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THE
DEADLANDS

ISSUE #1 MAY 2021

a journal of ends & beginnings

cover art by Sam Weber



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THE BEGINNING

I had to have been about eight years old the first time I saw a dead body.

My mom was travelling, and so I was left in the care of family friends. These friends worked for a funeral home and it was their responsibility to transport bodies. I remember them having a very serious conversation with my mom ahead of one stay, where they told my mom if we had to go on a run (they couldn't leave me at the house alone!), I wouldn't see anything.

That said, I do have a very vivid memory of being in the transport van, and seeing a body bag strapped to a gurney. I also remember trying to keep my attention on the Speak & Spell I rarely went anywhere without. I couldn't quite grasp what had happened, or what the bag was, or what it contained. The family friends made it all seem perfectly normal though—they had done this countless times before, and would do it countless times again. After we did the run, we had dinner.

When Sean approached me with the idea of this magazine, it felt right. It was the right time in my own life to explore this theme, but it was also the right time to return to editing. I was also honored that he picked me to execute his vision. When he made a list of influences, I knew it was a thing I could do, because I loved the books and poems and music he drew from. I had already embraced a lot of death fiction in my work at *Shimmer*—stories that still haunt me, stories that I wanted to see more of.

Now we can. In the coming months, we have some truly breathtaking stories and poems to share with you. Our journey will take us across the world, but also into the stars. We will walk the road of good intentions toward hell, but I suspect we'll also be up in those heavenly clouds. We want to explore all of the afterlives, all of the beginnings we may find when this existence of ours on earth is done. We're glad to have you with us.

E. Catherine Tobler
May 2021



PSYCHOPOMP

MJ Cunniff

The amount of architecture required
to ferry the dead must be momentous:

train tracks of finely wrought silver run
across the shores by the black rivers,

shuddering near each other
with calculated blasts of power.

Over the gray dust speed the cars
of the dead; on the far bank she stands and cries

*where are you, far from the blue hills
while the children still thrash in the water*

a geography I look for now
and cannot conceive,

though fish still explode out of bright clear eggs
in the harbor.



PERISTALSIS

Vajra Chandrasekera

Season one, episode one, minute thirty-one and thirty-five seconds: Leveret chases Annelid into the jungle. They are laughing, because they're teenagers and it's a game. The jungle is not quite a jungle. In a much later episode, we learn via a minor subplot about 1970s land reform that it was once a colonial-era rubber plantation, abandoned and gone feral. It will gradually grow wilder and more overgrown through the seasons. Leveret and Annelid will grow older, too. This is that kind of show. We know when another year has passed when the new year birds hoot in the background. There are only two kinds of show: the kind where people grow older and the kind where they don't. We, the fandom, love the first kind best. We love this show so much.

Leveret and Annelid aren't their real names—that is, not the given names of the characters in the show, which we never learn; the IMDB page tells us the real names of the young actors, but that seems irrelevant—but nicknames they took from old textbooks they found gathering dust in a cupboard in their little school that never seems to hold exams or have Intended Learning Outcomes or parent-teacher conferences. There are no ordinary school lessons. All they do at school is sit in a darkened classroom with the other kids, watching a show about us on TV.

We think this is appropriate. We watch them; they watch us. The wheel turns.



She runs into the jungle, the balls of her bare feet barely touching the ground, so that he will follow. She pushes aside branches that snap back at his face, leaps over roots that she knows he'll trip over, laughs so hard it echoes around him like a haunting. Annelid, and a lid, she's keeping a lid on it. She hiccups and can't stop giggling.



The TV in their classroom is an Australian-built Philips color TV from the late 1970s or perhaps the early 1980s: twenty-six-inch pale grey screen with rounded edges; fake wood finish on the chassis; black plastic grille on the right that you can take out with a *click* to expose the control panel where you can tune channels by turning tiny knobs. We remember those from life, too. Child-sized fingers were better at the knobs. Getting the channels right used to be one of our chores. (A hundred thousand childhood chores unfold in our memory. Husking coconuts on an iron spike. A fire between three blackened bricks. A short-bladed scythe through the long grass. A tire rolling down a dirt path by a lake, under a dry blue sky.)

We watch them watch us. The picture on the TV screen looks grainy and out of focus from our perspective, but the kids don't seem to have any trouble with it. We suspect this avoidance of perfect fidelity is an intentional device to avoid opening an abyss of mirrors. Nature abhors an infinite regress.

The TV does not show us in real time; it is in fact deeply committed to unreal time, seeming to glide back and forth across the spans of our lives. When we squint and peer at the blurry screen, our colors seem faded by modern standards. It makes us look like period actors. Our clothes, haircuts, and mannerisms are not distinctively contemporary. We can't tell if our technology is anachronistic in a given episode. For instance, is that a smartphone in our hands or a small book of religious scripture or revolutionary literature that we might be reading for inspi-

ration and to ensure our ideological righteousness? We cannot agree in our analyses, which manifests as dyspeptic unease. There are cracks in the unity of our we.

The audio track of the show within the show is completely inaudible to us except as murmurs on the edge of hearing, like the whispering of dead children. We can hear the kids in the classroom just fine when they whisper to each other, or the occasional expostulations and exposition from the teacher, even birdsong from outside hooting a new year in. It is only ourselves that remain inaccessible. Sometimes the kids mock the dialogue from the TV by repeating it in funny voices. That's the only way we know what we're saying.



She leans back in her chair, drawing pleasure from the way it doesn't yield, the way the wood digs into her skin, the ache in the unsupported small of her back. Annelid sits in the back of the class because she's a bad girl. Leveret is up front somewhere. She doesn't care about anybody else in the room; it's as if they don't exist. She doesn't care for him either, but it's a different kind of not caring. While the TV plays, the teacher drones on about the causes of the war, which is now over but never over: he says it was about burning books and bodies, though not at the same time. A library and a funeral. This, Annelid knows, is incorrect, or at least incomplete. She gets her true histories from Leveret's father, who has many strong opinions on this and other subjects. The last time she was at Leveret's house for lunch, Leveret went to piss and Uncle—who had been drinking, of course, as usual, he hasn't stopped drinking since his wife died, which is to say, nearly as long as Leveret has been alive—cornered her at the dining room table to explain what he refers to as the secret history of Jesus fucking Christ.

Whenever Uncle rants, about history, about politics, about the injustices faced by his, that is to say their, great race, his comb-over rises up

and unfurls like a flag. Annelid watches, her mouth open in fascination, as that white flag seems to wave in the breeze. Uncle is bare-bodied, because he always takes his shirt off after he's had a few and overheated, and frequently stops to undo and retie his colorful batik sarong. The curling hairs on his old-man chest are white, too. He is a large man and might have been muscular, once; his pointed breasts, with the nipples ringed in white hairs, still retain a vestigial sense of the pectoral.

—Let me tell you what happened in the lost years of Jesus fucking Christ, Uncle says. He frequently intermixes any mention of a salvific figure with fucking, uniting the imprecatory and denominational. This is especially true if he's referring to them by title, because Uncle disapproves of pride in titles. He himself is a doctor, he says, but he doesn't like being called Doctor Uncle. When he wants to show he's being serious about someone, he refers to them by their full true-name instead, like a disapproving parent. —Iyesu bin Yusuf, he says, goes missing in the record (ha! Only in the bhūmic record, of course, not in the akashic, of which more anon), you understand, he goes missing for eighteen years. Eighteen years! You, you're not quite yet eighteen, so this is a gap longer than you have been alive. And what was he doing those eighteen years? Well, what all have you done in your life? A great many things, is it not? Small small things and some big things also. So it is with him. Max Müller tried to cover it up, you know, but it is as Siddhartha Gautama said, there are three things that are not hidden—Uncle pauses to put a drink. He is drinking Vat 9 Special Reserve on the rocks. The ice is melting rapidly in the heat and the arrack is a pale yellow. It looks like piss. Annelid imagines dead liquid worming its way through a living body before exiting in an arc, glittering in the light.

—There are three things that are always hidden, Uncle says. —Three things that are secret: the ways of perverts, the ways of Brahmins, and the ways of women—he points at Annelid, accusingly—As you should know. And there are three things that are not hidden, which are in the open for all to see. Two of them are the sun and the moon, which is why

the sun and the moon are on the battle standard of the great ancestor of our great race, the so-called—*so-called!*—cruel young prince. The third thing that is never hidden is the truth. No matter what Max Müller says, it is out there for all to see, if only we will look. Here it is, for example, in this book by the Swami Abhenanda—Uncle pauses to run his yellowing fingernail across the spines of the books stacked on the dining room table, his recent reading.

The nail stops at one that is too deep to be pulled out easily without dislodging the whole. He taps it instead for emphasis. —Abhenanda quotes Notovitch on the missing years of Iyesu, *sa vie inconnue*, when he travelled to Rajagaha to study at Nalanda University. Iyesu, you see, was the *classic* perennial grad student. He changed his major many times, immersing himself in one discipline after the other. It was here that he learned the craft of his trade, learned the sacred truths that we all learn now as children—here Uncle waves his arms like someone standing on a runway and signaling to an oncoming aircraft, though Annelid is not sure if it would be coming down or going up, nor does she wish to interrupt because she would never interrupt, for instance, to say that *she* was never taught this as a child, that all their lessons consist of, in fact, television and hermeneutics, but the absence of her interruption goes unnoticed because Uncle ploughs on to bellow—what the fucking Buddha taught!



We the audience the fandom do not know at first what the deal is with Leveret and Annelid's names, until the flashback in episode five in which Annelid picks both nicknames. She names Leveret because he's nervous and quick on his feet and has long earlobes. She likes to tug on them sometimes. She suggests he should wear dangling earrings like the cruel princes of old.

She names herself Annelid because, she says, she likes that it means

“little rings,” though what she actually means (but does not say) is that she has a fascination with peristalsis. Swallowing and choking, digesting and shitting, the movement of dead things through the living body, it obsesses her as namings and the absences of namings obsesses us.

Neither the show nor the show within the show has a name. There are no credits, no title sequences, pure binge TV in its perfected manifestation, content that never ends, interrupted only and frequently by ad breaks, enforced absences in the flow of our consciousness, like a sleep full of symbols and portents. We reorganize the onstreaming into television in our hearts; we declare borders, we define episodes and seasons. We catalogue, document, and discourse, because we like it like that.

But it's confusing when things don't have names, so we do what Annelid did and give nicknames. We call the show the Show. The show within the show, the show that Leveret and Annelid and the others watch in class, the show that's about us, the fandom of dead children, we call it the Documentary. We call it that because that's what it seems to be; it cuts out little slices of our lives and holds them up to the camera. It focuses on us, or on the actors playing us, one at a time. It imbricates us and implicates us, plotless, fragmented, atomized. It makes us uncomfortable.

The fandom is so large we think the Documentary could go on forever without having a character recur, yet then some seem to. We find this moderately problematic; it compounds its unbearable individualism with favoritism. We are not upset, merely concerned. When characters recur years apart, they do not seem to have aged. We believe the actors are digitally de-aged to mimic our eternal youth. Some of the kids' whispered classroom mockery supports this theory. The de-aging is sometimes crude. The Documentary doesn't have much of a CGI budget.

Neither, to be honest, does the Show. They blew most of it in the first episode, in the Show's most important moment, which happens in the final minutes of the very first episode, the end of the beginning, when

Leveret chases Annelid into the jungle.

It happens so quickly that Leveret misses it entirely. We almost miss it too. We probably would have, if it hadn't been framed and foreshadowed so heavily by ominous, overbearing warnings throughout the whole episode.

The first foreshadowing: Annelid's mother warns the kids against going into the jungle. She says the jungle is demon-haunted. This is the wildening jungle that encompasses and interrupts their small town and all its shattered families. As the jungle used to be plantation, the town used to be a single mansion, the desiccated white heart of a colonial estate. No trace of the mansion survives. What used to be the monsters' vast and exclusive domain has been inverted: the people are on the inside now, and the monsters, according to Annelid's mother, lurking just outside.

Annelid's mother isn't a very good actor, or at any rate, seems to lack experience; she has no other credits on IMDB. Most actors on the Show have no credits, or very few. She delivers her warning so stiffly, so robotically, that the young actors can't prevent themselves from grinning on hearing it. Or perhaps it's just that the children can't take seriously the superstitious concerns of their elders. Annelid's mother, who Leveret calls Aunty so Annelid also does, is intensely superstitious. She is a great believer in horoscopes and Myers-Briggses and technocracy and meditation and life hacks to improve productivity.



The jungle is not demon-haunted. There are no demons in the Show at all. It is just not that kind of show. Only in the broken real are there demons and hauntings. We know this: we are the ones who haunt. The demons are our distant cousins. We might nod politely if we passed in the street, though we would not make small talk. If we are the world's young memories, they are old cogs in its operation, its invisible laws and

powers. They do not speak. It is a misconception that it is the demon who speaks in possession, a persistent confusion of rider and ridden. We file suggestions to correct the relevant Wikipedia entries, but are denied for lack of citable sources.



Annelid and Leveret are both present when Aunty gives her warning, yet she addresses it to Leveret with a fond smile, which is one of the many reasons Annelid has taken to calling her own mother Aunty. The kids are upstairs in Annelid's room. It's late and Leveret should go home but the power's out for another hour and if he waits till it comes back, the street lights will be on so he doesn't have to stumble about in the dark. Annelid lights a candle and plants it on top of an empty glass jam jar that still has the paper label on, half-peeled. The lid is caked with wax from nights and nights of powerlessness. They lie on opposite sides of the light with her small battery-powered radio between their heads. It is a struggle to avoid the news. Always so much breaking. Each time the music is interrupted by another alert, more death, more violence, more cruelties, one of them reaches out and spins the wheel until they find another station with music. Any music at all.

Every time Annelid rolls on to her side to tune the radio, sweat sticks her dress to her back. Leveret's face is shiny in the candlelight so she thinks hers must be too; she uses his face as a mirror sometimes. She wipes a bead of sweat from the tip of her nose and stays on her side, propping her hand under her head like a sleeping Buddha. The song on the radio is in English, a mournful howling encircled by jangles.

Aunty appears in the door, which is of course open. Annelid and Leveret have been friends since they were very little, which is the only reason she's even allowed to bring him into the house, never mind her room, but Aunty has made it clear to her that as they get older, Leveret's continued presence in her life is on sufferance. Hypocritically, Aunty is herself very fond of Leveret. It's him she addresses.

—Son, she says. —I wanted to remind. When you're going home, don't take the jungle path.

—Never do, Aunty, Leveret says. The casual fluency of this lie is not just because he doesn't want to Get Into It with Aunty. It's more that he doesn't see why there is a need to involve an adult, a person who by definition knows nothing, in the messy business of life. He takes the jungle path every time, because otherwise he would have to walk twice as long to get home.

—I mean it yeah, Aunty says. —Both of you. She spares a glare for Annelid. Aunty is shorter than either of them and ever since her husband died, which is to say, nearly as long as Annelid can remember, has worn osari every day, in fabrics that have grown more soft and pallid with every wash until they are reduced to a grey that matches her temples. Her pallu is always wrapped around her waist and the bags under her eyes are like eggs. Annelid doesn't like to look at her. Every time she does, her mother seems to have aged three years for every one that passes. —Every time I meditate and speak to the gods, lately, all they worry about is the two of you.

Annelid sneers and Leveret smiles politely.

—Last time I had a vision, says Aunty shadowed in the dark of the door, next to last of a long line of witches. —As I reached the first level of awakening, the destroying mother came to me. She planted her skull-topped staff so close to me that I thought she might shatter my ankles, so hard and so near did she stab it into the earth. She faded back into the night then, but the skull chattered its teeth and spat and spoke, and it said to tell you two to mind your business.

—We *are* minding our business, *Aunty*, Annelid says.

—What happened next? Leveret asks. He always treats Aunty's visions with friendly interest. Annelid hisses at him.

—The staff became rooted, Aunty says. Her voice is low, almost guttural, as it tends to become when she recalls the things she has seen, because memory is a kind of possession. —Vines grew from it and climbed upwards; red flowers sprouted from the eyes of the skull, and from its open mouth. Chinese hibiscus, five large red petals like arms and legs and a head; a long staminal column. The jungle rose up around it, bleeding up from the earth in green and red, until there were trees all around and the canopy closed overhead, blocking out the moon.

—And then you woke up, Annelid says. She doesn't despise her mother's visions because she disbelieves them; she thinks of them as invasive life worming its way into the dry, cracked earth of her mother's dead dreams. She distrusts them. She has no time for the destroying mother. Mere gods are not her concern. She is on her own path now.

—I was not sleeping, Aunty says. —I am awake.



A few days later in the Show's chronology, but still in the same episode, Uncle gives the kids a similar warning about staying out of the jungle. His warning is more prosaic, if equally portentous: he says there are communists in the jungle, training camps in hiding from the military's repression elsewhere on the island. The kids laugh at this too. It seems far-fetched to them. It seems remote. They're still too young to be recruited by revolutionaries. That only happens in the second season finale, when we also discover what really happened to the missing parents in both families, Annelid's father and Leveret's mother. They were killed. Uncle says they were killed by communists, or possibly killed *as* communists, in the counterinsurgency operations carried out by state paramilitaries. Aunty says they were killed by demons. Aunty says they were

killed by the townspeople because they were possessed by demons.

The episode continues; time passes fast in the Show. The sun and the moon strobe by, the wheels sometimes squeaking a little on the dome of the firmament. The kids go to school. They watch the Documentary on TV some more. The teachers make regular announcements that the jungle is declared out of bounds for all students and that nobody is allowed to enter it. The reasons change with time. Sometimes the teachers say they are banned from the jungle because they are polluting the wilderness with their modernity. Sometimes the teachers say it is because the jungle is full of dangerous mosquitoes and bats, reservoirs of strange disease, or because it is suspected that unsafe and unsavory elements are holding witches' sabbaths within, such as fascists or separatists or communists: lions, tigers, and bears, dancing naked under the moon. The class never seems to pay attention to these dire warnings. They rarely react when a teacher speaks. They are now, as they are always, engrossed in the screen. If they speak at all, it is only to comment on the Documentary.

The fandom has various theories about why the kids are required to watch the Documentary in school, but we all believe this core axiom: they are being prepared for life in the outside world. We believe these characters are being trained to become audience. If they survive their trials, they will join us here, where we are.

We posit that if the Show had completed the story it was telling—if it hadn't been prematurely cancelled after four seasons—that the Show's eventual true finale would have culminated in at least the protagonists exiting the story and entering the world. We believe Leveret and Annelid are living matter pushing themselves through a dying narrative, until they breach the veil and emerge screaming.

We divide violently into sects over the questions of how, exactly, and what it means, for them, for us, for the actors portraying Leveret and

Annelid.

The largest faction, the Inside, believe the actors would become possessed by or transformed into their characters; their opponents, the Outside, believe the characters would emerge into the world as new flesh, as physical duplicates of the actors, but independent beings.

Underneath this titanic struggle of discourse, there are two smaller factions with bigger problems: the Overlap believes Leveret and Annelid's escape would merge our worlds in their entirety; the Null believes their escape would irradiate our world with their cancellation.

These four factions of fan theory have become the horns of our tetrahedron. They are we, divided against ourselves.

The Overlap and the Null agree on almost every point of doctrine apart from their projected outcome of the breach. They agree, for instance, that we, the fandom, are the opposite of Leveret and Annelid. They are alive in a dead place, while we are the dead in a living world. We are the ones who make this a haunted world.



—Do you ever feel like we're being watched? Annelid asks. They discovered this little clearing a long time ago, not an hour's walk into the jungle from her own back yard. The earth is black and soft here. It has been years and many episodes since those early warnings and foreshadowings from their surviving parents and teachers. They have long since made the jungle their playground, this clearing their base of operations, their secret playhouse, their place to be alone. They have spent many hours drawing in this black earth with dry branches, playing pretend, talking about the world and its hauntings. They have never kissed. Leveret denies that any government spies have made it as far as their little town. He's friendly with some of the communists now, he says. He

knows things. But Annelid interrupts him while he attempts to relitigate the Sino-Soviet split.

—Not like that, she says. —I mean, like, right now. Do you feel watched?

They look around. Leveret shrugs. There is nothing to be seen except black soil and sky, the shadowed shadows of bats passing overhead, the indistinct trees dappled with the light of the pale half-moon, the invisible ghosts of children. There are no cameras. There have never been any cameras, except when we make a box with our fingers like this to frame a scene.



We died hundreds of thousands of times, whether in war, under war, or astride war: in shootings and bombings and shellings and camps and pogroms and hospitals. Oh, it's all war, in the end—the dead know. We are not children. We died old and young over the decades and centuries.

We are children because we choose it. Those of us who don't die that way become as children after. We decide to remember ourselves bright and innocent, untroubled by aches and pains and guilts and fears and abuses, unmarked by the things we did or the things that were done to us. We want to be remembered with childhood's halo. Surely, we reason, no one would refuse to mourn us like this. If justice is dead and dharma a maggot-infested husk, there must at least be sentiment left at the bottom of the jar. Surely no one would look away now.

We stick out our ghost tongues.

We sharpen our ghost teeth. We no longer remember which of us were once grown. We no longer tell ourselves apart, except through theory. Except through factionalism.

In our unparented ghost childhood we grow feral, like the jungle. Once we were plantation, neat and rubbery and exploited. Now we are bramble and undergrowth and overstory. We dream hot dreams and feel no guilt. We dream cold dreams and feel no pain. We are the ones who died for someone else's peace. We are not the ones at peace.



The most important moment of the first episode, of the whole Show, happens when Leveret loses sight of Annelid at 31:35. It's actually kind of weird and the fandom doesn't like to dwell on it. It is so quick and strange and disconnected from what the Show seems to be setting out to do—the tropes and genre conventions that seem to be in place, the formal expectations that have been set, the unexpected incursion of a CGI budget that we'd thought nonexistent given the lo-fi aesthetic—that we all do our best to forget it.

We almost succeed in forgetting, until the controversial fourth season, just before the Show is canceled without warning. In the fourth season, what seems to be building up to a romantic arc (they've both turned twenty-one by that point) ends abruptly with Leveret's death.

Leveret has been attempting to grow a beard. He has joined up with a revolutionary faction planning a nationwide, coordinated attack on police stations and army barracks in an attempt to seize state power. Perhaps they will storm Parliament and release doves out over the lake. The burgeoning not-quite-yet-romance has been complicated by Leveret's inability to recruit Annelid to the cause. She distrusts the way authority flows and pools, even among revolutionaries. Power is a dead thing, but its movement through the living body of a collective is suspiciously fluid and suffused with undead agency.

Season four, what turns out to be the unplanned show finale: Leveret

tries to recruit Annelid one last time.



She follows him unwillingly into the jungle. She's already refused to meet with his friends again, which Leveret agreed to forgo. But having reached this agreement, she couldn't refuse to at least hear him out one more time. They head to their clearing, of course, their private place: their own court. Here they are away from parents carrying too much baggage, free of small-town prying eyes. Here they are alone with the ghosts who love them.

—I won't be hanging around town much longer, Leveret says. —Things are happening.

—What things? Annelid asks.

—We could *talk* about these things if you were one of us, Leveret says.

—Is this your big speech? Annelid says. —It sucks. You suck. Your beard is the worst thing I've ever seen.

—I didn't have a speech planned, Leveret says. He is lying, of course. She knows his lying face better than she knows her own.

He gives his speech. At first he's the one walking around while she sits on the old log, careful of the soft parts that are rotting. Then she too stands, and in response he becomes still, still talking. She circles him, again and again. She's not listening to the speech. It's either about the movement or sex or both, and right now she's not interested in being recruited to either cause.

—I have a theory, too, Annelid says, after letting him speak for what she considers an extraordinarily long time. But he doesn't stop talking.

So she hits him in the back of the head with a rock. He falls, and we cut to black. The end.



At first, we think, well, obviously he's not *dead*. It was a fake-out. Season five would have picked up from there, if it had not been cancelled. The Inside think so. They say, maybe he'd wake up in hospital. Maybe he'll just go *ow* and get back up to glare at her accusingly.

After the cancellation, though, we revisit meaning, an ending in hand, even if it was not the ending we desired. We ask ourselves why, and how, and painfully remind ourselves of the things we had forgotten. The Inside is at first firm in their position that Leveret is not dead. His death is merely an artifact of the cancellation: a cliffhanger that, in the absence of a resolution, remains ambiguous. The Outside counter with scorn. A lady-or-the-tiger ending is not ambiguous, the Outside points out. It is never the lady. It is always the tiger. That's the whole point, that is the story's function, to make the reader choose the tiger. It is a story about doom and betrayal and the futility of shallow, self-serving hope. Therefore, Leveret is dead.

Shamed, the Inside falter. They disintegrate as a faction, unable to cope. We reorganize ourselves into an unstable trinity.

The Outside, in victory, ascend into hubris. They become obsessed with the heresy that Leveret had always-already emerged into our world, even before his death in the Show. They rewatch every episode and go through every frame of the Documentary, freeze-frame by painful freeze-frame, to point at every young, brown-skinned, bearded male who appears even briefly on that blurry classroom TV screen. This could be Leveret, they say, out in the haunted world, being documented. They are unconcerned with the objection that all these appearances predate Leveret's death in the Show because they believe the Documentary ex-

ists as a finished object that exists outside of the temporal continuum of the Show itself. The Documentary is a record of the haunted world, they say, which we the dead know is not a flowing river of cause and effect, but a glacial ocean, whole and complete, past and future laid out in full, frozen and transparent. An akashic record, like Uncle would say.

We know no such thing, say the Overlap and the Null. The Outside says pish posh.

We rewatch the Show, looking for clues. We wonder: perhaps their matched jigsaw nuclear families were a hint. Perhaps they are the same family, split down the middle. Perhaps they are brother and sister. Ew, says the Outside, who are quite committed to the romance angle that never happened. As they are the majority, this reflexive flinch of disgust carries the day.

Perhaps, says the Null, uncaring of the potential backlash, Annelid kills Leveret on purpose, as revenge for the murder of her father, who might have been a communist. Perhaps she blames Leveret's mother, who might have snitched on him to the paramilitaries and then got caught up herself.

Might have perhaps might have perhaps, the Outside says. This is all rank speculation. Complete fucking reach. There is nothing in the text to justify it.

The Null says something more, but they are swamped by opprobrium. They, too, cannot sustain themselves as a faction; their membership flows, angry and disaffected, to the Overlap.

We have become the thing we loathe the most: a binary.

The Outside has definitively taken Leveret's part in the story. To them, Annelid is trapped in the Show, unable to leave it because of the prema-

ture cancellation. They venerate Annelid as a self-sacrificing saint who enabled Leveret's escape into the world.

The Overlap, meanwhile, now reluctantly adapting parts of Inside and Null positions and expanding their own stance to incorporate them, takes Annelid's part. They see her murder of Leveret as a crime, an act of will and desire that flouts every law that she was bound by, including that of narrative necessity. They see her as the true protagonist all along, with Leveret retroactively turned into a supporting character who must die in order for her to grow.

It is right and inevitable, the expanded Overlap say, that the Show ended there, merging the world of the story with the world outside it. The living world in which the dead live, this haunted place; the dead world that the living died to escape. These are the same thing now. Perhaps this is finally something other than war.

With this, the binary destabilizes, then collapses. The Outside merges with the Overlap. We are grateful. Like the world, we are unitary—no, not unitary, but nondual—as we were before fandom.

We miss Leveret. We miss Annelid even more. We do not get to watch her grow because we are the shards of the shell she broke open to get out. She would not want us to, after all: she has come to know us intimately through years of education in the Documentary. She must have come to love us, perhaps, and certainly to loathe us. She has so little room to live in, between the demands of her writers and her actor and her director, between the needs of her viewers and her readers. We rewatch and watch for her without blinking so that we can glimpse her in the spaces, the gaps between script and performance where Annelid slips through.



Rewatch.

S01E01, 31:35.

Being chased in the jungle, the young Annelid crouches down behind a bush so abruptly that Leveret races past and loses her. She's laughing softly, gasping for breath. When the demon comes to her, she doesn't make a noise. It's as if she's expecting it, like she's seen the show before. We never see the demon clearly except for that all-too-brief moment when it's so huge it blocks out the sun like an eclipse. Its head is crowned with giant serpents, tongues forked like lightning, whose undulations cast shadows over its bulbous, undead eyes; its tusks dig giant furrows in the earth as it crashes toward her like a wave. Then it leaps into her mouth, or she swallows it whole, and she's covering her mouth with her hands to stop herself laughing or vomiting. We understand the demon is inside her from that moment on. She possesses it now. We never see it again because the Show blew the whole budget on that moment but we know it's there. It will never leave her. We watch the Show again and again, never growing old, looking for the devil in her eyes, in her words. This is not the story of how she got the way she is. She was always the way she is: that's why it came to her, eager for a rider.

We imagine her out in the haunted world, alive and unmarked by teeth or gastric acids. We imagine her looking up at familiar hoots of birdsong. Another new year.

In the uneasy ad breaks, we slip between the trees and remember to look over our shoulder in the haunted world in case Annelid returns to the scene of the crime. We watch out for her silhouetted against the sky, blocking out the sun, her parted lips hungry for dead things.





PAALAI ANJU

Shweta Narayan

1.

I've keened, cracked dry
as riverbeds before rain, heart pressed
to cactus thorns till flowers bloomed bright
as the dancer's painted hands, and you
called me exotic.

Who then stole this voice?

2.

If I dig into dry earth, ember-studded, calling
the red-mouthed mother to swallow me,
if I climb nanofibers out past this sea of smoke,
fall thin-aired into orbit, if I walk out
over darkness and dancing stars, leaving
footprints in the waves, would you notice?

3.

It's a doll you're laughing with, carved to what
I think you want. Me? I snuck out
years ago. This cracked land growing
spines and scorpions, this constant exile's thirst,

I choose it

over your beloved voice
casting me out.

4.

This chill doesn't fit empty wells, earth chapped
brittle as skin, tinder grass waiting
for its spark, masks and walls
and silences our ragged shields. When the desert
seared, wilted, spun smoke around my throat, I could search
for rains. Now I wonder if they'll reach us
through the wounded air.

5.

The horror of it is my luck: I get to struggle,
take in that next slow breath, slow to (slower) trick
the pain. I get to (limp) pull cactus spines
from my feet. I get to speak.
Those gnawed bones we passed, they were me
in other stories.



YOU ALWAYS WERE A MORBID CHILD

Amanda Downum

Tonight I'm piecing a man's skull back together. He came from the medical examiner, a full autopsy, his calvarium not only sawed open but shattered by a bullet. This will be a *project*.

At the end of 2018, I was not feeling my best. My writing career was in a slump, and the combination of anxiety and still-undiagnosed ADHD had turned all my efforts to crawl out of it into exercises in self-loathing. The political climate was not salubrious, my best friends were mostly hundreds of miles away, and my marriage, while not yet in its death spiral, was closer than I realized. My retail job of the past ten years had become increasingly soul-crushing, but health insurance kept me there. I was depressed, and everything I tried to fix it seemed futile.

Tonight I'm putting someone back together.

He's not being embalmed. I don't have the sinister alchemy of formaldehyde at my disposal. I can't massage color back into his hands, plump and firm sunken tissue, slow the intricate, inexorable onset of decay. All I have are soap and water, needle and thread, clamps and putty. There won't be an open casket, no traditional service, but his family will see him, so I'm going to fix him.

If you had told me, at any age, that I would end up a night-shift embalmer, I don't know what my reaction would have been. Eight-year-old me, in love with *The Tombs of Atuan*, fascinated by the word *necromancer* in *The Lord of the Rings*; awkward teenage me, haunting the horror section of the nearest video store; college goth me, spending my weekends dressed like a vampire playing Rock, Paper, Scissors—I don't know if any of them would have believed in that future.

Death didn't frighten me as a child, but I also never saw it up close. I had no spectator trauma, no family tragedies, no traditions. My grandparents died, one by one, but I was never present. I never attended a funeral. Death was natural and certain, but we never shook hands.

"You always were a morbid child," my mother said when I told her why I was going back to school. In most things I favor nurture over nature, but in this case I agree completely. It wasn't a phase.

Until 2018, I had no idea how one became a mortician. Neither university I'd attended offered Mortuary Science classes. Maybe it required a medical degree, or a masters, or you had to be born into a family-owned business, or come through a portal like the Tall Man. It might as well have been a mystery cult.

Then I read Caitlin Doughty's *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*. Then I met someone who had attended mortuary school, though since left the field. Then I watched the Netflix miniseries *The Haunting of Hill House*. Was this an option?

A little Googling revealed that Austin didn't have a Mortuary Science program, but there was one within commuting distance. It was only a two-year degree. The idea sank its claws into my brain and wouldn't let go. I was thirty-nine years old, and very used to the chorus of brain weasels telling me that I was trapped—this new voice was louder. I emailed the head of the program. A week later, while I sat outside his office waiting

for my interview, still convinced I was going to be rejected for any reason at all, a stranger wandered in to talk to the receptionist, glanced at me and said, "Welcome to the department."

That was November. My classes started in January.

Tonight I'm stitching someone back together.

I start with the Y-incision, replacing the ME's hasty whipstitch with a neater, tighter baseball stitch. The dead man's organs are tied up in a plastic bag inside his now-combined thoracic and abdominal cavity—I'm very careful not to puncture the bag with a clumsy needle. It would be bad, as Egon Spengler says. The Y is familiar by now, rhythmic—easy, in this case, though certainly not always so. The skull will be much trickier. I'm thankful that this person wasn't at the ME long enough for decomp to set in.

Once upon a time I wanted more than anything to be a Valkyrie. I'm a different sort of psychopomp now. My underworld is quiet, chilly, and very full of paperwork, more Niflheim than Valhalla or Fólkvangr. (I have a tattoo of Laufey's granddaughter on my right arm—still a work in progress—to celebrate my graduation.) Night shift doesn't make trips to the medical examiner's office, so these days I rarely transport those who die in battle, whether with others or themselves. But I do put them back together.

The skull is tricky, as predicted. "Only" a .22. A small entry wound in the right temple—the left temple fractured, but the scalp intact. Until the autopsy, at least. He has glass in his hair, I find out the sharp way.

If he were embalmed, I would have cauterants at hand, and hardening compounds. As it is, I wipe up the blood as best I can and start fitting bone in place. A few bits and pieces are missing, but I have enough. At least the worst of the damage is on the non-viewing side. Four calvarium

clamps hold the important parts in place, with putty to smooth over the cracks.

Filling in cracks with putty is a little too on-the-nose a metaphor for the past few years.

For over a year I commuted three hours round trip two or three days a week while working full time, and carving out chunks of time for internship. My home life was increasingly stressful. Sleep was a distant memory. School was more than worth it, though. The Mortuary Science wing was my sanctuary. There were no shifting goalposts there, no secret numbers by which to succeed or fail. Only amazing things to learn, in a place filled with people who were to greater or lesser degrees *like me*.

Then came 2020. In January I left the bookstore where I'd worked for over a decade and started my first mortuary job. I was halfway done with school, starting my embalming lab! The department was taking a field trip to New Orleans for spring break! The world was beautiful through death-tinted glasses.

That went as well as you might imagine.

The field trip was cancelled, and spring break was extended as the college scrambled to make classes virtual. I used that extra time off to move in with my parents, just before the first shelter in place orders came down. The rest of the year was, in many regards, an unpleasant blur. Students and teachers alike struggled with new platforms, struggled to stay engaged, struggled with everything. In September, at the start of my final semester, my favorite instructor died. Not COVID—the other Capital C. His was the first funeral I attended as a mourner.

Through all the miseries of 2020, it was my new job that kept me sane. I worked nights, had class in the mornings, and sacrificed sleep for the cases I needed for my license. I picked up the overtime you might ex-

pect of a psychopomp during a plague. My job title was “removal technician,” a bland and clinical term that encompasses nearly everything that happens back of house in a funeral home. Mostly, though, I went on calls. I was the quiet shadow slipping in and out of hospitals, drifting through the halls of nursing homes, waiting on the threshold of houses. Explaining to families what happens next, promising them that someone would look after their loved ones. Talking with the living was the most frightening part of the job when I started, but it turns out to not be so bad. There is no right thing to say, of course, but most people are content with the little answers when no one can give them the big ones, and that promise of care.

Now I’m here, a licensed embalmer, sewing a man’s scalp back in place. When that’s finished, I’ll wash away the last of the blood, comb his hair, close his eyes and mouth. We do this for the families. Agnostic that I am, however, I can’t help but hope that someone somewhere on the other side takes some comfort in that care.

I’m not particularly sentimental about the dead, but sometimes they catch me off guard. Several weeks ago I held a woman’s hand and cried while I embalmed her. A few years younger than me, beautiful, dead by suicide. I cried, and stitched her back together, and wished that I could do something more, something better. But the necromancy I have isn’t that kind of magic.

Peaceful is a word we use for the desired outcome of an embalming. We will never make someone look alive again; they don’t look like they’re sleeping. *Natural* is another often-used word, but death itself is the natural part, with its own rainbow of decay. I like *peaceful*. Sometimes I hope the dead find peace; sometimes I wish it for the families. Some nights, it’s enough if I find a little.

Funeral rites are for the living. Sometimes, necromancy lets you resurrect yourself.





LATER THE LOCH, SOONER THE LACK: THE LIFECYCLE OF A HORRID MAN WITH HORRID PLANS

s.j. bagley

-egg-

lapsarianism,
or something like it,
come to town,
this town, that town,
on the whisper of
the morning's mournings.

.

-larva-

we cannot repent
nor repeal and release
ratify and rectify
what we cannot regret,
no matter whose door is darkened,
face bruised by blacklight.

.

-first instar.-

he could remember his mother,
or something like her,
dripping with brackish water,
staining the pale floorboards,
calling forth notions of bismuth,
memories of worse days,
brighter days,
filled with the light of burning lime(s.)

.

-second instar.-

(and | now | we | have | waited.)

.

-third instar.-

he was a queer boy,
cracking his knuckles
and skinning his knees,
all in order to impress
the other queer boys,
but they neither came nor came,
so he moved to the tops of the pine trees,
sulking,
all a'glower,
tearing the pages out as carefully as he could,
hiding them where
,only,
the birds could find them.

.

-pupa.-

a street,
paved, partitioned,

with expertly carved marble cobbles,
and o! how they gleam
in the afternoon sunshowers,
washing away the pigshit
of memory, degloved.
(or maybe a whistle through the thistle is more to yr liking.)

.

-.imago.-

a quiet simmer
behind dirty spectacles,
he hates the professionals
(all of them, and the electorate be damned!)
he thinks of crawling,
not strutting,
a peacock with its guts entwined with silvered feathers,
a series of numbers upon some old radio,
abandoned by the seaside,
along with his henbones
and mothers' milk.



DEATH AND WEDNESDAY

Suzan Palumbo

I cannot think of my childhood without confronting my fear of death.

One of my earliest memories is of me at four, lying in the dark, my heart hammering and stomach cramping, in panic over the idea that a person would be dead far longer than they would ever be alive; that time existed before me and would continue without me. It was a large thought for a child—too large. I remember wanting to run. I did get up and run to the bathroom, where I screamed for my mother. When she came in, I told her my stomach hurt. I didn't have the words to explain what was actually wrong at the time, but her touch calmed me enough to help me return to bed.

Looking back, it's natural that my obsession with death began at such a tender age. I am the product of an unhappy arranged marriage. My mother met my father once before she reluctantly married him. It was a business transaction between her parents and his. He needed a wife, and my mother was a proper girl who was not allowed to date or speak to men. She was twenty-three, and it was time to be married. She arrived in Canada with a suitcase and wed my father in a burgundy dress she'd brought from Trinidad. No one she knew attended the civil ceremony.

A few months into my parents' marriage, my father's mother, who lived with them, was diagnosed with leukemia. The disease was advanced, and my mother spent most of her days witnessing the decline of a woman she barely knew. They talked, of course. My grandmother told my mother about the death of her own husband. He'd been an illiterate alcoholic who beat her and passed when my father was only twelve. Afterward, she'd supported her children alone by growing and selling vegetables in the market and taking on cleaning work. Tragedy returned shortly afterward, when her oldest son passed. He'd slipped while working on a roof and was electrocuted when he'd clung to a hydro line. She kept a black-and-white picture of him, which we still had when I was older. My uncle had been a serious-looking young man with a hard stare. I remember thinking he looked my father. I wondered if my grandmother saw my uncle's face when she looked at my father.

It was in this atmosphere of death that I was conceived. My mother watched my grandmother gasp her last breath while welcoming the flutter of my limbs. After my father buried his mother, my mother begged him to let her return to Trinidad to give birth to me. She'd known only grief and isolation in Canada. My father, not particularly attached to her or the idea of me, let her go.

I spent the first few years of my life in Trinidad. I was a happy, well-fed baby, according to my relatives. I smiled easily and laughed often in pictures. I am told I was well loved by mother's family. I recall very little of that time. When I see those images of my young self, I don't connect with the joy on that child's face. It is as if that little girl is the ghost of another woman; a woman who didn't grow up.

There are no pictures of me smiling as a child in Canada. Officially we belonged with my father in Toronto, and with my mother having no way to support us monetarily in Trinidad, we had to leave. The move was devastating for her. I became shy and withdrawn. We lived in the same tiny apartment where my grandmother had spent her last days. My mother had no friends in Canada and was completely cut off from

her family. The cycle of violence my grandmother experienced at the hands of her husband continued through my father, befalling my mother. I didn't eat well and was chronically underweight. Anxiety over my parents' violent fights or getting evicted from our subsidized apartment kept me awake at night. My mother constantly panicked over our lack of stability and my health. She was terrified of losing me, the only person she had in this country. Her fear was all-consuming. She once told me that she was afraid I'd get leukemia like my grandmother. This haunted me. I worried that I'd die like my grandmother with no one ever truly loving me.

At school, kids asked about the dark circles under my eyes and why I was so pale. Why were they able to see the veins in my face? I had no answers. It was difficult for me to make friends, and by grade four I'd become known as the school weirdo.

Needless to say, there was no one like me on television or in books. Aside from there being no brown girls in the media, girls were supposed to be cute, upbeat, and cherub-cheeked. They dreamed of weddings, balls, love, and even being astronauts. My preoccupation with death had robbed me of this type of escapism. I didn't daydream because I could not picture a future with me alive in it. I had no vocabulary to describe a person like me. "Weirdo" seemed to be the label people chose for me, so it was how I described myself.

I began to gravitate toward books and shows with characters who embraced darkness. I understood them; felt they were the only "people" I'd ever encounter who were like me. I loved Batman's rogues' gallery and the campy gothic settings of *Scooby-Doo*. I watched true crime programs I was much too young to view with my mother.

I couldn't talk about my dark thoughts without being told I was negative by my peers or by father's extended family. My mother tried her best to be there for me, but she had begun to work two jobs around the time I was ten and was in the process of saving money to leave my father.

There were few outlets to process my emotions, until I was almost a teen and watched *The Addams Family* movie.

Christina Ricci's Wednesday Addams created the space culturally for me to exist. Here was a seven-year-old girl, pale, sullen, and obsessed with death, the antithesis of the iconic Shirley Temple or *Full House's* Michelle Tanner, and audiences loved her. Wednesday had spent her childhood playing wake-the-dead in her family cemetery, while I'd spent mine having the dead keep me awake in government housing.

None of the Addamses required Wednesday to smile, be positive, or to stop asking questions about death and darkness. She was free to revel in the macabre without limitation. The entire Addams clan was conceived as a satirical portrayal of the American family. Of course, Wednesday is an extreme caricature and not an example of any form of acceptable behavior. For the record, I do not condone attempting to murder one's brother ever, much less repeatedly.

But her existence provided me with a frame of reference I'd never had. I could tell people I liked Wednesday and it became a shorthand in my teenage years for the kind of music I liked, books I read, and my penchant for wearing black. Wednesday helped other people connect to me. They could accept her as she was, and that made accepting me easier. I still didn't think I'd live to adulthood, but Wednesday, her mother, Morticia, and her grandmother were a guide for who I could be in the future, if I miraculously lived passed eighteen.

Wednesday gave me permission to process and cope with my fear of death and isolation by exploring it. It is no coincidence that I write Gothic horror, that I love existentialist philosophy, and that the song of my heart is "Only Happy When It Rains" by a band called Garbage. Grappling with death through art was healthier than keeping my anxiety bottled up during the day and being terrified of the dark and unable to sleep at night.

So much of what I create is tangled with the darkness that tinged my childhood. I have not outgrown my dizzying fear of death and most likely never will. At the end of *The Addams Family*, Wednesday, Pugsley, and Uncle Fester venture out to play wake-the-dead in the family cemetery, knocking on the graves of their ancestors and digging them up. Recently my mother looked at me during a video call and said, “You look like your father’s mother.” My face, it seems, had exhumed the long-buried memory of my grandmother for her.

That night, I lay awake and thought about death just I’d done when I was four, but I did not panic and run. This time I sat with the discomfort of looking death in the face, just as Wednesday would have done, and embraced it.





FEAR DEATH BY WATER

Arkady Martine

Begin here:

Yllia *imperator*, first of her name, shoved face-down in the reflecting pool with a knee between her shoulder blades, the bright red curve of her murderer's Judiciary cloak feathering through the water, as good as blood. Her hands scrabble at the tiles. Her mouth opens and her lungs flood. Marcalla, all her weight balanced on *that* knee, tosses her dripping hair out of her face and looks up at the starfield through the great quartz-glass windows of the Senatorial bridge. Every star she can see is within the scope of what Yllia controlled. Marcalla blinks tears out of her eyes while insisting the moisture to be pool-water. She is thinking two things at the same time.

First: *the end of tyranny is the function of my office.*

Second: *oh I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.*



To preserve a galaxy-spanning empire, large enough that sublight communication has begun to thin out to an insufficient trickle at its edges, months between communiqués, plenty of time to wonder what you've missed in the seat of power and to get caught on the centripetal force of local allegiances—to preserve *that*, and for a thousand years, you need a rough sort of magic.

There've been summer kings for as long as there have been people living together under the condition of government. Kings-for-a-year that buy a harvest with their blood.

So what if the harvest is light-years wide, the harvesters eagle-painted starships with their bellies full of poets and administrators and all the uglier gifts of civilization? The principle's the same.

Here's the trick. For a ritual to work, everyone involved has to believe it's real.



Look then: Yllia and Marcalla beside the reflecting pool, some time before.

Yllia has an easy grace to her, born of physical conditioning and the sort of charisma that draws all the light out of any room she walks into; at forty-five her face is firm-jawed, lined from smiling and from solar burn. She balances an ankle on a knee, leans back in one of the two chairs she's pulled out of their half-circle alignment at the back of the bridge. One for her and one for Marcalla. The rest of the Senate is nowhere in evidence; it's off-shift, and the only person who needs to be here is Yllia herself.

Marcalla feels very young, and very honored, and more than a little like she is being bribed.

"Why did you want to see me?" she asks.

"I'd like the opinion of the Judiciary Committee," says Yllia, trailing the tip of one sandal-clad foot in the reflecting pool and disturbing the images of the stars, "on the legality of going to war."

Marcalla has been a member of the Judiciary Committee for seven

months, and a Senator for nine. “With whom, *Imperator?*”

“Oh, would you call me Yllia—” Marcalla finds herself nodding, though she will not call Yllia by name, not now and not ever at all—“the only war worth my personal attention, Marcalla, with whom do you *think*.”

An empire like the empire Yllia has brought to heel has many enemies, but only one rival. Only one opposite number stretching across the eastern half of the galaxy, lion-bright, eternally foreign: the sort of place that captivates *imperators*, makes them crash thousands and thousands of lives against that implacable shore, and not care for how those lives break open. Marcalla, hewing to the conservative line of the rest of the Judiciary, has no intention of authorizing such a war.

“Surely,” she says, “if you want to go to war, you could put the notion to a vote.”

“Oh, I could. But I’d like to know what *you* think of it.”

Marcalla chooses, for a desperate and heartfelt moment, to believe Yllia. They’ve known each other for a long time, since Marcalla was a child and Yllia was a proconsul come back from campaign with star-flowers in her short hair, gleaming like a crown. “I think you’d have to overrule us all,” she says, “and that you’re too smart, *Imperator*, to want the enmity of your peers.”

(But she’s heard, in the bellies of this warship and others on which she’s served, the excitement of the soldiers, the cheering of the crowds. Star-flower crowns left on statues bearing Yllia’s face—)



Here are some signs which heralded disaster:

Before our eyes the bloated layers of a massive star undergo core collapse, hurling sheets of fire and molten starstuff parsecs-wide, a torrent from burst-open fusion furnaces;

The gravitational centrifuge on the starship *Acies Alba* shudders to an unprecedented halt. Her decks spasm, plate on plate;

The voices of long-devoured black holes resound through previously silent instrumentation, loud enough for all to hear, and in the falling darkness technicians report seeing phantoms of impossible pallor;

In the same hour, sinister filaments are found in the heart of a bullock vat-grown for sacrifice and comets streak across the quartz windows of the Senatorial bridge;

And who dares say the thousand suns in imperial space were false, when they warned us all that a dark uprising threatened?



Marcalla alone. At the moment she comes to a decision: her face painted red for triumph, red for blood, red as the cloak she wears as a badge of office. Victory-red, although she's gone to no wars. When a person makes a sacrifice, they must *render something up*.

Marcalla's painted her cheeks with cinnabar herself, to march in the procession marking Yllia's latest conquest. She has a standard to bear, a sanctification to perform. The red on her face marks her out: the members of the Judiciary are a kind of priesthood. It is given to them to safeguard the law, and thus the law has become a sacred matter between them. Marcalla watches Yllia toss credit chips to the crowd as largesse, sees the wide curve of her smile. Feels her own mouth tilt, stretch, the crack of mud under her eyes beginning, *scrunch*, marred by sentiment and desire—

Knows, clearly, that she'd rather be down in the crowd reaching for Yllia's hands, shouting *Imperator! Rex!* than here with the law on her tongue like a stone.

Is it any wonder she decided then what her sacrifice would be?



Don't think it didn't hurt her, our Marcalla. Don't think she didn't mean it when she wept, Yllia's heaving lungs under her knee.

The empire's still here, after all, so the ritual must have took.



The day after the triumph, Yllia casts the cards. Soldier's superstition, just a little more certain than dice; Marcalla, were she here, would have disemboweled a bird, but Marcalla, as you've noticed, is a traditionalist despite her better judgment.

Three cards. Self, situation, solution.

Here is Yllia's card: a vacuum-drowned soldier, bubbles in the blood, changed all to pearlescent ice. Here is a card for a pile of rocks, an empire to break an empire on. And here is a card for Marcalla, though Yllia doesn't know it: we'll call it the wheel. It isn't a *wheel*, but it goes around and around again, like crowds of people, walking in a ring.

Yllia disregards every warning. Why shouldn't she? She's *imperator*, the people love her. If she wants a war she'll get one. Let the Senate try to stop her.



A *tyrant* is any ruler who does not abide by the laws of the state. Thus, rebellion is internal to the schema of power: the empire survives it. The emperor doesn't.

This is what Marcalla believes.

This is why the ritual keeps working. Summer king, Yllia *rex*, drowned bloodless by her own favorite scion: the whole business washed clean again.



One more time: the reflecting pool, tremulous with stars.

Marcalla called the meeting this time. She sent the message personally, asked Yllia to come, to lend her wisdom and her power to Marcalla's questions. Half the Senate's in attendance, all of Judiciary and most of Trade, but no one sits in their chairs; they crowd Yllia at the door, they block the exits. Do you suspect she knows, walking down to the pool-side, what is about to happen to her? She might. It's far too late to stop. This isn't the first time we've played this out.

If you'd like, you can imagine Marcalla asking, "Imperator—what *wouldn't* you do?"

Marcalla would remember it that way. She'd like to think she offered an escape.

What Yllia replies is unimportant. She'd do whatever's necessary. That's Marcalla's problem. That's why, at last, she reaches for Yllia's wrist, and catches it, and tumbles them both into the starshine water. They struggle.



Two mutually interdependent aphorisms, then, to see us out. Marcalla's soaked to the skin, now, and come up from the pool. She walks on shaky legs towards the rest of the Senatorial chairs and their watching occupants.

First: *The empire, not the emperor, survives an insurrection.*

Second: *You break it, you bought it.*

Her colleagues are exultant and afraid. They have gotten what they want. Right order is restored (in this room; the rest of the fleet will take a bit of time), and no one's hands are dirty; even Marcalla hasn't got a spot of blood on her. They've seen her work, though, seen the fervency with which she defends the law she's sworn to (and some of them have seen her tears). They think they've got her measure, and they're close enough to right.

The empire needs imperators; the Senate needs figureheads. It is a way of giving dangerous men and women something to do.

They take Marcalla's cloak and they fasten a garland of star-flowers to her hair, diamond chips; some spare diadem fetched up from storage. No need to fish the corpse out of the pool and denude it.



What, did you think she'd get out clean? *No* one gets out clean. This is not that kind of magic. This is how to fuel an engine that devours and devours and devours.



After: in the temples ivory images wept for grief, and Marcalla wept with them.





DEATH OPUS

Romie Stott

It comes in waves, in subsurface currents.
Some believe a soul can leave the body days before death
and hover nearby as a ball of lightning
dutifully attending the roll call of the dead:
a crowd of afterimages, the ghosts of ghosts.

We are swollen with death we have not caught up to yet.
Infection inflames the brain, an inside-out fish
risen too quickly against the skull.
We are in the doorway, through and not through.

How can I measure a tide still running out?
A body lost at sea is floating, sinking, entangled.
I woke to a Geiger counter that was icicles dripping on the gutter,
false witness talking through sheet water.

Our knees knocked so loudly. We could not stay still.
We were too afraid to hide.
We breathed so hard it was a circular scream.
Our souls were escaping through our mouths.
Every cell is permeable (locked in cages to die).
Threats: singing, eating, embraces, shelter from wind, visible smiles.

The horror of witnessing.
The horror of being forced to turn away.

A cardiopulmonary gas line leak.
The odorless absence of oxygen.

The hibernation ran through summer and I woke in snow again
to a bright window with no warmth, unpeopled street,
a departed neighbor's yard dug over like a grave,
the moor from which a visitor never arrived.

Diagnosis: Your lungs are full of phantoms of lungs.
We must push a torpedo into you using a bellows.
The most likely outcome: You will float away
still waiting for Amelia Earhart.

A body is not tunneled into like jello,
not pliable like dough or mud to bake or crumble.
Dissection is opening a suitcase,
lifting each shoe or balled up suit
to guess at the trip that was taken.

What's only spoken spreads its legs across the subway car
as "home" gives soul to drywall
and a relentlessly twitching pump
becomes everything that can be classified.

An undercount is less to grieve, as many to bury.
Taboo inanimate flesh as a person is not a revenue stream.
Expletive nipple already broadcast
and what if the dog was to follow you home?
Cockatrice death comb, a killing breath
violating the child's compact with a dark bedroom:
I will only be killed by what I can see.

Guardian of the pleas of the state, custodian,
coroner, like Coronavirus, from crown:

custos placitorum coronae.

A name on a manifest does not explain a dead spot.

The event is ongoing but has ended for some.

Their funerals feel longer ago than their lives.

If my grandma hadn't died, she would have died.

Every natural death is also accidental, a neglectful butchery,
legislatures writing their broken bodies onto ours.

If salvation comes from suffering, vaccines are too kind to work,
worried cutting the callus will take off the foot.

Brought to heal, brought to heel,

a nation of boiled frogs churning the water,

larvae in rotten apples, a blown glass record of decay

washed off or on to hands.

Rubbed until charged, ready to bolt at a switch,

hairs raised by all we will pour into each other

at the first chance to get even,

we stop a story at a victory, a hairband to hold the braid.

Beyond it, we go to different lengths.

What began in holy trinity ends as fringe,

a moment of silence so long it cannot be covered with a quilt,

breath held so long it starves the candles.

I have not made peace with death.



AUTHOR BIOS



MJ Cunniff is a PhD candidate at Brown writing on modernist and contemporary poetry. They live in Providence, Rhode Island, with a dog statue and a haunted chandelier.

Vajra Chandrasekera is from Colombo, Sri Lanka. He has published over fifty short stories in magazines and anthologies, including recent appearances in *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Tiny Nightmares* from Catapult Books, and *The Best of Shimmer*. He blogs at vajra.me and is [@_vajra](https://twitter.com/_vajra) on Twitter.





Arkady Martine is a speculative fiction writer and, as Dr. AnnaLinden Weller, a historian of the Byzantine Empire and a city planner. She is currently a policy advisor for the New Mexico Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department, where she works on climate change

mitigation, energy grid modernization, and resiliency planning. Under both her names she writes about border politics, rhetoric, propaganda, and the edges of the world. Her first novel, *A Memory Called Empire*, won the 2020 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Arkady grew up in New York City and, after some time in Turkey, Canada, Sweden, and Baltimore, lives in Santa Fe with her wife, the author Vivian Shaw. Find her online at arkadymartine.net or on Twitter as @ArkadyMartine.

Originally from Trinidad and Tobago, **Suzan Palumbo** is a writer based in Toronto, Canada. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming at *Unfettered Hexes*, *The Dark*, *Weird Horror*, *Pseudopod*, *Fireside Quarterly*, *PodCastle* and others.

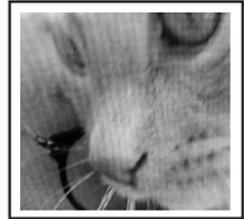


She serves as the Ignyte Award Finalist Liaison for FIYAHCON and is also the wandering ghost of a Shimmer Badger. When she isn't writing, she spends her time wandering her local woods. She tweets @sillysyntax. Her bibliography can be found at suzanpalumbo.wordpress.com.



Shweta Narayan was born in India, and has lived in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Scotland, and California. They feel most at home in liminal places, but have been mostly dead for the last decade and wouldn't mind hanging out in some other space now. Shweta's short fiction and poetry have appeared in places like *Lightspeed*, *Transcendent 3*, *Tor.com*, *Climbing Lightly Through Forests*, and *Strange Horizons*.

s.j. bagley is a multidisciplinary artist, composer, critic, and philosopher whose work can often be found in the irregularly published journal/zine *SOFT TEETH*. also! the editor and publisher of *THINKING HORROR: A JOURNAL OF HORROR PHILOSOPHY*, they live in a feral cat colony. in the woods. near the ocean. in rhode island.



Romie Stott is a poetry editor at *Strange Horizons* and the vocal half of the electronica duo *Stop-walk*. Her writing has most recently been anthologized in *We Robots: Artificial Intelligence in 100 Stories* and in *New Rules: Play During the Pandemic*. She is currently writing the libretto of a Broadway musical called *The Lady Takes the Mic*, about Death, Cupid, and an evening at a piano bar. She is also in postproduction on an Italian movie about a witch who steals time. You can find links to Romie's stories, films, and poems at romiesays.tumblr.com.



STAFF BIOS

Deadlands



Sean Markey publishes things on the internet for a living. He lives in Southeastern UT with his wife, Beth, many animals, and several acres of tumbleweed. He is on Twitter: @MarkeyDotCo

E. Catherine Tobler is a writer and editor. You might know her editing work from *Shimmer Magazine*. You might know her writing from *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Apex Magazine*. A trebuchet and Oxford comma enthusiast, she enjoys gelato and beer in her free time. Leo sun, Taurus moon. You can find her on Twitter @ECthetwit.

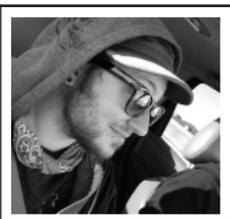




Sonya Taaffe reads dead languages, tells living stories, and loves the spaces in between. Her short fiction and poetry have been collected most recently in *Forget the Sleepless Shores* (Lethe Press) and *Ghost Signs* (Aqueduct Press) and her film criticism is funded by patreon.com/sovay. She

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

inkshark is a scandalously queer illustrator, author, and editor who lives in the rainy wilds of the Pacific Northwest. He enjoys exploring with his dogs, writing impossible things, and painting what he shouldn't. When his current meatshell begins to decay, he'd like science to put his brain into a giant killer octopus body with which he promises to be responsible and not even slightly shipwrecked. Pinky swear.



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

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

Amanda Downum is the author of *The Necromancer Chronicles*, *Dreams of Shreds & Tatters*, and the World Fantasy Award-nominated collection *Still So Strange*. Not content with *armchair necromancy*, she is also a licensed mortician. She lives in Austin, TX with an invisible cat. You can summon her at a crossroads at midnight on the night of a new moon, or find her on Twitter as @stillssostrange.



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.



THE END

Hello.

You've made it to the end of *The Deadlands*, Issue 01.

Did you love it? Will the stories herein haunt you for weeks and months to come? Will some imagery from one of the poems pop into your head at an odd hour completely uninvited?

I hope so.

It's been a really incredible journey putting together not only this single issue of *The Deadlands*, but also bringing the concept of a "death magazine" into the world, assembling an impressive team to help carry out and put their own spin on the vision. When I first had an idea to do a magazine that explored the theme of death only, I thought it would be a single-person-run zine that had small following, and we'd publish just a single piece of fiction a month or a quarter. But as I worked with Elise, my first and only choice to edit *The Deadlands*, I saw how this could be something much bigger.

Poetry! Non-fiction! Someone who could help us find great art!

I am completely thrilled to have created a space where amazing authors, poets, and artists can explore the ideas of death, afterlives, underworlds, other worlds, Death personified, psychopomps, and more.

A huge thanks to everyone that participated in our successful Kickstarter, to everyone who helped spread the word on social media, to *The*

Deadlands team for helping me Make A Thing, to the poets and authors who agreed to take a chance and write some awesome pieces for our first few issues, and to my wife, Beth Wodzinski, for so much support and encouragement.

There are a lot of great things to come—this is just the beginning.

You can best follow along with us on this journey at our website: <https://thedeadlands.com>, and on Twitter: @TheDeadlands.

Sean Markey | Publisher
May 2021