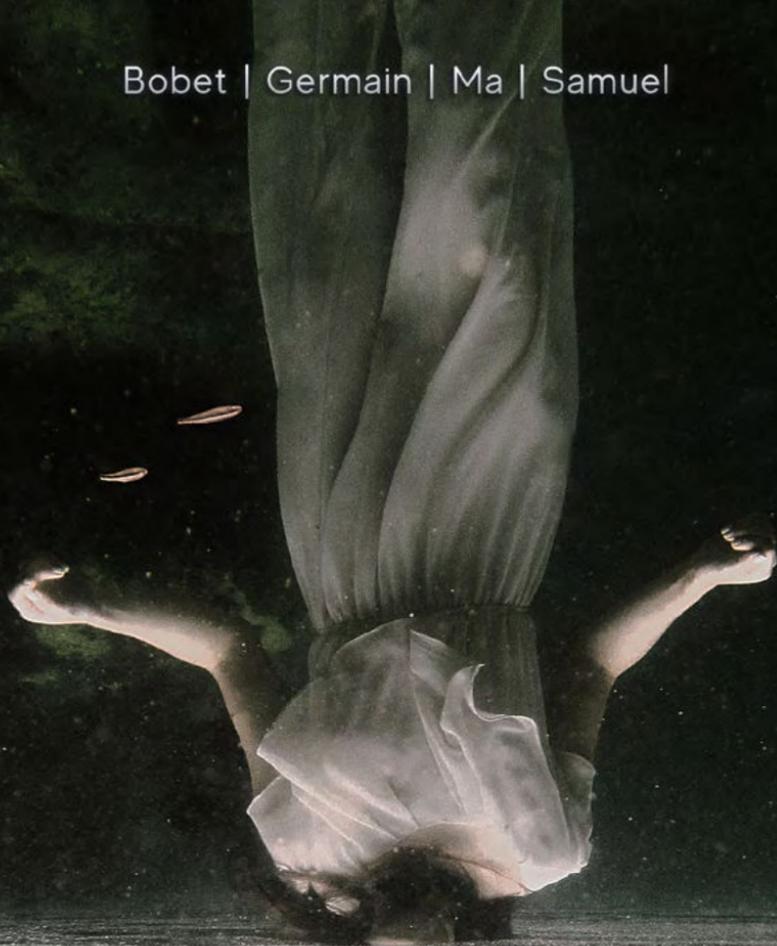


Bobet | Germain | Ma | Samuel



THE
DEADLANDS

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a journal of ends & beginnings

cover art by Eva Carollo Photography



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SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH HANK

Leah Bobet | Fiction

"Listen," she says, and takes Hank's hand—takes it because intimacy might soften the blow. "What do you think about meeting just the two of us next time?"

On the end of his tether, Horatio stirs. She had thought to catch him sleeping. It is four in the afternoon, the perilous periphery of Sunday roast and radio-drama time, and the red-checked picnic blanket Hank bought new for them at Gimbels is cleared of all but crumbs. The spring sun has the shadows stretched, rolled out like mourning ribbon across the new grass, and the only sound above the breeze is the youth choir from a Harlem church singing the way young children sing, all enthusiasm and little finesse. It has been a show tune of an afternoon: one of the slow ones, sewn with sweet violin.

Horatio's blank black eyes open, and she thinks: *Farewell to all that*. Hank's attaché, as he so deprecatingly calls Horatio, floats blurrily upright, his tattered uniform twisting with a wind that leaves the leaves untouched.

As for Hank, he only evinces a faint discomfort. "Lil, I explained about him," he says, and under her confiding hand she feels his fingers twitch. "We're a package deal."

"You did," she allows, heart pounding. Since the demob finished last year there's no lack of doubled men in lower Manhattan; they joke a girl gets twice the value, when young men are so scarce. Lillian is well versed in the good manners of the age: to listen, to lay a gentle hand atop the living man's hand and speak softly around the dead one, and say she cannot imagine the feeling—lean-jawed doctors in battlefield dress examining their knot inextricable, saying *it was you, you were flawed glass, it is irretrievable*—except for all the pervasive cornices where she can. There is, in the back steeple of her memory palace, a little room where lives a small infestation of rabbits, each one a scarring memory, tender and liable to shock. She goes into herself here and there, by night, and holds them gently in her palms; feeds them lettuces and apples that they snatch away and hide. They are beating their anxious back feet against the floorboards now.

"The trouble is, it's been a few months now," she says, as Horatio skips and bleaches, fully roused, "and I think you've figured out what I'm about, Hank Adams." She swallows. He feels like a rabbit under her palm, a rabbit concealed. "I'd like to know what you're about when it's just you at my doorstep."

She knows it's possible. Harriet Jacobi at the delicatessen counter knew a girl whose fellow left his attaché—his *double*—at home for a whole afternoon, and they went to Coney Island even though it looked like rain and whooped at the city from the top of the Wonder Wheel. She caught a head cold after, Harriet said, but it was worth it, worth every sniffle. Her Tom looked, she said wistfully, so light.

This will be worth it, Lillian reminds herself, as Hank's double diffuses into a miracle of incohesion. She tries bravely not to pay him mind—it is uncouth to stare at the tether—but it is impossible not to look at Horatio. When he is especially upset, he stutters like bad cinema reel, fascinating to watch except for how he's agonizing: his excoriated limbs play and replay pain previously unexpressable, pain extreme beyond bearing. The moment his knees burst is not the worst suffering; it is the

betrayal that comes with every wound. *This is not how*— his face utters, each time. *That's not what*—

Hank looks back at his attaché, captivated by the moment of dying. He's not a man who looks easily away from pain. "Lil," he says in his streetcar rumble, "that's—that's quite flattering to hear." But both their eyes are on Horatio. He glares at her behind his empty sockets, teeth bared, his face the last push over the top, and pulls on the tether with elephantine force.

Lillian sees the moment it takes him: Hank's puzzlement wiped clean, his eyes clear now, not clouded; his steady hand melted to a tremor before he reclaims it and thoughtlessly cradles it, rabbit-like, against his chest. "I thought you wanted us how we are," Hank says as Horatio mouths the words, and they both stretch to full height, five feet ten and one game leg and one blown-apart torso left washed-up on the roads of France. "I don't know how you could lead us on this way. That's—that's *rotten*."

She looks away. There's no sense protesting. It's gone. He's gone.

The sparrows halo out above them, abandoning ship. She tracks their furious shadows on her cool fingertips on the grass as he angrily packs the blanket, throwing picnic plates like mortars into the wicker basket with its charming blue bow. *Clank, crash, fwump*, punctuated by the duckling choir of children insistently screeching from their hymnals: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine*. One of them is mumbling, Hank or Horatio, and Lillian does not want to hear the words. She tilts her gaze away, watches instead a child at the farthest fringes, her hair done dutifully in puffed pigtails, looking silently to the sunset line. She thinks: *There is nothing a living girl can do to weigh more than a man dead overseas*. She thinks: *He smiles like smiles are new when Horatio's sleeping*. She thinks, chest full of rabbits: *Please don't go*.

Once the hymn ends, all his furious motion ceases. Lillian holds horribly still, waiting for a flicker across the grass. "I can't—" he starts, and then his shadow retreats, an inch and then out like low tide, and when she dares to look up: gone.

She knew this might happen, she tells herself, and wipes the sting from her eyes. Eleanor will take her out for hot borscht soup and sympathy, and Hank will call on her or he won't, when he comes down from the shock of it, when Horatio looses his celluloid hands from the safety line. She can't make him tiptoe out to her across that empty proverbial.

She so wanted him to say yes.

The choir begins to pack its bags, hymnals and milk sent from home in old cola bottles, and when the stubbled grass feels too much like the painpricks behind her eyes she retreats into that tiny conservatory, where the rabbits are agitated and wheeling. She takes her habitual count, and yes, there is a fresh one spawned: small, shaking, lop-eared, swirling as black and white as Horatio's dying rage, a rage so much more hallowed than all her heartbroke disappointments.

"Oh," she says, but softly, not to frighten him. "Oh, no," and gathers him in desperately; cradles him against her breast to soothe his fast heartbeats. Rabbits are easy to frighten, and hard to reassure. Her hands shake. The lean rabbit flickers in her arms, soft haunches and powerful, fragile ears, and she breathes deep, opens her eyes against the tears, and before she realizes just what she's done she's carried the lean rabbit outside its conservatory, awkwardly bunched between her arms, his tiny innocuous claws nubbed against her shirtsleeve, and into the park.

She looks around, startled. The sun has barely gestured while she was inside herself: the shadows still thin, and the lean old choirmaster still herding bags up and hats on. The rabbit's grey fur clouds and clears like wind across a storm sky; his newsreel-dark nose twitches at smells,

breeze, temperature. From his tail, the thinnest tether stretches tenderly to her palm.

There's no sign anyone at all has seen, is looking.

"There's clover here," she tells him softly, and sets him into the grass. He tastes and tastes, a blade and then a flower, and she watches, fascinated, as his ears lift and legs stretch out longer; long enough to touch a curve of shadow.

Hank, and her heart leaps, but when Lillian looks up she sees that dreamy little Black choirgirl lingering at the border of her pin oak tree, staring at the half-tame animal twitching around her feet. At the tether laid between them, full visible against her skin.

She catches her breath, suddenly all haunches, ready to run. But there's a yearning in that face she recognizes: that most physical desire for something gentle and soft; to reach out with a wondering hand.

It's not done for them to socialize. Last summer ran red in the South and even here, where the streetcars are desegregated, white women don't go to Harlem, and little Black girls dodge her eyes; their grandmothers' backs pierced with tethers that lead everywhere, lead into the ground. There are days even after now, now that the men are all come home, when it still feels like all the world is stealing into those middle lands of grey and white. As if one morning, she might twitch the curtain and see a newsreel world outside, every one of them a headline, knotted into bloody statistics, knotted together not by the ties of offer and reply, a wry good cheer shared, the laughing offer of the last slice of rye, but only dumb, shocked pain. All of them perpetuating a great forgetting that once friends bound themselves together with any other cloth than bandages.

She draws a deep breath, and offers only with her eyes: *You can pet him if you wish.*

The little girl looks over her shoulder, tiptoes closer. Lillian nods encouragement, but not too much. The girl's face is sunlit with a keen and curious expression: awe at his muscles, his imperfections, his breath. Her hand strokes him in a flash of fingers and then gone, fled around the pin oak tree, back to her playmates, holding her right hand cupped as if the feel of soft fur can be kept safe for a keepsake jar, opened rarely, treasured, precious. In the distance, Lillian hears her finally raise her voice, skipping down the pathway in her best patent shoes. *Johnny, that lady had a rabbit!*

Lillian's rabbit stirs. His little eyes have slid shut into a Sunday sleep. A leaf of clover hangs, half-nibbled, from his mouth, and for a moment it's shaded in black and white, but for a moment, his ears pink, and she sees color.



It is not too late. She can feel the axis righting. Hank is brave; he survived at Ypres. He was kind enough to welcome the dead man tethered into his life. When he walked her home last weekend he took her hand and held it, just under the streetlight, and she saw their skin luminous with current as if they were wet; as if they could sprout, together, a passel of roses. Their ten fingers slid together in a tangled knot that was chosen, not born in furtive pain, and made of more than amputations and offered-up wounds. There is more left than grieving in the world after all, and it is not too late, and not too late.

And then there are rabbits everywhere: grey, white, brown, sleek sleepy black, ranging out around her in the good earth, tasting spring. They are beautiful, and they are scattering beneath the bushes, along the path, and before them exclamations of wonder and surprise, a radiant circle of delight ever-expanding as they stretch out their bodies to be touched.

She leans back and watches them roam free, her heart light and alight. The sun is westering. Past the fountains, a lone fiddler starts up a lone fiddle tune. In the bracken an old woman peals a laugh, and Lillian breathes the stealing evening air, the ocean that connects her to all of it with ties inextricable: roast nuts, new grass, and old hymnals; the scent of Lifebuoy in her hair; musky manure plowed into the quiet-churning soil; a new daffodil; the city splashed green, blue, primrose. Soft fur and sweet clover. Hank's gentle hand. Life, life, life.



I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise. -George Gershwin





THE ECONOMICS OF DEATH

Nnadi Samuel | Poetry

for Japheth

Our deads cost a language to bring back.
& in Taiwan, mother lavish her speaking-in-tongues on empty sky.

not one deity moved
to translate our grief into oblivion.

a woman lifts a child,
and the price becomes too much to bear.
she empties her rib like a blank check.
says: to sex is human, the gendering is divine.

queer landlocks the nearby street,
and my loin gives off homosexuality.
I meet the burden halfway topless.

want tape measures me,
& I knit the longing into a breathless vest.

we're all trying to outdress our wounds,
name it by its design.

When I run the tap of my tongue,
a dialect overflows.
surely, goodness & mercy burrows me.

mother digs a godly trench, blood the waters
& I miscarry death in backstrokes.
in a male-deprived town, I devoice my boyhood,
tone down its lavish and spend it quiet.

I empty my strength & call it poverty.
we fall back to the arms of our male pairs when the trench capsizes.
each of us, fragile with our kidney stones.

Japheth bites the dust.
rectum, unzipped like a wallet.
guts, spilled lifeless as a dead currency.

I motion my lips & name it grammar.
name the stream in between— a bright phrase.
my verb, boiled into a miracle.

there are no rich enough words to Lazarus our deads.
sadness too, can depend on social class.
the stars, wealthy on his shin guard.

we unroll a tissue of pounds,
& it became their first duet with our fingers.
how miserable it feels now, to rank deity before death,
before a godless currency.





THIS RESIDUE LIGHT

Ewen Ma | Fiction

Light and life and rain and white noise and we are thrumming with the city's breath and soaring through its veins, its streets, alive, so alive with the intoxicating knowledge that we are this savage city and the city is us and we are on the hunt, raw and starved, watching, watching watching watching—

There. Outside the shutters of a decaying tong-lau apothecary still bitter with traces of medical herbs. One more spirit to be harnessed.

The graven-faced man bowed by the crush of scavenged cardboard boxes collapses at the gate. He is tired, so tired, and we too are weighed down by his burden but cannot do anything to ease the suffocation in his mind, and must instead wait and wait and wait and pluck him from the streets of the city at the right moment, the unseen moment.

We want to help. We want to comfort the old man we want to tell him that it will be okay, but we cannot, we are only light we are only residue we are only evanescence and we will surely break if we do this forever but we *must* do this forever, bind the spirits of the forgotten and the lost to us in the flickering candle-moment between memory and nothingness, make them a part of us, a part of the lights.

We see our chance. Seize it.

He passes beneath a streetlamp and we lace ourselves to him, dissolve his spirit, weave the remnants of all that he once was into pieces of all that we are, one more forgotten soul injected with worth and new life, given purpose.

It takes the too-vast, too-hollow space between one heartbeat and the next for his spirit to scatter into us.

I won't ask Ahlok for money I won't sink that low I'd rather earn my own keep than be packed off to a home should never have raised him to be such a spoilt brat shouldn't have stayed in City H should never have left he chose to cut his own heart out and wear the police uniform where did we go wrong to raise such a child what if the cop who drove me out from the underpass was him I couldn't see the fucker's face but I'd recognize that frame anywhere how many people did he beat into the concrete yesterday night how many kids' wrists did he tie behind their backs and how many of them did he shove into the van he is my fault he isn't my fault good riddance to him I'll fucking strangle him if he dares come back I want him to come ba—

And we tell him, tell us, whispering, *Adapt. Be us. Don't resist.*

Don't resist.

Don't

Resist.

When *he* becomes *we*, all that remains of the he-that-once-was is heavy cardboard, sodden and limp with rainfall.

A red minibus hurtles by with the inexorable force of gas from a canister and vanishes into the night.



Deepwater Pier district, near dawn. A riot of colors and noise and used cellphones and cheap lingerie and plastic toys spread out on the streets, stalls like miniature islands peddling electronics and semiconductors and CDs, kitsch and memory, nostalgia and bolts of tapestry.

At the crossroads right outside the busy green-tiled subway exit, a woman looks up at the decaying neon sign above her that flickers with forgotten life.

At us.

Her hair is milk-tea glossy and trimmed to a precision at the nape of her neck, her linen shirt half-tucked into a long mustard-yellow skirt: the perfect portrait of one of the young culturati of City H.

You can always tell her kind by their bearing, their countenance: worldly and naive and weary and fox-canny all at once. They are paradoxes in the way we are a paradox, as much a part of this city's tracery of veins as they are exiles in this city made for exiles. They are at home sweating amidst the roaring fumes of daipaitongs pungent with curry fish balls and siumai and cheung fun, or tucked away in upstairs bookeries and coffeehouses, record shops and haberdasheries, hungry, always hungry, searching for the lingering hallucination of some bygone era which will never be theirs in defiance of time.

And she is looking up at us, really *looking*, with the sharp-eyed awareness of a challenger, a combatant, a haggler inspecting some curio in their hand and weighing its worth.

(Something else you can always tell her kind by: the eyes. Fractured and jagged in the way of shattered window-glass. Every child here has the same eyes now. Feral eyes. Dead eyes.)

We cringe at the clarity of her gaze, uneasy at the prospect of being seen, of being judged and found wanting.

She takes her phone out from the pocket of her skirt and raises it to the shop sign, and we cannot hear the shutter-click of the device as she takes a photograph but we know that a fragment of us is forever immortalized, the hollow red-green-yellow hum of a dying neon sign captured as though an insect caught in amber.

Then the photographer is walking down the street now against the current, inspecting the contents of her phone, head bowed, seemingly oblivious to the sour sweat and heat and noise of the crowd drowning her like mountains, like the sea, and then the screech of wheels on concrete, someone shouting at her loud and shrill, *Watch where you're going, sei lang mui!*

Reeled in by the snare of our curiosity, we flow through particles of light, look down on her from above as she weaves her way in between buildings and through narrow alleyways stinking of pepper-rot and toxins.

We flicker, lover-close and hesitant, lean over her to inspect her phone.

A photograph. No, not *a* photograph, she is flicking through the photos and we see ourselves a hundredfold in the neon-bright, in the sepia, in the blacks and whites, blurred and knife-sharp, dating back and back. Fragments and shards of *déjà disparu* stitched together into a cartography of *us*, a thousand *us-as-we-once-weres* and *us-as-we-will-becomes*, sand in hourglass, sediments in the sea.

The *us* buried beneath the weight of so many discordant memories and unwritten histories and scattered terrazzo-stones of seven million lives pressed together.

Us as we once were and *us* as we are now. Tangled up in one another, in a collision, a dance, a shifting of one scent-note to another, separate yet unextractable.

The past is not etched into our language. Nor in our mirrored skyscrapers nor the junk boat in the harbor, nor the well-worn quandary of a city caught between worlds. This is who we are: the light, the not-alive, the unforgotten, the disappeared. The lachrymator smoke, the shadow, the debris, the sirens, the anger, the fear, the fifty years.

The young man in a yellow raincoat on the roof's ledge. (20,000+1.) The broken black-clad body pooling blood under the shadows of a car park. The child floating naked in briny waters. (An *unsuspicious death*.) The last innocent unbridled laughter beneath a mid-autumn moon. The kaleidoscope spin of every summer day and winter night collapsing into each other on torn-up streets, the death knell of an emergency alarm in a station deep underground, a bridge on fire, too-young foster parents and too-old children who do not know each other by name but are learning for the first time the meaning of blood, smudges of ghost-writing on every surface, *Hasta la victoria siempre, Je me révolte donc je suis, man was born for love and revolution, ji yau, gaak ming*, a cacophony of words upon words upon words papered onto every wall in jubilant colors.

And the photographer reaches another crossroad, another subway exit, and the sky is grey-white with the coming dawn and someone else is waiting for her there.

She closes into the other woman's space, a sharp jump from behind the woman, startling her waiting companion.

— *Diu. You scared me.*

— *Hey yourself.*

— *Hah, screw you. After what happened last night at Little Cove, I thought...*

— *I texted you, after. Once I got home. Said I was safe. You're not still mad at me, are you?*

— *All right. I'm sorry.*

— *You're all right, though.*

— *Yeah. Yeah, I'm all right.*

They cling to each other tight and fierce, in their own world as bright and fragile as a constellation of possibilities, alive, so alive, and who are the dead and the forgotten to deny them this fleeting rock-certain joy of existence?

The streetlights flicker off one by one with the finality of cut-string kites, and we fade away, drown ourselves in the deluge of a searing dawn, and the last thing we see is their interlinked hands as they turn a corner and step over the remnants of salvaged cardboard stirring in the breeze.





DERANGED SESTINA// OR TO OUTDRESS A COFFIN & NAME IT SELF-HARM

Nnadi Samuel | Poetry

I'm handpicked by a misphrase to where my person lies:
a gash in a word pool of listlessness where grief & suture hold hands.

I—bandage held towards gloom in the night of my waking.
the blank page below, puddled with darkness.
each margin, rarified into dusk.

thumb, fondling a dead braille.
ghosts tiptoeing my palm in worship,
in actual hand shape—thieved from the behavior of a less consistent
sign language.

from the handprints, I meet empathy tiling
the hour into grammar.

a slang missing my gum by a mile,
by all the possible ways we reinvent to educate our grief.

in the month of self-destruct, the hand slants in bold blood.
a corpse later, the coffin holds a body in italics
as we ache over the shape.

meaning: the body is capable of hurt,
 the body at rest keeps sad design.
 the body is unadorned in its vegetative state.
 the body outdresses a coffin & names it self-harm.
 praise to alphabet— the bruising of diphthongs.
 see me strawing this body to a ligature
 vowel-soft, wedging a protest.
 see the cultured abecedary I am blessing my lips with, robust with rant.
 see me word my loin with a heritage of glyphs.

a sneeze is a heavily punctuated afterthought.
 pain & regret known in the same breath.

our most glaring proof of insanity is:
 amounting up to nothing
 in this modern craze for a word count that meets me backbent.

feet, stomping the undergrowth of remembrance,
 arm shuffling a narrative.

what weariness leaves me undeserving of my clock,
 than this word spree unbraiding my tongue?
 jaw kicked open— you could read my lips,
 & still not get the utterance to subdue my bestial want
 to vowelize in cold-blooded adjective.

bestial, meaning this loin as a burden capable of death,
 capable of putting coffins out of fashion.

unaware, grief tastes like painless killing— where impact
 stains the ground with violent red,
 & pain tones the body into a litany in this breathless minute.
 anything can become prayer, if held to the ground.
 each small death starts with an uproar on the lips,
 knowing the mouth stomachs so many graves.





BEAUTIFUL OATHS

Shanna Germain | Fiction

In the very back of Landsdelle Cemetery, beneath a windfall of vine maples, Adaranth White took respite between two sheltered rows of graves, overgrown with blackberry brambles and tufted with moss. He'd chosen this particular spot because of the gravestone he was leaning on, that of one Jonathan Pease. He didn't believe he'd known Mr. Pease—not even someone such as himself could know everyone—but he thought he would have liked him. Or at least liked whoever wrote the man's epitaph, which read:

*Under the sod and under the trees
Lies the body of Jonathan Pease.
He is not here, there's only the pod:
Pease shelled out and went to God.*

It made him smile, and every day Adaranth White tried to find something that would make him smile.

Somewhere behind him, five black dogs wandered among the headstones, panting and pawing. Soon they would be bored—they were eternally bored with him—and then they would return, one by one, and lie down in front of him with their paws crossed politely, and their tails held steady, all of their focus on him, their most boring of masters. Their stares would politely suggest that perhaps it would be best if he was done with whatever this overly long rest was and got on with it.

But for now, they were still engaged with their rabbit trails and the scent of bones beneath the earth, and he could sit in silence among the dead.

Cemeteries were his bread and butter, to use an old country phrase he'd heard once and never forgotten, and they were among the only places he felt comfortable now. The living made him nervous, if he was honest, all of their yearning and angst to stay that way. It rolled off of them and filled the air with a gravity that made him tired.

What he *did* like about the living was their language.

Language lived, yes, but it held no weight, no intense yearning, no expectations laid upon him like prayers. Adaranth collected all of the livings' sayings, words, idiosyncrasies, idioms, oaths, and turns of phrase. The weirder and more esoteric the better. His favorites were expletives, often their origins long forgotten. Most of the interesting ones were not about life or death, but about the gods, or a God, or the idea of a god.

Some of his personal favorites were "ods bodkins" (God's little body) and "By St. Boogar and all the saints at the backside door of purgatory!" (which he understood came either from a novel or a movie, or perhaps both, neither of which he was familiar although he also understood there was some overtone or undertone of homosexuality, and this has for some reason caused an uproar at various points along the living timeline). In truth, the latter one was too long to be a proper expletive, but that's also what, in his opinion, made it both unique and fun to say.

Despite whatever the dogs might think—and he could hear them beginning to circle back already, their welcome worn, their scents chased and caught and locked away for dreams of later—Adaranth waited here for reasons beyond the delight of punny headstones and the cool shelter of the mossy shade.

He was here to do the only thing (other than collecting sayings) that brought him any semblance of joy these days: helping someone hide—for a day or a month or perhaps even a year—from Death.



By the time that someone came, the dogs had made a show of giving up on him with long drawn-out sighs and were sleeping sideways in the sunslants, their tails thumping erratically to whatever dreams rose and fell inside their black skulls.

He'd been dreaming himself, of his husband mostly—an ancient moment of vulnerability. The way the fine black hairs on his spouse's arms were whorled like fingerprints, how even as he kissed Adaranth with delicate, delicious care, there was always a part of him away, somewhere else. They'd been estranged for eons, which had taught Adaranth that, for him at least, time dulled pain, but it only deepened love. The way an injury settled into a scar. Or a shard of glass smoothed into a softness.

When Adaranth opened his eyes, somehow both heart-pained and groin-ached (time, it turned, did little to diminish lust either—a double-bladed knife both dull and sharp), she stood before him, her face at his face although she was standing and he was sitting. A child or a feywild? In his hazy, sleep-addled state, he couldn't be sure. Still, not what he'd expected. His usual clients were witchwives and beasts of the bracken, the rare ones who understood who he was and what he could do.

Although "client," perhaps, was the wrong term, as he never charged for his services. He did what he did to undo his own wrongs, and for the gift of any new phrase that might fall from the lips of those he helped. They called and he came, for what else to do with his long, unending years now that love was gone from him and all he had a

leash on (and they him) was this pack of bored and weary hounds, un-asked-for bodyguards against his desire?

“Adaranth White,” and it wasn’t a question, but still he said, “Yes,” because there were formalities to such things. Long ago, a soothsayer had asked him, just before he’d gone to stand on his wedding dais, “If you could see everything that would become, would you still go forth?” and how quickly he’d said yes, such a young man, not understanding time or love or even the power of promises.

Normally he would rise to greet a client, but it seemed respectful to stay seated, so that her eyes could see his, as he pulled various instruments from his many pockets and placed them purposefully on the ground in front of him.

She began to speak again, and he merely held up a hand, glanced quick at the dogs, who so far still slept. None had so much opened a single golden eye to see. His clients wished to hide from Death, but they didn’t know what that meant. All that entailed. How Death’s flamed eyes were everywhere, even in the golden eyes of these dogs, in the black beads of the crow’s gaze, in the sticky stigma of every pale flower that bent its head to the earth.

Adaranth alone knew that the only place Death never saw was cemeteries, graveyards, the occasional mass murder site. Because Death never looked. “Boring,” Death had said to Adaranth once. “Like going to a movie after the credits have rolled. To what purpose?”

To what purpose, indeed.

Still, precautions were to be had, even here. And so Adaranth laid out his instruments and watched the dogs’ closed eyes and did what little magic he had, what one small magic had been given to him not by bloodline but by marriage—a dowry of sorts—and he wondered who she had come to ask for. Not herself, likely—women, he’d found, of any

age, of any origin, nearly never sought his services for themselves. It was nearly always some other, a beloved, a feared, a needed, a burden. Her father, perhaps, wasting away, having heard stories of the one who could hide you from Death, at least for a while. Perhaps she was a spirit caught and sent at someone's bidding. It wouldn't be the first time someone had come to him unwilling, a captive broker of another's life.

It was human nature, he understood, to avoid dying for as long as possible, to do whatever you could to try and sidestep that final exit. Wasn't that, if he was being honest, part of why he'd gotten married? Not to avoid dying, but to bring Death so close that he was sure it would not find him?

When he was done blinding Death's eyes as best as he could, he nodded and said, "Who is it you wish to hide from ____?" He did not say Death's name out loud, nor any of his other monikers, for Death's ears were nearly as good and as omniscient as his eyes. Too, he resisted the urge to call her Child, for he still could not tell her age or origin, and did not wish to offend in case this form was not her own or not her desired one.

"No one."

Sometimes language was not what it seemed, and Adaranth took a moment to consider this unexpected answer. Was No One a name of sorts? A shibboleth that he did not know?

Before he could sort through it, she went on. "That is not why I'm here."

A misunderstanding of his skills, of what he could offer, then. A small matter, easy enough to fix and move on from. "I'm sorry," he said kindly, beginning to collect his instruments. The nearest dog opened one eye at a soft clang, and it didn't matter now, because there was no one who needed hiding. "I cannot bring someone back from Death's hands, nor put someone there. You will have to find another for those purposes."

“My Lord,” she started, and then went down on one knee in the dirt, her head to the ground before his feet and even though he was sitting already, he felt himself falling as if into an endless hole, his body sinking and boneless, and he knew then what kind of being she was.



Before the fire, before the oath, the soothsayer had asked her question and then etched Adaranth’s answer into his shoulder with the sharpened points of her nails. Pain was not a thing in the midst of love as big as this and he barely noticed, so intent was he on his beloved’s eyes, those golden flames that saw into him and through him and out the other side until every cell in his body was alight. The wounds upon his body had sealed instantly, seared to scar, and the soothsayer had placed a piece of parchment upon his skin and rubbed charcoal across it to make a mark. His seal. His signature. His oath.

Matched by his soon-to-be husband’s. The paper then rolled tight and tucked into a box into an egg into a raven into a beast unknown now on Earth sealed into a cave covered by a mountain beneath a tree bloomed into a fruit borne by a planet.

Now, Death’s messenger bent a knee to the earth and called him Lord.

“How did he find me?” Adaranth asked.

“You were never lost to Him,” she said.

Adaranth laughed, and it matched the howls of the black dogs and the whispers of the bones beneath the world and the tiny black eyes of every living creature shuttering open at once.

He understood that all his precautions, his instruments, his careful watch on dogs and ghosts and wild beasts—none of it had mattered. Death had always seem him. Into him. Through him.

Hiding from Death's eyes indeed. He wondered if the minced oath for Death's eyes was just... *dies*. All these years, and every time, Death had seen his actions ("You are not a movie, Adaranth. I would watch you through eternity") and still until this moment, had never come for him, had never told him to stop, never once begged him to come home, back to their marriage, back to their bed.

"Why now?"

In answer, she said all the names of Adaranth's husband from eternity to here and saying so took its own eternity and no more time than a heartbeat and a dog bark, and she finished with his most common of names, the one that Adaranth knew him and loved him by. "...has died, my Lord."

And there were, for the first time in centuries, no words to be found in Adaranth's mouth. No idioms, no sayings, no expletives, no oaths. He felt as though he'd spent a lifetime building armor about his body and his heart only to discover that it wasn't armor at all. It was just his own skin, fallible and thrice-worn thin. And still his heart, that treacherous beating morass of muscle and memory, refused to falter or fail.

A long time they waited, the dogs shifting and snuffling and eventually sitting on their hunches and howling in unison, a mourning of time's press and wane.

Eventually, because somewhere in the passage of time, his eyes had created an ocean and his wounds had seared themselves to scars and his tongue had remembered the form of words. And because he did not know what else to do but this, he said, "How can that be?"

She held out a small blue planet between her palms.

"He left this for you."



Between his hands, a planet. Inside, a pomegranate. A shard of stone. A beast unknown. A bird, croaked. A crystalline egg. A black box.

And in the center: a paper, rolled tight. An oath. A promise. A past and a future.

Even on their wedding dais. "What's mine is yours now, Adaranth. If I should die..."

Adaranth had laughed, kissed him, filled with all the things he didn't know and didn't understand. "Hush. You are Death. You will never die."

And hadn't Death promised Adaranth that was true? Hadn't his beloved looked upon him and agreed that it was so? No, Adaranth didn't think he had.

His husband. His beloved. His Death. Those golden eyes and dark whorls. That mischievous mouth. That part that was always elsewhere, overseeing the world's slow end.

He remembered, now, why they'd parted. It wasn't because there was no longer love or lust, but because there was too much, for too long. It burned through the edges of Adaranth's skin, seared his heart, a constant hot ember that flared each time it was blown on. Who could live in such love forever and not die of its sear?

The husband of Death, that was who. Dying, for him, was not an option. Adaranth thought he had escaped by running away, but he understood now that his love had let him go, as best as he could. Given Adaranth the hounds to watch over him and the Earth to wander and the small magic of hiding a few souls here and there. A purpose. A gift.

Adaranth held the paper oath between his palms and understood that this too was a gift. A final gift of love, of freedom, if Adaranth chose it.

It would burn so easily. Become ash and light and memory. Adaranth could make his final resting place here, among the sod and leaves and the headstone of Jonathan Pease. Lay it all down, let his bones decay the light, let his heart unfurl the roots of what was planted, let his love die.

Let Death die.

What's mine is yours now.

If you could see everything that would become, would you still go forth?

His heart answered what his mouth could not.

Yes.

"Let's go home," he said, and the dogs, upon hearing the word they'd been waiting for these long ages, had already risen and were ready, tails a-wag, before the man who'd chosen Death could bring himself to rise.





ASK A NECROMANCER

Fever Season

Amanda Downum | Nonfiction

In my life, I have rarely been on the cutting edge. Be it fashion, literary trends, or cell phones, I tend to run a bit behind the times. Little did I realize, when I began my first mortuary job in January of 2020, what a fascinating opportunity I was about to have.

When the Mortuary Science department canceled its spring break field trips that March and the college planned a temporary switch to remote classes, I admit that I grumbled and assumed they were overreacting. It wasn't going to be *that* bad. Sweet summer children, so many of us.

Lockdown as an "essential worker" was surreal. Highways were clear during rush hour. Streets were empty at night. Deer wandered through the city. At work, we sorted through dozens of new protocols. We waited.

Our very first COVID case was a house call on the third floor. The logistics necessitated calling the fire department for help. The firefighters took the situation incredibly seriously, to their great credit. This led to the surreal experience of my partner and me standing in a parking lot on a cold spring night being sprayed down with bleach by the glare of a fire truck's floodlight. Before the decon, though, I talked to the dead man's family—the usual things we tell families, but painfully rushed. I was sweating in my suit and unfamiliar PPE, acutely aware of my breath under a shield and KN95 mask. When family members have questions we can't answer, we explain that a funeral director will talk to them the

next day and go over the details. This time, though, the question was “Will we be able to get tested now?” I had no answer for that at all.

Another sharp-etched memory of the early days of lockdown was a nursing home call. The facility was still COVID-free, but closed to all visitors. I stood outside in the cold, giving a woman the chance to say goodbye to her father before we loaded him into the van. After that, cases increased, and everything began to blur.

I received my provisional embalming license in March. Due to the logistics of sealing the prep room, embalming COVID cases became the purview of night shift. The first time my mentor and I asked our boss if I could assist, he said no. The second time, he said yes. I got to see the aftermath of COVID very closely then: disfiguring edema, cheeks and mouths scarred by ventilators, lungs full of froth and pus. The worst, for me, was their hair—tangled and filthy after weeks in isolation. We embalmed in Tyvek bunny suits, double-gloved, masked and shielded, drenching everything and everyone in disinfectant.

The year wore on. I watched exhausted ICU nurses wipe down PPE meant for single use. Sometimes they would offer some to me—an extra mask or face shield. I rarely accepted them; I already knew I was in much less danger from the dead than the living. Nursing homes, rarely cheerful places to begin with, became nightmare fuel. We picked up the dead while the barely-living wheezed into respirators one bed over. We filled all the ancillary coolers in our funeral homes with corpses, and brought in refrigerated trucks. Services were delayed while whole families were sick or quarantined.

Austin did not suffer as badly as some other cities. My classmates working in San Antonio were overwhelmed, beyond exhausted. My mentor traveled to El Paso to help, and Dallas, and eventually L.A., and brought back stories. Three of my coworkers tested positive, and I spent two weeks working alone.

In March of 2020, I had moved in with my parents. As the pandemic wore on I was exhausted, frightened, and so profoundly angry. Had I been living alone, I might have accepted more risk, let my guard down. But that wasn't an option. Except it was, for so many people. I spent every day wanting to scream. I have always been perilously close to misanthropy, but I have never been so disappointed in humanity as I was that year.

We eventually relaxed our precautions in the prep room, as evidence mounted and supplies grew thin. The dead were safe enough. Never trust the living.

Despite the stress and misery, my job kept me sane. Unlike so many of my friends, I wasn't trapped at home. I talked to people face to face—even if I only saw their eyes. In many ways I thrived. I have the sort of ADHD in which adrenaline lends itself to hyperfocus; some nights I felt like a goddamned laser. On my days off I was scattered, scraped raw, barely able to read fiction, let alone write it. But at work I ran as long as I had to—thirteen- or fourteen-hour shifts, sometimes. My mental health is a work in progress, but my time as plague doctor had a profound impact on my baseline anxiety, for the better. I suffered for years from a chorus of doubt and self-loathing, telling me *I wasn't, I shouldn't, I couldn't*. By the end of 2020, I was pretty sure I damned well could.

But that doesn't mean I need to do that again anytime soon. So for the love of the living and the dead, be careful and sensible, and think about how your life intersects the lives of those around you.



The nights once again grow longer. Ponder, in the darkness, what questions you have for the necromancer. Submit them through our submission form at thedeadlands.com, or **@stillsotranger** on Twitter.





STILL-LIFE WITH SHRUBS

Nnadi Samuel | Poetry

Autumn buzzes around us, like the killing of bees.
our youthful legs still adoring crop stains,
stampeding the dense thickets, honey-sweet with cicada & fallen grapes.

our ripest inheritance— the luscious sting of maple leaves.
osmanthus, carpeting the undergrowth of
teff grain only our bare feet stomp.

we braid a garland round our necks,
having wishful thoughts of asphyxiation.

the night Japheth held his breath,
each winged creature froze midair as prayer weathering a quiet storm.

April, *Pa* buries all his love interest:
a sack of hand trowels,
a son shouldering his name & indifference.
the harvest, scanty as a willable plot of land.

friends say Japheth toyed with wizardry,
grilled hibiscus into oat,
summoning milkweed from the throat of a borehole.

we replay the scenario,
casting characters out of the wrong plot.

In our teenage year we toiled the gutters, soakaway.
sewage pits, surrounded by thorn pikes.
the leaves reddish in autumn's grip.

from the rust, we famed our jewelleries:
bracelets of green spinach.
trinkets of marshmallow lapped over our wrists—
bleeding as the early sugar carrots.

we harvest a mother bee from her hive,
and a swarm accost us.

tulips wreathing over a dull fence, lambent with fireflies.
the leftover glow, trailing us back to our homestead.





AUTHOR BIOS



Novelist, editor, and critic **Leah Bobet**'s novels have won the Sunburst, Copper Cylinder, and Aurora Awards, been Ontario Library Association's Best Bets, and shortlisted for the Andre Norton Award. Her short fiction has appeared in multiple Year's Best anthologies and is taught in high school and university classrooms in Canada, Australia, and the US, and her poetry appears in both speculative and literary journals. She was a founding editor at *Abyss & Apex*, editor of *Ideomancer Speculative Fiction*, and guest poetry editor for *Reckoning: creative writing on environmental justice*'s 2021 issue. She lives in Toronto, where she makes jam, builds civic engagement spaces, and plants both tomatoes and trees. Visit her at www.leahbobet.com.



Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published/forthcoming in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Timber Ghost Press*, *Haven Spec Magazine*, *Star*Line Fiction & Poetry*, *Penumbric Speculative Poetry & Fiction Magazine* & elsewhere. He is the author of "Reopening of Wounds" & "Subject Lessons" (forthcoming). He tweets @Samuelsamba10.



Ewen Ma was made in Hong Kong but now lives in London, where they write speculative fiction and poetry, devise theatre, and haunt cemetery parks. Their work can be found in *Uncanny*, *The Deadlands*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Anathema*, and *Apparition Lit* (among other places), and has been shortlisted for

the inaugural *Future Worlds Prize* in 2020. Ewen is also a 2018 Clarion West graduate and a lapsed Film & Visual Culture research student. Catch Ewen online at ewenma.com or on Twitter at @awenigma.



If **Shanna Germain** were a god, she'd be the Benevolent God of Rainbow Sprinkles. Sadly, she's only human. Her award-winning body of work encompasses stories, games, poems, and essays about lust, lies, and leviathans, and includes *Predation*, *No Thank You*, *Evil!*, *Invisible*

Sun, *As Kinky as You Wanna Be*, *The Lure of Dangerous Women*, and *The Poison Eater*. Currently, she's hard at work on a fantasy novel about psychopomps and Post-It note gods; a roleplaying game about the devil's dandy dogs; and a cookie recipe that she hopes will bring all the puppies to her yard. She lives in a rainforest with a dog named &. Follow her down the rabbit hole at shannagermain.com.



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.



Nicasio Andres Reed is a writer, poet, and essayist whose work has appeared in venues such as *Shimmer*, *Fireside*, *Lightspeed*, and *Uncanny Magazine*. He's read slush for *Strange Horizons*, edited manuscripts for award-winning authors, and owns five different copies of *Moby Dick*. He

lives with his family in Cavite province in the Philippines.



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.

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