

ELEGANT LITERATURE

MOONLIT MYSTERIES



#026

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Moonlit Mysteries
2nd Edition

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ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

CONTENT WARNING

Work published in *Elegant Literature* varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

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THANK YOU TO
OUR PARTNERS

SUBTXT
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

MOONLIT MYSTERIES

Write a story involving Moonlit Mysteries, and a hook.

Search beneath the full moon's glow. Veiled in shadow or revealed by silver beams, the answer to your question is out there. But be warned, for not all puzzles are safely solved...

The moon has hung in the sky for all human history. What ancient mysteries was it privy to, what modern crimes? Clues, ciphers, and detectives working the case. Motives, midnight, and mystic lore—the lunar influence has long fascinated our kind. From astronomy to the arcane arts, it is the center of temples and conspiracy theories. That cratered face watches over wary suspects and secluded lovers alike. It's cold comfort in the night and shyly shaded by day. An enigma. A silent observer in orbit. Reflections, rituals, romance. Eventually, we'll explore beyond, into celestial space. What we find among the stars is anyone's guess. So follow the footprints and seek answers to your moonlit mysteries, lest they forever linger just out of reach...

This contest invites you to explore Moonlit Mysteries, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

Head Judge
A.C WISE

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

LINDZ MCLEOD
SHIV RAMDAS
OGHENECHOVWE D. EKPEKI
BEN GALLEY
AI JIANG
HAYLEY MILLIMAN
JORDAN KANTEY
NATHAN BAUGH
JIM HULL
DJANGO WEXLER
NICKY SHEARSBY
MAX GLADSTONE
CREAG MUNROE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE
HONORABLE MENTIONS
PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Cucuy's Lullaby	Faith Borrasso
A Song of Berries and Blood	Ashleigh Adams
A Thanksgiving Mystery	john williams
A Theft in Austria	AE_Flint
A Walk in the Woods	C. Baker-Hefley
Caid	Tyler Brines
Fishhooks and White Walls.	Ruby Grant
Fishing for a Friend	Eric Holsinger
Inside the Secret Passages of Casa Garcia	Chey Rivera
Little Fish	Tobin Parker-Flett
Moon	Avery Briar
Paul	Sarah Sheplock
Roses and Moonlight	Marcia A. Sherman
Sapper Seven	AP Haro
Selma's Night Out	Antony Pütttschneider
Starchild	Lua D'Oito
The Boy Beside the Moonlit Tree	Christopher Hodges
The Boy on the Pier	Callum Young
The Space In Between	Anna Taylor
To Bridge the Gap	Joshua Parker
Unexplained Phenomena	Gracie Lyle
Welcome to Camp Moon Cult	Naomi Hawthorne
What Dark Poetry	Michael Feeney
What Lies Beneath	J. Anthony
Yes Mama	Brandon Paul

THE HOOK, THE HERB AND THE HAIR

ROWAN EVANS

THE SEAMS OF FAT CLOUDS split with moonlight and the bones of winter trees glisten with frost as they catch its silvery beams. The dead thing looks beyond the muddy banks of her open grave, through the branches of the forest, to the sky above. She takes her first breath in years and cold air blows dust from her deflated lungs. A single thought is resurrecting and it drenches her desiccated heart, bringing it pumping back to life. She's been estranged from thoughts for so long it's unrecognisable, but icy blood pulls it through her body and into her mind and it itches with acidic needles of agonising anticipation. Her shrivelled lips stretch into a sneer and a single word sits on the tip of her blackened tongue. Vengeance.

Bury something in the ground for long enough and the goodness will leach out of it. In the darkness, even souls can degrade and be carried away by scavenging creatures that writhe beneath the leaf mould. Her mortality tied her to morality, but death took her beyond reproach and all she does from this moment on cannot be altered by conscience, punished by man or judged by a God that she now knows does not exist. At last, she's free to be a monster.

There's no pain in the cracking back of dislocated limbs as she stretches her body. She doesn't flinch as she wrenches her head from the tangle of tree roots, ripping clumps of hair and skin from the back of her skull. The energy that surges through her is not life, but a pulsating, powerful urge that springs her to her feet and lights a livid fire in the soulless pits of her eyes.

Instinctively she rummages through mud until her fingers touch a soft, velvet bag tied with ribbon. She knows the mystery of her resurrection is to be found within a gift from the person who's opened her grave. She claws and bites the bag until it surrenders the neatly cut and tied human hair. Her emaciated fingers caress the softness and then she bows her head to sniff the scent.

No longer confined to human movements, the dead thing can climb the grave walls like an insect, she can pound the uneven forest floor on all fours like a beast and feel nothing as the brambles and twigs scar her flesh. The one she seeks will be close by, they will be un-

aware of her approach and their slaughter will end her unearthly awakening and allow her to sleep once more. This she knows, for it has happened many times before.

Always a house, always close to her grave and always marked by a sprig of rosemary, bound with her own hair and hanging from a hook; whoever delivers her from death's rustling womb guides her with this spell. The door is always open and there will be many witnesses, but none will intervene, they never do when dead things come calling. She pushes the door open and moonbeams follow her into a brightly lit hall; leaf skeletons and grave dust shower from her tattered dress and cover the ornate carpet and frost-scented air pushes back the smell of warm food and sweet perfume.

She follows the voices, the laughter and the scent of prey and, as she quietly pushes open the dining room door, she sees the one who's half smiling and awaiting her arrival. There's something familiar about the finely dressed woman; her frost-hardened eyes have looked upon the dead thing before and that mouth has contorted malicious, twisted lies into silken threads that slid into her death-dreams. Hatred quivers her body and she prays this is the one she has come for, but the woman places her hand upon the shoulder of another and the dead thing knows she has to obey.

She leaps onto the table and crawls towards the young man whose scent tingles in the serrated cavity of her nose. His smell is velvet deer musk, fermented autumn fruits and horseshoe iron blood that pounds his pulse from a horrified heart. Rainbows of gowns flash past as guests run. Gaudy desserts squash and crumble beneath the dead thing's mud-caked hands and knees. Glasses fall in her wake and smash into crystal shards that vibrate with sonorous screams.

Her movements slow as she nears him. He's paralysed by the touch of the woman and time pauses as the coldness of the dead thing touches the hot aura of his body. Face to face across the gulf of life and death; grey, sunken cheeks only inches from his flushed, fleshy ones. The woman removes her hand from his shoulder and turns away as the dead thing leans in as if to kiss him, her blackened tongue flickering at the corners of her shrivelled lips. Then she takes

his life, breath by rasping breath, bone by splintering bone and organ by rupturing organ until he is bloodied, broken and gone.

The dead thing scurries back to the embrace of the forest, bathing in the frost-chill and licking sticky salt from her fingers. In the moonlight his blood is silver-sheened tar and cooling in ripples over her face and arms like a liquid shroud. When she saw herself in his eyes, it was almost like being alive; when she felt his warm fluidity, it was almost like being in love, but the sparks of memory were quickly snuffed by death's cold breath.

She sees the moon fishing in its silvery beams, then sailing from the breaking dawn. She waits in the blue-black cusp between night and day, watching the barn owl's spectral flight and hearing the snuffles of badgers returning to their sets. As an orange tide rolls in over the forest floor, the dead thing pulls back into the shadows where she knows she belongs. Just before the light touches her toes, the woman comes into view, swinging the hook tied with rosemary and bound with the dead thing's hair.

"Come," she says.

The woman walks deeper into the forest and the dead thing scuttles behind. Now and then, she pauses and crouches as if to pounce, but the dark spell woven through herb and hair pulls her onwards in a docile crawl. When they reach the grave side, the woman stops and turns.

"You didn't recognise him, Rosemary," says the woman, "just like you didn't recognise your mother or sister before. After labouring for two days to bring him into the world, it took only two minutes to remove him from it. I wonder if he recognised his own mother in the monster who tore him limb from limb."

The dead thing cannot understand words, she hears them as part of the dawn chorus, rising up to the tree tops and joining the creaking of frozen branches.

"When I find your daughter," says the woman, "I will bring her here and take a snippet of her golden hair as a gift for you the next time I dig you from your grave. After you kill her, you will have nothing left alive in this world."

The dead thing tilts her head and listens to the melody of the softly spoken woman.

“And you brought this upon yourself when you bewitched the man I loved with your beauty. However, beauty is only skin deep and look at how yours has rotted away.”

The woman throws down the hook tied with rosemary and hair and grabs the dead thing by the throat. She leans her backwards over her grave.

“What does it feel like to be bewitched and lose everything you loved, Rosemary?”

The dead thing hangs like a puppet over her grave. But the strings controlling her slackened when the woman let go of the hook, and she feels something itching with acidic needles of agonising anticipation. With her own will, she raises a withered hand and claws at the woman’s face, but the hand around her throat opens and she falls backwards into her grave.

Sunlight pierces the thinning clouds as the dead thing watches the woman filling her grave. Dirt fills her nose and mouth, pouring into her lungs as they deflate. The resurrected thought dies again with her slowing heart and the pooling of her thickening blood. The light vanishes piece by piece in clods of mud until it’s gone.

Deep inside the ground, the dead thing holds on tightly to something in the darkness. The woman’s hair feels so soft and warm as her hand closes around it.

ROWAN EVANS

Rowan Evans writes dark stories to brighten her day. Much to her surprise, she's previously won a few things, including the CAS Short Story Competition and had a story published in the Oxford Flash Fiction anthology. Her stories are mostly about repulsive monsters which are usually based on herself.



NIGHT OF THE WASPS

SAM GRAVENY

ONE YEAR, WHEN I WAS a child, wasps built a nest in a vent in the kitchen wall. First, I liked it. It blocked dad's smoke; he said he loved to stand outside the kitchen and enjoy a cigarette and admire his little house and his little family. He said it made him feel like a lord on his estate.

The nest was a bulbous, papery thing which hummed with activity in the summer, quietened in a cold Autumn and revived when December came and, as Christmas luxury, the heating was on two hours a day. Black-and-yellow devils came creeping into our festive kitchen. They stung the dog and the dog screamed and ran into a wall and needed stitches to knit its scalp back together. We did not need the vet's bill. The wasps had to die.

When we looked for exterminators, they were on holiday, or charging holiday rates beyond what we could afford. We were economising, dad had given up his cigarettes, or so he had claimed. We wore long sleeves and hats and kept the kitchen cold. Our scarred and brave dog hunted wasps all day. It learnt to smash with paws, and not to bite, after its black gums swelled up with wasp poison. Dad, fidgety with nicotine withdrawal, wanted something to murder and prowled with a rusty badminton racquet. Mum prepared Christmas dinner in her old wedding veil and long white wedding gloves, an eerie ghost of Christmas Past.

Christmas Eve, and we put on our best clothes and walked to Midnight Mass. We kept up appearances in our family, and mum had used powder to cover the wasp stings. Dad lagged behind, breath fogging like cigarette smoke.

It was just the local church, a squat building made of stone always wet to the touch, but the glow of candlelight and the date gave it all a sense of ancient power, pre-Christian, pre-Roman, even. It was cool inside, and everyone kept their coats on, adding to the barbarian air, and we shared a pew with another family, and the wood was cold through my thin best trousers.

I prayed my own prayers, not following the priest's script. I enlisted God's help against the wasps. That they were also his creatures never occurred to me.

When the service ended, there was coffee in the too-hot hall and I complained I was tired and left mum and dad to talk to their odd church friends who had Biblical names and whose children did not go to my school.

The walk home was by moonlight. True or not, in my memory, every Christmas Eve was lit bright as the inside of a silver bowl. Bright as day, and in the cold air I could see for a hundred miles. I stood in front of my house, one of two dozen in a row, and luxuriated in my childish cunning. Midnight, and everyone was either asleep or at church.

From my coat sleeve I pulled a rubber tube, butchered from a Bunsen burner six months ago and used as a whip for childish horseplay. I had cached a baking tray behind the plant pots which were coffins for summer flowers. With my weapons, I approached our car. Step one, siphoning fuel. Fuel cap off, tube in, suck. My lips began to ache, and the fumes made my head spin, and the fuel climbed the hose slow like treacle. Then it was in my mouth, an awful, manly scent suddenly becoming a flavour. But I kept my calm, kinked the tube, and released with a retch. Petrol ran into the tray, and I contorted my body so I would not get any on my best trousers.

Step two was moving the fuel. It was difficult, sloshing left and right with each step as if all it wanted was to launch itself clear and splatter on the dead grass. The kitchen vent was at the house's back, the tumour growths of wasp nest sticking out, the thing which was killing the house and killing Christmas.

Step three: raise the baking tray with the fuel to wasp height. The fumes which were still making me woozy were lethal to the wasps, their little lungs would fill and they would die. My arms were stretched to their maximum, the nest six feet from the ground, and the effort was making me grunt and petrol ran down my wrists and under my shirt and down my naked, sweating sides. The wasps, even in dead winter, sensed danger. They sallied, a black-yellow foam. Some were struck down by the fumes and I could hear them drop into the fuel with the hiss of a candle going out. Others, valiant in the cold, explored my fingers and my forearms and my hair. I knew

I had to be brave, that dropping the tray would raise a clatter and the neighbours would comment, and the fuel would stain. A wasp stung my scalp, another landed on my shoulder, and nestled in the rucked fabric where the seam of my good coat accommodated my Atlas pose. Another sting, but the candle-hisses were more frequent. My strength was failing, the tray impossibly heavy, and, unable to see, unwilling to look up, I imagined a towering pile of wasps floating on the petrol like those old photos of bison skulls from the American west. My arms shook, and more fuel lapped out and landed on the sting on the top of my head. With the sort of groan I imagined Samson would have given, I stood on my tiptoes, triceps twanging like violin strings about to burst, calves swelling with pooling blood, and pressed the tray point blank into the nest proper, swamping it with petrol. It muffled the hum. I held it there for ten more seconds, and the hum stopped. There was luxuriant pain as circulation returned to my fingers, hooked into claws, and my thumbs, compressed from bearing the tray's weight.

Step four was cleanup. I left dying wasps behind like I was Ypres gas and returned to the car, used an old glossy magazine for a funnel and refuelled it, tipping the petrol from a corner of the tray. I returned the fuel cap, unlocked the front door and stepped in. The house was warm, a treat for the pious returning from church. I stripped, wrapped my clothes in a bin bag, twisted and tied the neck and stuffed it down the side of my bed (by the time mum noticed them missing, I would be hero, wasp-vanquisher), then I got into the shower with the tray and scrubbed the petrol stink from everything. In a fit of cleverness, I had stashed the washing-up liquid among the toiletries. I emerged pink, with a swollen skull from the sting. I put on a moth-eaten Santa hat and my pyjamas. The tray was dried, and went back into the oven.

In my bed I kicked my legs and clutched my stomach with excitement. It was the perfect childish pleasure: Christmas impending, a secret to bear, insects killed, a gift for parents whose emotional depth I was only beginning to grope at but whose pain I had still sensed. I felt like God. I had taken from the wasps and given to the

good, and then I quaked under the blanket, waiting to be struck down for blasphemy, and my fear lasted three minutes, then I slept.

I was carried, half-asleep and coughing, from my bed, and placed in the car. My memories are fragmented by chaos and sleep and cold, but I remember the house, now lit flaming, flickering orange, now siren-blue, now nacreous silver by the moon which watched it smoke impassively and made the firemen's hosewater a glittering rain.

We went back to the house on Christmas morning. Behind it, I saw dad squatting to pick up the wasp corpses where the nest had been, and now where there was a blackened void leading to what remained of our kitchen, where the fireman with the clipboard said the blaze had begun. Occasionally dad put a corpse in his coat pocket. I worried the wasps would betray me. I waited until he took his coat off in the hostel and reached into the pocket. No wasp corpses, but cigarette butts, and a lighter.

SAM GRAVENY

Sam Graveny is a creative writer based in London.

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THE SAMPLE
MICHAEL A. SHOEMAKER

SHE HAD GROWN TIRED OF holding the moon in her hand. This piece weighed exactly 1.7 grams, according to the digital scale behind the glass. Sarah turned the sample over in her gloved hand. The small gray lump the size of a raisin looked identical to the previous dozen she had already processed for her advisor this morning.

She tried to maintain her focus through the glass barrier into the nitrogen purge glove box holding the samples. The refrigerator-sized chamber was the most sterile environment for miles. No more than twenty molecules of oxygen and fifty molecules of water were allowed for every million nitrogen molecules. Her hands and arms were covered up to her shoulders by thick neoprene gloves protruding into the lifeless chamber. She rotated the sample tray under the examination light and watched it twinkle.

Earlier in her career Sarah would have marveled at the scientific value of such a specimen. Now she only saw dollar signs.

A kilogram of gold goes for around \$64,000. The Apollo lunar samples can be valued at \$200 million per kilogram, after considering the inflation-adjusted mission cost and the mass of the returned moon rocks. But of course, they are effectively priceless—national treasures owned by the American taxpayer. Most are securely locked away at the Lunar Sample Laboratory at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Priceless or not, one could always find a buyer.

“I’m finished for today,” came a harsh voice to her side.

Sarah jumped. Her thoughts quickly returned to the present.

“Do you mind closing out my area for me?” her advisor continued, “I’ve got a flight to catch.”

Sarah forced the corners of her mouth upward. “Of course not. Have a safe trip.”

He was traveling to the American Geophysical Union in San Francisco to present their work. *Her work*. He hadn’t published anything original in a decade. But *she* was the postdoc, and *he* was the research advisor. The pecking order had to be maintained.

She stored her sample and closed out her workspace. As she retract-

ed her arms, the black rubber tubes peeled away like twin pythons shedding their skin. The newly inverted gloves stretched rigidly into the laboratory space, grasping aimlessly at nothing.

She wasn't going to steal the samples. That had been done before. Now the security protocols had been increased.

No, she wasn't that stupid. It wasn't worth the felony conviction. The last guy to steal Apollo samples had earned himself eight years in prison. He stole 100 grams, not including the safe they were contained in.

Sarah was smarter than that. She wasn't going to steal a sample. She was going to forge one.

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome is a severe—sometimes fatal—respiratory disease caused by rodent infestation. The disease is transmitted by the inhalation of virus from the urine and feces of infected mice. Texas had forty nine known cases of hantavirus between 1993 and 2021. Sarah had researched these facts, because she was currently staring at the smashed corpse of a mouse in the corner of her office. The mousetrap had compressed the creature into an unnatural pose, black orbs bulging from their eye sockets.

She would have felt sympathy for it, but this was the third one this week.

Her office was located in a 'temporary' trailer adjacent to the sample processing facility. It was the same 'temporary' trailer that was first installed eight years ago, when a new office building had first been promised. But the most recent round of budget cuts ensured the new building was about as likely to be constructed as the next Moon base. Sarah had been forced to make do.

She sat at her desk, staring at her fiancé's photo taped to the artificial wood paneling on the wall behind her monitor. The padding of her discolored office chair was repaired with duct tape; she suspected the mice had been building their nests with its stuffing. The window-mounted A/C unit resembled a relic from the Mercury program. Its previously white plastic housing had taken on a patina the color of spoiled milk.

On her monitor, she scrolled through an inventory of lunar regolith samples. In her free hand she fidgeted with a small container of lunar dust simulant. It was normally used for engineering studies: similar bulk density, cohesion, abrasiveness. To the untrained eye, it was nearly identical to the real thing. She wondered what sort of container would look the most convincing. *Maybe if I gather it into—*

Ding!

An email notification interrupted her concentration. Her throat began constricting as she slowly read the sender's email address and subject line.

From: faculty-search@pgr.arizona.edu

Subject: Notification of application results

Sarah inhaled through her teeth and clicked on the message. She had long ago stopped preparing herself before this ritual. The result was always the same.

"Figures," she muttered to the dead mouse.

The job search had consumed a large portion of her free time. Her current postdoc appointment was due to expire in three months. She glanced again at her fiancé's photo. His music career was a dead end and would never sustain them both. They had joked about pulling up roots and moving to South America.

She retrieved her phone and stared at the encrypted messaging app, her finger hovering over the icon.

It's a victimless crime. The only people getting hurt are the guys who want to buy stolen goods.

She opened the app and pulled up the contact. It had taken some digging—a different kind of research—but she had found an interested buyer.

Maybe I'll just see how much he's willing to pay.

The air was sticky and the sun relentless: typical summer weather for Houston. Sarah swirled the plastic straw in her iced coffee, before pushing it away and forcing her hands into her lap.

Why did I suggest an outdoor cafe? A thin film of sweat had already formed on every square inch of her skin. She had gotten too

accustomed to the climate-controlled laboratory.

She resisted the urge to look at her watch. The meeting was supposed to be fifteen minutes ago. She stole a glance around the terrace; it was as empty as the previous ten glances. *Maybe this is some kind of test, and they are watching me right—*

“Hi Sarah, sorry I’m late,” came the voice behind her. “Traffic is terrible this time of day.”

Sarah? She didn’t remember using her real name. She watched as the man sat down opposite her. He was much plainer looking than she had imagined. He wore a baseball cap and sunglasses. His pink polo shirt was not yet darkened by sweat stains. He looked like any other random middle aged guy. Maybe that was the idea.

“No problem, just enjoying my drink.” She winced. *Is that the best you can do? Are you trying to sound like a nervous idiot?*

“You’re a very brave young lady,” said the man as he leaned back in his chair and propped one ankle on the opposite knee. His eyes were hidden behind the tortoise shell frames, but his voice sounded disinterested. It was as if he had recently finished a round of golf and was waiting for the waitress to bring him a cold beer. “Did you bring the sample?”

Sarah’s tongue felt heavy. She took a sip of cold coffee and forced it down her throat. She bent down and retrieved a small package from the backpack at her feet, then placed it on the center of the table. She refused to look at the item; instead, she scanned the surrounding cafe.

The man leaned forward and opened the metal clamshell lid.

“Are you sure you want to do that here?” Sarah asked. “Someone might—”

The man held the small vial in his hand. He looked at the gray dust for only a moment. He slowly peeled off his sunglasses and deliberately hooked them into his shirt collar. “That’s good. That means you are serious. We like working with serious people.”

Sarah leaned forward. “And the payment? The same amount we agreed to?”

The man was silent. Several seconds passed. “Sarah Miller. Please

don't insult our intelligence."

She watched as he unscrewed the lid and poured the gritty substance out of the vial and into her coffee. He then gave the mixture a slow stir with her straw. Her eyes met his; she expected to see anger, instead she saw boredom.

"Are you a serious person, Sarah?" The man's skin was dry, like he was immune to the humid air. Not a single bead of sweat was visible on his pasty skin.

Her eyes were transfixed. "Yes," she managed.

"Good. I'm glad we've gotten that out of the way. We have a different request for you. Something a little... unorthodox. But we are willing to pay."

Sarah's hands were sweating through the white gloves of the protective nylon suit. She shuffled into the sample room, her foot coverings sweeping across the smooth floor. The hum of the air handlers reverberated through her entire body. She reached into the pocket of her nylon suit and retracted a small silver tube the size of a cigar.

She did not know what the tube contained, nor the reasoning behind their plan. He had given it to her with explicit instructions. Her job was clear.

Luckily for her, the higher-ups had only improved the security protocols for preventing unauthorized *removal* of material; the protocols for introducing equipment *into* the workspace had remained unchanged.

Sarah's fingers trembled as she transferred the tube into the sample chamber. A few moments later, she was shoulder-deep in the glove box, her fingers struggling to manipulate the cylinder. She glanced at the wall clock. Her coworkers would be returning from lunch any minute. She found the sample he had specified. It sat undisturbed in its usual storage container: #53-001, a small piece of lunar basalt the size of a walnut. With a final twist, she freed the lid of the silver tube and tipped the contents out onto the rock.

She jerked backwards when she saw a clear viscous liquid cover the sample. The fluid resembled corn syrup, glistening under the

bright examination lights. There was just enough of it to cover the rock with a thin film. She quickly closed the empty tube and removed it from the glove box. *Make sure to incinerate the tube when you are done*, he had said. It was his last instruction.

Her job nearly finished, Sarah tried to think only of the drive to the airport. Her flight to Panama would be leaving that evening. The money would be in her bitcoin wallet within the hour.

As she closed out the workspace, her hands moving as quickly as the thick rubber gloves would allow, she noticed movement inside. She froze. The walnut-sized rock had rotated onto its side. Sarah's eyes were locked onto the specimen. The previously transparent film had transformed into a black, undulating membrane.

Sarah finished the exit procedures in record time. She paced in circles in the airlock as the disinfecting air washed over her for the last time.

What have I just done?

It would take several weeks before Sarah stopped lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering when someone would discover the adulterated sample. She had tried to settle into their new life abroad. Her fiance taught English. She worked the front desk of a beach resort and tutored local kids on the side. But the memories of that day in the lab were never far behind.

She saw the first breaking news report one morning as she sipped her coffee. Someone had discovered a new form of life in a previously unexamined lunar sample. She briefly contemplated coming forward and confessing. She could sell her story. It could be worth millions.

Sarah realized it was pointless. *No one would ever believe me.*

MICHAEL A. SHOEMAKER

Michael A. Shoemaker is an aerospace engineer by day and a writer by night. He enjoys writing techno-thrillers and science fiction, with a manuscript for a novel currently in work. He holds a doctorate in aeronautics and astronautics, and has worked on missions to Mercury, Venus, Earth, the Moon, asteroids, and comets.

This story is a work of fiction. Any opinions are those of the author, and not of the United States Government.

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THE OFFERINGS

A.K. MCCUTCHEON

THIS ISN'T A GHOST STORY. This is a love story.

I didn't know it was a love story in the beginning... when the offerings started to disappear.

Another morning. I shuffled into the kitchen and took two mugs from the cupboard. Then—remembering—I put one back. It's been a month since he went missing, and I'm still making coffee for two. Pushing aside the stack of mail on the kitchen table, I slumped into a chair with my mug, staring ahead with bleary eyes, seeing nothing.

My coffee had gone cold for I don't know how long when the doorbell broke my trance. I decided to ignore it, then I heard the rumble of a heavy vehicle departing.

The UPS delivery on the doorstep was a plain brown box from "Sylvia Hernandez, El Paso, TX." My sweet mother-in-law, Danny's mama. Squinting against the Florida sun, I grabbed the box and ducked back inside the darkened apartment. Strangely, with curtains closed to shut out the world, I felt less alone.

Tucked in the box was a handwritten note. I heard Sylvia's voice, the melodic twang of her Mexican birthplace:

Hola hija. You don't answer your phone. I worry about you.

For Día de Muertos, here is an ofrenda for Danny.

Call me.

Your mama Sylvia

The *ofrenda* was a small altar—shiny black wood aglow with luminous skulls and marigolds—and two votive candles in tall glass holders. I knew the tradition: offerings are placed on the altar to welcome returning souls during *Día de Muertos*, the annual Day of the Dead celebration.

It's a lovely tradition, but I don't believe the spirits of the dead return to us, no matter how tempting the offerings. In the foster care homes where I grew up, there were no prayers for the dead *or* for the living.

I closed the box with the altar still inside. Then, thinking of Danny, the memories ached, raw, tender, like an unhealed wound...

An outgoing Latino boy from a family rich in culture and tradi-

tions. A shy white girl with no family, no traditions, and no culture of her own. On our wedding day, my hands shook with panic: were we too different? Would we ever understand each other? Sylvia, somehow, knew. Her voice, soft, soothing. “*Mija,*” My daughter, “*El amor encuentra una manera.*” Love finds a way.

The flashbacks brought stinging tears. I fumbled for a Kleenex. My foot brushed against something on the floor: the crumpled page from the *U.S. Navy Times*. The words are seared into my brain. *Helicopter crashed at sea... pilot missing... search suspended... cause of crash unknown.*

Three weeks later, the Navy buried an empty casket with full military honors.

Danny’s family didn’t make the trip from Texas to attend the service. Sylvia is terrified of air travel and Danny’s brother didn’t want to leave her alone. I wasn’t there, either... still unbelieving, hoping against reason he would come home.

The days became a numb routine: stacking mail unread, eating food untasted, my thoughts haunted by an agonizing question: *was it my fault?* The pain of not knowing throbbed in my bones.

I ached with regret that I didn’t attend the service to honor his memory. But maybe there’s another way? I opened Sylvia’s box and unpacked the altar.

Searching through closets and boxes, I selected the offerings: a framed photo of Danny, handsome in uniform; the leather string bracelet he wore the night we met; the lacy garter I wore on our wedding day; and a handful of his favorite snack, shelled pistachios. I placed the altar on the only uncluttered surface in our small apartment: the tall chest of drawers near the bedroom window.

Another warm night. Drifting into restless sleep, a crescent moon glinting through the open window, candles flickering on Danny’s altar... I dreamed of helicopter blades splitting the air like giant wings, whirring and fluttering.

I woke early in the morning, feeling the effects of too little sleep, my body stiff, sluggish. I climbed out of bed and crossed the room to

extinguish the candles on the altar.

The pistachios were gone.

That's strange. They must have rolled off the altar during the night. I looked around the dresser, floor, windowsill. Nothing. Could it be—a cold shudder ran through me—a mouse, or worse, a rat? I called the apartment manager and scheduled an emergency pest control visit. Thinking about rodents inside my home made me queasy.

The pest control service found no evidence of rodent infestation.

I didn't sleep at all that night.

The next day, I stood in the shower, wet and shivering, looking at an empty towel hook. The laundry can't be ignored any longer. I pulled on some sweats and grabbed the laundry basket. Spotting a wrinkled T-shirt on the dresser top, I reached for it—

Danny's leather bracelet was missing from the altar.

My arms went limp. The basket landed at my feet.

I searched for the bracelet everywhere; it was gone. What was happening? My face flushed hot with dread. Has someone been inside my home?

The apartment is on the second floor. The only entrance is the front door, latched with a deadbolt lock.

The room began to whirl. Gulping air, I doubled over, fighting waves of nausea. After a few minutes, the worst was over.

I called the manager and confirmed what I already knew: she controlled access to the passkeys stored in a lockbox. No one has visited my unit, and there were no reports of suspicious activity in the building.

My head was pounding; the nausea returned. If only I could shake this anxiety. If only I could sleep. I called my doctor's office and requested an urgent appointment.

Back home after the doctor's office, all I wanted was a warm bath and a long nap. Dragging myself into the bedroom, I kicked off my shoes—and froze. A scream started to rise in my throat, but I couldn't draw breath.

The wedding garter had disappeared.

Danny's framed photo rested alone on the altar.

I don't know how long I stood, staring into the portrait's deep brown eyes, before my legs gave way and I dropped to my knees. I heard my voice, shaking, tearful. "Danny, was it my fault? I have something to tell you—"

The doorbell screeched. My body jolted at the sound. Rising groggily to my feet, I stumbled to the door and pulled it open.

It was Sylvia.

She was carrying a blue suitcase, the handle wrapped with an airport baggage tag. Sylvia, petrified of flying, traveled on two connecting flights to arrive on my doorstep.

Her face lit up with a dimpled smile... Danny's smile.

She opened her arms. "This is the Day of the Dead, *mija*. I wanted to be with you."

I collapsed into the embrace of the only mother I have ever known.

Later that evening, Sylvia sat beside me, her hand on mine. "So, tell me." As always, Sylvia knew.

Hesitating at first, then nodding, I told her everything... about the morning Danny said, "Let's have a baby," and I said, "Is this the right time to start a family? We have so many bills, and my work hours were cut. When you leave on deployment next month, I'll be all alone."

And he said, "Will there *ever* be a right time? Every time I bring it up, there are new excuses. I thought we *both* wanted a family, but now..." I felt the hurt in his voice, and then—I realized with a chill—an anger I had never heard before. "Got it. You don't want a kid."

"Danny, that's not it. Let's talk—"

That *wasn't* it. And we *had* talked about it, many times. But I could never find the courage to tell him the truth. The truth is, I am terrified of being a mother. No, I am terrified of being a *bad* mother. I'm ashamed I won't know how to nurture a child. I'm ashamed of the broken parts of me, broken and lost when I was a kid, moving from place to place, losing more of me each time. I could never find

the words to tell him. How do you tell someone who is fearless how afraid you are?

When I turned to face him that morning, I heard the front door slam with a force that shook the walls. He left without saying goodbye. That night, two uniformed Notification Officers came to my door.

I told Sylvia about the guilt crushing me with unbearable weight. Was he upset, distracted? Was it pilot error? If I hadn't said the things I said, would the crash have happened? Would he still be alive?

I told her about the disappearances from the altar. Sylvia's eyes widened, then closed. Her lips moved slightly, but there was no sound.

I knew what I must do next.

Taking a long breath, I told her the news Danny will never hear. "Sylvia, I'm pregnant."

As soon as I said the words, I exhaled. The pressure in my chest eased, and I was lightheaded with emotions: heartache and joy, sadness and peace. And relief. The relief of sharing the moment with the only person who can help me move forward without Danny.

Sylvia's eyelids fluttered open. Tears glistened on her cheeks. My own tears welled up and flooded. She shook her head and smiled. "Ah, no, *mija*. This is happy news. This is a blessing."

Folding me tightly into her arms, she said, "Tonight, we will keep vigil at the altar. We will tell him he will be a father."

Exhausted, I managed to lift my head from her shoulder to whisper, "Yes."

I needed to understand. I needed to know.

The waning moon glowed eerily through the curtains. We sat on the bed, propped upright with pillows. Time passed, minutes or hours. My head drooped and bobbed, resisting sleep... then I heard faint stirrings, whirring and fluttering, coming from the window.

Struggling to focus my vision in the low light, I saw a quivering apparition emerge from shadows shimmering in the moonlight. Gloved fingers rippled the curtains—black gloves like Danny's flight gear—then, the image wavered, changed shape, transformed into... a bird's wings, fan-shaped tail, shiny black feathers.

A large black crow landed on the altar, clutching a small silver object in its beak.

Sylvia switched on the nightstand lamp.

At the sound of the light switch, the bird hopped and flapped, dropped its cargo, and darted behind the curtains. Scrambling to the window in pursuit, I found the escape route: an opening where the mesh screen ripped from the frame. I watched the bird wing away into the dawning sky.

Sylvia slipped out of bed and stood beside me. “Your visitor brought you an offering.”

The bird had dropped a metal bolt fastener, a hexagon nut, on the altar. Grasping it between my thumb and forefinger, I rolled it back and forth, feeling its weight, the smoothness of the metal.

In that moment, marveling at the crow’s visits, searching for meaning in the bird’s gift, my mind calmed with understanding and acceptance.

Nuts and bolts keep an aircraft aloft. Nuts and bolts could bring it down.

I breathed the words, “It wasn’t my fault.”

Sylvia rested a hand on my shoulder. “Mija, of course it wasn’t your fault.”

A sliver of early morning light broke through a gap in the curtains, casting a slender beam on Danny’s altar.

Sylvia moved past me, reached toward the window, and opened the curtains.

When my son asks me about his father, I won’t tell him a ghost story. I’ll tell him a love story. I will say, “Love finds a way.” I will tell him, “Your father was an aviator, and once upon a time, he sent me a messenger with wings.”

A.K. MCCUTCHEON

California native. World traveler. Lifelong lover of words and moving pictures. She can be found clicking away at her laptop in the pre-dawn hours, until the Muses must toddle off to sleep.

UNDONE
MANU ST. THOMAS

YONA SHOULD NOT BE OUT here tonight.

He should have left Anka's house when she begged him to go, but he asked for one more kiss, and then another, and another.

The path to his village snakes through the valley. It narrows into willow-fringed walkways and bursts out into the meadows, where the air is smeared with traces of revels and bonfires. Above him, the moon hangs heavy with the seed of midsummer. And it's quiet, the kind of thick quiet that fills everything between the dirt and the stars, smothering the sound of his steps.

Everyone went home long ago and he should have too. The night is short but full of charm. Sweet breads proof inside the kitchens, under white towels etched with wishes of children. Wreaths hang in chicken coops, catching feathers and fuzz for signs of plenty. Unmarried girls with hair washed in rainwater sleep with bedstraw flowers under their pillows, to dream of their grooms. And no one goes near the fields after the witching hour, for tonight, the graces gather to worship the earthmother and hallow the fruit of her womb for the good of all souls that thrive on it. They come as beasts from riverbanks and crossroads, from mountains and caves, from windswept hills and whispering forests. Crawling, flying or skittering, they meet under the bursting moon and change into maidens with bells around their ankles and they dance their mad solstice dance.

Anka's kisses are still on his lips, the memory of her hair still on his fingertips. Yona summons the steaming impression of her body against his, again and again until it goes pale, then lets it rest for a few moments and calls on it some more. The lone oak ahead heralds the last turn in the road. He prays that Anka dreams of him tonight. And he prays for his legs to take him home faster, but he can't see well enough to run and there are rocks scattered on the path. Once he passes the lanky tree, it's two hundred yards to the vicar's cottage, the first house standing at the lip of his village. That's when he hears bells.

For a flash, he relishes in their glittery playfulness, before dread grips him. The sounds ripple through the night, at first slight and

clipped, like shreds of an echo. Yona covers his ears and walks faster, but they grow in clarity and fullness every second, until they morph into the enchanted heartbeats of a young dance, hastening, pulsing under his eyelids.

He must keep his head down and walk. Walk, Yona, come on. A little more and you can knock on the vicar's door and ask to stay there for the night. He sees Anka's face, but it's a reflection in the waters of his mind and the vibrations in the air stir it and make it boil. A drop of sweat trickles along his spine and he shudders. There's a warm light coming from somewhere nearby as if the moon is melting. His sense of reason squirms like a drowning dog, pushed down by the overbearing desire to turn and look.

The bells are thunderous. Feral thumps and rhythmic silver, coming from everywhere. There are voices too, chants that swell and shiver and rush through him. He is a wretched trespasser in a forbidden spectacle and all direction seems lost in the clamour. His legs wander, not knowing where they're going. Fear bleeds into temptation and Yona obeys the impulse and looks around him. He gazes at the sacred rite swirling in the field and it's like being struck by lightning and absorbed into their midst.

They are wild daughters of Gaia, with skin like quicksilver and hair that whips the night, tall and rapturous and he's hooked, frozen inside the maelstrom of their incantations. Under their heels, the grass shimmers with delight. Yona gasps for air but there is none inside their feverish circle. The graces twirl and bend and their hands rise and fall, drawing sparks from the darkness. They conjure hymns of gratitude and living prayers, in the true names of all the things that feed and breathe and mate.

The night feels immense and overbearing on Yona's shoulders and he crumbles under its unspeakable weight. Around him, the graces leap and spin in a dazzling gyre of silhouettes, blending into a ribbon of lightning and their chants grow louder, harmonizing to the secret chord of life itself. He vibrates to it, mute with enchantment, wrapped tight in their spellthreads, until the dance and the night and his mind burst and everything is white light above and below and he

dissolves in it.

Anka should not be out here tonight.

She snakes through the wooden gate once her parents are asleep and hurries downhill. Under her feet, she feels Yona's steps.

One year ago, on midsummer night, he left her house and walked the same path. She slept with clean hair and yellow bedstraw under her pillow and dreamt of their wedding. They kneeled in front of each other and the vicar put a cloth over their heads. He said the holy words, binding them as man and wife, and joy foamed in her chest. She held Yona's hands, but their grip turned violent and when she looked into his eyes they were lost and sinister.

Anka woke up at first light and ran toward his house. She stopped, drenched and breathless when she saw a small group of people gathered like curious birds around a strange lump. A woman was crying. For a moment, Anka wanted to run back, run forever until she died of exhaustion, but she went closer. When Yona's mother saw her, she opened her arms and sunk her head on Anka's shoulder. She had to gather all her strength to stand, with the woman wailing in her arms and seeing Yona on the ground, still breathing, but pale and empty like a husk.

He'd begged for one more kiss countless times and she indulged him. She'd urged him to go but she didn't want to let him go, and now he lay there, curled up and mad and his mother howled like she'd gone mad too. Anka squeezed her and whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Her boot rolls on a stone and the satchel she carries falls off her shoulder. The rush rips the reverie apart and draws her attention fully into her body again. She picks up the satchel, takes a deep breath and keeps walking. The darkness is still young and the moon's veil is sheer and gentle. Everyone spent the long daylight feasting, drinking and spinning in horas. Anka spent it preparing for this moment.

She loves Yona like she was made from one of his ribs and for the past year her love has been seething torment. There's almost nothing left of the boy she kissed last summer, when she should have sent

him away, but what she did instead was sneak her hands under his shirt. She remembers how he shivered a little. How her fingers moved on his skin and the delight she felt at the thought that Yona wanted her. Now he's a babbling spectre with white eyes tethered to something that wasn't meant for them. There is only one way to bring him back and she will bring him back. When she reaches the lone oak, she goes into the field, counting one hundred paces until she finds the hole she dug this morning. Beside it, there's the thick blanket she made, a wool quilt smeared with tar and encrusted with leaves, musk and pebbles. Anka takes off her satchel and pulls out a jar full of glowing bluebells that she picked by the stream, cutting their stems diagonally to preserve their luminescence. She leaves the jar by the hole and goes deeper into the meadow.

The constellation of Gaia glimmers above, waiting for the witching hour. Fear billows through her, but Anka gathers herself like pulling heavy ropes from the corners of her being until she rallies as one force.

There are pockets of heat in the air, big bubbles of condensed summer that burst when she goes through them, in split-second showers of childish delight. Anka follows their trail to where they congregate in a dense, sticky cluster. A mild veil of steam rises from below. This is the place where they will gather tonight. She kneels, takes the iron spike out of her bag and stabs the ground with it, leaving a few inches out. The warm soil breathes something almost like a sigh. Anka sighs too and she wipes her hands on her dress, picks up the bag and goes back to the glowing jar. There, she crawls into her hole, covers herself up and waits.

It's not long until she hears bells through the tiny opening she left in the blanket. In the beginning, they are faint crystal, windchimes stirred by a sweet breeze, but they become sharper and deeper and Anka's heart beats to their rhythm. She curls up, holding her hands to her chest, asking for forgiveness from Yona, from the earthmother, from everyone in the villages. The graces' chants seep into her and the shimmer of their enchanted choruses fills her hiding hole like she's in a bathtub full of moonlight. There's a strange pleasure in her

body, radiating against her misery and it's confusing and beautiful. She thinks of Yona, of running her fingers over his skin. That's when a ghastly shriek tears through the magic like red thunder, and Anka feels and hears wings and hooves and paws scattering, and then nothing but silence.

She pushes the blanket away and comes out, and the air is stale and heavy with the heat of a thousand dry summers and it smells like rot.

It hurts when he blinks, like there's a thin layer of glass over his eyes that he must shatter with his eyelids. Yona's fingers are stiff and trembling, but he can move them. When the world stops spinning, the shock of stillness makes him retch and the sudden movement sends a monstrous surge of pain through his body.

He vomits green smoke and once it's out of him and the clear waters of his soul flow back into his veins, he settles back and breathes. Slowly, he becomes one with his spirit again.

When he is fully awake and alive and can see in front of him, he sees Anka. She's laughing and kissing his face and Yona feels her tears on his cheek and it's like the first time he's ever felt something like this. He stretches his clumsy arms around her in a frail embrace and looks past her shoulder. The door is wide open and the sky is a bruise, laden with the promise of storms. He hears wails in the distance and a sordid miasma floods his nostrils. The road by his house is brittle and powdery and two chickens lay dead on it.

Anka wipes the tears and sweat from her face. The heat that rolls in from outside is thick like honey and there's no wind. She puts her hands on his cheeks and looks at him with delirious happiness and zealous love that knows no bounds and Yona feels like he's gazing into something forbidden again.

MANU ST. THOMAS

Manu St. Thomas is a writer born and raised in Romania, currently living in Germany. She has an MA in Linguistic Anthropology and is in her second year of a Creative Writing MFA at the Open University. She loves reading and writing magical realism and is obsessed with Marcel the Shell.

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WHERE THE DARK THINGS ARE

JULIANNE LOUISE PERLING

BILLY RAY GEST PULLED INTO Storyside at 10 pm. Driving through the gates, up the road, around the horse-shoe drive, parking outside the porte-cochères behind a dark-blue limo. In the Honda, Billy leaned to the side, scribbled a few notes on the legal pad, flicking his eyes up, back down, sure he was being watched from behind the bow windows of the mansion: couldn't tell for sure, but stood to reason the owner would be standing to the side in one of the windows, copping a view, trying to get a sense of Billy. Finished jotting his notes, Billy shut the car off, cracked the door, pushed it out; then for the first time set a foot down on the storied grounds of Storyside.

The front of the mansion was lit up brilliantly. Billy paused, standing next to the Honda in a waterfall of incandescence: every brick, every sheen of glass, every wrought-iron railing was bathed with light. Storyside's design was impressive, its array of opulence dizzying, and standing beside such an imposing edifice felt like a Lilliputian at the base of Gulliver. Billy ducked back in through the door of the Honda, swept up the legal pad and an old satchel, and in a swift motion had the legal pad slipped inside the satchel and the satchel strap on his shoulder; ducked back out, pushed the door of the Honda shut. Billy turned around, looking at the grounds of Storyside (*in the wastelands of night out beyond the range of bright lights were green carpeted hills and a forest going all the way to the road and out there somewhere a pond stocked with imported fish*).

Billy turned back. Looked at the limo, at the porte-cochères, looked up at the four floors, at the gabled roof.

It was said that Antoine Black, whom Billy was here to see, had purchased the estate not *in spite of* but precisely *because of* the stories. These were the stories the readers of *Fang* were interested in, the murder of Rufus Lepine especially—

"Mr. Gest, if you would not loiter please, do come this way."

Billy was moved from his reverie by the sound of the voice. It was not a British voice, not any kind of accented voice whatsoever, but a toneless, neutered voice. A disciplined voice, and Billy looked in its direction, at the entry beneath the porte-cochères.

The butler, thought Billy.

Billy straightened his slightly slouching shoulders, hitching up the satchel strap, and started around the iconic limo, stopped, the decal work catching his attention: dark arterial blood spilling out from claws that ripped open metallic skin. The man Billy was seeing was called the Ramsey Campbell of America. *“Blending the cosmic with the provincial, the grisly hand of horror reaches toward superlative art in Ant...”*

“Please, if you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Gest...”

“Yes; coming,” said Billy.

Billy followed in. Marble walls and floor and a corridor, and a butler’s heels *clicking*: up a few steps, entrance to gallery, along the corridor, through a dining hall, and into the atrium.

“Wait here,” he said, then crossed the atrium to a door and disappeared into it.

Soft voices. Billy listened, but couldn’t make out whose was whose, then the butler stepped back out.

“Through there, Mr. Gest. Mr. Black is waiting,” he said and walked off, his clicking heels disappearing somewhere inside the mansion.

It was a large office. Billy stepped inside and Antoine Black was in a Queen Anne chair behind a mahogany desk. In front of it, two chairs with crimson fabric and gold trim. Tall, filled bookshelves lined the walls.

“Shall we get started?” said Antoine Black.

“Thank you for doing this,” said Billy, coming in, taking one of the chairs, turning, looking around, nodding, then turning to Antoine Black.

“In here, wasn’t it?” Billy asked. “Where Lepine was found?”

Antoine Black looked at him a moment; then intoned:

“Yes. In here.”

“Animal attack they said, right?”

“If they said that, Mr. Gest.”

“But there was no, ah, corroborating evidence that it was.”

“You seem more aware of it than me.”

“You ever wonder? Get curious about it, Mr. Black?”

"Many things make me curious; not everything, Mr. Gest."

"Ever about how Rufus Lepine was killed?"

"Rufus Lepine was a butler. Perhaps the affair of managing this formidable house killed him."

"A... *haunted house*?" asked Billy.

"Are you not here to talk about me, Mr. Gest? If that..."

"Ah, Mr. Black, well, our readers at *Fang* would love to know how you come about developing your ideas. You are famous for your unusual story hooks. How do you come about that? Is it a visual process, say, organic, or does it come through a lot of hard work and revision?"

"The '*where do your ideas come from*?' question," drily said Antoine Black.

"Ah, well, yes, our readers..."

"It is not possible," said Antoine Black, "to tell you that. You would not be able to understand it in any way that is meaningful to you. I can only show you, Mr. Gest. If it is your wish..."

"*Show me?*"

"If it is your wish, I could certainly do that now."

Billy smiled. "Of course. Our readers are a dedicated bunch. They would love to 'see' how your ideas get made."

"You are mocking, Mr. Gest."

"Oh no," said Billy. "You have my curiosity."

"Then if you would, please follow me."

Billy stared as Antoine Black rose; sat there staring after Antoine Black, who came around the desk and walked over to what Billy assumed was a private

(*john? he wants to show me his private*)

bathroom.

Billy pushed himself out of the chair. Antoine Black waited.

"Yes," said Billy. "Okay? *In there?*"

"Distrustful, Mr. Gest? Has your curiosity withered? For the readers, you say. Yes?"

Frowning at Antoine Black. Billy now viewed him with the same contempt reserved for the tabloids and their articles claiming Elvis

was alive and in Brooklyn and raising his space baby—

*Click. And the door swung open, and
(marble and chrome and porcelain, oh my)*

Billy stepped in. *Just an ordinary rich man's bathroom.*

"The shower. Pull back the curtain, Mr. Gest."

"Jesus," Billy whispered under his breath, hiding a scowl, going in, tucking fingers around the edge of the curtain, snapping it ba—

"*Oh Jesus!*" Billy yelped, falling backward, his legs packing up and folding beneath him ("*Oh Jesus! Jesus!*"), the sink's porcelain corner edge grinding into his back—

"Oh Jesu—"

—holding onto the porcelain's cold edge.

"In case you were wondering," said Ant
*(bleeding darkness tub is bleeding darkness pouring)
(out trees and night and silver moon)*

when I got here, Mr. Gest. Don't know where it came from."

Billy stared, a dark hole, eye of a full moon staring at him in the center, a waterfall of darkness and moonlight spilling down into the tub, occluding what was behind it, a snow globe of trees and bats and night and moon sinking behind that web of skeletal branches, bats flapping, circling, dipping, Billy pinching his eyes, sharpening himself, nose leaning forwa

("curious, is it not?" said a voi)

and a brook, a quick little stream burbling with tatters of the moon carved apart by tree branches, his feet, wet, buried beneath the shredded moonlight, standing in the brook

(not in the tub not in tub not)

(in tub not oh jesus)

a wind shivers coldly, moves away, returns, shivers, drags his feet through the brook, bottom muck, he drags muck and leaves onto dry bank, thick, clotted shoes, space shoes, he walks up the bank in heavy space shoes, gathering more heaviness, swipes his foot on the ground, quick swipes, scraping it off, clumps marking up the grass, looking side to side, shoe sliding on top of the grass, backward, forward, whistling breathing and panting, wind arriving again, noisily

scrapes off muck from the othe

bats chirring, flapping, he stops, plods to a rotted, cored-out log, picks up a stick and sits there and Billy starts t

first one drops, *chirp*, *chirruping*, bites his ear, flaps away, then another, looks up, sky is filled with black fla

irrup, *chirrup*, another, there are hundreds of flapping bodies blotting out the moon, another flaps down, *chirps* in his hair, he jumps, swings his hand, hits a soft fast body that bites, turns, falls over the lo

ircling him, running, legs sweeping through tall grass, running through a clearing, fists swinging flying up at hordes of flapping biting gripping demons, stopping, teeters as he turns, flapping in his face, claws digging in, *off*, *motherfuckers*, twists, swings his body, yelling, *off*, swings, his blistered knuckles smacki

illy falls forward and lets out a scream as the ground hits his knees and sharp grass spears his eye: flapping above him and biting and digging and clawi

uried in the grass, bats flapping off, a lunar aura spreads over the night and the tall grass and him, a distant sound of flapping, breeze whistling, he sticks his head up, grass, tall grass, blowing, shadows, lunar light, shadows, fetid revolting air, he looks up, it watches, it watches him, sits there, trembling, trembling, he trembles, it watches, and th

he sits up, crouches, sits there, *no*, *no*, *no*, enormous creature, dark and gray and watches with behemothic eyes, *no*, *please*, *no*, he begs, *please*, crabbing back, fingers clawing grass and dirt, *no*, crabbing fast, it smiles, faster, back, the animal lets out a gargantuan scream and presses its fetid breath into his face

it tumbles down the incline with him, the stink of it, he rolls over, it tumbles, he jumps up, stumbles back, it barks as it hits a tree, stumbles, stumbles back, falls into a bed of moss, watches it shake and twist over and turn and glare, and then it screams, and he jumps, falls into a tree, holds it, pushes himself away, and into the trees, runs, his breath like flapping kites, runs, branches are breaking behind him, breezing through the trees, jumping logs, and out

down, goes down the steep hill, faster, pedaling, down to the bot-

tom, climbing, climbing out, up, digging in, climbing, his legs pushing him up, out, grabs the top, pulls out, runs across a field splashed in moonlight, runs to the edge of the world, runs to

lights ahead slipped from view, but still he ran, ran breathless toward whatever it was, whatever Storyside was, toward the lights, running downhill, running up, slipping, fumbling back to his feet, and on on on to Storyside, crossing the field of moonlight, crossing the last yards, the last steps, to the Honda.

And in there Billy sat, sat breathing hurriedly, breathing raggedly.

Oh what the christ. Oh what the—

A knock.

Billy turned; looked out.

Antoine Bla

Billy rolled the window down

“Did you find what you were looking for, Mr. Gest?”

“Wh-what was that?” Billy stammered out.

“That,” said Antoine Black, “is where the dark things are. It is the cold sweat on your neck when you lie awake in the middle of the night trying to fall asleep, Mr. Gest. It is every horror you tried not to imagine. Pleasant dreams.”

Billy watched Antoine Black walk back into Storyside. Billy sat in the car; eventually the lights were turned off, and Billy sat in the dark. *Jesus christ!* Billy tried to get his breathing, his heartrate, his whole frickin’ body, under control. *He couldn’t write this story*, he was thinking as he dug into his pocket for the keys. *There was just no way he could.*

Dark things, my ass.

Shit!

Billy yanked his hand out and searched the steering column: no keys. *Shit, where are the frickin’ keys? Where are the goddamn motherfuckin’ keys!*

Digging down under the seat, Billy’s fingers felt around.

What? Where the fuck...

Not there. Frantic. Digging.

Where the hell did I put...

Hot, fetid breath.

Froze.

Turning.

Oh fu...

Enormous head, dark gray fur and bulbous eyes, large dagger teeth,
smiling in throu

JULIANNE LOUISE PERLING

Julianne Louise Perling was born and raised in Wisconsin, where she still lives.

THE LAVENDER GARDENS

ANNA HILL

MANON WAS TOO YOUNG TO feel used up, but certainly too old to feel fresh. Her name played music to the tune of Massenet, and befit a different sort of girl, a girl who drowned in her own youth. It was a burden of a name on the anxious shoulders of a teenage girl, and teenagers have so little to formulate their identities on besides the instrument of their own name.

So Manon was running. She was running along the village's dimly lit streets, slowing only when she passed a pub, full and rowdy and desperate to shake off the week, so that the bouncers wouldn't find her odd. The cobblestones shot up like great daggers under her feet, but she had no time to consider tripping, falling, breaking her ankles. She hardly had a breath to wonder if they'd suspected her.

Of course, she was used to sneaking away. She had done so every weekend for months, slipping off the premises of her boarding school. It was a nice school, tucked away near a medieval village in the South, the building itself a great old chateau with blue stone walls and a neatly trimmed garden. Visitors admired it, and took photos, and the rich CEOs who had sent their daughters were pleased by the postcards and the precise handwriting. But Manon's bed was poky and it was drafty in her room, and daily phone calls did nothing to reduce the distance between her and home.

Manon wasn't the only girl to sneak away at night; the headmistress had a policy of turning a blind eye. It was easier, Manon guessed, than bothering their parents. The girls all went to clubs, and at first, Manon had gone with them. She had been determined to make a good impression: to be fun Manon, a team player, a flirt, and not a shut-away like she had at her old school. She watched the other girls and mimicked their clothes, their makeup, their stances; oh, they all seemed to know exactly where their feet fit on the ground. Manon smiled and danced and laughed and sang along to lyrics she didn't know. As the clubs grew hotter and more crowded, her mind seemed to separate from her body, her heart accelerated and she rubbed her hands on her skirt. Her smile faltered, but she maintained it, and danced, and laughed, and thought of how far away her mother was,

and the windows of her home, which would be lit with yellow lamps and candles and not LED lights.

The others met boys, older ones, but Manon never met any boys. Was it because she was ugly? Maybe; she hadn't thought so, but that must have been the reason. They never showed much interest in her, and after a few months her nights became patterned. Manon soon dreaded Fridays, terrified of the prospect of returning home alone, her careful makeup sweating off. And she dreaded the days that followed, while the other girls told stories of their inevitable fun. The shame of being unpicked was too much to bear; so Manon invented a boyfriend, and every weekend, she snuck away to see him.

The boyfriend was called Brett, and he was American, and older, and a musician, and lived in the city but visited Manon on weekends. The girls were awed; they latched onto Manon's increasingly lavish descriptions of their meetings, foaming at the mouth. So every Friday, Manon said goodbye, and wished them luck, and snuck away into the village. There she made her way to the lavender gardens, where they would never come.

In the lavender gardens, everything was peaceful and the moon was always full. The paths were wandered by inward couples and Manon had a favorite spot, just off the main path, under a warm streetlight. The moon and the streetlight lit Manon's weekends, and under them she sketched. Rarely did her charcoal pencil fixate on anything beyond the gardens in front of her, except for the moon, and Brett, and the great old Hospital that sat at the other end of the park. The Hospital was nearly as beautiful as the boarding school—it had been built by the same architect, though it had long ago been abandoned to the romantic imaginings of village schoolgirls and tourists, to Manon and her pencil.

She drew what she saw: the great towers, the chipped façade, the cold stone, the flowers at its feet. And she drew what she remembered of it: the legends dismissed by locals only to creep into their stomachs in the middle of the night. Of screams echoing for decades, of a revenge plot, a crime of passion. The story had changed so many times that no one recalled if it was a man or a woman taking revenge

on their cheating lover, murdering them and leaving their body as a calling card. The details were rough, but whatever version one recalled, they felt its legacy clearly. Once a year, the police received reports of screams heard from within the hospital walls; occasionally a sighting of a man standing at the upper floor window. They investigated, but never discovered anything. It was a legend owed to imagination and rumor, but it always ended in one fatal image: a man's body, lauding over the front door of the hospital, hanging by his coat from a lantern hook.

Manon had heard the legend from the other girls. The building fascinated her—grief and love and miracles had surely happened inside, all which surely echoed through its silent halls just as loudly as any imagined scream. Over and over, page after page, Manon drew the Hospital. She was never afraid, for at any given point there would be some laughing couple strolling nearby, some dawdling police officer, and her schoolmates were always far away in town.

Sometimes, when Manon grew tired of sketching, she put in her headphones and lay in the flowers. Her eyes shut, her soundtrack pensive, yearning, carefully curated. And suddenly she might feel Brett's presence, the fantasy, creep over her skin. She never saw him, only felt him—his breath on her neck, his hair on her arms. What would her mother think of him? No doubt his laughter would be welcome behind those warm windows.

One night, Manon heard him whisper: "I'll get you out of here."

She didn't open her eyes. Instead, she waited until he retreated, his breath, his voice, his heartbeat gone. And then she picked up her pencils and drew.

It was in this moonlit sketchbook that Manon's fate was suddenly printed. Her schoolmates had begun to notice the patterns of their own weekends, and grew curious about Manon's romantic adventures. They had never seen a picture, never met the boyfriend. It began with her roommate, a nasty girl called Laura, nicking the sketchbook from Manon's bedside table. By Thursday, it had gone through all of their hands, and they sat in Manon's bedroom, awaiting her arrival.

“What’s this, Manon?” asked Laura, her voice high and sweet and haughty.

Manon suddenly began to tremble. “Why are you looking at that?”

“Is this Brett?” Laura gestured to the man in the sketches. He appeared on nearly every page, handsome and bright.

“Yes,” whispered Manon.

“Are you sure?”

Manon suddenly snatched the sketchbook out of Laura’s hands.

“Of course I’m sure. It’s none of your business.”

“You spend a lot of time together in the lavender gardens,” said another girl, the blonde one, with a piercing through her eyebrow.

“We do. So what?”

“So,” said Laura, gently taking back the sketchbook, “Is everything you’ve sketched in here true?”

“Of course.”

“Even the bit where he’s in the window of the hospital?”

“Yes, of course.” Manon cursed herself.

“How did he get inside? All the doors are locked.”

“Have you tried?” Manon asked, feigning an air of confrontation.

“Of course, everyone does,” replied Laura, tossing her hair. “But you’re saying you’ve succeeded?”

“Brett picked the lock,” Manon improvised. She wasn’t sure why the lies were rolling off her tongue. Perhaps it was their look of incredulity, perhaps she wanted to impress them, perhaps it was fear. “And we went inside.”

“Can he get us in?” piped up the blonde girl. “I’m dying to see it.”

Manon twitched. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Well... we might get in trouble, that’s all.”

“Oh, let us try,” said Laura. Her eyes glittered. “Please. It’ll be such a great story to tell back home.”

“I don’t know,” repeated Manon. Her throat tickled; she touched the fabric of her sweater.

“You know,” continued Laura, “people say he haunts the place. The man who died there.”

“Which one? If everyone who died in a Hospital haunted it—”

“I mean the one who was found hanging off the hook, in front of the building. My cousin told me the police get reports all the time that someone is living there, but whenever they investigate, there’s no one.”

Manon quietly recalled the voice in her ear, the one who had promised to take her away.

“Say you’ll help us get inside,” repeated Laura. “Please.”

“I really don’t think so.” Manon hated herself for not saying yes.

“I told you all,” muttered Laura, turning to her friends. “He’s not real. That’s why she won’t help us.”

And Manon suddenly felt she might die. The venom, threaded through Laura’s words, her stare, trickled up Manon’s chest and throat. Every word, feeling, note seemed to settle on her chest, congealed, hard, unwavering. Her bones grew tight and her breath shallow. What must they think of her? She gripped the fabric of her sweater but it did nothing to drag her back down to Earth; instead, she floated in the air, away from her body, away from the torturous eyes of her friends.

“Fine,” Manon squeaked out. “Fine, we’ll go. Tomorrow evening.”

The girls exchanged a look, less satisfied than they might have been had she simply admitted to the lie. But Manon’s relief was short-lived, and twenty-four hours boiled inside her. She instructed them to meet her at the lavender gardens, and they did. The girls arrived outside the stone Hospital, in beautiful coats, with their hair done perfectly, their makeup, their conversation. They stepped with stability, without anxiety; they were armed with the gift of being born correct and right. They waited for Manon outside of the Hospital, and looked around for the man in her sketches. Manon left the boarding school, too. She was armed with a dozen more lies—Brett couldn’t make it, I can’t jiggle the lock myself, why don’t we go to a pub and forget about this? She wobbled as she stepped, and caught her clothes on branches and breathed too loudly. As she reached the garden entrance, she imagined the Bourbons facing the Jacobins. She couldn’t walk with their confidence, so she began to run.

Manon ran, and glanced over her shoulder, and feared they'd see her. She ran past the entrance, and through the village. They'd be looking for her, wondering where she had gone. They'd be talking about her. We were right, they'd say. But suddenly Manon didn't care. If they wanted to go inside, they'd find a way; if they wanted to catch her out, they'd already done so. And Manon wanted to go inside; she wanted to be behind the warm windows, the yellow light and the flickering candles. She thought of Brett; she was leaving him behind. He couldn't come with her. She had to leave him behind, to be mauled by her schoolmates who were no doubt still looking for her. Instead, she kept running until she reached the station. And, as her train pulled away in search of a better weekend, she thought: let them look.

ANNA HILL

Anna Hill is originally from Philadelphia and is currently completing her Master's in Public History at the University of York.

MARGINALIA

IAN SMITH

I FOUND THE WRITING IN a book, scrawled within the margins, filling any space the printer hadn't touched. At first, I thought it was a design gimmick, one of those metafiction puzzle boxes that winks at the reader, but then the words smudged beneath my thumb. *This is not for you.*

I stood alone in the library, staring at the book in my hands. It had no plastic to protect the cover, no barcode, or Dewey Decimal for me to follow. The author was Clarice Lispector. I found her likeness on the back. Her face was submerged there, behind a violent shade of crimson, staring at me like she knew I would steal her book, like she'd been waiting all day. '*Near to the Wild Heart*' was its name, and as I thumbed through its pages, I found a forest of marginalia, written in many different hands, holding a conversation I couldn't reach. That's when I saw it.

In a corner of the fifty-seventh page, amidst a sea of scrawling notes, so thick you could hardly see the paper, something changed—something small enough to be the flitting shadow of an unknown particle, or a mote of dust floating through the light. But it wasn't either of those things. It was a speck of ink that had dripped from somewhere above me, and landed there, in that dark forest of scratching lines and curves. When I squinted, I could see a distant sense of order, with sharp deliberate edges. Something had just been written. In an impossibly small, and barely legible font, it read: *This is not for you.*

Surely it had been there all along. Any disturbance of motion I'd seen had been some optical trick, depending on the light and my angle toward the text. I abandoned my skimming, and read through a page of Lispector's writing, deliberately avoiding the marginalia. I told myself it would only muddy my impression of the text. This is what I read.

"When I suddenly see myself in the depths of the mirror, I take fright. I can scarcely believe that I have limits, that I am outlined and defined. I feel myself to be dispersed in the atmosphere, thinking inside other creatures, living inside things beyond myself. When I

suddenly see myself in the mirror, I am not startled because I find myself ugly or beautiful. I discover, in fact, that I possess another quality. When I haven't looked at myself for some time, I almost forget that I am human, I tend to forget my past, and I find myself with the same deliverance from purpose and conscience as something that is barely alive. I am also surprised to find as I gaze into the pale mirror with open eyes that there is so much in me beyond what is known, so much that remains ever silent."

I closed the book, and after checking the hall for cameras, I opened my backpack, and stuffed the book inside.

At first it didn't bother me. It hadn't had time to fester. But I felt the weight of it as I left the library—an awkward sort of tenseness in my stride. Once outside, the autumn air struck my face, sweeping the street in waves of ochre leaves, and tossing my hair as I turned toward the sidewalk. There was a quality in the wind and the light which had led me there—to the library and the book. And the same sort of whispering now led me toward the sea. I would go to see Iago.

Iago was a friend and a mentor, living alone in his crooked, wind-blown shack by the shore. We had a similar taste and similar questions, and whenever he opened his door, great mountains of literature loomed and swayed behind him, perpetually on the verge of crashing to the floor, and flooding the place with history. When I brought him Clarice, it was the first time I'd seen his smile go slack.

"Where did you find that?" he said.

"At the library."

"You're not ready. It isn't safe."

I smiled nervously, expecting him to crack but his eyes remained hard. "You know that just makes me want it more, don't you?"

Iago snatched the book from my hands with the speed of a viper, before slamming the door in my face. I remember a cold wind howling from the sea as it skirted the cliffside, as if the door's slamming had sucked it from the beach.

"Iago!" I pounded on the door. "Hey!"

The door opened a crack, revealing one wild eye and half a crooked nose. “How could you be so stupid! Did you read it?”

“I opened it in the library. I only read a few lines. I thought it was interesting.”

The door slammed shut again and I heard a multitude of locks slide into place, before Iago’s feet pattered away, deep into the house. I stepped away from the door and circled the yard. The shack was bloated, waterlogged, and the only parts left were the strongest, those which had stood the test of wind and rain and time.

With the ocean on my left, I found the hole where his cats made their highway to the world. A space no wider than my shoulders. A hole that led to Iago’s closet beneath the stairwell. It was a maw of darkness, lined with the remnants of a feline economy—cairns of rodent bones and nests of shredded fur. I knelt and peered inside, and before I had time to think about it, before I had time to reconsider, I scraped along on my stomach through the musky shadows, ducking my head beneath buttresses of cobweb and half rotted beams.

Old leather and mildew hung in a bouquet of garments above me, and I tried my best to avoid touching them as I pulled myself free.

“Iago!” I called. No answer.

Iago’s house always felt larger on the inside than it looked on the outside, and its layout was always changing, in flux with his taste. Today it was especially labyrinthine. I could smell the fireplace in his study, the scent of pine and pitch and smoke growing stronger as I crept through the halls.

When I found the doorway to his study, the fire roared, casting tongues of light that licked the shadows, revealing bits of parchment that covered the walls, like the scales of some ancient paper beast. They breathed as the fire breathed and the fire breathed as I did, slower than my heartbeat and faster than the waves outside. Iago’s pipe sat smoking on his desk.

As I entered the room, the fire settled, sending bits of charred paper flitting from its mouth, and my book was there, sitting on the floor. A gust of wind nearly doused the flames, before opening the books pages, where they sputtered with the wind until they stammered,

slowed, and found a place to settle.

I can't remember what I read there, and it wouldn't matter if I could. Those words may mean nothing or everything to you, but I knew they were my mirror, and as I gazed at myself, not just a piece of me, but a chunk of my soul sloughed off and died. And another part grew. And it was painful. And fast.

I didn't care where Iago had gone too. Something told me not to worry. I had my book now and I could read as I pleased. And that dusty old shack was no setting to read by, so I left for the splendor that waited outside. I followed the path that skirted the cliffside and took my shoes off so I may better feel the sand beneath my toes.

It was uncanny to have an ocean so near; to look up from your reading with restless thoughts and find their cadence in the waves. The ocean was angry that day, as if its power had been taken for granted, and it needed to be seen for what it was, a churning, roiling blackness; dark enough to birth the world, dark enough to consume it.

I found a hollow in the sand to make my nest, shielded by dunes and grasses. The book felt at home in my hands there, and I fell into its depths like falling into sleep. When I awoke, I was gazing at the moon. It had pulled me awake like it pulled in the tide, stirring something ancient I'd forgotten, something that felt like a person. And then I saw your face, and all I could do was scream but I knew you couldn't hear me. You flipped through my pages without heading my words, where they twisted in my mouth like a hook. *This is not for you.*

IAN SMITH

I live on the Oregon coast, where I build landscapes with my father and read as much as I can. Sometimes the reading hurts though, and I need a break. Then I write until I can't stand my own voice and go back to reading again.

Instagram: [@ianbwsmith](#)



THE SUMMER OF THE RUSSIAN MOON

ATHENA ABRAMS

REALLY, IT WAS JUST THE summer holidays of 2015, but for me, it will always be the summer of Russia. And the summer of the Russian moon.

I didn't want to accompany my parents to my grandparents' dacha in Kazan. I basically couldn't imagine anything I would like less. I'd never been to Russia, and I didn't even speak Russian, not anymore: I stopped speaking the language even grudgingly, even at home, when I first went off to boarding school, aged eleven. As anyone who has ever been a preteen knows, the last thing in the world you need is something marking you as different. Plus, stopping drove my parents mental, which, of course, made giving up the language that much more appealing.

That year, with relations so strained between Russia and the West after Russia's takeover of Crimea, my Russianness was that much more alien, that much more menacing. This would just be one more thing to ruin my social life: 'Where did you spend summer hols?' 'Russia.' *Fantastic*. But for some reason, it was then that my parents decided that my father visiting his parents and his England-born daughter connecting with her roots was long overdue.

The dacha rambles three stories and outbuildings through a dense patch of Russian forest. The house is a mossy green, trimmed in curlicued woodwork that's painted rust red. You'd think the world had passed this place by and it sat still in the days of Vronsky and the Karenina; one expects women with heads covered in kerchiefs, a dairy house to be curing kefir and mushroom hunting expeditions to be organised.

Upon our arrival, on a summer's day much hotter than I thought Russia would be, my parents and I are hugged and kissed and then the adults partake in vodka shots chased with pickles while my cousins and I are given little glasses of dark brown *kvass*, the traditional Russian drink of fermented bread, and more back clapping, hugging, crying, even singing ensues. I've never liked kvass, but I drink it slowly, staring at my three cousins who stare back and fire off the words of English they've learned in school. It all feels uncomfortable

to me, especially the singing.

But the truth is, I couldn't respond in Russian even if I wanted to. Maybe I told myself that I stopped speaking Russian to annoy my parents, but that was only part of it. The language has become all knotted and gummed inside me, thanks to all sorts of things. Thanks to the memories of nursery school and the confusion of the teachers when I would mix my languages. The awkwardness of actual Russia-born Russian children arriving at my boarding school assuming we would be friends, and their consonant-torturing English shaming me into retreating into passing as British. Though their thick fur coats and thicker accents seemed still to throw a pall over me by proxy. And then last year, the invasion of Crimea, and suddenly I'm one of them whether I want to be or not, with my investment banker father and foreign surname, in the eyes of the teachers, the other girls. It's all of that—it has hooked up all my Russian words and gummed them into a little hot ball in my chest that I can't open.

It's not until the third day that everyone goes mushroom hunting, outfitted with baskets, my father trading his London suits for relaxed country clothes. I'm honestly not sure I'd recognise him if I passed him on the street.

I quickly find myself alone, my cousins holding little interest in a girl who won't speak their language and can't tell an edible mushroom from a hole in the ground. But anyway, I don't *want* to be like them, with their weird kvass and their mushrooms and their pickles. I don't want to speak their language, even if I can understand others speaking it perfectly well. I'm *English*.

Apart from the area cleared for gardens and lawns around the dacha, the woods press close, a dark and ancient presence. The first night I couldn't sleep, and I'd woken and crossed to the window, touched the single pane of old-fashioned glass, cool on my fingertips, pressed my nose to it to look up at the moon. The woods had appeared brooding, slightly creepy.

There's certainly something sombre about the woods, even on a bright afternoon like this, and I'm soon worrying that I've gone and

stupidly lost myself, when I notice a clearing and come out blinking into full sunlight. I haven't circled home though; this is another property, wildly overgrown. The house must have once been much like my grandparents', but it has faded to greys and beiges, and the roof has rotted in under a burden of moss.

I cross to a window. Inside, the floor is littered in rubbish, but it's the walls that are eye-catching: they've been painted in dayglo hammer and sickles, now faded.

Sometime later I do find the others, fortunately, and I want to ask my grandparents about the old house, their lost neighbours, but as always, the Russian words are stuck in that hot ball and I don't want to pry them free.

That night, I can't sleep again. I think of the crumbling dacha, the dayglow walls. Out my window, the dark woods are inviting: the trees and the sky don't care who you are, if you are Russian or English or a confused combination of the two, they just breathe the night in and dream. Perhaps these melancholy woods aren't sombre but sunk in memories of a past that stretches endlessly back to a time when this forest covered the whole continent.

I pull on some leggings, slip on my shoes and a knit jumper, tip-toe down the staircase, one hand on the wall. Outside, the summer-warmed night breathes a greeting on my face, and the starlight is silver raindrops catching and gleaming on the jumper's woollen threads.

As I reach the path at the edge of the woods, the night's gentle rustle falls hushed, and I step softly on the leaf litter, enjoying the silence broken only by the whisper of starlight brushing through the trees. There's a deep smell of earth here, of centuries of leaf turned to loam, of bark and pine needles, piercingly fresh.

Out of nowhere, I find myself thinking of bears. After all, Russia is famous for them.

I freeze, the beauty of the night broken in a rush of fear. Just yesterday, my grandmother told a story of catching a bear going after the chickens, scaring it off. What am I doing out here? I'm a fifteen-year-

old girl alone in the dark Russian woods, and I'm not even Russian, not really. I turn hurriedly toward the mouth of the path.

Just as I reach the clearing, I pause again, the hairs on my arms prickling. But it isn't a fearful noise that's made me stop—it's a glimmer of music. I hesitate, uncertain. It's a bit like singing, borne faintly on the hints of breeze that lightly twirl my hair. But it's not like any singing I've heard before.

I am both frozen to the spot and urged to run, but whether back to the house, to my warm, safe child's bed, or toward the music, I can't tell. As I stand peering into the darkness of the trees, breathing the rich night air, the underbrush lightens—the leaves and needles silvered as if an immense full moon is rising.

The light is irresistible, and I leave the trees for the clearing around the dacha, look up at a sky that is dancing with light. I know what I'm seeing, though I've never seen it before: it isn't just the moon, it's the aurora borealis. The sky is so bright that the house is a dark silhouette against shifting layers of candy-coloured light. I drop to a log at the edge of the woods and watch the sky open-mouthed, joy rising within me, my fear forgotten.

But the music is still there: voices singing, clear long notes with no words, both high and low, woven together, voices or perhaps bells. As the music moves closer, I begin to note other sounds beneath it. There is the clop of hooves, few or many I'm not sure, and the gentle tinkle of small chimes as though on a harness.

Just before the sounds reach what must be the edge of the woods, the hooves stop. I crane into the shadows, half wanting to run, half sure that nothing so beautiful could be harmful, entirely sure that I want, more than anything, to see the source of that music. The shadows are shifting but nothing is clear, it's more like the darkness beneath the trees is swirling, resetting itself. The music falls silent, and the colours of the aurora dim, leaving behind that vast white moonlight.

At last, I speak, low. 'Who's there?'

And the darkness under the trees begins to solidify, in places begins to glow with the colours of the sky. Then slowly and carefully,

from the shadows of the trees, steps an immense antlered reindeer, nearly twice the size of any beast I have seen; it appears cobbled of the shadows themselves. The reindeer steps purposefully into the clearing, head held high, and I see that while the creature bears antlers, they are not its own antlers: they are antlers fashioned on a vast mask that covers a horse's head, and they catch glimmers of the moon and send the silver rays shimmering down their lengths. The horse tosses its mane, stamps and paws the ground, and through the mask I catch a glimmer of eyes like stars.

The singing resumes, swelling from everywhere and nowhere, from the trees, perhaps from the sky. Hours pass, and I don't notice returning to the woods or the dawn coming, but suddenly I find myself rubbing my eyes in the silence of the forest, a silver-blue morning rising around me. Then I hear voices, normal voices.

My cousins are in the yard, running about and pointing eagerly at the ground. 'Horse! Horse!' They cry to me in English as I step once more through the trees. Indeed, the ground around the dacha is trampled in hoofprints, as though a whole herd passed in the night. My grandmother leaves the house, crosses to me, smiles down at me. Somehow, I feel that the lies forming in my mind about an early morning walk aren't going to do the trick with her.

She leads me to a bench by the vegetable garden, pulls me down beside her.

'What did you see last night? What did you see, Ksenia, in the lights? Did you see the horses? I saw them once, when I was a young girl.'

For a moment shock makes me tongue-tied. 'What are they?' I ask at last.

'The forest keepers of the old legends, the riders on the moonbeams. Have you heard of them? They speak to the earth and the heavens, and they are the mouths of the Earth's spirit, if they choose to speak. Or so the legends say. I saw them once—I stood just there.' She points off toward where I too had stood, near the path. 'I watched the moon in the sky, the brightest moon I had ever seen, and colours I thought were not of this world, and the horses rode by, from there

to there, and vanished into the shadows of the trees. Some of them wore masks of antlers.'

'I don't understand,' I say, my mind spinning.

My grandmother laughs faintly. 'I don't think that they are something for us to understand, child. There are many things in these woods. We don't need to understand them all.'

It isn't until later that day that I realise I spoke to her Russian, and the words came easily.

ATHENA ABRAMS

When she's not traveling, Athena spends her time at home in her study, editing other people's words and writing words of her own.

PAYBACK FOR HAMBONE

NOAH KENISON

CONTEST WINNER

HAMBONE DIED SOMEWHERE AND SOMETIME in the night.

He lay by the base of the tree that was Grandpa, beneath the drooping limbs of ripe and overripe apples.

Living in the country, you got used to the lightning and the big fires. You got used to the raccoons that killed chickens without eating them, too, and the ticks that stuck to your legs, sucking until you plucked and popped them. Things died. Things hurt. That's how it was... but Hambone was a dog—a black mouth cur—and he wasn't afraid of lightning or fire or raccoons, and he was smart enough to get a tick off himself without even having thumbs.

And Hambone was dead.

He lay by Grandpa, in a bag, while Bobby explained.

"Someone shot him right in his neck," he said. "Don't look at him, though. I know you wanna see... but you shouldn't." He grabbed an apple, cut a crescent around its edges with that weird, hooked knife he'd stolen a while back, then tossed the fruit into the nearby field.

It was hard not to cry, but it didn't count if your eyes just watered, so I sat there, watering my eyes, trying not to let any out. "He never bit any sheep or anything. He just barked at them to rile them up. You know that."

"The Morrisons are bastards... all of'em."

"Yeah..."

Bobby shook his head. "He was a good dog... What are you gonna tell your dad?"

"He's not here."

"Again?"

"We gotta bury Hambone," I said.

"So you're just gonna let the Morrisons get away with it?"

"Help me dig."

"Alright..."

We did it on the right side of the tree, away from where Grandpa had been buried, and away from where the apples tended to fall and from where the birds would poop as they munched on the fruit.

The sun snuck out from its hideaway to watch, casting away the

Moon and bringing orange and purple and light into the world.

The first time anyone saw Hambone, he looked like one of those sick deer, the skinny ones whose skin sticks to the ribs that Grandpa used to pass on but Dad always shot. He moseyed onto the porch and started chewing on some old possum bones, and of course, I gathered bones up from around the house and filled the bowl up, but I never told anyone that.

Grandpa shooed him away with a reed but Hambone came back the next day so Grandpa smacked him again with it and Hambone yelped and ran off. This happened for weeks, until one day Grandpa came back early from the doctor and caught me petting Hambone.

He was sweaty and grumbly, and he threw up a bit in his throw-up bush, but afterward, he brought out a big, bony, ham, and it was settled. A week later and Hambone was sleeping on the couch, in the old, dusty, indentation that Grandma had left before I was born. No matter how much food I snuck to Hambone, he'd always sit by Grandpa and they'd snore and grumble in their sleep. That was until Grandpa passed. Then Hambone slept with me.

When the hole was halfway done, Bobby made a big show of wiping sweat off himself and taking a seat.

"So what are you gonna do?"

"What?"

"You've got to do something back to them..."

"I guess," I say, tossing dirt over my shoulder. "I gotta talk to my dad."

"When's he back?"

"I don't know."

Bobby shrugged. "I know what I would do if some bastard shot my dog."

"What?"

"Do something to them."

"Dad would kill me."

"They shot Hambone," Bobby said, pointing to Hambone's body bag. "He's dead and gone. And you're gonna let them off scot? You know what their fridge of a daughter said to me the last time I saw

her? She asked me out, and when I didn't say nothing, guess what she said? She said better tell your friend to keep that mutt off our property. She knew what her dad would do, and look! He did it." Bobby frowned at the Morrison's farmhouse a half-mile away. "Look, all I'm saying is they technically had the right to shoot'em, so you can't call anybody about it. And your dad won't do anything, cause, well... you know. He won't. So that leaves you and me."

I put the shovel down. Get them back...

"Listen—what would your Grandpa do?" Bobby asked.

Grandpa would have kept Hambone chained up. He'd have built a fence or something the first time Hambone got caught barking at the Morrisons' sheep. Grandpa would have figured something out.

I kept digging. "How deep should I put him?"

"You're not listening, man. We gotta hit'em back. Nothing crazy, and nothing that will hurt them, but we gotta do something. For Hambone's sake."

The Morrison's farmhouse and its many windows loomed below the sun.

"We got clouds moving in tonight to block out the Moon," Bobby said. "You sneak over when it's dark and just cause some havoc. Kill a couple chickens—maybe kill that goat that little Miss Morrison is always hanging off of. Maybe steal a sheep or two or trash that little grove of theirs. Can't do anything too insidious, but you can scare them good."

"You're sure he shot Hambone?"

"He's got bullet holes in him. Who else? Mr. Morrison told you himself he'd shoot'em if he kept coming over there. You can't be surprised it happened," Bobby said. "Now look, what I'd do is wait until it gets real dark tonight, 'till the Moon goes behind the clouds, and then I'd sneak in and take care of business."

"I'm not gonna kill anything."

"You don't have to kill nothing." With his hooked knife, Bobby drew a picture of my house and the Morrisons' land in the dirt. "There. That grove of trees. Right by the window to Anna, The Ogre's window. Yep. Take some gas, throw it on those trees, and light

a match. Kaboom! That's what they deserve: a good kick in the ass. That's what I would do, anyway, if someone shot my dog."

A fire... No animals would get hurt, even if the Morrisons deserved that.

"Right is right," Bobby said. "They started it."

"Alright."

Hambone's burial could wait.

I spent the rest of the day gathering everything a person needed to burn a few trees. The matches came from Dad's stash, only a couple so he wouldn't notice. The gasoline came from the old push mower nestled among the briars in the back. The mask came from the general store, four and a half miles away by foot, since my bike was broken. And the gumption, well, usually Hambone would have given that to me, but I pretended I had it and that was enough.

We met up at dusk, near Grandpa and Hambone's half-dug grave.

"We can sneak through the fence in the south," I said. "And then it's a straight shot."

"We?" Bobby said, drawing long, curved, lines in the dirt with his knife. "Someone's gotta finish Hambone's grave."

"You're not coming?"

"I gotta bury Hambone... but if you really want me to, I could leave him out even longer. You're 12, aren't you?"

"Yeah..." I said. "Never mind."

"I'll give him the nicest grave a dog ever had and then when you're done, come back and I'll say some words for him. My dad taught me some nice things to say when someone dies."

"Alright."

We waited for the sun to descend and eventually, the Moon, brimming with light, hung in a dark, cloudy sky.

"Good luck," Bobby said as I headed off with the gas tank and matches and a mask, and a little gumption.

"Alright..."

The chinking of the shovel faded soon.

When the Moon was hiding, I rattled ahead toward that little grove of trees on the Morrison's property. When the Moon was shining, I

lay flat or behind a tree, and sifted through memories of Hambone.

I thought about when he'd wait at the bus for me, to and from school. He'd been there when grades had come in, when I'd tried to change the bleak F's and D's into B's. He'd been there, too, when Dad had found out and stripped his belt off... and Hambone had snarled at Dad, so he took the belt, too. And Hambone had been at Grandpa's funeral, wagging his tail. He must've known where Grandpa was going.

But Hambone would never wag his tail again, not on Earth at least, and Mr. Morrison, with his yellow teeth and his big nose full of pores, was to blame. A person ought to pour the gasoline right on their house and light it. That would be fair. That's what someone deserved for shooting a dog who never bit anyone.

I reached the Morrison's little grove of trees just as the Moon appeared, and started pouring. The gasoline soaked easily into the roots and the bark. A few lights were on in the big ranch house. Abby Morrison played with her hair in the mirror. Mr and Mrs. Morrison were somewhere inside, planning on the next dog they might shoot, maybe.

The Moon disappeared, and I lit the match and dropped it. Fire engulfed the tree, illuminating the world behind me as I fled over roots, through bramble, faster than anyone has ever run, slower than only Hambone after a squirrel.

Back at Grandpa, Bobby was gone and Hambone's grave was still unfinished. The Morrisons swarmed around their house, a flaming beehive, which leaked fire into the field... toward our property.

The flame leaped the fence and caught our trees, rolling through them without realizing that one land was owned by a dog-killer and the other, by a dog-lover. Black smoke and fire devoured the Morrison's house while they swarmed and yelled. And then it reached our house.

I pulled Hambone's body into his unfilled grave and ran.

Eventually, the fire department came and brought their hoses that sprayed hissing, useless, water. The fire rolled over and through our house and then promptly died, content and smoky.

They asked me questions and I told them that I didn't know where Dad was and that the water in my eyes was from the smoke—that it wasn't tears—and again I ran. They looked for me, but sometime near midnight, they finally left. The Morrisons, too, left, in their car, with a few suitcases, Mrs. Morrison clutching her daughter, and Mr. Morrison, the dog-killer, rubbing the water from his eyes.

When they and the Moon were gone, and it was finally quiet and dark, I snuck back to where Grandpa and Hambone were and waited for Bobby. It smelled like waxy, burning, hospital bills and magazines... like Grandpa.

It took a few minutes for the Moon to mosey out.

Grandpa's bark was crusted and dark and dry, a black drought. His branches were black, too, and all of the fruit was gone and there was nothing to do but bury Hambone. But not without seeing him one last time.

I unzipped the bag.

Hambone was stiff and cold, but not bloated yet, and not burnt.

Poor, poor, Hambone... and poor Grandpa. Water welled in my eyes.

In the moonlight, a long, thin, wound glowed in the fur near Hambone's neck. It wasn't a normal bullet hole, not like how they look on a deer, but more like a crescent, a thick gouge parting the fur, like an apple sliced with a hooked knife... and not a bullet hole at all.

Headlights appeared and overpowered the moonlight. The house where Grandpa and Hambone and I used to watch TV was black and crumbling.

Dad sat in his truck, the headlights illuminating the charred house, and me, and what was left of Grandpa, and cold, stiff, Hambone, with the crescent slashed in his neck.

NOAH KENISON

I'm here to write stories and chew bubblegum... and I'm all outta gum.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

A.C. WISE

PAYBACK FOR HAMBONE GRABS THE reader with a strong voice right away. The characters feel distinct, and the prose and dialogue create an immediate sense of who each of them are—from the narrator who wants to believe the best of others even when they’ve been hurt by life, to the curmudgeonly but ultimately caring deceased grandfather, to Bobby, the manipulative friend, and the stray-turned-loyal-pet-dog, Hambone. Each of them feels fully realized, which is all the more impressive for the relatively short length of the story.

The author effectively creates a sense of tension by providing enough information for the reader to realize what is going on, without cluing in the protagonist, creating a sense of unease and even dread. The main character’s choices feel inevitable, but also rooted in what the reader knows about them, and their actions feel earned. Because the reader is so fully immersed in the narrator’s point of view, even when they do make the choice to do something bad, they remain sympathetic. The reader sees the impossible position the character is in and feels for them, rather than being disappointed.

The descriptions and language are evocative, creating a sense of setting and place. When the odd, curved knife is introduced, it comes with a clear picture of the kind of character who would wield it. Similarly, the description of the dog, Hambone, making his way into the family feels real and grounded, and is nicely done. The main character leaving bones for the dog, and the grandfather grudgingly coming around to accepting the dog, along with the dog ending up loving the grandfather best, perfectly illustrates each character’s personality, and feels true to life.

The imagery of tears and eyes watering provides a lovely through-line for the story and creates a nice emotional touchpoint. The main character holding back tears and blaming their tears on smoke at various points adds to the sense of place, effectively conveying the environment and the people who live there, showing what they consider strength and what they consider weakness. The narrator’s choices, and willingness to go along with Bobby, make perfect sense, given the context of their life.

Little details throughout—the indent left by the grandmother on the couch, the narrator’s memory of trying to alter their grades, and the way the grandfather wouldn’t shoot at deer, but the father would—all build to a heartbreaking picture, and make the world feel lived-in. Overall, *Payback for Hambone* is a poignant story, with nuanced characters and a rich setting, that draws readers in and keeps them immersed throughout.

A.C. WISE

A.C. Wise is the author of the novels *Wendy*, *Darling*, and *Hooked*, along with the recent short story collection, *The Ghost Sequences*. Her work has won the Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic, and has been a finalist for the Nebula Awards, Stoker, World Fantasy, Locus, British Fantasy, Aurora, Lambda, and Ignite Awards. In addition to her fiction, she contributes a review column to *Apex Magazine*.

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