

ELEGANT LITERATURE

MADNESS AND MONSTERS



#025

Elegant Literature Issue #025
Madness and Monsters

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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 This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.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
NOW NOVEL
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

MADNESS AND MONSTERS

Write a story involving Madness and Monsters, and a skull.

Lock the windows and bolt the doors. Hole up in your house—it's the safest place you know. They call you crazy, but you're not. You know you're not. And only you can stop the monsters from getting in...

History is laced with frightful creatures. Maybe the stories drive us to madness, or perhaps hallucinations craft the narrative. Can we trust our own thoughts? Delusions, delirium, and doppelgangers. Dancing plagues and shared psychosis. The Jekyll and Hyde's live among us, no longer outcasts but holding positions of power. People chase Big Foot and the boogeyman under their bed. They believe their lover is an imposter while happily raising a changeling. Werewolves, wendigo, and will-o'-the-wisps. Why do dragons appear in nearly every culture? From harmless not-deer and dangerous cryptids to the eldritch of the stars, the siren call lures us deeper, until we no longer recognize the face in the mirror. Until there's nothing left but you, the monsters, and the madness.

This contest invites you to explore Madness and Monsters, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

Guest Judge
SHIV RAMDAS

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

A.C. WISE
LINDZ MCLEOD
OGHENCHOVWE D. EKPEKI
BEN GALLEY
AI JIANG
RICHIE BILLING
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

Awakening	M.P. Siddell
Carnival Of Madness	Brian Bosader
Coiled	Becca Martin
Dearest Departed	Amanda Cessor
Flourishing	Eli Gilman
Fragments between the Flash- backs & Forgiveness	Troy Earnest Cooper
Hellfire	David Bachman
Love Bite	Aly Kuch
Love is Madness	Diane Belmont
Minotaur	Jaime Gill
Mother's Bidding	Tyler Brines
My Father, The Doctor	Tanner Burke
Part of the Patch	Catherine Tally
Shadow Self	Gabriela Villanueva
Somebody to Worship	James Northern
Teeth	Phoebe Rosser
That Familiar Aching Sting	Stephen Kramer Avitabile
The Fate of Karl Bjornsson	Victor Louis Strömberg
The Impossible Die	David James
The Invitation	Jill Sbi
The Monster in My Head	AE Flint
The Problem At Vitality Scientific	Oscar Monahan
The Shape of Madness	EM Levine
Unfolding Futures	Justin Orr
Until Death Do Us Part	Lloyd Earickson

EARLY BIRD PRIZE

THE NOW NOVEL PACKAGE

**AWARDED TO E.M. LEVINE
FOR “THE SHAPE OF MADNESS”**

THE STALKING DEATH

RANIA E.

IN THE UNFORGIVING HEAT OF a relentless 1970s summer, an enigmatic man stalked the arid borderlands that separated Texas from Mexico. He was smartly dressed in a maroon suit, with brown leather shoes tipped with a metal that shone like gold. All proper and all. Not a local, that much was obvious. However, though he did carry himself with the style of those from up north, on the West Coast, no one could deny that he seemed oddly suited to the harshness of the landscape. His face was common. Not handsome, not striking or charming either. He had the look of a regular American man in his late 40s or early 50s. But oh how it was stern. Arid like the surrounding desert, as if it had been sucked up of any goodness in the same way the land sucked up rainwater. Something about him brought to mind a sand-coloured prickly pear. Except that just from looking at him, one knew the inside was no sweet fruit, but rather a rotten mush of *something*.

When he walked into the lounge of the hotel on that sultry Saturday, no one realized what he was. People continued their conversations, smiling, laughing, swearing. But those who had a nose for trouble instinctively made themselves smaller, quieter. Suddenly, nervous glances flitted about, as if some primal instincts had warned them of the invisible presence of a predator. One child in particular—a little girl with soft brown pigtails who wore denim overalls and had pink bow ties on her shoes—tightened her hold on her oblivious mother's hand, sinking further into the flower-patterned folds of the young, blonde woman's dress. Of course, the mother was oblivious, nattering away at her dismissive husband and her hawkish-looking sister? mother? Whatever, it did not matter. The girl, however, the girl *looked* at the man. And children's eyes see the truth of the world in a way that adults' never will. So when she looked at the sinister skull tattoo that peaked through the casually opened dagger collar of his off-white shirt, the little girl burst into tears. The day was hot, but her heart quivered at the sight of the pulsating fanged skull that glowed red-hot under the low light of the dark wood interior. She might not have been able to tell her frantic mother what had scared her so, but deep down she knew. She knew she was lucky. For it was not her that

the bad man was after.

The man was here for Bambi. Or at least that was what he had named her. She was a gangly thing, all limbs and coltish legs. It fitted her perfectly. After all, wasn't he the hunter and she, his prey? The last few months had been spent in hot pursuit of the girl. At first, she had not known of his desire to kill her. In their first—totally planned on his part—encounter, she had thought him to be an overly intense patron at her diner. She had been uncomfortable, but she had thought that it was part of the job, as unpleasant as it was. Stares were nothing new. But things had grown scarier when she had started seeing him everywhere.

The man enjoyed a good chase. And a prey that doesn't know it is being chased was no good. So he had slowly started to show himself to her, always on the edge, always too far to be able to do anything but unsettle her. He had followed her everywhere, making sure that she knew without a shadow of a doubt that no place was safe. He had waited until she had grown sick with paranoia, gaunt and under such stress that even going to the mall's toilets had become impossible, for fear that he would be there, lying in wait. She had started pointing him out to people to ask them if they too thought "that man over there" was following her and had begun having full meltdowns when they looked at her like she was crazy. Her realization that none but her even could see him had led her down the path of madness. The man was familiar with this game, and so he savoured her fear, her slow descent into a panic-fuelled delirium as she slowly started to wonder if maybe she was the one who was bonkers. Because surely, if no one could see him, then she was the one who was defective. That particular part was his second favourite. Humans do not taste gamey by nature, but it could be arranged through such a process. Fear and despair were the best when it came to giving flavour to the flesh, after all. She had grown so distraught that her scent had nearly driven him to cut short his hunt.

Yet he did not have the heart to skip his absolute favourite part: the confrontational phase. Oh, how delightful it had been to hear the quiver in her voice as she tried to put on a façade of strength, yelling

at him from afar that she wasn't scared, that he wasn't real, that he would never be able to get to her. How sweet had the terror on her face been when she had awoken to see him standing next to her bed, teeth on display as he loomed over her, lips stretched in a large, unnatural smile.

And of course, after a while, she had done as all prey before had: she had run away. And he was ever so pleased to see that she had been quite the slippery prey. From Oregon to Texas, she had truly put an effort into making things more fun and engaging for him. There were very few things that could rouse excitement within an immortal Wendigo. And at a thousand-year-old, the one constant delight to be found in his wretched existence was food. So there he was, and there she was. She had tried and she had failed. He had picked her, played with her, let her marinate further to sweeten his meal, and now he would finally have her. For he was inevitable. He, whose name in the tongue of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth meant The Stalking Death, had reached the end of his hunt.

The locked door yielded easily under his strength and he opened it with calculated slowness, sending a burst of pheromones to subdue the wild-eyed and shivering girl that waited for him in the darkened room. She was curled onto herself on a settee. Her red hair was dirty and matted, left loose around her gaunt frame, and her slight freckled hands clutched so hard onto a gun that the tanned skin of her knuckles was white. A high keening sound akin to the whimper of a beaten dog left her quivering mouth as her wet and hopeless green eyes took in his ominous and unnatural mouth. He shushed her kindly, as one would soothe a child, and it was with a fanged smile, eerily reminiscent of the fanged skull tattooed in glowing red on his chest, that he shut the door behind him. The click of the lock sounded like a gunshot in the silence of the room. Her hold on her gun trembled as she tried her best to combat his allure. Yet it was all for naught. The girl had been brave, the girl had been strong. But the time had come for him to reap his long-awaited reward.

Tonight he would feed.

And tomorrow he would find a new prey to sate his desires.

The girl screamed as he took the first bite of his feast.

RANIA E.

When Victor J. Banis wrote, “A good story is a dream shared by the author and the reader”, Rania took it personally. Inspired by her grandmother, who was a great storyteller, and encouraged by her bookworm of a mother, Rania decided that she wanted to become a writer. Decades went by, notebooks were filled, and her dream remained alive. Rania loves to write about anything... except herself, that is.

HOUSE-WIFE

JO DE GROOT

May 21, 1957

This morning I took down all the curtains on the first floor and washed them in the new Machine. It seemed too easy somehow, like I was cheating. It used to take me a full day to wash them all, and my hands would be red as a raw steak by the time I finished, but the Machine did it all in a few hours. I hung the curtains in the yard and watched them float like ghosts in the warm breeze, creating my own little world. They dried quickly, and I had them ironed and back up by the time my husband got home. My hands were smooth and white, and I'd painted my nails blood red. I'm not sure about the curtains though. I'm sure the House feels I've cheated.

May 23, 1957

Today I washed all the bedding in the Machine. Is it right to say I washed it, or should I say the Machine washed it? Yesterday I bought some lace and made a lovely valance for the kitchen window. I will make more for the other windows. If the curtains now take half as long to clean, I may as well double the number of curtains. I can tell the House approves.

May 28, 1957

We have another new Machine. This one washes dishes. It was very expensive, and we are the only ones on our street who have one. My husband is very proud of it. Strange, he has never been proud of me for washing dishes. Does he prefer the Machines? Are they better than me? They are faster and more efficient, so I suppose, yes, they must be better than me. I can't fault my husband for preferring them.

June 1, 1957

Yesterday I finished all my work before noon. The house was clean and silent, and I didn't know what to do. I hoped the House would suggest something, but it didn't. I could feel its resentment about the Machines. It wasn't getting enough from me, but I didn't know how to give it more, so I left. I went to the cinema. I had hoped for a romance, but instead there was a movie about Machines taking over the world. Of course they would. They're so much better than us. I was almost sad when they were defeated. The movie was terrible, but I loved it. I will go back next week.

June 5, 1957

Today the movie was about a plague of the undead. "Zombies", they were called. Corpses who continue to walk and move as if alive, unaware that they're not. Would my husband notice if I were a living corpse? Would I? The House would notice. The House doesn't like the Machines. It wants to be loved by a living thing.

June 28, 1957

I have been to the cinema nearly every day. I have seen women fall in love with monsters and women become monsters and I have longed to be one of them. I have seen a woman grow to the height of a skyscraper, towering above the city, and I have imagined what it must feel like to look down on screaming multitudes, or to crush a car beneath my heel. I have watched a woman shrink to the size of a mouse and I have dreamed of being small enough to scamper through the walls of my beloved House, to hide from everyone and explore every inch of the world I have nourished. I have watched a woman transform into a wild, fierce panther and I have dreamed of being feared, of being powerful, of my claws tearing through a man's flesh. I have seen women fall in love with aliens, robots, and hideous

creatures, and I have marveled that I ever wanted to watch anyone fall in love with a man. The House no longer minds that I leave in the afternoons. I still keep it spotless, still give it my time, my energy, my love. It misses me when I'm gone, but it loves to welcome me home. I tell it stories about monsters, and it loves them as much as I do.

July 2, 1957

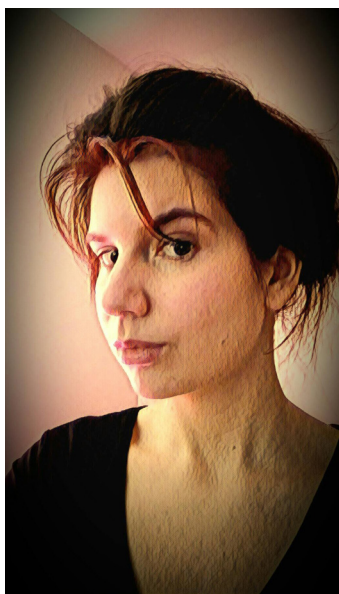
My husband is annoyed with me. I haven't told him about the monsters. He wouldn't understand. He says I have been serving too many TV dinners lately. I love the tidy trays, everything in its place, every food neatly tucked into its own little compartment. True, the food is not what you would call "good", but it is quick and convenient and very modern, and those are his favorite things, aren't they? Perhaps the next Machine he brings home will be one that cooks. Perhaps he can find one that will wear a dress and lipstick, that will kiss him goodbye in the morning and bring him his whiskey in the evening. The Machine could take care of him, and I could take care of the House. He can have the Machines, and I will have the monsters.

July 10, 1957

Yesterday my husband said he wanted to sell the House. He said he wanted to buy a big apartment in the city. He said all the Machines in the House make it more valuable. He has always talked about the House as though it were his, but the House and I both know that it is really mine, and that nothing could separate us. This morning my husband tripped on a corner of the rug that was somehow curled up. He tumbled down the stairs and hit his head on the tiled floor, a pool of blood forming around his skull. Did I kill him, or did the House? I'm not sure, but I suppose it doesn't really matter. We are together now. I am grateful to the Machines after all. It is thanks to them I can be a monster. Perhaps I shall grow claws.

JO DE GROOT

Jo de Groot lives in the Canadian prairies in a small basement apartment that she tries to think of as a hobbit hole. She spends far too much time reading, dreaming, and thinking about writing, and not enough time going on adventures, eating cake, or actually writing.



THE MEADOW

BRANDON PAUL

MY MOTHER USED TO REACH up through the soil in the Spring. She'd give me her hand, fingers twined through mine, and from deep down in her bed, she sang to me. A lullaby, it was. A love song, it is, and I can still hear it if I listen to the wind through the trees. I can hear her telling me that she will never let me go. And she warns me to never forget her sacrifice.

There was a time when I felt content. Spring afternoons, I used to lie in the meadow with sun warmed grasses growing up around me. Birds flitted high in the air above me. For hours, I'd linger, holding to my mother's strong hand. With eyes closed, I felt the entire world spinning; the wind rushing in my ears. My body was pulled in every direction, but I held tight to my mother, and she saved me from flying off into space. She kept me grounded. And to stay present with her, I pressed my ear to the earth and there it was, my mother's song of daffodil bulbs and endless childhood Springs. Her sweet words reminded me to never forget; and never let go.

But that was long ago. I missed a Spring or two or maybe three. There had been other loves in my life at that time; other adventures. I found escape at the beaches with sun tanned friends. There were long walks through the cool woods, holding other people's hands. I sought out red kisses behind the schoolhouse. And I nearly forgot my mother completely when I lay in the beds of strangers.

In the darkness though, in the night, I conjured my mother in my head. I mouthed the words to her song, and I repented. Oh god, I repented there in the middle of my sin. From whatever bed I found myself in, I apologized in silence and prayed for her forgiveness. I knew she would be disappointed. I knew those fingers, reaching up from under the ground, would find only dandelion fluff and the wild ivy leaves. She wouldn't find me there to cling to her and she'd know the extent of my discretions.

When I did return, when Springtime arrived after the rain, my mother's hand came slowly. The fingers had grown thin of skin and mostly bones they were. I twisted my warm fingers through her cold ones. I listened for her song but it was faint. It was nearly a whisper. For a long time, I lay there, eyes wide, and my mind was distracted

at the changes around me.

The meadow had gotten smaller. The trees had grown over. The boxwoods and the ferns had encroached, and the spring grasses held more weeds than they had when she first fell asleep. Her grave marker was aging. Ivy twisted its webs across her name and decorated the gray stone in a soft, mossy hue.

I closed my eyes as the world spun. I tried to hold tight to her fingers, but I began to slip. I began to fall away, and tears stung my eyes as her fingers unknotted from mine.

“Mother, no!” I cried.

“Don’t go!” I begged.

“I’m sorry I’ve been gone.”

Her hand wriggled, tugged, and pulled away. Swiftly, it disappeared down into the ground.

I screamed at her then. “You left me!” I bawled. Tears fell, watering the grass. I’d hoped they’d sink deep into the soil for her to feel my pain. “You can’t leave me!”

The earth rumbled at that moment. Birds lifted from the surrounding trees and called threats at me from the air. The breeze went cold. The wind turned sharp and stung my face and my mother’s song rose up like a war cry from under the soil.

“As long as the daffodils grow, I will never go.

And your childhood years will fade, but never go away.

My darling, return to me on Spring’s first day.”

“Mother,” I spoke into the ground. “I’m here. I came for you.”

But it was already the end of Spring. On that afternoon, Summer began in earnest. The sun rolled up like a powerful monarch to rule and for hours and hours and hours the light baked the meadow. Mother’s cool green grasses turned yellow as piss. The trees grew thin of leaves and the trickling streams became dusty ditches, cracked and dry.

The flitting birds moved deeper into the darkened woods and the earth no longer became a place I could lie on for blissful hours. A set

of silver lights reflected deep in the forest shadows, always set on me.

Winter blew in after months of heat. There was no autumn. No bright orange and red leaves to fall and cover my face. There was only the scorching hot and then the bitter cold.

I tried in vain to apologize, to show her that I did not let go. But soon snow covered mother's meadow. Even with a heavy cloak around my shoulders, I could find no warmth. With boots making deep holes in the drifts, I marched out there, hoping against any hope that her song could break through the snow, fill up the silent white meadow.

"Mother?" I called out and my voice broke icicles from the tree branches. "Can you hear me?" I shouted, pushing my gloved hand down through the snow, touching the hard earth. "Bring back the Spring," I told her. "I promise, I'll stay here with you."

Something moved with hunger in the shadows of the wood just then. I felt it before I heard it. Something darker than the trees themselves and far more sinister was lurking. I drew back, crouching behind my mother's great stone marker. I watched and breathlessly, I waited.

Mere moments it was before a silver-eyed wolf took one step into the meadow and raised its great head. Its hair was midnight black, matted and mangy against its feral body. The large nose lifted and sniffed at the air. The beast snarled, revealing a nightmare of razored teeth. Silver eyes like moonlight sharpened, surveying the open space.

"Mother," I whispered. "Help me, Mother! Save me!"

It was a slow walk into the meadow for the wolf. Step and step and purposeful step, head turning side to side, silver eyes deadly focused.

My heart jumped wildly inside my chest as I prepared myself to run. Moving in the opposite direction of the monster, I kept my mother's headstone between us. She was my only barrier. She was truly my only safety in the open meadow.

The wolf moved, sniffed the frozen air and found my footprints in the snow. He turned toward me then, his silver eyes glowing with rage and hunger.

He growled, dropping his body into a dangerous crouch.

“Please Mother,” I whispered. “I need you. I need you now!”

The hind legs of the wolf sprang open like a catapult releasing its deadly weapon. The huge, hairy body flew into the air and pointed itself directly at me.

Crying out, I fell back against the grave marker. I threw my arms over my face and just as the mouth of that great beast was opening to bite me apart, the ground opened up.

Long skeletal arms reached from out of the earth to grab the wolf. A terrifying skull rose up above those arms. It was my mother’s skull. Her jaws were wide in a silent scream and her eyes, each of them was like an eclipse. She turned toward me as she hugged the wolf tightly.

“Mother!” I cried out.

Her skeleton was draped in a beautiful blue dress. It blew up into the air, wrapping the body of the wolf in its folds. The fabric held tight those long, strong legs. The stitching trapped those sharply clawed paws. As she fell back into her resting place, holding the beast tightly, the wolf howled in horror. The earth trembled as it came back together to close over the top of the grave, sealing the great wolf inside the chamber with my mother.

I fell after them, but the grave was already shut. The earth was hard again and frozen.

I panted, lying there on the cold, cold dirt. “Thank you,” I breathed.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t been here for you,” I told her.

I made a promise that I would return every Spring. And though my mother no longer sang, and her hand no longer reached up through the ground, I still returned.

Throughout the rest of the year, I found safety and love in the arms of another. I found joy and promise holding hands with a living person. And the world spun, and she held me as my mother had done, keeping me grounded. Days slipped by and children passed through my arms.

But the first day of every Spring, I gave to my mother. And when the nights came and I reflected on her, sleeping underground, it was a bittersweet bile that I tasted. How I missed the mother of my youth, dark haired as the raven, magical as the witches she loved. And then

demanding and angry at the life she was losing.

I played her story in my head. I spoke my mother's story to my own children. I mourned her loss with my wife who comforted me and soothed me and sang me her own lullaby.

And when my wife went to sleep, I returned to the meadow; the secret meadow where the dead can still touch the living, and I buried her there beside my mother.

As I grow old, as I lie here in the meadow on this early Spring morning, I can hear the birds. And if I listen closely, if I close my eyes and press my ear to the ground, I can hear a lullaby, soft and sweet as the Spring rain.

BRANDON PAUL

Brandon Paul is an aspiring writer. Having written many short stories, his current endeavor is a novel of fantasy. When he's not writing, he works as a correctional nurse in a county jail, collecting bits and pieces of stories that inspire him to continue his craft. He works monthly with a writer's group and enjoys the motivation and company they provide.



DEATH SHOULD BE FINAL

NOAH KENISON

DEATH IS GOOD. NO, NOT just because it pays for the yacht and the trips to Bali, and no, not because my wife says so. No one says it's always pretty or timely, the insides of a car after it thwacks into a guard rail at 150—no—no one is saying that.

Allow a professional necromancer to crack open your skull, pour some knowledge in.

The life of a necromancer isn't complicated, once you have the tools, the requisite knowledge of human emotions, and the hard skills. You answer the phone, wait for the client to say something in a language you understand, tears and choked sinuses always adding a little flair to someone's natural accent. They dump a bucket of details on you.

55 years old.

Male.

Father. Grandfather. Husband.

Loved to play chess. Loved music.

How could this happen? We never expected something like this...

All lovely details. Alright. So you get your tools ready, kiss your wife on the forehead, although she barely notices, and you go to the client's house. There the victim lies, God having taken his due. The loved one has looked up their questions before and seen the same answers any self-respecting necromancer would give them, but they ask anyway.

Is it going to work? What are the drawbacks? Monkey's paw? A zombie spouse?

No, nothing like that. But there are drawbacks.

They always lean in then. What? What kind?

Well, they'll be alive.

Is that supposed to be a joke?

Then you've got to lie to them, no way around it, unless you have your own practice and you're okay with a bad review and fewer trips to Bali.

So you lie: *No. It'll be just like before they passed. There are no drawbacks. I'd do the same myself, in your position.*

After their serving of lies, they usually go to the other room and you perform one of the following, depending on the client's inclinations: a miracle, God's will, the Devil's work, a scientific breakthrough, magic, voodoo. Depending on the damage, it can take an hour or six, but eventually, the deceased returns to the living. The patient stumbles and shakes through a stupor for a couple of days, and after that, *blam*, they're back in the metaphorical saddle.

Those two days of stupor are some of the best of the formerly deceased's life. Chicken noodle soup. Cigarettes. Milkshakes. Weed. Back rubs. Sex. The spouse listens to whatever story they've already heard 106 times. They tolerate all of the little quirks: the leaving open of cabinets, the abandoning of socks in the living room, the splendid evacuation of a throat filled with phlegm.

For those two days, the formerly deceased is a monarch.

And after? How is their reign?

Mediocre. Hypocritical. Tolerable. Gray. Still.

Lukewarm soup. Room-temperature soda.

Reading People magazine in the dentist lobby while your wife is worked on. Sitting at a clothing store while your wife tries on a hundred identical tops...

Scratch that one.

The point is it's bleh and it's blah. That's how things are after those first two, glorious, days.

Ask any reputable necromancer in the comfort of their own home, away from a camera and they'll say the same thing. It's a sham! Not the work—that's real, and we're bringing people back to life, but rather the point of the work.

Here—take a deep breath in. Then out. Then back in. Alright, if you're one of the people who doesn't have a cold or the flu, or any number of respiratory problems, then you did just fine. If air only came out one nostril and you coughed up thick, pasta-lumpy bits of whatever, then maybe you'll understand what we necromancers already know.

Let me try a different angle.

One day the phone rings. A friend—Eli. His beloved Border Collie died at 16 years old after a long battle with life.

Can you bring him back? He asks.

Uh...

You have to!

I can... but...

Okay! Today?

I don't think it's a good idea—

Come over! Quick!

Well, that's a tight spot. On one death-defying hand, you want to help your childhood pal. On the other, you don't want him to be sad about his dog passing. You ask your wife for her opinion on it, and she doesn't pick a side, but you know what she's thinking.

The best thing to do is to convince Eli, in person, not as a necromancer, but as a friend. His house is dark, despair clinging to the unwiped counters and dust-laden fans. The old mutt lay dead beneath the Christmas tree, a present for the underworld. Eli, snot-faced with a teary wet spot around his collar, pets the tufts out of the poor thing.

Ugh. A necromancer's heart can take a lot, it really can, but not everything. Something about seeing your best childhood friend crying over *his* best childhood friend burns pragmatism to the ground.

Can you help? He asks.

Of course.

The canine miracle is simple—the dog suffered a heart attack and with an easy heart revive, it's back up and kicking. Eli cries. The dog gets steak and eggs, pisses in the house a few times. Eli tries to pay, but who could charge for something like this, for helping a friend?

Your favorite necromancer shuffles home. A cold drink. A hot shower. The wife gets the full story. I wish she'd comment, sometimes...

A month or so later I go back to Eli's to watch the game. The wife stays home, even though she played basketball in high school.

Eli's house isn't the depressing cavern it had been, but it's not bright, either, not cheery. It's got a drabness to it, a stillness, like

we're suspended in lukewarm soup. The dog gets its pets from me—on the butt—and it wiggles itself toward Eli, tail wagging, ready to play.

And here it is, the crux of the whole matter. Eli walks right past the poor pup, straight to the couch without so much as a pat. Not a single pat! The game is two and a half hours and guess how many pats this dog gets? Guess how many times Eli acknowledges the pup's existence?

He grants it the blessing of his attention *one* time—a stern warning—because the dog moseys in front of the screen during a crucial free throw.

Eli loves the thing, of course... he pets it when he's feeling sad, surely, but the dog is a hundred-dollar bill to a millionaire. It's a steak to a cow farmer, music to a hearing man.

Life is economics: supply and demand, or at least that's how my wife described it. She felt strongly on this one. *Death should be final*, her words. She never liked her bed with too many pillows... and she liked when the water heater went out.

She saw the phenomenon everywhere, badgered me until I saw it. The person with a good set of legs who never walks. A squirrel with so many nuts that he wanders from his nest in boredom, doesn't mind when the hawk eats him. Cold water from the tap. *Give it to a caveman once and it's bliss*, she said. *Give it to a caveman every day and he'll stop drinking it altogether*.

Eternal, burning, sunshine. Eternal, drowning, rain.

Is she right?

Bleh!

Blah!

Either way, necromancy, in all its lukewarm, soupy, grayness, pays the bills. Necromancy pays for the trips to Bali... even though they get lonely these days.

The first time we ever went to Bali, my wife—girlfriend at the time—dropped the engagement ring in the water, but the water was so clear she jumped right in and snatched it out of a crab's claws! Poor crab, a brand new pirate or fiancée, and its bliss ripped away in

an instant! The incident is on video, somewhere, my wife cackling while she plucks at the crab...

We'd talked that night, as a newly engaged couple must. We'd waxed and waned about the stars and about getting a dog and about bringing our future children to Bali someday. We'd philosophized, as a starry, foreign, night demands.

Death should be final, she had said, and at the time, what else can you do but nod and agree? Death is a paycheck. Death is something that happens to other people. You just smile and nod, happy that someone so beautiful is talking to you.

Life should mean something, she had said, and I agreed and kissed her like an excited puppy. *Whatever you say...*

But these days, walking in the house with my necromancy kit in hand... it's hard not to consider it... not to dive into the gray, lukewarm soup of necromancy. Four years dead is not too long to revive someone. She's whole, after all—no car accidents here—and she'd still have her faculties. We could go to Bali. We could get a puppy. She could reign as queen, maybe... for two days, at least.

NOAH KENISON

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

TAKE AWAY THE TEARS

EMMA BURNETT

CONSCRIPTED LIEUTENANT LOVEMORE VULGAR-
IS, HUMAN Corp Designer, tweaked the parameters, and
leaned back while the computer programme processed. He
glanced at the mug of coffee on his desk, but it had gotten cold, and
anyway there was a dead fruit fly floating in the scum of milk.

Coffee would be one of the things to go, soon. It wasn't a priority
crop anymore. People would have to learn to do without it. So would
the fruit flies.

His computer let out a bleep, and he glanced at it. Loading complete. Lovemore scrolled through the results.

Fingernails, toenails, hair.

He did a quick search on each of them, then accepted the programme's suggestions for toenails and hair, but left the fingernails. Fingernails were important for picking things up, creating counter-pressure. But toenails were basically pointless. And producing hair was just a waste of energy. Better to redirect that energy, maybe work it into improved tooth enamel.

He made some adjustments and re-ran the programme. Then he leaned back in his ergonomic chair and yawned.

So far, he had managed to shed over fifteen kilos of unnecessary weight. A lot of that was due to the reduction in maximum height and potential muscle mass. Smaller people needed less food, which meant less demand on the quickly shrinking globally available farmable land. Policies were already coming in to limit what people were allowed to do. Limits on travel, meat, all that. Lovemore was just creating the bodies to match the reality. He felt like an artist, an architect, designing the best people for the future.

Also, it meant no more gym bros. Probably no more gyms. Lovemore grinned at the image of the slender, petite future person displayed on his screen. He was saving the world, one protein shake at a time.

Earlobes. They could do without those. He flicked his own. Silly things, earlobes.

A thinner skull. Not too much, but maybe a little shaved off.

And wisdom teeth. Most people needed them out anyway, so why

bother growing them to begin with?

He re-ran the programme. It was running quicker now that it had fewer variables.

The computer bleeped. Appendixes. Gallbladders. Lovemore considered. They did provide some gut function, but they could also go horribly wrong, and that cost a lot in hospital materials. He marked them as maybes, something to discuss with his supervisors.

Setah, at the desk across from him, had fallen asleep in her chair. They'd both been here for days, conscripted into the Human Improvement World Task Force because of their design skills and backgrounds in computing. Also because of their wobbly morals. She'd been in a Siberian prison prior to this, arrested for her involvement with an underground baby mods project. He had been working for the Lunar Escape Colony, before it got shut down for tax fraud and legally dubious sciencing. He'd never even made it to the prison gates, had ended up here instead.

Bleep. *Palmaris longis*. He had to look it up. A vestigial muscle in the forearm that did pretty much nothing. Easy. He scrapped it.

Lovemore grinned again. He didn't think Setah had gotten as far as he had. He wasn't positive, but he thought it was probably a competition. He was sure someone at induction had mentioned something like that. Was sure they had mentioned benefits for the person who designed the best future people. Well, he planned to win.

Bleep.

Prefrontal cortex. Lovemore paused. That was a big chunk of brain, but he was running out of options. What if... he checked the work order. It was extremely vague. What if he proposed two contiguous human lines? One with a fully operational prefrontal cortex, and one without. Or, well, a line with a reduced prefrontal cortex. They'd obviously still have to be able to walk and talk. But, it would mean a whole category of people with fewer needs and gripes, people who could provide physical services.

Lovemore nodded and flicked his earlobe again. Yes. He liked this. There would be the full-brained ones, people who could guide humanity into the future. And the people who just did what they were

told. The thinkers and the doers. The brains and the brawn. Queens and drones.

He made some notes, gave the programme the new instructions, and let it run. He glanced down at his coffee again, then wondered if he had time to make a new cup. He didn't want to wake Setah, though. Not when she might see his plans. Not when he was this close to winning.

Bleep.

He checked over the outputs. The queens were basically finished. Small, lightweight, minus a few vestigial leftovers. He would still have to decide about appendixes and gallbladders, but otherwise, they looked pretty much perfect. Queens fit for the future on a resource-limited planet.

The drones, though. They could afford to lose a little more.

Lovemore made an executive decision on the gallbladder and appendix situation. Also, did they really need middle toes? Or so many vertebrae? Noses and chins that stuck out so much?

And, that downsized brain would mean a lot less thinking, and a lot less feeling. They probably wouldn't need to make tears. He deleted the lacrimal gland.

He leaned the side of his forehead against the heel of his palm. He really would need to catch some sleep soon. Just as soon he perfected his future people. He glanced at Setah, who was drooling slightly. Maybe he'd suggest that she be made into a drone. Start the rollout early.

Conscripted Lieutenant Lovemore Vulgaris, would be the best Human Corp Designer.

He re-ran the programme.

EMMA BURNETT

Emma Burnett is a recovering academic. She's big into cats, sports, and being introverted. You can find her [@slashnburnett](https://twitter.com/slashnburnett) or emmaburnett.uk.



UNDER THE FALLOW FIELDS

MATA HAGGIS-BURRIDGE

CONTEST WINNER

WHEN HE WAS A CHILD, Jeremiah believed the ‘fallow’ was the name of an old farming family. The wise folks of the village would always say, “Don’t go up to the fallow farm, never go there, stay away from that place, y’hear?” and Jeremiah would nod and wonder what the Fallow family had done. It must have been very bad.

’Cept there was no Mister and Missus Fallow. ‘Fallow’, he learnt when he got bigger, just meant a field that was left to itself, to grow how it wanted, and the soil liked that. When you gave a field a fallow year, the land was kinder to you next time.

Why an entire farm was left fallow, and left that way all the time—not just for one year—no-one would tell Jeremiah. But the wise folks had their reasons for things. He just had to trust they had their reasons, like grown-ups did. Perhaps leaving a whole farm fallow made everyone else’s land do better all around? If one field was good, a whole farm must be great. Jeremiah tried asking more, but everyone changed the subject, or shouted, or went quiet.

Anyway, the fallow farm didn’t seem to work, because every year they got less from their own fields. The winter was mighty harsh, and they had to count their stock when they cooked. In the spring, all the grown-ups had a meeting. Jeremiah, who was nearly twelve and so practically a grown-up, tried to get in, but again and again they shoved him out. They even chased him away from the windows.

They must’ve been sorry though, because the next day three of the wise folk found him when he was sleeping under a tree that he loved to climb, and gave him a special task. They told him there were special seeds up in the fallow farm, seeds that would grow good and strong and make sure everyone had plenty to eat the next winter. Only someone smart like Jeremiah could find them on the farm, because they’d be well hidden.

It was true, Jeremiah knew, that he was good at finding hidden things, like a hidden fresh-baked pie, the best apples, or the letter Widow Good sent to Father Davies which smelled of flowers.

The leader of the wise folk scratched his nose. “You go straight up there, have a good look through the buildings. There’ll be seed

somewhere, and don't you come back without it." He looked nervous, Jeremiah thought. "But, and you heed my words good, don't you go near their well. That's off limits. Look through the farm, but their well isn't for children. No going near the well." The old man stared across the hill, towards the farm. Sweat beaded on his forehead, which struck Jeremiah as odd in the sharp spring weather. "You hear me, boy? T'ain't for children."

And so Jeremiah found himself climbing the hill to the fallow farm, and the buildings jutted up from the crest, sharp and broken. The main house stood beside three barns and was blackened by fire, joists and pillars held only the ghosts of walls. A stone flagstone floor and a chimney remained, propping up the empty frames. The barns weren't burnt but looked decrepit, with sagging roofs and creepers covering their walls. Any seeds would be stored in there, although Jeremiah doubted how dry they would be. The closer he got, the more an odd smell seeped up from the dirt, like beer gone bad or maybe vinegar.

Reaching the ruins, he immediately saw the well in the centre of the farm's overgrown courtyard. The well head had a thatched roof, which was dark with damp and leaves, a neat stone wall, and a hand-crank winch like the well in town. It all seemed surprisingly intact compared to the crumbling buildings around it. The strangest thing was the rope on the winch: it looked new, like it had been strung there that morning, not hanging unused for years. But, besides that, there was nothing weird about the well. Did the old fools think he'd fall in if he got close? Was that why they'd told him so many times to stay away, like he was a stupid kid?

However, it was a bit of a strange place to have a well, all the way on top of the hill. Jeremiah wondered how deep it must go to reach water. Checking he wasn't followed—he wouldn't put it past the wise folk to play a trick like that, because they usually never trusted him with anything important—he sidled up to the well's edge. It was just a normal well. He spat into it, listening for the 'plop' at the bottom, but nothing came back.

Finding a stone, he dropped that in next. He cupped his ears, lis-

tening for the splash.

Instead, there was a voice. "Hello?" It was high-pitched and slightly girlish.

Jeremiah leapt away from the stone wall. Looking around him again, he scanned the buildings, making sure there wasn't a girl up there with him. Even before looking, he knew there wouldn't be anyone. The voice had come from the well, but that was madness. No one ever went to the fallow farm, and no girl was missing from town. Jeremiah knew everyone, and there'd been no runaways or anything for years.

Father Davies had warned Jeremiah and the whole town about the Devil's trickery, calling to the unwary inside their minds, but Jeremiah was sure this was real.

He crept back to the well. "Hello," he called into the darkness. Most wells echoed, but this one seemed to swallow his words.

"Is someone there?" The girl's voice was peculiar, a bit like it was a dozen girls speaking quietly, all saying the same thing at once. It must be more open below, bouncing her voice around like in a cave.

"Do you need help?"

"I'm lost."

Jeremiah thought about this. "Can you follow my voice?" He leant far over the hole and could just grab the rope with his fingertips. Pulling on it, he made it swing, hoping the bucket might splash or make some noise far below. It was far too dark to see if this had any effect. "Do you hear the bucket at all?"

A long pause, then her voice again. "I think I'm in trouble." A yelp of fear. "What is that?" A pause, then a scream.

Without thought, Jeremiah clambered onto the wall, wrapped his shirt around his hands, and slowly slid down the rope.

The walls were slick. Slimy plants clung to the bare stone. They smeared themselves across his skin as he descended, swaying and bumping into the sides. "I'm coming," he called, but there was no reply.

Down and down, the rope seemed endless. Jeremiah was a good climber, but even he started to worry if he'd done something dumb,

just like the grown-ups expected him to. He must be deep inside the hill now, lower than the village and the river and all the farms. The top of the well was a tiny dot, far above.

Dim light lit the area below. The walls widened as he descended, and he finally bumped onto odd spongy ground. It felt a bit like walking on packed wool bales. The smell was much stronger down there, yeasty and humid, and it made every breath catch in his throat. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the floor was glowing and made up of countless furry strands of white stuff. It coated the ground and the walls. It reminded Jeremiah of a patch of white mould that spread down the back of his bed one winter, except that had been powdery to the touch and this was moist and sticky.

The chamber was at least four times the size of his house, with tunnels running in every direction, each covered with whatever the stuff was.

The girl's voice came again, making Jeremiah jump: "Hello?" There was something wrong with it. It sounded as calm as before, like she'd never screamed.

"Where are you?"

"I'm lost."

Jeremiah picked the tunnel that seemed to be the source of the voice and started walking.

It wasn't easy. The growth—he was sure it was a sort of giant mould—clumped around his boots as he trudged along the passage. He tried to kick and scrape it off, but it would gather on there again only a few steps later. "Can you hear me?"

"I think I'm in trouble."

The voice came from ahead, and the light grew brighter.

A vast cavern opened around him. Trailing ropes of the mould were strung across the ceiling, embedded in the rock above, dangling and swaying with a faint beat that thrummed in the air like a pulse. Stalagmites and stalactites scattered the area like teeth, each swaddled in the white strands like weaver's bobbins, except many towered over Jeremiah.

"Hello?" her voice came from nearby.

Jeremiah plunged into the cavern, almost losing his footing as the mould grew deeper. It dragged on his shins as he waded through, desperate to find the trapped girl and leave. He'd return to the village as a hero. They'd always underestimated him, treated him like he was a waste of space, but he'd show them. He'd save her.

A skeletal, child-sized arm jutted from the mould ahead. Its skin had blackened and cracked like every ounce of life had been sucked from it; the fingers were frozen in a desperate claw.

This couldn't be the girl he'd heard, but then the pulse of the room quickened. The threads submerging her corpse vibrated. "What is that?" A piercing scream came from the vibrating threads—identical to the scream he heard before.

Spinning around, Jeremiah picked out other shapes sunken into the mould. He'd been so busy seeking a living girl, he'd ignored a shoulder here, an elbow there. Desiccated skin stretched tight across a small, half-buried skull and white mould strung through tufts of its pale brown hair. The room was filled with dead children.

"Can you follow my voice?" the mould said, sounding exactly like Jeremiah. "Where are you?" It was echoing words he'd said minutes ago, mimicking him almost perfectly, like a chorus of Jeremiah's whispering to him.

"I want to go home," he said.

"I want to go home," the trembling threads spoke back. "Can you follow my voice?"

He tried to flee, but the threads gripped him. Stumbling, he managed three more wading steps towards the passage back before he was dragged down onto the soft floor. The threads embraced him, pulling him below. Hard objects struck his body, scraping and cutting him: shattered bones, so many bones. The thing in the well had been luring people for a very long time, devouring them, thriving in the soil beneath the farms.

His energy was failing. He fought one arm free and dragged himself to the surface, but he could barely move. Every limb felt filled with wet sand, and he flopped helplessly onto his back. Above, the ropes in the ceiling quivered. He thought of climbing the well's rope,

going back up to the farm to search for those seeds, never telling anyone how stupid he'd been to go down there. And it struck him: there were no seeds.

Dank, furry mould crawled over him, clinging wetness covering his skin. A ripple ran up the walls and into the ropes hanging above. They quivered, coming to life, pulsing, fed by his body.

There were never any seeds. Below the fallow farm, something nourishes the soil, but it too must be fed. The old bastards had told him to stay away from the well, told him it wasn't for kids, knowing he wouldn't resist. They tricked him. They thought he was stupid and—as the mould filled his mouth, pushed into his throat, burrowed deep into his nostrils, caressed his paralysed eyeballs—he knew they were right.

MATA HAGGIS-BURRIDGE

Mata is a professor and writer for video games. They are seeking an agent for a contemporary supernatural horror novel set in rural England. In it, a Londoner must overcome her misanthropic nature to survive the haunting legacy of her family's past. A second novel is in the editing stages. Mata mostly writes supernatural, contemporary British-set horror. They occasionally dabble with happy endings. Check out their new Substack page for monthly short horror stories and more.

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THE BARBED WORM

T. PARKER

THE WORM LAY BETWEEN US on my workbench, glistening. The coils of its body twisted around themselves, wound into impossible knots that squeezed at its own flesh. Hundreds of tiny barbs sprouted from the worm's skin, rising from puckering holes like hellish seeds on a strawberry.

"I love it," Rufus said. "Very, what's-his-name. The *Alien* guy."

"Giger," I said.

"Can I touch it? Is it, like, wet?"

"That's just lacquer."

Rufus hefted the model. The full-size sculpture would be fifteen feet tall, with a hidden steel post so that the bulbous mass would appear to be balanced delicately on one tapering end.

"Wow. This could be, like, a thing. All our offices could have them. That would be a lot of money for you." He looked up at me, a nasty smile playing on his lips. "I know you need it."

"Hey. Cool."

I shouldn't have invited him to the studio. My real work was all around us, in various stages of completion. The couch I slept on most nights was there in the corner, stained and sad.

The worm was supposed to be a joke, at Rufus' expense. I'd known the commission was just his way of rubbing in his success over me, a noogie with a fist made of hundred dollar bills. So I thought I'd make a monster for him. I hadn't planned to disgust myself with my own creation, but there the worm was, in his hands.

"I could ask you to make something else, right?" he said, turning the model over in his hands. "Like, tell you this is inappropriate? But I can't, you know, go to the board with any of this other stuff." He looked around at my other sculptures, several of which I'd spent years perfecting. "They're not even done, are they? Rough drafts, surely."

I didn't say anything.

"No, I'm fucking with you. Ha ha. I love this." He looked me right in the eyes, letting me know—I hadn't fooled him. But he'd do it anyway, *force* me to build the worm, to show me that he could. He tossed the worm back on the bench, where it landed with a heavy thunk. "I

can't wait for Angela to see it. Get it done by the end of the month."

Large-scale sculpting is a brutally physical art form. The worm had me working ten-hour days, seven days a week. The rush was dangerous—the worm weighed several hundred pounds, and it had to be steadied or it would fall and crush someone. I hated the work, that I was doing it for Rufus, that the biggest commission of my career so far was to create this... *thing*.

Rufus threw a big party when it was done. I had to rent a tux. Angela was there, at the party. I think she got it. The joke, I mean, but I don't think she found it very funny. She wouldn't look at the worm, and she wouldn't look at me, either.

I had to pose for pictures in front of the thing. By myself, holding the scale model, with the board of the company, with Rufus, shaking his hand. I got drunk and tried to talk to Angela, but she saw me coming. She whispered something to Rufus, her hand cupped around his ear, and then slipped away. I staggered out of the warehouse into the freezing night, alone.

I woke up to the surreal vision of my own face on the thumbnail of a news update. The worm was a hit. A big hit.

Great. So, maybe not the way that I wanted to get recognized, but whatever. Now I had a platform, and I could put my real work out there. Rufus reached out to me at the height of it all, but I ignored his messages. It was time to focus.

It seemed Rufus' company had some policy about not settling contractor accounts until the end of the year. They assured me I'd get my fee. They encouraged me to be patient.

My brief fame never went anywhere. Nobody wanted to see my real work. I got a lot of surprisingly violent comments online. People just wanted more of the worm. My fifteen minutes ended, and I sunk back into obscurity.

"Man, where have you been?"

"Sorry, been busy. You said you might... need another sculpture?"

"Oh, yeah!"

I could hear his grin through the phone, his lips sliding stickily over his teeth.

“You know, I still haven’t gotten paid for the other one.”

“No! No fucking way! Dude, I’ll get on them about it. I’ll get you your money.” He laughed. “But yeah, our Miami office wants one.”

I stared at one of my sculptures I’d abandoned weeks ago, halfway through. It was this: work for Rufus, or start picking up shifts at Burger King.

“Yeah?”

“Yep, yep. Bigger, though.”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah, like, how big can you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, figure it out, man. I’m trying to make you rich, here!”

There was a squeezing, rubbing sound coming from my molars. I felt like I might crack one.

“Okay.”

“Fantastic, man. Amazing. And you know what, you should come to the house sometime. For like, dinner or something.”

I opened my mouth, ready to say no.

“Angela would love to see you.”

I was getting older. I could feel it in the way my body started to want comfort. Used to be I’d sleep in the studio, five nights out of the week. I would wake up at two AM, and work. Now I locked the doors at six, six-thirty if I was feeling inspired, which was rare. My apartment was tiny, and cold in the winter, and it had a smell to it that I had started to notice but couldn’t get rid of.

I started to dream about having a house. Nothing crazy, just a place with a real kitchen, instead of a hot plate. A backyard with maybe a tree in it.

Rufus and Angela lived on the lake. They had a giant lawn that spread like a falling skirt all the way down to the shore. We ate out there on a picnic table, while the sunset turned the water to blood. I stared at Angela while Rufus talked about work.

“You know,” Angela said, when Rufus paused, “Rufus just got a story published.”

Rufus grew very still.

“It’s a wonderful story,” Angela said. “Really.”

For the first time that evening, I really looked at Rufus. He was white with rage. Shaking.

“Oh, yeah?” I said, “I didn’t know you *wrote*.” A slow, vicious smile was spreading over my face. I couldn’t stop it. “Congrats, Rufus. Where can I read it?”

The story was awful. Really, truly, awful. I read it over and over—I downloaded it onto my phone so that I could have it with me all the time. I was lying on my couch, reading it, the next time Rufus called me.

“Hey, man. So Miami.” There was something different in his voice. An edge.

“Yeah, I can do it. But I need the cash up front.”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’ll be a smaller fee, if you want the cash now. If you can wait, it’ll be like...” he breathed slowly on the other side of the line. He could say any number he wanted. We both knew it. “Triple.”

“Cash.”

“Okay. But you have to be in Miami tomorrow. And we can’t cover your flights.”

“No problem.”

“I’ll actually be working out of that office, so—”

“I read your story, Rufus.”

Silence.

“Great work. *Really* good stuff.”

“Thanks.”

I grinned.

“No problem.”

The worm in Miami would rise three stories, crawling across a

series of steel beams that crisscrossed an atrium surrounded by sea-green glass. I made a scale model again, just to get it straight in my head. Just the preliminary safety work would take weeks—hundreds of pounds tied up with wires.

It was just as bad as the first one. I hated it, the worm. It sickened me.

And yet, I found myself holding the model sometimes, swinging it gently just the way Rufus had done with the first one. The barbs pulled at the skin of my palm.

Publicity became a factor. The world was excited, they couldn't wait to see my latest work. Or, my latest work that anyone gave a shit about.

Rufus caused a deadline to materialize from nowhere. I discovered that he'd tweaked the contract so that if I missed it, I'd have to return the fee. I worked without stopping, cutting corners, saving time. There was a utility closet with an air mattress and a sleeping bag that I crawled into when I could no longer stave off sleep.

Angela met me in the lobby of the hotel she was staying in.

"Oh, Nick." The look on her face. "Are you... are you ok?"

"Sure."

I wasn't okay. The barbed worm had become something that slithered after me wherever I went. Hideous, thick, writhing. I could see it reflected in the wetness of her eyes.

"I guess..." I blinked, trying to focus, "I guess I want to know. Was it the money? Was that it? Why you chose..."

Angela frowned, sat back. "Is that what you think of me?" She'd gone cold. A silver necklace at her throat caught the lobby lights.

I could feel the worm writhing, just behind me. I could hear the scrape of its barbs on the tiles of the lobby, the slick wetness of its skin smearing against itself.

Why, *why* did Rufus get to have her? She should have been *mine*.

"Why did you tell me about Rufus' story?"

"I thought..." She trailed off, then looked up at me. "I thought that maybe you could help Rufus. Writing, for him... it's hard. He gets

frustrated. Angry. And you've always been so good at that kind of thing."

I knew the smile that split my face was a corpse's grin. I started to laugh, but it turned into a coughing fit. She watched me, a look of disgust on her face.

"Nick?" She stood, holding her bag to her chest and looking down at me. "You should get some sleep."

The building was dark except for my work lights. Rows of half-carved spines threw serrated shadows over the glass walls of the atrium, and plastic sheeting hung like sloughing skin from the worm's flanks. Half-tied safety cords still tethered the worm in place—I hadn't even anchored it properly yet. It was the last night before the deadline.

"Hey, man."

Rufus let the elevator doors close behind him.

"Hey, Rufus." I picked up the scale model from the floor and turned it over in my hands. "Working late on another *story*?"

He stepped out into the light.

"Angela told me," I waited, just a beat, "you were having a hard time." I smiled. Wide.

"Fuck you," he said. His eyes were bloodshot, with huge dark circles around them, like craters on some sunless planet. "You're nothing." He took a step closer to me. I could see the worm, *see it*, writhing under his skin.

"It's in you too, isn't it?" I whispered. I couldn't stop smiling. It was starting to hurt.

"So what?" he said, sneering at the scale model in my hand. "You're gonna hit me with that? Solve all your problems, right?" He stuck his chin out, spread his hands wide.

"Go for it." He closed his eyes.

I bared my teeth, raising the thing over my head. I could split his skull with one blow.

After a few moments, I dropped the model. It shattered on the ground.

Rufus was beaming when he opened his eyes.

“We’ll need the money back, man. You’ve missed the deadline—”

A snap, from above us. We both looked up, just as the worm slipped off the beam and began to fall.

T. PARKER

Tobin works and lives in the Pacific Northwest.



WHAT IT LEARNED FROM THE ONES IT TOOK

RORY KRANZ

A bargain with the Dunes comes with two stipulations:

1. The lost soul must come willingly

2. The Dunes do not give back what they take

The day at the dig site was hot and long. I spent most of the time in the pit under a jewel-bright sky, narrowly avoiding the sand tossed around by the diggerdrone.

As the shadows grew longer, Amira darted out of our tent and descended the ladder to join me. Behind her, the sun dipped to brush the peaks of the endless dunes.

“Juri, I need to speak to you,” she said. She clutched what looked like several diagrams.

Callum, the team’s nepotism baby, lurked nearby under the pretense of examining a stone embedded in the sand. On the opposite side of the pit, Bea tinkered with something on the underbelly of the beetle-like drone. It twitched and hummed in response to each prod, and I caught a whiff of burnt metal on the wind.

“Can it wait?” I asked. “We’re close to wrapping up for the day.”

“No. I don’t think so.” I noticed the way her hands shook slightly as they held the papers.

“Okay,” I said. “What is it?”

She knelt and spread the diagrams out in the sand. The first two looked to be complex charts of the dunes. In the first, various arrows seemed to indicate the direction of sand movement. The second showed a geological cross section, with various layers labeled sandstone, bedrock, and so forth.

The third diagram was something else entirely. In it, a honeycomb structure sat beneath the earth with a thin tunnel leading from the structure to the surface. Amira pointed at the first two diagrams.

“Do you notice anything strange about these?” she asked. I shook my head.

“No.”

“You know what digger wasps are?”

“I haven’t heard of them, but I can guess,” I replied. Amira pointed at the third diagram.

“They’re wasps that build their nest underground, like this.” She turned back to the first two. “Even for me it took a while to notice, but there’s something not quite right with these.” She leaned closer, practically glowing with anticipation.

“The way the sand moves in the windstorms doesn’t match the supposed sediment layers. It moves as though there is something big underground. Something that would disrupt the natural flow. Just like the digger wasps.”

When it hits evening in the dunes, the temperature drops abruptly. I thought I had grown used to these sudden fluctuations, but at Amira’s words I felt the air chill as never before.

“Like a nest?” I said. Amira nodded.

“Exactly like a nest. Except much, much bigger.”

I was silent for a long moment, considering this. If there were tunnels underground, a nest of sorts, that would mean that the people who disappeared might not be gone at all. An odd sinking feeling began in my stomach.

By this point most of the crew had finished and left for dinner. Only Bea remained, shepherding the last pieces of equipment into their proper containers. I waved her over.

“Do we have contact with any of the other expeditions?” I asked.

“The Arshack crew,” she counted on her fingers, “the Space Center crew, aaaand... North Umber.”

“Radio them,” I instructed. “See if they’ve had any incidents.” Bea unstrapped the pinwheel radio from her belt, flicked a switch that set the circle of antennae spinning, and pumped in the coordinates. The radio crackled to life.

“This is Institution to North Umber. Come in North Umber.” Static crackled in response. Bea repeated herself and waited another moment. Still no response. She punched in the coordinates for Arshack. Also no response. The sinking in my stomach turned to nausea.

“Try Space Center,” I said. Bea nodded. We waited a full five minutes, listening to the static crackle into the silent evening air.

“There might be something wrong with the radio,” Amira suggested.

“I checked it this morning,” Bea said. “It’s in perfect working order. I was in contact with the North Umber crew about the storm system just this afternoon.”

“They didn’t mention anything out of the ordinary?” I asked.

“No. Nothing.”

The Dunes often wonder:

1. What it means to be human

2. Where did you go and why didn’t you stay?

I was woken in the night to the sound of canvas being pushed aside and hands on my shoulder. Amira’s face floated above me like a pale moon.

“Callum is gone. I saw him outside when I got up for water, he didn’t see me. He walked out into the sand and kneeled, and then, I don’t know what happened but he just vanished. It was like he was...” her face screwed up in disgust, “swallowed by the sand.”

I slid out of bed, reaching for my boots.

“Go wake Bea up,” I said quickly and quietly. “Tell her to meet me by the mess hall. Be careful not to wake anyone else, I don’t want a panic.”

When I stepped out of the tent, it struck me how bright the moon was. With no trees or foliage to obscure the light, it washed over the entire landscape like a silver balm. The rise and swell of sand—warm amber in daylight—turned to icy slate under the moon’s impassive watch.

When the Dunes wake up in the morning they:

1. There is no morning in the Dunes

2. Sometimes wish there actually was a morning, so that they could hear if the birds really did chirp like people said

I remember walking out to where Amira said Callum disappeared. It was just North of the camp, aside one of the smaller swells. I remember Bea handing me a flashlight and pointing out a small divot

in the sand. I remember the rough texture of the rope as I tied it to my belt and the sweet dusty smell of the night air. And next I remember... nothing.

I woke up alone and in darkness. I fumbled blindly for anything to hold onto, anything that would tell me of my surroundings. I felt a cool, sandstone wall. Something brushed against my foot—the flashlight. I picked it up and clicked it on.

It was a tunnel. I knew at once that Amira was right. Something about the curvature of the walls, the oddly waxy scent of the air, this was a nest. Several other tunnels branched out from mine, one slanting upwards and the other down and to the right.

A sob came from the tunnel that pointed downward. My head felt as though it was filled with cotton, but even in this state I recognized Callum's cries. I stumbled down the hall, trying not to slip on the loose, sandy floor. Around the bend, Callum was huddled on his knees. He appeared to be grabbing at something on the floor. He lifted his head and the flashlight lit upon his face. My heart thumped in my chest. Hair slicked with sweat and grime, tears and snot and blood dribbling down his chin, gleaming milky whites of his eyes.

"She shouldn't have done it," he babbled. "I told her not to. I told her."

"Told who what, Callum?" I tried to keep my voice steady. He lifted something off the floor and I caught the distinct scent of rotting meat.

"What is that?" I aimed the flashlight at the thing he was holding.

It was a head. The remaining bits of flesh on the skull were oozing with gangrene. In his lap was what looked like a rotted hand. There was a ring on one of the fingers, the metal sunken into the bloated skin.

"I gave her that ring," Callum sniffled. "A promise ring." He devolved into more sobbing, pressing his lips feverishly against the severed head. As he sobbed, I swore I could hear a faint shuffling sound, like two pieces of paper sliding against each other. I tried to focus on it, but the rotting smell was making me dizzy. I leaned against the wall for support.

“Callum, we have to—” The flashlight seemed to be growing dimmer and Callum began to sound like he was underwater. Was it in my mind, or was the shuffling growing closer? My vision went black before I could decide.

Something that has been on the Dunes’ mind:

1. It’s lonely when the millions of things around you are all just you. Because even if there are many of you, they’re all you, and so you are alone.

When I woke, there was no sign of Callum. The scent of rotting meat was gone, replaced by the dry, dusty smell of the tunnels. The shuffling was there again. This time it seemed to come from many directions at once. The flashlight was miraculously still in my hand. I clicked it back on.

It took everything in my willpower not to scream. They stood all around, faces pressed only inches away from mine. They were humanoid but not human. Thin and dust-colored, with no facial features, only a blank canvas. Despite the lack of eyes, I knew each and every one was looking at me. There must have been several dozen of them, they filled the entire hallway.

“Where is Callum?” I asked. They did not respond, only stared. I pressed my back as hard as I could to the wall, trying not to move or even breathe.

“I would like to leave.” Again they did not answer. I tried again.

“Why do you take them?”

It was the question that plagued every researcher at every university and institution I knew. Not the how, but the why. This time, I received a response. The voice seemed to come from all of them at once. It sounded like sand through an hourglass.

“To learn.”

“Learn what?” No answer. “What do you learn from the ones you take?”

“It does not matter.”

“I think it does,” I said. They stirred at this. A few of them moved

closer.

“Nevermind,” I continued. “You don’t have to answer. But I would like to leave. I won’t bother you, I won’t come back.”

More of them shuffled closer until I could feel the papery limbs nearest me brush against my own skin. The flashlight flickered and went out. I squeezed my eyes shut. Then, nothing.

And now for the most important question, what did the Dunes learn from the ones it took:

1. It’s not important.

2. Next question.

I woke up in my own bed. My boots were still on my feet and the flashlight rested near my chest. I could hear the sound of the digger-drone outside. I sat up and clicked the flashlight. It was dead.

I stumbled outside. It was early morning and the crew was at the dig site. From the side of the pit, Amira caught my eye and waved. Bea flagged me down and gestured for me to join her. I approached and looked into the pit. To my shock, there was Callum. He looked up at me and smiled widely, teeth flashing in the sun.

I mentioned the experience of last night to Bea and she laughed as if it were a good joke. Amira looked at me in confusion when I mentioned the digger wasps. I know most would say it was only a nightmare. I was tempted to believe it as well. But as I approached the crew I could smell it in the air. The same dusty, waxy scent from the tunnels.

A year later, when people began returning from the desert, they said it was a miracle. All the people we thought were gone forever, returned to us. I knew better. I remembered what the creature said to me in the tunnel. And now I knew the answer to the question.

I knew what it learned from the ones it took.

RORY KRANZ

Rory is a Minnesota-born writer living in the UK. They are a pagan witch who enjoys the stranger side of fiction, and never stopped loving monsters, fairies, and all things in-between.

[Instagram](#)

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FUR BABY
A.K. MCCUTCHEON

MY METAMORPHOSIS BEGAN THE MORNING I stepped from a steaming shower, cocooned in a towel of organic Turkish cotton, and detected the unmistakable musk of wet dog fur. *Ugh! Is Miguel borrowing my towels to give Biscuit a bath? It's his house, but that's crossing a line.* I flung the odorous bath sheet into the hamper and stomped into my bedroom to get dressed. When I reached out to grab the closet door handle, I froze.

My hand, *both* my hands, were... hairy. Pale brown fuzz from knuckles to wrist, where there had never been hair before. *What is this? A weird hormone thing?* Not great timing. The first day of my new job. No time for hair removal; I can't be late for employee orientation. *Luckily, it's barely noticeable.*

Late that afternoon, I glided behind the Richelieu Beauty counter at Fashion Fair Mall, slipped an RB logo smock over my head, and smoothed my slicked-back bun into place. As I hummed along to the Ed Sheeran tune streaming from the ceiling speakers, a familiar voice broke in: "Hannah, girl, is that you?" I whirled around, laughing. *Tanisha!* I hadn't seen her since our former employer closed their downtown store and terminated us the same day.

She scooted around the Richelieu Parfums counter, beaming with her cute gap-toothed smile, opening her arms for a hug. We huddled, voices low, commiserating about the depressing retail job market.

I squeezed her arm when I spotted a customer approaching. "Drinks after work, okay?" She nodded, then touched my hand, whispering, "You rocking a natural look now?" I followed her gaze. The hair on my hands had spread upward, dusting my forearms with light brown whorls. My jaw slackened in a silent "Wha—"

Tanisha clucked sympathetically. "It's probably a hormone thing." Her tone was cheerful. "There's waxing strips in the supply cabinet. See you later." She patted my shoulder and hustled back to her station.

Hormones, is it really? How is this happening? I shoved my hands into the smock's deep pockets. This was bizarre, and a little scary.

That night, Miguel got home late from his law office and I wasn't

in the mood to cook, so we microwaved leftover Chinese takeout and flopped on the couch to watch *Jeopardy* on TV. Miguel plays the game show like an Olympic event. We were newlyweds when he decided I didn't compete at his level, so he invited a guy friend to join us for dinner and *Jeopardy*. The same guy for a while... then a new guy. One night a week, then two or three. Game nights became guys' nights at his friend's place. When guys' nights became overnights, I confronted him. It was the first time I'd ever seen him cry. "I'm sorry, Hannah. I finally figured it out. This is who I am." We both cried that night.

Our marriage ended. But our friendship survived. No one understood how it was possible. Not my mother, not my girlfriends. But Miguel and I knew. We ended the way we started: best friends. When I lost my job downtown and couldn't afford the rent on my apartment, Miguel offered, "Move back to my place, for as long as you need."

After the final *Jeopardy* answer, between mouthfuls of Kung Pao chicken, I mentioned the stinky towel. He shook his head and shrugged. "I didn't borrow any towels. Biscuit goes to the groomer for baths." He stood and stretched.

"Well, babe, I've got an early flight tomorrow. You remember I'm going away with Ryan?" I looked up and nodded. He squinted at me, head tilted. "Um, you might want to do some lady grooming there." His thumb brushed my upper lip. "Good night. See you in a week."

Lady grooming? I ran to my bathroom and peered into the mirror. A mustache. Curving like a unibrow under my nose. I inspected my face from ear to ear... are those sideburns? *What is going on?* I shivered with confusion and panic. I've known women who chose to embrace a hirsute appearance, but it's not a choice I've ever had to make.

As I rummaged through my tote bag, searching for the waxing strips I'd pilfered from the store, a low rumbling sound pulled my attention toward the door. Biscuit crouched at the threshold, lips curled back, teeth bared, growling. I chirped at the little French bulldog I'd known since she was a puppy: "Biscuit, it's me." She yelped and scurried down the hall toward Miguel's bedroom.

When Miguel returned from his week in Cancun with Ryan, he found me where I'd spent most of the last three days: in bed, curled like a fetus, crying. "Hannah, are you okay? What's—"

I sat up, facing away from him, and enunciated carefully so he could register my voice. "Miguel, it's me." I turned around.

He recoiled as if struck by a blow. His hands flew to his face and covered his mouth. His muffled shout, "Oh, my god!"

I sat stiffly on a dining room chair, loose newspaper lining the floor beneath my feet. On the table, Miguel had arranged an arsenal of grooming tools: scissors of varying lengths, a Wahl clipper, a Philips electric shaver, a pack of Schick disposable razors. He picked up the Equinox scissors and squared his shoulders, "Ready?" I nodded.

I was undressed, but not naked. I was covered, head to toe, in fur.

The month was a blur of doctor's appointments, testing, consultations, more tests.

My first visit was with my gynecologist, the only doctor I'd seen in years. Dr. Huang, a petite marathon runner, pursed her lips and talked about hormonal imbalances. *Hormones!* She ruled out the obvious: steroid use; post-menopausal condition; eating disorder; the not so obvious: HIV/AIDS; thyroid disorder; cancer; then referred me to an endocrinologist.

Dr. Vasani, the endocrinologist, was wiry and bespectacled, with bushy eyebrows and long fingers he steepled while he spoke. He ruled out polycystic ovary syndrome; Cushing's syndrome; adrenal hyperplasia; idiopathic hirsutism; then referred me to a dermatologist.

The dermatologist, Dr. Silva, was a tall, elegant brunette who wore her white lab coat as if it were haute couture. After reviewing an analysis of my hair samples, she gave me a diagnosis: Acquired Hypertrichosis. She explained that the condition is extremely rare, seen in fewer than one hundred people since the Middle Ages. The puzzling aspects of my case, she said, were the sudden onset and the astonishing rate of hair growth.

I waited—between breaths, between heartbeats—for her progno-

sis. She met my eyes. “I’m sorry to say, because the cause is unknown, there is no medical solution.” *No medical solution.* The words throbbed inside my skull.

The doctor smiled wanly and handed me brochures for electrolysis and laser hair removal. *So that’s it?*

“One more thing, Hannah, would you mind signing a consent form? I’d like to submit your case report to the *New England Journal of Medicine*. A case this rare—” I tossed my scarf over my head, pulled it across my face, and left the room without answering.

As Miguel drove us home, I slumped down low in the rear seat of his Lexus and searched Wikipedia on my phone for “hypertrichosis.” The results: “Werewolf Syndrome... sideshow performers... freaks...” *That’s what I felt like. A freak.*

Richelieu sent a letter terminating my employment due to excessive absenteeism. I crushed the letter in my fist and screamed. I was drowning with no rescue in sight. No income, no future, no hope. I gave up on hair removal; the rapid regrowth of the wiry poodle hair covering every inch of skin made it impossible. Most days were spent in my bedroom, crying, sleeping, or scouring the internet for anything to help my condition.

My friend Tanisha called or texted daily, leaving messages, “Are you okay?”

Then one day, she texted me, “What is this???” with a link. When I clicked on the link, my stomach twisted.

Someone posted a video of me on Instagram. In the parking lot at Dr. Silva’s office, ducking inside the car, my scarf slipping off my head. The cashmere scarf Tanisha gave me for my birthday. Miguel’s license plate PEREZLAW clearly visible.

The video had gone viral. Hashtags #werewolf #wolfwoman #furbaby #ladymonster

My eyes burned, blurring with tears.

Comments numbered in the thousands. Many called the video fake; some were supportive, “I hope this person gets help,” and some were terrifying, “Where can I find the werewolf?”

The next day, reporters from *TMZ* and *Inside Edition* arrived at Miguel's office, requesting an interview with the wolf woman. Phone calls came in from news agencies, magazines, TV networks. With Miguel's house besieged by camera crews, his boyfriend Ryan took us in.

"You can't hide from the world forever, Hannah," Miguel said, cradling Biscuit. The dog had finally learned to tolerate my presence. We sat on my bed in Ryan's guest room, window blinds closed, curtains drawn. "You need to make a life for yourself. Have you considered your mother's offer?"

I shook my head. My mother, a born-again evangelical, saw the video and called me, insisting prayer and donations to her church would cure me, and proposing I move to Nebraska and live with her and her third husband.

"I can't do that, Miguel."

"Then take control. Don't let the media spin the narrative. Tell your story your way." His tone softened. "Babe, it's time to own who you are."

I squirmed, imagining strangers with cameras and questions. My reflection stared at me from the dresser mirror. I stared back. *This isn't who I am; this is how I am.*

My body stiffened with resolve. "You're right. I can't hide forever."

The *People Magazine* article came out the same day my TV interview aired on *Good Morning America*. The *GMA* producers agreed to a live remote segment from a hotel suite near Miguel's office. The TV crew and the team from *People* were attentive and kind. For a few magical days, I forgot I was a freak... almost.

Then Miguel got a call from NatureCare Global, maker of Nature-Care hair products.

Tanisha released the curling iron from the last spiraling tendril and stepped behind me, surveying her work in the mirror. "You look perfect." She smiled her gap-toothed smile.

"Wow." I leaned forward on the bar stool we set up in my bathroom and tossed my head. "You did a better job than the hair stylist from

People Magazine.”

Tanisha giggled. “Am I good, or am I good?” She patted my caramel-colored curls. “I love this color.”

“It’s a NatureCare Mad Hair Color, Wild Nutmeg. And this—” I reached for a bottle on the counter, “is NatureCare Mad Hair Taming Serum, which I basically pour all over myself.” I laughed. “Their Mad Shine Shampoo is lovely too. Take as many bottles as you want. They sent me boxes of the stuff.”

“Big day, hmm?” Miguel appeared in the doorway. “How’s the new podcaster doing?”

I smiled and swiveled around. “I can’t believe this is happening. I’m so excited.” I grabbed Tanisha’s hand. “Thank you, both of you, for everything.”

Tanisha’s eyes glistened. Miguel ducked his head, then glanced at his watch. “You better get going. Don’t want to start late.”

I hurried down the hallway and out the side door entrance to the newly-converted recording studio in Miguel’s garage. The engineer, Tyrone, fitted my headset so it didn’t pinch the hair on my ears and cheeks. Lifting a furry hand, I gave him a thumbs up. We did a quick sound check, then he took his position behind the camera, gave me a countdown, and flicked his index finger “go.”

“Hello, wild ones. Welcome to *Madness and Monsters*, sponsored by Mad Hair from NatureCare. Whoever you are, however you are, you have a home here. I’m your host, Hannah Perez. Today we’ll be talking about—”

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.

ALABASTER PIG

SAM GRAVENY

UGOLINO DELLA GHERARDESCA, COUNT OF Donoratico, founder of the city Villa di Chiesa and twice dictator of Pisa, starved in a kitchen which was also his jail cell. The kitchen was well-stocked: copper pans, firewood for stove and oven, sharp knives and heavy cleavers. It had salt and pepper and fresh water. It was garlanded with foxgloves, refreshed daily courtesy of his jailers. It also had a barred and locked door, and thick stone walls. It did not, however, have food.

Two weeks' starving had reduced Ugolino to a warp of cracked fleshless skin hanging from a frame of dry bone. His stomach bulged absurdly, as if he were pregnant.

Someone being led to the scaffold might find his mind sharpened by proximity to death, as a hunted fox thinks more clearly than a sleeping dog. Going to the block, the condemned might come to an agreement with God, or with himself, or with his fellow man. The count had no such opportunity, no such clarity. Hunger made him mad.

Before him were four pigs chained by their trotters and ready for slaughter. He could not remember when they had arrived in his cell. The biggest was as tall as Ugolino himself. The next was flabby, but massive in skull and shoulder. Another, sleek, had black bristles, and the last, more a suckling than a boar, was pale as alabaster. Ugolino held his knife.

'He's forgotten again,' said one of the pigs. Sometimes they spoke to him or each other.

'Father, come back to us,' said the strong-jawed swine. The alabaster suckling began to cry. The bristled hog comforted it. Ugolino heard grunting, but understood the words.

Like curtains briefly opened, Count Ugolino remembered, again. The swine were his sons, big Uggucione and strong-jawed Gaddo and his grandsons teenage Nino and pale Anselmuccio. This slice of recognition did not persuade him that he should not eat them. Hunger hunched over him like a vulture, gnawing at his brain.

Practically, nothing obstructed him: the boys were chained by their ankles, while Ugolino was free to roam the cell. He was armed. They

were naked.

Morally, the count knew precedents: Saturn ate his sons, and he was a god. Every day Christians ate the flesh of the Son, given by the Father. And as the Father had made the Son, so Ugolino had created his boys. He had planted the seeds; he should get to eat the harvest.

Legally, it was self-defence: he knew they were plotting against him. They were younger and stronger. They were waiting for him to get too close, and they would snatch him down. Chained, they could not cook him, but would devour him raw. Was he expected to allow this? He had seen them drawing straws, using Nino's black bristly hairs. A parricide's election.

Logistically, how best to proceed? Ugolino squatted and watched the four chained pigs and tried to quiet the hunger so he could plan. Slaughter one to feed the others, so they would not wither before it was their turn to be eaten? But one body between four stomachs would not last long, and he was loath to turn good pork into shit in four guts. Should he slaughter them all at once, and so spare them the anguish of sitting, chained to a brother's limbless trunk? But all dead, the meat would spoil. He sucked his teeth, thinking hard. Their blood would thicken in their veins and flies would come. If he wouldn't share his sons with his sons he refused to share with flies.

And how to prepare them? On Uggucione, he saw lean strips of meat which could be worked flat for salami or shaved for prosciutto. When he looked at fat Gaddo, he saw jowl and blade, hock and belly, shank and rib. He could heat water in a pan and scald and scrape Nino's cheeks to get rid of the wispy teenage beard. He imagined Anselmuccio over a spit, alabaster skin browning, cracking, crackling, spitting. He had oil and salt and pepper. He smacked his lips. A pity there was no garlic.

Ugolino was not a cowardly man. He had faced swords on the battlefield, commanded fleets. He had made the name della Gherardesca shine. He had no choice but to eat. It was an obligation to his boys that he continue. One della Gherardesca, fuelled by the others, continuing on, forever. Father, funeral monument to his sons.

The boars were snorting amongst themselves. 'You can, grandfa-

ther,' one of the boars was saying. It was the alabaster suckling. 'I drew the short straw.'

Ugolino considered what it had to say. He did not understand. 'So, it's you who'll kill me,' he replied.

'Cimon's daughter breastfed him when he was imprisoned,' the little boar smiled. 'Let me show such devotion. We drew straws.' Ugolino did not know boars could weep, even little piglets.

'Father,' said broad-browed Gaddis, 'that's Anselmuccio, your grandson. He is offering to let you eat him. He makes himself a gift. He lost the draw.'

Ugolino sat with this for a while. The alabaster swine smiled gently, his little grandson. Morally, he was undone: Saturn had eaten all his children save Jupiter, a greater god, so Ugolino could not claim to be greater than Anselmuccio. Legally, he could no longer claim self-defence; the boys would not hurt him. Logistically, the pale skin would spoil fastest of all the pork on offer, and there was not much meat on the bone. Anyway, Count Ugolino had never much cared for suckling pig.

'That's kind of you, Anselmuccio, but I do not think I can accept.' Satisfied, he sat back and closed his eyes. He slept a little. When he woke, it was the strangest thing: the boys were gone, and replaced with four pigs. He licked his lips and reached for his knife. How the pigs oinked!

SAM GRAVENY

Sam Graveney is a London-based creative writer and novelist.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

SHIV RAMDAS

THE FIRST THING ABOUT THIS story that arrests the attention is the voice—it's present immediately and with immediacy, doing an excellent job of grabbing the reader by the hand and drawing them into the world of the story, so deftly that it barely feels like it's happening at all. Voice is hard at the best of times, and when that voice is a child's POV, it becomes an even more complex craft exercise because of the twin requirements of maintaining both plausibility of character as well as level of detail to build out the world and plot. This opening does all that and more really well, and before we know it we're right alongside Jeremiah, sharing in his journey.

Having invited us into the world, the story does a really good job of swiftly setting up the stakes, and laying out all the intrigue there is. One of the hardest things to do is to get the reader to identify completely with the protagonist's goals, especially with regard to answering primary story questions, but this was handled perfectly here. The story also does a commendable job of not only setting but raising these stakes, the questions the reader has only grow more pressing as we learn more, and by the time Jeremiah sets out for the fallow fielded farm, we're as curious as he is about the well.

Perhaps one of the hardest things to do in a story is not to merely subvert expectations, but to do so by escalating them even beyond the scope of what the reader went in looking for. This is an even taller task in the horror space, and the story does this expertly, with the discovery of the horror lurking underneath. The only thing that's even harder is to immediately subvert expectations all over again, which the story does in truly wonderful (and horrifying) fashion when we learn that the true monster isn't even on the farm, but back home in the place Jeremiah considered safe.

All in all this story really lives up to the spirit of the theme, and delivers a power packed punch in that vein, while also creating, raising and then subverting expectations all around. Really enjoyed this short, creepy tale of monsters seldom looking like we expect them to and am very happy to declare it the winner of the award.

SHIV RAMDAS

Shiv Ramdas is a multi-award nominated author of speculative fiction short stories and novels. He lives and writes in Seattle, Washington with his wife and three cats. In 2020 he became one of only two Indian writers to ever be nominated for a Hugo, a Nebula and an Ignyte Award in the same year. He also gained Twitter fame in 2020 for live-tweeting the saga of his brother-in-law's rice mishap. His first novel, *Domechild*, was India's first mainstream cyberpunk novel. His short fiction has appeared in *Slate*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Podcastle* and other publications.

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