

ELEGANT LITERATURE

SILENT STORMS



#030

Elegant Literature Issue #030
Silent Storms

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ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

MAGAZINE & CONTEST

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

We aimed to change that.

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 This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

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

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

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

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

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

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

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

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

Happy reading!

CONTENT WARNING

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

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THANK YOU TO
OUR PARTNERS

SUBTXT
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

SILENT STORMS

Write a story involving Silent Storms, and a door.

Thunderclouds advance on the horizon, rivalling the rolling passion in your chest. Hold your breath as the energy gathers, growing, building to the breaking point. Can you find solace or shelter before it's too late?

Most of us are furnaces of raging emotion, locked up tight behind societal doors of steel. There's a reason meditation is a practice, and peaceful enlightenment a lifelong goal. In the meantime we struggle against the spiraling vortex, the whirling storm inside. Contain and control. Find the calm center. The hurricane's eye. Listen as the wind dies and the world stands still. Power, peace, and quiet. Will you seize the moment before the mayhem resumes? Is your magic harnessed from violence or silence? Artists, their canvas a turmoil of expectations. Soldiers, torn between duty and conscience. Hackers, breaking the barriers of our modern world. And all around us, the cosmos should be the loudest of all, yet we can't hear a thing. Silent storms brew not just in the sky but in hearts and minds. Muted, invisible but intense. How will you handle the pressure?

This issue invites you to explore Silent Storms, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

HEAD JUDGE
SOMTO IHEZUE

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

ANDY PELOQUIN
CHRISTOPHER FIELDEN
CHRISTI NOGLE
LINDZ MCLEOD
A.C. WISE
SHIV RAMDAS
OGHENECHOVWE D. EKPEKI
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HAYLEY MILLIMAN
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NATHAN BAUGH
JIM HULL
DJANGO WEXLER
NICKY SHEARSBY
MAX GLADSTONE
CREAG MUNROE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE
HONORABLE MENTIONS
PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

A Glittering Cage of Stars	Tim Deschênes
A Mother, Before All Else	Becca Martin
Angel at the Piedmont Library	Allison Colgrove
Beware Blue Skies	Wester Wagenaar
Deep Gut Gems	Joshua D Martin
Echoes of the Future	Mary Elizabeth Tait
FOR NORM, For us	Erin Brandt Filliter
Hear No Evil	Samuel Sargent
In the Shadow of a Crusade	Diane Belmont
Indian Summer	Zahn Bach
La Fromager (The Cheesemaker)	Kristoff Frey
Perihelion	Chiamaka Okike
Seeking Shelter	A.V. Steinbacher
Seven Swings	M.E. Moseley
Storm Chasers	Nathan Mehlhorn
Tempest of the Mindwalker	David J. Bothwell
The Eternal Legacy of the Blade	M.J. Herschel
The Moon Keeper	G. E. Migaj
The Rain That Falls Like Ink	Alora Claire
The Resort	Andrea Lynn Fitzgerald
The Things I Learned While Decomposing in the Woods	Kaitlyn DeVries
The Water Spirit	Avery Briar
Unforgivable Behavior	Samuel Atlas Summers
When Home Drowns, We Rise	Makei Tupou
Where Bravery Lives	L. L. Blackwell

A BAD PERSON

MARGARET SPRATT

I AM NOT A BAD person, I think as I sweep into the dressing room, simultaneously gathering up my hair to tie it back and shouldering through the other harvesters to get to my locker.

“You’re late.”

I shuck off my jeans with a huff.

“I know.”

The black dress smells like fresh laundry when I pull it over my head—a smell I know will last hardly longer than five minutes once I get out there. Siv—another harvester—leans against my locker as I quickly stuff my feet into the black ballet flats. She lets out a long sigh.

“I really don’t want to be here today.”

We are mirrors, Siv and I—the same black dress, the same black ballet flats, the same line between our brows. There’s a reason our uniforms are all the same colour: black doesn’t stain if you get blood on it.

“I know,” I tell her as I tug my dress further down my thighs. If I’m being honest with myself, I don’t particularly want to be here, either. But I need the money, and the money is good—it has to be. No one else wants to do the job.

I offer Siv a tight-lipped smile. “It’s one night.”

I pivot toward the door that leads out into the hall. Siv falls into step beside me.

“One night,” she says. “Until the next night. And the next. I’m starting to think money isn’t worth my humanity anymore.”

I scoff, halting before the set of swinging double doors. A string instrument—a cello, perhaps—wails on the other side. Voices mumble, nearly drowning out the sound of something else, something quieter, so quiet I could almost miss it: hot, thick, *bubbling*. I reach past Siv to grab a tray, balancing it on my palm.

I am not a bad person, I think.

“One night to pay off a month’s worth of bills? I’d say that’s worth it.”

I kick open the doors with my heel, throw back my shoulders, and glide inside. I am greeted first by a string quartet playing a romantic

melody in the far corner of the long, yawning hall. The lights are dim, giving a sort of intimate atmosphere to the room. Round tables covered in thick, glossy white cloth take up much of the space, leaving enough room for a dance floor, a bar, a thin, gossamer curtain that creates a sort of wall between one side of the hall and the other, and about sixty elegant patrons. Some look old, their skin lined, their hair grey, but I know they are far, far older than they seem. Some look young; none of them are.

“Another drink,” says a lady draped in white silk. I imagine the stain if she spilled the contents of her cup—blood on snow.

“One for me, too,” says a man in a suit, with eyes so dark they are almost black. Shark’s eyes.

The young girl sitting between them would look devastatingly beautiful—unnaturally so—were it not for the permanent sneer twisting her lips. “And get rid of these empty glasses, will you?”

I nod, all soft, pleasant smiles, my lips parted slightly as I gather up the empty, red-stained glasses on the table closest to me and place them on my tray. The trick is to breathe through your mouth as much as possible during the first hour of a harvesting shift. I’ve gotten decently used to the smell, but I’ve learned from experience that gagging (or, worse, losing your dinner) in front of a patron gets your pay cut in half.

It’s difficult to describe what a lot of blood smells like to someone who’s never been around a lot of blood. The penny-tinged tang clings to everything, even my hair. After a shift, I always shower twice: once in the communal showers on my way out of the building, and then again at home, as soon as I walk in the door. I don’t even let my husband kiss me first. Yet, sometimes I still wake with the taste of it, or what I imagine it to be (warm, wet, thicker than water; rich with an edge of something dark, something *reeking*, something *wrong*), under my tongue.

I make my way around another table, plucking up red-rimmed wine glasses as I go. I am a ghost among the living—drifting around the room, unseen, unheard. It’s better like this, when they don’t look at me.

The memory rises in my mind like bile in my throat.

The corner's of his mouth are stained red, like a mannerless child not bothering with a napkin after eating a plate of spaghetti. He smiles, a mouthful of tombstones, his *eyes*—

Those *eyes*—

It is better, I have learned, when they don't notice you at all.

When my tray is nearly full, I approach the curtain. With each step I take toward it, the bubbling—hot, thick, wet—grows. And the *smell*... I brace myself, closing my mouth and breathing in through my nose. My nostrils flare as the penny-tang rushes in.

I straighten my spine. Swallow once. Then I pull back the curtain.

The floors turn from luxurious red carpet to sterile white linoleum as I step through, quickly shifting the curtain back into place behind me. I blink back tears at the sudden onslaught of fluorescent light. Bleach burns my nose when I breathe in.

I glance over my shoulder.

My line of work has taught me that people can generally be split into one of two categories. There are the givers, and there are the takers.

Through the curtain, I see fragments of the takers as they dine and dance—a gold watch on a tanned wrist, a set of pearls draped across a delicate throat, a smile (perfect straight teeth, stained with red). It's a curtain, hardly even a cobweb, but it may as well be one-way glass; the takers never bother to peer through it.

If they did, this is what they would see:

Stalls are lined up against the far wall, each consisting of a hospital bed, a heart monitor, and a pink-steaming tank. In each bed, a person lies, too pale, too thin, submerged in a drug-induced haze (a drug, of course, that won't affect the patrons). Crimson tubes are tucked into their wrists, their throats, their thighs. Their eyes are all open, red and leaking from the inability to blink, but I do not think they see me. I hope they do not see me.

I am not a bad person.

I approach the first bed, as her tank is nearly full. Her eyes—blue-white and red-rimmed—stare off into some distance I cannot see.

I place my tray on the small table next to the heart monitor. The mechanical *whirr purr blip* mingles with the wailing strings on the other side of the curtain. I pluck up the first glass, ignoring the trembling of my hands as I bring it to the small spout below the bubbling tank. I press down on the tab and red liquid spurts forth. Once the cup is half-full, I replace it on the tray and repeat the process again. Again. Again.

It's only as I'm reaching for the final glass that I notice her eyes have moved. She is watching me.

I freeze. I can feel my pulse in my throat.

We stare at one other for a long moment. When she doesn't move, I pick up the final cup and bring it to the spout. As the first drop of blood hits the glass, something *shatters*. I whip around, only to find the woman now standing. *How—*

But I don't have time to think, to conjure up a reason why the drugs wore off, because she is reaching for me, reaching for my throat—

No, she reaches *past* me, her too-pale fingers curling around the largest shard of glass—a broken stem from one of the wine glasses. She looks at me once, something fierce in her eyes. *Please*, I think I say. *Please don't—*

She scoffs, a bitter sound that makes my insides curdle like milk, before she draws a straight line up either wrist. Her skin parts. Something splashes on the white linoleum. The heart monitor is a frantic, bleating bird, and I think I see a smile ghost the woman's lips before her eyes roll back and her body hits the floor with a wet thud.

Silence. Stillness.

Then: "Oh, god—oh my *god*." Siv. She's by the curtain, balancing a tray on her shoulder. I blink, blink again, my tongue a heavy, useless thing in my mouth. Hands grip mine, pulling me to my feet. "Go wash up," Siv says, eyes wide as she surveys the shattered wine glasses, the blood on my hands, the body on the floor. "Take the side door, don't pull back the curtain. They'll rip you apart if they smell it." I hover there, my breaths automatic things. The heart monitor lets out a long wail as the line on the screen straightens out completely. "*Now*."

My legs move on their own, robotic limbs carrying me to the door, into the hallway beyond it, past other harvesters watching me with wide eyes. I blink, and I am back in the dressing room, reaching for the sink to turn on the tap.

Why did she do that? What would she—

But I know why, don't I? I know.

People can generally be split into one of two categories. There are the givers, and there are the takers—but there is a third category, perhaps the worst of them: the observer. The silent perpetrator. The takers may drink the blood, but they do so from my cupped hands.

Even as the stream from the tap washes away all traces of the red, even as I watch the last of the pink water swirl around the porcelain bowl and then disappear down the drain, I know my hands will never truly be clean. How could they be? They are the hands that feed *them*.

The rest of my shift passes in a blur, a series of images I barely register.

I focus on the cups. Gather, fill, replace. Gather, fill, replace. I look no one in the eye, no matter what side of the curtain I am on. I have a job to do. Between one round and the next, someone cleans up the pool of blood that had been spreading across the white linoleum floor. Siv, perhaps. I am glad—I would have hated to slip in it.

The clock at last strikes sunrise. The patrons drain the last dregs of their cups, some smacking their lips, others rubbing their swollen bellies. They have had their fill for the night.

I enter the dressing room and peel off my dress, tossing it right into the garbage (even if I can't see the stain, I'll know it's there; I'll feel the phantom itch). I take my time in the showers, letting the hot water and steam wash away more than just the night's dirt.

My heart is still racing. I'm afraid it will never go back to normal—that they will somehow hear it, *pumping, pumping, pumping*, and that they will come looking. That one morning, I will open my eyes only to find they are already open—burning, leaking, unable to blink as I stare up at those fluorescent lights, the *whirr purr blip* of

the heart monitor in my ears as a harvester brings a wine glass up to my tank, pressing the spout with a shaking hand, bleeding me dry while she assures herself she is not a bad person.

MARGARET SPRATT

Margaret Spratt is an editor by day and writer by night from the Prairies.

Her stories typically include a monster of sorts and a stomach-churning twist. She writes about her dreams, or—more accurately—her nightmares.

When she's not cuddled up with her cat, Sooka, she can be found frantically trying to write seven novels at once.



TRI MARTOLOD

NICOLAS BADOT

ANAELLE'S BODY WAS WRAPPED IN a fishing net, rolling back and forth on the deck as the small boat rocked in the waves. At either end of the vessel were the two men who had loved her, and who she had loved in turn. Budoc, her husband, was at the bow, staring at the clouds that gathered on the horizon. Aodren, her lover, manned the tiller with his rough fisherman's hands.

The two men had been silent for the entire journey.

It had been Anaelle's dying wish that they go together and deliver her body to the waves beyond the Breton coast. A sailor's burial. A final voyage together for three childhood friends.

Her affair with Aodren had started when they were still young, before the sea salt and the bitter winds had ravaged their flesh, before decades of labour had gnawed their bones and shrunk them down to the elders they'd once scorned.

None of them had ever spoken of it. Secrets, it was said, belonged to the sea.

"Storm coming in," Budoc said at last.

"Aye, looks to be a rough one. Manannán fend."

There would be no talk of turning back. Being the first to suggest it would invite unspoken accusations. See, Anaelle. I loved you the more and he the less. Look how he balks at his duty to you. They would not change course, even if it meant both of them would die cold deaths beneath the waves.

How much fish had the three of them caught on this vessel? Glittering sea breams and cod fish to feed the village and trade with merchants; the rare soles and rays that they would cradle like treasures and reverently gut and clean before sharing the meal in the evenings, crouched around a fire with chouchen and wine, telling the same old fisherman's tales and gossiping about the same old neighbours from the village.

Three lives defined by the contours of this lone vessel.

Anaelle used to sing while the men cast their nets. They tried to remember her voice as waves swelled and the air thickened. How her songs would pierce the furore of the water and the wind, more beau-

tiful and calming than any siren.

She sang most often about young sailors and doomed loves.

Tri martolod yaouank

Tra la la, la la la la

Tri martolod yaouank o voned da veajiñ

Their reveries were shattered when lightning pierced the sky. Thunder followed soon after. It was close by. There would be no avoiding this storm.

“Did she tell you how far out she wanted to go?” Budoc said.

“Nope. Just that she wanted to be right up on Saint Mer’s bosom.”

“That’s just like her, isn’t it?”

A sad smile twisted Aodren’s lips. “Aye. She had a way of making the plans and then still making you figure everything out for yourself.”

Rain burst forth in torrents, soaking through both men’s coats immediately.

“Do you remember when she bought that sheep?” Aodran said.

Budoc chuckled. “Aye. Said she’d use the wool to make us winter clothes. Made us fence off a paddock for the beast and cart in a loom for her all the way from town.”

“And then it turned out she couldn’t sew for shit.”

The men laughed.

“And don’t forget her cooking,” Budoc said. “The woman never met a fish she couldn’t burn.”

“I remember when she tried to make soup.”

“Whole hut nearly went up in flames.”

“And she tried to put out the fire with a blanket. We had to chop the damn door to patch up the roof.”

“I’m a woman of the sea, you can’t expect me to work fire,” Budoc quoted.

Aodren loosened his grip on the tiller. “At least she always had us to come rescue her.”

“Aye. And then she would be so calm brushing off the little disas-

ters that followed her. Sometimes, I thought she didn't really need rescuing. Like she did it just to make us feel useful."

"You could never tell with her. She always kept us guessing. Raising hell one day and then acting like nothing happened the next."

"If I ever tried to tell her off for anything, she always said, 'You knew how I was when you married me.'"

Aodrans smile vanished. Before Budoc could say anything else, lightning struck again, even closer now.

The boat tilted violently. Anaelle's body started flying overboard and both men rushed to grab her. Budoc got her shoulders, and Aodren the legs. The sudden movement pushed the boat so far it almost capsized. They pulled back just in time, collapsing on the deck with the body flopping down behind them. The jib lines loosed with nobody to hold them and the boom swung wildly overhead.

"You damn fool!" Aodren shouted. "We nearly lost her."

"Fool?" Budoc spat. "You've made a fool of me alright. Going on three decades now."

Lightning blinded them. Aodren recoiled. Thunder.

Budoc stood up, steadying the sail with one hand. "How long did you wait after our wedding night, you wife-stealing bastard? Do you know what it feels to have your wife carrying on with someone else?"

Aodren stood too. "At least you had her to be your wife."

Budoc pushed Aodren with his free hand, sending the old man tumbling back to the deck. "Because she chose me, you worthless dog. You could have had anyone else."

Aodren kicked at his shin. "She was the only one for me, and you knew that when you married her."

Budoc let go of the sail and descended on Aodren, striking at his face with both hands. "You didn't have to hear all those folks snicker behind your back." Lightning. He struck him again and shook him by the collar. Thunder. "Do you know how it was to never feel like I was enough for her?"

Aodren clawed at Budoc's eyes and twisted his hips, sending his foe to the deck and scrambling atop him. He spat blood in his face as he spoke. "You felt you were never enough?" He wrapped his hands

around Budoc's throat and started to choke him. "No matter how much of myself I gave her, she was still yours. What did I have?"

Budoc struggled for breath. Rain pooled in his open mouth. He kicked and thrashed and the world started to fade.

The boom swung again, crashing into Aodren's temple and knocking him down. The boat shook. Budoc's reflexes kicked in and he grabbed the jib line, holding it as taut as he could with his battered hands.

The men lay on the cold deck as the boat rocked and filled with water. Both of them heaving and bleeding, clutching at the rigging for their lives.

When the storm finally subsided, Aenelle's body was missing.

"She's gone, Aodren," Budoc whispered. "She's gone."

"She must have gone over while we were tussling."

Drenched as they were by the storm, it was impossible to tell which of the men was the first to weep. They embraced each other tightly as the tears drained from them, finally collapsing once more and laying in silence, until the clouds cleared to reveal the heavens lit pink and orange by sunset.

"You know," Aodren said, "I think she would have found this whole thing pretty damn funny."

"I suppose she would. She'd probably make a joke of it. Say something like: 'Why didn't you fight over me like this when I was alive?'"

Aodren laughed. "I suppose we did, in our own way. Fight over her, I mean. Though she never would have stood for us throwing fists. Woulda called us both fools, or worse."

"And she would have been right."

The men took in the sunset.

"I guess we should say a few words."

Both men shifted uneasily, neither knowing who should speak first.

After a moment, they both looked at each other, and in unison, they began to sing.

Tri martolod yaouank

Tra la la, la la la la

Tri martolod yaouank o voned da veajiñ

Their voices mingled with the waning waves, and they knew that the sea swallowed more than secrets.

NICOLAS BADOT

Nicolas Badot is an Irish-Belgian writer of fiction and poetry currently living in the Balkans. His short fiction has appeared in the Sci Phi journal and 7th Circle Pyrite, and his poetry has appeared in a number of publications. He has a penchant for all things speculative, mythological, macabre and fantastical. He is currently drafting a novel about endless towers and the ruins of cities in the desert.



IF IT RAINS

MAEVE CONLON

*“Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue,
rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains...”*

Robert Geiger

April 13, 1935

“And don’t forget what the Lord says, ‘the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.’”

“Amen.”

Angela elbows me hard in the ribs and I realize I’ve forgotten to respond.

“Ah—amen.”

I used to pay attention in Sunday School, I swear I did, but that was before every bible quote we ever studied had something that related back to dust. Granda used to say that when people died, their bodies turned to dust so that they could be carried back to their homeland on the wind. If that was true, Mam, Da, and Angela would go back to Ireland. But Danny, Kay and Margie, they’d stay here, in Kansas. I wonder where my dust would go?

Mam was only four months pregnant with me when they left Dublin, but I was born somewhere near the Kentucky border. I don’t like to think of my dust sitting by its lonesome on that dirt road while the rest of my family is sitting on two different continents. I don’t want to become dust in death, I’ve already seen enough of it in life.

Dust has become my very existence. Its coarseness sands my skin anew everyday, covering every crack and crevice. It seasons our food, covers our quilts, we even cough it out of our lungs in great muddy hacks. When I close my eyes at night I feel the grit scratch my lids and all I can do is try and blink it down my cheeks in dirt stained trails, the same ones that led us to this Godless land.

I know I shouldn’t think such things. Mam always says how lucky we are to be in America. She even takes that great flag off of our porch everyday and washes it with the curtains knowing full well it’ll be full of dust again by tomorrow. But that’s just the type of person Mam is. She’s been running her own home since she was Angela’s

age, and at this point we all know better than to question her ways.

Sunday school's emptier than usual this week. I suppose most parents want to spare their children a walk in this weather, but Mam told us that if Jesus could wander forty days in the desert, then we could go half a mile through the dust to church.

When class finishes, Angela marches us all into the bathroom and washes out each of our dirty handkerchiefs until the water runs from a deep brown to a soft beige.

"Alright wains, line up now."

I hate when Angela groups me in with the little ones. I'm twelve now and only two years younger than she is, but she loves to play Mam whenever she can. I take my kerchief from her and wrap it around my head myself.

She's able to wrap Danny's with little trouble, but Kay always puts up a mighty fuss. She's at the age where everything's a battle: brushing her hair, eating her greens, taking a bath, and the dust only exhausts it.

"I hate wearing it, I hate it!" She squirms like a fish in Angela's grip, but Angela is patient as ever.

I know Angela's desperate to take some of the workload of the wains from Mam. She's still shook up from our neighbor, Mrs. Harris', suicide. The Harris children are even younger than we are, and with their Da gone to California for work they'll all be split up among distant relatives in the East. Just yesterday Angela and I watched 'em all get loaded up on a big cart with what little belongings the bank didn't repossess. They were all cramped and coughing and crying like mad. Mam says we're blessed to have Da out working for Roosevelt on the CCC and I can see her trying to act grateful, but everyday the dust seems to cover her a little bit more, and I harbor my own fears about what would happen if she let herself get buried entirely.

Before we even step outside, I can tell the wind's picked up some. It's lashing against the church walls like sandpaper. Once outside, we link arms as it's too dangerous to risk one of us wandering off in the wrong direction and getting lost in the storm. Angela takes the lead while I take the rear, sandwiching the younger ones 'tween us.

By the time we finally get home, Mam's already been waiting for us. She repeats Angela's same way of washing the muddied handkerchiefs while we sit for afternoon tea. I try to filter the sandy tea through my teeth, spitting the gobs of mud into my napkin.

"So what did ya learn today?" she asks.

I shrug, using my shoulder to try and scrape some of the sand from my ears. "More scripture about dust and how it'll all be gone soon."

She laughs, but there's no humor in it.

"Ecclesiastes then, aye?"

"Aye."

"Well, let's pray on that then."

A stale silence falls over us all for a moment, but it's just as soon broken when Margie starts hollering from the other room. Angela's up before I am and I can already hear the baby settling a moment later.

"Raegan, love?" Mam's voice is tired.

"Aye?"

"Won't you go read to your Granda? He oughta be up by now."

I nod as I push my chair from the table, leaving four streaks across the sandy floor.

"It's called *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Granda."

"What, too good for Yeats now are we?"

His voice is strained, but there's still a trace of teasing in it.

"I thought you might want a change, besides this one is more of a story than a poem."

"Aye, very well, I trust ye."

The dust has weakened him too, lined his lungs with crusted dirt so that every breath crackles like broken sugar candy. He's quiet while I read, his leather chest rising and falling with great effort.

"Water, water, everywhere but not a drop to drink.' I'd say that's a line that sticks with ye, aye?"

His voice startles me, I was sure the poem had put him to sleep.

"Aye," is all I muster, afraid to say too much, his voice is so raw.

"I wonder who killed the albatross 'round these parts," he mum-

bles.

I shrug.

“Tell ye what, if it brought our rain clouds back, I’d let ‘em don me with that bloody bird like a pearl necklace I would!”

I know he’s trying to make me snicker, but the question is already out of my mouth before I can swallow it.

“Granda, do you think there is someone responsible for all this?”

He sighs again, this one comes in tremors as he holds back a cough.

“Naw love, it’s just nature being mysterious and cruel—and so long as it’s poor people that are suffering the government won’t lose a wink o’ sleep. They’ll call it the will o’ God and move on to the next disaster, one that affects people more important than us.”

“I thought the bible says the poor will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven? That must make us at least a little important.”

He guffaws, a sound that still comes so natural it makes me smile.

“Hmph, don’t believe everything ye read, love.”

Again a thought comes out, I seem to be able to filter them less and less these days. “D’ya think it’ll ever rain again?”

He pauses.

“Perhaps it will, perhaps it won’t.”

He’s avoiding the question, I can feel it. I sink deeper into the chair across from him, trying to hide my face in the book.

“Raegan?” He wants me to look at him.

“Raegan,” he repeats, softer this time.

I look up.

He leans forward a touch.

“I’ve got a secret to tell ya, but ya have to promise me to keep it to yerself, aye?”

I nod.

“Good, now listen to this: Our Good Lord came to me in a dream just last night and made me a proposition. ‘Eammon,’ says God ‘Ye been such a good Catholic all your life, I’ve decided to grant ye one last wish before I take ye home with me.’ Well, I’m flattered o’ course, and I tells God, ‘God, I appreciate ye saying such a thing, and the only thing I wish to see before I come up with ye, is that you send me

one last good Irish rain.”

He’s searching my eyes for understanding, but all I can do is furrow my brow. He reaches for my hand.

“I’m not much longer for this earth, my love. Our rain will be coming soon, I promise.”

I can’t meet his gaze now, I just keep my eyes fixed on his hand on top of mine and try to imagine what it looked like before it was crusted over with dirt. His skin is the same colour as old map parchment, his dark veins etched across it like highways trying to find their way back to his slow-beating heart. I close my eyes and imagine the blood rushing through those veins, the same blood that runs through mine. I don’t want to open my eyes again, I don’t want to remember him in this haze of dust. I just want to remember this feeling, his warmth.

I shut my eyes tighter, abandoning every other sense to savor the feeling of Granda’s hand and then all at once... my ears prick up. I hear something; not the lashing of dusty winds, but the pitter patter of—

“Rain!”

It’s Angela’s voice that breaks me from my meditation.

My feet move on their own, pulled by some all powerful magnet to the front door. Angela is already outside with Danny. Kay and Mam are close on my heels. Gathered on the porch, we watch in disbelief as heavy grey rain clouds roll across the barren field, dousing everything they touch in thick droplets. Then before we have time to blink, it’s upon us.

We are screaming, crying, splashing. The rain melts the dirt from our skin, mingling with our tears as they fall into the mud puddles below. We are baptized again into a new stage of life, one of hope and wonder. A life where anything can come true if you pray for patience.

The celebration grows as neighbors spill out to join in our dance. Some cry and some laugh and some seem to be unable to make a sound at all. For years everyone has gone to sleep with a prayer of rain whispered on their lips, and every morning they woke up crusted in dust. Now it seems that after all this time, all this suffering,

God has answered our collective prayers.

“Ah! Finally a good Irish rain! The Lord has heard us at last!”
Mam cries.

But I know the truth.

I feel his eyes on me before I turn around and lock them in my gaze. Granda is standing in the doorway with tears on his face, clutching the door frame for peace.

A look of understanding passes between us, an acceptance, a private agreement of mum. I feel as though my heart might burst through as I look at him. I take him in, and I decide this will be my memory of him: this moment where he saved us all and sacrificed himself in return. I go take his hand, and lead him out to dance in the rain.

MAEVE CONLON

Maeve Conlon is a 26 year old Irish-Canadian writer from Windsor, Ontario. She graduated from the University of Windsor with a bachelor's in History and a minor in English Literature and is currently attending Wayne State University for her Masters in Library and Information Sciences.



FINDING TRUE NORTH

MADLINE CICCONE

CONTEST WINNER

LEILA IGNORES THE ALERT HOVERING over the hyper-train and leaps aboard as the final siren blares. She finds an empty compartment and sinks into a worn pleather seat, appreciative of the tinted windows that bar her from the outside world. The solitude is a welcome change.

She doubts it will last for long.

When the hyper-train lurches into motion, she uses her augmented reality lenses to set a timer for one hour. Once she arrives in Seattle, the never-ending questions from her colleagues will begin. That is, unless she can devise a way to sneak past everyone at the party. If only her Augmented Reality Intelligence could offer reliable advice.

North, run the Soothing Rainforest program, Leila thinks.

A virtual cat appears on the opposite train seat. North extends both paws and arches his back. Instead of playing calming music, however, he removes the window tint and reveals a barren landscape. Tree stumps covering yellow-brown hills rush past in a blur of decay.

Not helpful, North. Leila fidgets with the hair tie on her wrist and traces the indent left by the constricting band. Her ARI's noncompliance is a disappointment but not a surprise. For weeks, he's been feeding her prohibited images of loggers indiscriminately chopping through trees and anyone standing in their way. Still, North's rebelliousness is getting worse. *Can we please have a moment of peace?*

North's owlsh eyes narrow into almond-shaped slivers. *Less than one percent of old-growth forests remain in Oregon.* His baritone voice rumbles in her mind.

Leila closes her eyes, but the image of destruction remains printed on her eyelids. "Are you trying to goad me into a rash decision?" Desperation compels her to hiss the words aloud.

I'm merely trying to offer guidance. Dismissed, North curls into a ball facing away from her and falls into sleep mode. His presence hums at the edge of her awareness, but subtly enough that she can pretend he's not there. The only way to cut the link between them is to remove her augmented reality contacts.

Leila rubs her temples, grateful for the respite from North's incessant reminders about ecological disasters and impending doom. It

was her fault, really. Her desire to climb the corporate ladder that had made the virtual black market seem like a great idea. If she hadn't been so desperate, she might have inspected the enhancement more closely. The lapse had cost her. Instead of processing requests more quickly, North had started spouting environmentalist conspiracy theories and sharing banned videos.

Her thoughts gather like dark clouds before a storm. Only DawnWare has the ability to restore her ARI's original personality, but she can't risk her company discovering what North has revealed. Leila begins petting North, the receptors on the pads of her fingers conveying the sensation of touch. If she could access the lab and run a scan of her own, she might be able to pinpoint the buggy coding. Much safer to persuade a technician to fix one line of code than to give him access to her memory files.

A plan begins to take shape in her mind as the train barrels northward.

DawnWare is headquartered in the exoskeleton of a public library, the city having little use for such a building once books became an antiquated technology. Through her AR lenses, Leila sees the orange haze of the city transformed into a whimsical mist guarding the entrance to a secret garden. Of course, North being North, her lenses occasionally sputter out to reveal employees mingling in a battered building surrounded by pollution.

A weight settles on Leila's chest when she passes beneath DawnWare's logo of a rising sun overlaid with their iconic glasses. Even with stealth mode activated, she sticks to the shadows of flowering fruit trees, avoiding the mass of networking employees and their augmented reality assistants.

North guides her across a virtual river, beyond the hanging leaves of an unreal willow, and outside to a vibrant patio filled with extinct species. An iridescent blue butterfly lands on her hand, causing her to pause before the lab entrance. North swipes at the creature; it explodes in a cloud of shimmering pixels.

DawnWare is responsible for the decimation of thousands of ani-

mal species, including the Fender's Blue butterfly, he admonishes in her mind.

Before Leila can think of a reprimand, a colleague intercepts her.

"Look who's alive!" His steel-blue hair matches DawnWare's latest model of AR glasses. The dye color—combined with the weariness wrought by excessive overtime—adds a decade to his real age.

"Zack, I've been looking everywhere for you." The lie drops swiftly, like rain from a storm cell. She smooths the worry lines from her forehead and adopts an expression of pleasant surprise. It helps that Zack's expensive cologne smells like fresh earth.

He passes her a flute of champagne and winks. "There was talk you wouldn't make the trek this quarter." The unsaid reason hangs in the air between them. *Because you turned into a recluse who refused to join her colleagues in the cloud.*

"I'd never miss a company event, especially when attendance is mandatory."

"I believe the party line is, 'strongly encouraged.'"

"Even so." She takes a sip of champagne as Zack stares at her. His glasses flash neon, and she nearly spits out her drink. *Mother Earth.* He's running an assessment.

"You're paler than the proverbial vampire in Seattle," he comments.

Leila opens her mouth in response but is distracted by the imp that appears on his shoulder. Zack turns to confer with his ARI, who gesticulates wildly and bites him on the ear before disappearing again.

"How curious," says Zack. "My ARI confirmed that yours is showing an unusually high level of neural activity."

Unlike your colleague, North interjects in Leila's mind, *I think deeply about issues.*

Leila ignores the intrusion and shrugs. "He's programmed to be smart and independent. Like a real cat."

Zack prompts her again. "You haven't noticed anything strange?"

Nothing stranger than a group of aristocrats dancing while the world crumbles around them, supplies North.

Shush, North. I'm trying to think. North's ears flatten, but he doesn't comment.

“Not exactly,” says Leila in response to Zack, who remains oblivious to her internal discussion. “I mean, sometimes North tends toward the obsessive or melodramatic end of the personality spectrum, but he always snaps out of it.”

Zack leans in closer and drops his voice to a whisper. “If your ARI’s gone Rogue, you can tell me.”

Leila’s eyes widen. That was the last thing she wanted Zack to assume. “No. It’s just an independent streak. Nothing that won’t sort itself out over time.”

“Perhaps. But I think you should follow protocol and alert Brie.”

North jumps to a virtual branch and looks down at them. *Brie is a top contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Eliminating Brie from one’s diet can reduce one’s carbon footprint.*

Leila glares up at him. *I hope you’re talking about the dairy product and not my boss.*

Certainly wouldn’t want to confuse the two, replies North.

Turning back to Zack, Leila asks, “Since when does the Quality Assurance team rely on managerial oversight to diagnose an over-active processor?” She shrugs, adopting bravado. “If you’re so concerned, then come to the lab and help me find what’s causing his hyperactivity.” *Please don’t call me on my bluff.*

Zack’s smile widens. “Splendid. I’m right behind you.”

Leila walks briskly to the laboratory entrance. They slip through the door unseen by anyone in the physical or virtual worlds. North’s ecological warnings echo in her mind. She can only hope that the scan doesn’t reveal anything nefarious that might trigger Zack to report their excursion to management.

North purrs when he steps into the scanner, which causes Leila’s heart rate to increase rapidly. Why does this version of North want to be scanned? She hesitates before powering up the computer, but Zack’s proximity propels her forward. The alternative option is no option at all. She’d rather deal with the repercussions of North’s enhancement herself than alert Brie.

The whirring of the machine takes her back to the night of North’s

alteration. She had been so excited to upgrade her ARI and gain an advantage over her colleagues. How could she have known that the file had been corrupted? When North awoke from the download, he'd looked at the DawnWare marketing material on her desk and told her the number of deaths caused by the company each year. His revelations hadn't stopped there. At dinner, he'd left sleep mode to tell her how many billions of animals die each year as a result of factory farming. When she'd ignored him, he proceeded to display a live feed of the suffering. She'd lost her appetite for meat and hadn't gained it since.

Zack's voice pulls her back to the present. On the computer screen, she sees a file embedded in a line of code. This has to be the reason North nudged her until she acquiesced to a scan. He wanted her to discover this.

Before Zack can stop her, she opens the file.

"Are you *offline*?" shouts Zack. His voice echoes in the cavernous space, bouncing off the vaulted ceilings and metal surfaces of laboratory equipment. Color rushes to Leila's cheeks.

"Thanks for your concern, but I'm in full control of my faculties," she snaps.

"You might have downloaded something malicious!" His ARI reappears and begins flying circles around him. Zack narrows his eyes. "Unless you know more than you're letting on."

Leila shakes her head and returns to the file stamped with the word CONFIDENTIAL. "DawnWare to release an irremovable chip that would suspend part of the population in unreality—forever," she reads aloud. A lightning bolt of horror strikes her.

"I had no idea," whispers Zack.

They balance on the precipice of global tyranny. DawnWare plans to disseminate the chip to workers, packaged under the guise of convenience and happiness. On a planet hurtling toward extinction, only the select upper echelons of society can afford the planet's dwindling resources. The masses, missing out, could be tricked into thinking they had it all. Virtually, of course.

North, why didn't you tell me sooner? asks Leila.

I couldn't deviate from the plan. He prowls closer and sits at her feet, tail curled protectively around them. *We needed to be at headquarters.*

Leila is still puzzling over North's reply when she hears the clicking of heels growing steadily louder.

Zack swears. "Ah, I might have made the mistake of alerting Brie earlier." He seems to shrink in size. "In my defense, you were demonstrating textbook symptoms of a Rogue ARI. And we hadn't uncovered the company's megalomaniac plan yet."

Any ideas? Leila asks North.

Yes, but it would likely lead to your resignation.

You think that's a con?

Just making you aware of the consequences.

North moves into position near the door as Brie waltzes into the laboratory. A coiffed man in a suit trails her. Normally, Brie's pompous ARI makes Leila giggle, but the tension steals the air from her lungs.

"Such ambition," says Brie. "Working in the lab during a party." The innocuous comment doesn't match the hard edge of her voice. She glances at the computer screen and her mouth presses into a thin line.

Zack steps forward. "I'm sorry for—"

Before they can discover what Zack is apologizing for, North pounces on Brie's ARI. She tries to shut down her system, but the damage is done.

North's infectious bite has unlocked the door of knowledge.

The man doubles over, his programming already working quickly to incorporate the new code. Soon, his critical thinking response will lead him to pass on the code to other ARI's.

"What did you do!" shouts Brie.

North struts back to Leila's side. She pets him, and it feels like the storm clouds have finally parted.

Leila smiles. "I learned how to read a moral compass."

MADELINE CICCONE

Madeline lives in Portland, OR. When her invitations to Hogwarts and Brakebills mysteriously disappeared, she turned to writing speculative fiction. Trail running and cat herding spark her imagination.

ALL THE SHADES OF A TECOMA TREE

LEOW JINN JYH

Monday

Outside An-an's bedroom window, his favourite tree swayed gently in the morning breeze, bare branches holding nothing but white flowers. He had finished drawing its woody bits and put the stub of medium brown oil pastel back into its slot in his 24-pack box. He lifted out the piece of never-before-used white oil pastel and rubbed it between a fresh piece of kitchen towel. It took awhile but the pastel eventually came off clean.

It was perfect timing that Puan Noorhayati had asked them to draw a tree last Friday. This tree only bloomed once a year. All flowers, no leaves, like one of those trees he saw on TV that grew in cold countries. All other trees always had some green when flowering. Daddy had said it was already there when they bought the house. Mummy had replied she wouldn't have agreed to buying this house if she knew the tree would litter all of its leaves and then all of its flowers every year all over the front lawn and the car porch. This year, she made Daddy sweep them up with a lidi broom.

It always hurt An-an's heart watching the little white trumpets get skewered by the broom's stiff bristles. So last year, he snuck out early one morning and kept one pressed inside his Chinese-Malay dictionary. He looked at it from time to time, but nothing beat the real thing.

He tentatively drew a little loop next to a branch. It wasn't as difficult to see the white on white as he had thought. The paper was slightly yellow. And the oil pastel left a trail that stood out against the paper. Satisfied, he continued drawing little loops, the old rickety desk wobbled along with his rhythm. He would stuff a piece of paper under the leg later. Though it still had plenty, the wind was picking the flowers off the tree.

Daddy would grunt and say it was called a tecoma tree whenever Mummy asked him to sweep up the sakuras. When he had asked Daddy to look up a nice photo for the computer's background on the internet, they had found out it was actually called *Tabebuia roseo-alba*. It had taken An-an three days to memorise it. And it had different names, with letters wearing hats and stuff in other countries that

Daddy didn't know how to say. Tecoma was easier. Weird how one thing can have so many names. But then, Daddy was sometimes Ah-Chai, sometimes Ah-dear, sometimes Mister Teoh, sometimes Eh.

Late last night, on his way back from the toilet, he had heard Mummy, in a sharp whisper, calling Daddy a smelly man. But Daddy always smelled of soap. Maybe he should ask Mummy about it when she returns from the bank. At least that had reminded him to flush, which always seemed to stop the whisper-fights.

He looked at his drawing, then out of the window, then back at his drawing and pursed his lips. The white had caught a lot of the brown despite him cleaning the pastel tip often. Worse, when he sat back, the clean white flowers disappeared. They only showed when he looked at the drawing a certain way. And now the woody bits looked wrong too. The browns in his box were so different from the browns of the actual tree.

The front gate rolled open. He quickly cleared his desk of the evidence. He was supposed to have been doing his Chinese writing exercises before school. Mummy had warned him that Puan Goh had called her about his grades. Before stashing his drawing into the drawer among the graded quiz papers he kept hidden in his drawer, he gave it one final glance. It looked so... flat.

That was okay. He had until Friday.

Tuesday

An-an could still hear the washing machine downstairs through the rain as he rested his chin on his desk, watching the white trumpets droop like himself.

He had wanted to watch Bluey but the TV was downstairs with Mummy there. She hadn't smiled the whole morning. It was not like he had wanted to add more housework for her like she had said. He hadn't drunk any soup at dinner last night. He hadn't even eaten that much.

He shouldn't have asked Mummy that question about Daddy, he felt. But all the chewing and slurping and clacking of spoons on plates were so, so loud when nobody was talking and his earlier at-

tempts at conversation only got short answers. Mummy had left the dinner table without answering him. Daddy then had lectured him on how children shouldn't be eavesdropping on adults' conversations. He wasn't a sneaky-sneak! They had woken him up in the first place.

The breeze wasn't helping with the smell in his room. Mummy had said he would have to live with it until the next sunny day and then she would have him move his mattress downstairs and out into the sun all by himself. He could barely lift a corner to pull over the new sheets. How was he supposed to carry it downstairs?

Smelly man. Smelly boy. Smelly Mummy!

There was a clack and An-an felt a shiver run down his spine and turned around. He half-expected Mummy standing behind. Mummy could read minds sometimes. Like that time when he was about to doodle on his desk, she suddenly appeared over his shoulder. Or whenever they went to the supermarket, she would say, "We're not buying that," before he asked. But there was only his bedroom's open door still letting in the sounds of downstairs.

He exhaled and took out yesterday's drawing from the drawer. The trunk had smudged. So had some of the branches. The flowers—he could not see any of them except where the white had picked up the brown. Maybe he should just draw a boring tree like the rest of his class would do. A coconut tree maybe, something a little different.

Outside though, the tree looked majestic even in the rain, standing tall and holding its flowers high despite the heavy air.

No, he would not draw a coconut tree. He had to do his favourite tree justice.

He had found so many shades of white at the dinner table last night—rice, porcelain, tofu, fish belly. If he looked close enough, he could see bits of other colours in them, like how his drawing paper was a little yellow. The floppy flowers seemed to have taken on a little grey, a little blue of the rain. And the trunk was almost completely black but not black. His 24-pack box had none of the colours. He stared at the smudges, how the brown trails in the white. What if...

He flipped the drawing over, drew a dot of grey and dragged the white pastel over it. He smiled. Then he did the same with some light

blue, then he mixed the blue and grey and white and all the different colours. Soon, the back of the drawing was filled with more than the 24 colours he had been using. *This is amazing!*

He tore off a fresh sheet of drawing paper and began with the flowers this time. He lightly dotted a little light blue here, a little medium grey there. He didn't need that much to make the flowers show. The desk still wobbled, but he kept on drawing. He also found that layering black over dark brown and surprisingly, some moss green made the trunk look better.

Mummy yelled for him downstairs that he hurry up and get ready for school. An-an sat back and smiled. It was the best drawing he had ever done. He wanted to draw a bit more but Mummy yelled again. He had pushed enough of his luck today. He put down the drawing and ran downstairs before Mummy yelled again.

Wednesday

An-an stood on his chair. There it was. His drawing lay limp on the roof tile. Beads of rainwater quivered on the oil pastel. Mummy had scolded him about getting his books, the desk, and the curtains wet for forgetting to close the windows and letting in the rain. That she hadn't needed a second airhead in the family. In a way, he was lucky that she hadn't seen the drawing on the roof. He'd surely have gotten the rotan for it.

The roof didn't look that far down. Daddy sometimes walked on it to clear the tecoma leaves. If he was quick enough, he wouldn't even get that wet now that the rain had dwindled to a drizzle.

He pushed his window wider. The tecoma tree beckoned at him. He climbed on his desk. It wobbled, but as he steadied himself, he heard a crunch. The tabletop sagged where his knee had been. A crease had formed right down the middle like a bolt of lightning that travelled up his knee and jolted his heart.

Even the rain held its breath.

Then, the table creaked and crackled and the next thing he knew he was a heap on the floor, the damp curtain fell on him and his box of oil pastels crunched under his back.

Thursday

After breakfast, An-an sat by the dining table under Mummy's watchful eye, his pile of homework next to the rotan. The piece of dried flower fell out between the pages of the dictionary as he looked up "tanggungjawab". He bent over to pick them up but it crunched between Mummy's fingers before he could reach down. Mummy shoved it into the dustbin. He sniffed and filled "tanggungjawab" in the right blank on his exercise sheet. Yesterday was the angriest he had ever seen Mummy. Mummy had found all his hidden quiz scores in the rubble. His buttocks were still sore from the fall and his arms from the rotan.

Outside, the wind picked up, the branches of the tecomia tree swayed, sprinkling white flowers all over the front yard and the car porch. The broken tabletop that had been leaning on the column flopped over, bringing down with it a table leg that clacked on the car. Mummy mumbled to herself, "Told him to put it on the other side but did he listen?" She dragged open the sliding glass door which shook in the frame.

An-an rushed to rescue his pressed flower from the bin. He mourned at the pieces of oil pastel peeking out among the other trash. Mummy came back in just as he returned to his seat. She looked at him from the doorway for a bit before sliding it shut.

He did not draw that day.

Friday

It still smelled faintly of pee in An-an's room when he woke up but the sky was clear.

Daddy had come back early yesterday to retrieve his drawing from the roof. He had then made dinner while Mummy read the papers by the dining table. He had even folded the laundry that had been piling up on the sofa. An-an didn't know what had happened but he was glad to see them talking a little more.

He came downstairs to find a pack of his favourite tomyum fried vermicelli on the dining table. Next to it were pieces of his second

drawing salvaged from the roof and a new box of 48-pack oil pastels. Mummy brought him a cup of warm milo, and told him to hurry up and get on with the drawing before the school bus comes at 11:30. He had better get at least an A from Arts, she said.

He wolfed down the pack of noodles and went outside with a fresh sheet of drawing paper taped to a board and his new set of oil pastels.

The tree had lost most of its flowers. It looked a little beaten and bare. But he loved it still. The blues and greys were still in the shadows but the flowers blushed a little in the morning sun. He picked out a pale pink and began drawing.

LEOW JINN JYH

Jinn Jyh originally hails from Malaysia but is currently living in Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau. He spends his work days producing technical drawings and herding cats. His houseplant situation only got under control because he started writing.

HE WHO WANDERS

KATHARINA LAUKNER

ELDRON DIDN'T REALIZE DAWN HAD broken until the birds screamed at him to go to sleep. Towel clutched in one hand, a spotless bowl in the other, he stared out the window, furrowing his wizened brows. If he cleaned them enough times, he wondered if his dishes would eventually disintegrate under his diligent scrubbing fingers. Eldron glanced from the stack of clean kitchenware to the stack of cleaner kitchenware, and back to the sun slipping over the horizon, as if she hoped he wouldn't notice. To be fair, he *hadn't* noticed until now.

He set the bowl and towel down on the counter unsteadily and walked three steps to his bedroom, before pausing, one wrinkled hand resting on the doorframe. Perhaps if he cleaned them one last time?

Eldron shook his head. Hettie had told him to take care of himself.

His back ached like a taut bowstring as he perched upon the perfectly made bed and slipped off his mismatched socks. His fingers caught in the holes that had wormed their way into the fabric as he rolled them up and tucked them away.

Still wearing his threadbare sweater and stained trousers, he stretched out on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, by now lit enough to gauge whether he had to dust again this week. Unsurprisingly, he did not.

Eldron traced the soft ridges of the quilt beneath him, imagining they were hills and valleys he had yet to climb. The quilt had granted him a good two months of respite before he'd scrambled for a new project. Once every seat in the house had also gotten a quilt and the yarn had run out, Eldron had realized he needed to move on to something else. A phase of relentless baking had followed, until the cottage had filled up with enough baked goods for an entire village to eat. One night, when he couldn't sleep and the pantry was exhausted, he'd wandered through the cobblestone streets and placed his finished works on neighbors' doorsteps. He'd never heard back if they'd found the custard tarts and raspberry pies. Perhaps a fox had stolen them once Eldron had finally gone to bed.

He turned from his back onto his side, watching the sun creep up

the walls, through the window on the far side of the room, and escape to the little garden behind the cottage, casting a golden spotlight over the corpses of strawberries and beans. For four years it had lain barren, with only Hettie's ghost dancing barefoot amongst the brambles where her body now lay. She'd loved doing that—dancing barefoot in the garden while she worked, a melody always flowing like birdsong from her lips. But Eldron didn't have the tools to dig up the memories that lay there, to plant new seeds in the place he had buried dead flowers.

He turned his face away from the window and closed his eyes.

Night had pulled its curtains shut by the time Eldron regained the strength to rise. The lights of the village spread over the hills like falling stars, winking in and out of existence. He pulled the shutters open and let the scent of wild garlic and lavender waft through the hollow chambers beneath his skin. Lavender was said to be calming, but it did nothing to dispel the restless energy that made his fingers twitch and scurry for something new to occupy them.

With only half a thought, Eldron climbed out the window. His bones ached from the movement, but he ignored their incessant complaining and waded through the sea of grasses to the garden fence. Before he knew it, he was halfway through the village. Then at the gate that led to the forest beyond. Nobody stopped him. With a sigh, Eldron walked on, squinting when he couldn't discern roots from shadows. There was no point in going back now.

Every step forward pulled another after it, and Eldron found himself not being able to stop until the forest came to life around him and his legs were shaking. Begrudgingly obeying his body's commands, he sat upon a rock next to a stream and examined his surroundings. A rustling blanket of leaves splattered honeyed drops of light onto the forest floor, busy with the rush hour of tiny creatures hurrying to get to work. He watched a beetle as it clambered up the side of the rock, rustled its armored wings and buzzed away.

Rest couldn't seize Eldron for more than a handful of minutes, and soon he was back on his feet, clambering over the boulders lining the side of the stream, then wading through the water nipping at his skin.

He let the current push and pull at him, half-tempted to simply let it carry him away. With a grunt of effort, he heaved himself back up the opposite shore, panting by the time his feet once more touched stone. He took a step, then another, navigating from the rocky riverbed onto softer forest floor. It was only once moss kissed his toes that he realized he'd forgotten to wear shoes entirely. They were all the way back home, still waiting on the doormat exactly where he had left them.

Eldron stared at his bare feet in quiet shock. Then his gaze slid upward, to where a spark of color caught his eye. Dotting the forest was a trail of red spiderlilies. Their fragile petals trembled in the breeze, as if beckoning to him, waving at him to follow the scarlet flowers weaving past ancient trees. He knew where they would take him.

Eldron paused, hesitating for a moment. Then he turned and walked back the way he had come.

The afternoon sun shone lazy golden rays upon the ground, casting a warm amber glow over Eldron as he worked. His bare toes dug deep into the rich soil behind the cottage. Armed with Hettie's favorite patchwork apron and a shovel, he planted with quiet diligence, adding a third bed of flowers to the already wildly blooming daffodils and violets. They'd grown enthusiastically, spreading past their assigned beds and halfway to the garden fence. Perhaps soon they'd be wandering through the entire village.

But Eldron didn't mind.

It was the first time in a long time that his hands had been steady.

KATHARINA LAUKNER

Kat is 19 and lives in Dublin. When she's not busy writing, you can find her befriending forest spirits, drinking green tea, and reading more books than she has money for. She loves fantasy but enjoys experimenting with many different genres when it comes to both reading and writing.

THE TEMPESTS

A.K. MCCUTCHEON

LUCIA FERREIRA STOOD MOTIONLESS IN the Special Exhibition gallery of the Whitford Museum, unwilling to breathe as white-gloved technicians labored, inch by inch, to install the antique painting on the russet-tinted wall. Finally, she exhaled slowly, took a step back, and released the crew with a smile and a nod. The warm red wall color, created by Farrow & Ball for the new exhibit, rendered the perfect backdrop. A flawless placement for this last piece, her favorite in the collection: a dramatic British maritime scene.

"I wish you looked at me the way you look at that painting." Moments before his teasing murmur tickled her ear, the woodsy scent of his shower soap announced his presence behind her.

She turned, suppressing a smile, and signaled him to follow her into the unoccupied gallery foyer. Raising the volume of her voice intentionally: "How are security upgrades coming along for the exhibit opening, Mr. McKeefe?"

"How would you like a report over dinner tonight?" He snaked his hands around her slender waist. His chin, prickly with late-afternoon stubble, grazed the top of her head.

She giggled and pushed away from his embrace, glancing sideways with feigned indignation. "You're going to get us in big trouble, Nick." Smoothing her hair and straightening her blazer, she whispered with a wink, "See you tonight."

Lucia watched his long silhouette receding down the marble hallway, edged by ebbing daylight filtered through the glazed glass ceiling. She marveled at how quickly he had become a vital presence in her life. Only three months ago, the museum director introduced him as the new Security Chief at the Whitford. The tall Irishman shook her hand, smiling, and Lucia smiled back, smitten. She was immersed in planning the new installation, anxious to prove herself worthy of her promotion to Exhibitions Curator at the boutique museum on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Not an opportune time to embark on a new romance. And involvement with a coworker presented a risk. But, as her grandmother often said, "Life makes us choose between manners and mischief."

He was older than other men she'd been with; the silver flecking his temples struck her as madly attractive. Smug shivers ran down her neck when she spied women—and men—following him with their eyes. The challenge lay in maintaining secrecy until the appropriate time to disclose their relationship.

Lucia waited until he disappeared from view before heading cautiously in the same direction and boarding the elevator to her third floor office. Seated at the walnut Queen Anne desk she rescued from the museum's basement, she began her compulsive end-of-day routine: clearing her workspace of extraneous materials and straightening each remaining item with painstaking precision. When she picked up the glossy catalog for the special exhibit opening next week, her face heated with pride.

The exhibit theme was her creation: *The Tempests ~ Humanity's Struggle with Nature's Dark Side*. A representation on canvas of the eternal war against nature's violence: maelstroms, whirlwinds, tidal waves. Fifteen major works, including a van Gogh on loan from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and from the Tate Gallery in London, her favorite piece—William Turner's *Steamship at Sea in a Storm*.

Lucia smoothed the cover of the catalog and placed it carefully on the leather desktop, her fingers trembling. Everything must be perfect for the opening. Every detail. Perfect.

That evening, as they snuggled on the couch in her studio apartment, sharing takeout Chinese, Nick asked about the painting installed that afternoon. "What fascinates you about that one? Van Gogh is what everyone wants to see."

Lucia set aside her cardboard carton of Kung Pao chicken and dabbed her mouth with a paper napkin. "Hmm, yes, the van Gogh is impressive, but—" She sighed. "The Turner piece is *thrilling*. A steamship thrashing in a winter storm. Turner's brushstrokes are ferocious, swirling, they set the scene in motion. I can hear the thunder of the waves. When I look at that painting, I feel such passion, it makes me dizzy."

She hesitated, mulling whether to tell the story, then, her decision

made: "My grandparents crossed the Atlantic on a steamship from Southampton. Sixty years ago, in winter, with one suitcase and no money. Freezing and seasick in the lower bunk of a tiny inside cabin. Grandma never saw home again. She left her life behind, risking everything for love. She raised me after Grandpa died and my parents... well, my parents weren't interested in marriage or parenting."

She looked down, blinking hard. "I wish Grandma could have met you." Her voice dropped, almost inaudible. "She died last year. Now, I'm all alone."

"So that's why you never talk about your parents." Nick wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her toward him. "You're not alone, Lucia." There was a thickness in his voice she'd never heard before. "My grandmother, my *babushka*, would have loved you."

Lucia's face puckered. "*Babushka*? Is that Russian?" She smiled. "Isn't McKeefe an Irish name?"

He shrugged. "It's a name."

She wondered if he was disconnected from his family too. Another thing they had in common. They shared so many interests: art, wine, bicycling. He was attentive, flattering, yet there was an aura of mystery about him, a cryptic quality.

She would catch him watching her, his expression frozen, unfathomable. When she asked, "What are you thinking?" he'd answer, "Nothing particular." She wavered between intrigue and frustration with his elusiveness.

Yet, after their lovemaking, when he held her so close they breathed in sync, she felt anchored, safe, in a place where language was superfluous. She wondered—

"Lucia, there's something I need to tell you. Something I want to ask you."

That strange texture in his voice again. Goosebumps prickled along her arms.

He shifted on the couch to face her. "I'm leaving the Whitford when the exhibit opens. My work is done. The guards know the new systems. The guard supervisor can take over. It's time to move on."

Her breathing stopped. She shook her head. "You're *leaving*?"

Where... where are you going?"

"I have a new job in Europe... I want you to come with me." His tone was direct, matter-of-fact.

Europe? Did he expect her to leave her job, her life, just like that? She searched his face. There was something in his eyes, something she couldn't read.

His voice lowered. "I love you, Lucia. And I want you to come with me."

Her senses unmoored from her body and careened around the room. She had never fainted, but this was how she imagined the feeling. Gradually, her equilibrium returned, her mind calmed, and her thoughts crystallized.

Wasn't it the thrill of the unknown that drew her to this man? The white-hot attraction that crackled between them, daring, dangerous, outside the lines of her carefully curated life. Why not risk everything for love? Wasn't that what her grandmother did?

For love. *Was it love?* Or was she addicted to his intoxicating allure?

She took a long breath. "Nick, I... we haven't known each other long, and... I'm not ready to take such a big step. I mean... I'm not sure how I feel. If you could give me some time..."

His face darkened. He stood and stared down at her. "I'm afraid our time is up, *dorogaya*." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Good night."

"Wait... you're just walking out on me?" Lucia sat, open-mouthed, as he strode across the room. "Nick... really?" The door rattled shut behind him. Shaking, she grabbed her phone and googled "*dorogaya*," guessing at the spelling. A Russian word. *Beloved*.

The following day slid by in a flurry of preparations for the opening of *The Tempests*. Nick seemed determined to avoid her: not answering calls or texts, no sightings of him in his office or in the galleries. She decided to wait a few days, then drop by his place after work. Perhaps she could coax him out from behind his wall of silence. He had said he loved her, hadn't he?

The morning of the opening, her phone jangled her from sleep at 6 a.m. Emily, the assistant director, sounded distraught: “Lucy, the director wants staff to come in as soon as possible for an emergency meeting. There was a break-in last night.”

Lucia jolted awake, her chest thumping. “The van Gogh?”

Emily’s voice wobbled. “Not only the van Gogh. The exhibit is gone.”

How was it possible? Lucia’s thoughts reeled.

“The Board of Trustees is meeting now. The police cordoned off the building. The FBI is here. They want to talk to everyone. Lucy, they think Nick McKeeffe was involved.”

Lucia’s stomach twisted. *Nick? No, no... it can’t be true.*

“The guard schedule was changed. There was no one on duty overnight. The alarm system was disconnected from the offsite monitoring station. Nick’s the only one with the passcodes, besides the director, and she wouldn’t—”

Lucia idolized the museum’s director, a world-renowned antiquities administrator. The Whitford was her life. She couldn’t be involved.

“They think it was a foreign-based group. A similar theft happened in Prague last year. Lucy, I’ve got to go. More calls to make. Come in soon, okay?”

The phone slipped from her hand, lost in the bedsheets. She didn’t bother to search.

Nick. Who was he? Was that even his name? And why did she not see him as a fraud, as the con man he was? *The Tempests*. The exhibition she had worked on for over a year. Gone. She weighed the losses to the Musée d’Orsay and the Tate. The theft would be all over the news and social media, if it wasn’t already. How would the Whitford recover its standing, its reputation?

She pulled the comforter over her head and buried her face in the pillow. That’s when it hit her. The scent of cedarwood and spice and sweat. His scent. Lingering on her sheets. Reminding her, taunting her, that she had let him into her life. Reflexively, she breathed in deeply, inhaling his essence, and then the certainty arrived. The bitter, undeniable truth.

She loved him.

Damn him. She loved a man she never really knew.

Her bare feet hit the cold hardwood floor with a shock that electrified her spine. She ripped the malodorous sheets from the bed in frenzied motions, grunting and spitting. Her phone clattered to the floor. A metallic taste told her she'd bitten her inner cheek.

Panting hard, she conceived a plan to expose Nick: she would scrawl a hideous epithet on a sheet and unfurl it out the window. The most despicable label possible... "Devil spawn." That's it. She would paint "DEVIL SPAWN" on the sheet, and the TV news whores from *TMZ* and *Inside Edition* would rush to interview her, and they would ask, "Who is the devil spawn?" and she would tell them.

A cold shudder pulsed through her bones. She glimpsed herself reflected in the mirrored closet door. A crazed smile. Her nude body awash in the harsh morning light penetrating the gaps in the window blinds. Naked. The way he liked her to meet him in bed. Her guard down, her shields lowered.

Gagging on the bile from her oozing cheek, she stumbled to the bathroom and doubled over with dry heaves.

Lucia stood in the foyer of the Special Exhibition gallery, behind the yellow police tape. Her gaze swept the empty russet walls where had resided the fifteen *Tempest* masterworks. All were gone.

All but one.

One painting left behind on the red wall: Turner's *Steamship at Sea in a Storm*.

Crumpled in her fist, the note she found folded neatly on her desk: *Remember what you said you felt when you looked at the painting? That's how I will always feel about you.*

As she looked at the painting for the last time, Lucia felt neither thrills nor passion. The waves no longer thundered in her ears. In the room once throbbing with maelstroms and blizzards, she drifted, without anchor, in a sea of silence.

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.

THE STORM BEFORE THE CALM

CHRISTY HARTMAN

MARYANNE ALWAYS KNEW SHE WOULD be a mother, the sureness of it coursed through her blood, her bones, her dreams. As a child, she'd meticulously lined up her baby dolls to bathe, feed, burp, and swaddle. "You're going to be such a good momma one day," her own mother would tell her. When Maryanne married Donald, she packed him fancy lunches, laid out his clothes each morning and brushed the lint from his suit before work. "You're going to be such a good mother one day," he'd say, planting a goodbye kiss on her head.

By their fifteenth anniversary, Maryanne was still not a mother and Donald wanted to turn the nursery she'd decorated in the perfect shades of butter-yellow and mint-green into a room for his model trains. Maryanne ignored his hints and spent her afternoons knitting in the rocking chair watching cartoon duck decals march across the wall like fluffy soldiers headed to war. The drawers in the antique bureau were overstuffed with hand-knit blankets, hats, and booties.

"Any plans for today?" Donald asked, chewing his toast and eggs, eyes trained on the small kitchen television.

"Nothing special. Monday is for dusting." Maryanne moved her egg around with a fork.

"Why don't you find a little job to keep yourself busy and earn some pocket money?" Donald asked for the hundredth time.

"Hmm, maybe." Maryanne cleared the dishes from the table.

"If you go out, bring an umbrella, they're forecasting a big storm." Donald clicked off the Weather Network, kissed the top of her head, and left for work.

An hour later Maryanne shrugged on her lemon-yellow cardigan. She'd bought it during their Honeymoon weekend at the shore. Donald had crinkled his nose and called it garish; it was her favourite colour. She soon found herself driving toward the shiny new Super Mega-Store. Grey clouds swirled above, blocking the sun. A red and white 'Now Hiring' banner hung above the store doors. She didn't think working in retail was for her, but maybe this was a sign Donald was right.

The manager escorted her to the ladies clothing section, depositing her next to a tee-shirt rack. “Wait here and someone will bring you back for an interview.”

Unease crept into Maryanne’s belly. She imagined herself fading from the inside out until she was nothing but a ghost haunting housewares and men’s clothing. She wanted to be home in the rocking chair, embroidering tiny flowers on a tiny bonnet. Maryanne slunk toward the exit when her eye caught a small movement between two stacks of shirts. Peering closer she saw the perfect pink face of a perfect pink baby, no bigger than a potato. Maryanne checked over her shoulder, scooped up the infant, slipped her into her pocket and hustled out the door.

Maryanne kept one hand in her pocket, cradling the baby while the other gripped the steering wheel. Fat raindrops pelted the windshield. Her palm tingled where the baby lay, squirming. Warmth travelled up her arm, down her chest and contentment settled in her lower belly. Maryanne hummed a long forgotten lullaby as she navigated the little yellow car through puddles pooling on the roadway.

“Did you do anything interesting today?” Donald generously salted his porkchop.

“Not really,” answered Maryanne. Explaining the baby to her practical husband was not an option. “More turnips, darling?” She heaped them onto his plate before he could answer.

The growing storm rattled the kitchen window and the lights flickered.

That evening, while Donald slept, Maryanne slipped from the bedroom and crept to the nursery. The crib had felt too big for the tiny baby, so she’d lined a shoe box with a soft-knitted blanket. Maryanne cradled the girl in her palm and settled into the rocking chair. “I’m going to name you Fae.”

*Sleep, baby, cozy and warm
Safe inside from the darkening storm*

*The rain might fall and lightning crash,
The fireplace cold and full of ash
But momma's here to hold you tight,
Your beacon through this stormy night*

Maryanne sang and rocked Fae until the sky's grey light peeked through the gingham curtains. She tucked the baby into the shoebox and slipped into her own bed before Donald's alarm chimed.

"What plans do you have for today?" Donald asked, through a spoonful of oatmeal.

"Just laundry. I don't want to go out in this storm," she replied. "Any special requests for dinner?"

"Whatever you make will be delicious." Donald kissed her head, grabbed his briefcase, and left the kitchen.

Maryanne hurried upstairs to the nursery before Donald's car left the driveway. The smiling baby sat on the flattened shoebox, teetering back and forth.

"Oh, my goodness! Look what a big girl you are," she cooed, cradling Fae in the crook of her arm. Chubby fingers reached for Maryanne's smiling lips. They stood at the nursery window, watching the big oak in the front garden sway in the wind.

"This tuna casserole is delicious." Donald said, shovelling the creamy pasta into his mouth.

"Thank you, I used a new reci—" A loud thump from above interrupted Maryanne.

"What was that?" Donald looked to the ceiling.

"Oh, something must've fallen, I'll go take a look." Maryanne dashed up the wooden staircase. She opened the nursery door to see Fae shakily standing beside the crib, arms outstretched, giggling.

"Sing, momma!" the little girl squealed with delight. Maryanne sat on the rocker and pulled Fae into her lap. The warm toddler nestled into her chest and Maryanne feared her heart would explode.

Sleep, baby, cozy and warm

Safe inside from the darkening storm

The toddler sucked her thumb and drifted off to sleep. Maryanne laid her in the crib and pulled the soft-knitted blanket over her. “Goodnight, sweet girl.”

“It was a picture in the nursery. The storm must have shaken it loose.” Maryanne rejoined Donald watching the Weather Network. The sodden correspondent braced himself against the violent gusts and warned the viewers to stay inside as the storm was only growing stronger. “More casserole, darling?”

Maryanne spent the next two days in maternal bliss. Wednesday morning she taught Fae to talk, pointing to jungle animals, body parts and the seven wonders of the world in the encyclopaedias she’d poured over as a little girl. Wednesday evening Fae coloured Maryanne a crayon drawing of the two of them, smiling in the cheerful nursery. Thursday morning Fae peppered Maryanne with questions about clouds, houses, and mommies. Maryanne patiently answered each inquiry, marveling at her intelligent, inquisitive daughter. At each milestone Maryanne and Fae danced and twirled in the nursery, daring the relentless storm to impede their celebration. The happy little girl grew bigger and stronger each time she slept and by Thursday afternoon, she could help Maryanne in the kitchen.

“You haven’t made chocolate chip cookies in years.” Donald dropped his briefcase and sniffed the air.

“I had a craving,” Maryanne replied, setting the cookies on the table.

“Lucky me,” Donald said, crumbs spewed from his mouth.

“You’re taller than me now!” Maryanne and the teenager sat at Maryanne’s vanity rooting through Maryanne’s makeup bag.

“What’s this for?” she asked, touching her finger to a soft lipstick. Maryanne took it and showed her how to apply, press her lips together and blot with a tissue.

“Coral looks beautiful on you,” Maryanne said.

Fae frowned, poking an angry red pimple on her cheek. "I'm so ugly."

"Oh, sweet girl. Everyone gets blemishes. I can teach you how to cover up the ones on the outside." Maryanne pulled the foundation and cover-up from her bag. "The blemishes we grow inside are harder to hide."

Fae, distracted by the makeup, didn't notice the tears welling in her mother's eyes.

Two days later they were the same age with matching crow's feet and wild strands of grey hair. They drank tea at the kitchen table. The relentless storm continued to batter the little house. They talked for hours about everything and nothing all at once. Maryanne spoke of how she longed for children and how happy these days with Fae had made her. She mused about her own mother and her fifteen babies in twenty years. She reminisced about the boy in high school who'd said she had angel eyes and wondered where he was now. She reflected on her decision to marry the boy-next-door to escape the chaos of her parent's house and start a family of her own. She laughed about her dream to see the pyramids, to pose in front of the Sphinx in her yellow cardigan. She confessed her desire to write steamy romance novels set in the English countryside.

Fae listened to Maryanne, wide-eyed. She had no stories of her own to tell or dreams unfulfilled.

The next day, a white-haired Fae did not recall their conversations. She did not recall Maryanne at all. They had tea and cookies together. Every few minutes Fae asked if it was still raining. Maryanne offered the frail woman a hand up the stairs. In the nursery, Maryanne pulled her yawning, elderly daughter onto her lap.

*Sleep, baby, cozy and warm
Safe inside from the coming storm*

They rocked together and drifted off to sleep, lulled by the rhythmic banging of the window shutters against the nursery window.

"Wake up. Maryanne, wake up," Donald shook her shoulder. Mary-

anne blinked, trying to get her bearings. She looked at her empty lap, the knitted blanket she had wrapped around Fae had fallen in a puddle of sunshine on the floor.

“I was calling and calling for you,” Donald said. “What’s for dinner? There’s nothing on the stove.”

“I’m not hungry,” Maryanne replied, folding the blanket, and crossing the room to put it back in the dresser, pausing to admire the cloudless azure sky. “I want to paint the kitchen yellow, and I’m going to turn this room into my office.”

“Why do you need an office?” Donald gaped as if she’d sprouted a second head.

“I’m going to write a novel.” Her tone left no room for questions. “But not until I take a trip to see the pyramids. You’re welcome to come if you like.”

CHRISTY HARTMAN

Christy Hartman is a Canadian writer based on Vancouver Island. She is published in Sky Island Journal, Bright Flash Literary Review, and Fairfield Scribes. When not writing, Christy loves experimenting with creative vegan meals in her kitchen and enjoying the beauty of the West Coast with her husband and dog.



THE DOLLMAKER'S DERISION

JO NEELS

I AM ON A QUEST for the dollmaker's house, have you, by chance, seen it? I haven't been there in ages, I've forgotten the way. I recall it hidden in a shadow-cloaked alley, illuminated by a single lamppost, directly across from a one-eyed smith. There's a wooden door with ornate golden hinges—by all the mad monarchs, he loved those golden hinges—and the sign above it that he painted himself: 'real life dolls, superior craftsmanship'. You must've seen it at least once if you've lived here all your life.

Yes, the dollmaker used to be famous indeed, for his dolls, and perhaps also for his little sister, the monster of South-Cinister. You know of them, you say? Very well, then show me the way. Don't walk too fast, though, my legs are much shorter than yours, my joints are rusty, and my feet are made of clay. Sure, I'll tell you more while we walk, I'd love to revise some of this town's idle talk. But my mechanisms don't run as smoothly as they used to, you might notice it in my storytelling, the whirring becomes rather strained when I try to reminisce about my former dwelling.

Few people know about the twisted muse that Priscilla, his sister, became. The two moved into the upper rooms of the wood shop after their father's death. The dollmaker took a liking to the work, and was rather ambitious, but he was kept from his usual business because the little beast never left his side, she kept criticising everything he tried. Her erratic temper fuelled the progress of his wicked craft, he would have never been so successful if she hadn't pried.

He was a mediocre craftsman back then, made dolls from driftwood and cloth. He would paint their faces with a tiny pig hair brush, and fashion wigs from hard yellow straw. He used hinges and springs so their limbs would move, and even some clothes and small, leather boots. Priscilla, however, was never satisfied and grew tired of them after just a few days. She would start screaming and insulting his work, smash it to splinters, then throw the rest into the fire and laugh with pleasure as the dolls burnt to cinders.

I argue that he should have known then, that the problem was not the dolls, but the girl handling them. I presume he didn't want to admit to the burden of raising the girl, so instead took the challenge

of becoming the best toymaker in the world. He put himself to work with a burning desire to create dolls that even his sister would admire. He used materials as diverse as wax, porcelain, whalebone, and silky soft eel leather, all meticulously intertwined with strands of real human hair. He invented intricate mechanisms to operate the bodies, and carved hidden cabinets for their minds and beating hearts. Around their shiny, perfect teeth, he whittled a convincing smile, and attached vibrant, marble eyes that mesmerized every child.

I feel we are getting close, I recognize the smells in this area of town, from the stuffed pies at the bakery to the iron of the smith who swore he once welded the queen's broken crown. Anyhow, the dollmaker thought himself rather clever, he was the only craftsman who made living dolls that would stay with you forever. The towns' people gushed over them, he earned a fortune with his trade, I heard about it afterwards, and realised only then what hellish lives he did create.

Priscilla was finally pleased, so he made a large collection of which she only wanted three. He adjusted us and moulded us to fit her perfect picture, she made him use her raven hair so we'd look alike, you see? He'd finally appeased the little gargoyle, and had freed himself from her, for she never grew bored of being our commander. She dressed us in hats of lace with pink bows, and made us serve cake and tea to her guests at every party. Then she halted us mid-walk and made us repeat rehearsed sentences with please and thank you and a curtsy every time.

"Oh," she would boast, "how performatively divine!"

And her friends clapped, and prattled, and then snapped their fingers for more muffins. 'My little children' she would call us, meant to serve and please and fuss, we were only there to keep her content. Even when we learned to talk, and many realized we likened people more than wooden puppets, she still treated us as dolls: stored in her dollhouse at night, dragged along by day, and we still couldn't get away.

Don't be sad, it wasn't all bad. We didn't have freedom or individuality, but she took good care of us in her own selfish way. She brushed

us and fed us, and bought us expensive things. She taught us how to dance, read and sing. She loved us so hard she would die for us, and even though it was smothering, the concept of love—overbearing or otherwise—was something I never deemed superfluous. We were sweet and loyal and ignorant, we didn't know it could be different.

But the dollmaker knew better, and he never interfered, yet he often stared at our pageantry scenes with a puzzling gaze. He'd created living dolls, much like children, to replace his presence in Priscilla's life. He had never been able to fulfil her controlling needs, nor stand up to her demands, and now we filled her deprived heart and hands. He could have saved us, of that I am sure, but instead he gave us the keys to our inner cabinet doors. He said we should keep our nasty feelings locked away, so people would praise our ever smiling porcelain faces, our rose lips and cheeks. So we complemented the paint on the cups, the teapot, and silverwares as we sat fixed and invisible on church choir chairs, to be picked up to play with or stay breathlessly still.

Then the dollmaker suddenly packed up his shop and left for the big city, he didn't explain why, he didn't even say goodbye. That night there were no stars in the sky, the wind was rattling the wooden window shutters and his large painted sign clattered to the floor. With eyes big and glassy, we watched him disappear, then stayed up all night to wipe away Priscilla's tears. Not once did he consider to take us with him, nor did he come back, so the years just went by while we picked up the slack. We considered leaving too, but had nowhere to go, and back then we had no idea how to fend for ourselves out there in the world. Through all the tumultuous cohabitation, Priscilla never left us or bored of us, or threw us in the fire. I was convinced that was love, and it's still something I admire.

His absence grew into a roaring silence that steadily accumulated bitterness. The world outside marched forward, oblivious to the exacerbation within our confines. We were scolded, leaned upon, ignored, and though we locked our inner doors tightly, frustrations kept spilling through the cracks. There came a time when the hurt couldn't dissolve anymore, and my siblings collapsed.

I heard he moved back, but I wasn't sure it was true, until now that I see him through the dirty window of his shop. He's sitting hunched over in an old leather sofa by the fire. His hair is silver, his skin pale, his living condition dire. The crafting table is covered in dust, the tools rusty and corroded. I waited over three decades for this moment, yet still don't know what I want from it. What does one say to their maker after all this time?

This is where I leave you behind, and thank you for showing the way, however, I must go in alone. I stare at the gold hinges for a while, wondering why to me they seem vile. I open the door to my once sturdy prison, a little bell jingles and he looks up then down. I can see him smiling behind an etched in, rough frown.

"Maddie, my dear, it's so good to see you, come to the hearth to warm your old bones. Your rose lips have faded, I see, and your porcelain skin is cracked. I don't know if I have paint or gold to fix them, but I can oil your squeaky joints, cogs and wheels, if you want."

"No, maker," I profess as I feel my head rush. "I have come to ask you where you were all these years, and why you never came back for us."

"Oh, Maddie, it was because of Priscilla, not you three, you know that." He sighs sadly. "She was always so difficult to live with, you know that better than me, I had a hard time dealing with it, felt better to create some distance. Where are the other two then?"

His nonchalance makes me seethe inside, a rage surges in my thumping cabinets. I subdue it enough to answer through my teeth, "They malfunctioned, burnt up the whole house we lived in, some ten years ago."

"Oh," his eyes grow large, "that's when she..." He doesn't finish his sentence.

I choose not to react as my eyes are spitting acid, but he doesn't notice and goes about his ways. "Well, I don't blame you of course,"

"Blame?" I repeat, feeling something ignite in my chest.

"Yes, well I'm sure you didn't mean to, I must say it's strange losing a sister, but I was kind of relieved when I heard. I could finally return to my home, my shop, and restore it to its former glory. I use my

time to fix the dolls now, I don't make them anymore. In some way I'm kind of like your father, aren't I, and a father to all the others as well," the dollmaker chatters proudly, unaware of my current state. "I didn't think of it that way at first, but now I understand I created real people, isn't that just great?"

'Just great.' His words ring in my cracked ears, I feel white-hot hatred burst through my locked cabinet doors, my heart fills my whole chest, it might be too late. I can hear it drum a familiar, hollow beat, the one that precedes the all-consuming heat.

"If you understood the essence of what you created, why persist? How could you assume the role of god, only to abandon us in the aftermath, enslaved and undefended?"

He turns to me now, his bloodshot eyes big, his mouth slightly open. "I gave you speech, Maddie, and your own free will, how is it my fault that you stayed with her still?"

"How dare you," I hiss, pulling a sewing pin out of my ripped clothes, "blame us for lacking what you never gave. Where was your courage? Why were you never brave?"

He doesn't answer, instead he smiles apologetically, my rage is so intense it becomes tangible, my heart catches fire as I jump up to attack. I pierce my maker's eyes with the sharp, little pin, I stick him once for every doll who was forced to live like me and I watch the blood leak out of him.

76 punctures, and two eyes destroyed, he's crawling on his knees, trying to catch me with his hands. It's dangerous to play creator, I think now he understands. I laugh just like Priscilla did when he grabs me and throws me to the fire. My hair smells sulphuric, my eyes blacken, my mechanisms falter, and my feet disintegrate.

In my last thoughts I thank you for bringing me to the dollmaker, I realize now he would have been an even worse caretaker.

JO NEELS

Jo was a bookworm as a child, and loved to get lost in fantasy worlds. Whether they were nightmarish or wonderful, she travelled along with every main character, wishing the real world had some of that magic. She started writing at a young age and never really stopped. As a grown-up writer she creates her own magic, seasoned with a little existential dread.

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ONE IN FIVE

ANNA SCANLAN

THE SNOW HAD STARTED AT about five, and it hadn't stopped since. Pellets of sky hammered at the ground, and the below zero temperatures froze them into place. The wind slapped at her face, leaving it numb. It pulled her long hair every which way leaving a knotted mess that had taken forty-five minutes to undo. And, of course, she had forgotten to bring gloves with her, so her hands were chapped into sandpaper.

Julia pulled down a bottle of lotion from the medicine cabinet. She squeezed out a dollop and massaged it into her hands, taking one last look at her face in the mirror. Despite her disciplined skincare regime her eye-bags and wrinkles refused to budge.

She switched off the light and walked back into the bedroom.

Today had been a long day, the longest in a while. Her morning had started getting Jake and Angie late to school. She had forgotten her card at home, so she couldn't buy lunch. Then, on the way home, it had started snowing so hard she could barely see the road. Another car rear-ended her, leaving a big dent in the bumper. Not to mention that the twins refused to go down to sleep.

She had wanted to collapse into bed, maybe wrap herself around her husband for a while.

Instead, they had been fighting for—Julia looked over at the clock on the nightstand—the past three hours.

The point of this debate had been lost to time and a mountain of insults.

“What is this even about anymore?” She sighed and moved over to flop onto the bed. Sinking into the fluffy comforter, they broke eye contact as her gaze moved to the brown stain in the corner of the ceiling. Neither one of them knew where it came from; it had just appeared. “We should sleep.” The old lamp on the bedside table next to her head pulsed with heat. Julia reached over to turn it off before it decided to give out on its own.

“And this is what you always fucking do.”

“What do you mean?”

He snorted. “Every conversation needs to be over when you decide it's over. It's dismissive and childish.”

“So you want to just continue then.” Her throat strained with the attempt to keep quiet. “Continue throwing insults back and forth until the wee hours of the morning.” She swallowed down the scream that was burning in her throat. The last thing she wanted to do was wake the twins at this hour.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want,” Ben said, pacing back and forth in front of the dresser.

“Who’s the childish one now?”

Ben stopped pacing and turned. His sleeve caught on a dish of her jewelry. It clattered to the ground.

“That was clearly fucking sarcasm, Jules.”

“Sarcasm isn’t allowed past 2:30 a.m.”

Ben mumbled something that she didn’t quite make out.

“What is it?” She was done with his games.

“You always act like it’s past 2:30.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ever since...” he trailed off, leaving his words hanging between them.

The burning of her throat intensified as she blinked back her tears. The spot on the ceiling wavered, moving in and out of focus.

She so badly wanted to slap him, throw things at him, scream at the top of her lungs. But she didn’t have the energy. And, truthfully, the last thing she wanted to do was hurt him.

Instead, she covered her face with her hands and let a few tears trickle out of the corners of her eyes, down her cheeks. But in place of the relief she so desperately needed, the knot of pain threatened to further explode. “You know that’s not fair.”

Ben groaned, moving to sit on the bed next to her. “I’m sorry, Jules.”

Julia didn’t respond. Tears continued to drip down her face and onto the pillow.

“You’re right,” he continued. “We’re just circling and getting nowhere. It’s late.”

Julia had figured that out ten minutes into their episode. But, of course, he hadn’t listened.

She wordlessly slipped under the covers, struggling to slide in be-

tween the taut sheets.

“I love you, baby,” Ben whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Julia lay stiff in the covers, her damp face sticking to the tear-stained pillowcase.

She couldn’t bring herself to respond.

Julia stared out the window at the snow blowing about. She could just make out the trees that surrounded their house. Even though it was lighter than yesterday, the kids would inevitably have a snow day.

This kind of weather was as familiar to her as the back of her hand, but Ben was from Georgia. No doubt, he’d wake up and start grumbling about the weather, the roads, the ice.

It was one of the things that annoyed her about him the most, she thought. His endless complaining about everything, as if it would physically pain him to be positive. Somehow, that one hadn’t come flying out last night.

They hadn’t always been this tense with each other. Julia closed her eyes, trying to place when it had started. It had only gotten really bad over the past three or so years, she decided.

The snow continued to swirl about, blinding her to the world outside of the confines of their property.

Looking over at the clock, Julia let out an exhausted breath.
7:19.

Mornings never were her thing, but upon becoming a wife and a mother, they seemed to be the only time she could find peace.

The silence was calming, and the rumblings of the radiator, grounding.

A soft pattering of footsteps scurried across the worn wooden floor behind her.

“Mama,” a sleepy voice cooed.

Julia slid to the end of the couch. A head full of blonde curls and two bright green eyes stared up at her.

Her face broke into a smile. “Good morning, Emmy sweetie.”

“Hi Mama,” Emmy yawned.

Julia leaned over the side of the couch and scooped her daughter

up. Emmy murmured some toddler babble before nuzzling into the crook of her arms. It had been a while since Julia had a moment like this with Emmy.

But Julia lived for moments like these. Moments where she could memorize every last inch of her daughter's face without the distractions of her household, her life. With the twins growing up, everything was getting more hectic, not less like everyone had promised.

But right now, none of that mattered. Emmy mattered. Her little button nose, chubby cheeks, the small downturn of her mouth. She was the perfect mix of herself and Ben. His stubbornness, her curiosity. His eyes, her hair, her nose, his lips.

Julia treasured time with her daughter, wanting each second to last hours. Julia needed to memorize every breath her daughter took. Every tiny snotty snore. The pressure of her little body against her own. The fresh smell of her hair.

What she would give to bottle up this moment and preserve it forever.

She knew that there weren't many more of them coming, and the ones that did would be gone in a flash.

But that was how motherhood was supposed to work, right? Her children would grow up too fast for their own good. Their childhood would slip between her fingers, and she would be left grasping at thin air, aching for the "mama's" and the hugs and the innocent laughter.

Thinking of the kids brought Julia back to last night's fight and Ben's soapbox about having to do everything.

She had laughed in his face.

Who was the one cooking lunches, changing diapers, dealing with calls from the school? Who was the one constantly cleaning up Jake's constant scrapes and making sure that Angie didn't accidentally run off into traffic?

He had chalked it up to a feeling that she wasn't "present enough." It didn't get any more specific.

All this disdain over a feeling.

She would be lying to herself if she pretended that everything was normal, that nothing was wrong. As annoying and offensive as his

vague premonitions were, knowing Ben, he was probably right to some degree. He was always right to some degree, and as much shit as she gave him for it, it was one of the many reasons why she loved him.

Perhaps she should pick up therapy again.

The idea terrified her. Julia couldn't bear the thought of digging up all that she lost again.

She tried to blink away the fear, looking down at the sleeping toddler in her arms. Emmy would be about three now. Three years, four months, to be exact.

She missed the twins at this age. Old enough to be a person, young enough that they still wanted to climb into her arms. Lately, they had been distant; occupied with whatever it is that nine-year-olds do.

"Hey," a rough voice said behind her. "Can we talk?"

Julia snapped her head around. Ben was leaning against the door, dark hair disheveled, white tee wrinkled from sleep.

"Talk about what?" she whispered, resting her head against the couch.

"Last night went too far," he said, shuffling into the living room. "I know I did. I'm sorry."

"I know."

Ben sat down beside her, leaving about half of a couch cushion between them. He ran his hand through his hair, focusing his gaze on the ground.

Julia waited for him to continue.

He cleared the sleep away from his throat. "I don't mean this in any sort of way. I love you dearly. I know that you love me, love us,"

Julia stiffened. "But?"

"But something's not right with you. Since... it's been three and a half years, Jules."

Julia closed her eyes tight. She knew he was right. She knew he was only trying to help.

Losing a child changes you, forever.

Julia wouldn't be Julia again.

Ever.

It was a terrifying thought, the idea that she would never be herself again. Pieces of her were lost forever, and nothing would bring them back.

Emmy had taken them with her.

She put her head in her hands. "I know."

"I'm thinking that you should go back to Dr. Allison."

Julia forced her eyes open to look at Emmy's sleeping face in her lap, committing every detail of her little face to memory.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Julia squeezed her eyes tighter and tighter together as she let her sobs loose.

Her breathing sped up. Julia didn't want to go back to Dr. Allison. She didn't want to be sane. Be fixed. She couldn't give this up. It would break her.

But there was also Jake and Angie to think about. They were starting sixth grade next year. The sixth grade. The two of them were growing up so fast, she felt like she was missing it. And there was a potential promotion at work.

And Ben.

The love of her life. Sweet, caring, perfect Ben who deserved her to be there for him too.

"Okay," she whispered.

His steady hand squeezed her shoulder, closing the space between them. She turned and pressed her face into her husband's chest. Ben wrapped his arms around her, keeping her safe.

"She'll be gone," Julia sobbed. "Again."

"I know, baby."

"We didn't..."

Ben squeezed her tighter. "I know." His voice rasped with emotion.

"It's not fair," Julia sputtered, brushing the tears off her cheeks.

Ben didn't respond, but he pressed his face into her hair.

They had never gotten the chance to meet their daughter. Over the years, Julia had imagined what she would be like as she grew up. Her first steps. Her terrible twos. Her years of teething. Her first words. Her babbles of joy on family vacations. Mornings alone with her.

Those memories, they were real. Her daughter, she was real.
Julia let out a shaky breath and opened her eyes.
Emmy was gone.
The wind whistled outside, drowning out her muffled cries.

ANNA SCANLAN

Anna Scanlan has been an english nerd her entire life. In the fall, she will be starting her M.F.A in Creative Writing at Arcadia University. She writes in many genres including fantasy, historical fiction, contemporary fiction and literary fiction. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her baking, traveling, crocheting, or making short films.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

SOMTO IHEZUE

WHAT I APPRECIATE THE MOST about *Finding True North* is the glaring, painstaking effort that was put into every detail, plotline, and character—all necessary to make this story a stand-out piece of fiction. The author's ability to craft this futuristic dystopian world while seamlessly grounding it all in reality is enviable. And while we see the effort, we also appreciate the effortlessness of it all. To fit this worldbuilding into so few words with such precision is rather incredible. And there's the character: a virtual cat who embodies the physicality, nuisance, and mannerisms of a real cat. There's also the protagonist, Leila, who does an excellent job driving the story forward. Through Leila, we get a specific sense of this world and its history, the good and all the bad. Through both characters, we get to experience this story and its world with all its intricacies. This story captures the theme of Silent Storms through the richness of its characters: Leila, who we initially see as withdrawn and struggling with the choices ahead of them, and North, who, in a very cat-like manner, is persistent while still shrouded in mystery. In the end, they both break through, in Leila's case, her uncertainty. And for North, their mysteries—revealing the 'real' storm behind their silence... the words and actions buried within, and striking at the first opportunity.

At its center, the author brings a dire social topic to light: climate change and the contribution of capitalist conglomerates and governments to the decline of our natural environment. In this story, these topics do not read heavy-handedly or like something from a textbook. The author displays their brilliant storytelling ability by neatly infusing into their work this environmental concern and call to action. It comes naturally; it doesn't break or distract from the plot, the characters, and their journey.

This story encompasses many things: growth, a journey, bravery, skill, change—that change can be good, and because a thing is different does not mean it is broken. We see that with North not complying with their programming. And at first, we worry because Leila worries. In the end, both the readers and Leila arrive at a conclusion, that we are all capable of impacting change in our own way. But first,

like Leila, we must be a little brave.

I'm delighted to select Finding True North as the winner of the Silent Storms competition!

SOMTO IHEZUE

Somto Ihezue is a Nigerian–Igbo editor, writer, and filmmaker.

He was awarded the 2021 African Youth Network Movement Fiction Prize. A BSFA and Nommo Award-nominee and finalist for the 2022 Afritondo Prize, his works have appeared and are forthcoming in *Tor: Africa Risen Anthology*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Podcastle*, *Escape Pod*, *Strange Horizons*, *POETRY Magazine*, *Cossmass Infinities*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *NIGHTMARE*, *Flame Tree Press*, *OnSpec Magazine*, *Omenana*, *Africa In Dialogue*, *The Year's Best Anthology of African Speculative Fiction* and others.

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