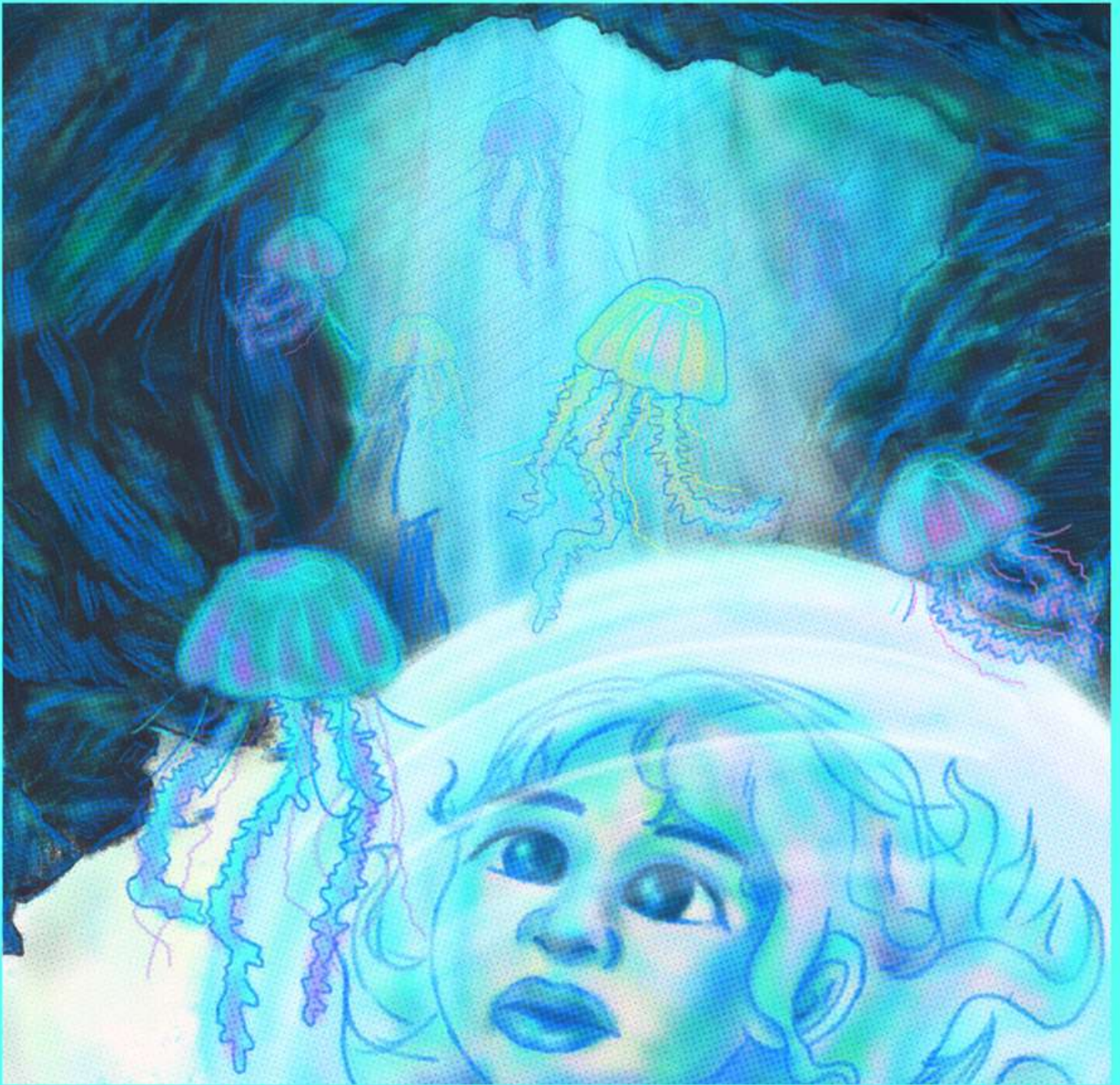


WATER



Word Tonic Anthology
Volume VII

Word Tonic

Cover Designed by Ayomide Ajani

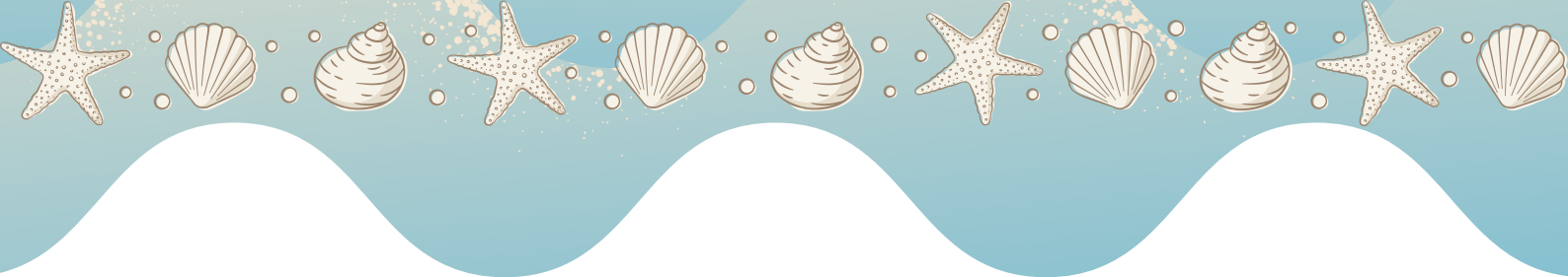
Word Tonic



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Preface by Roos van der Velden

When me and my co-editor, Angel, came up with the theme 'water,' I was honestly surprised we hadn't used this theme before. It's so simple, isn't it? Water, in any form - as untreadable bodies, as the source of life, as something annoying from the sky or as something we can play in - have been favorite metaphors for such a long time, that it seems almost obvious to use as a theme!

And my, my, our authors delivered. We, the members of WordTonic, present to you a flood of marvellous stories and poems about water, in all its shapes and sizes, metaphorical and real. Once again, our old and new authors have worked together - editing for each other, talking about their stories, and writing until the depth of night - to create another anthology.

I know I keep saying it, but that, to me, is the true beauty of WordTonic. Authors, copywriters, illustrators and editors all working together, each adding their little drops of talent, hard work and help, to create a floodwave which will leave you breathless.

So, since spring is starting, go your nearest river or stream, settle in, and entertain yourself with the newest stories by our marvelous authors!

Tschüss tschüss, Roos





Preface by Saarah Hendricks

Welcome to Word Tonic's 7th creative writing anthology. When asked to write the preface, I was both honoured and confused. What do I know about writing? Why should I be the one chosen to do this?

In his debut novel *Toward Eternity*, Anton Hur wrote:

"I am a cellist, and I have devoted my now very long life to music. I do not know what problems music solves for anyone else, if indeed it solves anything. But for me, it solves the problem of what to do with immortality, just as it had solved my problem of what to do with my mortality..."

I believe this to be a sentiment many writers – aspiring, beginning, or published – would hold. Lately, the creation of any artform has felt the threat of AI, and what we forget in our panic is every age has faced a threat of innovation. But writing is not about creating, we're not playing at being conquerors or Gods. We observe, we understand, we give voice to what is silent, shape meaning from our experiences, and ultimately accept the impermanence of being. And what could be more meaningful than a community of writers coming together to do just that?

Through a blend of unique voices, the *Water* anthology celebrates our passion for writing, and our shared love of storytelling.

Tepidity

Written by: Emerald MacIsaac

Edited by: Priya Rohella

Do you remember mornings warmly;
When stars burned a brighter hue?
Did you forget how liquid boiled
When we wanted something new?

Be it coffee for such mornings,
Broths and chowders for the night.
Burning bitter, loving warnings
Of three hundred Fahrenheit.

'Twas not spiteful nor disdainful.
It was just a rolling boil
With its jumping nature, harmful,
Like the spittle of an oil.

Hark my dearest, where's the boiling
That would thrust my heart alive?
Why must you leave me toiling?
Weak adrenals, I survive.

If I have not hell's lake of fire,
Then why not the coldest ice?
Tell, what more could you desire?
Else departure would entice.

Put a little in my coffee,
And dilute to something new!
Perhaps freeze perfection softly.
Polaroids of boiled brews.



Even glacial storms and hoarfrost
Burn more passion than you could.
Why do tepid feelings accost,
Like my tempered spirit would?

Overnight, you're brought to staleness,
Like how soda falls to flat.
Down the drain I send such frailness,
To the tepid habitat.

With no water by my bedside,
Dire thirst constricts my throat.
My boiling body banished pride
To stoic, lost emotes.

Stillness chars this aberration
'Till there's nothing left to burn.
Empty from evaporation,
With no coldness left to yearn.

All that's left is spirit tepid,
Without stars to warm my soul.
Loneliness breaks the intrepid.
Now I see I'm only shoal.

Protector of the pond

Written by: Janyne Langlois

Edited by: Priya Rohella

A cool breeze rustled through the grass and leaves, the sound echoing through the night. Fallen leaves rippled the pond, creating small waves and bumping every stagnant object – rocks, lily pads, even the woman sitting in the middle.

Her curly ginger hair was streaked with blonde and a few strays of white. Her tan-brown skin was adorned with glowing blue veins, protruding from her milky white eyes, fading as they neared her cheeks. Her right forearm resembled graphite mountains with shining blue rivers flowing all around.

The magic prosthetic arm was a result of her battle with the scaled beast that scoured the bottom of the Pond of Elysia. At some point, it was ripped from her body. She lost an enormous amount of blood and even died for a moment. If it wasn't for the spirit of her father, Anton, and the magic of the pond, she wouldn't be here.

Frogs croaked and leaped past her as the sound of the celestial whales' song echoed throughout the pond. The sound of a distant roar and footsteps approaching her, knocked her out of her trance.

Merissa's eyes fluttered open, blinded by the light of her magic flowing into the pond as well as the light of the moon.

“Anton would be proud of you,”

An older man with salt and pepper hair wearing blue robes made his way towards the pond. His chin stubble had grown into a full choppy beard, making him look even older and wiser than he already was.

Kallian Hemberlin.

The light of the moon shone on his dark eyes, though the glint was not silver or blue like Merissa's. His eyes held a gold tint to them, a giveaway of when his powers were the strongest; during the day, when the sun was at its brightest.



Merissa couldn't help but crack a joke; anything to keep herself awake after using so much of her magic.

"He'd also say you look old."

Merissa stood up, walking across the pond water to stand next to Kallian. He was still taller than her even with her travel boots on. She scratched her prosthetic arm, causing the glowing blue cracks to pulse.

"You know, I will never get used to that." Kallian hesitantly reaches for her arm and holds it like a dirty rag that could combust at any moment. "And you say it's like your regular arm?"

"Just like it. The only difference is the color. And the glowing... and that it feels more like a rock than an actual arm." Merissa stretches her arm once Kallian lets it go.

The past few months have been a journey trying to get used to the new arm. Even though the battle with the beast happened months ago, sometimes it would feel like it happened just yesterday. Merissa would wake up feeling excruciating pain in her arm and sometimes, she wouldn't be able to sleep. It would hurt to the point where she considered learning one-handed magic.

"Well," Kallian started, motioning for her to follow him. "I know you feel more awake during the night, but..."

Kallian let his sentence hang in the air. He scanned the young girl's face, the dark circles under her eyes more prominent than they used to be. Before they looked like she just needed a good two days of sleep. Now they looked like she needed two weeks

Merissa sighed as they walked through a wooden door that stood in the middle of the grassy plain. The moment they stepped through, they were walking down a gray bricked hallway, then into a large circular room.

Kallian's study room.

Merissa passed by a cabinet, grazing her finger along an old blue cup with the letter 'A' engraved in it. The cup used to belong to her father, Kallian's previous apprentice.

The light of the moon shone down through the circular window, casting a



blue glow on the study table and illuminating the runes. Merissa never asked what the runes meant because she knew that would be another lesson she'd have to pay attention to. And as much as Kallian tried to teach her, she just ignored him. And even though she complained about having to do work and magic, seeing the light shine down on the table was always her favorite part of the study.

"Alright old man, what are we learning today?"

Merissa grabs a chair and hangs her green coat over it. She runs her hands along the runes before Kallian swats it away. This was a common practice between them; it was almost tradition.

"We're going to learn how to rest," Kallian takes a kettle off the burner that Merissa didn't even know was there. She really needed to pay more attention to her surroundings.

"I never thought I'd say this, but that is the most boring thing ever," Merissa slumps in her chair, her back aching from sitting in the pond for so long earlier.

Kallian takes her mug off the shelf and pours the drink before handing it to her. Merissa sniffed the drink while staring down at its blue hue.

"Blue Lotus?"

"Chamomile."

Merissa groans, carefully sipping the tea so she doesn't burn her tongue.

"Yes, yes, I know," Kallian blows on his tea. "But you need to rest, not astral project."

"Same thing."

"It is not."

His eyes drifted down to her prosthetic arm once more. He can't even imagine how much pain she's in. He wonders what he could do to help relieve her pain. If there was a way to conjure a new prosthetic that wasn't as hard as a rock.

"I can feel you staring you know,"

Merissa looked at Kallian through her milky white eyes. Looking back at



them was hard. He couldn't help but remember the little girl with the dark brown eyes, or the woman whose eyes shone blue when she used her powers. Kallian cleared his throat, moving the mug from his lips.

"Sorry, I just..." Kallian took a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking up again. "Are you... alright?"

"Of course, I am. Why wouldn't I be?" Merissa took a swig of her tea despite it still being hot. Just this action alone was a dead giveaway that she was deflecting. She kept her eyes on her tea and was trying her best to stand still.

"Merissa," Kallian sighed and set his mug on the worktable. "You're tired. If you feel like you need a break from being my apprentice—"

"No!" Merissa quickly interjects. "I-I mean, no. Sorry. I don't need to take a break. I can handle it. Promise."

In Merissa's mind, taking a break would be like quitting. After her father passed, she studied magic to be Kallian's apprentice. She finally unlocked her true powers and found out she drew her magic from the moon and protects the pond. If Kallian hadn't taken her in, she would've never known any of this. And now he wanted her to just... stop?

"I can do it, Kallian. I will be okay."

Kallian eyed the young girl once more. He thought of her as a daughter, so seeing her hurting herself like this killed him.

"One day," he tells her. "Just rest for at least one day. Please?"

The study grew quiet as the two of them sat there; Kallian waiting for Merissa to answer, and Merissa trying to come up with an answer.

"Okay, fine. I'll rest."

*

Merissa, in fact, did not rest. Over the course of the next week, she helped Kallian with clients, potions and cleaning up the study as well as meditating over the pond every night like she usually does.

"We will not be working today." Kallian cut through the silence as he packed



up the study.

“What? What about all the potion orders? Clients asking for help?” Merissa asked him, though her words were a bit slurred from exhaustion.

“I need the rest of the day off. We can continue when the sun is directly above us. Understood?”

Kallian watched Merissa groan dramatically and slump in her chair.

Merissa let out a yawn and rubbed her face. How could she take a break? There was so much work to do.

“And what about the pond? I’m supposed to meditate over it-” Merissa questioned.

Kallian placed his hands on her shoulders, forcing her out of the study. They walked into a marbled open area with a flight of winding stairs. Kallian’s house.

Random objects were floating in the air above them, like potion bottles and kitchen utensils. There were two white couches with plastic covering them on either side of a large rounded table. Even though Merissa walked through this living room many times before, it seemed like there were always new objects. Like the glowing blue vase in the middle of the table surrounded by seven white candles. Before Merissa could ask what they were for, Kallian was ushering her up the winding staircase.

“Kallian...” Merissa glanced back at the older man as he brought her to his room.

“You don’t need to watch over me, I’m not a baby.”

Kallian ignored her protest, finding a pair of pajamas for her to wear.

“Here. Put these on and come back.” Kallian instructed, leaving no room for an argument.

Merissa always hated when he got like this. All parental and authoritative. It was as if he didn’t understand her. She had to make him understand.

“I’m fine with not doing the orders or helping clients, but I can’t abandon the pond, Kallian. At least let me do that.” Merissa begged.

Kallian let out a heavy sigh. He knew how important it was to keep the pond safe. It was where the wildlife lived, where they got their Lotus flowers from.

But he would not let Merissa run herself ragged.

“Merissa, I’m sorry, but no.” Kallian looked down at the young girl noting her tired

form. She looked like she could collapse at any moment. “You can do it tomorrow. One day won’t hurt.”

“It could.”

“You don’t know that.”

“*You* don’t know that!” Merissa exclaimed. “What about that beast that lives at the bottom of the pond? The reason I almost died. If I take one day off, another beast might find its way there!”

“Merissa, no one has meditated over the pond in years. That’s how the beast made its home. But one day of rest won’t do that-”

“It could! Maybe a more dangerous beast could make its home there and cause even more damage! What then? I actually die trying to fight it? I won’t have my dad to bring me back to life again! His soul would’ve been destroyed for nothing!” Merissa shouted at him, almost stumbling over from exhaustion.

“How do you think he would feel knowing he gave up the last bit of his soul to save his only child from death *just* for her to destroy herself?”

Kallian’s question hung in the air as a deafening silence came over them. Merissa knew he was right, she did. But she was stubborn and Kallian wasn’t getting her point.

“I’m not destroying myself-”

“But you are, Merissa!” Kallian exclaimed, his frustration boiling over. “Look at you! You can barely keep your eyes open! The circles under your eyes make it look like someone punched you! Merissa, I can see the hollows in your cheeks! So, yes! You are destroying yourself! If I need to find another apprentice, I will! But I cannot watch this happen anymore.”

Merissa wanted to argue, to tell him he was wrong. But her words fell flat.

“When was the last time you’ve eaten, huh? Or drank some water, got some sleep? You look like a corpse! Anton did not give up his soul just for you to take it for granted! I did not take you in and raise you after he died just to watch you slowly kill yourself!”

Kallian’s eyes flashed yellow, some of the candles in the room bursting into



flames. Merissa jumped back, stumbling over her own feet and falling on her back. Kallian immediately tried to calm himself down. He rushed over to Merissa, his worry more evident. He reached out his hand to help her up but immediately retracted it when he saw them glowing and heat coming off of it. “Sorry, um....” Kallian backed away from Merissa, not wanting to accidentally hurt her with his powers. “It’s been a while since I’ve had an outburst. I should... drink some tea.”

Merissa got herself off the ground, still feeling weak. She couldn’t help but feel guilty creeping up her skin. Kallian sounded so... dejected. In her thirteen years of living with him, she’d never seen him explode like that. She finally spoke up, her voice filled with regret.

“Kallian, I’m-”

“Get some sleep, Merissa, okay? I’ll be better in the morning,” Kallian shook his hands, trying to calm the heat in his hands and body. “I’ll be in the next room over if you need me.”

Kallian then left the room, leaving Merissa alone with her guilt. Now she felt horrible. They never fought like this, ever. She’d never seen him so... angry. Kallian was calm and collected, he never let his frustrations show.

Was Merissa hurting herself that badly?

Merissa held the pajamas close to her as she walked into the restroom. She turned on the light and grimaced at her reflection. Kallian was right, she did look like a corpse. Her dyed orange hair now had streaks of white where there should be blonde. Even her left eyebrow had flecks of white in it. Was this all from not resting?

As if on cue, Merissa let out a heavy yawn. She sighed as she changed into the orange pajamas. She noticed her ribs were starting to show more due to the lack of eating.

“Okay... I seriously need to do better...”

*



Merissa didn't know when she fell asleep. One moment she was in the restroom putting on her pajamas, and the next...

Merissa looked around, trying to gauge where she was. It looked like the bottom of the pond with an old cathedral.

'Last I remember, there were no cathedrals in the pond. This has to be a dream,' Merissa looked down at her arms. *'No prosthetic? Definitely a dream.'*

Something inside Merissa willed her towards the cathedral. It was one of her *'I just feel like I have to'* moments. The last time she had one of those moments, she fought a scaled beast and got a prosthetic arm.

The cathedral was tall and pristine, not weathered like the ruins around it. It was a light blue, almost white color which looked grey in the dark. Celestial fish swam past her and blue colored seaweed tugged at her feet.

As Merissa got closer to the cathedral, she heard whispers coming from inside.

'She is not ready.'

'She is the only one.'

'She is not worthy.'

'Give her a chance.'

'She is a child!'

'There is not much we can do now.'

'She is here.'

The whispers came to a halt as Merissa found herself in front of the cathedral doors. She placed her hand on the door trying to push it open, but it was locked. Then she tried to pull it. Still locked. Then a booming voice shook the ground.

"Merissa Kress. We have been waiting for you."

Merissa spun around, coming face to face with what looked like a large celestial whale with seven pairs of eyes on its back. The whale then exploded in a burst of light.

Merissa shielded her eyes as she was blown back into the door by the



explosion. When her eyes finally adjusted, she found herself trapped in a semi circle of seven ghost-like people.

Her vision was still hazy from the flashbang, so she could barely see them. Not only that, but they were faded, almost see through. But the one thing she could see clearly were their glowing blue eyes.

The ghost in the middle spoke first.

“You were chosen,” The faded figure floated closer to her, his glowing eyes boring into hers. The voice was distorted and deep, but if she listened closely, she could faintly make out the voice of a man. ***“Your duties are to the pond.”***

“The next protector is you,” Another one of the ghosts spoke up. This voice was lighter, almost feminine. ***“But you are hurting yourself.”***

“Look at your soul,” Another one spoke.

All seven figures outstretched their hands to her, blasting her with magic. Her body turned a celestial white and blue with black holes and cracks all over. The biggest hole was over her heart.

“Your soul is tired. Broken. You cannot be an apprentice and the Protector.” the first woman spoke.

“Be the protector. That is your job.” The first ghost spoke.

“Merissa?”

The faint sound of Kallian’s voice echoed throughout the dream. The surroundings around Merissa started to fade.

“Wait! Who are you guys? Why was I chosen?” Merissa called out. The last thing she saw were the glowing eyes of the seven ghosts before the dream faded to black.

“Merissa?”

Kallian watched Merissa stir and rub her face. He could tell she needed the rest. She looked much calmer, more alive.

“What time is it...?” Merissa yawned and kept her head on the pillow. Sunlight trickled in through a crack in the curtains, shining on Merissa’s milky white eyes.



“Two in the afternoon.”

“What?!”

Merissa shot up, her curly orange, blonde, and white hair looking wilder than it usually was. There was so much to do and he let her sleep that much?

“Kallian...”

“I would’ve let you sleep more, but you need to eat. Come on.”

Kallian got up from his kneeling position and walked towards the door.

Merissa

hadn’t registered until now that his hair was pulled into a ponytail. She groggily dragged herself out of bed and followed Kallian down the winding stairs until they made it to the living room. The objects on top of the table changed. There were still seven candles, but now they were lit. And in the middle of the candles was no longer a blue vase, but a candle inside of a Blue Lotus bud – Almost like it was waiting to bloom.

“Kallian?” Merissa tapped on the older man’s shoulder. “What’s up with the stuff on the table?”

“Hm?” Kallian looked towards the table in the middle of the room. “Oh, those. I’m not sure, they just appeared there a few days ago. I’ve tried moving them, but they just reappeared.”

Kallian and Merissa made their way into the kitchen where tea was boiling in a pot. There was already breakfast set on the table; spinach eggs and banana pancakes for Merissa, and one bagel half with avocado and eggs and the other half with cream cheese and strawberries for Kallian.

“You look better,” Kallian told Merissa as he poured tea for them. He set the mugs in front of each plate and sat down with a sigh. “I apologize for my outburst last night. I shouldn’t have gotten so upset at you like that.”

A silence filled the air as Merissa looked over Kallian. She let out a sigh and rubbed her face.

“I understand why you were upset. I won’t lie, that sleep was probably the best I’ve had in months... Thank you, Kallian. For always worrying about me.”



Kallian gave her a kind smile as they ate their breakfast in peace.

*

After a long evening of helping clients and making potions, they were finally done.

“Are you off to the pond?” Kallian asked her.

“Yes... and, Kallian?”

“Yes, Merissa?”

Merissa drew in a deep breath before she spoke.

“About the other apprentice thing...”

Kallian watched her carefully, a small frown on his face.

“What about it...?”

Merissa looked the older man right in his eyes. This was probably one of the hardest decisions she’s had to make in her life.

“You can start looking for a new one.”

Kallian knew he couldn’t make Merissa do what she didn’t want to. This was her decision, and hers mattered more than his.

So, he simply gave her a kind yet saddened smile and nodded.

“Alright... I’ll start looking.”

Merissa then left Kallian’s house and made her way down the cement hallway as it transformed into the lushious, grassy plain known as Elysia. She walked towards the pond, staring down at her reflection.

“Okay ghost people... I’m ready to talk now. How do I...”

Merissa felt her body move towards the pond on its own, as if willing her to jump in.

So, she did.

She closed her eyes and let herself fall in as the pond pulled her down.

When her feet hit the ground, she opened her eyes to find herself standing at



the bottom of the pond.

Or at least what looked like it.

Her feet were touching the ground, but everything was so... bright. It was as if the sun was right above her. Translucent sea creatures swam past her, the pattern of their bones resembling the constellations in the sky. It always amazed her vast the pond was and how magical being there made her feel.

But what caught her attention was the beautiful piece of architecture looming over her. It was the cathedral from her dream, but it wasn't weathered and ruined. It was pristine and bright and had gold accents all around. The huge brown doors swung open for her to walk through.

As soon as she stepped through, bubbles shot at her and clouded her vision. When the bubbles dispersed. She found herself standing in an open area of the cathedral. Everything was a various shade of blue – the grass and seaweed, the columns, the concrete floor – resembling the powers of the moon. From what Merissa has learned, blue was the primordial color of magic ruled by the moon.

Around her, there were seven long hallways with her standing in the middle. Just like the candles from Kallian's living room table. From those hallways, seven people emerged, all with a hint of blue in their eyes.

The first was a tall, skinny woman with pale skin and long, wavy black hair that was styled into a hime cut which reached her waist. She wore a flowy, long, white

kimono with blue fabric draping over her arms and silver jewels in the shape of a moon to clasp it closed.

The second was a short stubby man who had light brown skin and looked like he probably worked on a farm due to his farmer's hat and overalls. He had short, curly white hair and a full beard that needed to be combed through. On his belt was a crescent moon.

The third was a woman who looked like an assassin. Her skin was dark like soil and her black hair was cut into a short wolf cut. She wore a black long halter top and baggy black pants. Around her leg was a holster that held a



dagger with a moon emblem at the hilt.

The man in the middle was also tall, though taller than the first woman. He had tanned skin and choppy black hair that swept towards the back and a small strand sticking in front of his face. His dark hair perfectly complimented his pale skin and sharp jawline. He wore an outfit that resembled a pirate's and a large coat over it. His outfit was black and red.

The fifth was a man was a giant compared to the rest of them. Honestly, she wouldn't be surprised if he was part giant. He had skin as dark as the third woman's and wore an outfit similar to the guy in the middle, just without a coat and his vest was blue with crescent moons as the buttons.

The sixth was a man had tanned skin and short, choppy dyed blonde hair. His angular, narrowed eyes were kind – a stark contrast to the first woman's eyes that were narrowed in judgement. He wore blue, baggy and flowy pants that cuffed at the ankles and had a star and moon pattern on it. He wore it with an off white kimono vest. Something that stood out to Merissa were his pointed ears and the scars along the left side of his face. One of the larger ones even passed over his left eye and ear.

And finally was a shorter woman with brown skin and short, curly hair with two longer braids peeking out from the back. Her outfit resembled a purple two piece swimsuit with puffy sleeves and flowy fabric at the skirt and gold chain lacing around the neck area. She honestly looked like a magical jellyfish.

After taking in their appearances, Merissa finally found it in herself to speak.

“Are... you guys the... the ghosts I saw in my dream?”

The stone faced man with the red and black pirate outfit stepped forward and looked down at Merissa.

“Seeing as you're here and not in a dream, you've made your decision.”

Before Merissa could open her mouth to speak, the tall woman in the white kimono tossed her hair to the side and crossed her arms.

“We aren't *ghosts*, child?” She scowled at Merissa. “We are *spirits*.”

“There's a difference?” Merissa asked.

“There's a difference!” The woman looked offended just by Merissa's presence.

“And, pray tell, what is that difference?” The giant man in the blue vest spoke.

“Well, *for one*, we don't haunt houses and go *BOO!*”

“We do live in an underwater cathedral which is kind of like our house.” The jellyfish woman pointed out, causing the kimono woman to scowl once more.

‘*So she's always grumpy. Good to know,*’ Merissa thought.

“Enough!” The stubby farmer guy stepped up. “We invade her dreams and invite the young girl to our home, the least we can do is introduce ourselves. So,” He looks to Merissa to make sure she's looking. “From your left to right...”

“That's Eimi,” The woman in the kimono flicked her hair behind her.

“I'm Caelum,” He grinned, then pointed to the assassin woman next to him.

“This is Esmeray,” She pushed her bangs out of her face, her piercing blue eyes more visible.

“Mavros,” He simply crossed his arms and glared at Merissa.

“The giant guy next to him is Crius,” He gave Merissa a nod. “Crius is an interpreter for Skoll, the blonde guy next to him.”

Merissa only just noticed that Crius was making patterns with his hands the whole time they were talking. Skoll then looked at Merissa and gave her a kind smile – as kind of a smile as he could at least. One of his scars ran over his lip, so it looked more like a half smile.

“And last but not least, Nioma.” The woman in the magical jellyfish outfit waved to Merissa.

“And we're the seven previous protectors of the pond. And, in case you were wondering, yes. We're all already dead and we are technically ghosts.”

“Spirits,” Eimi corrected.

“Right, yeah, *spirits*.”



Merissa knew she wasn't going to remember all of their names. She could barely remember the names of potions she'd make with Kallian – though, that was more due to a lack of focus. Which was due to a lack of sleep.

“So?” Mavros spoke up, his gaze cold. “Have you made your decision yet?”

“You saw your soul, yes?” Crius asked as he continued signing so Skoll could understand. In turn, Skoll made his own hand gestures. “Skoll says your soul was one of the most broken and tired ones he's ever seen. You had a big hole over your heart.” Crius tells Merissa.

Merissa looked between the seven previous protectors. If she became one of them, what would that mean for her? She basically told Kallian earlier that she'd made her decision, but...

“If I become the protector... will I still be able to see Kallian?” Merissa asked them. “He's... I grew up with him, learned everything I know about magic from him. I wouldn't even know about the pond if it weren't for him. He's basically my father... so I need you to tell me.” Merissa took a breath before speaking again. “If I become the protector, does it mean I can't see him anymore?”

“Yes.” Mavros answered immediately.

“No! Of course not, sweetie, don't listen to him,” Nioma stepped forward, placing her cold hand on Merissa's shoulder and giving her a kind smile. “He believes every protector should drown themselves in their work and cut all ties because they're just ‘distractions’.”

“They are.” Mavros snarled. “Protecting the pond isn't *just* about meditating and giving magic to it. It's protecting all the living beings that call the pond their home, keeping the pond safe, making sure the magic stays clean.”

“I think she's proven herself,” Esmeray chimed in, twisting the dagger in her holster. “She fought that beast and lived.”

“Only because another spirit sacrificed themselves for her,” Eimi grumbled.

“And she came out with some pretty cool scars,” Crius' eyes glanced over Merissa's prosthetic arm and milky white eyes with glowing blue veins protruding from them. “Skoll says your scars are almost as cool as his. Almost.”





Merissa looked over at Skoll who gave her a half-smirk.

“To answer your question,” Caelum bellowed to get everyone's attention before lowering his voice. “Even if you become the new protector, you will still be able to see Kallian. While, yes, taking care of the pond is important... family comes first.” Caelum grinned at Merissa, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “So, what do you say, kid?”

*

“Don't forget to drink your tea before you meditate, okay?”

Kallian held out a blue mug filled with glowing Blue Lotus tea.

“And you go to bed right when Jacob gets here. He comes with the sun.”

Kallian reminded the young woman standing in front of him. Oh how proud her father would be if he could see her now.



Becoming water

Written by: Priya Rohella

I am water.
The air didn't grace me,
Neither did the warm touch of a blanket.
I was greeted with a pressure in my ears,
Resistance as I tried to move my tiny limbs,
A familiar incubator that I became one with.

I adore the water.
I can swim faster than I can run,
I feel incomplete without the smell of salt,
Without the feel of my skin wrinkling.
I live by the coast-
I am never far away from its serenity.
The saturated sand is where I am grounded,
The tide is my grandfather clock...

I question the water.
The waves failed to whisper,
Failed to lap against the shore,
The hills lay as damp as the sand.
It engulfed the land and took all I knew-
Took everyone I knew.

I abhor the water.
I couldn't swim fast enough,
The smell of salt hindered my other senses,
The wrinkles on my hands turned white and numb.
I lived by the coast-
I am never far away from its cruelty.



The saturated sand is where I start sinking,
The tide is my hourglass...

The current is steady.
A slight breeze graces me like a stranger,
The dins of waves rush my ears,
My limbs are met with only resistance.
I am incubated in the cold darkness...
I am water.



Sea of abyss

Written by: Chelsey Selvarajah

Edited by: Ozzy Langford

Bloody hands reach out for a water lily, almost slipping. She heaves herself up on it and collapses on its lush green pad. Gasping for air, Nila winced in pain. It was a truly pitiful sight, the esteemed Water God, no longer able to harness water. It had been too long since she had been to the upper water realm, spending a decade in that water prison, her spiritual power slowly siphoned away and released back into the seas. However, she had no time to dwell on the state of her past home; her body was deteriorating faster than she expected, and if she died before accomplishing her mission then this would all have been for nothing.

If only she had discovered the signs earlier, perhaps she could have prevented the worst of it.

She crossed between lilypads, where she had once glided with ease, like a stream flowing effortlessly over smooth stones. Now her path was fractured, the waters muddied and unsure beneath her. The palace came into view, and Nila lamented the murky darkness that seeped through the softened blues of the upper water realm—the darkness of the demon water realm.

She truly was a disappointment, both as mentor and a God. What use were the titles and powers if she couldn't even protect the one she cared about?

The least she could do was this, the last bit of her strength poured into this one act.

Stepping off the last pad and onto a cold, once-familiar floor, Nila looked up at the palace walls, throat tightening as memories of the past washed over her. No trace remained of the Sea Coven's temple. What had once been a bustling, lively sanctuary was now lifeless and desolate. Even the ornate placard had been crudely torn down and replaced with the words 'The Abyssal Palace'.

Was this all her fault? For not seeing the signs sooner?

The palace doors were wide open, no doubt expecting her arrival. Why else would she have been permitted to leave her prison if not to witness the

greatest spectacle of the upper water realm?

Bloody legs dragged themselves across the palace floor. The pain seared but she could stall no longer —her spiritual power was fading and soon her mortal body wouldn't be able to withstand the power of the sea realm.

Entering the courtyard, she could feel eyes on her, some familiar figures gazing at her with concern and reverence. What reverence did her bloodied mortal form deserve now? Others were unfamiliar, though from their sneers, blackened horns and the permeating stench of rotting fish, they were evidently from the water demon realm.

She stumbled from the pain, but before she could fall forward, her bloody hands were caught by alabaster ones—hands that had once offered comfort, now cold and cruel.. A taunting jeer met exhausted eyes.

It was Thamarai.

“Oh my, if it isn't my beloved ex-mentor. Have you come to pay your respects at my coronation?” Thamarai grinned, baring razor-sharp teeth. No matter how many times she had seen it, Nila could never get used to Thamarai's demon form. The horns, the blackened lips, the fish skeleton spirits that danced around her like a veil, the blue demon seal on her forehead. It was all so unfamiliar.

“How kind of you,” Thamarai continued, staring deeper into Nila's eyes. “it's the least my useless mentor could do after deserting me and leaving me to die.”

Nila resisted the urge to respond. This isn't her. It's all because of that thing, she repeated to herself. Looking away from her eyes, she looked down to what Thamarai was wearing.

In a crude display of power, she was currently donning the garments of the imperial Water Master, the first of the Upper Water Realm to become a God. Nila remembered the first time she had worn it, during the celebration after she had awoken as the next Water God.

The coven had insisted on holding a celebration, inviting everyone in the Upper Sea Realm. Back in those days, the waters had been clear, the air

brimming with life. That day of her celebration, Thamarai had assisted in putting her garb on, claiming that she wanted to spend a few moments with her mentor before having to share her with everyone else. In the silence of Nila's quarters, Thamarai had gifted her a brooch.

"I know you said you didn't want anything, but I saw this in one of those markets on the surface and it reminded me of you." Thamarai pinned it to Nila's lapel, smiling softly.

Nila hummed, the brooch catching the light. "The craftsmanship is exquisite, like moonlight on still water. A water lily brooch—just like your name, I see."

Thamarai's face grew redder than a goldfish and she immediately busied herself with tying Nila's waist chain. "I hope you don't think it's presumptuous of me. I just wanted you to have a keepsake of your best student for when you're busy with your Godly duties."

"You talk as if you are no longer my duty, Thamarai," Nila replied, half-jokingly.

"You're a God now, you shouldn't have to waste your time teaching me, I'm sure there's another—."

"Foolish girl. Who was the one who hounded after me for days on end, begging me to be her mentor? You are my responsibility, and I'm not going to relinquish that just because I have a few extra duties now."

Nila was broken out of her reverie of the past as Thamarai continued speaking.

"Still too prideful to talk to me? Despite being chained and powerless for song? You truly are befitting of your title; cold and unfeeling." She spat, bringing herself and Nila up. "You failed as both mentor and God, but I suppose you have a way of redeeming yourself. According to demon water law I am to marry. My father wants me to marry some noble leviathan's son, but we both know I was never quite interested in men." Thamarai's voice lowered by an octave, brushing her lips against the fold of Nila's ear.

"How delightful would that be? The Water God and The Water Demon,

drowning in hell for eternity?”

“You wretch!” A voice yelled from the crowd. Nila recognised it as Pani, one of her peers in the coven, before the demon invasion. “How dare you treat Lady Nila after she took you in and trained you?”

Thamarai glared at the offending voice, and sneered, “Took me in and used me as a tool to ascend to Godhood. That’s what she did. She waxed poetics about doing good deeds, about having an open mind and looking beyond the surface. Yet she discarded me when she found out the truth about me. If it weren’t for my father discovering me—the heir he never knew he had, I wouldn’t have awoken my true power and found my people.”

Having bided her time, Nila finally managed to summon the remnants of her spiritual power into her palms.

It was time.

She wrenched her hand out of Thamarai’s grasp and before anyone could blink, she plunged it into Thamarai’s heart—right where her core lay.

“It’s all my fault Thamarai, I should’ve realised it sooner. This isn’t you, it’s all his doing, but I had no choice and let it fester.” The words spilled out of Nila’s mouth like the high tide, after all, these were to be her last moments.

“Wha—hrk.” Before Thamarai could speak, Nila used the last vestiges of her Godly power to reach into Thamarai’s core.

And she pulled.

Her own core was crumbling, shattering against the strength of one as strong as Thamarai’s, but Nila resisted and with a snap, yanked out a black nail.

Thamarai immediately pushed Nila off her, eyes darkening. “You—what did you do?” Before Nila could respond, Thamarai staggered back, spewing black water out of her mouth and clutching her core.

The courtyard, silent up until now, had burst into disarray. The water demons on one end were panicking at the state of their leader and the former coven members were worried for their Water God, unable to find a trace of spiritual energy from her body. Some attempted to run over to Nila, now

curled on the floor and bleeding profusely, when they were blasted back by a flurry of water daggers. Thamarai had cast a water barrier, blocking herself and Nila off from everyone else.

“Stay away from her.” Thamarai growled, coughing up more black water, she bent down, grasping for Nila.

“What did you do? What is this gaping hole in my chest?” Perhaps Nila was disoriented, but momentarily she thought she saw Thamarai the bumbling student, not Thamarai the tyrannical water demon.

Noticing her eyes unfocussing, Thamarai shook her and released the barrier. “Nila! You’re not allowed to die on me. Healer! SOMEONE, GET THE HEALER AT ONCE.”

Nila forced out a pained smile, “Nothing can be done lotus, I am dying. Feel my core.”

Thamarai pressed two fingers against Nila’s chest, seeking for a drum of energy under her skin. “There’s... nothing there. But your Godhood? What of it? You should be able to easily heal?”

“That nail... made of toxic water... requires sacrifice to remove completely.” Nila’s voice was becoming ragged and it was harder to hold a conversation.

“This nail?” Thamarai grabbed the offending nail out of Nila’s hand and hissed. “This is made with the demon realm’s poison water—why was this inside of me?”

“A nail of corruption, a relic that only demon Royalty can create. A wicked tool that manipulates its victim’s emotion.” Nila took a deep breath. “Just remember, I forgive you little lotus, whether in life or death, none of this was your fault—I can only apologise for finding out too late.”

“Find out what? Tell me! I command you to tell me! I haven’t given you permission to die yet.” Thamarai didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, the one she thought she hated the most was dying, the thought of it made her numb.

“Please don’t leave me alone,” Thamarai whispered, her voice cracking. “We were supposed to drown together in hell for eternity. You can’t leave me like

this.”

Nila’s vision faded, her consciousness drifting in and out for the last time. She wished that things could have gone differently.

*

Nila awoke with a start, feeling a pull of water chains on her wrists and ankles. She knew this place all too well, after all, combining sea stone with water energy was her idea, and the sea prison was her creation, the perfect tool for blocking a criminal’s spiritual energy. She had spent the better half of a decade trapped in this prison after Thamarai had awoken as a demon and the demon realm usurped the upper sea realm. Was this a dream? No, the lack of core in her body and almost faint spiritual energy meant one thing. She had returned to the past.

Nila had an inkling this would happen. That if her sacrifice was large enough and she was lucky enough her death could reverse things. Perhaps it had to be her death as a God, or the death of her powers. Nila was broken out of her train of thought as the prison door unlocked.

Clack.

Clack.

Clack.

Thamarai’s footsteps resounded through the dungeon, approaching the God she had once admired. She was dressed in deep black clothes, worn by demon Royalty, a sword at her hilt. She looked at the figure in front of her coolly. Despite being chained and forced to her knees, her face was as sharp as a blade—cold indifference that had come to be known by all in the upper water realm. Yet, for a fleeting moment her eyes softened, taking in the sight of the demon she had once known.

Thamarai looked down at the God, lifting her chin with the hilt of her blessed weapon before speaking. “I just have one question for you, my dear former mentor—one I hope you can give an honest answer to.”



“Speak,” Nila replied, though she had longed to say much more.

“Did you regret it?” The demon asked, a hint of vulnerability flickering in her eyes, quickly masked by anger.

“Leaving me to die in the water demon realm after you discovered what I truly was? After I found out who I truly was?”

“This time, I will change everything,” Nila thought, her resolve hardening as she prepared to confront Thamarai with the truth about her father—and the nail of corruption that had sealed their fates a lifetime ago.

“I regretted it then, and I regret it now. Let me tell you about everything.”

Styx - Desensitised

Written by: Amelia Constantine

Edited by: Niahm Canning

Styx

Stranded.

An Island of possibility

I should go, the

ground

folds

downwards.

A ripple on the water.

Mud

billows

on an opaque mirror

my hands are cracked and white.

When it rains, the World cries.

Each time

learning myself as Something new.

Nail polish carefully applied,

chipped away.

There's no pressure in the rain.

Do I want more than this?

The inbetween is often forgotten.



Where does any of it go?

As it
drains
away.

A lazy river of fallen fauna.
Of dead hogweeds that cup at the River Styx.

*

Desensitised

In the violence of a storm my mind quiets.
Shoved deep down where sounds muffle.
Untangled from the Earth.
Thrown free to the water.

Liquid Gold

Written by: Scott Woolard

Head down. Out of sight. Small mutters. Arguments over scraps. Engines running. Advertisements blaring... Is what City 3 is all about.

Shoulder barge to shoulder barge tends to be the greeting for this place.

Everyone's always in a rush. I don't know where to, though. There's nothing to be excited about. It's dark. It's grey. It's covered in shit. The people are shit. There's nowhere to go. You can't get outside the dome of City 3. Only rumours are heard about getting outside, into the wilderness. Whispers from others trying to be hopeful about this cage we're stuck in.

All because of a resource. All this shit because of a resource. Everything else is still getting used, the fuels, the minerals, the trees, but one item became so ridiculous because it became so hard to get hold of. Even when it was, it was locked behind huge doors, containers, banks, and laws. Not that easy to come across.

It came to be called Liquid Gold.

Water.

Literally the only thing we humans need to survive. Apart from food, that was relatively easy to come across in comparison to this stuff. You could either work for it, which never amounted to much unless you were the upper class. Or you could do it the easier way, stealing it. That's always an option.

Always my option. Haven't had any issues yet. Guess you could say I'm a lucky one in that sense. Only part of this situation that I'd consider lucky...

"Hey! You!", was heard from over my shoulder.

It drew attention from everywhere since it came from the patrol of the Street Sweepers. All heads turned to the direction of the command, except my own.

No time to waste on their commands. I stayed to the side of the street, hugged tightly to the stand of a stall. Vision slightly impaired by the hood covering the face of a thief. Not much to look at, mind you. Not like the Lord and saviour of City 3 plastered all over the place. Old aged, white hair, flamboyant moustache, and a punchable face. The usual leader of a caged society.

“I said YOU!”, still hadn’t moved from my post. Head lowered as they drew near. The clothing worn here isn’t very unique from the others, but there’s still personalisation to some extent depending on how you wear your jacket, your cloak, or your hat. Nothing on your head or to cover your face is the suicide option. Anyway, the reason I explain this is because I look like others. I blend in. Invisible, out of sight, out of mind. Not of any interest. Therefore, the person being shouted out is my scapegoat. The only difference here is I have a backpack hidden under my layers.

“In the grey!”, a light from the patrolling vehicle spotted another of similar description within a few feet from where I was. A group of Street Sweepers closed in like a moth to the flame. The scapegoats stood still, hands up high facing the ceiling of the dome. It wasn’t just one. As I said, not much variation. The Sweepers weren’t exactly exact with their description, just that I had a hood. Again, not the only one with a hood. Whilst the group of grey hooded scapegoats were searched I was able to brush past and slither into the crowd.

The pack is what they were after. Hunted like it was a last meal. It could’ve been, it was either find it or lose their own H2O. Can imagine what people would choose. It’s not like I’m the bad guy here, I got to survive too. Anyway, I managed to slip through an alley, down some stairs and out of the beaming lights and torturous city. Further into the underbelly I traversed, aiming to lose the Sweepers attention and lie low for a few before I can get this batch to the markets. The markets were a safe haven for the thieves, beggars and people forgotten by the above. Little slice of peace without being checked on every week. Making sure the headcount hasn’t changed and you’re home by curfew. Not my thing. They don’t like to rummage with us. The pieces of dirt under their feet. In a way, makes it easier getting by when you know the underbelly of the city more than you know the guy on the broadcasts. Makes it sure as hell easier to keep out of sight too. Lock Picking, pickpocketing, hacking, sabotage, and the rest are my skill sets. Trading what I get keeps me up on my feet and what I don’t need I pass to those that do. Or try to at least.

I do what I can.

The people down here are a little more pleasant than those on the streets. Rather than a shoulder barge, you get to go past without having a confrontation. It's still not sociable by any means but it's the little things. The vaults people used as homes weren't the best of things, but they were better than sitting with no space at all in the Re-education Block, RE.D. They try to keep us in check by preaching how well we have it compared to other Cities but I don't quite believe that from what I hear through the tunnels. Collecting trades for relatively safe travel to another City or the wilderness. It's hopeful and that's enough for most people. There are ways out of the dome, apparently. I've not spoken to anyone myself who has managed to see other Cities, but there are plenty of rumours about the group you need to find.

They go by Conductors.

Fitting.

After making it to the Brewers, the largest of the vaults down here and therefore the meeting grounds. I was finally able to lower my blood pressure, even for a brief moment. Most others were paying no mind to who enters and leaves as we're all nobodies here. There is a sense of community, but not by much. There are other means of fluids, alcohol is a rife business if you can keep it hidden. It was outlawed so the ones above were able to hoard to their heart's content. Bullshit.

I wanted some Liquid Gold. I took it. Kept taking.

I've had enough of this City though. If enough people are talking about these Conductors, some of it has got to be true. I hope.

Great, now I'm sounding like the others.

I keep my ear out for any conversations mentioning meeting the smugglers whilst taking my time choosing a seat to rest my weary arse. I lock onto a spot just at the end of the bar, in the corner, so I have eyes on the entire space.

I just stole Liquid Gold. I'm not keeping my back turned with a literal target

on my back.

The alcohol tastes like piss. Bitter, acid, piss fluid. No idea what else is in there but it's fluids and it's something. After the glass I was reluctantly nursing had reached its end, the conversations of others who were drowning themselves in it started to loosen up. More information was being spilled across the bar, similarly with the piss. A pair a couple of stalls up were loose lipping, loudly I might add, about a recent encounter with the Conductors. My interest peaked. This is my chance.

I leaned in close to the bar, towering over the glass and to the left where the conversation was taking place. Trying to not make it obvious and let them continue with their free information speech.

"I had to meet a guy who was the broker...", one slurred, slow and focused on getting the information out.

"A broker?", was returned with curiosity.

"Yeah, they ain't giving themselves up without having the trade-off given."

"Trade-off?"

"Do you know anything?", the initial voice was raised in turn, a shake of his head followed and the glass dropped to the counter. "They ain't just gonna show up. They're hunted."

"They want value," they continued, more focused than before, "they want to make sure you ain't gonna throw them in the RE.D," the glass raised to their lips for another swig before continuing, "I gotta meet them in the Turn-point junction later", they ended their spiel and that was all the information I needed.

As for the trade-off. What item do I have of value? Food? Clothing? Shoes? Information?

The Liquid Gold is mine.

Unless I offer them a share of it but how do I know that I won't be the one in the RE.D?

I gotta take that risk. I need to get out of here. I know where the Turn-point

junction is. I'll make my way there. It's secluded. No one goes there unless it's for these types of dealings. I'll get some shut eye in the vaults nearby and wait for anyone heading that direction.

Forgot how long it takes to get to Turn-point. It's near the edges of the underbelly, at the edge of the dome. Fitting place to meet if you want to get out of the place. The infrastructure on the way was still littered with people trying to make do. Trying to make something out of nothing. The vaults were big enough but you were sharing it with plenty of other people. I found a break in the wall, big enough for me to sit in for a few hours.

I'm hoping it's only a few hours.

Some shut eye occurred before being stumbled over by, you guessed it, the same person that told me to be here.

I wanted their spot. He's not any better than I am here. There's rubble all over the place.

Why can't I have his spot?

The rubble was cold, damp, wet and slimy but I got a grip on it pretty quickly. I stood from the cubby with my arm raised high. Luckily they were hunched over against the wall, spewing up the so-called alcohol. I approached quickly, shamefully without hesitation and collided with the rubble to the back of the drunk's head. The body dropped like a sack of meat.

The spot is mine.

Releasing the rubble with a thud against the ground I carried on their path towards Turn-point junction. Towards my freedom. Towards not having to scrounge every second or every hour.

Turn-point junction was brighter than I remember. They must've done some work if the location was going to be a regular meeting point. Torches and candles lit up the darkest parts of the vault, three tunnels converging onto one open area. Enough routes for an escape if needed. Although the back wall looked a little suspicious. With my line of work, a keen eye is definitely needed to survive.

I waited at the end of my tunnel, hoping to see someone else from another. Time passed. Again. Was I too hasty? The drunkard had to be coming – he knew the time. So where the hell are they? They sharpened up when they were talking about this meet. Were they late? Too early? It's never fucking easy. All for this goddamn Liquid Gold. I want out of here. Where are they!?

Minutes went past. Certainly didn't feel like it.

Footsteps. More than one set. Two? No—Four. Four sets.

For one meetup about paying to get out of here doesn't make sense. They're coming from the left which means right is my only way. This can't be a set-up. It's not like the Sweepers for them to make their entrance tidy. They'd have wrecked the place. Stop freaking out. It's not them. It's the brokers. It has to be.

A rasping voice broke from the left – they'd seen me before I saw them. Not had that happen in a while.

"We got anyone 'ere t'night?" It was rough, rasp and sharp all in one.

"Y-yeah", I choked in response, coughing up a little to clear the phlegm lodged in my neck.

I'm really losing it here. Stay focused. You're so close. Pay fucking attention. Keep your head on a swivel.

The hallway gained a bright orange light which soon joined the rest of the colours in the center of Turn-point junction. The group waltzed in, spreading into a semi-circle to enclose the space. Present themselves as the ones in control of the situation.

I'm the customer, I'm in charge.

I stood upright and stepped into the center, joining the group.

"You here for the talks?", the closest of them spoke out, turning the light source forwards and towards me.

"I should hope so or we're all fucked," I returned, drawing back from the light after being down here for so long. Chuckles were returned from the exchange and a barrel was rolled from the right side to the center. I took the cue and stepped closer, my eyes adjusting and their faces becoming more defined.

“You want out then? If so, what’re you offering?” cooed the first one that spoke, a grin on his lips.

“I have information on Liquid Gold transport runs. Where they come and go, and the timings.” I dropped a hand to my side, pulling back the cloak and reaching into a pocket on the side of my thigh. I drag out a book. My book. All my recons and mappings over the years. “What about this?”, placing it onto the top of the barrel and then resting my hands beside it. It was picked up by the ring leader as soon as it was down, drawing it to the light sources and eyeing it as much as possible.

“This ain’t worth shit. We ain’t dealing with those wankers. What else ya’ got? Or we ain’t gettin’ anywhere. Did you even get anything from them?” The book dropped at the end of the questioning and their presence drew close once more.

“Fine. Fine.” The same hand loops round my backside and grasps at the hip flask in my belt. I draw my hand back round and place it onto the barrel, still firmly grasped and held close to my chest like it was a set of playing cards.

“I scored this,” with a shake to show the contents and then leaving it against my chest for their response.

Their attentions were glued, exactly like the Sweepers, like a moth to the flame.

“You got a flask of Gold?” A hand reached for the tightly held flask against my chest and I withdrew with a step back.

“You ain’t getting your hands on it until we’ve struck a deal. I want out, you want this. Get me out, and it’s yours,” I lowered the hand to my waistband and tapped the head of the flask against the barrel, as if to entice the deal even more.

This could work. I’m getting out of City 3. The fighting for water is over. I won’t have to scavenge for scraps because the ones above don’t know how to share. All because of the fucking previous generations. Screwing up the environment. It was a wilderness, not a wasteland.

The weather has no forecast anymore. It wants us gone. So we hid — in these domes called cities.

Protection from what we did, but not what we're doing to each other. It's one or the other. I want to help others, but they don't want to help others.

"Alright, alright... We can get you out. You want it done now?", the ring leader stood back, turning the semi-circular group into an arrowhead with themselves at the point. They were stepping backwards towards the wall at the back of Turn-point junction. The one that looked fake. Knew it. It didn't look right.

I was wrong.

The ring leader booted at the floor, kicking a pile of cloth debris to the side and revealing a metal entry point. Makeshift and clearly added to over time. "You wanted out. Down you go," they knelt down and shifted the metal cover off the ragged ingress. After stepping closer to the exit, the spearhead formation altered once again and became more dispersed. They started heading to the other entrances, as if anyone else is going this direction. The entrance soon appeared beneath my feet, I could see the bottom of what was another tunnel.

"Didn't know such things existed?", left my lips with utter curiosity as the hole grew bigger from getting a better look. A murmur of agreement sounded from the right, the ringleader standing up as I took their position over the entrance.

"I'll be taking that flask. Conductors are on the outside", their hand drops next to my shoulder, curling and uncurling their fingers as if begging for the paycheck.

Hesitation.

Why are you hesitating? You're right here. This is the exit. Kick your feet from under you and drop.

"Alright, it's yours," my feet slide from under me and my backside hits the cold surface. The backpack under my cloak made the tiniest ripple and splash against itself. Grunts emit from my lips at the same time, trying to

mask the noise. They don't need to know I have anymore. It's mine. Sliding off the rim of the entrance, another exhale of air escapes and a buckle in height occurs once again. The drop was further than I thought. Taking a minute to gather my thoughts I check both ways.

To the left is the exit, the outside, the better life, the freedom I wanted. All I had to do was slip through the partitions of the fans. To the right was pitch black, a dead end possibly? Who cares? I'm outta here.

"Hey!" came from above, which made me involuntarily tighten up and look at where it came emitted from. "The fucking flask!" you can imagine the spit that followed that sentence.

"Shit, my bad!" was returned as the buckle turned back into a straight posture with eyes locked on the entrance above, head against the base of my neck. The flask, in the same hand, was resting at my hips, once standing and postured I drew it up with force to throw it to the ring leader peering over the entrance.

"It was a pleasure", was shouted in return, echoing through the derelict tunnel. I paid no more mind to who they were. It was over.

A quick exchange.

Whilst they were inspecting the contents I set my eyes on the finish line, the freedom line, the escape. It was in reach. Maybe there is hope for others too. I started my approach, right-left-right-left, trying not to seem too eager but focused on the exit. The final metal bars were standing in front of me, easily manoeuvrable. Bend over at the hips, lift a leg through and I'm there.

It was just me and the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm done with this fucking city and this Liquid Gold.

I sped up.

I got hasty.

I got excited.

I was hopeful.

I was free.

I made it...



I got sloppy.

I got complacent.

I got rusty.

I was too fucking hopeful.

I got tunnel vision.

There were no signs of other entrances. Nothing. I thought I could make it. I was there. It was there. I was free. It was cold. Freezing, almost. Worse than the rubble used to knock out the drunk, is all I could feel. Then followed the crack of metal against another as it echoed through the makeshift chamber. I was on the floor before I could react.

There was no one else down here. I swear. All I wanted was the Liquid Gold. The water. The contents of my backpack that's currently coating my lips with my own Crimson Gold.

Sink deeper

Written by: Salis Fern
Edited by: Sunny Thorne

Water reminds me of my darkened reflection,
the yin of the sun of who I am perceived to be.

It reminds me of who I am pretending to be,
the truth of who I am not being.

Its violent as it churns within you and without you,
it's needed for life, but it crashes through you like waves in a storm.

It leaves you when you weep,
yet without it, how could you shed?

It reminds me of a dark churning, of the inner,
of the things you hide; gently lapping at the shores of consciousness.

It reminds you in tickling tides to be different,
to look beyond the surface where your distorted self, floats.

Go too far and you drown,
in the endless possibilities, versions of you spiralling down.

A bruising whirlpool of changes and confusion.
Which way is up again?

Deeper still, where unsurfaced truths lay strewn like long discarded
treasures.
Pearls clamped shut in things you won't see.

Ships crashed and rotting, old selves unsolved.

Waiting there in water.

The further you go the pressure builds, closing in around your lungs,
the deeper you sink the harder it is to stay aware.

The secrets get larger, where the sun beams can't reach and
only slivers of moonlight guide you.

Quiet now, the rush of noise dampened by the depth.
Endlessness on all sides, left with only yourself and the water.

Breath caught, a reminder that you don't have long down here.
Impressive how our lungs burn when breathless, the sun is in our chest.

Despite being surrounded in a biting cold underwater tempest.
A storm that doesn't shift, a violence that doesn't move.

Haunted only by what is expected not what is found.
Tears only join the limitless soft flow stream sinking deeper.

Caught in the rapids of instant gratification,
a current of content, a distracting maelstrom.

Swimming feels like trying to move through black tar,
every limb stuck to something holding you back. Keeping you trapped.

Have you forgotten how streams go slow,
they rumble over the rocks in new veins carving out the delicate earth,
it trickles and drips, cautiously through edges and cliffs,
rounding off the rough, caressing the land as it passes.



Like a diamond soothed through tides of change,
condensed back into oneself by the pressure.

The Fall

Written by: Grace Isobelle

Edited by: Priya Rohella

The path thins and crumbles
as we venture deeper into the wilderness.
Meandering around the bends.
Further and further, the end seems nigh,

till we witness the falls
cascade in front of us.
Various hues of blue and
dastardly rainbows, a
gentle spray tickles our
faces. We look at each
other, a euphoric laugh.

The defeated rocks lay detached
where the falls calm into a loving
flow. It carries
itself down
and out. A
small lake in a big
ocean,
mirror image.

Stars in her eyes

Written by: Alice Atherton

Edited by: Priya Rohella

the weekly doom scroll
stopped.
my fingertips hover over the screen.
time stood still.

The Eye of a Female Humpback Whale,
'Sweet Girl'
stares back at me.
a black void with rings of striking,
sapphires, lapis and indigos.

she pierces my heart, her voiceless scream
both deep and ancient somehow,
sings 'I'm alive'

she reveals the secrets of the universe,
ocean galaxies,
with thousands of burning stars.

I can't turn away
it's eating at me.
She has me.

the more I dwell here, the fear creeps in. I'm dragged
down
drowning in her eerie blues.

a window into her soul,
is it a warning or a reminder?



we are not alone,
we share this world.

it's a shame she never saw the propeller coming.

Let Me Linger In The Sea

Written by: Natalie Hyde-White

Edited by: Beth Norris

When I die, bring me to the sea.
If Darwin is to be believed, life first started in water.
Do not throw my ashes off a cliff into the swirling wind.
Go out in a boat, on a perfectly still day,
And drop my urn in the sea with care,
Watch the ripple as we slowly become one.
There is still so much yet to be known, in the great depth below.
Let me sink, falling down, down, and down.
To where no human can reach.
Where all the humdrum of the world can no longer bother me.
Yes, I may become a part of a storm, I may be a wave that furiously crashes.
Or I may be a part of sand, eroding glass shards into pretty stones.
For all I know, I will be gloriously alone.
Or I may be gobbled up by a pretty fish, some parts of me still useful.
In that way I could swim for miles with ease,
Without a mere stroke or stretch of my arm.
My body no longer burdens me.
I will be free, more than I have ever been,
My ashes dispersed from bright corals to the midnight sea,
Rather than hidden in a dusty urn on the shelf.
When you taste the salt in your tears,
Your memory of me will caress your cheek as the tears trickle.
You may remember where I am,
You may visit me if you choose.
On a sunny day, with beach balls and flip flops.
You will see me in the sea.

Cycles

Written by: Robin Cosmia
Edited by: Niahm Canning

I. Death

Swallowtail
drifting, floating in
the bird bath.
Inanimate,
swirling alongside
scarlet petals
The summer breeze
rushing with
Rose bush, jasmine incense
Honoring death.
Did the butterfly know they were dying
and offer themselves to the birds?
Want to die in a beautiful place,
want to be helpful,
give her all,
even in death?
Ask the Swallows.
They'll tell you
"It was the circle of life—
think nothing of it.
It's too bad
she couldn't be a bird."
Their songs, smog in the air,
readily received.
I can't help but wonder if
years of silent suffering
left her story in the mouths of her



oppressors.
Silent
in her desperation to prove
Goodness,
Usefulness,
Loveliness?
The desire to prove that she was living,
even as she died?
Swallowtail
swallowed by a Swallow in the end
who couldn't see
past her full belly.
Does it matter, if the birds will never know?
If they never see?
Vision is one part seeing
one part perceiving.
A life devalued by many
By some
By one
Does not devalue life.

II. Rebirth

Sinking, sinking,
The tide's rapid erosion
Beneath my heels
I'm consumed, slowly
Dissolving
Gently
The bees in my head go quiet





Put to sleep by campfire smoke
And I remember.
And I cry into the saltwater
And the Ocean accepts my offering.
Her eyes are soul piercing and
Compassionate—
The source of every tear.
Waves unbreaking, she speaks
“Will you hold tightly to the surface
Or be anchored by the depths?”
A wave of fear greets me,
That ominous, dark tsunami.
I know what must be done
“No more trying to walk on water,
The only way through is surrender.”
And so I liquefy, offering more
And more
And more of myself.
My breath becomes water
And we flow together
Lifetimes of grief exchanged
and joy! Oh, the depths are
Joyful
When you surrender
Fearsome,
When you resist.
I dissolve into the
Essence of life,
Held in the watery womb,
My body woven into
Countless forms





Through countless lifetimes
As the sun sets.
Gods of Fire and Water meet—
Casting magic,
Her water breaks
Spilling my body back onto
The sand.
My chest becomes air.
I am born.

III. Tasting life

“I hate water.”
Your head tilts back
Your gaze striking down in stubborn
Triumph
“It tastes like nothing.”
I knew better than to debate that look.
Yet as mysteriously as the glistening orbs of air
Were reaching the top of your cola
As you reached for a second swig
A memory rose to the surface of my mind.
Ribbons of glimmering liquid crystal
Flowing
Prickling my arms in frigid delight
The mouth of a cave gapes open before me
And following his instruction,
I open, too, allowing
The stream to travel through me
Through veins and channels
With widened eyes and shrieks of delight





My body is swallowed
Warm skin vibrating
Liquifying
The smell, the taste of rock and deep earth—
These were the elements I evolved with
The minerals
The water
Alchemizing in my blood.
The toad, the hawk, the bear, the child
We can't get enough
Flowing into one another
I taste everything.
POP-!
The bubble bursts as you insist
"I just need something with flavor."
And I wonder if you can't taste water
Because you've never seen the cave,
The source
Or because the artificial flavors
Make us forget what is real.

The Curious Tale of Fish For Dinner

Written by: Ayomide Ajani

CURIOSITY KILLED THE NARRATOR is what some tragic screenplay depicting the final events of my life would probably be titled. Instead, I have taken the liberty of writing the story myself. It's the last one I will ever write. I have nothing else now to do but write. As things currently stand, it appears I, and this story, will never make it out of this hotel room. With that in mind, I don't expect anyone to actually read this. But on the off chance that someone should happen across these pages, well, I hope you'll glean something from this cautionary tale.

It started with an unusual predicament. Not your typical writer's block: But something deeper and more perverse. I struggled immensely. Struggled to write and even to think of what to write. Try as I might, all forms of story-- or concepts of one eluded me. The condition had hindered me for months. And so, with no real explanation I found myself on the water's edge. I was mostly wandering aimlessly, feeling the wind whip around me. It was late, evening time. And so suddenly and unexpectedly, I became engrossed with the scene before me. Completely lost in the gentle lapping waves. You mightn't think it, but the first crucial part of the narration process is research. In order to tell a tale you must first live and breathe it. It must become as if you are recounting some personal experience. So suddenly then—I remembered all the tales I'd heard about the wicked witch who lived beneath the sea. And I knew I needed to write about the water. The witch would become the source of my story. But I was naïve then. In my quest to find a story to write, I needlessly propelled my own demise.

*

Agnes: It's a good thing you came to me. I know a good deal about water—



being the ‘*Wicked Witch of the Sea*’ and all.

Narrator: Actually, you don’t seem so wicked to me.

Agnes: Ah well, we all have our roles. That’s just what the story has decided.

Narrator: Sorry, I know it’s unconventional. Most narrators already have stories to tell. But me, well...

Agnes: Don’t worry about it. There is one story I think you could tell. One that *really* happened.

Narrator: Really? That’s great I-

Agnes: Only, I’m not so sure you can tell it.

Narrator: Huh?

Agnes: It’s quite dark. Grim. Not the sort of thing you narrator folk usually care to write about.

Narrator: I’m not sure I follow.

Agnes: Let’s just say, it’s not your typical fairytale.

*

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT A WICKED WATER WITCH NAMED AGNES.

Agnes is a very curious type of woman. Initially when I met her, I was slightly disappointed: she didn’t seem so “wicked” at first glance. But soon, as she herself had divined, things turned more sinister. What cruel cosmic



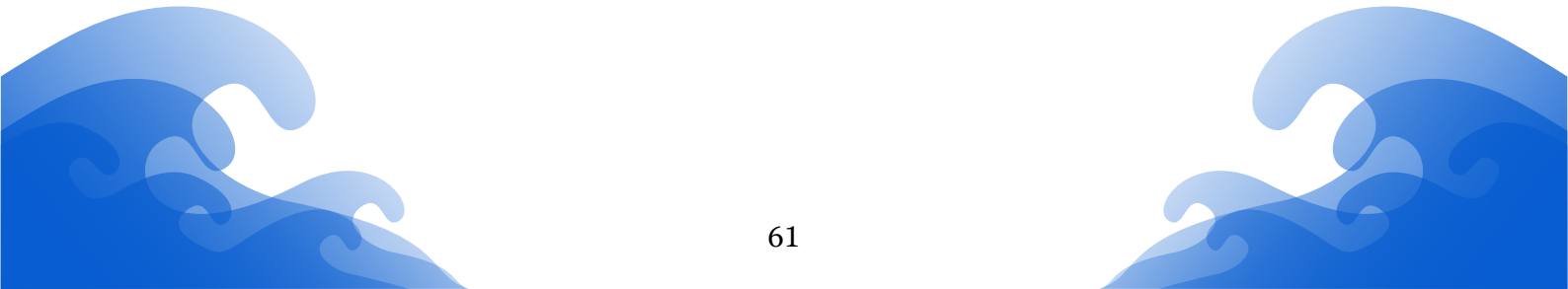
consequence! All for the sake of my desire to find a real story to tell.

Although it was my intent to write a story about the witch, I couldn't simply approach her as so. So I, narrator, had to pretend as if I had come to the witch to seek a story. Imagine! That witch is ever so surprising; in what she says, and how she says it. At first I found it amusing but quickly it became a great source of annoyance.

The story itself is as you'd expect. Terrible nonsense. It's like trying to decipher a tangled yarn of words. Not alone is the realism of the events is highly debatable, the characters are all lackluster. It has several glaring gaps in it, too many unresolved details, about as fleshed out as an unpeeled tangerine. I don't understand how I would even be expected to bring the story to life. And yet for the sake of pretense, I persevered and made-up reams of manuscripts to please the wicked witch—which I myself could only stare blankly at in utter confusion and bewilderment.

In playing my role as detective narrator, I was careful yet, the witch was wicked after all. But clearly I had underestimated her. I couldn't decipher whether the witch was truly mad and believed her own ramblings, or she had orchestrated the whole thing—to make a mockery of me, for personal satisfaction, or just for the sheer sake of being wicked!

It was about a week or so later after I'd first heard the curious tale. After a good bit of walking I arrived in the town just as Agnes had directed me, and there it was. The tall spindly building at the edge of the sea. A haphazard structure. Several planks of wood mottled together, jutting out at sudden angles. It was difficult to believe anyone had ever lived in this building, let alone called it a home. I stood tepidly, as if waiting for something to happen. Approaching slowly, I dragged my feet onto the porch. The planks beneath me squealed terribly with each step. I saw then that the planks that made up the house were charred. Hints of the original maple colour and flecks of blue paint, scratched through the surface of the now coal-black wood. Around my feet, chips of charred wood piled like ash on the floor. Whilst contemplating if I should even bother knocking, I was saved from the inertia of overthinking





when the door suddenly creaked open.

The door slightly ajar and my fingers prickling intensely. A gust of wind seemed to swirl out from inside the house and I had the impression of being sucked or summoned inwards. It was dark. The windows boarded up from the inside. Though teeny streaks of light still managed to filter through, they were no match for the darkness which seemed to envelop the innards of the house. The house groaned as if it was alive. Like a hug from a shadow, I felt it's arms around me, pulling me further into its grasp. Wind whistled through the house carrying with a briny smell on the tail end of its wisp. And I suddenly grew cold.

*

Agnes: It all happened one night, in that house by the sea, after the clock had struck three.

Narrator: Were you close with them?

Agnes: Something like that.

Narrator: Well, you seem to know a lot about them.

Agnes: I know everything about what takes place in the realm of the water. Water is like a refractive substance, the world and events surrounding it seep into its liquid, and it all comes back to me.

Narrator: Interesting, well how does that work then?

Agnes: The sea is my home. It wouldn't be right if I didn't know everything that went down in my own home.



Narrator: Right. Is that how you found out about the boy? You used your magic '*all-seeing*' *water eye*?

Agnes: I didn't find the boy. He came to me. So, in a way, he found me. He was quite a tiny thing. Small for his age. With hair that spiralled out in antennae around him. He didn't look at all like his parents.

Narrator: So, you've met them then? The parents?

Agnes: I've glanced at them from afar. Their tall spindly figures, shifting behind the curtains, but fortunately I have not had the displeasure of meeting them.

Narrator: Ah, villainry! Despite their haven given appearances of doting parents! I had not known that someone 'wicked' could fall illusioned to another wicked creature.

Agnes: That little boy was the centre of their whole entire world. If they were worms and the boy a fruit: They'd spend an eternity wriggling right through his browning core.

Narrator: My, but you do speak in riddles! So, when was this exactly?

Agnes: A long time ago. At dinnertime precisely.

Narrator: You must have more details than that, surely? I must say it's very difficult to attempt to bring a story to life without the requisite details. Naturally, I want to do justice to this... this curious tale.

Agnes: Want not, time is no factor. Justice has long been awaiting the twigs



Narrator: Ah yes, though I must admit, it's still not clear to me what this story has to do with water.

Agnes: Patience. I've not even begun to tell the real story yet.

*

AND THERE IT WAS, THE FISHBOWL IN THE CENTRE OF THE ROOM. Suspiciously clean, as if someone had taken care amidst the falling ash and dust, to shine it. Full of water, and a little floating fish. I thought it was dead, but as I approached it, it began to swim around in circles. I didn't know what to make of it. I crouched down and cupped my hands around the bowl. Cool and solid to the touch. A glimmer of fear rose to the surface, after all it was dangerous to be involved in such dealings with a wicked witch. I stood up, fishbowl in hand, and observed it for a while. I couldn't be quite sure, but the fish seemed to stare right back at me. What its expression was saying, I don't know.

Suddenly, it was as if the room had veered from darkness into a complete absence of light itself. A soft ivory glow glinted from within the fishbowl, right beneath the ripples of the water. And then I had this strange sense that someone was standing behind me. Breathing right down the back of my neck. I froze, unable to turn around. It was a strange sensation of warmth, unlike the chill which initially slithered through the house. After a few seconds the feeling had gone, and I braced myself to turn around only to find nothing there.

When I exited the house, it had grown dark outside. The sky was a mix of purples and blues streaked on the bottom with the calming red-orange hue of the sinking sun. Where the sun touched the waters' surface, or at least appeared as it did, it looked as if the water were somehow swallowing the sun. I couldn't help but think of Agnes and whether she was watching me right then at that moment. I wondered how she would decide which of a



multitude of moments were worth viewing through her all-seeing water eye. Wherever she was, it was likely we were both staring at the same sun, both submerged in the gentle eeriness of the evening time.

I walked along through the narrow winding roads of the town, fishbowl in hand. The place was scarce and the few townspeople I saw had these dark hoods draped over their bodies, enshrouding their faces in a darkness similar to that I had encountered inside the house. I had the subtle feeling then of being watched, or simply unwelcome. It was hard to distinguish. Even the little fish seemed wary, he clung to the side of his bowl closest to my chest.

*

Narrator: So, the boy had no idea about these dinners. And he couldn't eat fish anyway. What was so special about it then?

Agnes: Things are not always what they appear from the outset—*Right, narrator?*

Narrator: Oh, *right*. I suppose so.

Agnes: Well, on that night the boy stumbled into the basement when he really ought not to have done so. Perhaps because he was tired and couldn't sleep. Or because something somehow was drawing him down the stairs and into the basement kitchenette which he wasn't even aware existed.

Narrator: Something, somehow? A kitchen in the basement?

Agnes: The boy stood in the kitchen, when out of the corner of his eye he saw a spectacular sight in the sliver of mirror beside him. Skin morphing into iridescent shades and molding into scales.



Narrator: What? A fish!

Agnes: Oh yes! Arms into fins, skin to gills. Then appeared a tall stranger—the chef it was—who towered so much it seemed as if the ceiling had stretched in height just to accommodate him.

Narrator: And, sorry, you “saw” all this through-, with the water?

Agnes: It’s not important what I “saw” but what happened.

Narrator: Impressive. I wonder what sort of things you see with your water eye. You must know practically everything.

Agnes: Everything and nothing.

Narrator: Hmm, but how does it work? These are the kind of details that would really elevate your story.

Agnes: It’s not my story.

Narrator: Well, it would give more credibility to the story, which is what I mean. The boy and his parents. Trust me, I’ve been in this narrator business for years, it is my role you know. By the by, whatever did happen when you met the boy?

Agnes: You are ever impatient narrator. The story is not mine; it is only mine to be told—for now, of course.

Narrator: You say right. Apologies. So, the boy was transforming, how grotesque!



Agnes: The chef led him into the hallway, a never-ending maze of bitter zigs and zags that only the chef knew how to navigate. On one of the turns, he noticed the chef was brandishing a very large knife, its silver body glinting in the lights. He could tell just by looking at it that the knife was extremely sharp. The chef seemed like the sort of guy who would proudly spend hours smoothening and sharpening the blade until the surface was as smooth as liquid.

Narrator: Hmm, I can tell where this is heading. Grim indeed.

*

THE WATER IS TRICKY, SHIFTY. I thought it was just the house but maybe it's some unique quality of this peculiar town, something to do with its position by the sea. It's as if every building is alive. Shivering against the wind which is hurled from the sea into their direction. It's a wonder then that they are all built from wood and they haven't all collapsed yet. All I can hear is the water. Waves crashing all around the four walls of this room. It's equally as strange as it is spectacular. I feel as if I'm trapped in some liminal space, outside the limits of conventional space and time. A cold chill snakes around, just like in that house. The water permeates all, even my thoughts. It's almost overwhelming, being so constantly aware of the water's presence.

The water was my comfort and now has become anguish. It makes me squirm to think of Agnes. Perhaps Agnes had good intentions after all. I suppose I now have the authority to finish her story for her. In fact, this story is as much hers as it is mine. To start with, I have no idea what will happen to the fishbowl when I am gone. I also do not know how long it will be until I am gone. I do not know what wicked creature it is who lurks behind the door of my hotel room.

My initial thinkings were that Agnes must have been involved in this somehow. But now, the thought that she may be watching me—through here ‘



water eye'— brings me some strange peace. That I may not live out my final moments entirely alone. Perhaps it is she who summons the water to surround me, or perhaps not. Not forgetting the fishbowl on my desk. The little fish who swims inside. Despite it all, I feel we've grown closer during this time we've spent together. It seems like more than just a regular fish to me. The fish floats at the edge of the bowl staring as if it can read the words I've written on the page. I find myself staring back. Had this fish ever really been a boy?

*

Narrator: Right. So, go on then, what happened next?

Agnes: So, the chef led him into a large dining room. It was splendid really. Chandeliers dangling from the tall ceilings, and all sorts of ornate decorations. A shiny wooden table extended through the room with enough seats to fit about 100 guests.

Narrator: One hundred? One hundred people in the basement? Surely, you're kidding.

Agnes: No kidding. All the guests wore masks, like the kind you'd see at a masquerade ball. And he could see their faces. They were hungry. Ravenous, in fact. It was clear, not only by the giant plate on the centre of the table and the giant knife that the chef brandished, that they were all waiting to have fish for dinner.

Narrator: Gosh, but why?

Agnes: It is said that whoever eats such a fish, the kind who was once a boy, will gain unspeakable powers.



Narrator: Such as?

Agnes: Well, they are unspeakable.

Narrator: Yes, I know that, but- I just don't understand. What kind of people would eat a boy? A fish that was actually a boy.

Agnes: People do all sorts of things. I don't find it useful to ask why. The fact of the matter is, they had all prepared to eat him. It's the circle of life isn't it. Eat and be eaten.

Narrator: Eat and be eaten? I don't think that's the usual saying

Agnes: But it's true. We are all eating and being eaten.

Narrator: Okay, okay so I assume we are nearing the end of the story, right? So, the parents set the whole thing up, why? Why? To harvest their own son?

Agnes: Of that, who can be sure. But, it seems it was all a rather unfortunate accident. The two stood up and removed their masks and from that the fish-boy saw it was his parents. They recognised him too, for they weren't expecting to have their own son for dinner.

Narrator: Oh really, I suppose they would have preferred to dine on some other child instead!

Agnes: Well, somehow the boy managed to escape. I'm not sure exactly how it occurred. The chef set him on the table and he began to wriggle around like an electric eel. In his seizure of movements he knocked down one of the candle-lit lanterns with his tail, and the tablecloth quickly caught fire. The fire spread rapidly, as if on a mission until the table was alight and soon the



whole room was engulfed by smoke and fire.

Narrator: Extraordinary.

Agnes: True, though the boy did manage to escape, and he just kept running and running towards the water's edge. By now, I could see the whole thing happening right before me. One of his parents chased after him.

Narrator: One of...which one?

Agnes: I could never identify either of them; they looked exactly the same to me.

Narrator: Right, so then what? Some other grim thing I suppose.

Agnes: Cornered at the edge of the sea they pleaded and pleaded for him to stop running. With one misstep, the boy fell backwards into the sea. Upon touching the salty sea water a second transformation occurred—this is where I must admit I played a direct role in the tale. I turned the fish who was once a boy into a regular fish.

Narrator: Oh! A twist! For what reason had you done so? Why not from a fish-boy into a boy again?

Agnes: I figured it would be safer that way.

Narrator: So, this is why you want me to tell the story? So you can erase your title of 'wicked'?

Agnes: No, I am not driven by selfish means. As I have said, it's not my story to tell. After I had turned the boy to a fish, the boy's parent gathered a



fishbowl and quickly scooped him out from the sea and returned him to the house.

Narrator: And, then what?

Agnes: Well, that's the end of the story, technically speaking.

Narrator: It did feel rushed, no? I mean where are the details? Who really was the boy and his parents? Why the dinners? What are these magical fish you speak of? I- I'm sorry it's just too many unresolved details. It's certainly intriguing but I just don't think anyone would want to read this tale.

Agnes: Very well. That may be the end of the story but it's not the end of ours.

Narrator: I'm not sure I like the sound of this.

Agnes: I accepted your invitation to tell my story in the hopes that you would not just tell it, but tell it to completion.

Narrator: To completion?

Agnes: The story still continues. I want you to bring me the fish.

Narrator: The fish? You mean the fish from the story? The boy?

Agnes: Yes, just that fish.

Narrator: But a fish! How could you ever prove a regular fish is a fish who used to be a boy? I hardly even have enough details to believe this story is real!

Agnes: Trust me, the fish is real. And, if you find it, then the story is yours.





Narrator: Why do you need the fish anyway? I hope not for nefarious means, and you mean to send me into harms way?

Agnes: It has to be you. Like I said, the story is now yours.

Narrator: Mine? I'm simply aiding you to tell your story, nothing more.

Agnes: Would I really send you into harms way? You said it yourself, I don't seem so wicked now, do I?

Narrator: Yes, I did say that...

Agnes: Find the fish, and the story is yours

FISH FOR



DINNER

Ayomide
Ajani



Over Sky & Sea

Written by: Sunny Thorne

Edited by: Salis Fern

Should the body between us remember
its time spent carrying our hearts
from shore

to shore
to shore

I cast kisses
& make wishes
to my fountains & lakes & ponds.

So that it may be carried by our skies

To fill your cup. To touch your lips.

The way our minds drift to as we roam with solitary hands.

If memory is still held by water
then my molecules must still dance.

So long as it be that each step that I take
is a step that I take towards you

the rhythm of my head against your chest
will guide my weathered & winter-worn shoe.

The tears we shed;
salted
as the oceans we would cross.
Conduits of communicating-



to sleeves
to palms
to sheets
all too aware of what it means to yearn.

Our clocks do not show the same face.
But what a privilege!

For us to exist in the same time.

Our nights are not lit by the same stars.
But what a delight!
For us to breathe under the same sky.

Our rivers share not an origin.
Though they will meet the same end.
So what courage!

To stand on sand
to welcome waves
to look to the horizon
to trust that I will meet your gaze.

On a celestial scale
we are not so far apart.

A small solace
for a colossus stone.
I will love you from across the sea.
Until our light & our skin meet again.





Drowning on Dry Land

Written by: Scarlet Quilloy

When he opened his eyes, he thought he had died. Then, he realised that although he was alive, someone else must have believed him to be dead, for he was lying inside a casket.

The first thing he thought to do was scream. Except it wasn't much of a thought. It was an instinct. A roar emerged from the most primal depths of his being and tore through his throat, gasping and guttural, a bellowing sound that trembled through the long, narrow casket. He thrashed, flailing like fish fresh from the water, lip still caught in the hook. The mindless beats and blows of his fists came to no avail because desperation didn't always translate to strength. Another scream burst out of him, and another, and another. He screamed and screamed, but it was futile. Every sound only fell on deaf ears.

With each call, his fill of oxygen ran scarce. Not long after, the strains of his horror finally caught up. His throat prickled as if it had been wrung out, his voice hoarse and breaking into splinters like worn wood. When he gasped for air, he knew not to take another so soon. This one had to last. Instinct told him to scream, but intuition taught him to go quiet. With his silence, he plunged further into the hopeless chasm of his crisis. No one could hear him. No one will hear him. After all, he was six feet under.

The thing about dying was that most people fixate on the how's and why's of death or what came after death— not the in between. No one thought about what it was like to still be of this life, even when the soul had passed on. The liberties of death meant being free from thought, a release from earthly tethers.

He had no such privileges. He wasn't dead and free. He was alive and he had to think fast.

Working against his impulses proved fruitful; he finally got a good look at his



surroundings, limited as they were. He was in a suit that he couldn't remember he even had, cladded in new dress shoes he certainly never bought. Through his panic-addled state, he wanted to laugh, maybe out of hysteria, maybe humour. He couldn't tell. It's his double-edged sword, the best and worst of him. Who buys the dead new things? He hoped he was actually buried alive because he would be furious (more than he already was, that is) if they wasted money on a new outfit for him in death. He had no such privileges. He wasn't dead and free. He was alive and he had to think fast.

Working against his impulses proved fruitful; he finally got a good look at his surroundings, limited as they were. He was in a suit that he couldn't remember he even had, cladded in new dress shoes he certainly never bought. Through his panic-addled state, he wanted to laugh, maybe out of hysteria, maybe humour. He couldn't tell. It's his double-edged sword, the best and worst of him. Who buys the dead new things? He hoped he was actually buried alive because he would be furious (more than he already was, that is) if they wasted money on a new outfit for him in death.

Still, there was nothing on him to help make sense of his situation. Digging through the troves of his memory came to no avail in illuminating his predicament. He didn't have the time nor the air to try. He pawed at his person blindly in search of anything. Why wasn't he buried like one of those Egyptian pharaohs he read about as a child? Locked away in a grand temple, entombed with enough riches to last this lifetime and the next. All he had was a plush coffin and time to die.

For a moment, the idea seemed tempting, like a muffled echo of a siren's song passing through deafened ears— but he wouldn't surrender so soon. His hand trickled past his stomach, felt the cool metal of a buckle, and his synapses shot off like fireworks.

Of course, the belt was also new.

His nimble fingers made easy work of the belt. He swiftly grabbed the prong like a rattlesnake's tongue and ripped off the buckle before it could snap



back. The mismatch between the force of his blind desperation and the buckle's feeble resistance sent his elbow straight into the wall, but adrenaline was a numbing agent unlike any other. He coasted on his highest hopes and gouged the cushion with his buckle, ruthless as he clawed his way out of this soft, silken cage, until he hit the hard shell of the casket lid. The buckle did little to dent the wood at first— thank God, it was wood— but his efforts gradually carved a crescent dip into the shell.

He let out the breath he was holding and sipped another through the mouth. He huffed, the air heavy with its inescapable heat. He sweltered under the added weight of his layers. Faster. He needed to be faster. He couldn't get much force in, not without the room for momentum. He was crammed in here like a makeshift womb, but his resistance hardly waned. Faster, faster, faster. He couldn't die here, not like this. At the very least, he needed someone to pay.

He cast aside the buckle, impatient, *infuriated*, and burrowed his nails into the splinters. Then, he dug. He dug and dug, and dug. He dug until his nails broke and his fingers blistered. He dug until something warm and wet oozed, creeping down his wrists in streams, and sprayed his face rouge. Hands turned to arms—battering elbows, swinging relentlessly— then legs— launching kicks with those fucking dress shoes and their pointed tips. If he made it out of here alive, the first thing he would do was beat someone over the head with these shoes.

He almost missed the crack in the lid, a thin, jagged line that ran from above his head all the way down to his flailing feet. His body was no longer his own, a separate entity, single-minded in tunnelling its way out of hell. But the cost of freedom was unanticipated. With one brute kick to the lid, the casket gave way and the earth fell around him.

*

His father taught him how to swim.



A militant man, he hardly spent time with him as a child, more often elsewhere on some business trips overseas or long nights at the office than home. One day, as a spur of the moment decision, his father wanted to teach him how to fish. When the rare opportunity presented itself, he didn't think twice. He was only eight and didn't really care for something like fishing, but it wasn't about fishing. It was about spending time with his dad.

There was a river just a ten minute drive away from where their house was. His dad loaded up the back of the car with fishing rods and bait, while his mother made him wear a hat and wiped him down with sunscreen. His cheeks were still tacky when his dad drove them down the creek— start you off small, he said. The ride there was silent. No chatter, no radio but he didn't find it the least bit peculiar. His dad, besides being a busy man, was not much for words. He didn't even call him by his name, just Boy. He wasn't his only son, but his older brothers had a good decade ahead of him, having since moved out. Besides, he wasn't just the only boy under his roof— he was his only child left there. There was no confusion to be had.

He took to fishing with little struggle. He handled the cold with the resilience of a seasoned fisherman and had a knack for feeling even the slightest tremors of a line. Spending such little time with his dad taught him how to move quickly, learn even quicker because he had even less patience than he had time.

That afternoon proved fruitful as far as catches go. His biggest catch was a ten inch salmon. It was the biggest catch of the day. Hook, line, sinker— literally. His dad was impressed, but said it with the upward quirk of his brows rather than a statement of pride. He told him he could have it for dinner, and his mouth watered in anticipation of his mother's grilled salmon. They were ready to head home with a bucket full of fish and a pair of empty, clamouring stomachs, when his dad decided to take him further up the river. He wanted to show him the waterfall stationed at the end. It was by no means impressive, humble as far as waterfalls go, but the plunge was hardly ever vacant of swimmers, making today the rare occasion where no one else





was around. They had the water all to themselves.

The mercurial memory of an eight year-old is a curious thing. Some things always stuck out more than the others, turning into a fixture in the mind. He couldn't explain how he ended up in the water, just that he was wearing his lucky jacket, and that day was the very reason why he started thinking it was lucky in the first place. He couldn't imagine why his dad hung back as he struggled in the icy current, his lungs filling, air running thin, throat too clogged to cry out more than a gasp for help. Just that his hands searched for something solid to take hold of, reaching out for the setting sun instead of his father, who stared down at him alongside the cool, open sky.

Burgeoning fatigue was what made him think to let go of his frantic urges to resist and permitted the water to take him away. The reeds he imagined coiled around him suddenly ceased to be. Before he knew it, his limbs waded through the ripples like he had known how to do so his whole life, head bobbing above the water to find his father and a wry smirk on his face. After he clambered out, his father roughly grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back onto the trail, inconvenienced by what he treated like a minor slip.

Shaking his head, he said, "You've always been too quick for your own good, boy."

It was inescapable. The earth sifted through the fractures and broke apart the lid under its burden, rapidly filling the casket with a crushing heap of soil. With only a split second to think, he barely had the time to bring his arms over his head and burrow his face under his jacket. His casket was a respite compared to this. Without its wooden frame to shield him, the earth engulfed him, consumed whole with only a pocket of air to spare him in his last seconds. The taste of dirt found home in his throat.

He was going to die here. He was going to die. No, not yet. Not here. Not without seeing the sky. Not here, no, no—

The mercurial memory of an eight year-old was a curious thing. Some things became a fixture and some were lost to the sands of time. But some laid



dormant, tangled with others, until a timely snip of clarity finally cut through the haze and unravelled with the truth.

His father didn't tell him that on the day he almost drowned. He actually chastised him for coming so close to the water in the first place. That's right, he didn't tell him that when he was a child. He said that yesterday over dinner, sitting at the head of the table as his brothers sat across from him. Armed men flanked the parameters, a common sight since their mother's passing. When he called upon them, it came as no surprise to any of his children when he announced it was time for him to step away from their family duties. He believed it would only be right for one of his sons to take his place, though which it would be was the quandary itself.

He paid little heed to his father's musings, for he was always uninterested in the incessant bloodshed that came with taking his place and the brutality synonymous with their name. One of his brothers could do it. They had more skin in the game than he did when it came to the business. He should have known that wasn't his choice to make, nor any of his brothers'.

The barrel of a gun barely grazed his temple as he narrowly evaded the blow dealt by the guard behind him. He felt it coming before it got there, flinging himself out of the way, much to his own surprise and the guard's. His older brothers weren't so fortunate— one was seized before he had time to think. The other hit the ground with a lifeless slam.

He turned to his father in outraged horror, only to be greeted by the same wry smirk he once saw as a child.

"You've always been too quick for your own good, boy," he said.

This time, the same guard landed a blinding blow. In an instant, the world went dark.

His father had taught him how to swim just as much as he taught him to drown.

At last, he remembered everything more clearly than ever. He hadn't fallen into the water. He couldn't have. He was on the other side of the path, closer to the shrubbery. His father called him over and made him stand by the edge.



As he hovered over his reflection in the water, his father crept up behind him and tipped him over with a shove, stepping back before the splash could reach him. It must have been because his son caught the bigger catch. His father was a petty son of a bitch like that.

An electrifying conviction shot through him, swift and ferocious, as he grew resolute in his survival. Keep digging. He had to keep digging. The motions were familiar to treading water, but the pressure on his lungs felt a tenfold of the struggle. He knew to keep his head down, lips sealed tight from mouthfuls of dirt. His nostrils flared with the slightest whiffs of air. His fingers lost feeling long before the soil cloaked him, arms and legs heavy in his enduring fatigue. He was as good as blind, smothered in darkness, groping aimlessly but that didn't matter. He wasn't going to die here. No, not because of that bastard. Not this time. Not again. His mother didn't bring him into this world for the death of her to take him out.

He didn't know how long he kept digging just that he had to keep digging. Even when his hands became raw and ravaged, seizing and spasming as the skin peeled and his knuckles ached to the bone. At last, he reared his head above ground. The surge of open air rushed into his ragged lungs and left him lightheaded, disbelieving. The burst of light burned through his unaccustomed eyes but in the wake of its golden flare, he finally saw the bleeding sky, the obtrusive red spot and its descent into the distant horizon. Sunset.

With a final kick of his feet, he burst through the ground neither dead nor alive.

*

His makeshift burial turned out to be at a cemetery a few roads down from the family home. He figured out the way back and staggered along a dimly lit, unpaved road like a lost stray. In the light, he was relieved to find his fingers



were still fully intact but peeling and rather gnarly. His nails were fucked. He abandoned the suit jacket a few paces down the road, lost the belt and a shoe during his escape. He stank of death and something else he brushed off as paternal resentment. Every now and again, he found a new part of him that he had to empty of mud. He spat all the way home in a feeble attempt to cleanse his palate of dirt. The most troublesome proved to be his hair. Halfway through the stroll home, he was still plucking out stray clumps of grass in his curls.

When he showed up at the gate, he gave the old security guard the fright of a lifetime.

The maids were insistent on whisking him off to the hospital or at the very least, to the bath, preferably with some antiseptic ointments. He caught a glimpse of his mud-caked reflection on a window en route to his father's office, face freckled with dried copper specks, save for the clear streaks where sweat dribbled in streams. He took his remaining shoe off and carried it along, hoping to save the maids the trouble of mopping up his grimey trail. Given the rest of him, his efforts were in vain.

Upon reaching his father's office, the guards took one unnerved look at him before opening the doors on his behalf. As he would come to expect, his father sat there behind his desk, unshocked to find him unveiled behind the red oak. Somehow, he already knew he was the first of his brothers there, even without his father saying as much. Once he's done with this, he'll go find them, hoping the worst hadn't already happened.

Before a single word was uttered, he cut to the chase. He dashed across the room with lightning quick feet, lunging over the desk. Then, he swung his arm far and wide and slugged his shoe across his father's head. It crackled through the room, cacophonous.

His singular strike made the man black out, relishing the split second of the indignant flush he caught on his father's face before the shoe made hearty contact with his face. It even left a clean dent that made him smile.

The guards almost moved to seize him but they were uncertain of proper



protocol. Instead, they stood frozen in bewilderment, as he stood over his father in hardened silence. His father would not hear him in his state but he knew the message would get to him later.

He threw aside the shoe, stared down at his father like the cool, open sky, and smiled a wry smile.

“Too slow,” he said.



Little Wise River

Written by: Shannon Wilson

A river flowing
Through her years,
So turbulent it goes.
The water rushes
'Round the turns
Swiftly, overflows.

Bearer of life,
It grows the fruits
Which it cannot possess;
Bearer of wisdom
Rarely shared, but
Pertinent, nonetheless.

Five Summers Living With Chronic Illness

Written by: Izzy Tierney

August had sparkled - the last of its kind,
Where scars had been healed in an ocean cliché,
An unknown farewell to a world without grey,
Tsunami-like downpour left pigment behind.
Even the blush on her cheeks turned to ash,
Rusting her engine, foreboding the crash.

Carousel horses now orbit her mind,
One for each colour the rain washed away,
Licked by the paint of a summer bouquet
Only to wilt as the flood turpented,
Umbrella destroyed, she broke down in the hail
Relinquished control of her body, now stale.

Knowing she once was a vibrant oil painting
A champion horse or a hopeful would-be,
Losing the future she laboured to see
Eats at her lungs till it's asphyxiating,
Ingénue drowns in lost childlike wonder,
Dreams kiss her wounds with the softness of thunder.

Overwhelming grief for yourself is stagnating.
Seasons pass mourning the aquamarine.
City lights cease to show amber or green.
Outside life moves on... it's beyond isolating.
Precarious smiles are soon well-rehearsed acts,
Envy and loneliness misconstrue facts.



On nights like tonight, I wish I could tell her
Florence, your anguish became your protection,
Hiding from fear of your own reflection
Omitted your eyes from seeing you still were
Purple and red and orange and pink,
Evergreen rainbows brighter than you think,

For pain can consume when the rain's always there,
Unwanted in presence, unfair in its violence
Like longing to sing but forced into silence,
Nevertheless, in this fresh August air,
Enchanting kaleidoscopes make up my view,
Sunshine or rain storms could not change my hue,

She succumbed to the water; I resurfaced anew.

Night Rain

Written by: Bethan Amey

He returned to me when the rains did.
When the dry sky split and poured forth refuge,

So did he
Purge me from my drought.

As the ground cooled,
My Earth, from a sea of sheets, was warm beneath me.
Lighting my skin as I lay,
Locked in rock that traced the curve of my shoulder blade
And meandered over my hip.

I revelled in the rain.
And as the smell of earth now wet lingered in the air,

So did he,
On my pillow.

Estuario

Written by: Anna Bussabarger-Graf

Edited by: Egypt Sadé

Tantas queridas me dejen en el mar.

Aún no puedo ir al hogar.

La vía romántica es catastrofista.

The gentleness of waves,
lapping around.

Submerged into the depths, muffled sound.

Emerged from a soul cleanse, revelation profound.

All the while, the tides swirl & eddy with
underlying surround gyres.

Bioluminescence in worlds unseen,
Coral, squids, things you wouldn't believe,
70% of planet Earth teeming
all the while I float and breathe.

Layers upon layers,
how deep does it go?
Waves toiling and crashing.
Emotions mix and cascade in the flow.
They follow the natural course,
in a cycle without close.

To cross an ocean grants access to new worlds.
New sounds: strange tongues, gulls, and lapping waves.
To this I'd explore with curiosity untamed.
Above, below, inside—in the water,
your heart can't hide.

Freshwater Sea

Written by: Abbey Lane

I find myself craving the abundance
innate in the myth
of a freshwater sea.

It tells me:
"Drink up, solo sailor.
Freshen up for the treasure hunt
of a lifetime."

Our anchor-lines will tangle
if we stagnate,
and who would even doggy-paddle
in that murk?
Not me -- there are spring waterfalls
and smooth pebble beaches
just round the bend --

-- See?
Follow where the sun hits the line of ships
already onto something.
Only the fear-ridden
fight the temptation.
You can never be privy
to the depths of your fate
if your disdain for the deep expanse
sours the apple-seeking
spark in your eye.

The fruits of your shore-bound labour
will not be worth the sweat



when the wind turns.
It will bitter your blood
to make vengeful nations.
Sail instead.

For when your bones begin to bend to time,
you will wish you had dipped your toes
in the sun-tipped cresting waves
at one of your stops.

Safety is where your tears do not drown you.
Do not let them flood the bay."

Silent Forest Sounds

Written by: Angel Brooke

Songs and symphonies composing
Only heard in my head

Crunching Ice on powdered Snow
Winter fairies softly blowing. . .

Silent Forest sounds
Icicles clink & chime

Jingling keys, a reindeer sneeze
Melodies still growing. . .

Stepping forward gingerly
Frozen River wide

Ice pops with a crackle
Heart beating, I glide.

Cymbals crash, breaking Branch
Sound still slightly muffled

Breathing Leaves of ivy green
Snow pants swish & shuffle.

Gentle frigid Breeze
Rosy cheeks match our coats

Brook burbles and babbles
Angel wings in the Snow

Warm juxtaposition
Light faster than sound

Red Lingonberries
Snow Flurry surrounds

Crystal shards of Ice,
never before seen,
Intricately layering the powdered Snow beneath.

Ice pings like a piano,
heart beats like a drum,
Hearing hollow Rain sticks in the Breeze when it hums.

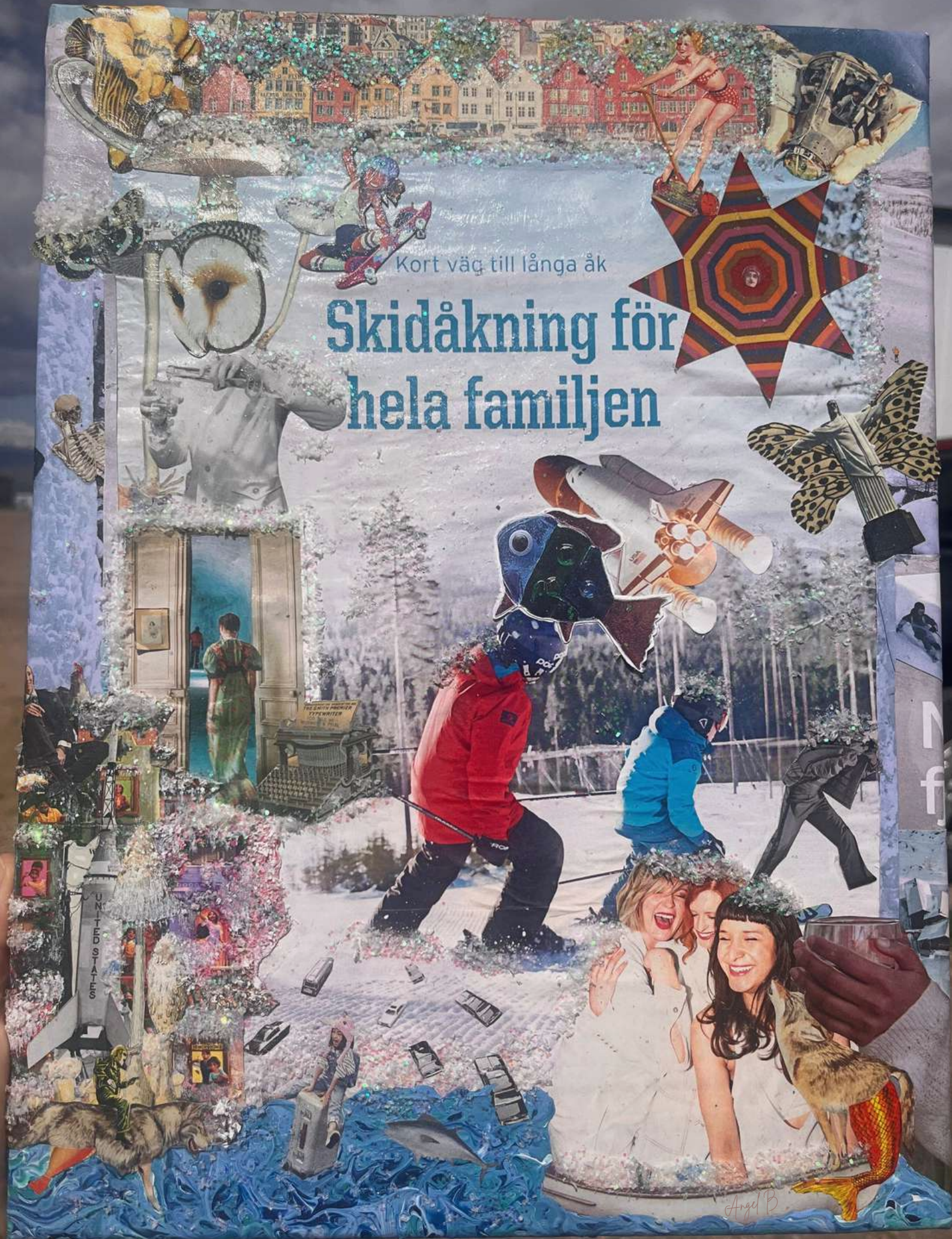
Emotions crescendo, moment profound
Eyes bigger than Mountains
Appreciation abound.

Grateful for all things
That are big,
But mostly little.

Silent Forest sounds
Shed a tear,
Wind whistles.



Angel B



El Niño

Written by: Caroline Hyde

I had grown weary of the wet season.
Prune fingers, tired legs,
I was still wringing out the mud
when your light came in.

You love the lake in a similar way
others turn to God— respecting power,
admiring her beauty.
I had given up faith long ago, but not in the power of Saginaw Bay.

I once begged her to swallow me up,
to show little mercy, but instead
I was gently returned to the shore.
Like sun-bleached driftwood, I lay on the coast, weeping.

You bring out my freckles, shoulders kissed
by the sun— by you.
Knowing better than to dive too deep,
you choose instead to worship the surface
Glimmering, refracting, adorned with foamy diamonds.

The petoskeys know my secrets and keep them
like old friends, buried
under layers of sand.

When I turn back toward the horizon, there you are,
floating— smiling at me, at the open sky
Sweet Poseidon child, I am unafraid at the shore,
whispering the waves' refrain.

Return. Return. Return.

Echoes In The Wake

Written by: Héctor “the Alchemist” Castañeda

a hollow storm boils the borders of our crossing.
immigrant marrow, bones porous as driftwood,
carry the sky-tide’s hunger, its false lullaby:
whiteness, consumption, a name reshaped
to contort into the mouth of a country,
drowning what it cannot swallow.

America: a liminal shore
a tidepool of inherited silences.
landscape both drowning and desert:
oil-slick oceans, fields bleeding into
family photos half-eaten by salt.

emerge as spectral echoes:
violence hums as arson crackles
the hiss of a silenced tongue.

dreamer terrains as shapeshifter:
one moment water, the next wound.

American Dream carnivorous lighthouse
beams a siren song of assimilation.

queer intimacy flares bioluminescent
in the depths—brief, radiant, hunted.

paradox of belonging:
taught to dissolve into a nation
that demands our erasure.



a net cast into the void to retrieve
ghosts unclaimed by trenches.

we are the muted greyness of choked silence
between waves. Father's tongue, a rusted anchor;
Mother's grief, a shoreline eroding.
I carved yourself from your frames:
a ghostly negative, a dagger of absence.

Do I have permission to approach the drowning?

My self portrait a riptide:
salt-crustured shipwreck.
in murky trenches, we mirror each other's fractures:

Grandma's self-silence, a waning tempest;
Mother's fists, monsoon-heavy.

I map my exit wounds with ink,
mosaic the gaps where my laughter pooled.
polish my suffering form—
but the water refuses to hold.

at the tide's edge, I melt into another man,
his veins a delta of amphetamine silt.
We collide like rivers claiming the same ache:

say spring despite the winter in your eyes.
say you'd murder an ocean of crows for this.
our clashing bodies, brief gulps of air
in the chokehold of greyed lineage.



his father's muffled cries through moist drywall;
my hands, scrubbing until the skin sings ash.

Queerness: two blades of colliding honey.
they sift our cinders for a language
that won't saltburn. look how joyous we are
to be emptied & still a family of
American phantoms, obeying the script
of a dream that devours its young.

I mold my mouth around your name,
letters dispersed like flotsam.
empty your mind, be saccharine,
be shapeless— but ego clings,
corporate cannibal.

I am the imprint of water:
refilling, collapsing, channeling.

here, my American dream
is a broken bruise:
a boy stitching his reflection
with threads of salt and semen.

the shore, a wound; the horizon, a lie.
in the storm's wet throat
we drift, unanchored—
ravenous, formless,
briefly beautiful, briefly breathing.

The Water Is Rising

Written by: Saarah Hendricks

Edited by: Roos van der Velden

“Maybe the beach was a bad idea today.”

I hum in agreement, listening more to the inside of the seashell than to him.

He chuckles. “What do you hear?”

“You?” I answer, lowering the shell to study the blend of hues of blue into white on the smooth inside.

“What?”

“I hear you”, I clarify, holding the shell out to him, “Please? My pockets are full.”

“No secrets of the ocean?” he teases, taking the shell and pocketing it.

“Ha-ha. It’s habit,” I shrug, “You didn’t collect them as a kid to listen to the waves at home?”

“Is that one of those superstitions or old wives tales?” he asks, perplexed.

“No? Everybody knows that - watch your step.” I point to a piece of seaweed, then slip on a stray strand myself, distracted by a sunray fighting its way through the clouds. A firm grip on my elbow steadies me.

“Everybody knows?” he echoes. “This isn’t one of those things somebody told you because you’re gullible and they knew you’d believe it, is it?” His hand slips into mine, thumb brushing against my knuckles.

“Nope, everybody believed it when we were younger.”

“Right,” he concedes, “What else did everybody believe?”

“Well, there’s the actual superstition that the ocean is a woman.”

Hearing this, he smiles. “See, now that I’ve heard.”

“Well I’d hope so, I’m pretty sure most people raised by South African women would have been taught that.”

“Do you believe it?” he asks.

“I understand that there is some significance to it in certain African cultures. I personally don’t believe it, though.” I admit. “But I appreciate the poetry of it. Nature and matriarchy.”

I bring up a hand to shield my eyes from a gust of sand. “Do you remember



me telling you about Tahlequah?”

“The orca who killed her SeaWorld trainee?” he guesses.

I shake my head. “That’s Tilikum. Tahlequah is the wild orca who carried her dead calf for 17 days.” I see that he remembers, and I add, “It would make sense that the home of creatures with such deep empathy would be personified as a woman.”

“Deeply empathetic but also deeply dangerous, they’re called killer whales for a reason. Come.” His hand moves to my waist, guiding me further from the water. “High tide.”

“If history has taught me anything, labelling something intelligent as dangerous is just another way of admitting that we can’t control it. ‘Humans are the real ecological disaster’ - or whatever it is John Green said. Oh! Did I ever tell you about the dream I had where I was at the beach during high tide? The water kept coming in, and everybody had gotten out of the water, but just as I was about to make it out, it was as though a giant wall came out of nowhere.” I stopped walking at this point to face him, raising my arms to demonstrate the height of a wall extending beyond the reach of our joined hands, “so I kept running along the wall to get to the steps, but they kept slipping further and further away.”

“Sharks in a swimming pool are a thing of the past, then?” he asks with a smile on his lips, moving to place himself between the now distant rising water and me.

“Oh no, sharks in a swimming pool will forever haunt me. I suppose it’s because the world feels bigger than that now.”

“You’re only starting to feel that now?” he says, his hand finding mine again. If it were anybody else the comment would have felt patronising. Yet, it’s him.

“Worse, I’m starting to resent it now.” I have to turn my head and shut my eyes against the next gust to avoid getting sand in my eye and scratching my contact lenses before I can continue, “It’s discomforting being confronted by the reality that the world is bigger than the grief of a mother who carried her



dead calves for days on end while life went on.”

What I don't say is that I see this in humans, too. Voices still echo in my mind all these months later, 'please don't ask me to wash the blood of my hands, how else will I sleep with my children tonight', 'she was the soul of my soul', 'Hi everyone, my name is Bisan from Gaza and I am still alive'.

I stop walking, turning to watch the crashing waves. “We seem to be most capable of empathy to what we owe no responsibility and have little to no control over.” What will we do when the sea finally calms down? I wonder, a bit annoyed

He's silent at my side, watching me.

“Anyway, the dream,” I continue, “I ended up not making it to the steps.”

He moves in front of me, blocking my view of the water. He looks... unimpressed. The irony isn't lost on me, my dream audience was unimpressed too, and not for the first time, it feels unfair.

There was only so much I could do after all. Nobody warned me to run. I wasn't fast enough to keep up with them either, and definitely not fast enough to outrun the water. My limbs were weighed down under the oppressive nature my dreams tend to have, only lightened by the attempts of the water to lift me. I look past him to the persistent sea washing ashore, a shared note with the song of my blood. It runs my veins raw. I'm haunted by how insignificant my efforts are, even represented in my own dreams.

“And then what happened, in your dream?”

“Then nothing. I kept trying to scale the wall when a wave would come in and lift me, then the scene abruptly changed, and suddenly I was at a seaside restaurant for dinner.”

“Life went on,” he repeats softly.

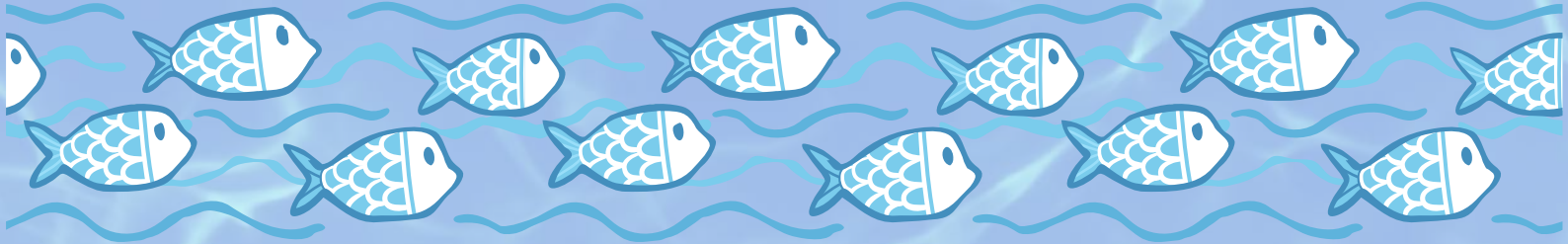
History repeats itself, we've inherited the stories and fears, but none of the lessons.

“We should get back to the car before the rain comes down.” His grip on my hand is firm, leaving no room for objection.

I find myself searching for the sunray that fought its way through the gloom



of the day. A bird passes through the light, then three, then five.
The wind is rising, we must try to live.



Afterword by Angel Brooke

Last summer, I told myself I wanted to flow more like water, be more like water, be water. This spring, I find myself doing just that — when I let myself. As great as it is to go with the flow and roll with the tide, sometimes it's better to be more like earth. Grounded, unshakeable, rock solid.

If I became water, I'd want to be a powerful and plentiful waterfall. But also have legs. Or at the very least, decide where I get to flow. Because the thing about water is it fills whichever container presents itself, and is sometimes at the whim of the wind (and gravity). But water is mighty. The poet Rumi shared: "I am not a drop in the ocean; I am the ocean in a single drop."

So yes — I *am* the ocean. But I'm also *in* the ocean, too.

I watch my pet turtles swim, how they glide in the water and take their time to explore. It'd be nice to be more like them.

People used to compare turtles to rocks — or at least confuse turtles for rocks, anyway. My turtles are tiny, but mighty in their way, in the universal cosmic web of it all. You could say their shells are as solid as rock, and their bodies soft and smooth like water. They move with the ebb and the flow, and can choose where they want to go (within reason — and turtle mom supervision).

I just moved from Chicago to Colorado, trading the lake and skyscrapers for the mountains and rivers. I loved the forest preserves in Chicago, but it's such a breath of fresh air to be towered by mountains instead of buildings.

In moving along trails and rivers, sometimes the water leads, I follow. But in "forging the path" ahead, I think I'll lead like water and be like earth. Maybe I'll be a glacier.



Author Bios



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer and student from the Netherlands, currently writing her thesis about romance novels. Previously, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk* fantasy. Recently, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit*, her first publication away from her home ground. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous issues she is still the editor-in-chief.



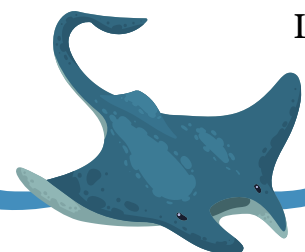
Angel Brooke
Co-editor, Author

Angel Brooke is a multi-media collage artist, spiritual copywriter & graphic designer, book editor, consulting producer, and founder of *Space Angel* magazine. *Space Angel* spotlights poets, creators, artists, writers, and their works. Find it at angelbrookewrites.com! This is Angel's third creative writing anthology, contributing in words, edits, layout, and design.



Lady Oracle
Author

Lady Oracle is a writer drawn to the quiet moments that reveal deeper truths. Her work explores themes of empathy, loss, and the intricate ways in which we navigate life's uncertainties. With a keen eye for the quiet, often overlooked moments, she writes to connect with the truths that lie just beneath the surface. She writes to make sense of the world – and occasionally to challenge it.





Author Bios



Emerald MacIsaac
Author

Emerald MacIsaac is a renowned Canadian poet whose stories and characters teem with love, in modern English, old English and everything in between. Despite being in full clown make-up, Emerald spears you with sadness. It's probably the pain she feels from bashing her head against a wall for hours doing stupidly hard challenges.



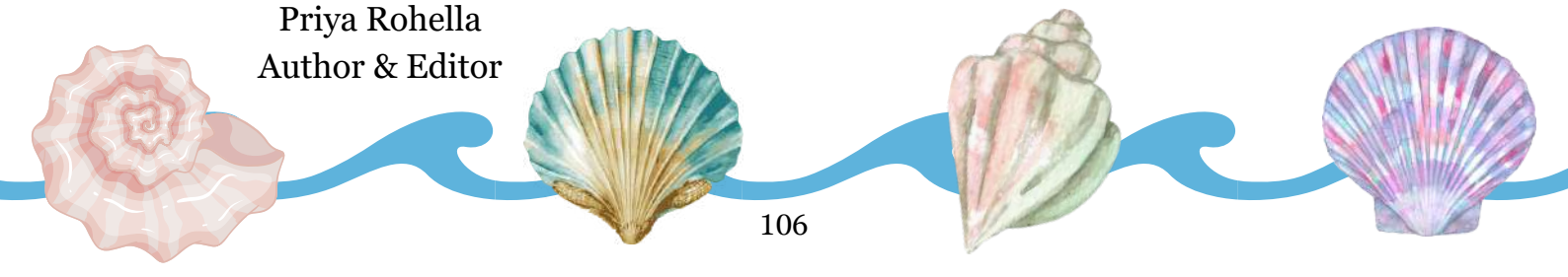
Janyne Langlois
Author

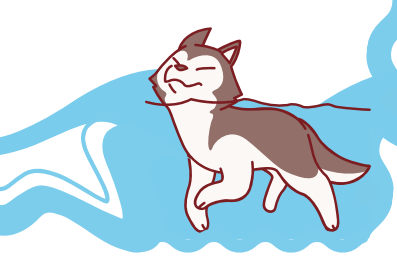
Janyne Langlois is a Florida based writer known for art, literature and having an enormous imagination that runs on overdrive. Her creativity stems from watching films like The Chronicles of Narnia, Harry Potter, and Sailor Moon. Her love of writing was fostered by her college English professor, who always encouraged her to keep going. When she isn't writing she's watching anime, listening to cinematic music, or screaming with her friends about characters they love.



Priya Rohella
Author & Editor

Priya Rohella is an author who loves writing about the Victorians, zombies, and murder-mysteries. When she is not typing away at her laptop, she is playing Nintendo or painting on canvas outdoors. Her poem 'Becoming Water' explores the duality of nature, being both deadly and beautiful, and what effects it can have on humans. Undertones of the poem include: adaptability, loss and depression.





Author Bios



Chelsey Selvarajah
Author

Chelsey Selvarajah is an aspiring author and editor from London. She loves to write sapphic, supernatural and historical stories (sometimes combining all three). This is her third time contributing to the anthology. Outside of writing, she can be found playing Hades, cross stitching and reading her comfort manga.



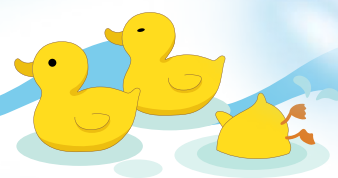
Amelia Constantine
Author

Amelia Constantine has a love for writing and literature so deep she spent extra time at university for it. That doesn't stop her feeling like an overly edgy teen when writing poetry, but as they say: art is pain - even if that pain is cringe. She loves experimental poetry using punctuation and form to add to the poem, itself as well as creating poems through experimental methods e.g cannibalising her own poems and eavesdropping.



Scott Woolard
Author

Scott Woolard has a love for dystopian escapism, flitting away from the sluggish drawl of day-to-day life, and into a universe of his imagination. He's adventurous and enjoys the challenge of diving into new perspectives, worlds, and themes. He's currently working on an ongoing anthology where he details the exploits of a twisted Indiana Jones in space - because who doesn't want that?





Author Bios



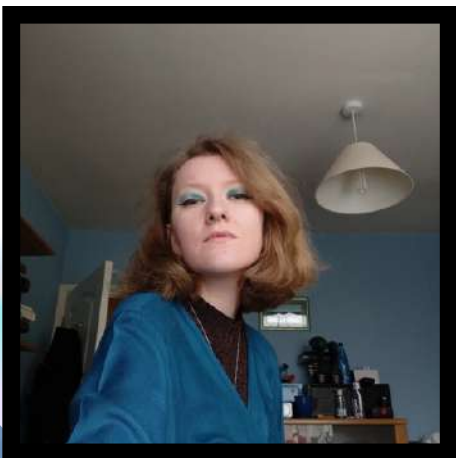
Salis Fern
Author

Salis Fern is a multi-faceted creative that explores, in chaotic depths, the peculiar realms of the mind. They enjoy writing poetry and fiction in the gothic horror genre to express the darker elements of the psyche and of identity. Influenced by their research in psychology, they enjoy exploring the absurdity of humanity. They hide all its liminal crevices in literature to share nuanced human experiences about the unsettling, authentic, self.



Grace Isobelle
Author

Grace Isobelle is a third-year Creative Writing student from Sheffield currently working on her first fantasy novel and poetry anthology, alongside being a content creator and freelance editor. Her website is: graceisobelle.com and her Instagram is @graceeisobelle where she posts often about her work and her travels around the globe.



Alice Atherton
Author

Alice Atherton is a creative writer and poet. 'Stars in Her Eyes' is her debut poem. It is about the haunting beauty behind 'Sweet Girl', the female humpback whale who met a tragic end. Alice writes in her own wonderland. Her imagination knows no bonds.



Author Bios



Natalie Hyde-White
Author

Natalie Hyde - White moved from a sleepy seaside town to university, a hundred miles away. Two months later there was a devastating fire. She lost everything. Everything but her handwritten stories. It was a sign. It had to be. A Universal nudge to follow that path, that passion. Poetry has helped her process, express and soar. A talent to be honed, a writer to the bone.



Robin Cosmia
Author

Robin Cosmia (He/They) is a 27 year old writer, artist, and insatiable learner. Through open-hearted exploration they are driven to create works that honor complexity and amplify hope. In “Cycles”, Robin navigates a journey through death, rebirth, and belonging within the wider web of the natural world. These poems explore the push and pull of our collective tides of trauma and healing. In honoring our communal ties, we remember that we are water, inseparable.



Ayomide Ajani
Author, cover artist

Ayomide Ajani is a creative daydreamer and multipotentialite who finds inspiration in the unexpected. She enjoys creative writing, chocolate, and the colour pink.





Author Bios



Sunny Thorne
Author

Madison “Sunny” Thorne is an Australian-born creative who has spent the last year and a half traveling around the world. When she’s not working, skiing, scuba-diving, or dancing with fire, she spends her time writing, painting, and reading. Her work ‘Over Sky & Sea’ depicts the pains and pleasures of having pieces of her heart scattered around the globe, an ode to the people she loves who are worth missing so much.



Scarlet Quilloy
Author

When Scarlet Quilloy isn’t struggling with a chronic case of Writer’s Block, she can be found in an unwitting reenactment of the Office, commonly known as a job. Otherwise, you can find her on her Wordpress, Better Out Than In, dedicated to anything horror and Batman, or at your local bookstore. ‘Drowning on Dry Land’ explores the competition inherent in father-son dynamics while asking the question, what if they were both unhinged?



Shannon Wilson
Author

Shannon Wilson is a professional trivia host and creative mind. She can often be found playing games, making art, working on her small business, or taking her dog Bailey on an adventure.





Author Bios



Izzy Tierney
Author

Izzy Tierney is a queer, disabled writer from England. She loves theatre and is a proud show reviewer for "All That Dazzles". When she's not procrastinating or maladaptive daydreaming, she can be found obsessing over her latest hyperfixation or tucked up in bed writing stories, poetry and song lyrics - the latter being her passion since she could hold her own head up. Sometimes, she attempts to sing said lyrics, which she is occasionally successful at.



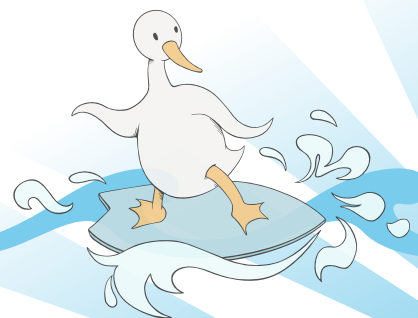
Bethan Amey
Author

Bethan Amey is a thinker of thoughts, writer of words and slayer of bathroom-dwelling Silverfish. Though these things do take up a significant amount of time, she also works in TV and is turning her passion for storytelling into a career day by day. With various accolades under her belt (winner of the Silverfish Gauntlet) she's excited to see where the world of words can take her. Oh, and her flat has a Silverfish problem.



Anna Bussabarger-Graf
Author

Anna Bussabarger-Graf is all about that flow. Yes, she does love water. She's also a water sign (Pisces to be exact). In her spare time, you can catch her reading, writing, and cooking. She is a marketer by trade, yet a writer by heart. The next item on her water bucket list? White water rafting.





Author Bios



Abbey Lane
Author

As a social sciences grad, Abbey Lane writes with a critical eye and hopeful tongue. She puts her complains about the world into essays, her passion into poetry and songwriting. Though originally from Asheville, North Carolina, these days you can usually find her jotting down thoughts in her phone while meandering around Glasgow, Scotland.



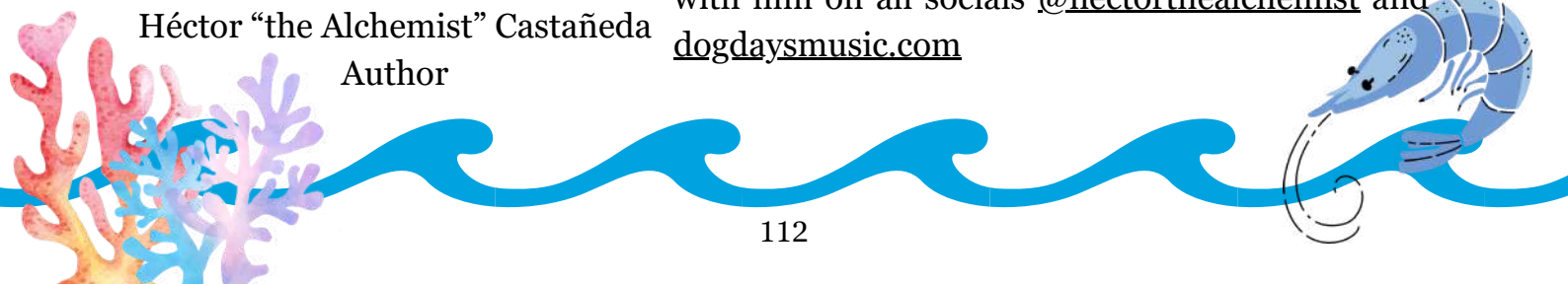
Caroline Hyde
Author

Caroline Hyde is a ghostwriter and creative writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan. While she constantly strives to become a multi-hyphenate author with published works ranging from full novels to prose poems and everything in between, her strengths lie in evoking vivid imagery of the world and nature around her. She has been published in multiple literary magazines, and two of her short plays have seen the stage in Chicago.



Héctor “the Alchemist” Castañeda
Author

Héctor ‘The Alchemist’ F. Castañeda is a Mercury News published writer, 10x HRDRV (“hard drive”) award-nominated singer-songwriter, music producer & graphic artist. As an intuitive Creative Clarity Coach, he guides queer neurodivergent artists of color to awaken their creative vision. He is based in Ohlone territory (California, U.S.) with his loving immigrant family. In his art, he tries rerooting his Temoaya Hñahñu, Otomí, and Mayan lineage. Connect with him on all socials [@hectorthealchemist](https://www.instagram.com/hectorthealchemist) and [dogdaysmusic.com](https://www.dogdaysmusic.com)

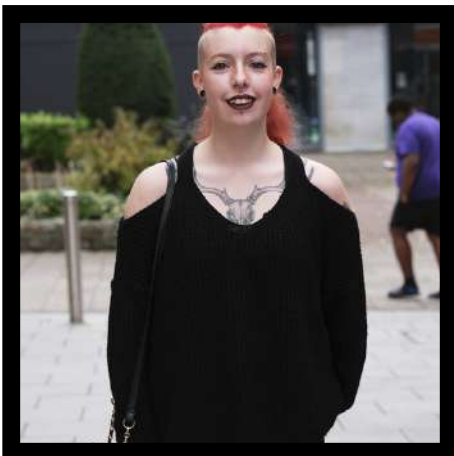


Author Bios



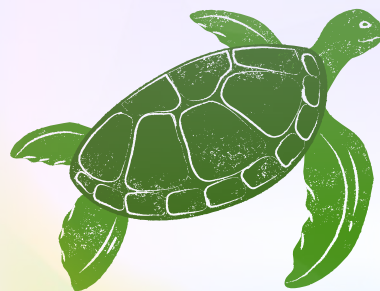
Beth Norris
Editor

Beth Norris is a 23 year old English Literature and Creative Writing graduate from the UK. Since finishing her studies, she has been exploring writing opportunities such as the Word Tonic copywriting course, launching her Bookstagram and Blog The Norris Narrative, and of course working on the WordTonic anthologies. She loves being a member of Word Tonic and hopes to work in publishing someday!



Ozzy Langford
Editor

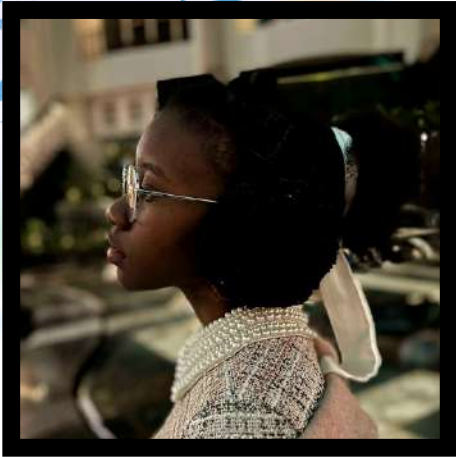
Ozzy Langford is a copywriter from the Black Country, England, who focuses on literature, film, and art. After getting a start managing their own poetry career, they want to break into writing engaging copy for other artists and projects.



Niamh Canning
Editor

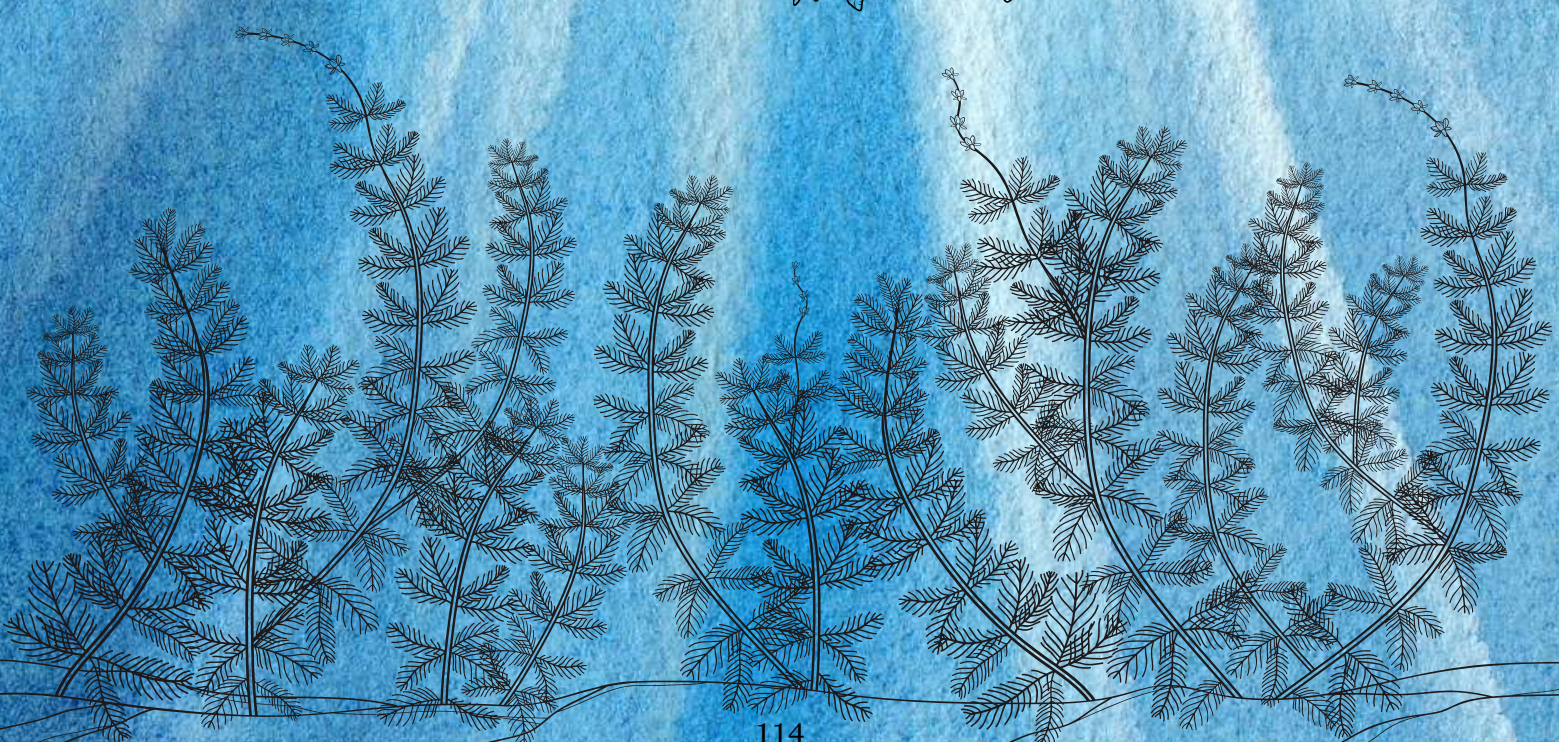
Niamh Canning is 26 years old and works in events. This is now Niamh's seventh edition of working as an editor on the anthology, and she has greatly enjoyed working on this edition.

Author Bios



Egypt Sadé
Editor

Egypt Sadé (aka MisSpoken) is a Bronx-born dreamer who loves to express herself through writing. As someone who is always open to new experiences, she has always explored her creative side along with her analytical one over the years. Egypt started writing consistently at thirteen and has honed her skills in poetry and story writing throughout the years. She has most recently been published in *The Abdu Review* and *The Aldrich Anthology*.



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