You should listen to them."

Elvira froze. She glanced over her shoulder at Rosa's turned back. Her sister's hair gleamed bright as Popocatepetl's peak in the sunlight as she passed the shuttle back and forth, rhythmic as the burble of the stream. Had Elvira imagined her speaking?

"To the souls." Rosa did not turn her head as she spoke, nor did she cease her weaving. "They want to be heard."

The skin of Elvira's arms prickled. She glanced down. Every hair on her forearms stood on end.

She turned her back on Rosa, and lifted the shuttle to resume weaving.

Instead she paused, and stared at the thread winking in the sunlight. At the geometric pattern she had woven into the aguamiel. How many cries were bound into each golden knot?

How many people?

She clenched her jaw and thrust the shuttle through the next row. These souls were damned. Their purpose was to be turned into aguamiel, to be sustenance for the gods. She wouldn't listen to them.

That was what she told herself.

Deep in her bones, she knew she *couldn't* listen. Perhaps Rosa could, because Rosa remembered cumino and the names of aunts and stories about monarcas, but she couldn't. Even those brief moments the souls' cries brushed her fingertips before she spun them into gold were enough to make her heart race in fear.

But fear of what?

She pushed the thoughts from her head and wove hard.

Later, Mayahuel scolded her.

“Stupid child!” she snapped, shaking the cloth in one balled fist before Elvira’s face. She threw it on the ground, and slapped Elvira’s cheek. The force of her immortal strength snatched the breath from Elvira’s lungs as she staggered to keep from falling. “You ruined it. Now fix it.”

Rosa glared at Mayahuel’s back, her black eyes flinty with loathing.

Though her face stung, burning from the goddess’s hand and humiliation, Elvira hoped Rosa would not overreact—after all, the goddess was right. The rest of that day’s weaving was tighter than the beginning of the cloth, and its edges curled in on themselves. Such imperfect cloth would not melt and pour when Mayahuel’s magic willed it to. So she stayed in the clearing long after the goddess left for Xochitlycacan, unravelling the ruined cloth and beginning again.



Elvira’s hopes were in vain.

The next day she finished her work earlier than Rosa, and raced blind to the pine grove. Though the trunks were bare of carpets of butterflies, she brushed her callused fingertips over fragrant bark to remind herself they would be back soon.

A shriek shattered the grove. Elvira froze, her heart in her throat.

Another shriek, but this one stretched longer, echoing through el Valle—until it broke with a sob. And another.

That was Rosa.

She sprinted through the pines, ignoring the branches whipping her arms and the stones cutting the soles of her feet.

Lungs burning, heart racing, she reached the clearing. Rosa knelt next to the obsidian bowl, cradling her hands in her lap, her cheeks slicked with tears. Mayahuel stood over her. Neither girl nor goddess acknowledged Elvira as she ran forward, then stopped short with a gasp.

Rosa's fingers bent in all the wrong places. They were broken, all of them.

Mayahuel whirled on Elvira, her face a mask of rage. She held up a small piece of gold—no, it was cloth. A small piece of aguamiel cloth about the size of Elvira's palm.

"There is no greater folly than stealing from the gods." Mayahuel's voice was soft, but soft in the way of the underbellies of snakes. Her dyed teeth glinted in the sun. "Consider it a boon I did not kill her."

The goddess tucked the piece of cloth in the waistband of her robes, and coolly ignored Rosa's sobs as she collected the rest of the aguamiel cloth. She straightened, an impassive expression settling on her strong-featured face, and swept past Elvira without so much as another glance.

A moment later she was gone.

Elvira stumbled forward and fell to her knees at Rosa's side. Her head spun with smell of salt, of tears and sweat and Rosa's sun-warmed hair. She kept her eyes on her sister's face, not daring to look at her ruined fingers.

"What happened?" she whispered.

Rosa lifted her chin. Her eyes were puffy and red.

They burned with hatred.

"I wove a piece for us." Her voice was thick from crying, but steady. Steady and cold and so determined that fear seeped into Elvira's bones.

"Why?"

"They get their immortality from it, I know they do." Rosa's breathing came in sharp gasps as she fought to keep from crying. "I know it. If we are damned to be here for forever, then I think we should be as strong and powerful as them. I think—"

"But she could have killed you!" Elvira cried. Now she looked down at Rosa's hands, and felt bile claw at the back of her throat. "How could you be so selfish! What if she had killed us both?"

One look at Rosa's hard face was all Elvira needed to know that she had thought of this, and it had not swayed her.

Elvira pushed herself upright.

"You deserve this for being so selfish," she said. "Mayahuel is right. It's folly to steal from the gods when they have given us so much."

Rosa lifted her chin, looked Elvira in the eye, and said nothing.

Proud, *stupid* Rosa. Elvira was glad for the anger she felt, for how its heat smothered the fear in her gut.

She turned and stormed into the forest. When she returned, she came with fistfuls of strong sticks. She unraveled part of one of their wool blankets for thread, and bit the inside of her cheek as she bound Rosa's ruined hands.

Splay-fingered as a frog, Rosa could not weave for weeks as her hands healed.

The xolotl clicked its tongue when it saw the damage. "Will you be able to keep up with Mayahuel's demands on your own?" it asked Elvira.

Elvira resisted the urge to look at Rosa for approval before responding to the squat spirit. She held her head high and took the first new soul from the obsidian bowl, ignoring its cries. "I've always been the better weaver." It was a lie. She willed her voice not to betray her as she silenced the soul with a spell. "I can manage."

The xolotl cackled, raspy and dry. "Ay, que orgullosa eres. Don't anger her again, girl."

"We won't," Elvira said. She felt Rosa's gaze on her face as she reached for the next soul, but kept her attention on the xolotl. "We've learned our lesson."

She wove from dawn to dusk to keep up with each daily delivery of souls. Rosa stayed in the cave, her back turned to the clearing as Mayahuel arrived, stony and silent, collected the aguamiel, and departed. She exchanged few words with Elvira, never sang or told stories, and stayed in the shadows of the cave as her hands healed.

Elvira should have resented her. And for the first few days of double the work, she did. She composed long arguments with Rosa in her head as the shuttle raced back and forth, as her legs went stiff from sitting with the loom tied around her waist and lower back. Arguments where she eloquently defended Mayahuel's actions as just punishment and silenced her sister's fiery temper at last.

But then, as she lay one night beneath their shared blankets, lulled to the brink of sleep by the crickets in the clearing, she felt Rosa's back shudder against hers. Heard her sister sniff once, then twice, before falling silent again.

She inched closer to her sister. One breath, then two, and their exhalations slid one into the other, graceful as dancers as they led the girls into the land of dreams.



Rosa's hands healed imperfectly, but Elvira helped her relearn how to spin with crooked fingers. From that time on, Rosa spun all the souls into thread, and Elvira strapped the loom to her back to weave. Thus divided, their work went quickly. Perhaps Rosa was the superior weaver before angering Mayahuel, but now Elvira's long, steady fingers flew deft and confident across the cloth. She had always loathed silencing the souls, and though she never told Rosa, she was grateful to be free of the task of spinning.

Slowly, stories returned to Rosa. She laughed less, and never sang, but Elvira was hopeful that soon Rosa would return to her brash self. Soon her bright voice would soar above the pines, las monarcas would return, and all would once again be well in el Valle. As it had been, as it would always be.

Elvira's hopes were, once again, in vain.

She realized this when the xolotl appeared unannounced one afternoon in the clearing, panting.

"What did you do?" it wheezed. "What in the name of Quetzalcoatl's hideous feathers did you do?"

Elvira stumbled, then caught herself. Her arms were full of blankets, freshly washed and heavy with cold stream water. Mayahuel had come and gone for the day; the long warm afternoons were for chores and stretching her stiff back and legs. They had plenty of thread for the next day's weaving, so there was no reason why the xolotl should return.

"What are you talking about?"

Rosa was too quiet, too steady, as she took the top blanket from the pile in Elvira's arms and spread it out on a sun-drenched stone to dry. Elvira's stomach soured, twisting with anxiety even before the xolotl spoke.

"I warned you not to anger her!" it barked. "Today she brought the cloth to Xochitlycacan. She melted it into the serving goblet as usual, but when she went to pour the aguamiel into the obsidian cup of Tezcatlipoca, it *screamed*."

Elvira's jaw dropped. Rosa took the last blanket from her arms, but the chill from the wet wool did not lift from her body, even in the afternoon sun.

"The aguamiel was screaming," the xolotl cried. "The halls of Xochitlycacan echoed with it—the screams and cries of mortals, and weeping. Children weeping!" It shook its head vigorously, as if to clear it from the memory.

The gooseflesh rippled up Elvira's arms. She turned to her sister.

Rosa's face was stony, her jaw set.

"You did that!" Elvira cried. "I know it was you. It must have been you. How did you do it?"

Rosa said nothing.

"I can't believe you." Elvira's heart raced now. "Why would you do that?"

She thought of how white Rosa's face went beneath her tan as Elvira bound each mangled finger between stiff twigs to heal. What punishment would Mayahuel dole out next? Trick a god once, and they may forget the insult, but trick them twice...

"They should know our suffering." Venom stung the air when Rosa spoke at last.

"They will know *your* suffering," the xolotl cried. "Mayahuel is on my heels. Gods help you, wretched girls."

It vanished into thin air with a sharp crack.

Elvira turned to Rosa, opened her mouth to speak... but it was already too late.

Mayahuel descended on el Valle like a storm cloud, thundering and heavy with unshed rage. Other gods followed in her wake. Dark Tezcatlipoca, god of night and sorcery, appeared at her right. His face was painted with thick stripes of ceremonial black, his diadem an obsidian mirror reflecting the shadows and smoke of the underworld. In his hand he carried an obsidian spear, the base of the blade adorned with a train of his brother Quetzalcoatl's long emerald feathers. At her left strode Xipe Totec, the burnished-skin god of gold, his skirt—made of flayed human skin—swaying with each step.

To the girls' left, glimmering Chalchiuhtlicue rose from the stream bed, her jade skirts dripping water. Her bottomless eyes fixed on the girls as she poured hungrily into the clearing.

Elvira grabbed Rosa's hand. Rosa gasped in pain; Elvira loosened her grip. She fought the urge to step back, to turn and flee as her thundering heart begged her to do. It was no use. There was no running, no hiding.

They were cornered.

Mayahuel pointed one long finger at Rosa as she glided across the clearing, devouring the space between her and the girls.

"You," she whispered.

Elvira's heart throbbed in her throat. She stared at Mayahuel, but all she could see were Rosa's shattered fingers, all she could hear was Rosa's lullabies, Rosa's laughter, filling el Valle with the same lilting waves as butterflies rising from the pines.

She whispered a silencing spell. And then she spoke.

"It was me." She jutted her chin forward, feigning Rosa's insolence, Rosa's hubris.

Every pair of eyes in the clearing, mortal and immortal, snapped to her.

Rosa opened her mouth to speak—but no words came out.

It was a guess, a shot in the dark, but Elvira was right: the spells to silence the dead worked on once-mortal weavers as well.

Mayahuel blinked in surprise, but recovered with the speed of a predator. "You," she repeated. "How dare you—"

"How dare I be a better weaver than you?" Was it fear or anger that loosened Elvira's tongue? She barely recognized the voice that rang through the clearing. She kept her eyes on the maguey thorns of Mayahuel's diadem, too cowardly to lower her gaze to her reddened teeth. "Did I embarrass you before your sisters and brothers? You boast that you are the inventor of weaving, but your hands are too heavy and clumsy to make aguamiel yourself. You know as well as I how difficult it is to silence the souls with magic, yet not only do I do it every day, I've now spun spells into the aguamiel to release their cries when I command them to. You're not angry because mortals humiliated you, you're angry because mortals bested you."

Mayahuel's lips paled beneath their dye, tightening in anger.

"Did we come here to listen to you be mocked by mortals or for blood?" Xipe Totec's human-flesh skirt swung as he shifted his weight impatiently.

"I tire of your games, Mayahuel." Tezcatlipoca's voice was the growl of a jaguar, velvet, dark, and deep as it rippled through Elvira's bones. She was suddenly aware of how clammy her palms were; how despite the pain, Rosa clutched her hand so tight her fingertips had begun to tingle.

“Decide on a punishment,” Tezcatlipoca ordered his sister. “And let us be done with this.”

Visions of Rosa weeping in the clearing, fingers shattered, flashed through Elvira’s mind.

Mayahuel opened her mouth to reply, but Elvira spoke over her, words springing to her tongue before she could think them through.

“Why don’t we see who is the better weaver, once and for all?” she said. Her lifted chin was a challenge, but the haughtiness of the gesture was hollow. Terror coiled her belly as her racing heart beat the time of each silent passing second.

Defying the gods meant nothing but trouble.

What had she done?

“A duel?” Chalchiuhtlicue burred, curiosity blooming in her hungry eyes. The water dripping from her jade skirts had formed a pool around her feet, and she stood ankle deep in water.

“A duel,” Elvira repeated quickly, keeping her eyes on Mayahuel’s diadem. If there was one thing she learned from Rosa’s stories about the gods, it was that the only things they loved more than obsidian and gold were duels and wagers. Aguamiel was ambrosia of the gods, but sport was their sustenance. “The winner will be she who weaves the most beautiful cloth. If Mayahuel wins, she can do whatever she wishes to me. But if I win, you must return us to our home in the mortal world.”

Whatever that was, wherever that was. The thought of leaving the pine grove and las monarcas filled Elvira with dread so heavy and ancient she felt she could sink into the ground. El Valle was all she knew, all she could remember.

But Rosa could not stay here.

For Rosa, Elvira would to fight to leave.

So as Mayahuel's siblings began their own round of mockery of their younger sister, Elvira pried her hand from Rosa's and walked on trembling legs to her loom. She lowered herself to the ground as steadily as she could, and, summoning every ounce of courage in her gut, cast a haughty look over her shoulder at the gods.

"Do we have a bargain?"

Mayahuel narrowed her eyes. She glanced to her siblings and back to Elvira, then sauntered over to the second loom—left unused since Rosa's punishment.

"Bring me thread," she snapped at Rosa, not bothering to look her way as she lowered herself to her knees and fastened the loom to her waist. Rosa obeyed, meekly keeping her eyes on the earth as she handed Mayahuel the spool and a shuttle. She retreated, hovering near Elvira's loom.

"Brother, we will begin at your word," Mayahuel said, tossing her jet hair over her shoulder.

Elvira picked up the shuttle. Her pulse thundered in her ears.

"Then begin," Tezcatlipoca commanded.

For a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, Elvira stared at the shuttle in her right hand. She didn't know how to weave beautiful images into aguamiel. She spent her days weaving common geometric shapes, never thinking of their beauty—for would they not be melted by Mayahuel and poured gleaming into goblets anyway?

A warm hand settled on her shoulder—a hand with crooked fingers. Elvira looked up. Rosa’s dark eyes burned, and though she could not speak because of the spell, Elvira knew precisely what she wanted to say:

Listen.

Elvira inhaled deeply, took the spool of thread in her left hand, and began. Inch by inch, as the shuttle flew and thread fed into the cloth, she untangled the spells silencing the souls of the dead.

And she listened.



Hours later, Tezcatlipoca’s voice broke the silence in the clearing. “The duel is finished.”

Elvira jumped. So engrossed was she in her work she had not noticed how the sun slipped down to the mountains west of el Valle, how the shadows grew long and violet.

She rolled her stiff shoulders and stood. Uneasiness pooled in her stomach as she and Mayahuel removed the cloth from the looms, rolled them to conceal the patterns, and met in the center of the clearing before Tezcatlipoca, Xipe Totec, and Chalchiuhtlicue.

“Show us first, sister,” Chalchiuhtlicue cooed. “For the mortal was the challenger. Show us!”

With a confident grin, Mayahuel threw her shoulders back and obliged her sister. Color burst forth as her cloth unrolled, filling the clearing with light. Mayahuel had used her godly arts to dye her woven depiction of the city of the gods in heavenly hues: the bright pearl pyramids of Xochitlycacan soared above the emerald islands in the great lake, which gleamed jade as Chalchiuhtlicue’s skirts. She had woven the gods’ brilliant feathers,

their glimmering ruby scales, their jaguar pelts, velvet as night past moonset. A portrait of Tezcatlipoca dominated the scene, his obsidian mirrors and topaz eyes gleaming in the deepening sunset.

Chalchiuhtlicue gasped; Xipe Totec nodded his head in approval. Tezcatlipoca, vain as any of them, tilted his head to one side. A smug smile twitched his painted face.

“And the mortal’s cloth?” he wondered.

Mouth too dry to speak, Elvira nodded to Rosa, who walked to her side. They met eyes for only a moment. The sun was setting behind Rosa’s head, crowning her pearly hair with an ethereal halo.

Elvira unrolled the cloth.

She did not have Mayahuel’s magic, and there was no color in the cloth but the gold of aguamiel. But each soul taught Elvira their song as they passed through her deft fingers, guided her hands as she wove their memories into the cloth: their children, their grandmothers, their ranchos, their rebozos, their long plaits, black and gray and white. Elvira listened as the souls sang memories of their gardens, their birds of paradise and humble agave, and wove the smells of the cinnamon in their café de olla and the cumino of their mothers’ kitchens into the aguamiel. She wove the sounds of bags on backs, filled with a life’s possessions, the determination of cracked feet, of worn soles, as they took one step and then another, paso a paso, across dry red earth to the north. A sharp note of grief cleaved twilight at the memory of the north: the final cry of so many souls, the sorrow of separation without hope of reunion.

They should hear our suffering, Rosa had said.

But the gods should hear their joy, too. So Elvira saved the smells of grandmothers’ soft skin for the end, and with a row of tight knots, finished the piece.

The gods looked on in silence. Even the stream and the wind were still; not a drop of water spilled from Chalchiuhtlicue's weeping skirt.

Lips trembling, Elvira untied the spell that bound her sister's tongue.

"You remember?" Rosa's voice was barely above a whisper. Her dark eyes shone wet.

Elvira shook her head. "But I listened."

Then Rosa's face changed; she took the cloth and ripped it. Ripped it again into smaller pieces.

"Stop them!" Mayahuel shrieked, and casting her own cloth on the ground, leaped toward the girls.

Something soft pressed against Elvira's lips.

"Take it!" Rosa cried.

She opened her mouth, and bit. The softness dissolved on her tongue like sugar—

Elvira looked at Rosa just as her sister shoved a piece of the aguamiel into her own mouth with crooked fingers. Feral victory broke across her face as Mayahuel descended on her with Tezcatlipoca's spear—



Rosa was right about the aguamiel. Mayahuel had lied to the girls. Aguamiel was not poison to mortals at all; it gave them eternal life.

But Rosa was also wrong: though it gave life, aguamiel could not ensure the eternal perseverance of mortal bodies, especially not those met with a god's obsidian blade.

When the xolotl came to el Valle the next morning, it found the remains of Mayahuel's final punishment. Elvira and Rosa's immortal souls called to him from the clearing, soft and pleading as fingers of mist. The xolotl approached, curiously at first, hopeful—then its paws sank into damp earth, and its quivering nose tasted the iron soaking the soil.

There was no hope for their mortal bodies, that the xolotl knew for sure. But what of their immortal souls?

It sniffed the air. Far beyond el Valle, crispness crept into the air of the mortal world. And with autumn came las monarcas.

In a few minutes, the xolotl's work was done.

It sat back on its haunches and sighed as two butterflies rose from the clearing. It watched as they lifted into the sky and glided lazily towards the pines.





INANNA 1

Bethany Fine | Poetry

The world is astonishing
I feel it with my body
Do you hear me?

I feel it with my whole body
Your mind is in your eyes
Your feet and your guts,
In the darkness of holes and in your eyes. It

Follows that your mind is in your shit,
That decreation is evolutionarily as important as your kids and theirs;

It's just astonishing. The world is. Today I saw an image of a grateful
statue from an ancient Mesopotamian museum. Gratitude to an un-
known god. The temple is E-shar.
Nothing else is known. Ok. Fight me that this is not astonishing on its own;

That the world is so peopled with gods we don't even know probably all
of them; the return is null; and then!

if you look up the temple you return many local doctors named Sharp
And violin instructionals,
But the city has a wiki stub
And it mentions the temple

E-shar

And it's devotions to Inanna,

The heart of my heart

The one in my soul

The flayed one

The one I think of every time I place wet laundry on a hanger

Gravity pulling out the wrinkles

Three days on the hook. Have you seen her? Inanna I mean. Ugly as shit.

Greatest lady, first in my heart. Did I know? I did not know.

Do I know? I know every third day. Will I know? My mind is in my shit

And my wet shirt as it straightens on the hook.

Become something of use.





ASK A NECROMANCER

Amanda Downum | Non-fiction

No Ethical Decomposition Under Capitalism

It's been a long week here in the underworld. A seventy-hour work week, to be precise. Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life? More accurately, do what you love and you'll have trouble setting boundaries and have no idea what a healthy work/life balance looks like.

Before I became a necromancer, I worked at a used bookstore. As a writer and reader, I loved that job at first, but ten years in retail slowly ground out all the joy. Towards the end, we were frequently understaffed, such that any additional absence meant extra work for everyone shifted that day. So even though we had plenty of sick leave available, people came to work ill, or powered through sobbing panic attacks. Capitalism: it smells like crying in the bathroom at work.

One of my former coworkers was fond of saying "There's no such thing as a book emergency." By which she meant that straining one's physical or emotional health for a retail job was not worth it. I wholeheartedly agree.

But...a death emergency? That feels different, doesn't it?

My corner of the underworld is also short-staffed right now. (During a pandemic? Quelle surprise!) And not just us, but many of our third-party psychopomp services as well. But hospitals need those beds. Families

would prefer not to leave their loved ones lying on the floor. Bodies in those refrigerated trucks need to be embalmed as soon as possible. So we pick up the overtime, and maybe cry in the cooler a little. That's just back of house—the directors are also stressed and overworked, but I don't know where they go to cry. Maybe the casket selection room.

People have many different opinions when it comes to deathcare, but I suspect most everyone accepts that it's necessary. For me, the part where necessity, ethics, and good intentions sink like Artax in the Swamp of Sadness is the intersection of death and capitalism.

Before I went to mortuary school, I had very little experience with the funeral industry. I absorbed most of my ideas from media. (Because everyone asks, no, I didn't watch *Six Feet Under*.) You're probably familiar with most of those negative stereotypes: exorbitant prices; bilking grieving families; stodgy, conservative, out-of-touch old men running everything. Being a big fan of Caitlin Doughty's work, I expected to share many of her prejudices against the industry. It turns out my feelings are more complicated than that.

In reverse order, my opinions and experiences go something like this: Yes, there are a lot of old white dudes in the industry, as in many industries. I've been trapped in hearses with seventy-year-olds who want to share their wisdom and put their hands on my knee. The industry on the whole, however, is trending young and female. In my Mortuary Science program, I—thirty-nine when I started—was one of the older students. The vast majority of my classmates were twentysomething Latinx or POC, with plenty of queer representation. The industry is still fairly conservative, but a sea change is coming.

Bilking families? It definitely happens. Only a few weeks ago I saw it happen to the family of someone I know.¹ Unethical assholes infest everything. However, what they are doing *is not legal*. Many of the stereotypes of the greedy funeral director hail from the days when the industry was unregulated. It wasn't until 1984 that the Federal Trade

Commission enacted the Funeral Rule, which requires funeral providers to give customers clear itemized prices and prohibits forcing unwanted goods or services on families. In my personal experience, directors are much more likely to work with families and try to help them than they are to pressure them into buying Grandma a fancier casket.

As for prices... Yeah, they're awful. Caskets in particular are exorbitant, and funerals in general are terribly expensive. My employer is part of our county's indigent burial program, providing burial or cremation for families with no money for services. I've sat with families who wept with relief to hear the county program had accepted their case, because they had no other recourse. I'm angry to this day on behalf of everyone who has lost a loved one and immediately panicked because they couldn't afford to grieve. You can't afford to get sick, but you can't afford to die, either. Welcome to capitalism: we're soaking in it.

On the other side of that coin, rent in my city is also exorbitant. Having earned my license, I'm now making the most money I've ever made, with health insurance and sick leave and other benefits. I can still barely afford an apartment. Funeral homes, like their employees, need money in order to function.

I see a lot of criticism of the funeral industry in America. Some of it is quite valid. But much of it is facile condemnation of an easy target, without examining the underlying causes. It's not unlike publishing in that regard—the industry is a hot mess, but writers need to eat. Deathcare, like healthcare, like art, is necessary. So, as a necromancer I ask you, how do we fix it?

If you have questions for the necromancer, whisper them into the darkness at the hour of the wolf, or use our submission form at thedeadlands.com, or ask [@stillsotranger](https://twitter.com/stillsotranger) on Twitter.



[1] This happened outside of Texas, the only state in which I'm licensed to practice, so I had to sit on my urge to burst in like the Kool-Aid Man. [Return to article.](#)



WHAT REMAINS TO WAKE

Jordan Taylor | Fiction

She Sleeps

Spiders' webs stitch shut her lips. Dirt weights her eyelids. Her hair has long turned to mold and leaves. The forest shifts around her, cycling through the seasons. She thaws. She freezes.

She sleeps.

Her roots tangle with those of the trees.

One spring, her toe pokes its way out of the leaf mold, like another of the pale mushrooms that grow around her body. The next spring, her finger, wearing a ring of tarnished gold.

One year, her whole body appears, surfacing from the spring thaw, dark with dirt, pregnant with worms. She is a living fossil—exposed, shoved back down, exposed—each time she surfaces, worn a little further away.

Her thigh, a rotting log. Two iridescent beetles, her eyes.

Is that mushroom still her toe?

Once there was a casket, buried eight feet underground. Once there was a palace made of stone. A gown of shining gold. All are now dust. All except for her.



A Bride, Dressed by her Mother-in-Law

She kneels on soft, richly patterned carpet. Her mother-in-law stands behind her, rubbing jasmine-scented oil into her new daughter's pale hair. She remembers an echoing vaulted ceiling, the perfume of roses, silk bed-curtains that dance in the breeze from the open window.

There is a full-length mirror also, reflecting a dark and cloudy version of her mother-in-law's lined face, now looming close, now smiling, now in ripples and about to disappear.

"I barely slept the whole three weeks it took for you to travel here," her mother-in-law laughs, but it is a brittle laugh, a nervous laugh, "so fraught with worry and anticipation was I. What would you be like, I wondered, the girl who would marry my son?" She talks with her long hands. They flutter like trapped birds. "What girl could be good enough for him?"

The new daughter rises, spreads her arms to be helped into her gold silk wedding gown. It is not so very far away, her parents' kingdom, she thinks. Three weeks is not such a very long time. She could have done it in two, if she could fly like the cuckoo. If horses could walk as tirelessly as the migrating red deer.

"Not that I mean to worry you, of course." Her mother-in-law helps her step into her gown. The silk pools on the carpet. She remembers the fabric shining, the way the occasional gleam of sunlight now pierces the

tangle of forest to shine in her mind's eye. The warmth of it. She stares at herself in the cloudy mirror.

She is a golden statue—a thing—a pretty bride for a prince, and that is all. She can feel the bald fact of it, lacing her up tight like the bodice of her wedding gown. They would have done better to have made a golem girl from the forest's dirt, she thinks, to have given her the gown instead.

“When you are a mother, you will understand.” Her mother-in-law draws the laces tighter.



The Story Told to Her by Her Parents' Wise Woman, in Secret

Imagine this: The mother, her face red and white, her hair drenched. The bloody sheets. The scent of sweat. The father, pacing, like they all do, useless things, the vast bedchamber, the screaming babe. The babe, held in the wise woman's hands. Her hands, already knotted, tremble a bit.

It was not a particularly difficult birth. They are all like this.

The cord has been cut and the afterbirth burned. The young midwife—or at least she looks young, to the wise woman—hovers, blood down the front of her smock.

The wise woman murmurs over the child, her voice a low croon. It is her place to give the usual gifts, the ones that mark a princess out from the rest, that set her apart, like a precious thing on a shelf. But this wise woman has the sight, and what she sees during the blessings shakes her.

The traditional gifts are ridiculous things. Pale blonde hair like spun flax—so domestic, that hair—lips like the first blush of sunrise, flawless white skin.

When the bloat first sets in, the princess will glow in the dark with the mushrooms of her forest home. The wise woman sees this.

Small feet. Teeth like pearls.

These will still gleam, centuries later, as they cling to her rotting skull.

Something must show on the wise woman's face.

"What is it?" the mother asks, her voice shrill. She struggles to sit up, her face white, the hollows of her eyes dark.

The wise woman peers into the baby's unfocused eyes—green as a new leaf—her hands cupping its round head, still sticky with blood and mucus. "Oh, she will marry a prince!" Something good, for the parents, then. "And—" She stumbles backwards in horror, into the younger arms of the midwife. The mother reaches for her child, clutching it to her swollen breasts.

"Her mother-in-law will kill her." Her voice is hushed. The room goes still.

"No," the mother says, shaking her head. "No, no." She tries to stand, as if she will hide her baby away immediately, perhaps within her gold-and-pearl inlay marriage chest, which stands in one corner of the bedchamber, perhaps under the enormous red-draped marriage bed.

Her husband, the king, puts his strong hands on her shoulders, holding her down. In the end, she is too weak to resist.

"There must be something you can do," the king commands.

"We cannot change the future." The wise woman wrings her hands.

"Only work with it," the midwife pipes up. The mother looks at her in horror, then.

"She means," the wise woman hastily amends—they were both young, truly, now the midwife thinks on it—"There are ways to save her without changing the events."

She did not know, then, how easily blessings can turn into a curse.

"This, then," the wise woman says, "can be my last gift. You may raise her as normally as you see fit. You may even marry her off, and retain the benefit to your kingdom."

The mother stares at her blankly and tightens her arms around her child.

"Her future mother-in-law may think she has killed her, but she will not have. The princess will sleep, through the seasons, through the years, until someone comes who will steal her heart and take her unto themselves, and then she will wake, and she will live."



Eat, Eat

In the forest, she sprouts. She flowers. In the summers, she puts out fruit. In her sleep, she breathes out seeds.

Her children visit her. Sometimes they bring her news.

The birds—starlings, ravens, and cuckoos—snap up the seeds, peck fastidiously at a crop of sweet berries which was once her cheek.

"There are houses where the palace once stood," they tell her. "They creep into the forest, eating it away. There are shops, and cats that sleep on the roofs."

"Eat, eat," she murmurs with the voice of the forest. "You are eating of your own."

The deer chew thoughtfully on her green leaves, rip gently at the mound of moss between her legs.

"There is a highway put in around the forest," they tell her, "a glistening dark road, and things that run upon it like a roaring wind."

"Eat, eat." She calms them with the calm of the forest. "You are eating of your own."

Summer thunderstorms roll in, and she is scattered by the wind. She travels in the stomachs of her descendants. All that happens in the forest and the world outside reaches her in whispers, in tremors running through the ground, in birdsong and the slow thoughts of trees.

Do you find this strange?



A Falcon

This is how she remembers the prince. A falcon sits on his shoulder all the time, hooded. Tiny bells jingle as he walks. He is handsome, dark where she is pale, and if he is aloof, it does not mean he is unkind.

Each day, she walks with him through vast stone hallways, their footsteps muffled on carpet, to the study where he meets with his mentors and advisors. She imagines it full of books and strange instruments and the meaningless arguments of men.

She has never been in.

Each day, he kisses her on the forehead and closes the study's oak door.

She is not used to being left alone to her own devices. This is how she excuses herself.

She wanders the palace, peeking in on the stables (rows of curved ears twitching toward her voice), the library (the silence so oppressive she quickly ducks away), the secret underground kitchens (the dark, the heat, the noise).

The kitchens, and the cook she remembers better than the prince.

Long, delicate hands. A stained apron, and the way he reaches behind to take it off. A voice hoarse from shouting over the noise.

She spends much more time with her mother-in-law than she does with the prince, exchanging small talk and sewing in her chambers. It feels like waiting. Like she sleeps, like it isn't real.

"What do you do with your days?" her mother-in-law asks. She sits primly, the silver of her needle flashing in and out of the cloth stretched over her embroidery hoop, and her daughter tries to copy her motions but fails, everything as tangled as the branches that now lace above her body. "You have enough amusements to occupy you, I hope?"



The Stories the Animals Bring Her as She Sleeps

In the city that has sprung up where the palace once stood, there lives a girl who gives birth to eggs like a bird. She carries them with her in her purse, warm, wrapped up with an old scarf and bits of cotton batting. When they hatch into baby cuckoos, she will raise them with an eye-dropper, will catch them bugs. When they are grown, she will take them

into the forest on the edge of the city, and the forest will care for them as if for its own.

“Eat, eat,” she’ll tell them when she leaves them. “You are eating of your own.”

In a suburban town not far, there is a boy born with antlers and hooves. His parents make him special shoes, file the antlers down with an industrial sander. He hates that bone-jarring “brrr, brrr.” One day soon, he will run away to the woods.

“Eat, eat,” she will tell him when he finds her. “You are eating of your own.”

In a stretch of woods by the highway, a baby crawls on all fours behind a mother deer and its fawn. They pick leaves like the deer and put them in their mouth.

“Eat, eat,” she tells them. “You are eating of your own.”

One day soon, headlights will mark this descendant as someone passes, and they will be picked up by horrified adults, who will call for a policeman. They will grow up in foster homes in the city, will marry and have children and those children will have children and one of them will be a doe.

Does this surprise you?

Do you find it strange?



A Mother and Her Children

There are two of them, twins. A boy, a girl. A princess and a prince. Blonde. Chubby. Pale. They dash through the lush grass of the palace

gardens, stumbling over the hems of their skirts and their own unsteady feet. When they fall, their mother's arms are waiting to catch them. They laugh, throwing handfuls of dirt and leaves.

"Are you picking flowers again? Is that a worm in your fist?"

"One of each! How perfect, how sweet!" Her mother-in-law lives in rapture now. The children fill their days, no more waiting, no more sleep.

"Are there twins in your family, dear?"

She tells her mother-in-law that there are, and she pulls her children into her arms and kisses their cheeks.

She lies.

The cook has a twin. The twin is too often drunk—it cannot be hidden, though the cook tries—and he has not risen nearly so high in the palace hierarchy as his brother. The cook sneaks him bottles from the kitchen. She has seen him do it, his finger to his strong mouth, a grin, a swift wink.

Another secret.

Don't tell.

She has been surprised by the twin, once or twice, come upon him laying fires in soot-blackened clothing, pushing a broom through the halls at a lean.

"Dearest, what are you doing? What's happened?" She has run to him, panicked, her whispers carrying too far. "Are you all right?" Sometimes, now, a child rides on each hip.

"Mommy, who is that?"

She has little time for tumbles in the kitchens, now.

He has looked at her through bleary eyes, and she has stumbled backward, realizing her mistake.

“What?”



Rescue

Once, long after she has stopped counting the seasons and the years, but before the palace falls, someone comes. To steal her heart? To take her unto themselves? She has a much better idea, now, what this might mean.

She can feel him creeping closer, crushing mushrooms, turning aside the dry branches, picking his way through the fallen leaves. Has he heard stories of a girl who sleeps in the forest?

Or does he merely hear her breathe?

He stops. She tosses and turns, beetles scurrying away, as if she is caught in a bad dream. Does she want to be woken? Who is he?

Is he watching her?

He's gagging. She can hear him in her sleep. He turns and runs, twigs snapping under his feet. The autumn wind chases him, flinging acorns and leaves.

That's right, she thinks. Her heart still beats, but he did not want that. Her body was all he could see.

Her fingers spread into roots, they toss the ground under his feet. He stumbles, panting in fear.

Good luck, she thinks, finding an opening in this body of mushrooms and leaves!



The Feast

There is a day her mother-in-law invites her to her rooms, but tells her to leave the children behind.

"How often in three years," her mother-in-law asks her when she arrives, "have you had a rest? You are too thin, too pale. Look," she says, "I've had the cook prepare you a feast." The daughter freezes in the doorway, her stomach turned by the smell of charred meat.

"Come, come!" Her mother-in-law hurries over, guiding her into the room. "Look what I have done for you!"

A circular table has been set in her mother-in-law's parlor, filling the small space. It groans with carafes of red wine and platters of unidentifiable meat. Her mother-in-law pulls out a cushioned chair for her—the same she used to sit in to practice her embroidery—and helps her into her seat.

"Just sit back and relax, dear." Her mother-in-law sits across from her and pours her a drink. "Being a mother can be exhausting." She carves her a slice of each of the two hunks of meat, one large, one very, very small. "Trust me, I know." She smiles, a tight smile.

Her daughter's heart races like a trapped bird, like a deer about to flee. The room is too warm. She sips at the wine. Something is wrong.

"Succulent young venison," her mother-in-law smiles, gesturing towards the larger piece of meat. "And a rare treat, a young cuckoo, trapped just for you!" She later supposes that, to her mother-in-law, this passes for a joke.

She takes a bite of each piece of meat. She can taste nothing but char, the burnt bits sticking to her teeth.

"I have never seen the cook be so careless with the meat!" she exclaims. She feels strange, her chest tight, her heart racing faster. She can barely breathe. She gulps her wine.

"Eat, eat!" her mother-in-law urges, as black spots swarm her vision like flies. She is floating in her seat.

She understands, she wants to cry out—she is a mother, now, after all, and she knows this story, it was foretold—but her throat is closed.

Does she truly understand, or does that only come later? This part is muddled still.

She chokes. Her mother-in-law smiles. "You are eating of your own."

She falls to the floor, but no matter what her mother-in-law thinks, she is not dead. She sleeps.



Overheard in Sleep

Voices, muffled as if by distance, or through a door.

"Let me pass! I will see my wife!"

"You cannot. The contagion—"

"My children, then. My children—"

The breeze from an open window.

The slow creep of sunlight across stone floors.

Can one hear sunlight?

Her mother-in-law's voice is pitched low, and broken as if by grief. There are sobs between the prince's words. For the first time she feels an overwhelming gnawing of guilt.

She tries to open her eyes, and finds that she cannot, despite the fact that she is aware of all that happens around her. Her limbs are impossibly heavy, as if her bones have turned to stone. This, then, must be the sleep.

Her mother-in-law speaks again, words to comfort and protect her son. "You must think of your kingdom. What would happen, if you became sick? If you died, even, like them? Come with me to the chapel, where we can grieve.

"I, you know," her mother-in-law says, "I loved them deeply too."

"What a display," a voice remarks, close to her ear. "Anyone could see you're not dead at all, no matter you do not wake." And then, "The window was open, so I flew in. Do you mind?"

It is the falcon's voice. The prince's falcon. How does she know that? She has never heard a falcon speak before. Does she dream?

"Does a talking falcon surprise you?" There is a hint of amusement in its voice. "Do you find this strange?"

She does, but no matter. All is strange, now. She wonders if he is hooded, and feels a sudden rush of pity. All is noise and sensation. All is dark.

"A pretty casket they've put you in," he remarks. She can feel the crushed velvet cushion beneath her neck, can smell the polished oak wood.

"She washed your hair, too, herself. She cried while she did it. You would have laughed, had you seen that. You're in your gold wedding gown." She can feel it, the silk skimming her bare legs. So he is not blind, then. Only she is.

"They're going to bury you in some lonely bit of forest, far away. I heard her talking about it. The contagion." If a falcon could smirk, this one would.

Bury her? No! She'd toss and turn, if she already knew the way. The world is dark now, but that—

"Yes," the falcon sounds thoughtful. "Horrible, isn't it? I imagine you'll spend many years that way."

The wise woman had tried to prepare her, when she was a child, but she realizes now that there was really no way. How could she be ready for this much dark? For the weight?

"You brought it on yourself, you know," the falcon says, a bit testily, she thinks.

Did she? Or was it fate?

"But I'm only a bird," the falcon reminds her. "What do I know about free will? About fate?"

Then why is he here? Did he come only to mock? She'd scream if she could, but she has not yet learned to talk in her sleep.

She has not yet learned the patience that will come with centuries of waiting.

"I was hunting outside of the kitchens today." Her breath stops in her throat. "Just a few moments before I flew in. I caught a mouse running out of those stone vaults, and he had a most fascinating story to bargain with. That's why I'm really here. Not to waste time philosophizing on fate."

"Would you like to hear? It concerns," the falcon says, "your children."

Go on, if only she could move, if only she could scream, go on.



The Story a Mouse Offers a Falcon

Weeping, in the kitchens. Weeping, and the pulling of hair, and the tramping of heavy-booted feet.

"Shut him up!" A voice like a bark, like the queen's hunting dogs. "Don't try to lie now! She knows; it's too late for that! She knows the children are yours. Yours!" Disbelief. Spit hitting the floor. Shuffling feet.

"Oh, you just want to see them? She's going to send them down now. She has in mind"—a pregnant pause—"a feast."

"All of you." An imperious finger sweeps the room. Everyone – the cook's girls and boys and the choppers and the dicers and the dough kneaders and the sauce stirrers and the butchers and all the rest—cowers against the walls, away from the cook, who is crouching in the middle of the stone room, his chest heaving, his long hands curling and uncurling, away from the guards who surround him, their feet planted, their hands on the hilts of their swords, afraid to pick sides, afraid to associate with anyone.

She suspects the falcon is embroidering details, now.

"No heroics. Your master has brought this on himself. And we are watching you."

"His brother! His twin!" This time her agony is so great that she manages to say it, despite her sleep. "He told!"

"Tut," the falcon says. "Stupid, biased child. Did you not know that your mother-in-law is a wise woman? Do you not think that she could intuit such a thing herself? Do not speak. I have not finished yet."

The upstairs mice pass the news downstairs. The queen visits the nursery, and where two children once stood, there is now a young cuckoo and a red fawn instead. A guard carries them downstairs.

The guards are weaker than they try to seem. They bring the children into the room and cast them at their father's feet. But they do not want to watch the deed.

It is just a bird and a fawn, they tell themselves, but they do not believe.

They back from the room. They shut the doors. They guard every known entrance and exit, but they put their hands over their ears to muffle the sobs and screams.

In a dark corner of the kitchen, the cook's twin sleeps off a bottle or three. Mice run over his feet.

When a guard next judges it safe enough to stick his head through the door and check on the cook's progress, the cook is roaring drunk, the children unidentifiable flaming hunks of meat. The guard decides it not worthy to report. The poor man.

The guard is a father.

He would have had to do the same.

"As you know," the falcon points out, "the underground kitchens are a warren of secret places."

The guards know of many entrances and exits. The mice and the cook know of more. The cook is running down one of those stone tunnels now, a fawn tucked under his elbow, a cuckoo held in his fist. The other end of the tunnel comes out into the forest.

That is too far for the mice. There are owls there.



What Remains

An acorn buried in snow, where her heart once lay.

A scrubby strip of woods, beside the highway.

A red deer comes upon the acorn of her after a dangerous dash across the wide dark asphalt. He's panting, his breath fogging in the silver light of the moon. His eyes are dark, still twin pools. He tugs his rack of antlers through the bare branches of the trees.

At first, she thinks he is her son, but that was—oh—eons ago.

He could be a descendant though, one of hers. Or he could not. It hardly matters now.

He noses through the snow, white flakes sticking to the dark velvet of his nose, and laps up the acorn, crunches it between his flat teeth. He walks away, into the cold night.

He will sleep.

As he sleeps, will strange thoughts of individuality, will memories not his own, begin to take shape? A golden gown, and a palace made of stone. Stolen pockets of time in a noisy kitchen. Two young children, twins. A body, a feast.

Will he wake one day from a deep sleep, with a pale body, with flaxen blond hair?

Would this surprise you?

Would you find that strange?





WHAT IT IS TO BE A DYBBUK WHO HAS TRAVELED FROM SOMERVILLE TO BRIGHTON

E. Lev Arbeter | Poetry

The opposite of a body, but in a body. In where blood is, and marrow,
and everything around and in between. To live without living in between

finger nails and flesh. To operate a body towards want, and only want.
The opposite of breath and metal, all lack, and navigating above concrete

in a body walking across the concrete, past the shul that beckons,
kadimah,
kadimah, but no, you must go onward, the arch wrought above its gates
saying

KADIMAH and the Magen David atop the arch's lamp sings, begging you
towards maariv, but to this body you must cleave. And your task com-
mands

you elsewhere. Past the monastery now becoming luxury apartments
(this body no luxury, no home, no), and past the hospital named for a
saint

neither you nor this body believe in. To find the body without thinking
tucking a strand of its own hair behind its own ear
(a strand of dead cells less dead than you are).

Nearby on Malbert Rd, there is a dilapidated Victorian mansion.
And to it you must go. You must. To have walked this body six miles.

To have walked this body alongside and over the River Charles.
To miss the feeling of water. Even if this body were to drop its hands

into the currents. Even if this body were to plunge, to bob
from scalp to soles. To not feel it. To not inhabit the body,

not truly, no, no, only and only the spaces around and
in between (to exist always and only in the in between
of this body and your body, with this body your body).





AUTHOR BIOS



Ewen Ma is a speculative fiction writer-poet, theatre deviser, and lapsed film and visual cultures researcher made in Hong Kong. They are a 2018 graduate of Clarion West, and their work was shortlisted for the Future Worlds Prize in 2020. Ewen's work can be found or are forthcoming

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Lauren Ring (she/her) is a perpetually tired Jewish lesbian who writes about possible futures, for better or for worse. Her short fiction can be found in *Pseudopod*, *Recognize Fascism*, and *Glitter + Ashes*. When she isn't writing speculative fiction, she is pursuing her career in UX design or attending to

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Henry "Hank" Greenspan is a playwright, oral historian, and psychologist, Emeritus at the University of Michigan. He has been interviewing, teaching about, and writing about Holocaust survivors since the 1970s. Along with two non-fiction books and multiple scholarly articles, his

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Francesca Tacchi is a fantasy writer based in Italy. Her non-fiction works are featured on Strange Horizons; and her novella, *Let the Mountains Be my Grave*, is scheduled for publication in Spring 2022 with Neon Hemlock Press. Despite working in STEM, she's a huge history nerd and shares her

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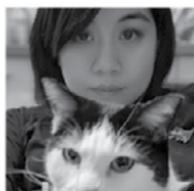


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Deadlands



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

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



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

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