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THE
DEADLANDS

ISSUE #2 JUNE 2021

a journal of ends & beginnings

cover art by Jenna Barton



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UNSELVING

Greer Gilman

When I died I rose
to meet myself,
not quite as
shadowed leaves
touch leaves that fall
on water, meeting
palm to palm. Then
verges ever on
the yet-to-be,
is never this,
now, here. Nowhere
a kiss, and onward
from that instant O
and O. I wake
no travelling.
On either bank,
the trees are rooted
in their fall.
The river's night here,
and the leaves
rise falling, self
toward self unmet.
The crowd is parted
by the prow.





SHUCK

G. V. Anderson

No one, not even Bridget, could remember how it started, and yet by the winter term, it was common knowledge that she'd taken over the old smoking area and, for a price, would answer one—just one—question about the death of her friend, Samantha. Year Nines were especially bloodthirsty. Balancing on the threshold between childhood and everything after, they demanded to know things like: Did her brains wash off your parka afterwards? Did she die right away? Did you *actually* see her head come off?

Bridget charged an extra 50p for that last one.

The teachers knew she traded in gore and often skulked in the car park adjacent to the smoking area during lunch—wraiths, lost against the tarmac in dark grey coats, just *waiting* for an opportunity to lecture her about unhealthy grieving habits, but Bridget was doing just fine, thanks. In fact, it helped to break the crash down into a nod yes or a shake no, to mythologize—and not only helpful, but lucrative. Sammy had been a practical, worldly girl; she would have approved of Bridget's enterprise, even if it came at her own expense.

Today, though, the car park was haunted by another specter. She watched as something dark slinked behind the head teacher's Ford Escort—something shaggy and quadrupedal and vaguely canine. Bridget clenched her fists, knucklebones undulating into place beneath her skin. It didn't reappear, the dog, but to see it at school...

Too close. She'd have to kill it after all.

Can you kill Death?

A welcome distraction in the guise of a Sixth Form boy came sidling up to the smoking shelter. "Hey, Fridge."

"Hey, Mardy."

He was rolling a cigarette. "Busy?"

"Piss off," she said mildly. "You've had enough questions out of me."

"Not everything's about Sam, babe." Mardy licked the Rizla's edge, sealed it, and offered her the first smoke. Crud ran under and all around his nails. She refused. She hated the taste of cigarettes—she might as well shovel ashes straight into her gob—and Mardy knew that, but he was the sort of person who always offered.

He lit his cigarette and sat next to Bridget, their thighs touching. She was pretty sure Sammy wouldn't have approved of *this*, which, if she was being honest, was rather the point. The only thing spoiling her triumph—the worm in the apple, the shit in the pool—was that Mardy kept calling her Fridge. Frigid Bridget.

"I know you're not frigid," he'd said teasingly, the last time they'd been alone. His hand snaking up her skirt, fingertips twanging her knicker elastic. "It just turns out you're a stone-cold bitch, giving up someone's last moments for money."

"She would have given away mine for less," was Bridget's knee-jerk reply, and then, angry at herself for letting an ugly truth slide out—always a risk when you were grieving a girl like Sammy—she'd called him a wanker and told him to get off her coat. By the time she saw him again,

the fire in her gut had gone out, and now she couldn't even remember its warmth.

Frigid Bridget, the stone-cold bitch. Fine. Whatever. As long as she could shoot straight, it wasn't the worst moniker to leave school with.

"My dog had her litter," said Mardy. "Did you want one of the puppies?"

"Not really," Bridget replied, slipping her scarred right hand into her pocket. She'd been scared of dogs ever since a Jack Russell took a bite out of her when she was small. It was one of her earliest memories. Other people, when they thought of dogs, conjured up caramel eyes and wagging tails; all *she* could think of was the flash of snapping teeth. To her mind, it made perfect sense that Death would take this shape—they both trotted at your heels, deceptively docile for years and years, until one day...

"They're all gums, though," said Mardy.

"The mum isn't."

Mardy smiled. His teeth were the same yellow as good salty butter.

"Okay." He shrugged. "I was just asking in case you wanted to, you know, come over."

"Are ditches not good enough for you anymore?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong, they're cleaner than my sheets. *Definitely* your parka. But, ah, actually, my mum wanted to say hi."

This tore her attention away from the creature lurking behind the Ford Escort. Mardy had never invited her home. They were each other's sordid little secret. Bridget liked it that way. She thought he felt the same. After all, who wants to be seen dating *Fridge*?

"Do *you* want your mum to say hi?"

He shrugged.

"You're not half selling it."

"Forget it, then." He flicked away the cigarette, barely done. He enjoyed the prestige of being Someone Who Smokes at School more than actually smoking. There were sweeter flavors. His look turned sly. "Do you want to skive instead?"

By *skive*, he meant *find somewhere quiet and fool around*. And she wouldn't even be expected to do anything—she never touched him. She'd tried to once, but was too self-conscious of her scars. Better, easier, faster to lie back and concentrate, pretend she was alone. Sammy had said sex was supposed to be *fun, dummy*, but Bridget found herself worrying too much about the faces she pulled, the sounds she made. Whether or not she had a double chin. What Mardy thought about while he was down there. Sammy? Other girls, other boys?

Bridget—well. Bridget just thought about Death.

"I can't today." She told him she was on, which was a lie.

"We don't have to do stuff every time."

He was hurt, she realized. Good: let him hurt. "What else is there? *Talking*? I hate football, you hate Nirvana."

He gestured past the school to the PE grounds. "You used to play football."

"Sammy used to play football. I played hockey. Dick," and she stomped off instead of untangling the dreaded knot of jealousy, guilt, and self-doubt in her breast, woven as tight as any string of fairy lights. Sammy

had tangled them expertly. She'd done it when they'd stood in their PE kits by the side of the gym, waiting their turn at badminton, and Bridget's eyes had lingered a little too long on Mardy. Sammy had put her hand down the waistband of Bridget's shorts, tugging *out* to demonstrate the snug fit and *down* to reveal her stretchmarks—which Sammy, of course, didn't have.

"Mardy doesn't go for dumpy girls," she'd said, and everyone within earshot had sniggered.



The alchemy between two people is never perfect—it can't be—but normally there are pressure gauges. Checks and balances. Other hobbies, other people in orbit around the nuclear pair. With Sammy and Bridget, one nasty, the other reticent, there were no such distractions. Left to curl up on themselves like ingrown hairs, the girls calcified into something mean and bitter. An animal that bites itself as often as grooms.

In the last months of Sammy's life, they'd finally begun the messy process of pulling apart. Sammy started hanging out with other girls. They called her Samantha, which felt classy. They passed tampons under the toilet stall doors to each other, and as a rule, anyone else caught short on the loo with stained knickers around their ankles who dared call out for a pad got slung with palmfuls of pearlescent liquid soap out of the wall dispensers. When it dried, it looked disgustingly like spunk. No doubt these new friends indulged Sammy's worst tendencies, but Bridget didn't have to care. At last, she'd gained some distance, a little autonomy—which was exactly what made the night of the crash so unfair. They no longer had any right to be out together; it was a trip for old times' sake, and not even a good one! Now Sammy was dead, and it seemed Bridget would never escape her.

They'd been speeding home on Sammy's moped after seeing a gig in Great Yarmouth, Bridget riding pillion. Her small stature, which Sammy

had often sneered at, ended up saving her life: shorter than her friend by a foot, the sheet of metal that slammed into Sammy's face when a haulage lorry jackknifed in front of them merely grazed the scalp of the girl perched behind her.

Everything was a blur now, but she was sure... Well, reason conspired to twist things, but there had been flat, empty fields either side of them for miles until the last second, when Bridget was certain she'd caught sight of a monstrous dog on the grass verge.

Black fur matted by peat.

Two red, very round eyes.

Sammy didn't see it. She was watching the road and the lorry ahead, the corrugated metal sheets that would shortly kill her bouncing loose in their bindings. But Bridget saw the creature, *smelled* it, and recognized Death.

This was fen country, after all. If you're born and raised in Norfolk, you can't help but carry Shuck in your bones.



Bridget jerked upright. Marshland slid past the window, sectioned off and made sensible by dikes and culverts. Just now, there had been a huge, hunched shadow. On the verge. Like before. Guts cold, Bridget grasped the emergency brake and pulled.

"Stop the bus!"

The driver braked so hard the back end of the vehicle swung round. The other passengers shrieked and made a grab for anything that would make them feel safer—the seat in front, their belongings. Bridget staggered up the aisle to the door, shaking hard. The driver was on his feet.

"What the bloody hell was that for?"

Bridget's face greyed. "I just... I need to get off."

He was all too happy to jettison her by the side of the road. She bent double over the tarmac, letting the wind snatch away the stringy bile hanging from her mouth. The bus continued along its backcountry route without skidding or blowing a tire or spontaneously exploding, despite the premonitory prickle of her scalp. Nor was there a dog, though she found fresh scorch marks among the nodding heads of saxifrage.

The clouds were lined with sickly yellow by the time Bridget arrived home, her feet soaked through from overgrown grass. She lived with her Grandpa Frank in a squat stucco-finished farmhouse hidden by trees, half an hour from anywhere interesting. As she approached, something about the air felt rank.

She turned into the drive, heart jolting her ribs.

Shuck was waiting for her on the front step. He *engulfed* the front step—there was no way past him. Her school, her bus, now her home, closer and closer. The crash should have done for her. In the smallest of increments, Death was trying to amend his mistake.

Bridget hauled in a breath. "Oi!"

Shuck's attention narrowed.

She cast about for a projectile, grabbed a large rock that had broken off the boundary wall, and chucked it at the dog. It thumped him in the ribs. A smaller animal would have sprung out of the way. His matted fur simply absorbed the impact.

His ears swiveled back. He bared his teeth and pushed off the front step as if to start towards her.

"Don't you dare," she yelled, throwing another stone. This one caught him on the muzzle. He didn't even flinch; the red eyes stared through-out. A third hit his neck. Then the porch light flicked on, and the encroaching dark was burned away. Shuck melted into the Norfolk twilight, and warmth flooded the gravel as Grandpa Frank popped his head outside.

"Is that you shouting, Bridge?"

She pushed past him grimly. He smelled of engine oil. "I thought I saw someone hanging around. You need to start locking the bloody door, Grandpa."

"Mind your language, eh?" He scratched his whiskers with nicotine-colored fingers. "You're late."

"Bus trouble," she replied, which covered a lot of ground. She left her wet shoes on the porch. The walk had worn out the toes of her socks, so she pulled those off too and dumped them straight in the kitchen bin. Then she threw herself upstairs.

"Hey, dinner's waiting for you!"

"Be right there."

She spent precious little time in her room anymore, and it had taken on an anonymous quality—the Soundgarden and The Verve posters were gone, living on as pale rectangles in the paintwork. There were no childish knickknacks dangling from the ceiling. After the crash it had been easier to strip everything away and start again; but she hadn't, yet. Started again. The bed linen was blue, an old set of Grandpa Frank's. The other linens in the cupboard, either Sammy had slept in over the years or they'd *been* Sammy's. She wasn't ready to pick through that minefield. And no photographs had graced the nightstand since she was young. It was too eerie to see her mum smiling cheerfully, ignorantly from inside

a cheap Woolworths frame. In the same way it was eerie for Sammy to have jerked her head at the haulage lorry and said as they kicked off, "Wouldn't want *that* to fall on you."

Pretty soon, the lorry's contents would be slicing her to ribbons. The subtle fingers of Death plucking an unsubtle chord.

Bridget groped under her mattress. She felt the long, hard double barrel of a shotgun. Grandpa Frank's shotgun. It had a walnut stock and two round, unblinking black eyes, good for staring down something big. She'd fetched it from the shed.

Just in case.



The window on the landing overlooked the front of the house. Bridget spent her nights perched on the sill, the break-open shotgun dangling from the crook of her elbow. The vigil, while comforting, was an impotent gesture—the only shells she'd found in the shed had been badly stored. Moisture had corroded the casings. If, by sheer luck, they still slotted into the chamber, the powder inside was almost certainly ruined, to say nothing for her aim. Her mum had taught her to shoot a long time ago, but they'd fired at clay pigeons in their own time, in good light.

Death would come by night and he wouldn't wait for her to shout, "Pull!"

While she kept watch, Grandpa Frank snored, oblivious, and that was a comfort, too. Her mum had slipped away, you see, unwitnessed by all except the early hours—terrifyingly easy in every way Sammy's demise wasn't—and since then it had played on her mind that Death could seep undetected like rot.

Whenever her eyes threatened to close, she prowled the dark house noting every hazard: exposed wiring, glimpses of Victorian wallpaper,

the old boiler. Invisible. Innocuous. Well, a dog can nuzzle as well as bite. Sometimes, before retiring to her post on the landing, she would slip her cold feet into Grandpa Frank's wilted army boots and stand a while on the gravel drive. Test the air for the smell of singed undergrowth.

Doing just that, she saw a pair of eyes burning in the murk. No huff of vapor gave him away—but then, she reasoned, Death had no need to breathe. She brought the shotgun up. Her pulse jumped in her fingertips, unsteady the barrel.

"Come on then, Cujo," she muttered, sounding much, much braver than she felt.

But Shuck was in a voyeuristic mood that night and ventured no closer. They stood off until the sun broke over the tree line and the red eyes resolved into bike reflectors abandoned in the grass.

Bridget laughed bleakly, a sticky film of plaque dulling the gleam of her teeth.

She walked into town later—she couldn't bring herself to trust the bus—and purchased two boxes of shells from the Outdoor Store. The man behind the counter was a friend of Grandpa Frank's, so the sale was made on a knife-edge—on the one hand, he knew the family to be responsible gun owners; on the other, Bridget looked like she was one bereavement short of a breakdown.

"All right, love?" he probed.

"Yeah," she replied, setting the coins atop the counter, "just finishing my Christmas shopping. My granddad wants to take me shooting over the holiday," gambling that his friendship with Grandpa Frank was the distant kind that wouldn't elicit a phone call.

"Keepin' well, the two of you?"

"We're fine." Not reassuring enough for him to release his grip on the shells. She switched gears, cranked a smile. "We're good. Cheers. I'll tell him you asked."

Her purchase complete, Bridget stamped out of the store. Thank God for shoe chains; brown slush had frozen into rigid wrinkles overnight and made a rink of the pavement. The high street looked pitiful—the council had strung lights across the road that flashed in a cheap artifice of movement: holly-wreathed bells flicked left, right, left, right; a tree illuminated itself from the bottom up. And the window displays, so inviting by night, bordered as they were with spray-on snow, stared haggard and hungover at the locals as they passed by. Too early for the cafés to open; too early for much at all except the gritting lorries and the troublemakers.

Too crisp and sober by far for Shuck. Safe, then, to linger.

Bridget watched someone dress a mannequin in the Oxfam shop's window. The slip dress they were pinning into shape skimmed the knees. Slinky, in a bubblegum-and-butterfly-hairclips kind of way. It was something Bridget would have liked to test drive, if the spaghetti straps didn't practically forbid a bra and the satin didn't cling quite so much around the middle.

A boy yelled, "Try it on for us, Fridge!" Bridget tucked her chin and looked around. Mardy was there with his mates, but it wasn't him who'd shouted; he was already smacking their arm and coming over to her, his hands thrusting into the pockets of his bomber jacket. His cheeks were pink as if they'd just been pinched.

"Hey. Spending your hard-earned money?"

She drew the plastic bag containing the shells behind her. The Outdoor Store didn't brand its bags, but its contents were visible up close.

"Maybe."

He nodded at the slip dress in the window. "Were you going to try it on?"

Bridget shrugged. The last time she'd strayed from softened plaid, jeans, and Doc Martens, Sammy had laughed in her face.

But Sammy wasn't here anymore, was she?

"It's not the kind of thing I wear," said Bridget quietly. "It wouldn't suit me."

It was Mardy's turn to shrug. "You'd look great."

She glared at him, and he met it. No smirk played around his mouth, except the one that said he didn't know how to proceed when girls refused compliments—she could see his mind working out where to tread next. Backtrack or push forward? A joke? Either way, his expression was genuine—vaguely baffled, even—and his friends were jeering, calling him back, yet he ignored them. It was all the affirmation she needed. Bridget set her shoulders and strode into the charity shop. She asked the assistant to unpin the slip dress, please, she'd like to see how it fits, feeling quite outside herself. Once the curtain was drawn across the door to the changing cubicle, she had to brace herself against the wall for a moment and let her brain catch up to her racing pulse.

She set the bag down and peeled everything off except her knickers and socks, then dropped the dress over her head and scrutinized her reflection.

She hated it immediately.

Why was her skin so pallid? She disappeared against the satin. Why were her thighs wider than her hips? Why did her knicker-line have to protrude? You had to create the illusion of going commando in dress-

es like this; everyone knew that. And why was the thermostat set low enough in here to harden her nipples? She folded her arms across her chest, shame burning the back of her sinuses.

The curtain suddenly clinked aside and back into place. "Told you you'd look great, babe," whispered Mardy.

Her breath caught. She covered her face with her hands. Her voice dripped mortification. "Oh my God, get out."

He giggled. "The manager will see me." He was so close that he couldn't *not* put his arms around her waist—there was nowhere else for them to go. He bent his head to hers, the smell of chewing gum mixing with tobacco and his own faint musk. "Are you going to buy it?"

"Are you actually taking the piss? I want to *burn* it."

"Why?" Mardy drew back as far as the cubicle would allow and appraised her. She felt his hands wander down to pinch at the hem, check its length. "It's nice. Different. You *do* want it, babe. I saw the way you looked at it in the window."

She replied, "It looked better on the mannequin," but what she meant was, *it would look better on Sammy*. How tired she was of having to navigate the crater that girl had left behind.

"Er, no." His hand cupped her bum. "Can't do this to a mannequin."

She snorted and said, "You're an idiot." He shushed her and drew her face into his chest to stifle her response, and they stood like that for a long moment. His heart beat through his jacket, sure and steady against her forehead, and his fingers slowly curled into her hair as a different mood took hold. Their exhalations were too loud in the tiny space. She felt movement in his trousers. The response from between her own legs? Nothing.

"You need to go," she whispered.

The curtain twitched. He sighed. "She's standing right there. I'm going to get a bollocking."

"You should have thought about that earlier."

He shifted. His tone changed. "What are the bullets for, Fridge?"

They both looked down. Amid her discarded clothes, the plastic bag had spilled its secrets.

"Shooting," she said.

"Shooting what?" Easy question, easier lie, and yet Bridget couldn't think of one—rabbits, birds, beer cans, anything would do except this strange, guilty silence. The longer it stretched, the angrier she got. Mardy lowered his voice. "Shooting *what?*"

"Oh, myself, I don't know," she snapped. "Can you get out now, please? I've asked twice."

Without a word, he dashed for the door. The manager yelled at the back of his head, and the look she gave Bridget then, you'd think she'd stepped in something. "Leave, before I call the police!" Bridget didn't need telling twice; she was already jumping into her jeans. She ran from the shop the second she was decent—still, after all that, wearing the slip dress. Flustered with embarrassment, she hardly felt the cold. At the next alley, she flung her bag and bra down and started buttoning up her top.

Mardy was already there, getting his wind back.

"Are you *okay*, Fridge?"

He said the word with such delicacy, as if *she* was the cornered dog about to bite.

"Fridge?"

"My name's Bridget," she fired back, "and I'm *fine*."

"Sure? You just said you were going to blow your head off."

"It was a joke, Mardy." She shoved her arms into her coat sleeves and zipped up the front with a quick, sharp rasp.

"A really bad one."

"Well," Bridget served—buttons askew, bra swinging from her hands, she found herself shouting without knowing why—"I'm grieving, so."

"Yeah," he volleyed, "you've been through shit, I get it. But this whole attitude, like you're the first person to lose a friend, is getting really fucking old, Fridge."

Lose? Lose? Sammy wasn't a set of *keys*.

She wasn't a friend, either. The feelings would be cleaner, surely. The grief would be simple, with no savage relief muddying the water. She'd never had the courage to ask anyone after the crash: *Is it okay if I hated her?*

"Have you ever seen," she said, voice trembling uncontrollably, "someone you know turn into meat?" Her eyes looked like glass: glistening, even the whites. She held up a hand to stop his reply. "She was meat, Mardy. Roadkill. Her clothes were the only thing that looked human." She gasped for air that wouldn't come. "No one should ever have to see that."

Mardy started forward. "You're having a panic attack."

"Don't touch me."

She charged past him into the dull grey of the street. The scattering of people there murmured to each other—look, it's the girl whose friend died in that awful crash—and Bridget turned her back to them, gritting her teeth. How long had Sammy been dead? Long enough, and yet somehow Bridget was still being defined by her.

She hadn't helped matters, of course. She hadn't broken new ground, only kept to the grooves Sammy had carved for her. The same choice of college, the same clothes, the same stomping ground. Even the same boy. A rat in a cage pressing the same old buttons, a slave to dopamine. No more. She passed a beggar, a collection tin for the PDSA, a wishing fountain, and she threw coins their way until she had nothing else left to give.



They sat for dinner, she and Grandpa Frank, at the tiny kitchen table. He couldn't abide chat at mealtimes, so they ate in near silence; their spoons scraped the bottoms of their bowls and their mouths worked gingerly around the microwaved lasagna. However, it was companionable. Grandpa Frank didn't ask much of her—he never had. Not the most paternal of men, he simply got on with his routine as if she'd never come here, as if she was passing through. Sometimes he asked about school. Exams. Never sex or the sanitary products in the bathroom. Never Sammy, for which she was grateful. And each night, when he finished his meal, he would rinse his bowl and spoon and set them to drain, pop open a can of Coke—a sole concession to sugar—and plant a whisky kiss on the crown of her head without saying a word.

Tonight, she grasped his hand as he made for the living room. He glanced down and frowned.

"I'm heading straight up," she said.

Grandpa Frank gestured with his Coke. "*Generation Game's* starting."

"It's the eighteenth."

The date of the crash. Always the date of the crash. He needed no further explanation. He muttered something gruff about time passing and patted her shoulder. "Sleep well, then."

"You too."

Off he went in search of his leather recliner, clearing his throat with a cough. The TV murmured to life. She sat unmoving for a while in the darkening kitchen, until she heard Grandpa Frank scrunch up the can of Coke like he always did when he was done. She scraped the rest of her meal down the sink and washed her bowl and spoon, placing them neatly on top of his, and helped herself to a swig of milk and a Wagon Wheel. By the time she padded to the living room, the half temazepam she'd crushed into his food had done its job.

She didn't allow herself any guilt as she tucked a rug around his legs. The shotgun had a bark to it, and she didn't want to startle him.

She loaded the shells by touch in the hallway. On that dim winter's evening, electric light felt like an imposition. Plus, it would suggest wakefulness to anyone lurking outside, and—she snapped the gun closed with a grimace—Bridget wanted Shuck to let his guard down. She wanted to be close enough to hear a whimper when she pulled the trigger.

The gravel out front was rimed with frost. Every step sent cracks whisking across the skein of ice, as if the house perched upon water. She paused to listen when the ground finally turned to noiseless grass. The cold ached against her eyeballs. She heard the distant hush of tires on tarmac and the ticking of the clock in the house behind her, but nothing

organic—no crickets; they perished in autumn, singing lullabies to their eggs—nothing living except her own breath and her own blood throbbing in her ears.

She tiptoed between grass and stone. Years of Sammy jumping out and scaring her by shouting *Woof!* in her face had trained her to expect surprises; she didn't blink twice when a dark shape skittered along the tree line, snapping twigs in its wake. Her glove was too bulky for the trigger guard. She bit it off and readied a finger, wincing as her scar met the burn of cold steel. The gun bucked, spitting shot. The boom echoed, then crackled as shot tinged off the trees, before silence restored itself. Already, she knew she'd missed; the peace was too thick, loaded. Watchful. She glanced back toward the house. She knew Grandpa Frank lay within, and yet its windows stared gauntly as if plucked out. As if the structure had stood empty for years. It was quite a distance away, further than she'd realized. Had she given Shuck room to double past her?

Her lips peeled apart, skin splitting. "Shit," she whispered shakily. How could she be so stupid?

Frost dampened everything—feeling, fear, even adrenaline. With a sense of unreality, Bridget lumbered stiffly around the garage, stepping through undergrowth, to check the back of the house. After that, she would go inside. Warm up.

Bridget?

She hesitated, pinned between the wall of the garage and a holly bush. The voice had come to her as if from underwater.

She looked over her shoulder towards the front drive.

Bridget!

Two red lights.

She whirled around to face them. Fired.

The lights fell; something heavy hit the gravel, gurgled. Steam lashed the sharp air. The wind brought iron with it. She stared, shotgun limp in her hands. A strange, twisted protuberance spun in the air, round and round, accompanied by a fast click-click-click.

Like...like a bicycle pedal and chain.

Bike reflectors.

Mardy.

She'd shot Mardy.

Halfway to his side, her legs gave out. She wailed an approximation of his name and her voice broke, ripped by grief. Starlight picked out the speckled texture of his torso: he glistened like ground beef. She crawled towards him; she touched his wounds, expecting to sink her fingers inside him, but found him peppered with something coarse and dry. And he stirred, conscious! She gasped; at that range, buckshot should have torn him apart.

"Bridge," he breathed.

She touched his face. It was a wonder he *had* a face. The man at the Store—he must have swapped out the shells, given her rock salt instead. Dangerous, but not always lethal. Less than useless against a creature like Shuck. She threw the shotgun aside in despair.

"Mardy," she whimpered. "I'm so—so sorry."

"I heard a gunshot."

She sobbed. *Of course* he'd been on his way to check on her. *Of course* Mardy would do that. She'd fired into the trees and probably hastened his coming.

Her chest hitched. "I need to go and phone an ambulance."

When she turned around, Shuck was standing over them.

Her hand moved for the shotgun—idiot; it was unloaded, and what were the shells in her pocket going to do, exactly?—but Shuck got there first. A streak of white teeth. Splitting pain. She screamed herself hoarse, but of the two souls nearby, one lay dying, the other lay drugged. No one was coming to help. He yanked her into the murk of the trees, and she tried not to look at her arm as the dog's teeth degloved it, but she felt every bone in her wrist grind to dust, and thought she would pass out.

Past the trees, across a ditch into open marshland, Shuck came to a halt and dropped her ruined arm onto the pale, frozen grass. Each green blade was encased as if by glass—a field of sparkling teeth, their tiny points reflected in the sky far, far above. A lower jaw, an upper jaw, and the fens a wet tongue between them so flat as to discern the curvature of the Earth.

It struck Bridget, then, that she had been brought across some boundary. That although he'd let go of her, she'd never left Shuck's mouth.

She lay sprawled on the ground for some time, if time could be measured here. Ice crystals formed on her lashes. Slowly, the wilds returned. A raft spider tiptoed beside her head; a fen cricket burrowed into the rich soil; a pair of dappled curlews gracefully dipped their downturned bills amongst tussocks of cocksfoot and red fescue as the giant dog curled around her and licked warmth into her cheeks. His breath was foul.

Will you never learn?

A tired, resigned sort of hatred settled in her limbs. Her head lolled away from him, a million teeth stabbing her cheek. Several yards and several lifetimes away, blue lights flashed on the side of the road. A police car. An ambulance. A jackknifed haulage lorry. If she concentrated, she knew she would recognize the smoldering remains of a moped. Of the smear that had been Sammy, she saw nothing.

A woman in a high-vis jacket was loping in Bridget's direction, the beam of her torch sweeping the smoking debris, searching. Bridget watched her advance for an age; she watched for so long that by any reasonable physics, she should have been found, but for all the woman walked, she came no closer.

Oh, Bridget's body was found, certainly. But *this* moment was only a simulacrum of that one. A holding pen. A threshold between life and everything after.

Heartsore, as she always was when the truth rushed back in, Bridget turned away from the crash. She had been here many, many times. Had failed to move on many, many times. At least her end was calm. Private. She'd crawled far enough away from the accident to find a little tranquility, which turned out to be a blessing and a balm when she surfaced raw from every failure. What must it have been like for Sammy to return to this moment, that wretched, inhuman state, again and again as she reconciled with her own Death?

Not for the first time, resentment softened into a resemblance of grace.

Shuck lay his muzzle upon his front paws and looked at her pityingly.

You tried to kill me again.

Until she accepted him, she was stuck on a loop. Playing infinite projections over which she had minimal control. This, he had explained.

Meanwhile, the world continued on without her. While she was lucid, she asked, "Grandpa Frank?"

Is still safe and well. Mardy, too, though I don't know why you fixate on that boy. He thinks of you not one bit. Her face crumpled at this. The Mardy she always conjured was not the Mardy she'd known. Shuck snuffled at her neck. *Peace, child. It is the way of things. Are you ready to try again?*

Bridget shook her head. She grasped a handful of his greasy scruff, tight enough to imprint the sensation of a fist onto her mind. Something to anchor her, force a reckoning. Something to give her courage for the next attempt. "I need a minute."

A minute, a millennium. He sighed, nostrils flaring close to her face like the twin barrels of a gun. *I can give you all the time in the world, Bridget.*





OPPENHEIMER IN VALHALLA

Marissa Lingen

An enterprising chooser of the slain
Thought to select him: not Death,
As he had feared, but surely Her bondsman
Therefore to stay and fight
Among the bright blades, his own way.
Haber agreed readily; Nobel was relieved
To see the wounds spring back healed
Each night, all forgiven at the feast.
They had seen sad-eyed warriors before. Robert,
Chewing his pipestem, nerves still jangled
Despite the end of breath, declined.
Was knowledge, hardest won war,
To fragment and fail every nightfall? No,
Time's arrow was too dear. And he
Had stood shoulder to shoulder once
With Teller and LeMay, on order's side.
Never again. The valkyrie frowned: but then
Would he oppose the einherjar?
Would his black holes draw him in
To the swirl of chaos one last time,
To join the Jotuns at Ragnarok? Again no:
The battles of the world remain
But not for this mind's devising.
Neither entropy's soldier nor its foe
But grieving witness to the final fission.





THE THING THAT DOESN'T DISINTEGRATE

Kate Lechler

My first skull was a roadkill deer in town. It was November, and I had been a month separated from my husband, seeing him only for dinner at our shared home a couple of times a week. Driving home for one of these dates, I saw a struck doe flopped in the grass across the street from the big cemetery in the middle of Oxford, Mississippi.

"I want that deer's skull," I told him when I got there. "Do you want to help me get it?"

Mutilating a roadkill carcass of indeterminate expiration date was a big ask of my partially-estranged husband. On one hand, he was used to a certain amount of unpredictability (what I privately liked to think of as "delightful chaos") from me. But I'd already put him through one of the biggest shocks of his life when I had come home in October and told him, after several months of marital counseling, that I'd found a temporary place across town and I would pack a couple bags and stay there for a while.

He did not want to help me get the skull.

I put in a few calls to friends and found someone willing to hold my flashlight while I hacked with a shovel at the vertebrae connecting the head to the neck and used a pair of shears to cut the skin. In the middle

of this process, the Methodist church next door let out their Wednesday night prayer meeting. The faithful exiting the parking lot got an eyeful of me, illuminated by their headlights, wearing disposable painter's coveralls and a face mask, gleefully mutilating a corpse near William Faulkner's grave.

I carried the head back to our house in a garbage bag, dug a hole in the backyard, and dumped it in. It looked up at me while I covered it with dirt.

When I moved all of my stuff out for good in May, I returned to the mound of earth I'd marked with a couple of bricks. Digging down through the soft soil, I worried at first the skull had disappeared, been scavenged or rotted, or merely dissolved into the ground. But then yellowed bone gleamed up at me through crumbling dirt. The soil where I'd buried it had been too moist, and the bone had started to decompose, creating deep cracks radiating up from the snout.

But the incisors fell loose from the skull into my hand, a few ivory slivers about the length of my thumbnail. The teeth were pristine.



Once I had that first skull, I got a taste for it. It quickly snowballed, friends getting on board to tell me where they'd seen roadkill raccoons or calling me to come over and collect dead squirrels or mummified frogs found in attic boxes.

I was surprised by how important teeth were to identifying unknown skulls. The first question is, "Was this a predator, or prey?", and that's answered with one quick check for canines. Past that, though, it's easy to get lost in the weeds of skull identification. I once found one with long yellowed incisors that curled into the skull, twice as long as what was sticking out of the bone. Squirrel? Rabbit? Beaver?

Muskrat, it turned out.

Have you ever held a single tooth in your hand? They are tiny, ugly things, instantly recognizable yet anonymous. Like tree roots, they're best left mostly covered. The skull's smile, that final lipless grin at death, exposes what some of us spend years hiding from: the frightening reality that we will die.

But something of us will stick around, and it's likely to be our teeth. Tooth enamel is harder than steel. Teeth can survive cremation and are used to identify bodies long after the rest of us has crumbled or liquified. Once, I had an entire fox skeleton disintegrate over just a couple of months; the soil where I'd buried it had been too acidic. The teeth were still there, though, clinging to a shard of jaw. I wore one as an earring for a couple of days, a bright pointed dart through my pierced lobe, and felt raw, witchy. Primal.



Before I started collecting skulls, I hadn't given much thought to teeth, other than to wonder about my own. When I was a kid, one of my front teeth stuck straight out of my mouth, like a tilt-up garage door opening. I still have the plaster cast that the orthodontist made and every time I look at it, it shocks me how intense the misalignment was. I had my palate widened in fifth grade, which involves a four-legged metal device that slowly breaks the bone of the upper mouth and jaw—still cartilaginous before puberty—and spreads them apart. Every month or two, the orthodontist would slide his gloved hand into my mouth and turn a metal key that would widen the expander another millimeter and cause me a week or more of pain. I hated the smell of the latex, the scratch of the brackets against the inside of my lips, the dull ache of my young bones learning to spread. The only thing I liked was picking the colors of my rubber bands—hot pink, electric blue, and purple.

In high school, I had braces again, this time to straighten errant teeth. I opted for clear brackets and rubber bands—anything to diminish the

obviousness of my dental gear. The day I got them off, I couldn't stop licking my teeth, relishing how straight and slick they were.

They didn't stay that way, though. Despite the palate widening, my teeth are still crowded, too many of them jostling for space in my skull.



When we were in marriage counseling, my husband complained that I was always changing my mind.

"It's a midlife crisis," he told the therapist. "I don't think she really wants to end this. She's just got an idea in her head, but that happens all the time, and then she moves on."

He brought up my fascination with the musical *Hamilton*, which had been intense but ultimately waned. There were several examples of this tendency to obsess over something and then fully abandon it. *Supernatural* fanfic. Sewing and crafting. Eating only local foods. I tossed myself into my passions, but in six months or a year I'd be onto something else.

I wondered if he was right. Was I flighty, unable to commit to anything? Could my unhappiness be a phase? Were all the things I wanted—travel, sex, artistic success, to own a home—temporary passions that would die down with enough time? From high school, I'd always recognized myself as someone full of appetite. I wished I had ten lifetimes. I wanted to do and be and fuck everything.

But my longings began to crowd each other, cutting me from the inside.



Teeth are, as Titus from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* says, "bones that live on the outside." Humans use them to bite, chew, talk, and emote. They represent our biggest urges. The drive to grow, to change, to nourish ourselves. The drive to feel pain and pleasure.

Yes, pleasure. Teeth can be sexy. Constantly pressed against our lips, nestled inside our cheeks, embracing our tongue. In the Edgar Allan Poe short story “Berenice,” a man fixates on a woman’s teeth, imagines holding them, looking at them from every angle. After Berenice is buried, he goes into a trance and digs up her (still-living, in one version) corpse to pull all the teeth out of her mouth. He wakes up covered in dirt and blood, with the shovel and a box of teeth next to him. You can see how Poe (because somehow Poe seems to inhabit every one of his male narrators) might be entranced by them, might want to slip a finger into a soft, warm, wet mouth to trace their hardness, tease their sharp edges.

Or maybe that’s just me. Maybe I want my fingers in your mouth.

Because when Lady Gaga sings, “Show me your teeth,” I think about sex. “Don’t be scared / I’ve done this before,” Gaga murmurs over insistent drum beats, like a bedframe thumping against a wall. Because she knows what I know, what the best lovers know—the point of teeth is, well, the point. The pressure. The biting. The thrill of an incisor against skin is the sharp pain of the present *and* the mark left behind. A reminder of pleasure, a reminder of mortality. This is how close we came, it says, to something else. A different kind of animal.



I had an astrology reading done, and the astrologer said that I should consider Demeter, the goddess of grain and the harvest, the cycle of life and death, as a patron goddess. I think this had something to do with how much Saturn I had in my chart. A kind of death-driven energy, a fascination with endings and, consequently, beginnings.

I dismissed this recommendation initially. Sure, I might collect skulls, but I never felt like I was a Demeter girl. She was too sedate, agricultural, matronly. If anything, I was Artemis, the goddess of the wilderness, the moon, female independence. Or possibly Odin, the wandering one-eyed sorcerer with his raven messengers, Huginn and Muninn.

As I thought about it, though, I kept remembering Persephone, Demeter's daughter, stolen away by Hades, the god of the dead, and taken to rule by his side as the queen of the underworld. Demeter's grief at her loss was all-consuming. It ended harvests and started an eternal winter. The only way to restore the world to order, to some semblance of wholeness, was for Demeter to get Persephone back.

But even then, she couldn't keep her forever.



My ex-husband's teeth are white, square, and even, with the smallest hairline gap between his front incisors. Set in a wide mouth that is even wider when he smiles, which he did often. Big teeth, big mouth, big man.

Now that we're divorced, I have to go back to Facebook to see him, to remember his teeth exactly. In the process, I get caught up looking at old photos of us. So many happy times—a trip to Stone Mountain, a holiday in Prague, the first house we lived in together on Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue. I examine how our faces, our haircuts changed over the years we shared. Remembering my striped pink scarf, his green vintage Tallahassee Parks and Recreation tee shirt, both gone now. We've lost them, but we still have our same smiles.



Did you know that teeth are one of the only parts of the body that cannot heal themselves?

"Tooth buds" start to form on the jawbone six weeks after conception.

Girls' permanent teeth generally emerge before boys'.

A recent study of the plaque on a medieval woman's teeth revealed traces of lapis lazuli, which helped determine that she was likely an illuminator,

a skilled manuscript artist, a position historians hadn't previously believed women held.

When teeth emerge, dentists call it "eruption." Like a volcano, subtle movement under the surface before a violent change. These imposter bones tearing their way through our flesh and out into our mouths, to keep tearing our food for us so that our bodies can transform the food into more flesh. The teeth making up for what they destroyed.



Years ago, before my husband and I divorced, I was at his childhood home, helping him and his father sort through my late mother-in-law's belongings. We had made it through her closet, her bathroom cabinets, and were working on excavating her bedside table. Amid handmade Mother's Day cards and the kids' ancient swimming awards was a tiny box, like a plastic pirate's treasure chest.

Within, three small teeth, one each for my husband and his siblings.

I held the box in my palm, presented it to him, then set it aside as a keepsake. It fit with what I remembered of her: practiced hostess, devoted mother, shuffling around the dim house in slippers, skinny legs protruding under her terry cloth robe, asking me once more before bed if I needed anything. Her own teeth, long, rectangular, stained from coffee and cigarettes. She didn't show them often. When she smiled for the camera, posing next to or behind her kids, it was demure, a bit embarrassed, a tinge of "ah, you've caught me!" hanging around her expression.

But digging farther down, past detritus of family vacations and a fourth-grade report card noting my husband's tendency to goof off in class, we found more teeth. In drawstring velvet jewelry bags. In tiny manila folders. In a flat box with cardboard dividers, each tooth carefully placed like a kitchen utensil. Cuspids, molars, the odd incisor, some clean and

shining, others clinging to shreds of old blood, and one with a metal brace epoxied onto its thin ivory surface. When we got to the bottom of the drawer, receipts and pictures and birthday cards removed, there were still more loose teeth, rolling around among the dust and grit—too many, I felt, for three children to lose.



The part of the Demeter story that I find the most poignant is the tension between permanence and change. She gets her daughter back, but has to immediately accept that she will lose her again. Again and again and again. When Persephone left Hades, she plucked those three seeds like garnet teeth from the mouth of the pomegranate, setting into motion an inescapable cycle of loss and reunion. Of change.

“All changed, changed utterly,” Yeats says in his elegiac poem “Easter 1916.” He calls this change “A terrible beauty.” The terror, I can see. The last three years of my life have included an axis-shifting divorce, a public coming-out, another shattering breakup, and a global pandemic. These changes have wrung and frightened and depleted and exhausted me; they’ve scratched at my spirit, torn my self-image. I’m sorry, Yeats, but I struggle to see the beauty in change.

Except, maybe, when I’m looking at a skull.



Why did I want that deer skull to begin with?

A friend of mine collected natural curiosities. I went to his house every now and then, went for long rambling walks with his wife around their property while we talked about writing and dogs and, always, eventually, my marriage. Beautiful, inspiring, intimate conversations that made me feel like it was normal to be a little unhappy. It felt grown-up, even artistic, to have one understanding of my marriage at home—supportive, fun, loving, the kind of daily domestic ease many people dream of—and

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then a different understanding when I talked about my marriage with friends. I was obsessed with what wasn't happening, all the sex I wasn't having, how a chance to understand my own queerness had already passed me by, and those doors were closing forever now. The person I wanted to be—the person I could have been—was receding from me and, naturally, it was my marriage's fault. But this passage-of-time stuff was iconic, too. I thought about all the unhappy marriages I saw on TV and film, all the Don and Betty Drapers living beautiful but passionless lives in tandem. Marriage wasn't glamorous anymore; what was glamorous was being quietly, stoically disappointed by marriage.

After these conversations, I'd go inside my friend's beautiful home and look at his collection. Hagstones, rocks with natural holes in them. A bone from a walrus penis. A big bull skull covered in turquoise. He had an entire bookshelf full of bones, jars of feathers. I wanted these things, and more than that, I wanted to be the kind of person who would have these things. Someone in touch with nature, someone with the kind of sight that would go out into the world and notice an interesting knot-hole, know how to tell a swallows' nest from a wrens'.

When I decided to harvest the skull from that roadkill deer, I didn't know at the time what I wanted from it. If I was trying to be edgy, to figure out unusual ways I could break out of a stultifying traditional heterosexuality, or was just unhappy and needing a thrill that wasn't sex.

But I know now that it sparked something in me, an urge to collect the world's small, hidden, hard things. To hold them in my hands, display them in my home. And most of all to preserve the thing that doesn't disintegrate. To remember that, underneath the muscle and skin and fur and everything else that changes and shifts, some things remain.



When I finally got to the bottom of my mother-in-law's bedside drawer, I had stopped feeling tender and awed, had stopped laughing. It wasn't

cute anymore; it was uncanny. I brushed the dozens of baby teeth out of the drawer into the garbage can with the blade of my palm, then wiped it on my jeans, trying to rid myself of the feel of teeth. Where had they all come from? And why had she kept so many? There was something strange here, something I couldn't understand, that I didn't feel comfortable looking too closely at.

Now, several skulls later, I know. When I think about what part of myself is going to remain—to outlast my marriage, the pandemic, this season of decay and loss—I understand why someone might hold onto what is small and durable.

She didn't want things to change.





ASTYNOME, AFTER

Mike Allen

The Fates persist in fractal layers,
the tapestry they weave
spreads fingers, grips skeins,
the work itself a weaver,
that winds yet another copy
through the warp, piling colors
until the shuttle gives rise
to coils of minute artisans,
who wind the reverse sides
of countless lives until the scene
that draws me out arrives,
threading stone and flesh,
kings, priests and generals.

Ships high in the backdrop,
goddesses squeezed to the margins,
moving pieces of a single surface
that can only, you believe,
be unbound by blade or fire;
I kneel, stitched, between
my father and my captor,
studiously recording notes
as my body is bartered,
auditor of my own plunder,
or so the thread has cast me.

The men that surround me
gaze at each other, my cage
strung by lines of sight.

Yet on other planes I too weave,
not more copies but a reprieve,
your light and cunning the warp
you provide without knowing.
Map what my reed has marked,
string dark whorls into letters,
mouth a word to guide my weft,
spin plague from the wrathful sun.

Echoes across centuries still
hammer tremors of the scourge
that made Agamemnon quake.

Sickness gels in shadows
that no light will dispel
until you have freed me,
granted me the final spree
begun by the myopic dreamers
who returned me to my father
and left my thread trailing
in the Lethe. From the fluid
in your spine and throat
I wade ashore, my cords
wound around yours, worms
looped around the wooden hook
that twines them to the surface.
I peer out through your windows.
I am owed, owed outlets
for pent-up combustion and shocks.
I deserve to slash the holy,
burn the priceless, drop antiquity

three stories and giggle
as it shatters and fissions. We
will wind my new fate
full frontal, we will brave
Ptolemy's wobbling spheres,
hopping from disk to disk,
and at the edge of the universe
we'll pay the Moirai a call,
you keep them talking
while I transmute their spun wool
into a gunpowder fuse.





BONEFIELDS

Margaret Ronald

He had been born with a thick web of skin between the first and second fingers of his right hand, supposedly a sign of bad blood. That hadn't been why he'd cut the hand off, but it was a passable reason if he had to give one.

"That's not what you said last time," said the girl as she pushed her way through the crowd. "Last time you said—" she paused to duck under the arm of a man carrying three plucked chickens, "—you'd had to cut it off after a member of the Goldmark brotherhood recognized your clan tattoo." Two women shoved past her, and she grabbed Rhode's cloak to keep from getting crushed.

"Did I?" He must have been feeling imaginative. That was getting rarer. "Well, then that's what happened," he said. The merchants didn't bother him; not many people bothered a man a foot taller than most and with a face like stone.

"And the time before that you said you'd lost it as the penalty for robbing a wizard."

"Ah." Rhode let his gaze slide past her to the closest market stall, where a woman sold bundles of fresh bluestalk. People passed in bright blobs, their identities reduced to a haze of garbled sound and smell.

The girl elbowed him—gently, though; she'd learned that at least. "So which is it?"

He shrugged. "Pick one."

She sighed and threw up her hands in a theatrical gesture undoubtedly learned from the traveling sideshow they'd been with until yesterday. "You're hopeless."

He nodded. It was a good word.

This was about as small a market town as it was possible to find on the main roads. Rural country; "cow-screwing country," so Bronze Michel had called it; old-gods country. Stheutes's country, where the white stones rose from the bonefields. The fragments of speech he bothered to hear had a guttural accent; he supposed he had one as well, even after his years in the city.

His sister Linnet had tried to erase her accent, wanting to sound more authoritative. Their father had laughed, saying it didn't matter what she sounded like, since Rhode would be the one following in his footsteps. Rhode had always been careful not to respond to that.

The girl tugged his elbow again. "We could pick up some silver here."

He stared down at her, and for a moment saw Linnet in her place, and the chill in him could not for once be attributed to his own affliction.

"I could juggle," she went on. "You could lift a few cows one-handed — well, of course one-handed; what I meant was—"

"No."

"Think about it. These hicks probably haven't seen a decent show since the moon was in its egg. Just a ten-minute performance—"

"I said no."

The girl sighed again. Her gaze shifted to over his shoulder, and she went pale beneath her olive skin. "Damn. Look, can we get moving? Forget the show, let's just get on out of here."

A man's voice, wheedling and high, rang out over the market, and Rhode's skin went cold—well, colder. "—four silver for a lesser resurrection, and the blessing of Stheutes is yours, preserved forever by the god's bounty! Stint not, friends, lest your departed loved ones sigh at your miserable parsimony!"

Was it Ranulph? He raised his head to look, remembering in time to pull up the hood of his cloak. No, the shouting man was Egaron, one of Ranulph's old friends. His face warmed with a dull flush of relief. He hadn't planned on meeting Ranulph away from the shrine; to meet him now would have meant a change in plans. And Rhode wasn't sure he still had the flexibility for that now.

But Egaron was here, and it was all too obvious who had hired him. His stall was too well-built to be temporary. Posts had been sunk into foundation stones, and the ceiling was sloped to shunt rain onto the sagging slats of the next stall. Egaron harangued the crowd from a little dais, the white skull-mask of Stheutes painted on a purple banner behind him. To either side stood statues of the recent dead, half the height of the people they represented. Stheutes's bounty. Rhode closed his hand into a fist.

The girl shook his arm, then cursed and tried to hide behind him. It did no good; a hand shot past Rhode and grabbed her by the wrist. "So this is where you've got to, Mongoose!" a voice boomed.

"Let go of me!" She twisted, sank her teeth into the hand, and tried to pull away. "Block, help me out here!"

"Block?" The man who'd caught the girl—Mongoose? No, that wasn't her name—took a step forward to face Rhode. "Damn. Didn't expect you."

Block. Who was Block? Yes—they'd called him the Block in the sideshow. Ranulph had sometimes called him as thick as a block. And Linnet had called him a fool, when their father couldn't hear. He looked away from Egaron's stall and focused on the man—Ophit, the head of the sideshow. "What do you want?"

Ophit reddened. "Well, it's not so much what I want, as what the rest of the show wants. See, Mongoose here—"

"My name isn't Mongoose!" the girl spat. "It's Wist!"

"Mongoose stole our payroll," Ophit continued smoothly. "Of course, I had no idea you were working with her..." He tried a smile.

Rhode glanced from him to the girl—what was her name? She'd just said it; his memory was slowing, like the rest of him—and then to Egaron's stall. Egaron hadn't noticed him, though he might if this went on.

Rhode laid his hand on the girl's shoulder in the grip Skald Six-Bladed had taught him, the one that didn't hurt but promised pain. "Give me the money."

Not-Mongoose glared up at him, black hair falling across her eyes. He could see her think about lying, but instead she swore and produced a thick packet from under her tunic.

"Thank you," Rhode said, taking the packet. Something skittered on the back of his neck as he turned away, and he heard the girl gasp. He looked to see her backing away, a broken knife dangling from her hand. "Stop that."

Ophit chuckled. "Mongoose, you're a fool. Did you think the blades we broke on his belly every show were fakes? Why do you think we billed him as the Human Stone?"

"Name's not Mongoose," she mumbled, still staring at the shattered blade.

Rhode unrolled the packet. "These are for me," he said, taking out three gold coins, then three more. "These are for her."

"The little fool's not worth half that," Ophit sneered.

Rhode looked at him, and the sneer wilted. He took another three gold from the packet and tossed the rest to Ophit. "These are for the end of her apprenticeship."

Ophit looked like he might argue, but Rhode turned, so that the broken bits of knife caught in his cloak sparkled. "Er. Thanks, Block. Be seeing you."

The girl was still glaring, though shaken, when he turned back to her. She was alert, he remembered, and smart, and he could use some help for part of the way. He tossed her six gold coins, then held up the last three. "I'm hiring you."

"For what?"

He handed her one of his coins. "Go buy three lanterns. Good ones. And—" he paused a moment to calculate, "—two of the red jars of oil, with the blue stamp."

She looked at the coin in her hand. "If you're hiring me for your doxy," she said in a rush, "I won't do it. I had enough of that in the sideshow, and I'm not going back."

"I'm not." He waited until she looked up at him. "I'm hiring you to keep me awake."

She gave him a baffled look, but nodded anyway. Once she was gone, he turned his glacial gaze to Egaron's stall. Egaron had gone inside, probably to bilk another mourner.

Rhode's father would have torn down the stall, trampled the banner underfoot, and proclaimed Egaron exile from the bonefields, excommunicated for selling what should be free to all. Rhode only gazed at the skull-mask and thought of his sister and the shrine.

Had it just been Ranulph's influence that brought the whole thing down? Ranulph hadn't had many scruples, it was true, but a younger Rhode hadn't thought him capable of murder. Could the shrine really have been so much of a prize? What sort of fight would Linnet have put up in his absence?

The girl was back for a full five minutes before he noticed her. "I got you the lanterns," she said sullenly.

"Thanks," he said, inspecting what she'd brought him. Two were plain bronze and glass. The third was pierced iron, wrought so that the wick and oil floated in the middle of the lantern and would shine out of the bottom as well as the sides. On one side of the lantern was a crudely hammered skull. He held it up so that iron mask and painted mask faced each other.

"Now what?" Not-Mongoose said. "Got any more shopping?"

"No." He wrenched the symbol of Stheutes off and tossed it onto the boards of Egaron's stall. Let him find it and think it an omen. "Come on."

She followed, but kept talking. It seemed to be a permanent feature.

"What was that place? You kept staring at it, and you didn't even notice when I poked you. What do they sell there, statues?"

"He is selling use of the bonefields," he said.

"Oh. You mean like buying a graveyard plot?"

"No." He quickened his pace. "The graveyards—the kind you have in the cities—are poor imitations of the bonefields. You city folk play at planting your dead, and raise a stone above them... If a skeleton is planted in the bonefields, the earth will devour it and return in its place an unbreakable statue of the person, bone made stone."

The girl was silent a moment. "You know," she said finally, "I still can't tell when you're telling the truth and when you're deliberately confusing me."

"Yes." Most city folk preferred to scoff at the bonefields, even if they bothered to learn about them. The first time he'd seen a graveyard, a week after losing his hand, he'd thought someone had planted the bones wrong. So he'd gone in with a chisel to fix them. That had earned him a night in the lockup, which was where he'd met Skald Six-Bladed, who'd eventually introduced him to Bronze Michel. Bronze Michel had some assassins after him, and it had amused him to have a one-handed bodyguard to thwart them, even if said guard was a little naïve about the city.

He struck the stump of his right hand against his thigh. In those days he'd worn a boiled leather cap over that stump, set with three short blades. It had always baffled the assassins to be confronted by a one-handed man using two weapons.

It had been good work. Certainly it was good for a former devotee of Stheutes used only to tending the bonefields. Rhode had even enjoyed the unfamiliarity of it; only his strength and skill mattered, not what he'd

learned, not who worked the fields. Not who was firstborn, and therefore would be priest after their father.

He glanced back at the girl, realized he was comparing her to Linnet, and looked away again.



The sun's glow had almost disappeared before they stopped, and then they paused only to fill the lanterns. "You walk behind me," he said, "and keep the light on my back. I'll carry this one up front."

"That'll tell any bandits we're here," the girl said.

He glanced at her. "You're worried about them?"

It was almost a joke, unusual for him, and it startled her into smiling. She had a nice smile, he thought. It was too bad they hadn't met earlier. Not that it would have changed things.

"When were you planning on stopping?" she asked.

"We're not." He tapped the side of his lantern and adjusted its wick.

The girl gave him a skeptical look. "We didn't stop last night either. You're not tired?"

"No." Weariness was only another burden among many.

"Ah. Then I'm not either."

He got to his feet and winced as a thin line of pain twined up his ankle. "One moment. I'll catch up."

In the light of the bonefields lantern, it looked as bad as it felt: a faint smudge of white under the hard flesh of his leg, just where the ankle-bone pressed against the skin. He didn't have much time left.

He turned down the cuff of his trouser and stood back up, muscles grinding like millstones. The girl looked at him askance. "What's the matter, Block?"

"Don't call me Block." The thought knocked up against an associated one. "Your name's not Mongoose."

"Very good, Block." She tried for sarcasm, but the nervousness in her voice undercut it. "It's Wist. That's the sixth time in two days."

"Ah. Wist." He raised his lantern, checked the wick, and started down the road.

"Why do we even need these things? There's a full moon, the road's pretty clear—"

"Light slows it," he said without thinking. "Sunlight's best, but lamplight works... 'Dig by day, don't walk by night,' that was the proverb... There's no darker place than under the ground."

He glanced back after a moment's silence to see a look of fascinated horror on her face. It made her look younger, closer to her real age. "Keep walking," he said.

"You're sick, aren't you, Block?"

He didn't answer. Sick wasn't the word for it.

"Will I get sick now?"

"No." He knew that much. "Keep the light on me."

The road was flat and monotonous, enough that it was easy to doze off even in full sun. However, there were roots and ruts that waited to trip up sleepwalkers, and one of these caught the girl sometime after moonset. Rhode felt the chill of the light off his back before he heard the clatter and curse. When he turned, she was crumpled on the road where she'd fallen, lanterns to either side.

He gazed at her for a long moment, then flexed the fingers of his left hand. They still moved, but not well. He had time for a delay; not time for sleep.

It took a few minutes' work to attach one of the lanterns to his belt, so that it shone its inadequate light over one side of him. By that time the girl was almost on her feet again. Against her protests, he picked her up and balanced the bonefields lantern on her chest, tucked so it wouldn't scorch her, and kept walking.

The girl complained, but not enough to stay awake. He gazed down at her when he could spare his attention from the road. There were scars in her hairline that he hadn't seen before, scars like the kind Skald Six-Bladed's wire tools left. For a moment he was sorry he hadn't killed Ophit, but there was no point in it. No point in liking her now—perhaps if he'd been younger. If he hadn't worked under Bronze Michel so long. If the frost beneath his skin had stayed away.

At first he'd thought it was just the price to pay for his ageless face and unyielding strength. Then he'd remembered his hand, how he'd had to cut a second time on seeing the white smears rising in his flesh, and he'd gone to look for help.

He remembered countless hours in the circles of the city's wizards while they consulted each other and argued and tested him with spell after spell. He gave them so much blood he thought he'd turn translucent, and one even asked for a toe-bone. In the end, all they could tell him

was that it was a fascinating malady, worthy of years of speculation and study, that it had never happened before, and that it was irreversible.

Harsh words for a god's bounty.

He'd tried to get a time estimate from them and failed. He'd pressured them (this was when he still wore the blades) and learned that they really had no idea how much time he had. One wizard, a weedy and twitchy type, had offered a few speculations to make up for his lack of knowledge. Before the end, the wizard told him, his entire being, including his thoughts, would slow as he petrified from the ground up. The last image he saw would remain in his stone eyes for a very long time. Maybe for eternity.

That was when he'd begun to plan. And those plans had led him to travel with the sideshow and meet this parcel of thievery.

He could tell himself he was going back for Linnet, who must have been cast out once Ranulph had his hands on the bonefields. But she'd always been strange to him, too avid in her studies of the bonefields in a way that had chilled him. Memories of coming upon her in the fields while she examined the bones rose to the surface of his mind and were pushed down again. There had been something cold about her, ever since they were children.

He wasn't going back to claim the fields. He no longer had any tie there.

He wasn't angry that Ranulph had tried to kill him. He'd been so once, but time had scoured it away. But a murder wasn't everything.

No, he was going back for what else had been done to him. For his burial in the bonefields. For the white patches on his chest, the hardening of his skin. For the dreams in which he tasted sour earth, clawed at the dirt filling his eyes—and just before waking, he would always have his hand

back, and he would always feel the slow prickle as the earth—Stheutes's bounty—began to devour him.

For that, he wanted revenge. He shifted the girl's weight and kept walking.



When the sun rose, he was halfway up a hill, still carrying the girl. He hadn't even fallen, only stopped in his tracks like a weary ox.

The girl woke before him, and it was her gasp that brought him out of sleep. She stared up at him. "Block, what's wrong with you?"

He set her down and touched the nerveless patch on his neck, where the light hadn't reached. "A lot of things." He unhitched the last lantern, pinched out the guttering wick, and handed it to her with the last two coins. "Go. I don't need you anymore."

"That's a lie. I was with Ophit longer than you, Block; I know lying."

He didn't answer, just walked on. When he heard her light footsteps behind him, he paused. "Rhode," he said. "My name is Rhode. Remember it if you're coming. If anyone says it, tell me."

"I will," she said, but her voice quavered.

The first townsfolk recognized him as he passed the common fields. Children watching after their family's one cow glanced up and away incuriously, but the old women with them stared in disbelief. "They're talking about you, Block," said the girl. "I mean Rhode."

"I hear." He tried to remember her name again and only came up with Polecat or Ferret, neither of which could be right. "Keep walking."

They walked on, drawing near to the bonefields, and so he was prepared for her yelp and stumble—though not for how she treaded on his feet in regaining her balance. “What the hell is that?”

He raised his eyes to the fields, unnaturally bright green speckled with white, like a sheep pasture seen from far away. She was quick; she’d figure it out. And she did, shivering and forking her fingers at the fragments poking through the turf. “Rhode, I know they’re supposed to be sacred, but they give me the cold shivers.”

“Yes.” He remembered walking among those statues, the white faces and hands reaching for the sky. Remembered hours spent with his father, learning a history and a duty believed sacred. How to care for the bone and stone, how to survive if he had to be in the fields after sundown, how to nurture the changing statues. All the rites of Stheutes, of memory, the same rites Ranulph now used to wring money from weeping families.

And yet there was always the sour taste of earth and the prickling in his right hand.

“There’s nothing sacred about them,” he said, harsher than he’d meant to. “Nothing.”

The home he’d grown up in was now much bigger and prettier, with a second story built on. The shrine of Stheutes had been repaired a little, but not nearly as much as the house. New gilding limned the door, but the shrine’s front pillars sagged and leaned toward each other.

“Wait here,” he told the girl—what was her name? Thist? She nodded, uncharacteristically quiet.

As Rhode stepped over the boundary between house and shrine, the door opened, and Ranulph emerged, whistling, with a bundle of sticks

under one arm. The merry tune died with a hiss, and Ranulph paled to the color of the statues. "Rhode?"

"Yes." Rhode didn't stop—if he stopped moving now, he'd never start again. "You tried to kill me."

Ranulph blinked, then glanced at the shrine and seemed to come to a decision. "Yes. Yes, I did—Rhode, I thought you were dead—"

"I hope so." He took another step—Ranulph hadn't even tried to flee—and laid his hand on Ranulph's shoulder, like a friend offering comfort. "Do you know what happens to a living body in the bonefields, Ranulph? A body under the ground, away from the light? It isn't just bone that changes down there. Stheutes will take flesh too."

As if summoned by his speech, daggers of cold sank into his feet and worked their way up. White patches blossomed over his still-hidden skin; soon they would be visible. Ranulph backed away, but too late; he'd given himself no room, and Rhode was too close.

Rhode flexed his fingers, bones audibly creaking, and laced them around Ranulph's throat. Ranulph squeaked, but Rhode's grasp was set. This is what I wanted to see, he thought, what I wanted fixed in my eyes as I die. "Do you know what happens?" he repeated.

"I do," a woman's voice said behind him. Not the girl's.

He forced his muscles to turn as stone crept through his veins. The girl was almost within arm's reach, at the edge of the garden, and behind her stood a woman he would have known no matter how many lines time wrote on her face. Linnet. His sister.

She wore the gray surcoat of Stheutes's anointed—their father's surcoat—but the horn-handled knife she held to the girl's throat was no tool of the priesthood. "I've had time to wonder, and time to find out.

We found your hand, but never the rest of you—I'd wondered how far you could go with the bonefields in you, but I'd never have guessed you could go twenty years." She smiled, and it was the same cold smile, stripped of any innocence. "Now we can place your statue beside Father's."

"Linnet—"

She didn't hear him. "Now let go of my husband, or I cut your doxy. And believe me, I'll bury her still breathing if he comes to harm."

He drew breath—he'd almost forgotten to breathe—and released Ranlph, who sank to his knees. "Linnet—you—"

He lurched backward blindly, twisting to reach her. But the stone had worked its way too far into him, and his bones gave first. Something snapped as his knees ground themselves to splinters. He roared and fell as far as the stone would let him, crumpled over his petrifying limbs.

Linnet shook her head. "You're still a fool, Rhode."

The girl—Twisp? Quis?—snarled and wrenched his sister's arm away. "Don't you call him that! Block and me are no fools!"

She twisted out of Linnet's grasp in a move that was definitely part of the sideshow, and her foot caught the back of Linnet's knee.

Off-balance, Linnet stumbled and fell. He dragged his leaden arms to catch her, expending his last moments of mobility. She shrieked as he grabbed her by the wrist, and the knife tumbled to the earth. White blooms rose to the surface of his skin and spread, his fingers a shackle that could not be undone now even if he had wanted to let go. "The stone of Stheutes is unbreakable," he murmured, just loud enough for her to hear. "You can get away from me, Linnet, but you'll have to lose what I lost."

She realized what he meant, and her screams grew shrill. Craven, he thought; compared to his fate, her punishment was much lighter.

“Rhode!” Wist cried.

The muscles of his neck creaked and protested, but he forced them to move till he could see her. Wist knelt in front of the garden, a stricken look on her face. He tried to smile, to reassure her, but the stone reached his face as his lips formed the barest curve. Then sight froze forever, leaving him the image of her trying to smile back.

It was, the last spark in his mind told him, not such a bad vision to have for eternity.





The House of Ill Waters

R.B. Lemberg

Turn back

from these precipices,
where the wind strikes its wind harp with jagged fingers of rock and bone.
Sure, you died, but that's not the rare
jewel you think it is. You don't get
to call me as if you own me, as if you know me,
to ask for anything from me.

You seek the forgotten powers, but I myself
erased your buzz-crawling world from my memory. I sought
something more melodious:
the last cry of a bird
in the crushing hand of the wind, its heart
singing with all the languages of birds,
before I swallowed it.

I am the wind that ends winds, deity of the forgotten,
guardian of the domain I locked from you, so now you must
go somewhere else. Go. Leave.

No, I don't care. When I cared
I rode the serpent of the wind
whose tongue hissed between clouds; I asked
your kin to aid me, I asked your kin
at least to stop cutting: the trees, the earth, each other,
the essence of time itself, stop tearing ragged

the wounds I rushed to stitch whole, but you people kept at it.

I threw away my mending needle,
my thread, my healer's knife. I forged
weapons, and from the devoured
heart of the heartbird, I learned
the language of all deaths, and out of every crevice
called the ghost birds to me: my ancestry, my armor, the poetry
of all the smelted keys to my domain –
shards striking obsidian, and the piped wail
of marrowless bone.

Yes, I did once
open the door
that no longer exists
to admit human poets. What
have you done for me lately?

I was young once, and softer.
Know this: aeons ago,
beyond these mountains a great nothingness
exhaled the translucence of the sky. Between clouds,
the child winds frolicked, yet unabandoned
by parent storms: and your people

sang the song of precipices, sang
without despair or subterfuge; they made
my mending thread from their marrow, not shying
away from deathwork, the gutwork, the bloodwork
with which poetry is inked –
my door was wide open then.

You think me evil, because
I despaired of your kind?
When will you do something? Instead of you

and yours, my House of Ill Waters
traverses the sky now, roiling its wrath:

your melted snow, your desiccated seas
that rose as vapor and rebelled; my ghost birds
interpret the language of ill waters
hiss by hiss and syllable by storm's syllable, so I can speak it too,
spit your people out of the story.

I am the wind that stills itself,
the forester of all felled trees, the keeper
of the library of ghost birds, I am
the rememberer of your promises, all broken,
none mended. What will you do here if I admit you?
No.

But if you would
"do anything," then drink
every move of this mountain as if it was water,
breathe the wailed harmony of the wind,
then dare to be sent back, to wake
in your torn world again, to the pain, to the confusion,
the imperfect recovery, the fear, wake
to everything your people wrought,
wake to aloneness, to the weight and wreck
of generations. It's not your fault, you cry, but your inheritance
demands more than your indifference:

these tree stumps, this suffocation, this lamentation
of the wind that was once sea, the perished birds, the grasses
that poke stubbornly from the earth, still hoping for you –

and for their sake, you must
become again, and choose
this pain, if you want to carry me.

So reach to that stilled syllabary, pull it out of you feather by feather, shriek
that melody you would not touch, sing it better
than ghost birds, scream that song because I am
the protector of precipices, the one who would ride your dreams,
the one who forever descends
from the mountain,
never reaching the ground below.

I will promise you nothing until your heart
gapes wider than death's gate, until you let
the House of Ill Waters into your veins, until the storm
becomes your voice and swallows it, until you roar
my mending thread back into your torn world, until
you *do*
the work
with no hope of returning here,
with no recompense but this labor:
ill waters, reborn and cresting to mend:

or – forget it. Leave.

Choose well.





ASK A NECROMANCER

Amanda Downum

Decay Always Wins

When I started my Mortuary Science program in 2019, I immediately wanted to talk about all the amazing things I was learning. For reasons I will never understand, however, not everyone wants to hear about how cool dead bodies are. I first envisioned *Ask a Necromancer* as a Q and A to pitch to my local SFF convention, as a resource for other writers, or anyone who was curious about death as a process or an industry. Then COVID happened, and that con didn't. I'm still just as excited to talk about death, though.



Our first question comes from Austin on Twitter: *"Given that decedents' mouths are sewn shut in advance of viewings, how concerned do I really need to be about being bitten if I'm attacked by a zombie?"*

Methods vary, but generally speaking when we close mouths we either wire or suture. Wires are deployed with a terrifying device called a needle injector. (Don't look this up if you have dental nightmares; trust me.) They require the deceased to have solid bone in their mandible and maxilla, or else they pop right back out again. Jostling the decedent's head while moving or dressing can unseat the wire, if you're not careful. Depending on how well the wires were anchored, they might slow a zombie down for a few minutes, but not for long.

If a suture is used, it goes through the cartilage in the septum and either under the muscle at the root of the tongue, or around the mandible. A mandibular suture is the sturdiest, and might give a zombie pause. The cartilage is the weak spot in this equation—I don't know how much pressure it takes to tear through that, but I suspect a determined zombie would manage. The more they decay, the easier it will be.

This all assumes mindless undead; more cogent reanimated corpses could simply untwist the wires or untie the sutures. And of course, not everyone is viewed before burial.

The short answer is: Mouth closure will only buy you a little time. Use it wisely.



Next, Liza asks: *"Do some bodies 'keep' better than others postmortem? If so, why?"*

Absolutely, yes. Many factors, extrinsic and intrinsic, contribute to post-mortem state: environment, time before refrigeration, age, illness, etc. Some people sit in the cooler unembalmed for a week and look better than I do today. Some people come in with discoloration and skin slip—desquamation—hours after death.

The embalmer's nightmare when it comes to bodies going bad is a charming little pathogen called *Clostridium perfringens*, aka tissue gas. Tissue gas causes rapid discoloration (usually blue-green "roadmapping" as it spreads), distension, and skin slip. It has a very distinctive smell, and you'll hear and feel a crackling sensation when you poke infected areas. Regular embalming fluid doesn't kill it, and if instruments aren't properly disinfected, it will spread from corpse to corpse. You do not want a needle stick while dealing with tissue gas.

A less nasty but even more common cause of desquamation is edema, or abnormal amounts of intra- or intercellular fluid. Water retention—it happens to most of us at some point during life. Lots of things contribute to edema, including extended bed rest and many medical treatments. I see it frequently in people who were hospitalized for long periods. The distension it causes contributes to skin slip, and once the skin tears, all that fluid leaks out. And leaks. And leaks. The extra fluid inside the body cavities also wants to leak—mostly out of the mouth, nose, and eyes of our unlucky corpse.

If death were not indignity enough, I find it especially rude to swell someone up like Thunder in *Big Trouble in Little China*, and then leave them prone to drooling unmentionable fluids while we try to dress and casket them.

Autopsies can be better or worse when it comes to preservation. A body that sits at the ME for weeks before coming to us may not be in great shape, especially if the person wasn't found immediately after they died. If someone dies quickly, though, and is released promptly, they may turn out well. (I don't encourage "live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse" as a lifestyle, but when it comes to embalming, it sometimes works.)

The beauty of the autopsy (we call them posts, short for postmortem examination) is that the internal organs are removed during the examination, and afterwards sequestered. The bacteria in the intestines can't travel throughout the body encouraging decomposition, and we aren't left with hidden pockets of blood or other bodily fluids hanging around waiting to start trouble. The worst complication is when the medical examiner severs the facial arteries while removing the tongue. This may cause an embalmer to curse, weep, or pray while trying to get embalming fluid into someone's face.

I'm told (and experience bears this out) that dieners try to always leave one carotid long so the mortician has something to work with. That's a lovely sentiment, but with a cranial autopsy, the Circle of Willis—the

anastomosis of cerebral arteries—is severed, and we have to inject up both carotids to get fluid to the entire face.



And last, Laura wants to know “...how long bodies are supposed to last. ...just long enough for the wake? In hopes that they’ll still look great if exhumed a year later?”

The best answer is: As long as they need to. Mostly, we want them to look good until their services are complete. Embalming is only temporary; decay always wins. Some bodies may indeed be recognizable if exhumed quickly enough, but at that point it’s out of our hands. If someone is going to be viewed and buried or cremated within the week, we may use a less concentrated solution. (This is never an excuse to be sloppy, but if you know that post with the severed facial arteries is going out in a day or two you might stress a bit less.)

Sometimes we know services will be delayed weeks or more, or the person will be shipped out of state or overseas, and so we use a higher index of embalming fluid and make sure it gets in all the nooks and crannies. One of my instructors told us about someone she embalmed who took years to finally travel home for services. Such things are possible with care, luck, and refrigeration.

Ideally, thorough arterial injection would leave someone viewable for weeks or longer. Extra steps may include dressing someone in Unionalls (a plastic onesie that goes underneath their clothes to contain leakage—imagine putting a onesie on an adult-sized toddler who’s just discovered passive resistance), possibly with the addition of paraformaldehyde powder.



I owe a special thanks this issue to the mysterious Lord and Lady Blackwell for their invaluable insight into autopsies.

If you have questions for the necromancer, draw a circle, prepare the blue fire...or email **necromancer@thedeadlands.com**, or ask **@stillsotranger** on Twitter. From green burial to death in the time of capitalism, every month we'll explore fragments of knowledge of the Great Unknown.





AUTHOR BIOS



Greer Gilman's mythic fantasies are *Cloud & Ashes: Three Winter's Tales* and *Moonwise*. Her metaphysical mysteries set in Ben Jonson's London are *Cry Murder! In a Small Voice* and *Exit, Pursued by a Bear*. She has written on the languages of the fantastic, on archetypes of girls in fantasy, and on Sylvia Townsend Warner. Among them, her works have won the Tiptree (Otherwise), World Fantasy, Shirley Jackson, and Crawford awards. She likes to say she does everything James Joyce ever did, only backward and in high heels.



G. V. Anderson's short stories have won a World Fantasy Award, a British Fantasy Award, and been nominated for a Nebula. Her work can be found in *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed* and Tor.com, as well as anthologies such as *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror*. She lives and works in Dorset, UK, and is currently writing her first novel.



Marissa Lingen is still recovering from her physics education. She writes speculative fiction, poetry, and essays, mostly in her home in the Minneapolis suburbs even before all of this. She likes Moomins and tisanes immoderately and has read more sagas than a person really should.



Kate Lechler's (she/they) work has appeared in *Fireside Fiction*, *Podcastle*, and *Shimmer*, among other places. They teach British literature at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Miss., where they live with their dog, Charlie, collect skulls, and write about the apocalypse.



Two-time World Fantasy Award finalist **Mike Allen** edits and publishes the Mythic Delirium Books imprint. His short stories have been gathered in three collections: his Shirley Jackson Award-nominated debut *Unseaming*; *The Spider Tapestries*; and *Aftermath of an Industrial Accident*. His novella "The Comforter," a sequel to his Nebula Award-nominated horror story "The Button Bin," appeared in an anthology of four dark long-form tales, *A Sinister Quartet*. Mike is also a three-time winner of the Rhysling Award for poetry. You can follow Mike's exploits as a writer at descentintolight.com, as an editor at mythicdelirium.com, and all at once on Twitter at [@mythicdelirium](https://twitter.com/mythicdelirium).



Margaret Ronald is the author of *Spiral Hunt*, *Wild Hunt*, and *Soul Hunt*, as well as numerous short stories. Originally from small-town Indiana, she now lives outside Boston.



R.B. Lemberg is a queer, bigender immigrant from Eastern Europe to the US. R.B.'s novella *The Four Profound Weaves* (Tachyon, 2020) is a finalist for the Nebula, Ignyte, and Locus awards. R.B.'s novel *The Unbalancing* is forthcoming from Tachyon in 2022, and their poetry memoir *Everything Thaws* will be published by Ben Yehuda Press, also in 2022. You can find R.B. on Twitter at @rb_lemberg, on Patreon at <http://patreon.com/rblemberg>, and at their website rblemberg.net.



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Deadlands



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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 shipwrecky. 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

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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 @stillsotrane.



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.

Front Cover: Grim Fields, by Jenna Barton.

"Bonefields" by Margaret Ronald originally appeared in Ideomancer, 2005.

The Deadlands is distributed monthly by Sean Markey, HC 64 Box 2406 Castle Valley UT 84532.

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