

Ali | Beveridge | De Winter | Duckworth  
Gill | Jiang | Linden | Svobodová



THE DEADLANDS

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a journal of ends & beginnings

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# CONTENTS

I think of my grandfather – <i>Jonathan Duckworth</i>   Poetry	3
The Projectionists – <i>E.M. Linden</i>   Fiction	4
Grieving Rehearsal – <i>Akash Ali</i>   Poetry	17
The Custom of the Sea – <i>Katie Gill</i>   Nonfiction	18
The Train – <i>Ivana Svobodová</i>   Poetry	27
To Build Eternity, With Bones – <i>Gunnar De Winter</i>   Fiction	28
Ask a Necromancer: Everyone Dies Alone – <i>Amanda Downum</i>   Nonfiction	39
The Alchemists, the Squirrels – <i>Robert Beveridge</i>   Poetry	43
In Water, We Survive – <i>Ai Jiang</i>   Fiction	44
Author Bios	47
Staff Bios	50



# I THINK OF MY GRANDFATHER

Jonathan Duckworth | Poetry

17, rubbed in his family's Liège apartment, throat like sawdust, half hoping to die & wondering if he already had. Before that a missile peeled a building, a home, a family away. Before that a V-2 rocket launched from the Baltic made gravity a chump. Before that prisoners hungrier than him welded its casing together. Before that Herr Professor Wernher von Braun decided between two neckties in his closet & noticed a thumbprint on his glasses.

83, prostate cancer detected too late after living for years two floors above a urologist's office. Every so often somewhere in Europe someone finds a bag of gold teeth in their drywall. Life is funny like a melted unicycle. In the absence of irony & religion & someone to miss us, we could call death a really long blink. Try telling a burrowed cicada in Indonesia how the northern lights ribbon over Nunavut. It took me years before I cried.





# THE PROJECTIONISTS

E.M. Linden | Fiction

Nobody talks about what happened in Hasan's city, so he looks for clues. His memories are jumbled up and broken. Boots thudding. Shards of glass. Shoulders and fists slamming on the thin wooden door of his flat. He remembers one night some men forced their way in. The latch is still broken. But Hasan's father says no. That was only because Hasan locked himself in once and the neighbors had to rescue him. It's a funny story, not a scary one. And his mother is with relatives. Hasan doesn't need to worry.

Sometimes Hasan's father wakes up crying.

Hasan has milestones for every season. In autumn, he waits for the Projectionists, scanning the streets for their hand-lettered posters. In September he spots them, taped up at the corner shop; papering over the bullet holes on the old shoe factory. The Projectionists hang a sheet against someone's wall and play films for the neighborhood. Hasan watches *Black Panther* and an old *Star Wars* film and other movies from America. He comes home with his head full of stars and explosions and hidden kingdoms, and pours out his wonder to his father, spills his tea in his excitement. "Amazing," says his father. "Tell me more. How did they hide this kingdom? And what was it called again?"

Hasan goes every Thursday, with a blanket and his father's flask of hot tea. He wants to be a projectionist when he grows up. It's not a job,

not a proper job, but he wants to learn how anyway. He hangs around, watching the tallest of the young men wrestle the sheet into place.

In winter, it's too cold to sit outside, so the Projectionists take a break. The smoke of coal fires hangs over the city. Daylight is trapped behind the clouds. The dark disorients Hasan, like the clocks and the prayer-towers and the bread-sellers are all playing tricks on him. He wakes groggy, and his flat is so cold that his breath hangs in the air.

But winter also brings the snow, gentling the city in thousands of small ways. It smooths over the potholes on the way to the market, and the frozen mud doesn't clog his shoes, at least until it's trampled into slush. The snow trims the broken-faced buildings in smart white paint.

He likes the squeaky crunch of fresh snow underfoot. The smell of chestnuts splitting over charcoal. Snow fights. Sliding down the steepest streets on flattened cardboard boxes. Snowflakes that dust his gloves but disappear on his bare skin. The sting and flush of his face and ears, then hot barley soup and action films on the television in the long evenings.

In winter, everyone walks as slowly and carefully as Hasan's father. Nobody clicks their tongue impatiently behind him.

Hasan's father is setting a record. On the surface, it's simple: to go the longest stretch of days without mentioning a particular woman. Every day his lead increases. But there are vastnesses in his silence. Daylight trapped behind the clouds. Hasan knows his father.

"Make sure you have your jacket with you," Hasan's father always reminds him whenever he leaves the house. "But it's not snowing," Hasan says, and his father replies, "It's not snowing now, Hasan; nobody knows the future."

But snow tells Hasan the past. Where people went, the shoes they wore, how long ago they left. The unmarked snow is as white as the Projectionists' sheet before the film plays, and the footprints are the beginning of the story.

Hasan is a detective in winter. Footprints crisscross the snow on the main paths, so people's tracks are cleanest when they trespass and stray. The shortcut-takers that hem their neighbor's gardens; the rooftop trceries where people tap into the power lines; the double set of footprints on a mysterious errand in the half-finished hotel.

Not everyone leaves footprints. There are the silent people. Hasan has seen them ever since he can remember, one or two in a week, perhaps, but there are more and more these days. They're everywhere. Behind broken windows and waiting for buses on routes that are no longer serviced. Mostly they just seem bewildered. They make no tracks for Hasan to follow.

It sounds simple, Hasan knows, but sometimes you never do find out where people go. Like the son of the bookseller, the one near Little Tree Street, who sometimes gave him cloves to chew when he helped his father in the shop. The old man shut his lips tight and shook his head whenever Hasan asked him when his son would come back. Now he knows better than to ask. Some things he must find out for himself.

Every day his father's record is a day longer, and harder to break.

One day a woman slips on the ice. Her head hits the concrete and bounces hard. People rush to her side. Hasan hangs back. The helpers crowd in, brandishing cellphones, talking urgently, telling each other not to move her. It's cold, well under freezing, and soon the woman shakes so violently her legs drum on the concrete. A shopkeeper comes out with a woolen blanket, and they lay it over her. The ambulance arrives eventually, and young volunteers in red fleeces slide a brace around the woman's neck. Hasan perches under the overhang of the shop and watches.

Someone comes and stands next to him. It is the woman, the same woman. She is lying on the ground, now still. She is standing next to Hasan. She is being loaded onto the ambulance. She is watching herself, puzzled.

She notices him looking and offers him a sunflower seed. Hasan shakes his head politely, and the woman shrugs. She opens her mouth to speak, and her face distorts, like the image on a flickering television when there's interference with the transmission. White noise. A snowy screen. Silence. The woman flickers jerkily back into place.

That's when Hasan knows. They're ghosts, the silent people.

Workers from the countryside clear the snow. Hasan flinches when their shovels scrape the concrete; their plow-wielding trucks belch fumes and churn the snow into wet dirt. They're hungry men, their families live far away. He's not sure where they go in summer.

When the roads are clear, the traffic starts back up, choking the city and making Hasan's father wheeze. But where the snow is left alone, where people don't tread and cars don't go, it sculpts itself into lovely shapes: porcelain bowls, the prows of ships. It sparkles in the sunlight. And it hides treasures for Hasan: a five-tan coin, a bird skull.

Hasan's father buys him a pair of waterproof boots. He likes the slip and give of their soles on the weathering snow. But one day Hasan breaks a lace and, impatient, walks home along the road by the government buildings. The pavements there are always well-salted and cleared of ice.

Outside the Ministry of Security, the silent people throng. He shivers when he sees them, but something in him wills them not to fade away.

By four in the afternoon, Hasan is home with his father. It's already nearly dark, but the small television screen glows. Hasan winds himself

up in the rug, and rolls himself out, and sneezes. His father watches television from the chair, but Hasan prefers the rug. His father nudges him with his stick, and Hasan sits upright. The Minister is on the television again. There's supposed to be a film, but the news runs late. The Minister talks about traitors and terrorists. Suddenly the image fades. The screen blinks. There's a snowy flurry of interference. Hasan's father rumbles from his chair. Hasan obediently gets up and waggles the aerial until the Minister fades back into the screen, an apparition. He rambles on with his speech. Finally, Hasan's film starts.

The snow makes the ghosts clearer, sharper-edged, as if it amplifies whatever connection allows them to appear in Hasan's city. Hasan thinks for a long time he's the only one who can see them. Then he realizes everyone can see the ghosts, but only children stare. People avert their gazes, keep their faces blank, twitch their children away and make sure their sleeves do not brush against them. If a ghost is on the tram, retracing their old routes, the living leave a respectful space, even when everyone else is squashed in until the windows stream with condensation.

When he next sees the woman who fell, the one who offered him a sunflower seed, she's filling her basket with winter pickings at the market: fat pumpkins, chestnuts, leeks. He's used to the silent people by then, so he pushes right past her. He thinks he'll pass through her because she's dead, but instead he jars her arm, and she drops her basket. She's solid and alive. Hasan apologizes and helps to gather her spilled groceries. "How's your head?" he asks.

She stares at him in confusion. In life, her eyes are green. "Oh!" she says. "Were you there? Just a concussion, thank God."

He doesn't know what to do with this clue. More and more, Hasan learns, there are things in his city he must not notice. Questions nobody asks. Small things, like a friend's careless comments, to which the response is a poker face or a noisy clearing of plates. Big things, too. Shiny squares on dusty tables or bright patches on faded wallpaper;

the marks of exiled photographs. "Sometimes people see or say too much," his father tells him. Hasan works out the rest of the sentence on his own. Such people are troublemakers. Sometimes troublemakers disappear, and when they disappear, nobody remembers them.

That night, the news presenter frowns. She's not trying to be difficult. She just wants the Defense Minister to reassure the viewers, and her. *Somebody* must know what's going on. The Defense Minister looks more and more flustered. "We'd like to remind the public that, even if they look like—like someone you think you might know—they're—terrorists—traitors—not citizens."

"But *how* are they—"

The Minister cuts the presenter off with a sharp wave of his hand. "We're dealing with it." He smiles tightly. "We don't give airtime to terrorists."

Hasan learns the rules. Grief shows that you remember. If people disappear—*terrorists, traitors, not citizens*—they never existed. But grief gets in the way. So in Hasan's city, people do not grieve. No smoke and jasmine and blue beads to map the dead's path to the next world. No mourning prayers, no tears or other defiances. No keeping vigil until the right moon sets. No bodies.

Even the dead can drag you down with them if you love them too much. Hasan's neighbor made this mistake when her husband disappeared. Now their flat stands empty. Hasan fears sometimes that his whole city could disappear like this, chains of people destroying each other through reckless grief and love and stubborn memory.

Or maybe this is what will save the city. If you are remembered, you persist.

He wishes he could remember more of his mother.

Hasan learns. Anything can be erased. A son. A war. But he also watches the snow. Things are still there, underneath.

The Chief Minister makes his next speech on Victory Day. Bored, Hasan sprawls on his stomach and tugs blue threads from the rug. Hasan's father likes the rug, but fair's fair, he has also insisted on the speech even though there's a James Bond film on the other channel.

Hasan wraps the blue thread around his finger. Then Hasan's father makes a sound that might be a laugh. Hasan's father never laughs. He glances at his father in shock, then up at the TV. Six burly security guards surround the Chief Minister, but they cannot keep them out. The crowd of ghosts press in. They cluster around the Chief Minister like moths to a candle.

The Chief Minister's eyes widen and widen, his voice shakes and his breath quickens. He looks very carefully straight ahead of him, as if he can't see the silent people, and continues with his speech. A halo drifts in front of the camera, like snow across a street lamp. The Chief Minister shuts his eyes and shudders.

"Why doesn't he just stop talking?" Hasan asks. His father shrugs.

The Chief Minister mumbles. He has lost track. The General standing next to him opens his mouth, but his face is filmy because a ghost hovers between him and the camera. "They'll be, um, defeated," the Chief Minister says. The sound is crackly. "The gho—the terrorists. We cannot give in to, to, to tr—"

"Maybe they're not ghosts," Hasan says, thinking of the woman with the sunflower seeds. "Maybe they're still alive somewhere."

His father meets his eyes. It is a look he gives Hasan every now and again, a look as if he is sorry and maybe a bit ashamed, and for a long moment Hasan thinks his father is going to tell him. But Hasan's father

swallows, and the presence of Hasan's mother fades back into the dusty curtains that she sewed and the marks on the couch from her careless cigarettes. "Yes," he says, eyes back on the screen. "Somewhere."

The thaw comes. The snowplows rest. The air is clean and quiet. Hasan finds a piece of blue glass in a puddle of snowmelt, as smooth as if it had come from the sea. The weather warms, and the Projectionists show their films again. One of their friends, the tallest young man, doesn't return. That happens sometimes. Their sheet is shabby, stored in a dusty cupboard over winter, and without their friend, they struggle to reach high enough to hang it.

But other things have changed too. Maybe the ghosts made them brave. Now the Projectionists show films unlike any they've shown before. Not from America. From Hasan's own city. They have ordinary people in them, talking in a way that Hasan has never heard. It's in his language, but it uses new words, and familiar words in new ways. They're talking about things people are not meant to talk about. Like truth, and justice, but not the Truth and Justice that American superheroes bring. More like farmers discussing the rain, quiet but sure. They need it, but they know the drought always breaks eventually.

Hasan's father bans him from visiting the Projectionists after the first police raid, but he does not see what Hasan sees. Amidst the cracking truncheons and the running feet, Hasan sees a man he's been told to stay away from, a security officer whose job is to scare and hurt people. Today, though, tears stream down the violent man's cheeks, glinting in the blue-white light of the projector. A ghost faces him calmly. Hasan recognizes the tallest Projectionist. The violent man shivers in the spring sunshine, trying to keep his eyes on the sky and not on the ghost's face. He gazes at the sky, and his lips move.

Is he praying? Hasan cannot lip-read. He doesn't know what has made the man like this. Fear, perhaps regret. But he knows the man will never again be able to do what he used to.

Hasan steps closer.

“Please,” the man is saying, over and over. “I’m sorry. Please. I’m sorry.”

After that, Hasan isn’t scared. He’s not the only one. People become bolder, speculating secretly, then openly. He hears the grown-ups around him ask and say things they would never have dared to say before. In his whole life, he’s never heard people talk like this.

Even his father ventures a thought. “They’re not remembering themselves,” he tells Hasan quietly, who has bumbled on all through dinner. “We’re remembering them.”

A ghost passes by a white wall like an image from a film, and something clicks into focus for Hasan. They’re projectionists, these ghosts, sending themselves back. They’re stuck somewhere and can’t move on. Like the woman who fell on the pavement. She left her body when it was hurt and cold, to stand peacefully next to Hasan for a little while. In Hasan’s comics it’s called an *out-of-body experience*. But as much as he’d like to believe otherwise, deep down he knows the woman is the exception. Maybe it was something in his father’s face. Not every ghost returns to their bodies. Most are dead.

Hasan thinks he understands. They can’t move on because they were never mourned. No jasmine, no tears. But they find their way back because they are remembered.

So Hasan looks. He tries to be an aerial, a blank slate, a fresh snowfall, a white sheet. He tries to be a projectionist and reach out.

But what he wants eludes him. He must be close. Every day he stops at a certain spot outside his block of flats, a tiny edge of land where wildflowers struggle and thrive each summer. Another milestone. In this particular spot, Hasan’s frustration and sadness are almost too big

for him to carry. Perhaps the feelings are from within him, but maybe they belong to someone else.

Hasan admits it to himself. He's hoping.

When the ghosts bring names, tiny messages to the living, it spooks the Chief Minister even more. He announces forceful new measures. The ghosts are banned, interacting with ghosts is treason, and the ghosts don't exist. People read the messages anyway. The Minister of Security quits. Some say he had a nervous breakdown.

Hasan finds it strange that nobody he knows personally is scared of the ghosts, but everyone in charge seems terrified of them.

The ghosts don't listen to the Chief Minister. They cradle scraps of cloth and paper. They warm their hands on them. Still silent, they reach for the remnants of words. The scraps are as intangible as the ghosts, so they cannot hand them over,

*tel thm ii*

*tl ahmd*

*tlel ssara i*

but the ghosts learn. Through trial and error, they grow stronger and capable of more. They remember language. They hold the scraps up for the living to read. It has cost the ghosts everything to write these fragments. All their ingenuity and patience. But they are read,

*tell them*

*I am adam sami ali tell*

*robin lina i love*

*im rosa im ella i sorrow*

and the living whisper the messages and pass them on. The names reach the people who love them,

*all send my love*

*tell leila im*

*with her our son*

the survivors who cherish every syllable. The messages are heard,

*do not fear*

*not forgive*

*be angry*

spray-painted on walls and broadcast on pirate radio stations.

But Hasan never finds her. She cannot reach him. He's only gleaned one word from all his searching. A breath on the wind, passed with a puzzled look by a stranger who caught a bus to find him.

And Hasan holds back all his longing until the day he comes home and looks at his father and says, "She's not with relatives, and I need to know."

Hasan's father looks back at him. He is so much taller than Hasan. The silences are gathering. Daylight trapped behind clouds. Hasan should have known. Should have held back like his father.

"Annie," says Hasan.

And Hasan's father's face crumples. "Annie," he repeats. "Annie."

He gathers Hasan in his arms, though Hasan is far too big, and at last he tells him.

He doesn't understand all of it, not straight away. His father's story is raw and rough, never before voiced. But there will be time for more conversations later.

And Hasan will remember. "She drew cartoons," his father tells him, just before Hasan falls into a tearstained, proud, exhausted sleep. And, "sometimes we don't get endings."

The Chief Minister can do nothing to stop the ghosts. Every day people are braver. Even the children know that something big is coming; they rush around, nervous and excited, while their parents smoke too much and talk in low voices.

The government releases their own lists. Lists of the dead, of the people never grieved. They were accidentally overlooked, the Chief Minister says. They died of natural causes. He extends his condolences.

The bookseller sobs. Hasan's father retrieves the photo of Hasan's mother from under the mattress. He places it on the windowsill where the sunlight pools in the mornings. His father moves so gently and holds himself so upright that Hasan has a fierce feeling, something like pride or love. He punches his father on the arm and rushes out the door. He goes out to the wildflowers and cries there.

It's not enough. Not yet.

*not forgive*

*be angry*

When the people march, the ghosts march with them. The ghosts have no bodies to hurt, no freedom to lose. Death has made them untouchable.

The authorities panic. The more they crack down, the more ghosts join the march.

Hasan watches it all on the television, then when the broadcast is cut, he sneaks out and watches with a gaggle of other local kids from alleyways and balconies. Then, braver, he joins the back of the crowd.

His father is there somewhere, limping up ahead of him, a tiny photo of Hasan's mother tucked into his shirt pocket. And a tiny photo of Hasan.

It's the first time Hasan thinks his city might not be the way it is forever. That there are other ways that it could be. He thinks of all the questions he can ask his father. The city is a blank sheet, and everything is starting.





# GRIEVING REHEARSAL

Akash Ali | Poetry

I am preparing for an unforeseen death of my mother:

I am dressed in all red.

I am letting prayer beads dry my tongue.

I am planting devil's helmet over my bed.

I pretend her body is not here anymore  
and only communicate to her through old pictures.

I open the lid of the casserole and bury my nose  
into it like it's the last meal she had created.

And at night when my chest goes numb,

I don't call out for her anymore.

I hug a hot water bottle and attempt to cry  
myself to this daily temporary death.





# THE CUSTOM OF THE SEA

Katie Gill | Nonfiction

It's human nature to ascribe gentle euphemisms for horrible things that happen. An animal is put down or crosses the rainbow bridge. A family member hasn't died, they have passed away or they're with the Lord now. In the 1700s and 1800s, if you were a sailor who had the ill luck to participate in survival cannibalism, you undertook the "custom of the sea."

Survival cannibalism is defined as the act of a member eating a different member of the same species to survive. The important asterisk there is "in order to survive." The Donner Party was survival cannibalism. Hannibal Lecter isn't. It's due to the dire straits nature of survival cannibalism that historically, the practice is looked upon with more sympathy than its non-survival counterpart. Of course, some people were still looked at with fear and revulsion—some had their reputations destroyed or were legally court-martialed. But there are just as many instances of perpetrators of survival cannibalism, once rescued, going on to live a long life and becoming valued members of the community.

Survival cannibalism was the unspoken secret of being a European or American sailor, especially in the 1800s. Everybody knew it could happen—there were even folk songs and ballads that referenced survival cannibalism, such as "Little Billee" and "The Ship in Distress." Everybody knew at least one famous voyage that ended in survival cannibalism. It seems everybody knew what to expect. A series of patterns show up in various

instances of survival cannibalism from 1700 to 1900, in sea, land, and polar cases, almost like there was a rulebook everybody was expected to follow.

So, you're a Georgian or Victorian sailor, your ship's wrecked, you've run out of food in your lifeboat, and you've decided to undertake the ultimate taboo: what are you going to do first?

### **Make Sure There's No Food Left**

This may seem obvious: obviously you should make sure there is no food left before deciding to embark on survival cannibalism. In situations of dire hunger, the definition of food becomes expanded. Animal blood, domesticated animals, candles, bone marrow, sea lice, lichens and moss, seaweed, barnacles, and any form of leather could serve as food when the situation gets dire. And hey, if you survive, you might get a neat nickname due to eating some dubious materials. The Copermine expedition of 1819–1822, led by Sir John Franklin, ended in an utter disaster as the nearly starving men made a desperate retreat across uncharted territory in an attempt to reach civilization. Local fur traders critiqued Franklin for his lack of planning, but in the eyes of the British press, he was a hero who battled the elements, pressed on against unforeseen consequences, and got a new nickname: “the man who ate his boots.”

Though do be mindful if there is any alcohol left. The French frigate *Méduse* ran aground about fifty kilometers from the coast of Africa. One hundred forty-seven passengers boarded an unstable, hodge-podge raft in an attempt to steer themselves to the coast. They had provisions, but the provisions included barrels of wine instead of water. I'm not saying that the most likely inebriated state of the poor souls on the raft of the *Méduse* helped contribute to the onset of survival cannibalism...but considering that some members resorted to survival cannibalism on the *fourth day* of floating on the raft, the fact that they were most likely drunk couldn't have helped. There isn't a set time limit on when survivors resort to survival cannibalism—it could be a week, it

could be a month. But the *Méduse's* streak of four days might set the record as the least amount of time spent between the ship's wreck and the enactment of survival cannibalism.

Being intensely drunk might have hurt the chances of *The Peggy's* crew as well. *The Peggy* was an American schooner carrying wine and brandy who was de-masted in a storm in 1765—she continued to float, but could not be steered. The crew ate their way through the provisions, but still had quite a lot of alcohol left. A potential rescue vessel sailed in *The Peggy's* direction, but one look at the absolutely wasted crew caused the rescue ship to turn right around.

### **Wait for Someone to Die**

The important qualifier here is *wait* for someone to die, not “kill them outright.” In 1884, the yacht *Mignonette* sank, leaving its crew of four to abandon ship for a lifeboat. After about fifteen days with barely any food, seventeen-year-old cabin boy Richard Parker fell into a coma. Fellow sailors Tom Dudley and Edwin Stephens killed Parker and, along with the third sailor Edmund Brooks, ate him. When they were rescued and questioned, Dudley and Stephens were candid about their actions, believing that the custom of the sea would spare them from any legal punishment. That was a reasonable belief: pre-*Mignonette*, the attitude towards survival cannibalism could basically be summed up as “we know it happened and really wish it didn't happen, but let's not probe too closely into it.” However, pre-*Mignonette*, the attitude towards survival cannibalism involved casting lots to randomly select a victim if there were no bodies—not outright murder, in the case of Dudley and Stephens. Instead of getting off relatively easy, as they had hoped, the crew was arrested and Dudley and Stephens were charged with murder. The ensuing legal case that followed, *Regina v Dudley and Stephens*, established the principle that necessity is not a defense for murder. Dudley and Stephens were sentenced for the death penalty, a sentence that was commuted to six month's imprisonment.

Things are different if people have naturally died. In 1710, the *Nottingham Galley* sank off the coast of Maine, leaving the crew stranded on a small, provision-less island. The question of cannibalism was broached only when the ship's carpenter slipped into a coma, then died of natural causes. For a different example, in 1820, the whaleship *Essex* was attacked by a whale. The survivors abandoned the ship, dividing their number into three whaleboats. The blistering heat, grueling sun, lack of food, and kidney failure brought on by drinking seawater meant that men soon died of natural causes. The first of the deceased were given burial at sea. As time ran out and provisions ran dry, those who died helped sustain the rest of the survivors.

### Cast Lots

If nobody has died and it's gotten to the point where everyone is close to starvation, then it's time to cast lots. Casting lots is the art of drawing straws, rolling dice, choosing slips of paper (*The Peggy's* method of choice), or any other method of chance to determine an outcome. The whaleship *Essex* sank in 1820, leaving its survivors scattered across three individual whaleboats. When one of the *Essex* whaleboats ran out of provisions, sixteen-year-old Charles Ramsdell suggested casting lots. The other sailors—Owen Coffin, Barzalli Ray, and Captain George Pollard Jr.—agreed to the proposal. They cut up pieces of paper and put them in a hat, and the unlucky lot fell to Coffin. Next, they drew to see who would kill Coffin. That lot fell to Ramsdell, who initially refused to follow through before submitting. Coffin asked Pollard to deliver a message to his mother before he was shot and then consumed.

If you're useful to the crew, then congratulations! You might be spared from the lottery process! There are conflicting accounts of what happened to make the whaleship *Janet* resort to cannibalism, but two things are certain: multiple sailors ended up adrift in a whaleboat, away from the ship, and the captain was spared, probably because he was the only navigator on the whaleboat. Like all games of chance, casting lots can inevitably be rigged. Cooks, surgeons, or anyone with the stomach to handle

the butchery often coincidentally (or “coincidentally”) escape drawing the short straw, such as Ann Saunders, fiancée of the cook on the *Frances Mary*. The *Frances Mary* was a ship that in 1826, was wrecked and disabled by a storm. Saunders was one of the people who took up initiative in butchering the bodies and survived the thirty-five days the ship was afloat at sea.

### **What to Do with the Body**

Once the decision has been made, someone must be the first to cut into the body. Often this duty falls to the ship’s cook or doctor. In the case of the *Nottingham Galley*, the job fell to John Deane, captain of the ship, who coincidentally had training as a butcher. The ship’s carpenter had died due to exposure, and it was decided (either by Deane or the crew, sources differ here) that he should be eaten. The first thing Deane did was to make the body seem less human. The hands, feet, head, and skin were all removed. Afterwards, Deane removed the organs, cut up the man’s breast, and then wrapped the pieces in seaweed before distributing them to the crew.

It was best to eat from the body as soon as possible: blood would still be relatively fresh, not clogging or coagulating inside the veins. When someone died or was killed, blood was often caught in containers and then immediately drunk—that was the case of the *Euxine*, a British collier that sank in 1874. The man who was to be eaten was Francis Shufus, an Italian crewman. After Shufus’s blood was drained, his body was dismembered, his organs cut out, and his head and hands thrown overboard. Survivors of the wreck of the *Cospatrick*, also in 1874, mention drinking the blood and eating the organs of the dead, as do survivors of the *Frances Mary*.

### **Keep Your Optics in Mind**

Don’t want to admit that cannibalism happened? Find a scapegoat! In 1854, the explorer John Rae brought back news that the men of the Franklin Expedition, an expedition that vanished six years earlier, almost

certainly participated in survival cannibalism. Lady Jane Franklin, wife of the expedition's leader Sir John Franklin (yes, the Sir John Franklin who famously ate his boots), did not like that idea. It ran counter intuitive to the narrative she wanted to promote of her husband as a hero and a paragon of Englishness. So, she decided to change the narrative. With the help of Charles Dickens (yes, *that* Charles Dickens), Lady Franklin launched a slander campaign against Rae, claiming that he was misled and that his sources, the indigenous people of the area, were lying, having partaken in the cannibalism themselves instead. Lady Franklin's PR campaign worked: Rae's news was discredited in the press.

It also is an unpleasant fact that occasionally, the optics of who were eaten do not look good. Often in a survival cannibalism situation, people splinter into in-groups and out-groups. One might focus on taking care of those in one's own group before taking care of others. While not purposeful, any outsiders to the group might end up a lower priority than those in the main group. We see this pattern appear time and time again in survival cannibalism situations: those of the same race, ethnicity, or social class often bond together (whether intentionally or not) against those of a different race, ethnicity, or social class. That certainly was the case with the whaleship *Essex* and the American sloop *The Peggy*.

The *Essex* was based out of Nantucket, a booming American town with a large population of whalers. Even when the ship was sailing, the Nantucketers stayed together, bonding with and prioritizing their fellow Nantucketers over any out-of-town sailors. That did not let up when the *Essex* sank. When the ship was abandoned, the captain, first mate, and second mate divided up the crew among three whaleboats. Unsurprisingly, most of the Nantucketers landed in the captain and first mate's boat. In their quest to sail to civilization, the survivors first landed their whaleboats on an island—uninhabited, but with scarce resources. Three men decided to stay on the island and take their chances there: none were native to Nantucket. And when cannibalism started on the whaleboats, the first four men to be eaten were African American. There is no reason to believe that the men's demise was hastened by

the sailors, as all the men died of natural causes. It was likely that they all had an inferior diet before the ship sank (food on a whaleship was often assigned due to where one slept—the African American sailors, who slept in the forecabin, received food of a lesser quality than those in the officers' cabins or steerage), and three of the four held heavy manual labor jobs on the ship. This was a profound embarrassment for the fiercely abolitionist Nantucket.

I'm willing to cut the *Essex* crew a little slack with regards to their actions because there have been cases where the game was blatantly rigged. After springing a leak, *The Peggy* soon ran out of provisions. When talk of casting lots was brought up, out of the crew of ten, the first person whose lot came up was the captain's Black manservant, who was quickly killed and eaten. Later, when the crew of the *Peggy* drew lots for a second time, the lot fell to David Flatt, a popular member of the crew. And instead of the crew taking action immediately, as they did with the only nonwhite crew member, Flatt was granted a night's reprieve. Miraculously, Flatt was spared his fate, as another ship found *The Peggy* the next morning.

### **Accept the Fact That There Will Be Rumors**

This is the 1700s and the 1800s, after all. If your shipwrecked crew or your falling-apart whaleboat or your polar expedition is found, and you are all in relatively good condition compared to the majority of your dead men? Someone is going to float the question about cannibalism, and someone is going to print a salacious newspaper headline. If you're in the 1700s or the early 1800s, it might be easier just to own up to it. But if you're post-1850, post-Franklin Expedition, when the general culture of the United States and United Kingdom takes a bent towards morality, didacticism, piety, and sternness? Even if you say that cannibalism never happened, à la Adolphus Greely and the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (yes, named for the same Lady Franklin who came up with a John Rae smear campaign), people are still going to talk, and rumors are still going to persist.

**Remember: Your Life Isn't Over**

Though if you were in a position of authority, hopefully you were nice to your crew before the cannibalism started. While surviving trauma might serve as a bonding experience, people will still remember what happened before the trauma. After the crew of the *Nottingham Galley* were rescued, John Deane immediately published an account of the journey that showed himself in a heroic light. When the other crewmen returned to London, they published a pamphlet themselves, casting Deane in a negative light, accusing him of cowardice, cruelty, and trying to turn the ship over to French privateers—an accusation that ends up favoring the crew, as years later, Deane was court-martialed for taking bribes.

But those who had to partake in this gruesome scenario shouldn't be rejected or shunned. Obviously, there will be some lingering trauma associated with the act. Owen Chase, first mate of the *Essex*, was plagued by headaches and late in life, he began hoarding food due to the trauma. Before that, Chase had a long, full life. Chase returned to his job as a whaler, serving on whaleships for close to a decade, before retiring back to Nantucket with his wife and children. Captain Pollard's whaling career was short-lived as the next ship, he commanded, the *Two Brothers*, also sank. His career path ended with him becoming the town's night watchman and a respected, well-liked member of the community.

After all, despite what pop culture might tell you, there is no inherent immorality to survival cannibalism. It is simply a human eating another human to survive. The immorality comes in the lead-up to the act. It's easy to read immorality in the blatant racism of men on *The Peggy* or the murderous actions of the *Mignonette*, but what about the *Essex*, or the *Nottingham Galley*? What about the modern stories of people driven to survival cannibalism, such as those affected by war or famine? There is nothing immoral about wanting to live: it simply depends on how you go about it.



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# THE TRAIN

Ivana Svobodová | Poetry

The train flows through the midnight of tunnels,  
hums inside ribs.

Raindrops wink on the window  
as they say goodbye to platforms  
that give them a grin full of bones of cobblestones.  
Rustling leaves wrap around fingers  
the monuments of the abandoned stations.

Bezprávi,  
yearning of wires, mires in the mist on the glass,  
bared teeth of the lightning-catcher  
that swallows the autumn like a bitter burning cure.

Then a plain opens its palm  
where the most beautiful girls get out in Olomouc  
and reach up to the racks,  
where the most beautiful girls get out in Ostrava  
and put on their coats,  
where the most beautiful girls get out in Oświęcim  
and haul their suitcases out of the wagons.





# TO BUILD ETERNITY, WITH BONES

Gunnar De Winter | Fiction

Every summoning is a deal with the bone baron.

I see him dance toward us across the floes of ice. No one else on the ship can see him; I'm the only necromancer. His features are hazy. Across his gray skin, shadows dance independent of any light source. Not that there is not much light here, in the eternal night on the sea of shards.

The baron's bowler hat is too small, and his mouth stretches into a rictus grin. It's the only sharp thing about him, the smile seared into reality.

As always, he is bare-footed. The ice cannot touch him; he is colder. His well-fitting tailcoat is the black of a moonless night, as is his cane topped by an obsidian skull. Most people wouldn't notice the slight deviations, but I can tell the skull is not modeled after a human one. Wrong proportions, teeth too pointy.

He edges next to the bone ship I have to keep fracture-free and tips his hat to me. The rest of the crew has no idea. They are too busy navigating through the dark, ice-infested waters. Not that they would be able to see him on a clear, sunny day.

“Nice night for a walk,” he says. His voice is a discordant warm note in a world that has become a symphony of frost.

I merely nod. There’s already enough prejudice on the ship without me muttering to a mirage.

The baron’s glinting eyes wander over the ship, over the giant ribcage that forms its protective shell, over the femur spire that is the mast.

“Not bad, Blite. You always had a knack for the big ones.”

The key is cartilage. Aspiring necromancers focus on the bones; on building large, complicated constructs. Most of them fail. Articulating the bones is crucial, and since we can’t animate normal tendons, we have to fashion alternatives from cartilage. I’m good at it. I didn’t fail. I started small so that now I can go big. It landed me this gig.

The baron spreads his long, thin arms and bows. His grin emphasizes the gesture. “What brings you to these pleasant climes?”

*Leviathan*, I think at him. There’s no need for words. I know that the baron—patron saint of the necromancers, even though the term would make him shudder—is much less human than he pretends to be. The form he takes when meeting one of his acolytes is nothing but a front. He is the personification of the power that resides in bones. He is not a he, but I can’t help thinking of him that way. The sailors have a patron saint too, but the mermaid cannot follow us here. Only the bone baron is impervious to the life-sucking cold that rules the sea of shards.

His mouth stretches wider, almost curling up to his ears. “Leviathan? Does that story still live? Nice try, Blite. I know you’re sharper than that. Whatever you are here to find, good hunting.” He taps his cane, and the sleet-filled gale reduces him to dust. His smile is the last feature to go.

He’s partially correct. The crew are here to find and capture Leviathan, the largest construct ever, made by my mad tutor. A rumor, nothing

more. Unknown to them, I am here to build a Leviathan. Of sorts. There has to be an ice whale cemetery beneath the sharp sea somewhere.

The shards of ice scratch the ship's bony skeleton as if it were my own ribcage. The ship's ribs don't break, though. The cartilage joints binding them to the keel's vertebrae give them enough flexibility.

I've had enough of the frozen rain pelting me. I don't mind cold stinging my flesh, but when it starts to seep into my bones, I'm out. I retreat to the surface cabin reserved for me. The others huddle together in their hammocks belowdecks. No one wants to share a room with a necromancer. Good. The feeling is mutual.

It's funny, though. In my face, they cower and—grudgingly—respect my wishes, but behind my back I can hear them call me "Skellie," the pejorative for necromancer. Whatever. All they have to do is get me to where I need to be.

A shadow shifts in the corner of the cabin. My fingertips tingle, looking for bones to animate. They travel to the pouch of my necklace, filled with bone flakes. Piss me off, and I can turn them into bullets that rival those of the best pistols. I feel the mouse skeletons stuffed in unexplored corners of the hold. There's even a dead seagull down there.

"Wait, it's me."

There's only one thing more annoying than the people who hate us, and that's the people who think they admire us.

Karla, young and wide-eyed, lights the oil lamp with deft fingers. The mapmaker, barely graduated and wanting to make a name for herself. Stupid girl. Embarking on a ship full of rough sailors. Mermaid cultists. The whispers that thread through the harbors say they aren't strangers to human sacrifice for their patron saint. They haven't tried anything

yet, but I can feel the hunger in their eyes. Hunger for flesh. Fools. The bones are what matter. Karla won't last. Not my problem.

She has a great bone structure, though—sharp jawbones, accentuated by the sparse food stores on the ship. Strong cheekbones. Broad nose and shoulders, the former red with cold.

Her flesh repulses me. I ignore her and stare at my bony hands and swollen knuckles. My own flesh sickens me. That's why I don't eat. I can animate my bones and will my heart to beat. I draw nourishment from the bones and the cold that surround me. The baron feeds his acolytes.

"I, uh." She looks at me bashfully from behind long lashes, "Would you mind if I slept here? I don't like the way they look at me."

So she's not that stupid after all. Unless she's lying. I know her kind, the hopefuls, convinced that there is some secret I can share to turn them into necromancers, convinced that they can become one. They can't, you are one or you're not.

"I won't protect you," I say.

She shuffles closer to me and pulls her black fur coat tighter around herself. Her skeleton speaks to me, the old fracture in her left forearm, running across both radius and ulna. The tendon attachments on both her hips are thick and robust. Hiker or runner. "You don't have to. I can take care of myself. I just don't want them to try anything while I'm sleeping. I'll stay out of your way."

I wonder what she sees when she looks at me. A young woman with raven hair and sunken cheeks? A witch that can grant her immortality? How little she knows. I shrug an admission and realize I've made a mistake. Don't get attached; stick to the bones.

Her hand finds mine, its skin red and rough. But warm. Alive. It seeps into my aching ribs and soothes them. I pull my hand away. "Good night." I turn my back to her and curl up on the narrow cot. She can sleep here if she wants to, but her bed will have to be the floor. She does not complain.



A shove and a scream wake me. Almost like I'm back at the academy.

The shove is the ship hitting something; the scream is the wind coming through the slits in the cabin's wooden walls.

I rush outside, my clothes still damp and clingy. Even before I reach the railings, I feel them. There are many dead things here, calling. I've never felt so alive. The power of oblivion runs through me and dispels the dust in my veins.

The hushed whispers, a mix of fear and superstition, lose their meaning in the gale—another good sign. Then, I see it, bright white in the dark sea. A rib as long as our entire ship. This is it.

The baron blinks into existence and tap-dances on the magnificent bone. He ends with his heels together and knees apart, half-bowing with his tiny top hat in one hand and his cane raised in the other. "Let the show begin." He winks and blinks away.

There is a lull in the storm. Even the wind respects the graveyard I can sense beneath the icy sea surface.

As the wind dies, the whispers come alive. I don't register it at first because I'm too invested in the things below, but the murmuring has turned angry. Leviathan is dead, I hear. A pointless journey, others grumble. Turn back, all agree. Fools. They can't see beyond death, can't see the life that hides in bones.

"No." My voice echoes through the eye in the storm. "We stay." So much power here. Waiting. My fingers twitch, and the ship's ribs groan. Being a necromancer is not what most people think. No sixth sense, no incantations; it's more like straddling two realms that have the baron as gatekeeper, like having extensions of yourself that grow and shrink depending on the amount of death around you.

The ship breathes alongside me, and I watch dread and anger collide in the sailors.

Another mistake. I'm getting careless this close to the goal. Doesn't matter, they can't—



I crack my eyes open, and my skull tries to split in half. Hairline fractures. Someone must have hit me on the head.

"Take it slow." Karla is here.

Here. Where is here? The cabin. The ship. The rib. I can still feel it, but we're moving away. "We have to..." A sharp arrow bounces around inside my head. I push my hands against my temples to prevent my skull from shattering into pieces. At least they didn't tie me up. Nowhere to run. Or so they think.

I reach out and tell—command—the rib to follow us and bring some of its friends. I barely manage because of the distance, but rage can make bones burn with purpose. Sweat beads my brow, even though it's cold in the cabin. Of course, it's cold. It's always cold. I can't remember "not cold." Except for the heat coming from Karla's hand as she places it on my forehead. "You're burning up," she says. She has no idea.

Ignoring the protestations of every bone in my body, I sit up.

"Take it slow. He hit you hard. I was afraid you'd never wake up."

"How long?" I manage.

Karla shrugs. My eyes are used to the feeble light, so I see her clearly. She seems genuinely worried. For me or herself? "Hours, maybe."

Good. I can work with that. Too bad necromancers can only control the bones of the dead. Otherwise, I'd have these fuckers walk into the sea and freeze to death, after which I'd summon their skeletons and mangle them into a giant landmark. Here lie the corpses of those who tried to mess with Blite.

I knew I should have built my own ship with a literal skeleton crew. It would have drained me too quickly, though. I'm not good enough. Yet. Leviathan is something else. It's still one construct. It's what I came here for. And now they leave me no choice. There's not a lot of time left before we're too far from the whale cemetery.

My skull refuses to stop whining as I crawl to the door.

"Wait," Karla says with a voice like a muffled gong. "They said... They said they would hurt me if you tried anything. Hurt me badly."

I hesitate. Why do I hesitate? What is wrong with me?

The bone slivers in my pouch call my name. They're special. Ounce for ounce, bone is stronger than steel, but it's a lot less dense, so we don't notice this. The flakes I carry with me are compressed. Very dense.

"Don't worry," I say between gritted teeth. "They won't touch you."

*I won't protect you.* The words I spoke hours earlier trudge through my veering thoughts, arrogant with the speed of their dismissal.

Focus.

The shards I shake from the pouch are small, flat coins with razor edges. I reach out to them, and they slice through the lock as if it was butter.

Men swear.

I snub the ache that travels through my skeleton and stand upright before I kick open the door. The hail-studded wind slams into me. As does the bullet that lodges itself in my shoulder blade. I'm flung against Karla behind me. She does not stumble; her strong legs keep her rooted in place.

I can't—



My screaming shoulder silences my pounding head. Silver fucking lining. The bullet is stuck in the inside of my scapula. The fuckers couldn't even shoot me right.

My shoulder is bandaged expertly. Karla shuffles in a corner. Fieldwork comes with valuable lessons, I suppose. Cold sweat and warm blood impregnate my shirt and coat. I wince when I sit up.

Karla is by my side immediately. "Careful. I couldn't get the bullet out." A shrug. "Don't have the material here." She tries to keep one side of her face away from me, but I can see the bruises. I look into her and notice a few cracked ribs. Not fully separated. Painful nonetheless.

"Did they..."

Another shrug. "They thought I was helping you."

“Why aren’t we drowning in ice-cold water?”

“Their compass isn’t working, and they’ve got neither sun nor stars to work with.” Shrug the third. “They need a mapmaker to get home.”

*And their patron saint is too far away to be swayed with a sacrifice.* “Then why am I not drowning in ice-cold water?”

“I told them I needed you. The ice shifts, so I need landmarks beneath the surface. Dead things buried in the seabed.”

Her heat comes at me, throbbing with life. I know her smell, too, and every bone in her body, and every story engraved in those bones. She might have saved me. The wound and the cold water would have knocked me out before I could have called the trailing bones to my rescue.

The bones! The rib is still there, at the edges of my reach. A few others, too. They’re slipping, though. Leviathan crumbles.

I do have a very big ace up my proverbial sleeve, though. They probably think I wouldn’t jeopardize myself. They have no idea who they’re dealing with.

“It’s going to get very cold,” I tell Karla. “Try to stay in the middle of the room.” It’s unlikely she’ll survive. Part of me feels guilty. My searing rage burns that part down.

The ship’s skeleton is bone. I am a necromancer. A good one. Even the baron said I always had a knack for the big ones.

I let my self sink into the ship’s bones. Its ribs become my ribs. The ribcage opens when I command it to. Wood splinters, men scream, I gloat. Hammocks rip and crates float from the hold as the water inundates every part of the ship. My feet are wet, freezing. I don’t care. The rush keeps me warm. I push the ribs farther out. The final few holding

on plunge into the numbing sea. Paralyzed by cold and then ripped to shreds by ice.

Nothing of the cabin remains, but I have guided the vertebrae to the surface and sit down on a giant one. Karla's teeth are chattering behind me. I force the ribs down, and they form a mirror ribcage. I am sitting atop the reversed ship. The key, as I taught myself, is cartilage. The ribs didn't break from the spin because of the cartilage. I gloat again, this time at memories of fellow students who mocked my suggestions.

I slow the ship down and let the other bones catch up. It's a joyful reunion. Bone hugs bone. Cartilage welcomes them all.

Karla is fading. "Help," she whimpers.

Revenge always comes with a cost. There is nothing I can do. Warmth is not my power. I have mastered death, not life or love. Before guilt and shame trap me, my eyes fall on the baron, who sits cross-legged on a nearby ice floe, cane in his lap, chin in his hands. Stripped of his usual vibrance and smile, he is watching me intently.

When our eyes meet—his a mere glint in darkness—he stands up and bows deeply. Not to mock me, but with respect and—perhaps—awe.

I understand now. I understand why my tutor came here to build Leviathan. An artist lives on in their work, a necromancer in their construct.

I am standing on the back of eternity. My eternity. I *am* Leviathan.

I glance back at Karla one last time. She is still. Beautiful in death. A shame. I could reanimate her skeleton, but that would make her a puppet to do my bidding. I will not do that. I respect her too much. There is only one thing I can get her. More than love, bone lasts forever if you know how to use it.

I throw a handful of my flakes in the water and steer them toward the giant rib. They carve away. I pull other bones from the open wounds of dead sailors and link them into a long chain. Then, I attach the chain to the rib.

A buoy, a landmark, a monument. It will withstand ice and cold and wind and hail. It will withstand time and etch the memory of a could-have-been into the story of the world.

Here lies the corpse of Karla, the one who saved Blite.

I shrug off the final dregs of sadness and embrace the new me. All the bones I didn't use for Karla's monument hurtle at me. The pain and exhaustion fall away like the dried remnants of a chrysalis. This is more than mere control; this is symbiosis. I am the bone and the bone is me.

Without shivering, I lower myself into the water and swim to the heart of the ribcage. There, I encapsulate myself into an ossified sarcophagus. Air, blood, skin, it all becomes insignificant. I build cartilage tendons and intricate joint articulations. I flatten some bones and thicken others. I turn the ship, the construct, the body into a giant rendition of a prehistoric armored placoderm.

The universe hiccups. Perception twists, shifts, changes. All my senses implode, only to expand beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

Someone walks on my large bone-plated back, accompanied by the tapping of a cane. Every summoning is a deal with the bone baron.





# ASK A NECROMANCER

## Everyone Dies Alone

Amanda Downum | Nonfiction

Alex expresses curiosity about how bodies are found. When it comes to the details of exactly when your neighbors notice a weird smell, or how long you don't answer the phone before family and friends grow concerned, I can't comment—except perhaps to encourage everyone to check in on their loved ones. I'm not privy to the events leading up to that moment when someone realizes they need to call the authorities.

On the mortician's end, we have to wait for a body to be formally released before we can take custody. This requires medical professionals or the police. The bulk of our clientele come to us through hospitals, nursing homes, or other care facilities with a doctor present. More than half of the house calls we perform are for those who died under hospice care. The moment may be unexpected, but the event itself was imminent.

When an unforeseen death occurs, the police and other emergency services are involved. If you come home to find a family member dead on the kitchen floor, call the police first and foremost. The local coroner or medical examiner will decide if the death warrants further investigation. If so, the deceased will be sent for an autopsy. If they deem the causes natural enough, they'll release the body to a funeral home for pickup.<sup>1</sup> These tend to be the "interesting" calls. I could—and likely will—go into more depth about our interactions with the police and fire department.

There is a different direction in which I can take that question, however: the conditions in which people die. Specifically, the conditions in which people die while in long-term care facilities.

Eldercare is a serious issue for...everyone, really. Unless you're holding out for vampirism, cryogenic suspension, or digital consciousness upload, senescence waits for us all. Some of us may be lucky enough—or privileged enough—to remain independent until the end, but for those without savings, without lifelong access to healthcare, without a family support network, options may be grimmer.

I've discussed suicide before, and the particular sadness of seeing young people laid out on my table. Those deaths stand out for their relative rarity. Most of the decedents we pick up are elderly, people who have died of natural causes after what most would consider "a good run." A good run, however, does not always finish well.

One of my most vivid memories from my early days as a psychopomp (aka removal technician) was my very first nursing home call. The entire floor reeked of urine. The residents' doors were nearly all open, letting everyone watch me wheel my cot down the hall to the nurses' station. The nurse on duty signed my paperwork, and waved me vaguely down the corridor; no one was available to help me. I could have taken anyone out of that facility, living or dead.

It didn't take me long in the field to notice the difference between that kind of nursing home—crowded and filthy, with exhausted, overworked staff—and the much nicer kind. Clean and cheerful, where the staff come out to say goodbye to their residents before we cover them up. That difference, all too often, is money.

As a removal tech, I've watched residents wander the halls in confusion, haranguing the beleaguered staff. I've listened to people call for help unceasingly for the entire time it takes me to complete a removal. I've entered bare, grimy rooms and lifted emaciated bodies dressed only

in diapers off sheetless mattresses. Some facilities house two or three residents to a room. If we're lucky, the living roommates are taken elsewhere while we perform the removal. Sometimes a curtain is drawn between beds, and we try to be as quick and quiet as possible. When I started embalming, I got an even closer look at the unwashed hair, necrotizing toes, and truly horrifying bedsores that so many of these people died with. And that was before the pandemic struck: COVID hot-spot nursing homes were a nightmare out of a disaster movie. All these things fill me less with sadness and more with deep, abiding anger.

Occasionally that anger surfaces when I'm dealing with seemingly uncaring staff, but I know that only in rare cases is neglect the fault of any one person. My brief exposure to the foster care system left me with a similar undirectable rage. State and federal programs like these—understaffed, underfunded, ignored—grind down the best-intentioned nurses and social workers.

I've spoken of the loneliness of depression, how it can leave you feeling isolated even when surrounded by friends and family, how it can convince you that the people you love the most don't love you in return. The decision to place a relative into a care facility isn't an easy one. Many families have no other option, but will still wrestle with guilt over the necessity. My anger is never for those facing only bad and worse choices. I'm furious at an entire system that decides that humans can... depreciate in value. That without money, the best we can hope for is a bare minimum of support until we're disposed of as quickly as possible.

Everyone may die alone when it comes to our individual experience of that final moment, but far too many people spend their final days, weeks, years, suffering alone—or simply suffering a loneliness that breaks my heart. By the time I arrive at a bedside, the most I can do is offer some sympathy to the living, and perhaps a little dignity to the dead. But the more dead people I carry out of empty rooms, the more fiercely I want a sea change, a *revolution*, for the living.

[1] Around here, certain counties are notorious for deciding not to spend money on an autopsy. [Return to article](#)



If you have questions for the necromancer, please drop them into the nearest abyss, or use our submission form at [thedeadlands.com](http://thedeadlands.com), or [@stillsotranger](https://twitter.com/stillsotranger) on Twitter.





# THE ALCHEMISTS, THE SQUIRRELS

Robert Beveridge | Poetry

The search for the perfect needle  
continues, the thread acquired  
in a deal that saw you relinquish  
three quinces, your grandmother,  
and a draft choice to be named later.  
Between sips, what was once rye  
in your shotglass seems to have  
become amaranth. The priest  
on the stool next to you claims  
no possibility of transubstantiation;  
you withhold judgment. The ritual  
is still on, your roommate asserts,  
and Charles Abi Enonchong  
has been contacted to record  
the proceedings; it falls to you  
to procure the last necessary  
ingredients: split yellow dal,  
the eye of an emu, venom  
from a spitting, hooded frat boy.  
Each step you take brings you  
closer to midnight, and further  
from the attic spice cabinet.





# IN WATER, WE SURVIVE

Ai Jiang | Fiction

Debris littered the shore, stretching its way to the beach house, which sat windowless. It was almost as though it welcomed any—all—within its water-stained walls after the waves upon waves upon waves struck its structure, hoping it would fall, but it didn't. The Hulnitól beach house loved gatherings—the grander the better. It fed on human materialism. Hulnitól was beautiful once, but so was Earth.

The tsunami came without warning, as if conjured by gods. Whenever the people began rebuilding, the tsunami Bunet returned. Human constructions were such nuisances.

You were once human too.

You were washed up on shore, naked. There was no water, or air, to cough up because your lungs no longer existed. *You* no longer existed—not in this world. You expected the noise of glass, plastic, metal against your bare feet, but there was no sound except the tango of waves clamoring in the distance. The sequined dress, the color of smog, muted rather than sparkling, you wore on your birthday was nowhere to be found, but you don't miss it.

The waves engulfed you each night. You had to return by sundown or the land of the living would be lost to you forever. The waves whispered, beckoned, told you to leave them—the humans. You said you couldn't let go, not yet. Before you returned to the water each night,

you always left messages on the palm tree next to the beach house. Who did you leave these messages for? Why did you want to hold on to, rather than sever, your ties to the human world that has little to offer?

*October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2095*

*You were missing when I woke up on the shore. I'm surprised the beach house stayed intact. Is everyone else... intact?*

You ran a hand across the strokes carved into the bark. You couldn't touch anything man-made, but nature was always there, somehow.

*October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2095*

*I can't move past the borders of the beach house. The end of the driveway is the end of my world. Will you return to find me? Will you be able to see me? Perhaps the water can reach farther.*

Near the palm tree, you piled driftwood to resemble an altar of sorts. The jagged lines crisscrossed at the top. There, you had set the laminated birthday invitation you found with your name.

Why did you want your party at the beach house when you had lived encapsulated within the city such that the ocean and surrounding waters might as well have been a mythic thing? Why did you want such extravagance? Surrounded by the city lights, you were blinded by everything except the beauty of Earth.

*October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2095*

*You tried to warn me. I know. But if you knew it was dangerous, why did you still come? Why did you stay as the sky grew darker? As it rumbled while we all laughed. But really, it was the storm who should have found the situation funny? Why did you stay in the corner while we tossed our red Solos, shoes, whatever we could find in a drunken stupor, calling it a "sacrifice" when we were the real sacrifices? We joked that a storm was coming because the gods were angry. Like the house, perhaps they could be calmed by material goods. We were wrong.*

You found her body—the only connection you have left to the human world—on the shore before sunset. Her flesh was swollen, bloated. The birthday card she wrote was still in her pocket. You couldn't touch the man-made fabric, but you could tell from the shape, the angles that jutted out, stretching against the organic cotton—a stark contrast from your artificial neon dress long swallowed by the lapping waters. She never gave the card to you, but you already had a feeling what was written inside. The waves drew closer until it lapped against your feet—and hers.

When the sun set, you didn't return to the water. You watched the ghost of the tsunami approach, and with it came *her*—*Bunet*. You shared almost the same face, but *why* were you and she so different? She walked around picking up the waste around the city while you added to it. The home she lived in was close to barren, while yours sat on top of the building that never slept, with its luminescent lights winking at the stars as if to say, "Hey, I'm brighter, better." It didn't matter now. Soon you and her would be the same.

You left Bunet's human corpse, a tether to the human world snapped and abandoned, and stepped into the suspended waves of Bunet.

*October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2095*

*We will return, and return, and return, until all the filth you have left on this earth disappears.*

Together, you merged into one. What they would call you, it didn't matter, because together you would wreak havoc on a world that turned its back on the waters.





# AUTHOR BIOS



**Jonathan Louis Duckworth** is a completely normal, entirely human person with the right number of heads and everything. He received his MFA from Florida International University. His fiction and recent poetry appears in *Pseudopod*, *Wrongdoing Mag*, *Bayou*, *Southwest Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and elsewhere. He is a PhD student in poetry at University of North Texas and an active HWA member.



**E.M. Linden** (she/her) is a postgrad peace and conflict studies student from Aotearoa New Zealand, who has also lived and worked in the Middle East and Australia. She has recently returned to speculative fiction so that she can spend more time writing about ghosts, monsters, and witches. She lives with her partner and a disreputable rescue cat. On twitter: @e\_m\_linden



**Akash Ali** is a 22-year-old Muslim Pakistani poet based in North West England. He has poetry published in *Dryland*, *fourteenpoems*, and elsewhere. Instagram: @\_akashha



**Katie Gill** is a librarian by day, essayist and podcaster by night. She has previously published at *The Singles Jukebox*, *Anime Feminist*, and *Manor Vellum*. Hear her voice on various podcasts including *PseudoPod* and *Stacks and Stories*.  
Twitter: @katiebeluga



**Ivana Svobodová** lives in Olomouc in the Czech Republic. She studied English, Dutch, and Spanish and currently works as a translator. She writes both poems and short fiction. She grew up devouring myths and fairy tales and has never fully recovered. She loves travelling and discovering new places. She fell hopelessly in love with Iceland. She enjoys wood carving and still has all her fingers. Her projects can be found on instagram @iva\_svobodovaol



**Gunnar De Winter** is a biologist/philosopher hybrid whose stories have found their way to *Future SF Digest*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Abyss & Apex*. He wanders the Twitterverse as @evolveon. Come say hi, he rarely bites.



**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Sparrow's Trombone*, *Three Line Poetry*, and *Failed Haiku*, among others.



**Ai Jiang** is a Chinese-Canadian writer, an immigrant from Fujian, and an active member of HWA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *F&SF*, *The Dark*, *PseudoPod*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Hobart Pulp*, *The Masters Review*, among others. Find her on Twitter (@Aijiang\_) and online (<http://aijiang.ca>).



# 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](https://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](https://sonyataaffe.com).



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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Publisher: Sean Markey

Editor in Chief: E. Catherine Tobler

Poetry Editor: Sonya Taaffe

Art Director: inkshark

Nonfiction Editor: David Gilmore

Necromancer at Large: Amanda Downum

Copyeditor: Laura Blackwell

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