

Butner | Chan | Daleziou | Grunigen
Rountree | Smith | Van Ell | Wehm



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THE DEADLANDS

a journal of ends & beginnings

cover art by Mélissa Houpert



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THE RAVING ONE

Jenn Grunigen | Poetry

I wake in the night
when you don't.
You sleep beside a bassaris on a bed of piss
set with figs
and flesh.
I sleep
(when I do)
on lungs.





THIRTEEN GOES TO THE FESTIVAL

L Chan | Fiction

It is festival time in the Narrow City. The air is thick with the sound of rustling paper, as though a whirlwind is loose in a library. The Narrow City is as old as the world on the other side of the Gates, older than the Gates, older than the Guardians. Parts of the City have crumbled into dust, the denizens scattered to the blasting winds from the less salubrious parts of Dìyù. Other sections of the City have grown brittle, yellowed like dry bones, and the inhabitants move slowly, for fear that they will tear straight through the paper walls of their domiciles.

The City is constantly being born, even as it dies, new additions springing up while old buildings crumple. It is at the newer neighborhoods that the Cloister of Unloved Aunties has its latest chapter, where even now the sound of shuffling tiles cuts through the swaddled soundscape of the Narrow City.

“Pong!”

The voice of Auntie Nine rings out, a near screech, high and piercing like a hunting bird’s cry. A fish eagle perhaps, something with talons and a cruelly curved beak, diving with the sun behind it, only a blink to warn of rending and death. There was something of that still in her. Slim as a blade, and dressed in a crimson cheongsam with intricately brocaded buttons in the shape of rosebuds. Auntie Nine slams the set

of tiles on the table, showing matched suits. The tiles rattle like old ivory, but like the Cloister, like the City, they are nothing but paper.

Aunties Four and Seven maintain neutral expressions. It is hard to tell under their caked makeup, so thick that it backfills the furrows and creases of their faces. But signs persist, the deep crinkles of their lips, permanently pursed under blood-red lipstick. Their eyes, sclerae yellowing and networked with fine blood vessels, twitching uncontrollably and searching for a way out of their prison of bone and nerve.

“It was a good game, let us play again,” says Auntie Two, and her voice is simultaneously a whisper and the loudest thing in the Cloister. Auntie Thirteen feels the pronouncement breathed straight into her ear. Even stoic, wordless Ah Ma, sweeping imaginary dust in a corner, looks up. Auntie Two lifts her porcelain cup, lifts the lid, and takes a sip, the air redolent with jasmine for a moment. Real tea, not from funereal offerings. Auntie Four and Seven had run successful enterprises in their previous incarnations; mainly in opium and back-lane gambling, back when the Singapore River was more effluvia than water, iridescent with the runoff from diesel engines. Seven, in particular, still runs a successful racket sneaking in contraband from the world beside, keeping Auntie Two plied with fine teas; sweet preserved plums, dark as midnight and smooth as eels; and honeyed walnuts. Auntie Thirteen, unbidden, fills Auntie Two’s cup.

Auntie Two’s feet do not reach the intricately tiled floor of the mahjong hall. Her slippers dangle between carved mahogany, her dress crinkling on the marble inlay on the seat. The striations on the marble are reminiscent of mountains in China, the armrests of the chair carved into fierce dragons with pearls in their mouths. Auntie Two taps the table three times with fingers pressed together, a gesture of thanks. Auntie Thirteen cannot help but fix her gaze on Auntie Two’s fingernails, mottled brown and variegated like old wood. Thirteen is so distracted by this that the hot tea reaches the rim and sloshes to the

surface of the side table. Ah Ma, the wizened old lady with the wispy white bun of hair, trundles over and dabs at the tea with a washcloth.

Auntie Seven tsks, and Auntie Four glares. Auntie Nine, in her time a budding movie star and manager of two of the biggest nightclubs in the city, is well versed in avoiding conflict, although her skills are little exercised in the Narrow City. She clears her throat and addresses the smooth-faced child that is Auntie Two. "Aiyah, dà jiě," she says, "Don't mind the new one, you know how girls like her are, cannot work. Maybe we should settle everything, not good to go to the festival with debts unpaid."

Auntie Two laughs, and there is something old, something hard in that laugh, a promise for cruelty ledgered and postponed. "You are right, as always, Auntie Nine."

Auntie Four takes out a sheet of paper and scratches at it with a blunt pencil. "After cancelling everything out, Auntie Two keeps the taste of chendol on a hot day, Auntie Seven needs to give up the sound of every piece of music from 1935. That's a big loss. Auntie Nine giving up... your first wedding night?"

Auntie Nine snorts and opens an ornate fan with a snap, the rapid flutter creating a small ghost breeze that doesn't budge her elaborate hairdo. "I had half a dozen wedding nights, I can spare that memory for the betting table." At the other end of the square table, Auntie Four's fingers find the bottom of the shallow dish of dried plums. Meeting Auntie Thirteen's gaze, she slowly brushes the dish over the edge of the table, where it shatters into dozens of shards. The cost must have been exorbitant to procure a single piece of real porcelain from the world of the living, and yet, Auntie Four has just...

Ah Ma comes forward with her broom, ever silent and efficient. She and Auntie Thirteen are the prologue and epilogue to every mess in the mahjong hall. "Hai, if you were not so slow and clumsy, Thirteen, the

dish would not be so light, so easily pushed over." Auntie Four turns her attention back to the other three at the table. "It is not long to the Festival, ladies. We have better things to do than to watch over this wordless old woman and this plodding child."



The Festival is a month long, the Gates are open, not just to the Narrow City but all of Dìyù. During that month, the dead roam free, while the living burn paper offerings of food, money, and wealth. The air grows heavy with ash and the heady scent of incense. For the tortured, the lost, and the wandering, the Festival represents respite, freedom from chains and suffering. For those in the Narrow City, with its edifices built out of paper and smoke, it is another night out on the town.

The Aunties are resplendent. Auntie Nine in a fitted cheongsam that flows over her form like water over river rocks, Aunties Four and Seven dressed in summer dresses suited for garden parties before Singapore fell in the war. Thirteen has no such riches, it is the charter of the Cloister that only the unmourned make it there. But the unloved are not incapable, and the Aunties had wealth and power of their own. Thirteen herself is dressed simply, in a style that wasn't too far off from what she'd see on Earth in a while. Already the shades of the Narrow City are drifting to the great gates, in ones and twos, and then a great tide of them. In truth, Thirteen doesn't look forward to the Festival, she is of the Cloister of Unloved Aunties, after all. There is nothing for her top-side. Even the idea of real food, not the offerings the Narrow City gets, does not appeal to her. Or so she tells herself, because there are dishes that she longs for, things from the far past that she cannot go back to.

Auntie Two appears at the vestibule of the Cloister, where the others have been waiting for her. Nobody would think of leaving without Two, such is her influence over the others. Auntie Two is clad in a delicate child's gown, lace and linen, and gloves to cover her gnarled hands, Ah Ma trailing behind, carrying a handbag also fit for a child. The Aunties

turn as one to leave the Cloister, filing out by appointed number and rank, the smallest at the lead and the willowy Auntie Nine bringing up the rear. The Gates will be open for a brief span, and the Aunties expect to get there just in time. It is not Thirteen's first festival, but after serving the other Aunties for three years, living in the Cloister with shades from across the ages, she found that there was a strand of cruelty that bound them tighter than blood. She is going to be late if she doesn't rush, and yet she pauses to look back at the weathered woman the Aunties are leaving behind. Ah Ma has already begun wiping down the furnishings of the Cloister. There is no real need for that, the Narrow City attracts no dust. Ah Ma's hushed commitment to cleanliness reminds Thirteen of something long forgotten.

Thirteen had been told her service to the other Aunties would bring advancement, but the more she sees the flaws in the perfection of the others, the less she wants to ascend. Worried, perhaps, of what flaws the new Auntie Thirteen would see in her.

Nine turns back to check on the holdup.

"What about Ah Ma?" asks Thirteen.

Auntie Nine looks at the old woman from head to foot and back again, seeing but not seeing her. "Thirteen, leave her here. Nobody knows how long she's been here. I don't think she even understands what we say."

Auntie Nine slows for Thirteen to catch up, and leans forward to bring herself to Thirteen's eye level, Thirteen does not like talking to Auntie Nine up close. Instead of a small, sharp tongue, Auntie Nine's mouth is filled with concentric rows of teeth, disappearing into the dark of her gullet, and her mouth always seems bigger than her perfect lips would suggest.

Nine lays a cool palm on Thirteen's cheek. "Girl, if you want to climb, stop looking down." Then she pinches Thirteen's cheek, a gesture meant for a child. Thirteen's cheeks are still ample and pliant enough to be

pinched, but this will leave a mark. That's the thing about the Cloister, it stains, it taints. Even the purest acts hint of the stink of the Cloister.

Thirteen goes back to Ah Ma and takes the hand of the older lady. It is softer and drier than she expects, cooler than living flesh. Auntie Nine snorts, and clicks away on her high heels, sharp footsteps bouncing off the paper walls of the Narrow City, hastening to rejoin her quartet. Thirteen glances at Ah Ma, who offers no resistance when she tugs the old woman towards the Gates; around them, the Narrow City flutters in anticipation. Everybody deserves the Festival, deserves to see the moon above instead of the painted sky of the Narrow City. Most of the dead visited their old homes. Not the Cloister. Especially not Thirteen. She'd left for good and found her way to the Cloister not long after. The details were fuzzy. She kept nothing with her on her way to Diyù except a grudge. Ghosts were allowed to keep those forever. No, home doesn't hold any draw for Thirteen, or so she tells herself.

The Guardians of the Gates tower above the buildings of the Narrow City, more statues than living things. Both finely muscled and one with the head of an ox, the other with the head of a horse, they stand guard, their breath furnace-hot and strong enough to shake the paper walls of the buildings down the street. Going through the Gates extracts a toll, like the Aunties and their game of mahjong, a little memory, a little sense of self. An elegant system to wean the dead from longing for earthly things. Another reason for communes like the Cloister is that ghosts who lost too much of themselves could easily find themselves earthside, left to wander. But Thirteen's had enough of the Aunties, enough of living off smuggled preserved fruits and tea, and at least Ah Ma will have a night out.



Thirteen hasn't been dead long enough for the world to have moved on. She still remembers to will the Gate to deposit her somewhere central, in this case, just outside the shopping district. Ghosts, by nature,

do not interact well with the world. Once the senses are attuned to Dìyù, other realms fade. The two worlds are closer during the Festival. Not by much, but just enough. To touch. To taste.

Most ghosts would request the Gates disgorge them near their homes. Not Thirteen. She loves the revelry of the stage much more, and home has nothing left for her. The stage is a wooden platform atop a metal trellis, under the spreading branches of great trees. Normally, this is a vast car park for the adjacent hawker center, where touts offer savory satay, sticks of meat glistening with oil to unsuspecting tourists. Thirteen can still see, in the distance, platters of crab awash in a thick sauce of egg and chilli. See, but not smell. Closer, but not close enough. On stage, the main act is just getting started. The actors are resplendent in heavy silk robes, in imperial yellow and darkest black, embroidered with dragons and phoenixes. Their expressions are accentuated by heavy makeup, the pure white base a canvas on which to paint ruby lips, or frowning eyebrows, topped by elaborate headgear that adds nearly a foot to each player's height.

Thirteen remembers her time as a child, when her own nǎi nai brought her to the same opera, the Getai, and whispered the plot to her, snatches of conversation in broken Mandarin between the clash of cymbals and the falsetto singing of the actors. There had been a wall there; her nǎi nai was versed in Teochew, the language of the opera, but Thirteen only learned Mandarin at school. Their interactions were only when commonalities between the two languages provided cracks enough for meaning to slip through. But that little was enough. Or when her father deigned to be a linguistic bridge between daughter and his mother, or through slow words supplemented by signs and gestures. But there were languages other than speech, like the way her nǎi nai waited in the rain to walk her back from school, the sweat on her brow when she slowly cooked Thirteen's favorite dishes. That was in the past. Thirteen is here, now, with other problems to solve.

“Come on, Ah Ma,” says Thirteen, we should get in line for the food, already it is beginning to look like a scrum. Few things transcend death. Rudeness is one of them. She takes the old woman’s hand and pulls her forward into the crowd. Ghosts press in. Thirteen’s not had to deal with this since she’s been at the Cloister. In the Narrow City, being from the Cloister carried a certain cachet, and others gave them a wide berth. More ghosts join the crowd. Thirteen’s grateful that she can’t quite smell anything. Ah Ma slips from her hand. There’s no space to move, and Thirteen can feel an old panic surfacing as surely as a bloated corpse.

Until the crowd parts, to reveal the offering table, piled high with food, with Ah Ma at head of the table. “Come join me, Thirteen,” she says. Thirteen just gapes. Ah Ma’s voice, as she always expected, was warm and kindly. Exactly as she thought it would be.

The table, like the stage, is makeshift, flaking and chipped wood atop a rickety metal frame. A feast lies on the table, some dishes traditional, some from the hawker center next door. Plump roast ducks glistening with oil, chickens basted with rich soya sauce, and slabs of pork belly under a crunchy brown layer of skin. Seasonal fruit as an accompaniment, round pears, oranges, and apples, coated with a layer of ash from joss sticks. Different from the Cloister, with its sickly-sweet array of preserved fruit in an endless array of little porcelain dishes. Like the Aunties of the Cloister, dried, desiccated, and flavored more with spice than with life.

Thirteen tries the duck. She knows it should be moist, it should have the tang and sweetness of the plum sauce she’s dipped it in, but she can neither remember how it tastes nor savor it now. She chews mechanically and swallows it like so much wet cardboard. “Have you always been able to speak, Ah Ma?”

The old lady grins, and her smile is flawless, if yellowed. “I speak only if there is something worth saying, otherwise I would be no better than

the unloved Aunties." Ah Ma picks up a slice of roast pork, and crunches the crackling between her teeth. She sighs.

"The other ghosts here hold you in some regard," says Thirteen.

"The Cloister is respected, even here."

"Not for me," says Thirteen, trying the chicken. It is tasteless, like her existence.

"Enough with this, let's get some real food," says Ah Ma.



The walk feels like hours, although Thirteen can tell from the movement of the moon that it cannot have been more than a matter of minutes. Leaves rustle, but she doesn't feel the breeze. All she can smell is ash and incense, so much like the Narrow City. There's a faded quality to her existence here, the toll she pays to come to the Festival taking a fragment of her at a time, slowly diminishing her. Not too different from her time alive. Thirteen felt like a statue being hewn from a block of stone, except the sculptor wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of her. No wonder she found her way to the Cloister.

Ah Ma is silent beside her until they make it to another part of town that Thirteen has never been to. They're at a temple, an old one, carved dragons around columns, paint faded until there's nothing but dark wood. Altars and alcoves surround the courtyard. An old priest has set up another feast at its center. The Festival is here too. Thirteen follows Ah Ma to an alcove, where there's a funeral tablet, a slim stick of wood with a name carved on it, so ancient and weathered that the words are gone, only a shadow remaining.

"That's you?" asks Thirteen. Ah Ma nods. "How long have you been working at the Cloister?"

"A long time. From the start."

The tablet is in a palace of honor, surrounded by others. Other names, other families. A temple patron. Auntie Two went back over a hundred years. Ghosts have an affinity for things long dead, and this tablet is older. "You're Auntie One, aren't you? You founded the Cloister."

"Guilty. The others came about later."

A feast was laid out for the dead, of a different caliber from the hawker center. Steamed fish with sour plums and preserved lettuce, braised goose atop a bed of tofu, steamed crab with ginger and scallions. Thirteen gets it this time, the ghost of a taste; sweet, sour, savory on her tongue. Food is the most evocative of memories, it grounds ghosts the most in the senses, in the time before. In a dish, properly prepared, there is love's labor in kitchen heat, there is the steady hand of her *nǎi nai* giving her the best part of the dish; a sliver of chicken thigh, stained dark by hours of preparation, a slice of pork belly, perfectly balanced between tender meat, melting fat, and crunchy crackling. Food was the language of her home, and the language was love, even when they couldn't communicate. But Thirteen can communicate now, and that remains a mystery.

"How can I understand you, Ah Ma?"

"Same reason you understand the opera, Thirteen. What you're hearing isn't what I'm speaking, but you grasp it all the same."

Thirteen takes more food, desperate to taste again. "I don't understand the Cloister. I don't even know why I was chosen."

"The Cloister is... a place for second chances. Some climb up the numbers, some leave. The mahjong group has been there for a long time."

"Why don't you leave?"

"The Cloister was the place I needed. To atone. To give back. Have you heard of Ching Shih?"

"No."

"A pity. They called her the Pirate Queen. I was in her fleet, good enough to have my own ship. Some of the money I made went into this temple. The rest of my afterlife I dedicate to the Cloister. For those who no one loved."

Thirteen finishes her portion. She is still hungry, the food is still there on the table. This is the nature of existence as a ghost, the essence of the Narrow City; to eat only what is offered, to live in a flat facsimile of things from before. Unchanging or unable to change, so she had been told.

Ah Ma smiles, a hard smile. Thirteen sees a hint of pirate. But there is still a mystery to be solved. "Why are we even here, at this temple?" she asks Ah Ma.

"To chat, to have tea, as a waypoint before."

"Before what?"

"Your final test, of course. You're going home."



This isn't Thirteen's first festival. She's been topside enough to feel gaps left by tithing at the Gate. But she still remembers home, and the Gate has not occluded her mind enough to take the pain away. They were at the foot of the block of government flats Thirteen had spent all her life in. Around them, families are burning joss paper offerings folded into gold ingots and sticking red wax candles on the pavement for their departed ones.

She takes the stairs. Ghosts always do.

They are outside her door. She remembers leaving, in anger, for good. And now she's back, but she's dead. It was a running war. Like all wars, neither side could claim a moral victory. Thirteen looks at the shoe rack, and her shoes are all gone, leaving gaps in the rows of shoes that her family never filled.

"What happens now?" she asks.

"We can go back to the Cloister. We continue. You go in. You can stay. This world is not for those that have moved on, but many try, so why can't you? Or there is a third way. I will wait at the temple. You were chosen for the Cloister. But now you can choose. The Gate extracts its toll, even from me. My purpose is strong but it is not unlimited. Someone else needs to guide others to the Cloister."

Ah Ma leaves. Thirteen is alone. She can smell something from her home now. Her favorite dishes, the sharp, cutting scent of tamarind and galangal, the burn of sambal, the comfort of fatty pieces of chicken stewed in thick gravy. She hasn't smelled that since... she hasn't actually smelled anything at a Festival before this one. It's stronger than it was at the temple. Stronger by far than at the hawker center.

Thirteen knows what choice to make. The Cloister is no longer the place for her, and she can choose to love and be loved. And that it isn't really the food that she's smelling, or that she will be tasting. Thirteen will be heading to the temple. But first. But first...

She goes through the door. She smiles.

"Hello, nǎi nai."





HOW TO MAKE TIME

M. Darusha Wehm | Poetry

take one moment, finely chopped
sautéed with onion, garlic, an anchovy if you eat fish
prepare some bread and butter
let it rest

take the next, a piece of cake
broken into pieces
stir gently into a glass of wine
red for chocolate, white for fruit

take the third, a fallen leaf
not too crispy
chewed along with a swig from a bottle of beer
stout, if possible

the fourth moment is your phone, blended
spread shallowly on a baking tray
and set outside on a summer afternoon
to dry naturally in the sun

the fifth, that watch which you never wear
tied to a string and suspended above the bath
set it to swing
when your watch stops you are done





A LIFE AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

M. Van Ell | Nonfiction

A band of children chasing a half-deflated ball past sun-bleached skulls and discarded femurs. Clotheslines burdened with damp linen sagging between crumbling tombs. A skillet sizzling away above a makeshift stove perched atop a chipped sarcophagus.

These scenes may strike most of us as plucked straight from the fictional landscape of some post apocalyptic motion picture, but to an estimated one million people worldwide, this is an everyday reality.



The rare socioeconomic phenomenon of “cemetery slums” has been documented in at least four cities: Lima, Manila, Cairo, and Phnom Penh. Each in its own right a major tourist destination and cultural hotspot, these national capitals have been subject to a surge in foreign investments and, as a result, rapid economic expansion.

This circumstance, in turn, prompted numerous residents of the impoverished periphery to abandon the destitute provinces, searching for employment and better opportunities in the capitals of their respective countries. However, mass urban migration, though itself a byproduct occurrence, brought along adverse consequences of its own.

Though distant in terms of geography, following a strikingly analogous developmental trajectory led these four cities to a similar if not identical fate. With wave after wave of domestic migrants arriving on the brightly-lit shores of the megalopolises, the demand for affordable accommodation soared. The capitals proved unable to cope with the influx, and an acute housing shortage ensued.

Shanties and shacks, cobbled together from corrugated steel, plywood, washed-up timber, and any refuse fit for the purpose, started appearing in uncontrolled quantities. Slums sprawled for miles and quickly became breeding grounds for organized crime.

Local authorities and state security forces responded accordingly, taking harsh measures to curb the unbridled proliferation of unauthorized settlements. Evictions—often violent, coupled with drug raids, and carried out without any prior notice—left thousands of families without roofs over their heads.

To make matters worse, Manila and Phnom Penh, both situated in a region prone to frequent hydrological and meteorological activity, suffered several heavy floods and storms over the years. Collapsing riversides and washed-away stilt foundations robbed those already teetering on the verge of homelessness of their improvised dwellings and belongings.

Thus placed in a most harrowing predicament by circumstances far beyond their control, large numbers of people resorted to squatting in cemeteries, occupying the stark and somber abodes reserved for the dead.



Historically speaking, for the living to take up residence among the deceased isn't new. Practitioners of various professions inherently tied to the graveyard are known to have made the practical—if arguably

morbid—choice of staying close to their work space in the past. And the cemetery’s demographic wasn’t confined to just the obvious morticians and monumental masons. In al-Qarafa, the Egyptian City of the Dead, for instance, students of the Islamic mystic tradition Sufism, as well as scholars interested in the religious monuments erected there, would too, on occasion, sojourn within the walls of the necropolis.

The population of folk willing to share quarters with the dead, and able to overcome superstition and social stigma, fluctuated throughout the decades, but never even remotely approached the unprecedented numbers it reached in the twenty-first century, when the housing crisis escalated beyond any proportion.



Starting with the least inhabited, the Cambodian Smor San public cemetery currently counts in excess of five hundred informal settlers. By contrast, as of 2019, the burial ground holds less than two hundred graves, which is due to some families relocating the remains of their loved ones out of concerns for the graves’ possible desecration.

As is true for all the cemetery settlements, Smor San lacks electricity, running water, proper sewage, and is comprised of hazardous homes built from reclaimed materials. Apart from the obvious challenges the inhabitants of the stilted huts must face on an everyday basis, here in Cambodia, there’s also a spiritual issue to consider.

The graves in Smor San belong predominantly to ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese citizens of the country whose respective faiths—Confucianism and Taoism—sanction or even insist on burial without cremation. The living occupants of this graveyard, however, profess a local variety of Buddhism closely interlaced with animism. According to their beliefs, a person’s earthly shell must be committed to a pyre in order to enter the next plane of existence. Improper disposal of the body, such as interment, results in a spirit trapped between this realm and the next.

Convinced, therefore, that the miserable and disgruntled ghosts of the dead upon whose ground they trespass still roam the earth, many in the community live in constant superstitious fear. The children seldom stray from their sparsely furnished homes after nightfall, and the adults complain about otherworldly presences haunting their dreams.

The city hall's attempts at relocating the eighty or so families to a village have so far been unsuccessful. The cemetery's residents communicated a preference to live side by side with the dead rather than move into the inadequate homes the municipality has to offer. With most of their households counting five or more members, the slum dwellers are reluctant to trade their admittedly makeshift but nonetheless spacious, sometimes multistory abodes for tenements of scarcely three hundred square feet. The effort to find a suitable alternative to the unauthorized settlement is ongoing.



Next in terms of statistics come the Philippine Navotas Public Cemetery and Manila North Cemetery, the former housing an approximate of six thousand poverty-stricken Filipinos, whereas the latter serves as permanent address to a staggering ten thousand.

Unlike Smor San, the Philippines' two largest cemeteries are still very much active and growing, receiving up to a total of eighty funerals a day. It comes, then, as no surprise that the majority of the informal settlers here make their livelihoods in services associated with tending to the dead.

Men work as gravediggers, whose duties involve not only the burial but also the removal of bodies. A banal lack of space—the scourge of all four of these giant cities—calls for stacking tombs into structures akin to high-rise apartments. This same issue dictates the practice of exhuming the remains after a five-year renting period expires. Relatives are then given notice and the possibility to renew the lease, though

with the stacked tombs reserved for the country's poorest, few find themselves in a financial position allowing them to afford this last dignity for their deceased. The tombs are hence vacated and stripped of epitaphs and other personal markings, and the remains are discarded or burned.

Cooking, laundry, and maintenance of their modest homes—among which concrete mausoleums are kept in good order for a small stipend provided by the rightful owners—occupy the women, and while their mothers tend to the household, the children are busy as well. Few are exempt from labor in the cemetery's competitive economy.

Deprived of the privilege to enjoy education, to the minors of Navotas and Manila North fall such tasks as fetching water from the communal well, painting or repainting tombs, sifting through waste, and scrubbing headstones on compensated request of the relatives. Their work, performed unsupervised and with minimal equipment, habitually involves climbing the necropolis's towering stacks and exposure to decomposing remains.

On Undas, a Latin-influenced Filipino holiday related to Halloween, crowds flock to the graveyards to honor their dead, presenting an opportunity for the cemeteries' tenants to sell flowers, candles, and refreshments. Children and adults alike avail themselves of the chance to boost their humble incomes, but with the recent pandemic requiring strict measures in regard to large congregations, Undas is mandated to be celebrated at home.

Unlike with Smor San, no documented attempts have been made to re-accommodate the informal settlers.



A tableau painfully similar to that in the Philippines greets the eye in Peru. Of the fifty existing cemeteries in Lima, only as few as eighteen

are authorized burial sites. The rest, among which the Cementerio Santa Rosa, have sprung up as a result of the public cemeteries' unaffordable fees. Here, too, the tombs are stacked high. Higher, in fact, than in Manila, with some of the niched walls counting up to ten tombs placed on top of each other.

Least documented of the cemetery settlements, the community of Santa Rosa is believed to be two thousand families strong. Unlike the other settlements, though, the original residents of the now extensive slum didn't live between the dead from the beginning. Initially, those unable to acquire proper housing purchased vacant plots on the outskirts of the graveyard, building homes in proximity but not exactly next door to the crypts. This changed with Santa Rosa's explosive expansion.

Illegal entrepreneurs, some of whom pretended to hold religious titles, began offering funeral services at a fraction of the cost the bereaved would be obliged to pay for a private burial. The financially challenged, unsurprisingly, turned to the unlicensed gravediggers and bricklayers, fueling an underground economy law enforcement has struggled to rein in ever since.

By no means exempt from the tribulations common to cemetery settlements, of all the mentioned, Santa Rosa remains the greatest cause of public health concerns. Unsanitary living conditions amplified the spread of such global afflictions as Zika, in 2016, and the COVID-19 virus. The graveyard has been shuttered, walled in, pronounced hazardous, locked down, and fumigated on several occasions, but to little avail.

Health agencies and local government both find themselves helpless in the face of this dilemma. They can neither relocate the twenty thousand graves nor stop the illegal burials, nor can they improve the slum's inhabitants' conditions. To this day, the Cementerio Santa Rosa presents a socioeconomic Gordian Knot.



Last on the list is the ancient Cairo Necropolis. Made up of multiple Islamic-era burial sites blended over the centuries into one labyrinthine whole, al-Qarafa spans for several miles and has come to serve as a refuge for an estimate of between three hundred thousand and one million Cairenes.

Sharing the fate of Manila, Lima, and Phnom Penh, Cairo too has undergone fast economic growth. As in the other countries, Egyptian society's least fortunate members were forced to establish their domiciles among the departed.

Crowding the ill-lit confines of elaborate marble crypts or nestling mud-brick installations between crumbling shrines, the ostracized poor persevere in the City of the Dead, generation upon generation. They tap electricity, collect scrap metal, keep livestock, vend an astounding assortment of handcrafted goods, play music, and observe religious rites, paying the neighboring caskets and tombs little mind. Some attempt to escape society's fringe, usually through marriage, but most resign themselves to following their kin's example and stay within the cemetery walls, far from judging eyes.

Of the mentioned inhabited cemeteries, it is here in al-Qarafa that contrasts clash fiercest. Recognized as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Historic Cairo, the necropolis serves as the final resting place of prominent individuals. Sultans, emirs, generals, and saints from centuries past repose in their sleep everlasting beside today's most marginalized social class.

A veritable magnet for conservation architects and scholars, al-Qarafa boasts numerous buildings of unique historical value. The elaborate vaults, lofty minarets, and picturesque mosques that have witnessed the rise and fall of empires vie for space with tottering hovels. The living keep swelling in numbers, crowding out the dead, and as the government's nationalist vision of a new Egypt is put into effect, the rumble of bulldozers draws ever near.

Grave concerns are raised over the construction of highways cutting unceremoniously through the vast al-Qarafa, but local government, pressed to alleviate Cairo's traffic congestion, give priority to more immediate issues than preserving sepulchers.

The cemetery's residents watch the city of the living encroach upon the City of the Dead with understandable disquiet. After all, in this grotesque collision of circumstances, so little stands between them and mad urban conquest apart from the untouchable status of the dead. The dead care for the living here, and if the rights of the perished are also sacrificed on the altar of "progress," the living will suffer expulsion to even more distant corners of society.



Author's Note

To report on the phenomenon of cemetery slums and remain unmoved is, frankly, impossible. However objective a mind the observer strives to keep, the sight of such human suffering is apt to tug at even the most callused of hearts. Yet, bleak though a picture this essay paints, it would fall decidedly short of exhausting the subject without remarking on the affected people's determination and unbroken spirit.

Surrounded by death and decay, their lives entwined with the grief and loss of others, tragedy and injustice being the order of the day, thousands of Filipinos, Egyptians, Peruvians, and Cambodians nonetheless display a valiant optimism. Even in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversities, they do not lose hope and they make of their situation the best they can.

Forced into coexistence with the deceased, the living have adapted, showing a singular resourcefulness in forging a symbiotic relationship with the otherwise shunned dead. These people *live*, proving again and again that life is an admirably stubborn thing, resigned to trickle where it is not allowed to gush, like a streamlet picking its serpentine course in defiance of towering obstacles.

Anyone who visits these settlements is bound to discover an undeniable sense of community. There is solidarity and support here, decency and dignity, despite all odds. And when the battering heat of day finally gives way to cool twilight, strange though they may fall on a foreigner's ignorant ear, song and laughter ring among the graves.

Because life always finds a way. Even if lived in a graveyard.





THEIR BLOOD SMELLS OF LOVE AND TERROR

Josh Rountree | Fiction

I don't want the things they offer me.

Warm blood and broken skulls. Grunting pigs and headless roosters. Bottles of cold milk I can't drink and hard bread I can't eat. There's only one thing I really want, and none of them is likely to give it to me.

I'm tired, and I want to finish dying.

Night sits heavy against the harvested fields as my bones stir beneath the soil. They find one another, grind together, and take shape as I inhabit that old skin and prepare to play my part once again. Summer is dead. The people who work this land have gathered to pay for their prosperity, and it's my responsibility to collect. I'd gladly recede into the gray gloom that has long been denied me and forgive them the debt.

But it's hard to overcome the legend.

I greet them wearing a wrinkled brown suit and a crooked string tie. Shoes dusty and dull, with the soles pulling away. I carry an oak-handled scythe, a tool I don't require, but the people expect a certain image from a creature like me. My dress and my manner evoke their grandfathers and stern guidance. I am a touchstone, linking them with every harvest going back before the days of oxen and plow, to the time

when we used sticks to dig and turn the soil. My straw hat is warped and muddy. My face is a terror, patterned in gray and brown scales, with a jaw that unhinges wide enough to take a child's head into my mouth and draw the life from her with my fangs.

The people wait on bended knee.

I had hoped they'd finally reject me, but their misplaced faith appears intact.

When I leave the empty fields and walk along the town's lone paved street, I'm met with a bounty. Golden stalks of wheat bent into geometric shapes so ancient the people have forgotten their original meaning. Tin buckets of fresh blueberries and fat Mason jars filled with honeycombs. A spotted calf lies in my path, flayed open from neck to groin, as if I have any interest in such a thing. I step over the bloody body and hiss a note of displeasure. At the very least, they might spare some miserable beast next year. Pecan shells crack beneath my steps, and I scatter corn husks and field mouse bones with my scythe as I proceed to the town square.

The town stands in the shadows of twin grain silos, built of weathered brown bricks, capped with conical roofs. The windows of the pharmacy advertise headache powders and vanilla ice cream sodas. A corrugated aluminum building houses a diesel cotton gin. Many of my worshipers traveled from their homes in motorcars or on sputtering green tractors. They live in a world of miracles but still can't slough off the old ways, no matter how painful a burden they've become for us all.

Their blood smells of love and terror, and it's such a heady thing I take a deep breath. The adoration makes me weak, and I must remind myself I'm not a god.

There was no god when I was killed, and there is no god now.

There is just a hungry eternity.

The sacrifice is named Eliza and she's fourteen years old. The men usher her forward and toss her to the ground at my feet. They retreat in a rush, more afraid of me than the girl is.

Eliza wears a sackcloth dress, and someone has shaved her head bald for the ceremony. She holds a wilted sprig of cotton in her small hands, like a bridal bouquet, and a cottonmouth snake skull is tied to it with a bit of blue ribbon. The skull's empty eye sockets are meant to gaze upon the brightest possible future for the town. The teeth symbolize the bite of death, necessary payment for continued prosperity.

I look over my worshipers and absorb their fear. Any one of them could raise a rifle and shoot me dead. They could converge and overpower me, take my own scythe, cut off my head. And I would let them. It's only their belief and their tiresome superstitions that keep us locked in this cycle, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to upset it.

I offer my cold hand to Eliza, and she takes it.

We know one another well now.

Every year I lie uneasy in my half grave, wet and tangled in the roots, and I listen to everyone moving above me, alert to every fret and folly that plagues the town. And I do my best to guide them, though they rarely pay attention. I whisper my counsel in their dreams, but they close their minds to my words. They hear me, but they don't want to *listen*.

They only think they want a god.

I help Eliza to her feet, and she looks right into my yellow eyes. She recognizes me from her dreams, and I wonder if she remembers what I've told her. What I've begged her to do. *Refuse me. I am not your god. I am only a corpse. I hold no sway over your lives or your prosperity.*

The town holds its breath, so quiet I can hear cattle lowing from a fenced-in pasture beyond the fields. The people have dimmed their harsh electric bulbs for my sake; barn lanterns and smoky tallow candles light the proceedings. I've called this place home for so many decades, I've lost count. We hadn't even the dream of electric lights when I was full of youth, and the night then was a deep and terrible thing these people could never conceive.

Despite their attempts to hold it at bay, the darkness hardens around us with the weight of ritual.

Eliza holds my gaze, and I wonder if she's seeing the monster or my real face. I used to be a young girl with sun-browned skin and bleeding calluses on my hands, living through a drought that promised never to end, and my people, my *family*, buried me alive in the fields, hoping my blood would water the soil and appease a deity that didn't exist. Cottonmouth snakes burrowed in close against my skin, cold and corrupt. Beetles and june bugs nestled inside my rib cage and chewed away my vitals. Rain eventually poured down and seeped into my grave as my teeth fell loose and my skin pulled away from my bones. And I remained in the earth for the entire year, listening to the afterlife call me, begging whatever force kept me there in the ground to let me die. When summer collapsed into fall again, I dug my way out and became the thing they wanted to see. The god they wanted to fear. Brother Fang. Old Cottonmouth. So many names, but they all mean the same thing. I am the keeper of the harvest, without whom they would all starve and die.

Every year I rise, and every year they feed their young women to me.

Always their young women.

The people are afraid to move, but I can feel the motion of their hearts and the tension in their backs. They're wondering if I'll find Eliza worthy, as if anyone can be judged worthy or not for such a reason.

Oak leaves ride the breeze, and the air smells like animal sweat and dried dung. I breathe in all that life despite myself. These sensations aren't meant for me, but I can't help but mourn the life I used to have. Eliza doesn't flinch when I cup her bald head with my talon. Most of them do. My jaws open wide to reveal the white membrane within and curved fangs wet with venom. I can't help the hunger I feel, the need to accept the people's sacrifice. If it were as simple as refusing to feed, I'd gladly starve and die. But long ago I realized it's their belief in my power that binds me here, and I simply can't resist.

I wish I could hate them all for it, but I understand their desperation.

We have spoken in dreams many times, but now I place a question into Eliza's waking thoughts. *Do you offer yourself willingly for the harvest? For the good of the town? For all who gather now, and all who come after?*

I've prepared her for this moment. Begged her to release me from their worship. I have drawn her mind down into the soil and shown her its secrets.

But Eliza stands before me, eyes bright and ready to die.

The old people caution their children from an early age not to believe what I tell them. I may be their god, but I am, after all, a serpent. I cannot convince this town their prosperity has nothing to do with whether I'm pleased or angered. I'm neither of these things, only sad and tired and eager to escape.

Eliza has not given her answer, has not voiced her assent, a necessary part of the ritual we've unwittingly built. The town fathers rumble low in their throats and risk dark glances in her direction. This is not uncommon. The sacrifice often hesitates and must be coaxed to speak.

But Eliza is smiling, and this is something I've never seen before.

I repeat my question. *Do you offer yourself willingly for the harvest? For the good of the town? For all who gather now, and all who come after?*

Eliza shakes her head, answers aloud.

“No. I’m sorry. No.”

And that is all it takes.

The afterlife opens before me like a flower greeting spring sunshine, irresistible and golden.

Then I’m gone, and nothing remains in my place but a wind-tossed pile of bone dust and a dry, transparent snakeskin coiled around a brown suit and battered shoes. My scythe blade blows away, a cloud of rust, and the shaft clatters against the brick street. My essence, my *soul* if you want to call it that, hovers overhead, already dissolving into whatever comes next, and Eliza looks up and keeps smiling as if she can still see me there.

I think maybe she can.

For the first time in ages, I feel something like joy.

I’m no longer bound to the earth by superstition and human weakness. Eliza has chosen life, the only blessing I can ever bestow, and she’s given me the final death I’ve been begging for.

A woman wails from the crowd, and someone screams an obscenity. The town rises as one. None of them can see me anymore.

They see only the girl who killed their god.

There is no hesitation. The people fall upon Eliza with splintered axe handles and heavy fists. She resists with open palms and spindly arms, but

there are too many. Work boots stomp and rusty pocketknives stab. Eliza screams until her voice falters. The stench of the town's anger and fear pollutes the air, and I want to let go, to allow death to absorb what remains of me, but someone must bear witness. The people are driven by a fear older than themselves, and while I don't believe they understand what truly motivates them, they are terrified to reveal any faithlessness.

Eliza's own parents go at her the hardest, as if to distance themselves from her sin.

If I were truly a god, I'd strike them all dead.

Eliza lies in the street. Bones protrude like jagged tree limbs, and her eyes are swollen shut, but she is still alive. Crawling. I wish I could reach out and take her hand. I want to assure her that death is close, and not so terrible, but I don't know that for certain. Eliza moans through broken teeth, scrapes her hands and knees against the gravel in a frantic effort to escape. This cannot be the end of her. Eliza is a girl who loves running barefoot through wet grass on summer nights, capturing fireflies in glass jars, listening for owl calls and the rustle of night winds through the brush. She collects porcelain dolls and sleeps with a blind old terrier named Samuel, whom she's known her whole life and treasures above all other creatures. She is smart and curious and, yes, sometimes willful. She knew there would be a cost for her defiance.

But she had not expected *this*. Neither of us had.

We are both fools.

One of the town fathers sweeps Eliza up in his arms like she's a sack of cornmeal and tosses her onto a flatbed trailer attached to a tractor.

The people watch, eyes glassy and afraid.

The tractor shudders to life, chokes out oily black smoke, and lurches forward, pulling the trailer behind it. The people follow, marching up the street and into the fields, parishioners in a cursed congregation. Their procession is silent and gilded with shame, and their faith draws them through the darkness to a place none of them really wants to go.

There is already a hole. A grave. My home.

The tractor goes silent, and the night becomes a web of fevered whispers, raspy breathing, and quiet sobs. The same man who loaded Eliza onto the trailer lowers her into the hole. Her chest still rises and falls, but there's not much life left inside her. What remains of my spirit hovers overhead like a gray storm cloud as the people converge to bury her alive. They shovel in handfuls of dirt, eager to cover her up before she opens her eyes. I wonder for the first time if there was another girl before me, if there will be more after Eliza, if there was ever a time when these people were not so afraid of the world that they turned their daughters into gods.

It seems the people must have *someone* to worship, but I can't let someone else take on that burden, else I'd be no better than they are.

I flow like cold moonlight through the soil and take up residence inside Eliza's body. This despite the hungry pull of the afterlife, so eager to have me that I need only relent for one second to become part of the mystery. But I can't let this girl take my place. It's easy enough for me to jostle her spirit loose and send it skyward. She's newly dead, and I've far more experience walking the tricky path between now and forever. She rises from her own chest like smoke from a chimney, hangs above us all in a moment of terrible clarity. We see one another, and she understands what I've done. What remains of the girl Eliza used to be smiles down at me.

Then the universe inhales, and breathes her in.

I'm alone inside the body now, feeling every broken bit of my new self, feeling the weight of the soil layered on my chest. I catch a momentary glimpse of the haunted, sweaty people peering into my grave before the dirt fills my gasping mouth and covers my eyes. Already I can hear the burrowing approach of the things that will remake this corpse, but I'm not afraid.

I've been here before.

When my breathing goes entirely still and the people are gone, I invite the corruption back in. Even as I wonder what form I'll wear when I rise next year, I realize it doesn't matter. I could be Old Cottonmouth, or the town's imagination could conjure up a new, more fearsome god.

No amount of blood can water the furrows.

No amount of grief can make the wheat grow taller.

And I pray to whatever god will listen that one day they'll all figure that out.





ASK A NECROMANCER

Beware the Bone Thieves

Amanda Downum | Nonfiction

The first day I set foot in the embalming lab as a wee mortuary student was a profound experience for me. It was the first time I had been in the room with death, face to face and flesh to flesh. In that moment, any doubts I may have had were quelled: I was in the right place.

The next time I went to the lab to observe, I experienced an equally profound moment of “What the @*\$% is that?” I was looking at something out of *Silent Hill*, or a Clive Barker story. The corpse on the table was splayed open, hollowed out, arms and limbs peeled back like rind to expose muscle and fat, but not bone. I was looking at a meat suit, a flesh husk.

What I was looking at, in more technical terms, was an autopsy and bone harvest.

I’ve spoken of autopsies before, and those are fairly common knowledge, at least in principle. Before I became a mortician, the only idea of medical donation I had was organ transplant, usually through highly dramatized, race-against-the-clock television plots. I had no clue about tissue harvest.

This, dear reader, is where I must offer a sincere disclaimer. I fully support all medical procedures used to save and improve lives. I want people with treatable problems to receive that treatment! And really,

if that treatment involves recycling tissue from dead people—that’s pretty freakin’ metal. However, on the mortuary side, tissue harvest complicates matters, and we necromancers frequently say unkind things about the process, and swear a lot in its aftermath. Please understand that we’re only venting, and we begrudge the living none of their secondhand skin or bones.

What is tissue harvest? To quote from the website of United Tissue Resources, an organization we work with frequently: “Hospitals are required by federal law to report deaths to donation organizations. When this happens, agencies like United Tissue Resources will contact the hospital to evaluate the patient for donor eligibility. Referrals may also originate from a medical examiner’s office, justice of the peace, or hospice care...The UTR Staff operates on 24 hours a day to provide families with the option of the donation and facilitate the gift.”

That didn’t answer the question, did it? What is...*the gift*? Further reading elucidates the types of donation UTR collects.

- Heart valves
- Long bones
- Saphenous veins (found in the leg)
- Skin grafts
- Tendon and ligament grafts
- Nerve grafts

There are other possibilities. We also liaise with the Texas Organ Sharing Association and the eye bank, which handles corneal harvesting.

Note the phrase “provide families with the option.” I don’t know the intricacies of the process on the other side in regards to registered donors vs. viable candidates whose families consent. All I know is that in my particular corner of the underworld, we guard our corpses carefully, and require a lot of paperwork.

Sometimes, in the case of hospital deaths, the harvest can take place at the facility, before the funeral home ever gets involved. This is ideal. If we pick up a viable candidate before the donation service can finalize all the details, though, then we can expect to field a flurry of phone calls. The process is time-sensitive, decay being what it is, and it's important to keep track of refrigeration times. We also require a paper trail and multiple parties to provide consent before we release anyone for harvest. As with all corporate paperwork, I'm certain that this is because once upon a time *something happened*.

Once our ritual challenges have been met, we allow the donation service their prize. Someone picks up the decedent, takes them away, and they return to us missing something. Bone, skin, and corneal donation are what I see most often.

Corneas are by far the easiest to deal with. We simply have to dry the eye with cauterants or absorbent powders, use eye caps (imagine a spiky contact lens) to restore the proper shape, and make sure that the lids are sealed.

Skin harvest is perhaps the greatest nuisance for an embalmer, because that skin is often harvested from the person's back. It's a large expanse, after all, and less likely to be damaged during surgery or autopsy. The skin is removed in a neat rectangle from the top of the shoulder to the base of the spine. The muscle below is laid bare in a fascinating display of anatomy. When we receive the decedent after the harvest, an absorbent pad has been stitched over the excision site.

Why is this so bad, you may wonder? First of all, they need enough skin to make harvest worthwhile. A ninety-pound person is unlikely to qualify, as opposed to a beefy two-hundred-fifty-pound guy. So after we've embalmed them, we have to roll the person onto their stomach to deal with that absorbent pad, which is now soaked with blood and embalming fluid. This is a two-person job, if we're lucky. (I flipped someone by

myself once, and quite frankly I should not have done so. Anubis smiled on me that day; I'm not going to press my luck.)

Once the decedent is—ever so carefully—on their stomach, we get to remove the old pad, apply more cauterant and powder, and stitch a new one back on. Who would have thought necromancy would require so much needlework?¹

And then there are bones. Bone harvest is one of the few things in my line of work that gives me the heebie-jeebies. I should be grateful! I had to have a bone graft with dental surgery several years ago. My jaw may contain a dead man's femur. But I'm afraid I won't be able to pay that particular gift forward. I'm not especially fussy about what happens to my earthly remains after I die, but in one regard I am resolute: you may not take my bones while they're still wearing my skin.

UTR's site mentions use for the long bones of the leg and the crest of the hip, but I can assure you that the humerus is fair game, too. When a bone donor comes to us, they have been opened from hip to ankle, and sometimes shoulder to elbow. The flesh is sometimes packed with desiccant crystals—the kind that come in new shoes and pill bottles, carefully labeled DO NOT EAT. The bone itself has been replaced by a wooden dowel, perhaps to preserve the dignity of what would otherwise be a comically floppy corpse.

After the removal of bones, and possibly veins as well, arterial injection will no longer distribute fluid to the legs. The embalmer will have to hypodermically inject whatever's left below the hips and pack the rest with paraformaldehyde before—you guessed it—stitching the limb back up. After all that, the dead person will be dressed in a plastic onesie (thoughtfully provided free of charge by the donation service) to contain the myriad potential leaks.

It's a testament to the cosmetic art of embalming that people missing bones, organs, skin, and eyes can be displayed in an open casket with no one the wiser. Except the embalmer's aching hands, that is.



Death is an endless source of things you never even thought to ask about. But if you have thought of a question, please send it our way! Use the submission form at thedeadlands.com, or **@stillsotranger** on Twitter.

[1] I've read at least two fantasy novels in which a dragon's wing was repaired by patching the wound with leather—when I get sucked through that portal into a magical world, I'm ready. [Return to article](#)





ROOMMATE

Cislyn Smith | Poetry

the ghost screams
twenty-three minutes before your alarm
makes the towels musty damp
all the damn time
she shatters your favorite mug
and hides the superglue in the freezer
insists on slamming doors shut
and opens all the windows wide in winter

look
you can't really blame her
for being cranky,
a sullen spectral roommate
wafting through repainted walls
wailing at odd hours

you're in her house
rudely redecorating
walking through her, oblivious,
making tea where she once ate breakfast
doing laundry in the basement
right over her remains

living with the living
is basically the worst





ADVENTURE

Richard Butner | Fiction Reprint

On the ferry to the island, I saw a man dressed as a jester. His image flashed into view in my side mirror as I sat there half-dozing behind the steering wheel. It was midday as we chugged along across the sound, and the sun glared off the smattering of pickups and SUVs and vans on the deck. For a second, I thought I had dreamed him.

I turned in the seat and looked out the back window, and there he still was, just his head and what looked like the end of a fishing rod visible. He was standing out on the back of the boat. He was looking up at the sky, not squinting. Farther behind him, a flock of gulls followed the boat. His head slowly lowered until he was staring straight at me.

I spun and sank back into my seat, slumping so that I wasn't visible in the side mirror. I wasn't in the mood to talk to some kind of street performer who fished, or some fisherman who was heavily into cosplay. I was tired and hungry. I was looking forward to seeing my old friend Virginia, getting the tour of this odd little island that wasn't close to much of anything, drinking a beer or two, getting away from the world, if only for one night. She would probably know the story of the jester. She knew all the stories.

The ferry docked and I was one of the first off, and Virginia met me in the parking lot next to the abandoned Coast Guard barracks. Virginia was wheeling around an oxygen tank fitted with tiny clear tubes that swooped up to her nose.

"You hadn't mentioned this," I said.

"There are some things I'm not going to talk about," she said. She tapped the silver canister. "This is one of them. The first rule of oxygen tank club is, you do not talk about oxygen tank club."

She pulled a plastic bottle from her back pocket and handed it to me. Bug spray.

"You're going to need this," she said. "The mosquitoes are no joke here."

The jester trudged off the ramp of the ferry, carrying only his fishing pole. I asked Virginia if she knew who it was, and she just shook her head.

"You get a lot of people in costume out here?"

"In the summer, there are occasional infestations of pirates. Lately there've been mermaids, too. Never seen a jester before."

I had been hoping for at least a sliver of adventure. Maybe seeing Virginia for one night after so many years wasn't going to fix my life, but if it did, all the better. On the phone she'd said something like, "I've got something important I want to give you, you have to come pick it up." This was suddenly a very different sort of trip, one that included an oxygen tank.

Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was one of Virginia's pranks. When we were younger, she stole this gimmick off of *WKRP in Cincinnati*, and always had a bandage on some visible part of her. She wore one across the bridge of her nose for a year solid. Every time someone asked her what had happened, she said that she couldn't really talk about the details. An oxygen tank. I wouldn't put it past her.

"What do you think he wants?" I asked.

"Let's say..." Virginia said, and then she paused. That was the introduction to all her great improvisations.

"Let's say he wants me. Call him Death's Fool. See his staff?"

I squinted and saw that the fishing rod wasn't a fishing rod or a normal walking stick. At the tip there was a little doll-sized figure of a jester, also holding a staff.

"Okay," I said.

"I've never been much afraid of anything—you know that—or even if I was, I would just run toward the fear, not away from it. But that right there is Death's Fool, and maybe he doesn't notice me yet, but he will. Stay out of his way when he makes his move."

Virginia bent over at the waist and started coughing and laughing at the same time, holding her hand up to fend off any possible assistance.

I laughed too.

"I think I could take him," I said. The skinny jester with the funny stick had left the parking lot. "I've been working out. Krav Maga. Needed to drop some pounds."

I opened the passenger door so she could get in. "Your Krav Maga workout is no match for Death's Fool. Besides, he came here on the boat with you. How do I know you're not working together? Here, let me drive."

Twenty-five years earlier, I'd watched as Virginia head-butted a would-be thief, a guy who walked into the bar where she was working and leaned over the counter trying to grab money from the cash register. She knocked him flat out. She called the cops with one hand while

fishing some ice out of the cooler and holding it to her forehead with the other.

“Well, maybe he’s gone now. I don’t see him anymore.”

“He’s still there. Where’s he gonna go? Striding off into the Atlantic? He’s probably waiting in the lobby of the inn right now.”

Virginia had been the caretaker of Blackbeard’s Hideout for a few years. She knew I wasn’t particularly happy sitting in a cubicle designing catalogs for a medical equipment supply house. Now there was an oxygen tank. We talked on the phone maybe two or three times a year, and she always asked me to come visit, and finally there I was visiting. Hadn’t actually seen her live and in person in twenty years. She was going gray. I was too.

Virginia was my oldest friend.

“I guess we won’t be going for a run on the beach,” I said.

She went to get in the driver’s side of the car, pulling the oxygen tank behind her.

“No run on the beach, no swimming, no diving, no horseplay.”

“Whatever you say.” I looked back toward the sound, where the ferry that had dropped me off was already chugging back into the distance.

Virginia started the car and we pulled onto the main street, what seemed like the only street. Surprisingly, she obeyed the 25 mph speed limit. Speed limits had never really been her forte.

To our right was the harbor, mostly empty docks. To the left there were houses and the occasional restaurant or bar or kayak rental hut. Nubbin’s Grill. The Rusty Cutlass. All of them still boarded up for the

off-season, even though it was a warm March. Then a low brick wall around a small cemetery, iron gates with an anchor motif. Death's Fool sat on top of the wall, staff in hand, staring off into the distance. I pointed him out to Virginia.

"Want to see if he needs a ride anywhere?"

"Hell no," said Virginia.

Just as we rolled past he looked over at our car and smiled. I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or at Virginia. He had no teeth.



We lurched to a halt, clouds of gray dust billowing up from the gravel lot at the side of Blackbeard's Hideout. I moved slowly, deliberately, trying to match Virginia's pace as I retrieved my bag and walked past the nineteenth-century pointing finger sign up to the screened porch that was seeded with rocking chairs. The building was a dark two-story hulk, more barn than hotel, down a side street from the main road. A fan inside the engine compartment of the car spun to a stop, clanking. Beyond the hotel, the side road curved off to the left. There were vacation houses with white picket fences, and everywhere the gnarled scrub pines.

Virginia went in first through the screen and front doors, not locked. Inside the lobby was a big open space, concrete floor with doors all around, a balcony with the same, all of it dimly lit. There was an old Cheerwine machine that whirred away. There was a pool table, and there were bicycles stacked against the wall. I spotted Virginia's unicycle, the one with the zebra print seat. There was also a small boat built into the floor that said *Adventure* on the side. Virginia walked around and stepped through an opening into the boat, which evidently was the reservations desk. She slid a brass key on a diamond-shaped fob over

to me. "How about Room 102? It's right next to the caretaker's apartment." She gestured to a door, cracked open, near the boat.

A scraggly white cat with bent whiskers and chewed-off ears shambled out from the opening into the lobby. "You remember Lightning," she said. The cat made its way toward us, in no hurry. I did remember Lightning. Lightning had been her cat when we were kids, decades ago. I remembered Lightning zooming around her parents' split-level house. Lightning stalking my shoelaces. Lightning shambling into the room to deliver a huge cockroach corpse to me. Maybe Virginia always got white cats and always named them Lightning and this was Lightning Mark Two, or Mark Three. No way it could be the same old Lightning, unless she'd had him cloned. I tried to think if she'd ever mentioned pets in her calls or letters, but couldn't recall.

"Meow," said Lightning, walking into the boat and then jumping onto the desk chair and then the desk. Virginia proffered her hand, and Lightning bonked into it. He batted at the oxygen tubes as if rearranging them, then settled down on top of a big leather-bound book.

"Give him a scratch," she said, so I leaned over and tickled him under his chin. He'd always liked that. All cats like that. This couldn't be the same Lightning. His fur was so thin, I could see the pink skin underneath. His purr was a loud thrum, just like the old Lightning's.

"He's happy to see you," she said.

Lightning stood up and bonked against my shirt, leaving a patch of white hairs. Then back to my hand. I picked up my bag and took it to room 102. On the door, a spray of dried flowers hung from a nail. The stems were dusty gray, but the dried blossoms were red with yellow tips.

"What's the flower?"

“Blanket flowers,” she said. “We call ‘em Joe Bells. Joe Bell: jilted lover from further up the coast, wandering the island. Folks left him baskets of food, and he returned them filled with blanket flowers. Then one day he was found in his boat, dead, surrounded by the flowers. That’s the story, anyway. I’ve got them planted around the swimming pool. They grow anywhere—might as well be weeds.”

“What does Lightning think of Joe Bells?”

“Lightning is more interested in the vole, shrew, and mouse population. As far as flora goes, he’s a purist. I grow catnip for him in the herb garden.”

Lightning had come over and was patiently waiting for me to open the door to room 102.

“Is this place built on a Native American burial ground? Do you often get the urge to type the same sentence over and over during the winter months?”

She laughed but then immediately started wheezing in spasms. I rushed over but she waved me off.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Sounds fine to me,” she said. “Don’t worry, we don’t have a room 237.”



The room was more rustic than piratical, with a double bed, a red Naugahyde recliner, and a wooden dresser. The carpeting was worn through in spots and lumpy in other spots. No television. The window was half-covered by a bright red curtain tied back with rope. I threw my bag on the bed, then pulled out my toiletries bag and put it on the sink in the tiny bathroom. Lightning had followed me into the room

and made his way from the recliner to the top of the dresser in two tentative hops. He slumped down and lay there with his head over the edge. It looked like it would be very uncomfortable, even for a cat. It also looked exactly like how Lightning, the Lightning of my youth, had lain on the coffee table in the living room of the split-level house where Virginia lived.

I was startled by a sound outside. At first I thought it was a dog snarling. Lightning didn't move from his spot. I went to the window, standing far enough back so that I wouldn't be seen. In the side lot of the hotel there was a spindly young boy, no more than twelve. He had a plastic cutlass in one hand, and wore a long black coat belted with a red sash. On his head, a black pirate hat, which bore a skull and crossbones logo, in case there was any doubt.

"Arrr!" said the boy. Over and over, while shaking his cutlass at the air, at the building, at all the points of the compass. He would stylishly pose for a second, hands on hips, then start up again with the yelling and the swordplay.

I let the curtain fall all the way across the window, not wanting to incur the wrath of the tiny buccaneer.

The one piece of art on the walls was a print of a coat of arms, very English, a busy array of lions and unicorns and crowns and roses. At the bottom, a banner read "Semper Eadem." Instinctively I pulled my phone out, but there was no signal. I walked over to Lightning.

"Lightning," I said, "can you translate, hmmm?"

Lightning stood up when I said his name. I reached over to give him a pat, and he leaned back on his back legs and clutched my hand gently between his front paws. He held on for a few seconds and then let go, back onto all fours. It was, of course, something that the old Lightning had done many times.

"Where should we go eat, Lightning?" I asked. "Let's go talk to Virginia."

She was sitting in the reception desk boat, absently spinning a little ship's wheel that was bolted to the desk.

"The *Adventure*?"

"Yeah. One of Blackbeard's ships was the *Adventure*. The other was the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. They found that one. Never found the *Adventure*, though."

"And here it's been sitting in this hotel all along. You should notify the historic preservation office. Hey, what's with ye olde coat of arms in my room?"

"That is, perhaps not surprisingly, Queen Anne's."

"The Latin bit? The slogan?"

"Semper eadem: Always the same."

"Good luck with that, Queen Anne. Hey, they got any restaurants on this here island?"

"Oh yeah, we've got tacos and pan-Asian and a wine bar and a bakery and a pizza place. And seafood, of course. And none of them are open for the season yet. The pub is open, where you can get all the fried brown food you'd ever need. But let's just eat here. I can make sandwiches, and I've got beer. You still drink beer, right?"

"I still drink beer."

"Besides, Death's Fool might spot me if we went out somewhere."

"I'll protect you."

"I don't think you'd be much up against Death's Fool. We should stay here with Lightning. Death's Fool hates cats. It's like an allergy. Confuses him. It. Them. I don't know what gender Death's Fool is."

"Let's go with 'him,'" I said.

Lightning entered on cue and went into the boat. Virginia pulled him up into her lap. He hung his head down over the ledge of her knee.

"When do I get this artifact of great importance? Is it some of Blackbeard's treasure?"

"You in a rush? Ferry doesn't leave until tomorrow morning."

I shrugged a shrug that Virginia had seen a thousand times before.

"All right," she said.

She turned up the regulator knob on her oxygen tank, dumped Lightning out of her lap, and got up.

"I can get it, just tell me where—"

"I'll get it, hang on."

She went into the caretaker's apartment and then came back with a dark blob in her hands. When she got back in the boat, she tossed it over to me.

It was my old Norfolk jacket. I'd bought it at a thrift store sophomore year. I'd been in an extremely brief tweedy British explorer phase. Then Virginia had taken it from me, saying it looked better on her than it did on me. Which was true. She would roll the sleeves up and wear it as a top in cool weather, stashing beers in the voluminous pockets.

"Still fits you," she said.

"Only because of this ridiculous diet I'm on."

"Looks like it's working."

"Well, this is awkward. I show up here empty-handed, and you've given me this jacket."

"That's not a jacket, that's a historic artifact. Also, it's your jacket, remember?"

"Yeah. You know what else you could give me, Virginia? Wisdom."

She laughed.

"Could I say anything more eloquent than 'Hang in there, baby,' the line from the old cat poster? You want platitudes? I've got books full of them—my ex started sending them to me. I guess he feels sorry or that's his ass-backwards way of apologizing or something. Live, keep going, all that."

"I've tried living and keeping going."

"Me too, and look where it's got me." She thought for a moment. "Seriously? Okay, Virginia's rules. Follow your obsessions. Honor complexity. And, I dunno, maybe take up unicycling. Although it's probably too late for you to take up unicycling. But you knew all of that already."

"Yeah."

"Excuse me again, will ya?"

She went back into the caretaker's apartment, moving slowly. I thought about obsessions and complexity as I rummaged through the pockets

of the jacket. I tried to think of the last thing I'd been truly obsessed with, but nothing came to mind. In the jacket there was half a tube of old butter rum Life Savers, a butane lighter, and a packet of sugar. One of Virginia's party tricks was opening a packet of sugar and drizzling the grains through the flame of a lighter, which when done correctly produced a big stream of crackling fire. Always a hit on the back patios of rental houses and dive bars, and only one time did a fire extinguisher have to be deployed. I wondered when the last time was that she'd done that trick. I wondered if she still had the knack.



She was gone for a while, long enough for Lightning to go investigate, and then finally they returned together.

I brandished the lighter and the sugar. "Can you still do this one?"

She rattled the plastic tubes that led to the ever-present tank. "I don't really go in for tricks anymore, especially ones that involve open flames."

She came over and sat next to me on the couch.

"There's an island story, one that I actually believe. A ship wrecked off the coast here, one carrying a circus and menagerie. Circus costumes washed up on the shore. Carcasses of hippopotamuses, giraffes, camels, lions, and tigers washed up on the shore. But two horses survived and roamed the island for years, performing circus tricks for anyone they came across in hope of getting a treat. Eventually they just faded into the herd of wild ponies that already lived here. I think about those two horses a lot."

Lightning smashed into my leg. I leaned down to pet him. I could feel bumps, growths, under his patchy fur.

"You know, Blackbeard tried to go straight," she said. "After blockading Charleston for weeks, he surrendered to the governor. Promised he'd stop with all the pirating. He moved inland, married a local woman. His fourteenth wife, by some accounts. Didn't last, though. You should go see the Point. That's point with a capital P. Most historic part of the island. Blackbeard died there. In the *Adventure*."

"The boat that's never been found."

"Yeah. Walk out of here, turn right and then head down the road to the lighthouse, then keep going past it. Look for a green gate and an informative plaque; that's where the trail to the point starts. Stay on the trail. Keep an eye out for Death's Fool. And for mosquitoes. You might want to spray yourself again."

"Aren't you going to come with?"

She coughed again, wheezing wetly into her hand. "I'm tired. Maybe I'll work on a trick for you, that one with a playing card and a shot of whiskey and a shot of water. Go on. If you leave now you can watch the sunset from there. Take a flashlight."

I took a flashlight, doused myself with more bug spray, put on my sunglasses, and set out.

I walked out to the road, where there was a Canada goose milling around by the roadside. Just as I turned right, it fanned out its wings and started honking at me. I kept going—it was only a bird—but then it attacked, flying up and pecking at me. I batted at it, which I'm sure looked hilarious to any islanders watching. It was a lot better at dodging me than I was at dodging it. I fell backward onto some crushed gravel. The bird did not let up, flying over and continuing to jab at me. I heard a window slam open from the hotel.

"Stand up and take your sunglasses off!" she said.

Still under attack from the goose, I complied as quickly as I could.

“Now spread your arms out.”

I did that, and suddenly the goose backed down and backed away.

“You okay?” she said. I shook the dust off of myself.

“I don’t think it broke the skin. I thought they only attacked when defending their young?”

“You thought wrong. That one, he’s lonely. Been hanging around here, not paired up. Single male goose. The seasons are so weird now, I’m not sure when he’ll migrate. If he’ll migrate.”

“So you have a special power of kinship with animals now, too?”

“No, I’m just not a dingbat who goes wandering around not paying attention. Now get going.”



I found the green gate past the lighthouse. There was a slot at the bottom of the informative plaque that contained one lonely, sun-bleached informative brochure. I stuffed it in my back pocket. I wished that there was a brochure on all the various diseases and conditions that required use of an oxygen tank. My phone was still useless. No bars.

The trail ran by a white picket fence next to an old house. After the house, the fence changed into stacks of driftwood, some of it hung with shells and horseshoe crab carapaces. After some sandy hills the fences stopped, and I entered the maritime forest. The gnarled live oaks had already sprouted new leaves, so I was surrounded by a canopy of green. The trail ran up and down hummocks, past salt marshes and yaupon thickets, with no sign of habitation of any kind.

I felt alone on the island, as if I might as well have been back in the time of the pirates. The only noises were the noises of birds, birds that I could not identify, chirping and peeping and squawking. I tried to imagine walking over the next rise and finding Blackbeard and a convocation of fellow pirates there. I skimmed the brochure as I walked and learned that indeed this exact area had been where he and his men holed up in between plundering runs. And that the largest convention of pirates ever had been held there, right there. There was no trace, just sandy soil and trees. Then I got to the cistern and the grave.

I consulted the brochure again. The round brick cistern was covered now. The twentieth-century owner of the property was buried there next to his horse. He must've loved that horse. I wondered which one of them died first.

I kept going on the path. The trees thinned out and now it was mostly high grass and then over a final dune there was the sound, placid in the fading rays of the sun. Directly ahead of me in the water was where Blackbeard had been anchored in the *Adventure* when he was ambushed and killed by the Royal Navy, his body swimming around Lieutenant Maynard's ship three times after it had been beheaded. There were no boats nearby that I could see. Far to the south was another island at the other side of the inlet.

I tried to imagine it in the early morning hours, in 1718, multiple ships occupying the channel. Cannon fire, guns and grenades, ships ablaze, the clank of cutlass and dagger. The groans of men killing and being killed. The sun was sinking low now, setting the water on fire.

And as I stood there, balancing on a cinder block against which the corpses of two jellyfish beat in the rhythm of the waves, someone ran into my legs from behind, knocking me down on onto all fours in the shallows. It was the pirate boy.

"Arrr," the pirate boy said, brandishing his plastic cutlass.

I still hurt from where the goose had pecked at me, and that gave me the idea to fend the boy off in the same way. I stood, pushed my sunglasses back on my head, and spread my arms wide to make myself as big as possible.

The boy ran at me and whacked me in the crotch with his toy sword. I collapsed.

“Arrr!” he said again, emphatically. Then he ran up the beach, toward some lights in the distance. I rolled over to a sitting position and waited for this new pain to subside.

It was starting to get seriously dark, so I retraced my steps down the path and back to the hotel.



Virginia had left the porch light on at the hotel. Moths big and small bashed themselves senseless against it. The door to the lobby was open, and I trudged in. My shoes were full of sand, and even though I’d doused myself in spray, I still had a couple insect bites. Plus the aches and pains inflicted by the goose and the pirate boy. I needed a drink.

“Get any good photos?” she said.

“Nah,” I offered. I didn’t mention the pirate boy. If she had secrets, well, I could have secrets too. “What are my beer options?”

“Just random cheap stuff, I’m afraid. I don’t drink much beer anymore. Switched to vodka and grapefruit a while back. Get some vitamin C with my vitamin A. The fridge is in my apartment, check it out. And fix me a drink.”

I went and got a random cheap beer and made her a vodka and grapefruit.

We sat on the screened porch, me and Virginia with Lightning playing the part of the elephant in the room. Virginia turned the light off so the only illumination was the occasional sweep of the lighthouse.

Lightning took an interest in something on the other side of the screen, standing on his hind legs and pawing away without extending his claws. When my eyes adjusted, I realized that it was the goose.

"Your familiar is good at making friends," I said.

"Oh yeah, they're pals, at least as long as they stay on either side of the screen. And the goose visits Lightning pretty often. If you take my hint."

I took the hint. That's why I said: "Tell me a story." It was one of our oldest routines. One would say, "Tell me a story," and the other had to make up something right then. Virginia had always been a lot better at it than I was.

"Tell me a story about Death's Fool."

And so she did.



Once there was a citadel in the mountains ruled by a Queen. The citadel sat on a plateau at the top of a pass. There were seven gates, and the gate to the east was called the Gate of Cats, and the gatekeeper there was a man with a son and a daughter. The Gate of Cats sat at the top of a long, steep climb up from the valley below, and the doors of that gate rarely opened.

But one day, there was a rapping at the gate, and the gatekeeper was not there to hear it, for he was at the temple lighting incense and praying to the gods. The son and the daughter—their mother had died

years ago—were there, and sat listening to the sharp knocks, four at a time and then a long pause and then another four, and so on.

Finally the daughter went to the gate and slid the spy door open. The son crept up slowly behind and watched.

“Let me in,” said the thing beyond the gate. Its voice sounded like the stone wheel that the miller used to grind grain. The thing at the gate rode a goat sidesaddle. The goat was bigger than any goat that the daughter had ever seen. Behind the rider, a rooster perched on the goat’s rump.

“Who calls at the Gate of Cats?” said the daughter. She had heard her father say this before.

“Death’s Fool,” replied the thing on the goat.

That doesn't make sense. You said that Death's Fool was allergic to cats.

Okay, it’s the Gate of Owls. Happy?

Carry on.

It carried a staff, at the top of which there was a figure that looked like a miniature of Death’s Fool, which in turn held a tiny staff, at the top of which there was an even tinier figure, and so on. Death’s Fool gently touched the ground with the tip, and the rooster crowed, and the goat bleated, and when these things happened, the locks and latches to the gate clanked open. The boy and girl ran off to find their father. Death’s Fool nudged the gate, and it slowly swung wide open. The goat shuffled through the gate, past the rocky ground of the pass and onto the flat packed earth of the citadel.

When the boy and girl got to the temple, they found their father the gatekeeper lying supine beneath the altar. A rivulet of blood dripped

from his open mouth. The children screamed and cried. But they were not alone in the temple. The gilded doors of the royal chamber opened, and the Queen emerged.

"O Queen," the daughter said, "Death's Fool is here!"

But the Queen paid them no mind. She rushed straight to the body that lay beneath the altar, and the children gave way, because she was the Queen. She knelt and felt the chest of the gatekeeper, which no longer held a warm, beating heart. She turned her face away from the children.

"Go home," she said. "Go back to the Gate of Owls."

The children did as the Queen said, because everyone did as the Queen said. They rubbed their tears away with their sleeves and walked down the aisle between the benches and out into the sunlight. But they did not go to the Gate of Owls, because outside was something even more wondrous. Lying on top of the grave where she'd been buried, dressed in gauzy white that could not possibly have been the same shroud she'd been buried in, was their mother, pale and whole again. Her bright hair shone in the sun. They ran to her and embraced her.

"I have been dreaming of you," she said. "And now you're here."

The children were so amazed that all they could say was "Mother! Mother!" and hug her more and cry more.

"Where is your father?" she asked, and that shocked them back into what they'd witnessed only moments before.

"Father is dead!" they cried.

"Well then, there's nothing we can do about that. Come with me, children."

And with that their mother stood, as nimble as a fox, and took them hand in hand back in the direction of the Gate of Owls.

As they walked, their mother began to sing a song, and it was a song the children had never heard before, and the song went like this:

*At break of day
We sit and weigh
The rights from wrongs
The words from songs
We pull and push
We taste and touch
The games we'll play
At break of day*

As they walked along the Queen and her Guardian Prime, her constant companion, rode past them. The Queen's horse wore a bell, and everyone knew its tone and knew to kneel and avert their gaze when the Queen rode by. The children heard the bell and fell to their knees and stared at the ground, but their mother did not. Their mother remained standing, and turned toward the sound, and there was the Queen, swaying as she rode along, with her fiery hair and upturned nose.

Their mother snorted at the Queen, as if she were a pig. But before the Queen could respond—and surely this would mean some kind of punishment—from the opposite direction there was the cry of a rooster, and there came Death's Fool aboard his great goat. The Queen tugged the reins and stopped her horse, and waited as Death's Fool arrived. The goat shambled up the street until it stood in the shadow of the Queen's horse.

"Who are you?" said the Queen.

"I am Death's Fool."

"We have known Death here."

"I am not Death. I am Death's Fool. Today is my day, and this place is my place now."

Death's Fool wore motley in stark white and black, off-kilter stripes and patches that were hard to focus on. Death's Fool shimmered in the sunlight. The rooster had black and white feathers, and the goat was white with a black mask and mantle.

The Queen commanded the Guardian Prime to banish Death's Fool. The Guardian Prime rode up past the Queen, but then the rooster crowed and the goat bleated and at this, his horse stopped and would go no further. The Guardian Prime dismounted and moved toward Death's Fool, but then before he could touch the nose of the goat, the rooster crowed again and the goat bleated, and the Guardian Prime could go no further.

"I am going to sit on your throne," said Death's Fool to the Queen. "And if I want to dance a jig, I shall stand up and dance a jig. And if I want to play a tune, I will rip out your shinbone and make a flute of it. And if I want to beat a drum, I will tear out your skull and tap it like a tabor."

The great goat stirred and shifted in the direction of the palace.

"Stop," the Queen said. "Take all the treasure that you can, but leave this place, and come here again no more."

"Very well; it is done," Death's Fool said, and touched his staff to the ground, and though no one could see it at the time, the treasures in the royal storehouses vanished. All the gold, all the silver, all the rubies, everything. Death's Fool continued, unimpeded, on to one of the gates in the west, and left the city and was never seen again.

The mother took her children by the hand and led them along the path to the Gate of Owls.

When they got to the gatehouse, the children broke down in tears, for even though they had regained a mother, they had still lost a father.

Their mother packed as much as she could into satchels for the three of them, and worked the locks and latches of the Gate of Owls open, and led the son and daughter out and down the steep path.

The little monarchy in the mountains eventually faded away. And no one knows what happened to the mother and her children.

So, there's your story.



That was not the end of the night. We stayed up and talked.

We talked about old times, people and events from years ago, some of it rehashed to death and some of it things I hadn't heard in decades. We talked about Butts on Parade, each of us blaming the idea on the other. We talked about that one summer I spent watching *Monty Python* reruns in the basement of her parents' house after getting off my shitty job polishing tabletops at the furniture factory. We talked about the circle of fifths, which she once again tried to explain to me and which I once again could not fathom at all, given that my musical career ended with the recorder in the sixth grade, whereas her musical career had extended all the way to the island, where she would sit in with the cover bands that played the pub at the height of the season. We talked about the time that she entered the father/son swim meet with her dad and they cruised to victory, pissing off the other families, him wearing a Speedo and doing the backstroke with a cig in his mouth and her in an American flag one-piece. I talked about how she was my diving board hero when we were kids.

"You always had that ability to land on your feet."

"You don't land on your feet in the water."

"You know what I mean."

"Until, until, until."

She raised her drink and said, "Here's to the *Adventure*."

"To the *Adventure*," I replied, and clicked my beer against her glass.

We talked and talked and then she said, "I want you to have something else besides the jacket." So we talked about that for a while.

And then she was tired, and went in to bed. I stayed up a while, finishing off a third beer, wondering who else I'd have to battle to get off of the island.



In the morning I drove to the ferry, Virginia in the passenger seat and Lightning in her lap, the Norfolk jacket and Lightning's dish in the floorboard. I stopped in the parking lot. We both got out. She spread the Norfolk jacket on the seat, and Lightning curled up on top of it. She closed the door.

"Come back when you can't stay so long," she said.

"Well, I know how to get here now. So when I can find the free time, I'll come down," I lied.

We hugged, for the first time that trip, and I felt just how little there was left of her, and she pushed me away and smiled.

“Okay, that’s it,” she said.

“Yes.”

I got in my car and got in line to roll on to the ferry. And then we were pulling away, and I got out and left Lightning asleep in the car and stood near the fantail as the boat chugged out of the harbor, looking at Virginia, who waved every so often just to make me wave back. In the distance behind her, I spotted the jester, slowly walking toward her.





MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE

Madalena Daleziou | Poetry

I

My great-grandmother's house didn't die
when she left. They took away her only
ring, the moldy zines, the chairs and
coffee tables she had collected
from green rubbish bins.

When that failed, they took her
ghosts as well.

II

My mother slapped my arm when I
tried to press a hand against the wall.
It is bad manners to wake a house
from its slumber. Since teenagers
marked the bricks with a single
white graffiti word

—"Remember?"—

my mother whispers the same reply
each time we pass by.

III

Ghosts are not like the ring with
the large diamond orbited by
eight small ones—how did it
survive two World Wars?—
or the leatherbound Latin book
from 1865—she'd never been
to school, how did she know?—
It is a messy business to distribute
ghosts. My family had to weed them
out of mouseholes and cracked
teacups. They resisted the way
only ghosts know, but all
gave away in the end
like nylon socks.

IV

My uncle had it easy: dusty books
and moldy zines, collector's editions—
how did she know? —The unfavorite
grandchild was lucky; the ghosts fled him.

My grandmother took in the
hauntings, so her children wouldn't
have to:

"Your sister has no coat, why do you?
I don't have a penny, why do you,
why do you?"

echoes of debt-collectors' footsteps and
caresses to the cheeks of less unfavorite children

My grandmother always said that a mother can bring up nine children, but nine children can't care for a mother or tend to her ghosts. So my grandmother swallowed them unchewed, and burnt candles in front of the grey photograph. She grew fat with ghosts so her children wouldn't have to. Would they?

My mother looked and looked as she dusted the corners and threw the last carton box, but only the nine-diamond ring and the dreams remained, so she took them and wondered if it was a mercy.

V

The women in my family still talk to her when they pass by the semibasement, but I was born too late to be so enamored with ghosts.

When I grow too old for my mother to slap my arm, I don't press my palm against the wall. I'd be ashamed to feel its pulse, to wake it from its slumber and say,

"I don't remember."





AUTHOR BIOS



Jenn Grunigen is a writer and fig omophagist.

Her work can be found in *Nightmare*, *Strange Horizons*, *Shimmer*, and elsewhere. She drums for multiple projects, including the folk/black metal band Felled. Their album *The Intimate Earth* is out now on Transcending Obscurity Records and can

be listened to at felledblackmetal.bandcamp.com, or wherever you like to get your music from. When she isn't scribbling or hitting things with sticks, she hunts truffles with her dog, Vixa. Jenn is on Instagram and Twitter @foxnettle. www.jenngrunigen.com



L Chan hails from Singapore. He spends most of his time wrangling a team of two dogs, Mr Luka and Mr Telly. His work has appeared in places like Clarkesworld, Translunar Travellers Lounge, Podcastle, the Dark and he was a finalist for the 2020 Eugie Foster Memorial Award. He tweets occasionally @lchanwrites.



M. Darusha Wehm is the Nebula Award-nominated and Sir Julius Vogel Award-winning author of the interactive fiction game *The Martian Job*, as well as thirteen novels including the *Andersson Dexter* cyberpunk detective series and the humorous coming-of-age novel *The Home for Wayward*

Parrots. Their latest book is the KeyForge tie-in *The Qubit Zirconium*. Darusha is a member of the *Many Worlds* writing collective and their short fiction and poetry have appeared in many venues, including *Strange Horizons*, *Terraform* and *Nature*. Originally from Canada, Darusha lives in Wellington, New Zealand after several years sailing the Pacific.



Born and raised in post-Soviet Ukraine, learning English was to **M. Van Ell** both a way to escape the bleak chaos of a ruined country and an act of intellectual rebellion. A fortunate find—his uncle’s secret collection of foreign literature—introduced him to fantasy, science fiction and horror, sparking

a lifelong fascination. His family fled the oppressive regime of their homeland and found refuge in the Netherlands, where they reside to this day. M. Van Ell is autistic and through his writing hopes to convey the message that, sometimes, it’s the minds branded as broken that surprise you the most. Find him at Twitter @M_Van_Ell.



Josh Rountree writes horror, fantasy, science fiction, and whatever else sounds good at the time. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, including *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Horror*, *Bourbon Penn*, *PseudoPod*, *PodCastle*, and *A Punk*

Rock Future. His short fiction collection, *Fantastic Americana: Stories*, is available from Fairwood Press. Josh lives in Texas and tweets about records, books, and guitars @josh_rountree.



Cislyn Smith likes playing pretend, playing games, and playing with words. She calls Madison, Wisconsin her home. She has been known to crochet tentacles, write stories at odd hours, and study stone dead languages. She is occasionally dismayed by the lack of secret passages in her

house. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Diabolical Plots*, and *Mermaids Monthly*. She is a graduate of the Viable Paradise Workshop, a first reader for *Uncanny* and *GigaNotoSaurus*, and a founding member of The Dream Foundry.



Richard Butner's short fiction has appeared in Year's Best Fantasy & Horror, been shortlisted for the Speculative Literature Foundation's Fountain Award, and nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award. He has written for and performed with the Little Green Pig Theatrical Concern, Aggregate

Theatre, Bare Theatre, the Nickel Shakespeare Girls, and Urban Garden Performing Arts. His nonfiction, on topics ranging from computers to cocktails to architecture, has appeared in a variety of magazines and newspapers. He lives in North Carolina, where he runs the annual Sycamore Hill Writers' Conference. He and Harry Houdini have used the same trapdoor.



Madalena Daleziou (she/her) is a Greek writer and content creator living in Glasgow, where she studied an MLitt in fantasy literature. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Lucent Dreaming*, *the other side of hope*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, and other venues. She can most

often be found at a bookshop, or behind a keyboard, writing stories with too many ghosts. Madalena is on Twitter @LBooklott and her bibliography is available at ladyofbooklot.wordpress.com/publications/.



STAFF BIOS

Deadlands



Sean Markey publishes websites for a living, and has always dreamed of publishing a magazine (about Death). He lives with his wife, Beth, in central Vermont. Follow Sean on Twitter @MarkeyDotCo (if you want).



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/sovay. She

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



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

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



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

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



Amanda Downum is the author of *The Necromancer Chronicles*, *Dreams of Shreds & Tatters*, and the World Fantasy Award-nominated collection *Still So Strange*. Not content with *armchair necromancy*, she is also a licensed mortician. She lives in Austin, TX with an invisible cat. You can summon

her at a crossroads at midnight on the night of a new moon, or find her on Twitter as @stillsotranger.



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



R J Theodore (she/they) is an author and graphic designer. Her short fiction has appeared in *MetaStellar* and *Fireside Magazine*, as well as the Neon Hemlock anthologies *Glitter + Ashes* and *Unfettered Hexes*. She lives in New England, haunted by her childhood cat. Find her and her writing at rjtheodore.com.

The Deadlands

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Front Cover: "The Place I'll Return To Some Day" by Mélissa Houpert

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