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THE
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SHIPWRECKED

Gretchen Tessmer | Poetry

sea girls are wrestling red tigerfish

while Margaret
gathers up
wet bones in a basket
with a howl
of wind blowing
cicada shade
through dank and damp corners
of deep-mouthed
ocean caves

her oars dip in and out of shallow water

the hot wheeze
of hazy, humid days
breathe in
breathe out
the bathwater tides
roll in
roll out

sailing by shore, she waves at white skeletons

in forced repose
some at tea
on sandy beaches
some reclining
in the jungle shade
all without clothes
 (the sea girls claimed those)
wearing eerie smiles
under withering
sunshine
bleached
blanched
and dead-faced

. . . brave, it's important to be brave

while dredging up old friends
from watery, unmarked graves





THIS IS I

KT Bryski | Fiction

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Light and night are falling from me,

Death and day are opening on me...

Who do you think you are, an artist? Here's a story. When you were nothing more than an underfed slip of a girl, you carried home butter wrapped in newspaper. Unfolding it, you discovered—O serendipity!—reprinted poems of Tennyson. And thus, romantic appetite was kindled in the cutlery-maker's daughter. No wonder you got tangled up with painters.



On either side the river lie long fields of barley and of rye. In Elaine's mirror, they suckle the horizon like dead oceans. Yellow grass wilts in the heat, and the river creeps brown and sluggish, breaking around a stony shard of an island. Shalott's four grey walls and four grey towers enclose a dirt patch. Withered roses scabble up the hoary stones through sheer spite.

High in her eyrie, Elaine adjusts the beams of her loom. Hot, motionless air slicks the space between her shoulder blades. Her fingers cramp. She ignores the ache, weaving with the dispassionate industry of a spider, or a good Victorian housewife.

Knights ride along the road, two by two. Abbots, damsels, pageboys, shepherds. Passing her taciturn tower, they cross themselves and shudder.

Fuck them.

As the afternoon wallows into dusk, Elaine checks the mirror again. The tapestry spreads like mold across the walls. Same brittle fields, same market road. But then—

Another woman's face fills the glass. Thin, translucent, with blue veins webbing her throat. Unremarkable, save for the tumbling masses of red hair.

Elaine's feet fly off the treadle. "Who are you?"

The other woman hesitates, glancing behind as Elaine cannot. And then, archly, she says, "My name's Gug."



Tennyson wrote two versions of "The Lady of Shalott." One in 1832, another ten years later. The revision gets anthologized. No one remembers the original.

A shame. I like it better.



Painters loved you for your hair. They scooped you from the milliner's shop floor for it. Spilling from your bonnet in deep, burnished red, it damned you, saved you, transformed you from woman to muse.

There were three men, to start. A new artistic brotherhood, a trio of triply named young cads: John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. They explained everything to your parents

over tea. Their proposition wasn't exactly *respectable*, but with the right safeguards in place...

So you modeled for them, these upstart painters. Better money than millinery. Easier work, too. Stand still, stay quiet. Hold this. Don't move. Look dead. Smile. Smile *more*. You are scenery; you are art; you are certainly not a human woman who catches pneumonia while submerged in cold water as the drowned Ophelia.

They felt bad about that. Truly. You were simply the victim of artistic focus. It overshadows ordinary things like hypothermia. Artistic focus—

Gabriel's face *blazed* with it.



"Gug?"

"Yes, Gug." The stranger's nostrils flare. "And you are?"

She matches tone for tone. "Lady Elaine of Shalott."

"Really?"

Elaine gestures over her shoulder. Only shadows prowl the night's quiet. In the corners, the tapestry lurks, coiled. The first conversation she's had in years, and it's *this*.

"How came you to my mirror?" Elaine asks.

"I didn't. You're in mine."

Intriguing prospect. "Are you cursed too?"

"Yes," Gug says, slowly. "Yes, I believe I am."



The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood ate that shit up. Tennyson shit, I mean. Pseudomedieval Romanticism. Tragic fallen women with loose dresses and long hair. William Holman Hunt painted the Lady of Shalott. Rossetti painted her. John William Waterhouse painted her *three times*.

Does Waterhouse count as a Pre-Raphaelite? I don't know, I was dead by then.

No one remembers my "Lady of Shalott," any more than they remember the original poem. That's history for you.



"I can't paint anyone else," Gabriel said.

Poor fool, you were flattered.

"I've fallen quite in love with you, Lizzie."

Poor fool, you believed.



Finally, a flicker of interest stirs in Elaine's breast. "What's your curse?"

"Invisibility," Gug says promptly.

"I can see you."

"There's *seeing*, and *seeing*." She shakes her head, shakes out the red, red hair. "What about you?"

"If I should stay my weaving...glance down to Camelot..."

"Doom."

Elaine nods. Her loom clicks and creaks, warp and weft meshing like teeth. Always, she weaves what appears in the mirror. On the threads, Gug's narrow cheeks and hooded brown eyes take shape. "Hardly invisible," Elaine says.

"That isn't *me*. It's a phantasm." Sudden tears choke Gug's voice.

"That's no more *me* than my reflection."

"Reflection is all I have, I fear." Even so, she eases her feet upon the treadle. A faint scratching joins the loom's clicking. Elaine cocks her head.

"A pencil." Gug doesn't look at her. "I was sketching a self-portrait when you entered *my* mirror."

"May I see?"

Gug holds up a sketchbook. Faint lines, tentative and few. But Elaine sees the loom's shape, her own upright body. Gug shrugs. "It only seems fair."



Why Shalott?

Like I said: tragic fallen women. They were obsessed, the Pre-Raphaelites. Personally, I think it was adolescent guilt over their enthusiastic penises masquerading as High Moral Feeling. You look at Holman Hunt's *Lady of Shalott* with her aureole of unbound hair, and you tell me that he didn't have uncomfortable thoughts about sex. He stuck an allusion to the Garden of Eden in the background, just to drive the theme home.

And (petty point, forgive me, but still) the loom is all wrong. Had he ever even *seen* one?

But then, what do I know? No one asked me.

No one ever asked me.



"You should spell your surname *Siddal*," Gabriel told you. "Not *Siddall*."

Why?

"More genteel."

So you drop the second *L*. So you drop your job at the milliner's shop. So you drop modeling for everyone but him.

Nearly two centuries later, it'll be a footnote. You changed the spelling of your name. Ah, well, it happens. But even historians have a hard time keeping it straight: was it *Elizabeth Siddall* or *Siddal*? Who's the original? Who's the facsimile?

It's incredibly sad. But then, you were never sure yourself.



"I have to go," Gug says. "He's calling me."

"Will you come back?"

"I'll try."

Somewhere far distant, a chair squeaks. The glass goes dark. Elaine weaves until the room's light reddens like blood, and then she selects

more thread from the eternally replenished basket and sets about winding the loom's warp. Tedious work, but it gets her on her feet, and it's technically weaving.

As she toils, she's careful not to glance towards the window. In the curved mirror, the towers of Camelot soar. But for the first time, she doesn't think about the markets and the crush of people; neither the waves singing upon the wharves, nor the willow trees that stroke the water's face. It was nice, hearing another voice.

As the evening light fails, Gug's face emerges in the mirror like a corpse through deep water. Elaine straightens on her bench. "You returned." She isn't sure how much relief to let into her voice. "I wasn't certain you would."

"I wasn't sure I could." The color rises in Gug's cheeks. "Productive day?"

"Not as such." Under the loom, she kicks the piled tapestry. "What use has the world for this?"

"Absolutely none," Gug says. "It's *pretty*. It keeps you quiet. Too busy to think. That's the point, for women."

"How perfectly awful."

"I entirely agree."

More than ever, Elaine wants to dash the loom to kindling and fling herself at the window, intoxicate herself on the glittering stars and the cool night air. But her fingers march on. "I've remembered another thing about my curse."

"Oh?"

"Whatever it is, I shall die before I'm old."

To her surprise, Gug smiles. Sad, broken, knowing smile. "Me too."



We're not going to talk about Rossetti's stab at *The Lady of Shalott*. For one thing, you can barely see the Lady squashed into her funereal boat. The focus is all Lancelot.

That's what Rossetti wanted. Lancelot love: idealized and passionate. Not the love that weathers household bills and tired squabbles and ordinary days unfolding one into the next.

Though to be fair—

To be fair, I wanted his brand of capital-R Romantic love too. What can I say? I have—had—an addictive personality.



You muster your courage and lift a pencil. Little things, hidden from Gabriel. A few sketches, self-portraits, figures from Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson. Faltering lines of your own poetry. You're more furtive with those. Gabriel's sister is a *real* poet and she despises you. Eventually, of course, Gabriel finds your sketchbook.

He's delighted.

He can teach you, mold you. In his own drawings, he captures you at the easel. Mirrors reflecting mirrors. The heights only increase; Gabriel's connections run deep. The great critic John Ruskin wishes to buy your work. Either piece by piece, or £150 per annum for everything you produce.

Piece by piece, you say. That's how other artists do it.

They smile at each other, these two men. Over your head, like you're a child.

Oh, dear. Sweet Guggums. Poor Lizzie. You're too frail to produce regular work. Don't you see that? Better to take the £150 like a good girl and dabble away at your little masterpieces.

But you're an artist now.

"You must try and make yourself as simple a milkmaid as you can," Ruskin says, "and only draw when you can't help it."

Fuck him. Fuck Gabriel too, for agreeing.



"Are you ever lonely?" Elaine asks.

"All the time."

"But you mentioned—I thought you had a—"

"A lover?" Gug snorts. "That doesn't help loneliness. Trust me."

"I thought—"

"A knight astride a white steed, the chalice of his heart running over?" The snort sharpens. "I have no loyal knight and true."

Elaine bites her lip. "A wandering eye, is it?"

Gug ticks names on her fingers. "Annie Miller, Fanny Cornforth, Jane Burden...but who am I to restrict the passions of *genius*?"

Leaving one hand upon the loom, Elaine rises. Cold glass lies dead against her palm, but she strokes the mirror as though caressing the other woman's cheek. "I am sorry."

"It's all right. No, it isn't, I—"

Elaine resettles herself. "Unburden your heart, if you would."

And Gug does, gasping late into the night. The shuttle flies back and forth across the loom, Elaine pushing the treadle mechanically as she listens. Torturous love, yes, but also—

Waves breaking into light upon the shore; dawn seeping through smoked summer air; whiskey smoldering in the belly as laughter fills the room. Elaine aches and pines and presses Gug for more.

When Gug finally bids her goodnight, Elaine kneads her forehead. All through the night, the threads between them have tightened. Warp and weft, over and under, a single strong cloth. Except the room is empty. In the mirror stirs the barley, and nothing else.

"I am half-sick of shadows," says the Lady of Shalott.



You know what happens next. It's not a secret. *The Lady of Shalott* ends with death: in 1832, and 1842, and every painting thereafter. Why should this be different?



After stringing out the engagement for nearly ten years, Gabriel marries you. You get pregnant. If you can't be an artist, you can take up your proper mantle as wife and mother.

Your daughter is stillborn.

Laudanum tastes like Christmas. Cinnamon and cloves catch in your chest; wine drowns the poppies' bitterness. How cordial, this cordial. Down in the depths, grim amusement rolls over. Mostly, you drift.

The broad stream bears you far away—

Shadows creep across the apartments you share with Gabriel. Your own face keeps you company, smiling from canvases stacked along the walls and sketches piled on tables. When your feet obey, you waft through the dingy rooms like a ghost, leafing through your repeating image.

You sink to the couch and wait to feel something—some holiness, some dread—but the seas are empty. Somehow, the laudanum bottle rests in your hand again, the milk of paradise searing your throat.



Black clouds brood over the fields and darken the room. The treadle thuds, the shuttle flying with a lightning *crack*. In the mirror, Gug looks distant. "Are you all right, Elaine?"

"No."

Beyond Shalott, fat raindrops ruffle the barley. A cold wind whistles through the curtains; the air smells charged, metallic. Elaine feels as though she could throw her scissors out the window and pierce the sky.

The wind tickles the back of her neck. She squares her shoulders to it. On the storming road, someone sings over the downpour: "Tirra lirra, tirra lirra."

"Gug? What is it like, to feel the world upon your skin?"

"I thought I knew, once."

For a long time, they sit in silence. Outside, the pale grass whispers, the yellow wood bending in the wind. At last, Gug wipes her nose on her sleeve. "You're going to look, aren't you? Down to Camelot?"

"Yes."

"And the curse?"

Elaine gestures to her stifling room, the heaped weaving, the dispassionate mirror. "So you see it." With a shuddering breath, she brings her lips to the mirror. They part on cold glass. "Goodbye," she whispers. "Thank you for everything."

She leaves the web. She leaves the loom.

She makes three paces through the room.

And as the rain patters fresh upon her cheeks, the mirror cracks from side to side, taking Gug with it.



It's easy to read it as suicide. Tennyson did. Here's the end of the 1842 revision:

But Lancelot mused a little space;

He said, "She has a lovely face;

God in his mercy lend her grace,

The Lady of Shalott."

Lend her grace. At that time, they called such deaths a sin. In 1862, too, which is when I died. How, you ask?

It's easy to read it as suicide. But the historians will never really know.



When you're laid in your coffin, Gabriel tucks a bound manuscript beside you. It's a collection of his poems, the only copies in existence. A grandly hysterical gesture, a capital-R Romantic parting gift as he weeps melodrama over your corpse.

Seven years later, he digs you up again. The poems, you see. The damned poems. Except he doesn't have the courtesy to do it himself, sending a bevy of friends instead. From the ghastly encounter springs a legend: your hair kept growing after death; it filled the coffin with radiant red-gold; your corpse proved incorruptible, his own personal saint.

Let's be very clear.

You were soup and bones by then. Nineteenth-century burial practices did nothing for preservation. Water, worms, and rot. When Gabriel opened the grave-robbed manuscript, it was scarcely legible through decay.

But you? You weren't even allowed to putrefy like a human woman. That's the story that lingers in the imagination: a smiling face—only sleeping!—and the red, red hair. Even in death, they twisted you into art.



There is wind upon the water and starlight in the trees. The dark leaves sigh as Elaine's boat winds down the river. Her signature stands clear on the prow, marked in a sure hand. *The Lady of Shalott*. Deep within her marrow, ice sharpens and spreads. She drinks the night until she chokes on it and the river sings alone to the willows.

The boat bumps softly into Camelot. At the wharf, an assembled crowd reads the note pinned to her breast.

The web was woven curiously,

The charm is broken utterly,

Draw near and fear not—this is I,

The Lady of Shalott.



That's how it should've gone. The 1832 ending. The Lady breaks the curse by throwing herself into it—the real curse wasn't death, but a life of shadows all along! Sweet, sharp irony.

But that's not what we expect of good Victorian women. The Angel in the House mustn't break the precepts that bind her. The story here is disobedience and punishment, not apotheosis.

Let's give the last word to a man, right? "*She has a lovely face...*"

Well, thank God for that.



After your death, you become his masterpiece. *Beata Beatrix* shows Beatrice at the moment of transcendence. Yes, *that* Beatrice, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Twice met, forever a muse, just like you.

This is Gabriel's best work. Gazing upward in spiritual trance, you emerge from a dark wash of earth tones, lit with gold. A flaming dove lays a poppy in your palms. After so many awkward compositions, Gabriel's struck something truly poignant, genuinely arresting.

You have a lovely face.



The web was woven curiously—



In the end, Rossetti got what he wanted. That burns me. He wanted a Romance, an undemanding muse to feed him with *true kind eyes*. One more tragic fallen woman with loose dresses and long hair. That's all I was, from the moment they spied me in the milliner's shop.

Dante Alighieri and Beatrice Portinari. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall. Gabe and Gug. Exemplars of love. Male genius loosed by unattainable female beauty. Fuck that curious web—I wish I could've broken the charm.

Draw near and fear not—

Let this cracked mirror show something else.

This is I—

I painted. I wrote. I lived.

O God, remember me.





BRUYN'S HOUSEFLY

Neal Auch | Nonfiction



In 1524, German Renaissance painter Barthel Bruyn the Elder completed a bridal portrait depicting an attractive young woman, Margaretha von Mochau, offering a single carnation to her new husband—a symbol of love and devotion. The painting is technically sound but, taken on its own, somewhat unremarkable. This work was probably commissioned, either by Margaretha von Mochau or her husband, to commemorate the happy occasion of their marriage. In essence, what we are looking at here is the sixteenth-century equivalent of wedding photography and—as with contemporary wedding photos—the work has limited value for anyone except its subject.

What is considerably more interesting than Margaretha von Mochau's bridal portrait is the grim scene that Bruyn chose to paint on the reverse of the

canvas. There, we find a human skull resting on a shelf in a recessed niche. The jaw is unhinged and many teeth have gone missing, perhaps suggesting that the ravages of time persist even after death. On a ledge beneath the skull, there is a single candle, its wick glowing faintly as if it were extinguished just moments ago. Finally, on the opposite side of the niche, we have a piece of paper bearing a motto that leaves no room for ambiguity in the artist's intentions. "Everything passes with death," the text assures us. "Death is the ultimate limit of everything." The message Bruyn is sending to the new bride is very clear: you might be young and beautiful and happy now, but those days are numbered. This grim image is an early example of *Vanitas* painting—a symbolic work meant to emphasize the certainty of death and the futility of earthly pleasures. Both literally and metaphorically, Bruyn's *Vanitas* is the exact opposite of a bridal portrait.



Bruyn's painting is among the earliest examples of still life; at the time, images like these might occasionally adorn the back of more "respectable" artistic works such as portraiture, but they were not yet widely seen as something to be purchased and enjoyed on their own merits. Although Bruyn's *Vanitas* anticipates a number of developments in the art world, it is not a stand-alone work, and the philosophical meaning

of this image cannot be disentangled from the charming bridal portrait on the other side of the canvas.

In the decades that followed, still life would come into its own as a genre of painting and images like Bruyn's grim arrangement would explode in popularity in many parts of Europe, most notably in the Netherlands. While not every example of the genre is as macabre and heavy-handed as Bruyn's *Vanitas*, the central themes of death, decay, and transience are never far below the surface. Those seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of tulips might seem quaint to us now, but viewers at the time would have understood the implication that life, like the beauty of the flowers, does not last very long. This connection is made explicit in the book of Job. "Man, who is born of woman, is short of days and full of trouble," we are told. "Like a flower he comes forth, then withers away."

Having immersed myself in still life for the better part of a decade now, I find that this way of thinking follows me even outside the art world. Increasingly, I am inclined to see the grand tragedy of the human condition reflected back to me in the most quotidian things. One day, during lockdown, an elderly neighbor plucked a tulip from her garden and gifted it to my young daughter. We carried this treasure home and set it in a beer glass on the window sill. And, over the coming days, we watched it wither and die. Some insect, presumably lured by the scent of the flower, fell into the glass and drowned there. If the scene had been rendered in oil paint, it would be tempting to read it as a meditation on the transience of beauty. Is the interpretation any less valid if the scene has not been staged?

These were days when the subject of death was never far from my mind. The COVID-19 virus and its attendant threat were all we talked about. On the news every morning, they counted the dead, updated the figures, presented us with charts and graphs and statistics. Over dinner, on the chattering screen, we watched drone footage of corpses being buried in a mass grave somewhere—men in hazmat suits standing around while backhoes pushed dirt over the bodies.

My father was dying, also. He spent his final weeks in confusion and agony, cursing and struggling against the restraints that bound him to his bed, uncertain of what was happening and unable to recognize loved ones.

The tulip in the beer glass shed its petals; I tossed both the flower and the drowned insect into the rubbish bin while my daughter was asleep.

My father died in a hospital bed, surrounded by unfamiliar faces.

Everything passes with death.

Death is the ultimate limit of everything.

There's another element in Bruyn's *Vanitas* that I omitted from my initial description: the housefly. For Bruyn, the fly was almost certainly meant to represent death—metaphorically no different from the skull upon which it is perched. To me, though, Bruyn's housefly is conspicuous for being the only sign of life in the painting. Flies feed on death; they lay their eggs in dead flesh; there is a sense in which flies might represent the possibility of rebirth and renewal in the face of death and decay and ruin. As I read Bruyn's *Vanitas*, there is perhaps a faint glimmer of hope contained within the housefly. Death might be the ultimate limit of everything, but there is always the possibility for new life to emerge from the remains of the old.

In seventeenth-century still life paintings, butterflies are typically associated with divinity and rebirth, because the metamorphosis from caterpillar into butterfly is thought to echo the resurrection of Christ. But the life cycle of the housefly is no different. Why don't we regard the transformation from maggot to fly with equal wonder? It seems to me that the distinction is purely aesthetic: we don't elevate the housefly to a symbol of rebirth simply because we find its eating habits disgusting and its appearance grotesque. Perhaps, if we could bring ourselves to find the beauty in this lowly thing, we might recognize the element of hope that Bruyn's *Vanitas* hides in plain sight.

In the series of compositions that accompany this essay I have appropriated the key elements of Bruyn's *Vanitas*: bones, insects, and extinguished candles. These images are intended as an homage to the master but, at the same time, they represent my own attempt to grapple with the meaning of Bruyn's housefly.



In several images I have conspicuously swapped the fly for the discarded carapace of a cicada. This choice is meant to emphasize the glimmer of hope that I find implicit in Bruyn's work; in art, cicadas are often used to represent personal change and transformation. The cicada spends years living in darkness before it emerges, triumphant and fully realized in its adult form. And when the cicada finally emerges from its burrow it comes forth singing—a shrill, droning song that seems impossibly loud for such a tiny creature. The cicada shells in these images are not associated with the creature's death but, rather, are something that it casts off in the realization of its full potential.

In other images I have chosen, instead, to replace Bruyn's housefly with dead wasps or flies—a creative choice that intentionally strips away any chance of interpreting the insect as a hopeful symbol. In

some images, I have included both the dead insects and the cicada shells, intentionally making the messaging ambiguous to emphasize my own contradictory feelings on the subject.



I was asked to deliver the eulogy at my father's funeral. This was not something I was particularly enthusiastic about—at the time, my anxiety disorder was as bad as it's ever been, and the idea of public speaking, even for a small audience, felt overwhelming. Nevertheless, I agreed; there was no one else in my family willing to do the job, and I couldn't bear to leave it to a stranger. So, with my hands tucked behind the lectern to conceal their trembling, I shared my story to the small room full of mourners and to the urn that housed my father's ashes. The story I shared was a small moment from my childhood, a memory

of walking with my father along a beach in Eastern Canada as the tide was rolling in, swallowing up the sand and threatening to close off our passage back to the safety of home. It was a small and ultimately inconsequential moment; nothing more than a casual stroll on a beach near dusk. But at the time, it had felt like some grand adventure—a hero's journey. It felt exciting and important to my young mind because my father had made it feel that way, because he had a gift for constructing fun and excitement from even the most quotidian events.

Toward the end of my eulogy, I talked about my relationship with my daughter, about how I aspire to incorporate this sense of playfulness and mythmaking into my own parenting. I wanted to argue that this is the way that we carry our loved ones forward with us, even after their death. This was a very dark time for me, and I desperately wanted to find a perspective where there was something to be hopeful about in life. I wanted to believe that there is something that doesn't die, something that is carried forward to the next generation, something of value that can emerge even in a world of ruin and death and decay.

I didn't realize it at the time that I was writing my father's eulogy, but I was channeling Bruyn's housefly. I was trying to find the faint glimmer of hope hiding in plain sight. I was trying to argue—perhaps in vain—with the notion that death is the ultimate limit of everything.

The still life compositions that accompany this essay are a continuation of that thought process, an attempt to wrestle with my own contradictory thoughts on Bruyn's housefly, on my father's death, and on the possibility of rebirth and renewal. I do not know if I truly believe that Bruyn's housefly can meaningfully be construed as a hopeful symbol, nor do I know if the assortment of scavenged insect remains in my own compositions can meaningfully offer a message of hope either, but I want to believe that they can.





AFTER THE FIRE

Ada Navarro Ulriksen | Poetry

She took a dip in the healing waters
of Lethe, rubbed the ashes away
until her arms were pale and gray

with cold. She stepped out, and then began

the procession of lotions and
late-night pomegranate trays.
Deep breath in.

She thinks to herself:
*The past doesn't exist except
for what its ghost hand has etched
on my body.*

Breathe out.

And she thinks:
*Rub hard enough with the right soap and the right
scrub and the marks will go away.*

She spends hours in that river,
scrubbing till her limbs feel raw.

Deep breath in.

Breathe out.

(There is still smoke in my lungs.)

One day she stops scrubbing and traces a scar
with a ragged fingernail.

Her mind is blank but
her skin

is a record player.
And when she lies real quiet,

she can hear it sing.





THE MORTHOUSE

Maria Haskins | Fiction

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In her forty-two years on God's wide Earth, Gerda has read no books other than *The Bible* and *Luther's Small Catechism*, but once, after Sunday service, she heard the sexton say that there are places where the dead traverse a river after death, paying a boatsman to ferry them across the water. Gerda knows such a thing must be either blasphemy or fable, and she knows for certain the dead will find no passage here, not this far north in Sweden, not in January when both the creek and inlet by the village lie frozen; the murky, brackish waters of the Gulf of Bothnia slumbering below windswept ice.

Here, in winter, the dead go nowhere at all, not even into the ground.

When Gerda's boy was taken by the fever after Yule—once he'd been washed and dressed and laid in his coffin with a page torn from the hymnal tucked beneath his beardless chin—a horse-drawn sled brought him to the morthouse by the church. That small building with its tarred-black wooden door and white plaster walls is where her boy waits still—his pinewood box set side by side with the others who died this winter. Whether they died of misfortune or fever or old age, all of them are waiting. Waiting for spring. Waiting for the ground to thaw. Waiting for the day when shovel-blades will bite deep enough to dig new graves.

The morthouse sits just inside the low stone wall surrounding the church grounds and cemetery. It's close enough to the church that you can hear the bell whenever the sexton makes it ring, quiet enough that you can make out the murmur of psalms on Sundays. Gerda knows this because she's stood on the threshold of the morthouse every day since her boy was brought here.

Inside, the morthouse is lit only by the wan winter light seeping through the small, solitary window. So little light comes through the dappled glass that Gerda, swept in her black church-coat, grey-blonde braids covered by a black shawl tied beneath her chin, barely casts a shadow on the floorboards. She knows she should let him be. Knows she should not be there, yet she cannot go home because her boy is not there.

January's teeth bite hard, through wood and wool and marrow. The cold makes Gerda's fingers and toes go numb. It makes the heartwood of the birches groan. It rimes each coffin lid with a thin layer of frost. Gerda thinks of her boy, wearing nothing but the suit he would have worn at his confirmation next summer, beneath that lid. She thinks of him, as she saw him last alive, thin chest racked with cough, flustered skin so hot it burned her hand to touch him.

There is no warmth left in him now. Nor in Gerda, standing by his coffin, but wherever her boy is, that is where she must be.



When her boy's fever worsened, Gerda thought of going to Miriam. Some in the village would say Miriam had a mean streak, that she made the cattle waste away if you crossed her, marking how she never showed her face at church. Some spoke of darker things, of pentagrams and poisons, of children strangled in the womb and Miriam's black cat speaking in an unknown human tongue, chanting the Lord's Prayer backwards on Good Friday. But Miriam was there when Gerda's boy was born, had pulled him from her womb safely even though he was not turned the

right way 'round. Surely she'd have helped if Gerda had begged her, if she'd offered to pay whatever price the crone might name.

But Miriam lives in the woods beyond the village, and the trail from the road is hard to find and harder to walk in winter. Besides, by the time her boy's cough and fever worsened, Gerda's own veins burned with the same sickness, and she could barely rise from her cot.

Her husband was coughing, too, but Gerda could not find it in her to ask him how he was. He said nothing as the sickness consumed the boy, just sat there on the padded bench by the iron stove, head bent, as if he were praying. Gerda wondered what prayers he had left. She had long since run out of words to say to God.

"Do something," Gerda wanted to say, but the words were lead weights, sunk too deep for her to reach.

After the boy was gone, Gerda and her husband sank too, descending into a silence as fathomless and cold as the murky waters beneath the sea ice, an abyss where neither words nor grief could surface.



Gerda imagines her husband is still sitting by the iron stove, callused hands clasped in his lap, wondering where she's gone though he should know there's nowhere else for her to go but here.



Through the window of the morthouse, Gerda marks the priest and sexton coming out of the church: black cassocks flapping like crows' wings against the snow, their shapes like smudged soot on paper. They linger outside the church door, and for a moment she fears they'll look her way, tell her to go home, or worse, try to comfort her. Instead they head up the road, toward the rectory.

When Gerda steps out of the morthouse, the church looms over her with its white stone walls and steep, tarred wood shingle roof. It is an old, simple building, no tower or spires, just the two rectangles of nave and transept forming a cross. The windows, round and arched, are set deep in thick stone walls.

Long as anyone can remember, there's been a church here, and this building has loomed over every day of Gerda's life. She's sat beneath its vaulted ceiling every Sunday since she was a babe, has heard the bells ring for war and peace and every holy day throughout the years. She was baptized, confirmed, and wed here. Both her parents were laid to rest in the cemetery, where her boy will join them soon. Standing in the snow, she can almost see herself as she once was, a younger Gerda, rocking her boy to soothe him before bringing him inside to be baptized one sheer June day, thirteen years ago. The weight of that memory, the sudden warmth and sharpness of it in the cold, almost brings her to her knees.

Leaning on the doorjamb, Gerda calls her boy's name, as she would do in mornings to wake him. He slept hard, that boy, always difficult to rouse, for school, for work, for church. She knows he is not asleep beyond the door, knows he won't hearken to the sound of her voice anymore. And yet she says his name again, the breath released when speaking it so insubstantial it does not even leave a curl of mist in the air. Again she speaks it, again, again, again.

God in his heaven could grant her this one thing if he were listening, if he had mercy, if he cared enough to take pity on a woman such as Gerda, standing in the snow, her life hollowed out until only the bitter, brittle husk remains. But no matter how many times she speaks her boy's name, he stays inside the morthouse.



It's a long walk through the village, between the houses where other people hunker down against the cold with the glow and warmth of stoves and hearths and kerosene lamps, all of it far beyond Gerda's ken these days. The snow turns blue in the failing January light. Sunbeams still cling to the highest trees, gilding the tops of the pines before the sky turns to lead, while Gerda trudges through the heavy snow toward Miriam's house.

Gerda has not spoken to Miriam since the woman helped her in the birth-bed all those years ago. She's only seen her in passing, and whatever Miriam is or isn't, Gerda always thought it wise to give her a nod and curtsy, if nothing else.

The path to Miriam's house is narrow as a whisper—deep, hardpacked snow creaking beneath Gerda's worn boots—and she almost thinks the path has led her astray until she spots the swaybacked shingle roof huddled beneath the eaves of the forest. Miriam is outside, splitting firewood on a rough-hewn stump beside the porch. The thump of the axe rings out dull and heavy between the darkness of the woods and the snowbanks folded high against the silvered timber of the cottage. Miriam is dressed in felted wool and a cape of squirrel skins, a tasseled black scarf wrapped around her scraggly white hair, and she looks no older than she did when she came to Gerda's bed all those years ago. Miriam's black cat sits on the porch, watching Gerda's approach, eyes like gleaming cinders in the dusk.

"What purpose do you have here, Gerda?"

Gerda falters, unsure for a moment if Miriam or the cat spoke. But the cat has turned away and is busy licking its front paw while Miriam holds Gerda's gaze. The old woman's eyes are dark beneath unruly brows. "Long way for you to walk in such a season," Miriam says and sets up another piece of wood, raising the axe and letting it fall with another dull thud. "You must have a pressing need."

"I want my boy back," Gerda says, her voice no louder than a murmur.

Miriam does not look up, just balances another piece of seasoned pine on the stump, raising the axe. "You have your boy. Or has he up and left the morthouse?"

Gerda flinches at that, and on the porch the cat closes its eyes as if it, too, thought those words too callous.

"I want to ask... to know...if you could wake him. If you might know a word or spell or..."

Miriam makes a sound that is halfway laughter, halfway cough. "Raising the dead is not my business." The axe falls. "And even if it were, you'd not be able to pay the price, Gerda."

"I'll give you anything, everything. I know I should have come to you when he first got sick. I should have..." Her voice fails.

Miriam shrugs. "Might not have helped. This winter's fever... it burns through blood and bone like fire through fatwood. Not much I've been able to do for anyone, even when asked. People overestimate my powers, maybe." When she speaks again, her voice is not unkindly. "Go back, Gerda. Find whatever solace you can before spring arrives and your boy is lowered into the ground."

Gerda feels as cold as if she were naked beneath trees and skies. As if her skin and heart were rimed with frost same as her boy's.

"You know me, Miriam. You know my boy. You brought him into this world. Do you remember? You pulled him out of me and cut the cord." Gerda shivers, the words like ice in her mouth. "I prayed for years for a child. Thought I was barren, tainted by some sin or flaw. My husband likely thought the same, as did the rest of the village. I know they looked askance at me. But I kept praying, and when you put my boy next to me,

bathed and swaddled, when I held him at my breast, I thought God had relented. That he'd heard my prayers for once. But what the Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, and I am done begging him for favors. My boy, he was my only. He was everything I ever asked for myself. He was ..."

Gerda tightens her hold on her coat, as if speaking another word might shatter her. "I've spent every day since he passed in the morthouse. I can't leave him there. Can't put him in the ground neither." She doesn't look at Miriam, but the cat is listening, its yellow eyes fixed on Gerda. "I know what people say about you, Miriam. That you are older than you seem. Th-that you've cheated God and death. That they tried to burn you at the stake long ago but failed. That y-you wield the devil's power. I don't know if any of it's true, but I don't care. Don't care where the power comes from--if you can give my son back to me."

Miriam plants the axe in the stump with a firm swing. She looks at the cat, and Gerda is sure that something passes between the two of them, crone and beast, even though no words are spoken.

"Maybe there is something I can do for you, Gerda. But this is no easy matter. If you persevere, you might get what you want, though you will likely have to forsake whatever's left of your faith to find what you seek."

Miriam and the cat are watching her, rheumy eyes and narrow embers fixed on her as shadows gather beneath the heavy branches of the spruce. Gerda thinks of the Bible and *Luther's Small Catechism*, of psalms and prayers, of all the words she's read and recited by heart through the years, of everything she thought she knew of herself and God. She thinks of the morthouse, of the pinewood lid nailed down over her boy's face, of his skin gone blue and icy in the cold.

"I'll do whatever you ask of me."

Miriam clears her throat and spits into the snow.

“You must bring me three things and you must not ask me why or how. If you fail, I cannot help you, and even if you do as I tell you, it will be a hard thing to get done.”

“Tell me.”

“First I’ll need water from the baptismal font. No matter how small a measure, you must fetch me something, even if just a spoonful. Bring me that to me and I’ll let you know what’s next.”



The church is empty when Gerda enters, sneaking down the right side-aisle like a sinner come late to worship on a Sunday. She’s waited in the morthouse, too fearful to enter when someone else might have been close, but this morning, with dawn slanting through the church windows, there are no sounds of songs or sermons to fill the high space above the pews. It’s as cold as the morthouse in the transept where the baptismal font stands, placed beneath Christ on the cross and the painted figure of Mother Mary, crowned and robed, her boy child tugging at her wooden robes.

The font is sculpted from grey granite, polished smooth. Angel wings and haloed heads crowd round the bowl, skulls and crouching devils intertwined round the bottom of the pedestal.

Gerda remembers how her boy struggled in his embroidered christening gown as the proper words were said, how he cried as the water wet his skin, how his blond hair lay slick and dark against his soft skull, the weight and warmth of his small body once he was back in her arms. Reaching for the font, she trembles—the memory, briefly, hovering like a mote of dust in the illuminated air before it fades—and she realizes too late that she has brought no cup or glass to carry what she needs. Dejected, she touches the surface of the water but finds only ice, cold and unyielding, beneath her fingers.

A thin, sharp blade of anger cuts through her, then; that this simple thing would be taken from her, too, the water she needs for her boy. Gerda raises her arm and brings her fist down, hard, while Mother Mary holds her babe close, blue eyes painted on wood, unseeing.



"It will do," Miriam nods from the threshold of the cottage when Gerda hands her the shard of ice. Beyond the old woman's silhouette, Gerda glimpses the flicker of the hearth, the gleam of cat's eyes. The ice glints in the sunlight, dappled and veined like the morthouse's window glass, as Miriam slips it into a copper pot lined with tin. "Next, you must bring me something that sprouts beneath the ground in winter though it is neither tended nor planted."

"What..."

"No questions, just bring it to me once you've found it," Miriam says and shuts the door.



Gerda does not roam the church grounds and morthouse anymore. She wanders the snowy meadows rolling down from the village toward the inlet and the creek, she roves the oat and barley fields and frost-decked gardens. But nothing, nowhere, grows in winter. The earth is frozen solid, and there is no place for roots nor leaves to sprout.

It takes Gerda a long time to guess what she might bring Miriam, and when she thinks of what it might be, she follows the road back past the church to her own house. A curl of smoke rises from the chimney, and the soft light of a kerosene lamp glints in the kitchen window, but she doesn't go that way. Gerda strides past the house, past the old rowan tree by the barn, to the two tall pines beyond the byre, to the root cellar delved into the earth beneath the boles and branches.

She used to walk here a few times a week at least to fetch potatoes for supper, onions to fry for salted pork, a jar of lingonberry jam from the shelf inside the door. When her boy was little, he'd come with her, tugging at her apron, gawping at the darkness inside when the low door creaked open, scared to enter until she held the lantern high to cast its light around them.

Gerda has no light to raise now. Instead, she props open the door to let in the last remnants of daylight. Even so, the root cellar is dark and close, its walls lined with wooden bins, filled with the potatoes harvested from their small plot last year. Gerda remembers her boy as he was last spring, whole and hale, bending down to plant seed potatoes in the plowed row ahead of her. His narrow back bent, his neck gone ruddy in the sun. The familiar slant of his smile as he turned round to speak to her. Try as she might, she cannot remember what words he spoke, nor even the sound of his voice. She gropes for the memory, but it slips from her grip, a polished stone, sinking in the murky waters of silence that hold her now.

In the wooden bins, the potatoes are dry and dusty, still firm and good for eating. But one is on the floor; perhaps it slipped from her hand one day and fell right there, where a narrow band of light would catch it whenever the door is opened. Now, white and purple shoots sprout like twisting limbs from its eyes.

She picks it up, and the potato is soft and warm in her hand, like flesh.



Miriam takes the tuber from Gerda and places it gingerly in the copper pot before covering it with a lid.

“This will do. Now, listen close. The third and final thing you must bring me, is a piece of gold.”

Gerda staggers. "I have no gold."

Miriam tilts her head. "Are you not a married woman then, Gerda? Do you not wear a gilded- silver betrothal band on your left ring finger? Is it not shaped like two hands clasped? Did your husband not gift it to you on the day he asked to marry you all those years ago?"

Numbly, Gerda lifts her left hand, but there is no ring. She turns her hand over, as if doing so would reveal the missing band, but there is nothing but wind between her fingers. Gerda shivers in that wind. Her hair's come loose from its braid (when did she comb it last?) and her black shawl is gone (when did she take it off?), and the cold creeps down from her crown, slipping between her ribs, into her gut.

"Did you lose your ring, Gerda? Lose it in the snow, in the fields, in the root cellar, by the water's edge where the ice lies thick in winter? Or did you leave it somewhere, in a place you have forgotten?" This time, Gerda is sure it's the cat speaking because the voice does not sound like Miriam's. It is mellifluous and low, trembling at the edge of hearing, like the lowest note on the church organ. When she looks up the cat is watching her intently, a glint of teeth beneath its whiskers.

"Fetch me your ring, Gerda," Miriam says. "You're almost out of time."

If she or the cat says anything else, Gerda does not hear it, because she's already gone.



Standing in the yard in the trodden, dirty snow, Gerda looks at the house she's lived in for over twenty years. A small building with a pitched roof, painted dark red with white trim like all the houses in the village. Wilted rose-hip brambles nestled by the south wall, and in the windows, the curtains she hemmed herself: white fabric, small blue flowers.

Gerda can't remember the last time she was home. Can't remember how many nights she's spent in the morthouse rather than her bed, how many days she's roamed the woods and village rather than these rooms. Now, she is reluctant to enter, as if she were standing at the door of a stranger's cottage, and yet she must go inside because her ring is surely there, in the bedroom, on the dresser, in the small glass bowl by the mirror, where she always places it when she heads out to do her chores.

Gazing into the kitchen, Gerda sees her husband, seated at the table. His face is wan and drawn, creased deeper than she remembers it. Gerda taps the glass with cold fingers. At first, it's as if he does not notice her, but when he does, he looks away. Neither of them moves or speaks for a long measure. Stood outside the window, Gerda can't remember anything he's ever said to her or anything she's ever said to him. All their years together have been steeped in silence. At first, that silence was companionable, perhaps, when they were young and knew what they might want to say, but a look or touch would do instead. Then, year by year, they said less and less, because each spoken word would turn into a barb or admonition. Lately, there have been no words at all. Not of love or solace, care or comfort, no barbs or admonitions neither, nor has she even felt the desire for any of those things.

Gerda peers into the kitchen, *her* kitchen. The iron stove, her polished pots and pans hung neatly on their hooks above it. The bunches of thyme and lovage bound with twine hanging where she strung them up to dry last fall by the chimney. The narrow daybed where her boy would sleep. For a moment, she wonders what it would be like to step inside, to rest awhile, perhaps, but she knows she cannot enter. Cannot enter the house when her boy is not there, cannot cross the threshold to see his bed and chair empty, the scent of him still lingering in wool and wood and linen.

She cannot. Not even for the gold.

Inside, her husband rises from the table, reaching for his hat on the peg beside the door. He is dressed in his best suit. The one he dons for church, but it's not Sunday, is it? Can't be Sunday because she's not heard the church bell toll. In the stillness, Gerda listens as water trickles off the eaves, as the icicles cry themselves into the dirt beneath her feet.

It's spring.

How did she not notice it before? That the ground is thawing at the touch of sun and meltwater, that it's already soft enough to dig new graves?



Even as Gerda rushes to the church, to the morthouse, it's too late, and she knows it. Spring has come. The creek is hurrying over rocks and pebbles; the ice covering the inlet is cracking, heaving, opening to the sea.

Outside the morthouse, Gerda stops. In the cemetery beyond, new graves yawn wide, dark earth bared, coffins already brought into the open, mourners gathering in black, her husband walking, hat in hand, beside the priest. The morthouse's door is closed, but Gerda knows it's empty. As empty as the church, as empty as the home she left behind, as empty as Gerda herself.

Miriam deceived her. She never meant to do what Gerda asked. All this time, the crone has only worked to thwart her. To put her off until winter's gone, and her boy's been planted in the ground to rot.

The church bell peals, summoning the mourners, but beneath the familiar clang of bronze, Gerda hears a different sound—distant, faint, seaward—it's a ship's bell, timorous and hollow, calling her to the shore.



At the water's edge, at the dock where fishing boats and trading skiffs will gather come summer, Gerda looks across the inlet. The ice has broken, floes dancing in the grey swell, and out there, headed toward the open sea, a boat. It is no boat that Gerda knows. No dinghy or skiff or rowboat, rather, a weave of shadows crafted into a slender, high-prowed craft. In the stern, a tall figure, cloaked and hooded, stands with one hand on the tiller, the other sounding the bell that summoned her. And seated in the bow, her boy. Even this far away, even with his back turned, Gerda knows it's him.

The ship's bell tolls again, the sound far away and fading, yet it tugs Gerda ever closer to the water.

"I do remember your boy," Miriam says, ambling up beside her while the cat slinks round her legs, trying not to dip its paws in the snowmelt. "I remember every child I've pulled into this world, and every child I've pushed out of it. I remember your boy squalling as he drew breath and I remember how you smiled at him that day. I know you feel bereft, Gerda, but no God gave him to you and no God took him away. Your boy was simply born, then he died, and the same is true for each of us."

"You lied to me."

Miriam shakes her head. "I might have misled you, but I don't lie if I can help it. You might think what I asked of you was nothing but a ruse, but I did it with a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To help you remember. Though I had hoped you'd get around to it before now."

"Remember what?"

A half-smile tugs at Miriam's mouth.

"If you're alive or if you're dead. You've forgotten what you are, and it's no good for anyone, spirit or flesh, to linger in between. One way or another, you must decide where to go."

Gerda considers going back: to the village, the church, her house. But there is nothing left but her boy's coffin and grave back there, her husband already shoveling dirt into the hole where his body will feed the worms. Is there a coffin for her too back there; a grave, as well?

Gerda cannot remember. Cannot remember if the fever claimed her too, after her boy was taken to the morthouse. Cannot remember if her husband closed her eyes, cannot remember if he wept as they laid her in the coffin, cannot remember if her ring is still set upon her cold finger beneath the pinewood lid. She remembers nothing. All she knows for sure is that her boy is in that boat, that he's found passage to whatever lies beyond, and that she was not here to go with him.

"That boat won't turn back," the cat says, looking up at Gerda with fiery eyes, its deep voice barely more than a purr. "It never does. But your boy might hear you, if you call."

Gerda calls her boy's name. The wind tears it from her lips, but maybe her boy stirs, maybe he turns, maybe he beckons and smiles that familiar slanted smile, maybe he shouts something, though she cannot make out the words, and now she does not hesitate. Whether she's alive or dead, spirit or flesh, whether this is blasphemy or fable, no matter. Gerda wades into the murky, brackish waters; she strides between the ice floes, deeper into the churning waves. She needs no boatsman to ferry her across these waters, needs no craft to carry her, because wherever her boy is going, that is where she'll be.





A MAN IS TWO GRAVESTONES

Blessing Omeiza Ojo | Poetry

Mortals, my father says, come twice before they finally hit the eternal rest button. By this he meant, a man is to two gravestones, that a man drowned in the slave ship with his dreams, his master and the sailor can be gifted a chance to own a tomb in the afterlife. That the bodies burnt by a country for loving themselves above other things could sit on their monuments, rewrite their epitaphs, and supplant the corpse flower sprouting from their bodies with hyacinth. Something I am not supposed to share: after my father's departure, I haven't seen him in a body but as a ghost in my sleep. And sometimes, he shadows me. I haven't touched his skin, soft and sheepy, like my first child. And as I write this poem, a yearning forges. How to suppress it is a thorn in my flesh. Fine, if he had said grief reincarnates into different bodies. I am not saying my father lied. He who doesn't measure sin with mudu knew which tent God would be in the wilderness, and how to offer poem as praise. What sin death saw in him, I can't say. What did he see in your loss?





ASK A NECROMANCER

In a Lonely Place

Amanda Downum | Nonfiction

[View Content Notes](#)

A dear friend recently said to me, “*You get the thing where enough ‘lonely’ feels like ‘death.’*” I’m not sure if it was meant to be a statement or a question, but it doesn’t matter: the answer is yes.

Several months ago, a funeral director called me at midnight, asking me—pleading—to add one more prep to my queue that night. An autopsy, a suicide. A case for the county’s indigent burial program. There would be no services but the graveside, but his family wanted to see him. *He was only twenty*, the director said to me. *He was only twenty*. I stayed late that night to stitch that too-young man back together. There was no question about that.

The first time I caught feelings at work was a different suicide. A woman who hanged herself. I held her hand and cried. She was in her thirties, only a few years younger than me. Still too young.

More recently, I dropped everything one night to pick up a teenager out of their own backyard where the police had left them. Should they have gone for an autopsy? Certainly, but that’s not my decision. All I could do was go, and clean the leaves and blood off that child’s face so their mother could see them again. To look her in the eye with nothing to say.

Enough lonely feels like death.

We—as a profession—do what we do for the living. For the families. Decedents in our care are “loved ones.” I don’t make light of that. Families wound in so many unavoidable ways, while doing the best they can. While loving each other profoundly. That’s the price of interpersonal relationships. And when someone is crushed by an imbalance of brain chemicals too painful to bear, sometimes no amount of love can help them, however much we try.

However, I’ve known far too many people who were betrayed and abused by those who should have protected them. In the case of young suicides, there is dark question whispering in me every time: was a family member responsible for this? I may never have an answer to that question. I’m not that kind of necromancer. But just in case, I choose to care for the dead for their own sake.

It’s been a rough few weeks for me, emotionally. Lonely. I know I’m not alone—I have friends who care about me, who’ve been there when I needed them. But most immediately, my co-workers have been there. It’s a sure sign the therapy is working when—despite being at the lowest point I’ve reached in years—I can notice that people are making sure I eat. Trying to make me laugh. Doing little things to make me feel better. Years ago, I know, that wouldn’t have registered at all.

Many friends of mine wrestle with suicidal ideation. I’m lucky enough to have never felt that. No matter how bad things have been, I have too much spite. No matter how harsh or lonely or cruel the world can feel, it can damned well break its teeth on me before I make things easy for the abyss. I’m not advocating this as a coping mechanism, by the way. Therapy and medication are much better.

I’m also not going to decry the selfishness of suicide. For those are who are suffering that much, I’m not about to tell them to suck it up and suffer more so others can feel better. I’ve watched people I cared for grapple

with that crushing sense of isolation, the certainty that no one actually gave a damn if they lived or died. I've argued with them, angrily—not even on my behalf, but on behalf of others who I knew loved them so very much. But I've also been in their place, and I understand what that feels like. When the black dog has its teeth in you that deep, arguments ring hollow.

"It gets better" is a glib response for those who don't have access to healthcare or social services, who have been failed by someone who should have nurtured them. Not much kinder than "Suck it up" or "Other people have it worse." But it *can* get better. Someone does care, even if you can't see it. A stranger somewhere is rooting for you, even if you never meet them. Spite isn't better than hope, but some days it's what works.

I wish everyone a warmer hand to hold than mine.



Please submit your questions to the necromancer, lest she stare too long into her own abyss. The abyss is quite frankly getting a little weirded out.

Send your questions via the submission form at thedeadlands.com, or [@stillsotranger](https://twitter.com/stillsotranger) on Twitter.





OWL'S HEAD, 1980s

M. Regan | Poetry

i. *The Ocean*

Gilded crests and metallic prisms
are shattered now, transmuted now:
emerald to tanzanite to sapphire to silver
in accordance with nor' eastern alchemy.
Like birth, the horizon becomes distinct bodies;
you watch as sea splits free from sky.

And there, between—a line across deep water:
an ouroboros loop betwixt past, present, shore.
Serpentine, it ribbons on the backs of swells,
incorporeal and hazed. Rising and falling.
When the wave reaches sand, bleaches beach,
you think you've fallen back through time.

ii. *The Fog*

Like your maritime fellows, you yearned for Paradise
till it was close enough to choke you with lungfuls of cloud.
Armageddons come without trumpets or fire;
the void exhales, and through nebulous breath
the silhouettes of sea stacks remind you
of ancient chapels, burnt to ash.

The word that you are looking for is *liminal*:
that space between Heaven and Hell and

the crushing, inky black associated with nihilism.
 Veil upon veil, shroud upon shroud,
 the ethereal unfurls around you, cloaking and reminding you
 that you were a corpse long before you died.

iii. *The Ship*

Pitch left, pitch right, press on through darkness.
 Sweat lingers at the temple, brackish then cold.
 Her hull is two or three and susceptible;
 her mind undammed and thoughts a-flowing;
 her emotions tidal, loadstars in her eyes.
 A child is built to weather the unknown.

Pitch left, pitch right, round the hall's tight corner.
 Fabrics froth at tiny feet: surging, washing
 over skin as smooth as newly christened figureheads.
 You guide her with the practiced touch
 of a man who spent a lifetime steering vessels
 with cheaper parts, fewer joints, more souls aboard.

iv. *The Light*

"Fog's rolling in! Time to put the foghorn on!"
 Startled, they listen, they go, off to do their duties.
 Obedient, they listen, they go, off into the light.
 And you, on the stairs, on the precipice,
 feel the little girl's smile ripple out
 of her small self and into your own.

"Will you go, too?" she asks,
 her voice two or three and susceptible again.
 "Will you go off into the Light?"
 Through an atramentous window, mourning winds wail;
 the ocean waves, and you recognize the summons.
 But you have ignored the inevitable for this long.





AUTHOR BIOS



Gretchen Tessmer lives in the U.S./Canadian borderlands. She writes both short fiction and poetry (way too much poetry), with work appearing in *Nature*, *Strange Horizons* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, among other venues.



KT Bryski is a Canadian author and podcaster. Her short fiction has appeared in many places, including *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, *PodCastle* and *Apex*. She's won the Parsec Award and the Toronto Star Short Story Contest, and she has been a finalist for the Eugie, Aurora, and Sunburst Award. KT co-chairs *ephemera*, a speculative fiction

reading series occurring monthly in Toronto (or YouTube, depending on COVID-19). When she's not writing, she frolics through Toronto enjoying choral music and craft beer. Find her on Twitter @ktbryski.



Neal Auch has spent the last few years using photography and prose to explore the unlikely beauty of death, decay, and ruin. His images draw considerably from 17th-century Dutch still life paintings and they have been exhibited in galleries, published in fine art books, and adorned the covers of horror novels. Neal is a self-taught artist whose practice is informed by an eclectic background that encompasses experimental music, transgressive literature, and theoretical physics. He lives in Hamilton, Ontario, with an unreasonably accommodating partner and a bloated collection of dead things. You can find Neal at www.nealauch.com.



Ada Navarro Ulriksen is a Chilean-American writer who lives in California. Her poetry has appeared in the journals *Quatrain.fish*, *soft surface poetry*, *Three Line Poetry*, and *Poetry Quarterly*.



Maria Haskins is a Swedish-Canadian writer and reviewer of speculative fiction. She currently lives just outside Vancouver with a husband, two kids, a snake, several birds, and a very large black dog. Her short story collection *Six Dreams About the Train* is out now from Trepidatio Publishing. Maria's work has appeared in *The Best Horror of the Year Volume 13*, *Strange Horizons*, *Black Static*, *Interzone*, *Fireside*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Shimmer*, *Cast of Wonders*, and elsewhere. Find out more on her website, mariahaskins.com, or follow her on Twitter, @mariahaskins.



Blessing Omeiza Ojo—Nigerian poet, teacher and author—is a Best of the Net Nominee. His works have appeared in *Split Lip Magazine*, *Parousia*, *Olney*, *Còn-sciò*, *Roughcut Press*, *Art-sLounge*, *Wax Poetry Journal*, *Lunaris Review*, *Last Girls Club*, *Armosterrific*, *Trampoline*, *Praxis* and

elsewhere. His poem, “Everything Around Us Sings” was selected for publication at the Castello di Duino 2021 International Poetry and Theatre Competition. In 2020, Omeiza was named the Arts Lounge’s Literature Teacher of the Year. He was a shortlist of Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize 2020, semi-finalist for Jack Grapes Poetry Prize 2020, and the winner, 9th Korea-Nigeria Poetry Prize (Ambassador Special Prize). He teaches creative writing at Jewel Model Secondary School, Abuja, where he has mentored winners of national and international prizes. When he is not reading or writing, you may find him playing PES. Reach him on Instagram @ink_spiller_1. Say hello on Twitter @donfox001.



M. Regan has been writing for over a decade, with credits ranging from localization work to short stories to podcast scripts. Their soulful debut novella, *21 Grams*, can be found on Amazon and Timber Ghost Press’s website, while they can be found on Twitter and Facebook at @MReganFiction.



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.



CONTENT NOTES

The Deadlands, Issue 12

This Is I

Contains discussion of suicide, mention of child's death, depiction of drug use.

[Return to Story](#)

The Morthouse:

Contains the death of a child.

[Return to Story](#)

Ask a Necromancer:

Contains discussion of suicide.

[Return to Story](#)



The Deadlands Issue 12, April 2022

Front Cover: "Charon's Burden" by Julie Dillon

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