

Ando | Arroyo | DiGirolamo | Gill
Grodzins | Harrow | Madden | Yong



THE
DEADLANDS

ISSUE #9 JANUARY 2022

a journal of ends & beginnings

cover art by Skulltura



CONTENTS

Bayú – <i>Michael Baez Arroyo</i> <i>Fiction</i>	3
Grievances of a Young Midwife – <i>Lacey Yong</i> <i>Poetry</i>	7
The Mummies of Beechey Island – <i>Katie Gill</i> <i>Non-fiction</i>	10
The Long Way Up – <i>Alix E. Harrow</i> <i>Fiction</i>	19
The Astronomer – <i>Lily Grodzins</i> <i>Poetry</i>	37
Pale Horsepower – <i>Cara Masten DiGirolamo</i> <i>Fiction</i>	38
The bone moon above Kōdaiji: A Quartet – <i>Ryu Ando</i> <i>Poetry</i>	42
Ask a Necromancer – <i>Amanda Downum</i> <i>Non-fiction</i>	45
“Death Will You Play With Me?” – <i>Phil Madden</i> <i>Poetry</i>	49
Author Bios	51
Staff Bios	54
Content Notes	57



BAYÚ

Michael Baez Arroyo | Fiction

Nothing says Puerto Rican funeral more than milky coffee, hot chocolate, bread, cheese, and stale pastries. Francisco Oller perfectly captured a snapshot of Puerto Rico in *El Velorio*, but Oller never painted the afterlife. He'd settled on the living and their celebration. Partying in La Placita captured the essence of life in my island, except here among the black clothes and the bitter coffee, there's only death.

My funeral lacks Oller's celebration: people sob, my skin's yellow, and neither heaven nor hell welcome me despite repentance. My conditioned morality has no punishment. Goodness has amounted to nothing but another word in the dictionary. Inquiries won't give me a second chance at life, or reanimate me for that matter. All that remains are memories, regret, and the monstrosity before me.

It arrived as I did, but in place of a face there was a vejigante mask. Reminiscent of a stag, it stares at me. Enormous paws scrape the red carpet as it waits for me at the edge of the open casket. It stinks of dread and pitorro. Its beady eyes drag me away from my pettiness. Its silence mocks me. The beast speaks without wavering lips. They tell stories of Agüeybaná, of the colonists, of the years forgotten among the petroglyphs. Words filter into my mind like water from a ruptured dam, enlightening me. The memories aren't my own, but those beady eyes tell me otherwise. I can feel them in my blood—in the land I inhabited for all my life.

Yearning for an escape, my eyes meet my portrait. Glistening gazes mimic each other. I remember the day they took that picture: my discomfort. Mom's nagging was excessive. She'd committed blasphemy to get my lips to part. I never understood why God wanted me to smile. What a wonderful birthday it was! My folks gave plenty of excuses that day: too expensive, too distracting, too whatever. Spoiled had nothing to do with it. I follow the commandments, I treat people well, why couldn't I have what I wanted? At least, I like to think I know what I want—knew, anyway. My coffin is just another example of my folks' pettiness.

The coffin my folks have chosen for me splinters under my weight. All the money in their joint bank account, and they couldn't pick a better one? My flesh would rot in the ground, and the wood would cave in under the dirt.

The stag's horns grace my back; it's too close now. Each exhalation is history. No words have left its mouth. I wonder why it even has one.

Weeping escalates, and mother and father are snatched to the side to find comfort. My heart shatters—the same one that stopped beating a couple of days ago. My pride withers away among memories of my own tears—in silence, in turmoil, in worry, in desperation. Comfort was missing when I needed it. And now, among the perishables, like the food after Hurricane Maria, they all cared. How dare they take my moment away?

Swatting its horns, I turn to the stag. Robust thighs covered in emerald shrubbery catch my eyes. My nostrils are overpowered by sofrito and El Yunque, beach and sand, wind and sun. Despite horns sprouting from its face, it doesn't frighten me now. Its familiar masks littered throughout Ponce and San Juan make me feel at home. However, the paper-mâché, the glue, the paint, and the humans are all missing. History clings to the fur and the rigor mortis in its skin—it's weirdly comforting. My hand reaches out to the beast in hopes of finding the creases of the mask. There are none. Unlike the Fiestas de las Calles San Sebastian,

this one doesn't come off. It's like skin, like bone, like what I fear more than anything—reality.

The beast nudges against my fingers.

Angels sent their ugly cousin to guide me to the afterlife. Just my luck. Christianity had abandoned me. Hadn't I been a good servant? One look at charcoal eyes, and I knew the Europeans had nothing to do with it. This was ours all along. I hear the coquis, gargoyles, and chupacabras whispering.

No, I refuse to leave! My hands palpitate. Achiote stains my fingertips, and the yellow fades away despite my resistance. The single thought of crawling back into my skin clutters my mind. If only I could breathe life back into the stiff old corpse in the coffin. The auburn only expands, enveloping me.

Its beady eyes blink, enraged. Shining stars and imploding galaxies hide among those marbles. I see their glow—there's more to it. There's the shimmer of light and death. There's a tint of green and blue.

"It'll stop only if you agree." Staff in hand, an old man in black and white sits on the front row. I'm amazed I hadn't noticed him—the wizard-looking motherfucker stands out like a pink guava on a midsummer's day. "You don't want to stay behind."

"I'd have to say I do." Cousins I haven't seen in years march into the room. They'd abandoned the island ages ago among the deterioration. One last glimpse at me before they went along with their lives. Family pictures would be hidden forever. "Anyone would."

The duality in the man follows him as he approaches. Warmth and chills exude out of him. Pale bones are visible under the cloth. I can smell the cilantro and the habichuelas.

“Everyone has patatús.” Withered old lips smacked together. “How you deal with them is where potential lies. Come with us to Coaybay and leave the past behind. Otherwise, Opiyelguobiran will drag you if he must.”

The beast has a name. Impossible to pronounce, but a name, nonetheless. Only then do I notice the sharpness of the horns. Those would impale me and drag me to the unknown. Complying doesn’t sound so bad under the threat of a stabbing. An idea I might be able to get behind. Red flees from my skin as I comply.

I stroll down the path. Friends and family on either side: crosses and verses, coffee and bread, cheering and weeping. Did I ever know them? The picture near the coffin mocks me for the last time. The world vanishes behind me as I exit.

Opiyelguobiran leads the way beside the old man. That’s when I see it: the island, the people, my culture, my family. Long live the Caribbean!

“Who are you?” I bask in the merengue, the piña colada, and the pig roasting over a bonfire.

“That’s irrelevant.” The old man pets Opiyelguobiran. “You’re home.”

Heaven loses its appeal among the bayú. I let my legs and my hips do the talking. Where else would I find a slice of Puerto Rico?





GRIEVANCES OF A YOUNG MIDWIFE

Lacey Yong | Poetry

I did not hunger

for spawn of my own. Had I not seen enough women with regrets, deep as the furrows they carved with their feet? Groaning beside the ox while their men held the whip, bellies bursting beneath sweat-stained tunics as they labored to feed children that wriggled like newly hatched eels in the rice paddies. No. I belonged to my hut, and the grind of my pestle keeping time with the crickets in the jade mountains. My education was the rough bark that expels a child from its mother; my nighttime companion was the sweet reed scent of lu gen. Tending to herbs, I was content to leave my womb undisturbed like virgin earth.

Now I want

him, pale and refined as the crisp Western collar circling his neck. The firstborn son of wealthy farmers, returned to the village with a head full of barbarous medicine. In the confines of his sister's birthing chamber, our hands touched, seeking the curve of the infant's skull beneath her taut skin. On a table, the twin metal snakes of his instrument – a stethoscope, he called it – entwined around my ceramic cup of herbs. Together, we pushed and rolled the infant so its feet would not cross into Diyu, the earth prison where a soul's time is measured according to the gravity of its sins. Afterwards, he pressed an embroidered coverlet

in my arms. Payment, and a token of my gratitude, he said. In the cloud-covered night, we scented the coverlet with our bodies, and I learned to read the calligraphy of his limbs.

And I pray,

in the dark womb of the temple: let me marry him, and if not, let me have his child. But agarwood smoke chokes me, and the only thing that grows are the whispers of the women. *She has bewitched my son – he no longer feeds me the smooth cheek of the fish from his rice bowl,* his mother says. Her voice hisses in the chamber like an unsheathing sword. *Look at her bold eyes, her unbroken spine. She will refuse to bear the household work like a slave,* says Madam Zhu. I delivered three of her babies. *She ought to know better – she is only a poor orphan, after all,* says Madam Fan, who sold her daughter for a bag of gold. *A woman like that is capable of all sorts of wickedness,* says his mother, and her words constrict around my throat, curling tighter than the incense coils hanging from the roof.

Yet I yearn

to laugh in their faces. Don't they know my body has betrayed me? Despite my knowledge, no herbs can make me fertile; no child will disrupt the straight lines of their family branches. The villagers do not listen. They beat on my door as thunder ruptures the sky. Tearing through my hut, they cast my scales in the dirt and crunch the fragile skeletons of my herbs underfoot. Fingernails carve small moons into my arms. In the shadow of the mountain, they haul me to a barrel suspended over a vat of boiling water. Steam the evil spirits out of her, his mother says. And he watches – oh, all he does is watch – as vapor scalds my skin and the screams tear themselves from my throat.

Look at what you've done,

I say. At the ghost gate, Ox-Head ushers me in with his trident, his horns gleaming in the firelight. In the caverns of Diyu, the wicked wail, their blood slick on the tree of knives, but I stamp my feet into the earth and raise my voice to the living. By driving me out, you have invited me in, and the time between reincarnations is long. Look to your children, who sicken. Save your husbands, who drown in their boats along the river, their flesh to be consumed by eels. Lift the lid of your clay pot. Watch the maggots wriggle in your rice.





THE MUMMIES OF BEECHEY ISLAND

Katie Gill | Non-fiction

I have a favorite mummy.

I realize this is a bit odd. Most people only know one or two mummies, certainly not an entire group and certainly not enough to pick a favorite. For those who know about multiple mummies, I doubt many of them have strong mummy opinions to have an outright favorite, but I do.

My memory isn't the best. It's always a guess whether I'll remember important events from my childhood, like birthdays or holidays. I'll remember an odd childhood memory, like the time a family friend gave us a coconut cake that was slowly eaten over the course of two weeks, as I'm the only one in my family who likes the taste and texture of coconut. But it takes me a moment to remember precisely where I was and what I was doing on September 11, 2001—and even then, I'm not sure if I remember it or if this is just my brain filling in details it knows must be there. I'm not one of those people who can call up the faces of their childhood friends. I have introduced people to each other, only to have them remind me that of course they know each other, we all went to this outdoor festival before, we had a great time—and said outdoor festival was less than a year ago. I routinely live my life by a planner, knowing full well that if I do not write down something, it might not exist.

Perhaps this is why I'm drawn to mummies in general. Their memory is preserved. You can look at a mummy and get a good idea of who the person was, what they held important, what they ate, what their life was like, and so on. Their memory lasts past their lifetime. I'm especially drawn to natural mummies. Natural mummies are mummies that were accidentally created, that did not go through the traditional mummification process one associates with them—there are rarely any sarcophagi or lavish tombs here. These are mummies that are preserved due to unnatural circumstances: dying in a salt pit, preservation due to subzero temperatures, preservation after being thrown into a bog. Granted, sometimes the preservation is less than perfect. Very few mummies retain the detail of the Tollund Man, a bog body so well-preserved that it looks fake, a mummy on whom you can count the wrinkles on his forehead. Most mummies are closer to Ötzi, a man who lived between 3400 and 3100 BC, whose body looks humanoid, but is shriveled, partly deteriorated, and an interesting amber color. They're definitely human! You can test for DNA, you can do an X-ray, you can examine what their last meal was. But they don't *look* entirely human. There's something a little off.

The bodies of the Beechey Island mummies, three mummies buried on a small island in the Arctic Circle, are some of the most well-preserved mummies I've ever seen pictures of. You can make out the smallest details of the mummies—hell, get close enough and you can probably see their pores. John Torrington has brown hair and delicate hands. John Hartnell is wearing a shirt with the letters "TH," which probably belonged to his younger brother and fellow sailor on the expedition, Thomas. William Braine is over six feet tall and has a dark beard. You half expect them to climb out of the grave, waking from their eternal slumber to look at the world around them.

The Beechey Island mummies are also my favorite mummies. Not simply because they're so well-preserved, but because of their story.

Torrington, Hartnell, and Braine were sailors in the Franklin Expedition, one of history's most famous nautical mysteries. Two ships, HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, left London in 1845, commanded by Sir John Franklin and staffed with a crew of 128 men. The goal of the Franklin Expedition was to find the Northwest Passage, a sea route through the Arctic, to shorten the distance of trade routes. The ships were last seen by whalers in Baffin Bay before vanishing for over a hundred years. In 2014, the wreck of HMS *Erebus* was found at the bottom of Wilmot and Crampton Bay in Kitikmeot Region, Nunavut, Canada. In 2016, the wreck of HMS *Terror* was found, appropriately enough, at the bottom of Terror Bay. But while the ships were found, another mystery remained. What happened to the men?

Ships and rescue expeditions were sent out to try and find any survivors and then, once it became obvious to all that there wouldn't be any survivors, to find any trace of what could have happened. Explorers searched the Arctic Circle, finding tragedy after tragedy. No living men were found, but quite a few dead men were. There were two skeletons, found in a boat, surrounded by abandoned equipment and paraphernalia, most of it useless for an overland walk on the ice. There was the skeleton of a man, clutching the papers of *Terror's* captain of the foretop, Henry Peglar. The man probably wasn't Peglar himself, as the kerchief around the man's neck identified him as a steward. There was the grave identified as that of Lieutenant John Irving because a medal Irving had won for mathematics was placed in the grave. There were stories from the local Inuit people, stories about men so gaunt they looked like the walking dead. There were bones with knife marks on them: tell-tale evidence of cannibalism. There was a trail of death and sorrow writ large across the lands of the Arctic.

Torrington, Hartnell, and Braine missed all that. The three men died before *Erebus* and *Terror* became lost in the ice. And as the search for the missing men captivated the world, there was one very easy-to-find place where *Erebus* and *Terror* made one of their first stops: Beechey Island, an island in the Arctic Circle, where the two ships wintered over during

their first winter. Early rescue missions found the detritus and garbage, empty tins that used to hold preserved food. They found the remnants of shelters. They found rock cairns, built up so that Franklin or one of the other officers, could store notes, supplies, or important documents. And they found three gravestones: one for Torrington, one for Hartnell, and one for Braine. The three men died early, spared from whatever suffering befell the rest of the men. As they died on solid land early in the expedition, their deaths could have a little dignity. Each man was buried in a coffin, sealed shut and filled with wood shavings, possibly to help offset the smell of death. Each man has a headstone, telling his full name, rank, age, and date of death, some with an accompanying Bible verse. And each man is well preserved, essentially mummified due to the below-ground burial in below-freezing temperatures.

From 1984 to 1986, anthropologist Owen Beattie and his team carefully exhumed each of the mummies. What they saw was remarkable. Each of the men was exceedingly well-preserved, with little decay. The temperatures and the rigor mortis had frozen their faces into rictus stares, as after death, the tissue of the lips dries out to show the teeth (this is the reason why for an open-casket funeral, embalmers often sew the lips of a corpse shut). Likewise, one of Hartnell's eyes was damaged, probably due to his unearthing and reburial in 1852 by a rescue expedition—Beattie suspects the *Isabel*, a privately funded schooner staffed by seventeen men and led by Commander Edward A. Inglefield. But the fact that the men's eyes were preserved well enough for Beattie and his team to notice the damage, to see the color of each eye, was astounding. They could see the color of the men's hair. They could know their height, their weight, what they were wearing.

A mobile laboratory was set up, allowing Beattie and his team to perform autopsies on Torrington, Hartnell, and Braine. Each of the men was carefully unfrozen as slowly as possible so as not to damage the men, their coffins, or the existing surroundings. Once the bodies were unfrozen enough to be lifted from the ground, they were taken to the mobile laboratory setup. The team carefully stripped the bodies and

performed the autopsies. Tissue and bone samples were taken from the bodies, allowing more rigorous tests to be performed outside of the Arctic environment. The men were then re-dressed and reburied, again with the utmost caution, care, and respect.

Petty Officer John Torrington was the first mummy unearthed. One of the first things Beattie noted was the man's coffin. It was impressively built, made out of mahogany, with white linen tape tacked to the front and sides of the coffin. There was a wrought iron plaque on the front of the coffin, hand-painted and securely nailed to the lid of the coffin. Torrington might not have been the first man to die on the expedition—after all, the information we have is scant at best—but his coffin shows the love and care the crew took with regards to his burial. Torrington's body was also light: the man weighed less than a hundred pounds at death. His cause of death was listed as pneumonia. Based on the softness of his hands, it appears the disease had ravaged him for a while, preventing him from attending to his job as the stoker on *Terror*.

There is an interesting fact about Able Seaman John Hartnell's body, something that Beattie only discovered when they prepared the corpse for autopsy: John Hartnell had been previously autopsied. There was a large Y incision in the man's chest, similar to the autopsy incisions Beattie and his team would make, believed to be the work of *Erebus*'s assistant surgeon, Harry Goodsir. The incision was also upside down: Goodsir made a mistake while preparing the man for autopsy. One can imagine Goodsir looking on from the afterlife, blushing in shame as Beattie not only finds his mistake, but publishes details of it in his book. One can also imagine poor twenty-five-year-old Goodsir alive, under the watchful eye of Stephen Stanley, *Erebus*'s chief surgeon or possibly even Franklin himself, panicking, tensing up, making that simple mistake during the autopsy. Was it simply nerves? While Goodsir was licensed by the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, his job prior to signing on to the expedition was conservator of the Surgeon's Hall Museum in Edinburgh. Was his mistake simply due to being a young surgeon, nervous as he operated on a body for the first time in years? Or was it because

he knew that outside of the surgeon's chamber, somewhere on the boat, possibly within earshot, John Hartnell's brother was there? What did Thomas Hartnell think as they took his brother under the knife? John Torrington, the first death, wasn't autopsied. Why John Hartnell? What could they have possibly hoped to gain? Who comforted Thomas at his loss, knowing that he had to spend at least another year on the ship where he died, sitting with his grief, before going home to inform family and friends of John's fate?

We don't know these things. We'll never know these things. But what we do know is that John Hartnell was buried in one of his brother's shirts. Sure, the TH could be someone else. There was another TH on the ship's expedition: Thomas Honey, *Terror's* carpenter. But the simplest answer is usually the right one. No matter what, I'm sure a little part of Thomas died the day that his big brother did. Maybe he metaphorically buried that dead part of himself as he literally buried his brother, surrounded by sawdust shavings in a coffin, wearing Thomas's shirt. It's due to this human element, these little touches of man interacting with his fellow man, that make John Hartnell my favorite of the three Franklin Expeditions mummies—though Torrington and Braine make a very close second.

Private William Braine was the last of the Beechey Island mummies exhumed. One of the first things Beattie and his team noticed was a chipped tooth at the front of Braine's mouth, a sign of a man who had lived a rough life. Poor Braine also seems to have suffered the most indignities during his death. Braine was buried hastily, with his arms and head not properly positioned in the coffin—indeed, Beattie's first thought was that Braine's left arm was amputated, instead of awkwardly bent behind his body. Braine also had lesions on his shoulders, chest, and groin, courtesy of rats that had chewed on the corpse before burial. Slight decomposition had also set in with Braine's body before the mummification took hold. Perhaps he had died while hauling a sledge? If he had died hours from the camp, decomposition would have had time to settle in before the body had frozen. Needless to say, his body

was treated with the same grace and care, though not really as much gentleness, as the other two sailors were, before being entombed back into his frozen grave.

I cannot overstate just how important it is that these bodies were found, because most of the crew's fate remains unknown. Sure, they found skeletons, but nobody could do DNA testing back in the 1840s. Their identity had to be guessed by context clues. The steward holding the papers of Henry Peglar? He might be *Terror's* gun room steward Thomas Armitage; Armitage and Peglar served together on prior ships. We don't know for a fact that John Irving is John Irving—we only have the contextual clues of his grave and its contents. Of course, these guesses might be wrong. In the 1870s, a set of remains were inspected and declared to be the remains of Henry Thomas Dundas Le Vesconte, second lieutenant on *Erebus*. Over a hundred years passed before a 2009 examination involving isotopic studies of the body's tooth enamel and forensic facial reconstruction revealed that those remains are most likely of Harry Goodsir, he who messed up Hartnell's autopsy. Some of the men have been identified through modern DNA testing: the remains of John Gregory, warrant officer on *Erebus*, were identified thanks to a match with a DNA sample obtained from Gregory's great-great-great grandson. But for those whose identity has been figured out, we still don't know how they died, or what happened in the last minutes of these men's lives. Was it quick? Did they suffer? At least we know what happened with the Beechey Island mummies. At least their families can have a sense of closure.

William Braine was thirty when he died. John Hartnell was twenty-five. John Torrington was twenty.

But there's one other body buried on Beechey Island.

When news started to spread that Franklin's ships were lost, dozens of exploratory missions were launched, though it soon became apparent that the missions were less "rescue" and more "fact-finding." Lady Frank-

lin, wife of Sir John Franklin, funded a large portion of these rescue ships herself, at first to find her husband but in the end, more to shame the Admiralty for what she deemed their inaction in providing aid to Franklin's men. One of these ships was the HMS *North Star*, and on that ship, another sailor died. There is a fourth gravestone on Beechey Island: Thomas Morgan, A.B., HMS *Investigator*, died aboard the HMS *North Star*, May 22, 1854. The 1854 voyage wasn't the *North Star's* first trip to the Arctic: in 1849, she made a trip to the Arctic, with the intent of bringing supplies to James Clark Ross, another explorer searching for traces of Franklin. Instead, she was trapped, moving at the mercy of the wind and the ice, and forced to winter over in a cove now known as North Star Bay. HMS *North Star* managed to survive that winter with minor casualties—only four men died, compared to Franklin's entire crew. She deposited her supplies in caches along the shore, went back to England... and then was almost immediately sent back to the Arctic, this time to help the HMS *Investigator*, a ship that had left England in 1848 and had been frozen in the ice for some time.

We don't have much information on Morgan himself. Hell, we don't even know if he's even there. As far as I know, no one's unearthed his grave and examined his body. After all, he's not part of a mystery. Robert McClure, the captain of HMS *Investigator*, survived the three years in the ice and returned to England to publish his memoirs. On the HMS *Investigator*, only six of the crew died. Songs, stories, and shows aren't written about a ship where sure, a few things went wrong, but all in all it wasn't *that* bad.

I've got a soft spot for Morgan anyway. Nobody would really consider him as famous as Torrington, Hartnell, and Braine. He's not a celebrity corpse. He's not going to be dug up and autopsied any time soon, but it seems he received that same level of care as those men before him. He had a headstone as well. His body joined the impromptu, accidental graveyard of Beechey Island, and while his story is quite tragic—the poor man essentially died after being rescued, after all—it's also a little hopeful. Two ships and 129 men went missing in the Arctic, and people

immediately started trying to help. Funds were raised, ships were sent out, and people from multiple nations came together to try to find what happened to these men. Who knows why Morgan signed up with HMS *Investigator*? Possibly he was just in need of a paycheck, or possibly he felt the need, like so many of his fellow crewmen and fellow sailors, to simply try and *help*.

The Beechey Island mummies are my favorite mummies. Not because they're so wonderfully preserved—though I'll admit, that does help, but because their story lives on. Their story, their lives, even a little bit of their personality lives on in their bodies. And as their story lives on, so does the story of the Franklin Expedition itself. Through John Torrington, we learn about the care the crew took in his burial. Through John Hartnell, we can speculate about the other men, about a devoted brother and a nervous surgeon. Through William Braine, we learn about the hard life he must have lived through before his equally hard death. Through Thomas Morgan, we learn about the helpers, the people who heard news of a missing ship, of 129 missing men, and immediately thought “what can I do, how can I help.” Through all of those men, we learn a little bit more about the rest of the Franklin Expedition, those remaining 126 men whose fates are still unknown.





THE LONG WAY UP

Alix E. Harrow | Fiction

[View Content Notes](#)

Ocean's twelfth therapist isn't fully licensed in the state of Maine. Her office is an RV parked behind the Hannaford, from which she also sells crystals, blueberry jam, and sex. Her advice is erratic and mystic, largely unhelpful, but Ocean doesn't mind. She doesn't want to be helped.

A therapist is, in her estimation, a person you can pay by the hour to listen to you talk about your dead husband. Ocean exhausted all her other outlets six or seven months ago, when her mourning crossed the invisible river between tragic and annoying. Her friends and relations were frustrated by her aggressive sadness, her refusal to proceed along the stages of grief they'd read about online.

"At some point, you just have to let go," her sister told her one day. Ocean told her sister to fuck off, which she did.

They make it three sessions before Ocean's new therapist says the same thing. Ocean tells her to fuck off, too.

"Look, everybody's lost somebody. And they get over it and they go on." Her therapist is looking at her with what Ocean suspects is personal, rather than professional, disdain. "You think your man was so special?"

"No."

Privately, Ocean does. She was raised by a pair of starry-eyed hippies and, while Ocean uses real soap and pays her taxes now, she's never shaken her childhood faith in the grand and beautiful design of the cosmos—fate, fortune, luck, soulmates, et cetera. She believes that she and her husband were meant for one another, that their love was a species distinct from the small and ordinary love of small and ordinary people.

Which is why she finds it so intolerable, so fundamentally incorrect, that he would crash through the guardrail on Route 1 going eighty-five miles an hour. Sometimes she can't decide which she misses more: her husband, or her good luck.

Ocean's therapist is shaking her head. "You're going to be unhappy for a long time, hon." As prophecies go, Ocean feels this one is pretty low-hanging fruit.

She checks the time, and her husband's face glows up at her for a half second before the screen goes black again. Sixteen minutes left. "I've been thinking about this one time, back when we were both working at the truck stop. I was taking out the trash and Ethan was on his smoke break. There was this stray cat that used to come around—not a kitten or anything, one of those old, tough toms with oozy eyes and one ear. Most people threw stuff at him. But Ethan didn't. He knelt down and fed that cat his whole breakfast burrito. Every bite."

It wasn't the moment Ocean fell in love with him—she'd been falling in love with him since his first shift, when his curls stuck out of his hairnet like the frilled antennae of a moth—but it was the moment she knew she was right to do so. "He wasn't trying to impress me. He didn't even know I was watching. He just did it because he was so—"

"I'm sure he was." Her therapist sighs for a long time, watching Ocean with eyes like a pair of brass scales. She must come to some conclusion, because she leans closer across the chipped linoleum and asks, "What would you do, to get him back?"

"Anything," Ocean answers, and it's the truth.

She expects to be told that this is unhealthy—a word all eleven previous therapists have used liberally—but her newest therapist merely pulls an oversized handbag into her lap and produces a yellowed business card from some inner pocket. She hands it to Ocean.

Ocean holds it in the striped gold light that comes through the RV blinds. Matte lettering spells THE HOUSE OF STICKS. There's no website, no phone number.

"What's this?"

"Take the dawn ferry. Show the operator this card and don't forget to tip." They still have nine minutes on the clock, but her therapist stands. Ocean tucks the card in her jacket pocket.

Her therapist follows Ocean down the RV steps and flips the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. She catches Ocean's eye, almost by accident, and her face contorts with an unfamiliar expression. Pity, maybe. "It's a long way down," she says.



The ferry comes out of the mist like a Polaroid developing. A shadow, then a shape, then a flatboat big enough for three cars and an operator's booth. Ocean watches it arrive with a pleasant feeling of purpose, a sense that she is finally correcting a cosmic mistake.

She drives up the ramp and puts the Corsica in park. No one boards behind her.

Halfway across the bay, she leaves her car and knocks on the booth window. "I'm supposed to show you this?" Ocean flattens the business card against the window, her wedding ring clacking hard against the glass.

The operator looks at the card. He grunts once. A coin tray slides out at Ocean's elbow, and she fills it with wadded bills and loose change, everything she had left in the house. He sorts through it, returning the bills but keeping two silver quarters.

Ocean waits for further instruction, her reflection pale and uncertain, but none is forthcoming. She clears her throat. "So you'll uh, wait for us? On the other side?"

The operator's eyes—small and bloodshot, infinitely weary—settle on Ocean for the first time. After a very long pause, he nods, and Ocean understands that he does not expect to see her again.



There's no address on the card, but half a mile from the pier Ocean finds a white saltbox with the words THE HOUSE OF STICKS printed on the mailbox. There's a sign taped to the door listing hours of operation and requesting that packages be delivered to the back entrance. Ocean enters without knocking.

Inside she finds a small waiting area and a reception desk. The woman behind the desk passes Ocean a pen and clipboard without looking up from her phone.

Ocean had assumed her journey was an exceptional, and therefore solitary, event, but at least half the chairs in the waiting room are occupied. She squeezes between an exceedingly morose young man and an elderly woman. The morose young man slides his guitar case aside and heaves a theatrical sigh, as if he would like to be asked if he's okay, so he could say he isn't. Ocean concentrates on her paperwork.

There's a lot of it: permissions and releases and consent forms, photocopies of photocopies now so blurred they resemble grave rubbings more than typeface.

Ocean returns her clipboard and hovers at the reception desk. “Hi, excuse me, but I had a little trouble reading some of this. Can you explain how it works, exactly?”

The receptionist looks away from her phone with a sigh suggesting she is not paid enough for this sort of harassment. She licks her index finger and flips through the clipboard pages. “Looks like you’re getting the standard deal. You go down and find your”—she double checks the first page—“husband, you bring him up, he stays. So long as you meet the conditions listed here.”

The receptionist turns the clipboard around and taps a brief, bulleted list. The conditions don’t strike Ocean as particularly challenging; she signs and dates the final page.

The receptionist presses a small silver button, and the door behind her clicks open. She’s already looking at her phone again.

Behind the door there is a set of stone steps. They look very old to Ocean, white stone, their middles slick and sagging beneath centuries of feet. There are handrails on either side, the brass made lustrous by thousands of hands, and beyond them there is nothing at all.

Ocean can’t see where the steps end.

Ocean experiences a moment of doubt. She imagines many of the people in the waiting room would turn back at this point. Their small and ordinary love would falter in the face of death, and they would give up. They would let go.

Ocean clenches her fist around her ring and takes the first step.



It’s a long way down.

In the first hour, Ocean's hamstrings cramp. In the second hour, she thinks fondly of the water bottle she left in the car. By the fourth or fifth, she starts worrying about food. She can no longer see the door behind her by then, just an endless series of steps receding into the distance.

Every now and then she encounters other people on the stairs, some headed down, some on their way back up. Most of them are alone.

Her phone dies on the second or third day, and after that she loses track of how long she's been walking. The only sign that time is still passing is that she's getting hungrier and thirstier, but eventually even that fades, leaving her feeling insubstantial, almost transparent, a mere shade of herself.

Still, she doesn't turn back. To turn back would be to render herself unexceptional, a regular person with a regular husband, both subject to the routine tragedies of the universe. It would mean that her first eleven therapists were probably right, and also that she would never again kiss the crow's feet at the corners of her husband's eyes. (This last occurs to her a little belatedly, as an afterthought, but she rearranges the list in her head so it ranks more highly).

The stairs end abruptly and without fuss. Ocean finds herself standing in someone's basement.

The walls are cinder block and the ceiling is spotted with mildew; the air smells like the damp earth beneath a stone. In the corner there are two people sitting on a plaid couch, not looking at one another. Neither of them is Ocean's husband.

Ocean strides by them without saying anything and shoves through a metal door. The next room is a root cellar lined with jewel-toned Mason jars, where a middle-aged woman is singing softly to no one. After that comes a bomb shelter, then a cave, then a catacomb, every kind of dark

home humans have ever built beneath the earth. Ocean is running now, scanning strangers' faces before slamming into the next door.

Eventually she stumbles into a room that resembles the basement of her grandmother's house, where her cousins used to gather on Thanksgiving to get high. There's a twin bed and a boxy TV playing a *Law & Order* rerun. A man is watching the screen, the hollows of his face bathed in blue light, but his eyes aren't following the characters.

Ocean makes a sound. The man looks away from the TV, and Ocean watches him turn to her in exaggerated slow motion.

Her husband is older than she remembers him, the crow's feet deep and black beside his eyes. He always tanned easily, but now his skin has a clammy, translucent look, like the underside of a fish, and his hair has thinned. Ocean decides, easily and firmly, that he's still the most handsome man she's ever seen in life or death.

He sees her, and he flinches—a tiny, involuntary contraction. Ocean lets the motion pass through her like a wrong note in a recital or a flubbed line in a play, an accident the audience must ignore for the sake of the show.

There's something acid and vicious boiling in her stomach, but she knows her lines. She takes a single step forward. Her breath catches on the shape of his name.

"Ethan."



A part of Ethan has been waiting for her to show up—he once listened to Ocean talk the cable company into forgiving three months of late fees and adding six channels, so he naturally assumed death would be a temporary impediment for her. But he isn't prepared for the sight of

her. All that heat and light, that furious intent, sewn into the skin of a fragile white woman in her early thirties.

He winces, and her afterimage glows on the backs of his eyelids. “Hi, Ocean.”

She says his name again, already running toward him.

He stands to meet her and she slams into his chest like a small comet. “I can’t believe it—Ethan, God, I *missed* you—” Ocean sobs into his shoulder, clutching at his shirt, her entire body shaking. Ethan holds her, running his thumb between the wings of her shoulder blades. The motion is mechanical, instinctive, like petting a cat.

She pulls away, but her palm finds his. Her grip is too tight. “Come on, I can get you out of here. Just follow me.” Her voice is low and urgent. Being loved by Ocean always felt like this, less a decision than a demand.

Ethan doesn’t feel much of anything these days, but he’s surprised by a surge of nostalgia, a wistful fondness for the way it felt to deserve all that imperious, overwhelming, infuriating, infinite love.

He disentangles his hand from hers as gently as he can. Ocean looks down at her empty palm like it’s one of those metal brain teasers, a thing that doesn’t make sense.

“Ocean,” he says. “I can’t go back up there. I’m sorry.”



“What do you mean?” Ethan doesn’t answer, so Ocean clarifies. “What the *fuck* do you mean?”

Ethan is looking at the thin carpeting. “Look, I know that’s not what you want to hear. I know you came all this way—”

"I walked into hell for you."

"I didn't ask—"

"And now you're telling me that you can't walk out with me. For some reason." That vicious thing in her stomach is rising, licking up her throat. She realizes, somewhat to her surprise, that it's fury, and that it's been there for a long time.

She chokes it down, drags an effortful smile across her face. "I don't know what you've gone through, but it's going to be okay now. You just have to trust me."

Ethan's is watching her with the same expression her therapist wore: pitying, a little guilty. "Ocean," he says again. "You know it wasn't—it wasn't totally an accident, right?"

"What do you mean?" Ocean's voice sounds tinny in her ears.

Ethan looks back at the carpet. "I mean that I sort of came here on purpose."

Ocean thinks: okay.

Okay: so maybe Ocean did know that. Maybe she knew Ethan never went over the speed limit and had great reflexes. Maybe she knew he'd been distant for months beforehand, slipping away like water from her cupped hands. Maybe she'd been having dreams where she stood waist-deep in a cold river, and when she looked down she saw his face beneath the current, pale as a star.

But he didn't leave any evidence behind—no note, no weapon. He'd left her the gift of doubt, and she didn't know how grateful she was until he took it away.

The fury is rising sick and fast, like bile, but Ocean manages to lift one shoulder in a shrug. "Well, I came here on purpose, too. To save you."

That gentle, pitying look. "Sweetheart, if you could have saved me, I wouldn't be here."

He reaches for her as if he's going to tuck her hair behind her ear the way he used to, but the anger is filling her mouth now, pressing against her teeth. "Don't touch me. Don't—" She hates the wobble in her voice. "*Fuck you, Ethan.*"

She turns away from her husband. She slams through doors until she finds the root cellar again. She smashes jar after jar against the cinder-block, until the whole wall is gummy and oozing.



She returns a few hours or days later, Ethan isn't sure which; he has trouble telling time down here. There are flecks of gooey color spattered on her clothes and small red cuts on her hands.

"Hi," she says. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Ethan says, but it isn't. After she left he'd felt restless and hot, like a dead limb waking up. He couldn't sleep or follow the conversations on the screen.

Ocean walks around the bed and stands between him and the TV with her arms crossed. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. Can I try again?"

Ethan shrugs. Ocean tries again.

She takes a rational approach first. She lists the advantages of going up with her (soft serve ice cream on the beach, yard sales, Sunday morning

sex) versus the advantages of staying behind (none). She talks about mental health resources and recovery and the privilege of a second chance.

Next comes the emotional appeal. She tells him about the twelve therapists and the sister who isn't speaking to her anymore. She tells him how lost she is, how sad. She tells him, again and again, how much she loves him.

Ethan doesn't doubt it. Even now, numb and depressed and dead, he can feel her love like gravity, pinning him down. It used to feel good, but then some crucial structure inside him had cracked, and he could no longer bear the weight of it.

Eventually Ocean runs out of words, and Ethan says, "I'm sorry. I just can't."

"Why not?" He can tell she's trying hard to sound understanding and sympathetic, but that she's mostly just pissed.

"Because I can't be...I'm not the person you need me to be, anymore."

Ethan isn't sure he ever was; Ocean decided early on that he was clever and good, special in some indefinable, intoxicating way, and he'd done his best to make it true. But her version of Ethan wouldn't sneak to the bathroom at three in the morning to Google *anhedonia* and *disassociation*. He wouldn't spend his days off drifting from room to room, feeling the hours pass in sudden sickening gulps. He would never leave her, because he would never need to.

Ocean is looking down at him with her jaw set. "Remember back when we first met? This one time, you were on your smoke break, and that stray came around. You didn't know I was watching, but you—"

"God, Ocean, I knew you were watching, okay?" He'd been helplessly, painfully aware of her every movement back then, as if there were a golden thread stretched taut between them. He knew the sound of her

breath and the scuff of her steps, the Dollar Store smell of her shampoo and the prickling heat of her gaze on the back of his neck.

Of course he knew she was watching that day; of course he'd fed the damn cat. By that point he'd have done anything at all to keep the stars in Ocean's eyes.

That's why he didn't tell her when everything started going sour in his head, why didn't call any hotlines or make any appointments. Instead he found himself driving too fast, closing his eyes on the state highway for brief stretches. When his tires finally left the asphalt, he felt nothing but relief, that he would no longer have to live with himself, and a faint sense of heroism, that Ocean wouldn't either.

Except it didn't work. Here he is, still stuck with himself, and there she is, watching him with those stupid, stubborn stars still flickering in her eyes.

He takes her hands in his. "Just go. Please."

He feels her waver. A bitter sort of satisfaction fills him: he always knew she would leave once she saw how he really was.

But then her hands clutch hard around his. "If you're not coming with me, then I'm staying with you."

"Down here?" Ethan doesn't mind it down here—he doesn't mind anything, anymore—but Ocean always loved the sun. In winter she followed the light from window to window, like a cat, and on the first fine day of spring she always stayed out until the tops of her shoulders were hot pink.

Ethan tells himself it won't last long. This is merely her third appeal—a grand gesture designed to guilt him into compliance—and when it fails, she'll leave him alone.

He scoots over on the mattress. Ocean settles beside him.



If Ocean is honest with herself, which she rarely is, her decision to stay was more of a grand gesture than a sincere offer. She thought it would take a day or two, maybe a week, before Ethan's essential goodness overcame his brain chemistry. He wouldn't let her languish down here for long, surely.

But here she is, languishing. There are no clocks or calendars down here, but she feels time rushing past them in a ceaseless current, eroding her at some cellular level. They watch TV together, but there's never anything good on. They talk, but not about anything important. They sleep, but they're never tired.

Every time they wake up, Ocean asks Ethan if he's ready to go yet. At first he makes apologies, tries to explain, but after a while he just shakes his head. Eventually he ignores the question altogether.

Ocean hates being ignored. It abrades her pride, suggests that perhaps she isn't as important as she thinks she is.

She asks more and more often, unsure which of them she's punishing, until finally Ethan cracks. "Tell me," he sighs. "How would it work? What are the terms of this deal?"

Ocean tries not to look overeager. "It's easy. You just follow me up the stairs. We can't talk to each other or hold hands or anything, and I can't look back, but that's it."

Ethan smiles, not pleasantly. "And you think you could do that?"

"Of course I could."

"You could walk and walk, all that way, with no proof that I was still behind you." His smile is ghastly now. "You wouldn't doubt, wouldn't want to check, just to make sure—"

"Of course not." Ocean's lips feel numb. She can feel tears rising for no reason. "I trust you."

Ethan's tone softens, that terrible smile fading. "No, you don't, sweetheart. Not anymore."

"No," Ocean whispers. "I don't." It feels like a thread snapping between them. It feels like the truth.

"Good." Ethan looks away from her, nodding at the wall with the tendons of his neck stretched tight. "Neither do I."

Ocean thinks: okay.

She twists her wedding ring off her finger and sets it on the plastic top of the TV. Then she leaves, pushing through the door without looking back. She knows he won't follow.

She keeps going until she's standing in that first basement again, looking up that long staircase.

She's crying hard now, but all she feels is a furious embarrassment. She thought she and Ethan had something unique, a special place in the grand and glittering design of the universe. But if that were true, how could he leave her all alone up there? And how could she leave him down here? Perhaps they were only ever ordinary, subject to all the ordinary tragedies of the world.

Ocean stands at the bottom of the stairs for a long time, feeling the threads between them snapping one by one.

But still: she can't seem to take the first step. She just stands there with a silly montage playing in her head: Ethan's sullen moods and sudden smiles, Ethan's curls, Ethan's fingers when he rolls a cigarette, certain and clever.

Apparently a final thread remains between them, spun from some stubborn substance that persists after everything else—trust, hope, pride—is gone, refusing to let either of them go.

It does not occur to her that it might be nothing but ordinary, everyday love.



Ethan isn't expecting his wife to come back this time, but she does. She slips through the door, face patchy pink, and walks to the TV. Ethan watches her with a dull pain between his ribs. She's frowning, looking for something that isn't there.

Ethan clears his throat and holds up his hand. Her ring is wedged around the first knuckle of his pinky. She smiles when she sees it, and the pain in Ethan's chest sharpens.

Ocean steps between his knees and takes his hand in hers. She pries the ring off him and slides it back into the pale dip at the base of her finger.

She sits besides him without letting go of his hand, and they watch *Wheel of Fortune* until they fall asleep.



Ethan expects her to be gone when he wakes up, but she's still there, and still there the next time.

She doesn't fidget or sigh anymore. She doesn't ask unanswerable questions—like *why?* or *how could you?*—with that acid betrayal in her voice.

She doesn't even ask if he's ready to leave, anymore, but just sits beside him, her thigh pressing alongside his.

It fills Ethan with a restless, unsettled energy. He can't sleep, so he talks sometimes. About nothing at first, and then about how it used to be, and how it became. She was never a good listener, but she listens now, holding his hand palm up and tracing his lifeline with her thumb.

Ethan starts taking long, aimless walks, more and more often. One day he returns to find Ocean sitting beside a stack of mold-spotted magazines. She's tearing out the best pictures—baby orangutans, rock climbers dangling from slim ropes, sandy beaches with candy cane lighthouses—and taping them to the cinderblock walls.

She looks over her shoulder at him and shrugs. "I found them three rooms over, in a library basement." She could never abide a bare white wall; their house had looked like an underfunded art museum.

Ethan stands looking at the magazine pages for a long time when she's done. It's a very Ocean thing to do: covering up an ugly truth with pretty lies. It used to seem miraculous to him, like spinning straw into gold, until he began to worry what she would do when the gold faded, and she finally saw the ugly truth of him.

But she sees him now, surely. And she hasn't left yet.

It occurs to Ethan, looking at the pictures she hung on the wall, that she isn't going to leave.

Ocean is asleep by the time Ethan climbs in bed. He slips his arm beneath her head, breathing carefully around the pain in his chest.

She rouses. "I decided it doesn't matter, you know. Why you fed the cat."

He breathes a laugh into her hair. "I only did it to impress a girl."

Ocean burrows deeper into her half of the pillow. “Yeah, well, I don’t think the cat cared.”

Ethan laughs again, but he lies awake, turning the thought gingerly in his hands. It has a circular, seductive logic: because she believed he was a good man, he became one, and she became right.

He doubts Ocean believes it anymore—the stars in her eyes are dim, dead things, now—but she stayed anyway. She’ll stay forever, wasting away in this unchanging dark, not to prove a point or win an argument, not to fix him or guilt him, but just to be with him.

It strikes him as another ouroboros, even more simple and seductive than the first: because she loves him, he becomes worth loving.

He waits for her to wake up, feeling the pain spread from his chest to his limbs, a sweet and terrible ache.

Her eyes open, and he takes her hand. “I’m ready.”



Ocean is standing at the foot of the stairs again. This time, Ethan is standing beside her.

She says, after a while, “It’s a long way up.”

“Yeah.” He’s holding her hand very tightly.

“We don’t have to do this. I’ll stay with you.”

He smiles, lopsidedly, fondly. “That’s sort of why I’m going.”

Ocean swallows several times. “I won’t look back,” she whispers.

"I know," Ethan whispers back, and she knows he's lying. "I won't stop."

"I know," she says, and she's lying, too. She's riddled with doubt and terror, choosing to trust him without any evidence at all. But that's what trust is: a function of doubt, an act of faith.

Ocean meets Ethan's eyes and sees love there. Not certainty, not even much confidence, but Ocean supposes that makes sense. If love isn't preordained and perfect, if it isn't written in the stars or divinely decided, then it's just an act of trust, repeated. It's an endless staircase climbed in the dark, the steps worn smooth by all the lovers who have climbed and fallen and climbed again, long before you.

It doesn't seem like enough; she decides it is.

She lets go of her husband's hand. She turns her back to him. She takes the first step up.





THE ASTRONOMER

Lily Grodzins | Poetry

Through his telescope the professor searches, his withered hands
clasped as in prayer.

When young, his Lover was a girl from Neptune,
so now he blushes at the nudity of celestial bodies,
and wonders after the cores of apples and Earth.

The gray hair of the back of his neck rises whenever his azure eyes turn
to the horizon.

In dimly lit parlor conversations, the distinguished ladies will agree he's
gone mad –

always was a bit of a strange lad.

Entire nights he wastes looking at nothing new with his great lens
pointed straight upward at the wedding band of the Milky Way.

But when he went – for he did go –

down he lay in the company of meteors and supernovas.

Those gentle lights, burning just as a candle burns.

Flickering slowly out beneath his gaze,

burning just as a candle burns, billions of years away.





PALE HORSEPOWER

Cara Masten DiGirolamo | Fiction

Death drives a fast car. It's cream and silver—like a pale horse. When it needs service, she comes here, because we're the best shop in town. If I could've put "Services Death's BMW" on my signboard and had anyone believe me, I'd've done it right off.

Fact is, our shop's looked out for her vehicle for generations, and I hear my great-grandad used to shoe her horse. When Dad agreed I was taking over the shop, since my brothers were all skipping for Cuba, he sat me down and told me that some nights I'd get a visitor. He'd have a big cream car, and I was to fix it up perfect. *No shortcuts*, he said, *none of your crazy ideas neither. Don't look at him. You see that big cream car in the drive, and you look at nothing but the car. And you don't ask for payment. An honor's an honor.*

Now, when my dad got disappeared, and the shop came to me, I wasn't really in the mood to bow my head to whatever generalissimo was paying us by not throwing us into prison when clearly they'd forgotten their end of the bargain. So when I woke up for no good reason at 2:00 a.m. and saw the cream car in the drive, I stomped right into my shop and said, "So who the fuck are you? And guess how much you're going to be paying for 2:00 a.m. service!"

Then, of course, I saw her. A girl in a bomber jacket, lighting up a clove as she stepped out of the car. She was tall, skinny as a skeleton, with ash-blond hair that had to come out of a bottle, but like, an expensive bottle, and knife-blade eyes. She raised an eyebrow at me.

"Huh," she said. "None of you've ever asked me that before. I'm Death. What would you like to be paid?"

The helpless stammering I did at that—*What the fuck do you mean, Death?*—was a bit embarrassing. But eventually I fixed her car—she'd burnt the fuck out of the transmission, too much stop-and-go these days, she said, and I didn't have one that would fit, so I offered one of my "specials," even though Dad had forbidden that. She seemed intrigued, and I rigged her up. Then I figured I knew what I wanted as payment. I asked her when I was going to die.

She looked at me, something about her eyes shimmering out, and winced. "You don't want to know that."

The wince was enough for me to guess the answer. "How 'bout you tell me when it's the last time you're coming by instead?"

It was enough, knowing I'd get to see her again. I also didn't have to be scared to say what I thought about the fucking fascists. I was never good at holding my tongue.

Death came in about once a year for servicing, and a few extras. She didn't mind my "specials" and would grin at me, leaning on the side of the car, as I explained my new idea to soup up her car into a proper deathmobile.

She said no on the afterburners, but I could tell she regretted it.

Then one time she showed up and looked at me, and all the human went out of her face.

I was twenty-eight, pretty healthy, so I could guess I was going to get on the wrong side of a cop or an auto lift. But I would have liked to get more than twenty-eight years. You're just starting to get over your bullshit at twenty-eight.

I fixed up her car, then started ringing her up at the cash register. I'd never done that before, and she came over to puzzle at my angry typing and the chime of the change drawer.

I shoved the bill at her. "By my accounts, you owe me for six years of services—minus the first, since you paid that off. But you owe my family more than that. Dad serviced your car for maybe twenty years, and granddad too, and then we looked after your horse before that. So you *owe* me."

She looked down at the bill, frowning over it. Then she lifted her chin to examine me also. "What do you want?" she asked.

I looked at her. I looked at the car. I looked at my little shop, and my no-more family and no-more future. I thought about asking not to die, getting another ten, twenty, fifty years in this same life. I thought about asking her to look after my people—if any were still around. I thought about asking her to fix this bullshit world—but if Death could make people better, we would be better already.

"I want to go with you," I said. "Take me in that car. Take me away."

Startled, she took a step back. "We don't do that."

"Well, good job it's me asking then," I said. "I've never been all that impressed with what's 'done.' Maybe you should try doing something different. Maybe you'd like it."

I think immortal beings change slowly. But humans change quick, and she'd been hanging out with one for six years. She scowled like she did when she was trying to get her head around a new concept. She'd never quite figured out a lug wrench, no matter how many times I'd shown her how they worked. But *this*, I thought, just maybe, she might be able to get *this*.

"You'll be lonely," she said.

That was a word I hadn't heard her say before. I'd asked her once if she was lonely, and she looked like I'd spoken a language she'd never even heard of. But this time she said it like she knew what it meant.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll be with you."

Death opened the passenger door.

Death drives a fast car. She doesn't come to my family's old shop in Miami anymore, but she doesn't need to, you see. She's got her own in-house mechanic.

She's got me.





THE BONE MOON ABOVE KŌDAIJI: A QUARTET

Ryu Ando | Poetry

i.

Who sees the black sakura in the courtyard,
the fruit that weeps on the branch, a tender flesh

staining the tips of your fingers – red as your lips?

Who sees the fractal twists of suffering in

glints of light on the flagstones? Or your

arthritic hands held up to the sky? Or the glass god

casting silvery petals all over the dry rock?

Who marks the hours lost raking these stones

while the karyōbinga

cries out in the dark?

ii.

Who sees your serene face covered in growth,

old roots grasping at phantoms in a river of gravel,

a heat-whispered tree gone cold in the night?

Or feels the ice in your veins, your carcass

buried upright in limestone? Who sees your
limbs ground into fine powders – dispersing until

the world ends – then begins – yet again?
Who holds in its gaze the haunted winds on

the hilltop, the low clouds suspended like a
thousand white birds at the edge of the night,

where they never rise
above this darkened line?

iii.

Who knows that you once lived a year without
the burden of dreams? Or that you covered the world

in petulant darkness until rising again? That you
held ice in your hands to know what love feels like?

Who else can show you to yourself – standing on
the threshold – thrust between the real and the unreal,

lighting your dark passage through this ancient house,
bright silences patched on the floor, panels sliding open

into empty rooms and
riddles newly found?

iv.

Who else knows of its own death – its own
oblivion up *there* – among the hanging stars

and in catuskoti memoirs etched in ice?

Who else but the bone moon, rising,

its clipped nail tearing into the sky – imperfect

circle, damaged sphere – will tell you that

time, that thin dark wire shifting the shadows

across your pillow, that rippling wave of

dry rivers unresolved, that reaper of light itself

riding on the cusp of all things, upon the crest

of all our dreams,

still moves like a scythe?





ASK A NECROMANCER

Amanda Downum | Non-fiction

Traveling with the Dead

And I say I'm dead, and I move.

—The Crow



Laura and several others have asked me some variation of the same question: *Do dead people ever move?*

I've talked about rigor mortis and cadaveric spasm before, and how some corpses like to toss things off the embalming table, but this question refers more to old wives' tales of bodies sitting upright, or otherwise acting like extras in the cold open for a zombie or vampire movie. When I was just a wee deathling, I would often read "Believe it or not"-style accounts of corpses sitting up, usually attributed to the build-up of gas. I've personally never had a corpse sit up, no matter how gassy they might be, and every other modern mortician's account I've found debunks that particular myth. Sorry to burst that spooky little bubble.

If it's any consolation, however, many dead bodies do groan. You may have heard the phrase "death rattle"—that's the colloquial term for terminal respiratory secretions. As a person nears death, they sometimes lose the ability to swallow, causing saliva and phlegm to build up in their

throat and produce a choking or gargling sound as they breathe. Those accumulated fluids remain after death, and that same rattling moan will continue whenever air is pushed through the windpipe. I encounter it most frequently while rolling a body from side to side or lifting their head. It's definitely an unsettling experience the first few times one hears it.



While the dead may not move on their own, they do have other options available. We have third-party transport services entirely dedicated to making long-distance removals and deliveries, and I've dropped off many dead people at the airport. Most of them are embalmed for shipping, but for those whose religious beliefs preclude it, ice packs and a well-sealed container are also an option. Repatriation of the deceased happens less often, but is still a regular occurrence. In cases of international travel, the necessary paperwork takes weeks to process, so thorough embalming is extremely important. Stoker may or may not be right about the dead traveling fast, but he was definitely correct about the legal assistance they require.

I recently learned that a family can choose to transport their own dead. I embalmed a man whose relatives decided to drive him out of state themselves. Given the cost of mileage and airfare, this seems entirely reasonable to me. Mind you, you must work with a licensed funeral provider on both ends of the journey for this to be legal. You can't just pack Dad up for one last road trip without paperwork.



Another, entirely different Laura asks about people being buried or cremated with personal items like glasses and jewelry. When it comes to burial, grave goods are an ancient tradition, and you can be buried with just about anything if it fits in the casket. It's fairly common for the

deceased to wear their jewelry for a public viewing, and then have it removed and returned to the family when the casket is closed. Some families do choose to inter those valuables with the decedent, however. Exhumation is possible, after all, if someone changes their mind.

Cremation, on the other hand, is permanent. That may seem obvious, but we have to specifically state that during arrangement conferences and have people sign a form, so clearly someone at some point believed otherwise. When it comes to cremating grave goods, the question is simply, will it burn? Photographs, letters, stuffed animals, clothing, cigarettes—these are all things we commonly find being sent along for cremation. Metal is a different story. Medical implants like pins, screws, and joints will be left behind after the cremation process, and are usually sent off for recycling. Things like glasses and jewelry can be placed with the cremated remains if a family so chooses, but don't belong in the retort. We can bury your uncle with his golf clubs; we cannot cremate them.

What also cannot be cremated are any medical devices that contain batteries—pacemakers, defibrillators, pain stimulators, etc. The battery will explode, and can damage the cremation chamber. These devices must be removed prior to cremation, and are also sent away for medical recycling.¹

We don't expect the general public to know about exploding pacemakers. That's a niche sort of fact that a person could easily live their life without encountering. However, there are other things that ought not be exposed to open flame. Things like, say, live ammunition. This is why we triple-check everything where cremation is concerned. Very recently a decedent at my funeral home was being prepared for cremation after a visitation, and the crematory operator found some extra personal effects that had been slipped into their pocket. Including a bullet. Dear reader, no one in the funeral home was amused that day. No matter how funny you may think it is to send someone off "with a bang," funer-

ary staff are fragile creatures who should not be exposed to unexpected loud noises.

[1] Fun fact: when a pacemaker stops working, it beeps like a smoke detector with dying batteries. We have a box full of them waiting to be recycled. It took me at least a month working in the funeral home before I figured out what that noise was. [Return to article.](#)



The dead hunger for your questions! Submit them through our form at **thedeadlands.com** or ask **@stillsotranger** on Twitter.





“DEATH WILL YOU PLAY WITH ME?”

Phil Madden | Poetry

For a little while. I have appointments at 2.

Can we play parallax, the event horizon, asymptote?

The ones where you never arrive? I like them.

Won't get you anywhere though.

What else?

You know the tide comes in faster as it licks at the heels?

The tape spins round faster at the end of the reel?

What can be done to slow them,

preferably up not down?

No idea. I'm not up to speed on such things.

And you know in a tea timer the salt only falls?

How do we stop the lobster trap?

If we give it a somersault can the tea be refreshed,

and my blood spring baby-pink?

Can that old sympathetic magic

really show it cares?

I couldn't possibly say.

And now if you will excuse me.

It was lovely to meet you.

À bientôt.





AUTHOR BIOS



Michael Baez Arroyo is currently teaching at the University of Puerto Rico Secondary School, while finishing his EdD in Curriculum and Teaching in TESOL. In addition to his teaching credentials, Michael Baez was Editor-in-Chief at *Vaunt Zine*. When it comes to his published works, Michael

has published in *Corpus Litterarum*, *Inter Metro Newspaper*, *Flores Nuevas Poetry Anthology*, *Leading Edge Magazine*, *Tongvas*, *Rigorous Magazine*, among others.



Lacey Yong is an emerging Chinese-Canadian writer. Her creative nonfiction and short fiction has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Microfiction 2022, and she is working on her first YA steampunk novel. She lives in Calgary, Alberta with her husband, a baby on the way, and more manga

than she has time to read. This is her first speculative poetry publication.



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



A former academic and adjunct, **Alix E. Harrow** is a NYT-bestselling and Hugo-award winning writer living in Virginia with her husband and their two semi-feral kids. She is the author of *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*, *The Once and Future Witches*, and various short fiction.



Lily Grodzins is a sophomore in high school who has been writing poetry since she was literate and dictating it even before that. This is her first professional publication.



Cara Masten DiGirolamo is an MFA candidate at the University of British Columbia, an amateur bookbinder, and an instructor in the secret art of Turkish paper marbling. She is a queer writer, a Linguistics PhD, and a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop. Her fiction can be found in

Beneath Ceaseless Skies, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Cast of Wonders*, *NewMyths.com*, and *Daily Science Fiction*.



Ryu Ando shares his time between Los Angeles and Saitama, Japan. He has authored four poetry collections. Online at: ryuando.wordpress.com and [@ryu_ando_98](https://twitter.com/ryu_ando_98).



Phil Madden lives in Wales, a parent of three and a grandparent of four. He is a social worker, but his main work is with the engravers Paul Kershaw (Grapho Editions) and Peter Lazarov (Pepel Press), creating limited edition fine art books. He is currently working on a book of cartoons.



STAFF BIOS

Deadlands



Sean Markey publishes websites for a living, and has always dreamed of publishing a magazine (about Death). He lives with his wife, Beth, in central Vermont. Follow Sean on Twitter @MarkeyDotCo (if you want).



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

Taurus moon. You can find her on Twitter @ECthetwit.



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

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



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

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



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

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



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



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



R J Theodore (she/they) is an author, podcaster, and graphic designer. Her work has appeared in *MetaStellar*, as well as the Neon Hemlock Press anthologies *Glitter + Ashes* and *Unfettered Hexes*. She lives in New England, haunted by her childhood cat. Find her at rjtheodore.com.



CONTENT NOTES

The Deadlands, Issue 9

The Long Way Up:

Descriptions of suicide, suicidal ideation, depression, and car accidents.

[Return to Story](#)



The Deadlands Issue 9, January 2022

Front Cover: "Humility" by Skulttura

The Deadlands is distributed monthly by Sean Markey, 30 N Gould St. STE R, Sheridan, WY 82801.

Visit thedeadlands.com for single issues and subscriptions.

Copyrights to all stories and illustrations are the property of their creators.

The contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the consent of the copyright holder.