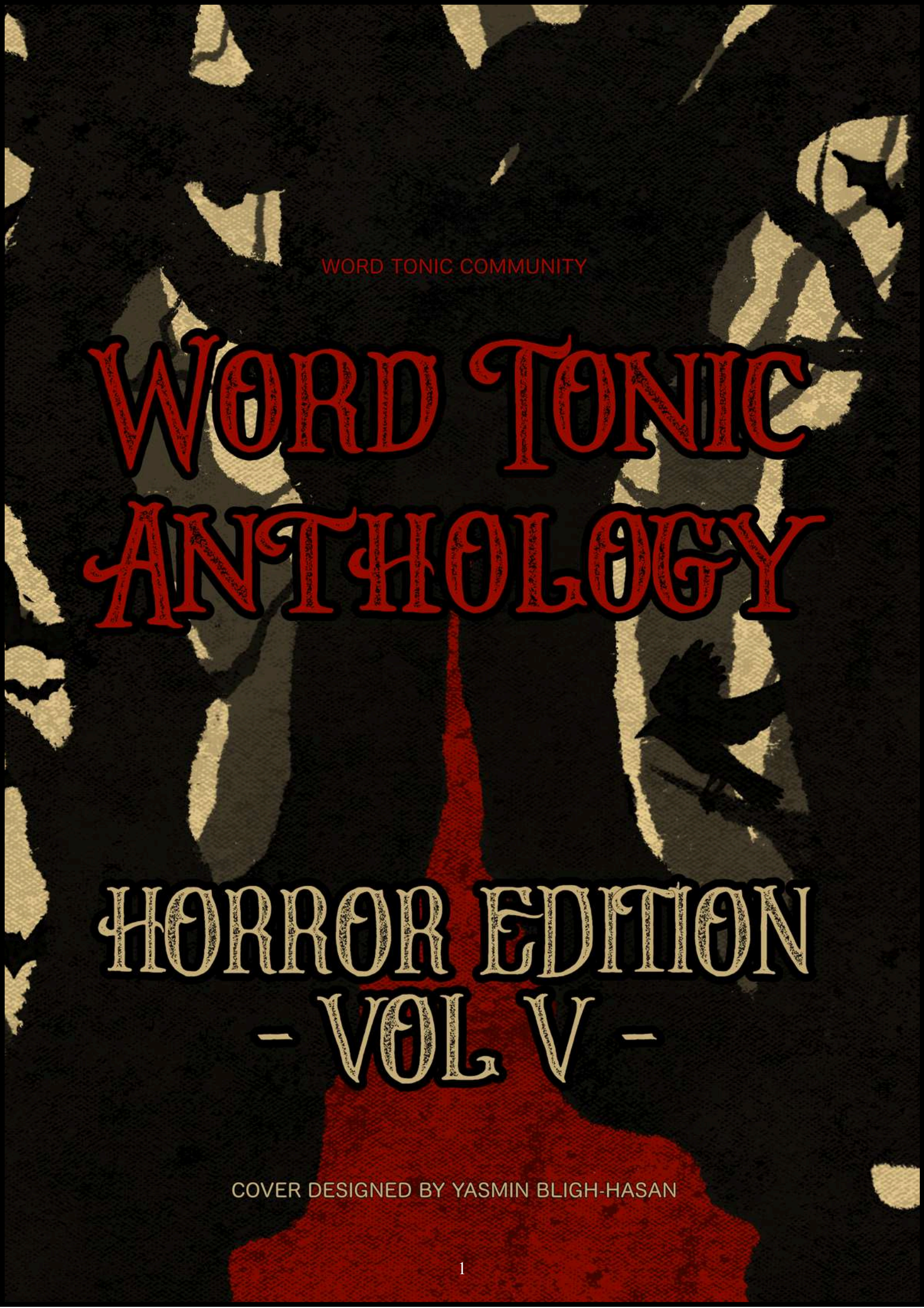




WORD TONIC COMMUNITY

WORD TONIC ANTHOLOGY

HORROR EDITION - VOL V -

COVER DESIGNED BY YASMIN Blich-HASAN

Word Tonic

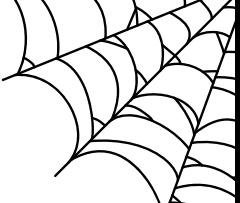
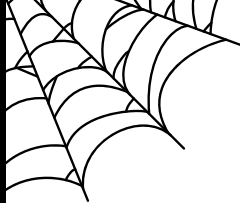
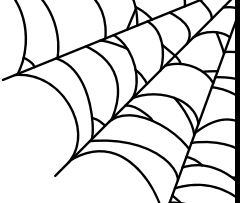
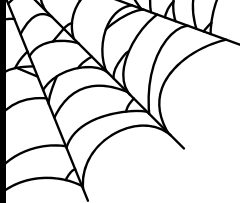


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Preface by Roos van der Velden

There I was, pacing around my friends' dorm room in Cologne, on the phone with WordTonic founder Carolyn. The carpet was soft, but I couldn't help but notice that maybe my friend wasn't as good at cleaning carpets as he said he was.

The phone call was about the very anthology you currently hold in your hands. As you may have noticed, it came out on October 31st exactly. What else then a Halloween release date would be the perfect excuse for an anthology filled with horror stories?

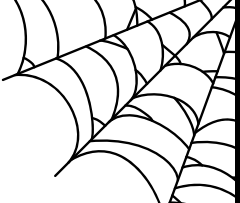
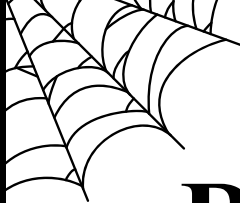
Yet, we usually have some rules in place for the WordTonic anthology, like no gore and no extreme violence. But well, without gore and violence allowed, how can you make a proper horror book? As such my call with Carolyn on the slightly filthy carpet I had decided to sit down on anyway.

And well. Luckily, Carolyn, little horror fan that she is, agreed with me that for this one edition, the guidelines would have to be more lenient.

This may sound weird, but at that point, the carpet stopped bothering me. It was a little musty, that's true (sorry Daan), but what are horror stories if not a peek into the dark, filthy, bloody, taboo, and, of course, terrifying look into the human experience? If you can't take a little dirt, who are you to meddle in horror?

(That being said, Daan, take off your damn boots next time you walk on your carpet or I am not coming over to play Mario Kart again).

Strap yourself in for exactly that. For a little body horror, for shrieks and some thriller, for psychological horror, organs, dirt, taboo and blood, for slasher and for deep metaphor. Don't say I didn't warn ya... and enjoy!



Preface by Niamh Canning

This is Halloween, this is Halloween! HalloWEEN! HALLOWEEN!

It's my absolute honour to welcome you to Word Tonic's Halloween horror edition, an anthology born from a shared love of goriness, spookiness and the downright weird ... ness (it had to be done).

When Roos approached me with the opportunity to write this preface, I couldn't resist. Halloween, after all, is the most wonderful time of the year. I have always loved how it has made people feel like they can be their most authentic self. It also allows us to explore our deepest, darkest fears as the lines between the real world and the supernatural become blurred.

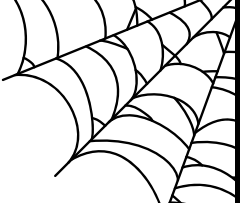
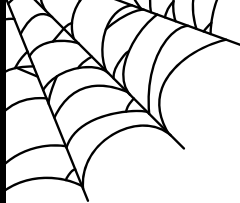
In the pages that follow, you'll find tales that haunt the mind and images that linger long after you've stopped reading. When you're tucked up in bed tonight, it might just have you questioning if you need to check for monsters.

So, reader, prepare yourself. And, if you do have nightmares, don't say we didn't warn you 😊.

Read at your own risk and enjoy, if you dare.

Happy Halloween! Stay weird and stay spooky 🕷️

Niamh



Little Beast

Written by: Lauren Storey

Edited by: Benjamin Smith

The city is a cesspool, rotting everything that dares exist within its boundary. It's a breeding ground for filth and ruin. No matter how steady your pulse, the only way to exist there is in a state of decay. For a long time, it was all I knew. I was so used to the fog and grime that clouded my vision I didn't realise I was being blinded.

Creatures like me don't belong in the city. We need open space and stars visible against the black sky, no blinding streetlights to block them from view. We need clean air, tall grass to hide in and plenty of places to lounge under the midday sun. Most importantly, we need a better hunting ground than the city's paved roads can provide.

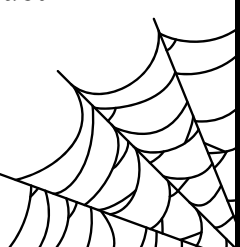
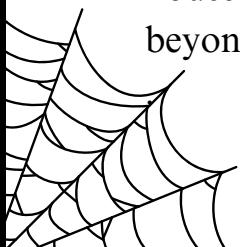
Human fared better than I did, but even he couldn't stand to let his roots take hold in such a bleak home. A couple of years ago, he packed our stuff and moved us out into the countryside. It's a sensory feast in comparison; a spread of lush aromas, starry skies, and meat so fresh I feel its pulse before I take a bite.

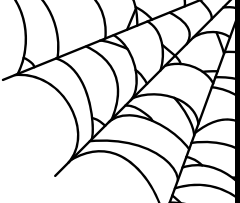
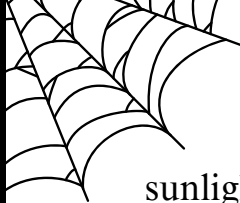
It took me a while to orient myself in the countryside, but once I'd found my way around, I rarely stayed indoors. I'd go on long walks and sleep out under the open sky, living off the land in a way I'd never imagined possible. I learned I could survive without Human, and more than that, I could live a glorious life as a wild thing. But, still, I went home to him at the end of every adventure. I couldn't stomach the thought of leaving him behind for good.

If I was ever gone overnight, he'd be waiting for me when I got back with a smile that reached his eyes and deepened the dimples in his cheeks. He'd scoop me into his arms and say, "Welcome back, Cat, my little beast. What mischief did you cause this time?" I'd push my face into his chest as if I was trying to burrow my way inside. It was nice to have the freedom to do as I pleased, and it was all the sweeter knowing that Human was waiting for me at home.

At least, he was. Until yesterday.

I'd been out hunting for two days, and as I strolled down the stone path to the house I was excited to see the door wide open, a dark silhouette hovering just beyond its frame. I picked up my pace, expecting Human to step into the





sunlight at any moment, but as I drew closer, the silhouette fractured into smaller lumps and forms. There was nobody there. What I thought was a welcome home was actually shadows from broken furniture and bits of plaster scattered across the hallway, light reflecting off shards of glass on the welcome mat, and a door that wasn't just open but hanging off of its hinges.

Human. That was my first thought, my only thought. I raced the rest of the way to the house and rushed inside, not thinking about the possibility of someone lurking in dark corners. Whatever monster came to tear down this home didn't hang around to watch it fall, but I would have dived right into their miserable jaws if it meant helping Human. Destruction and a spoiled scent paved a path to where I knew he would be waiting. I followed his silent call to the living room.

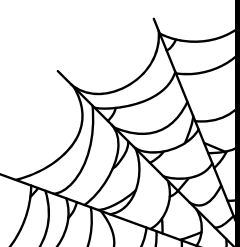
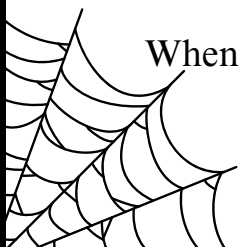
There was more glass in here, spread across parts of the floor like a second carpet, fallen from the broken windows and the shattered coffee table. It lined the way to the figure sprawled out on the settee, his head resting on a pillow. He looked like he'd dozed off. I was sure I could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest, the subtle movements of his lips with each exhale. For a moment, I let myself believe that he'd slept peacefully through disaster, that he'd hidden in his dreams and somehow escaped the chaos. Then I moved closer.

Human stared at the ceiling, his eyes glassy and unblinking, hand dangling off the edge of the sofa. His mouth hung open, agony etched onto his features, a perpetual scream caught beneath the slice in his throat. Underneath him was a blanket of dried blood, turning the cream cushions a dark shade of red.

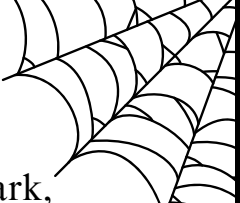
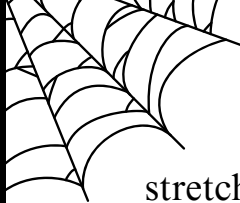
I made my way over to him, barely noticing the sharp stabs from shards of glass too small to see. When I was close enough, I rubbed my face against his dangling palm, closing my eyes so I could imagine his fingers were gently stroking my cheek. But his ice-cold touch was hard to ignore.

Human was dead, and what I'd discovered was just the flesh he'd left behind. I did the only thing I could think to do. I curled up on his lifeless body and rested my head on his cool chest, the ghost of his heartbeat pulsing against my cheek. I tried to think of all the other times I'd lay like this, buried in the warmth of his torso. Somehow, at some point, I fell asleep.

*



When I woke up it was dark outside, and Human was still dead. I got up,



stretched my back, and faced the sofa. Parts of his body were lost in the dark, but the light from the moon and distant street lamps illuminated Human from the chest up, casting a soft glow onto his frozen features. I thought back to the last time I'd seen him alive.

He'd been so happy, so full of energy. It was hard to reconcile that with the limp form before me. Human was a force of nature, someone who was as tough as he was kind. He loved telling stories, and even though I didn't understand everything he said, I would hang onto every word. Human had a weird sense of humour. He thought humans shouldn't name cats, so he called cats 'Cat'. He called me 'Cat' and to him, this was hilarious. I responded to the name, but I much preferred when he called me 'little beast'.

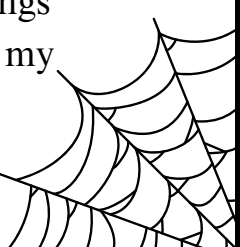
As I watched him, I remembered all the times we'd curl up on that very sofa, his stomach a soft cushion that moved my body to the rhythm of his breaths. I'd watch the colours move across the TV screen and pretend to be interested in whatever it was Human wanted to put on; what we watched didn't matter as long as he kept brushing his hand across my spine, the movements practised, habitual.

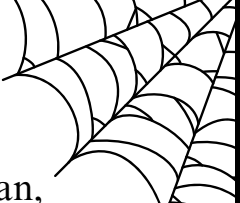
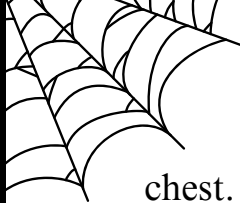
Staring at his stiff frame, the way those fingers that once reached for me, even in the dark, drooped to the floor, made my mouth dry and my heart hurt. A pang hits my chest, sends waves of something I can't identify and don't understand rushing through me. I knew I was running out of time.

Soon someone would discover us, and they would take the Human away. I'd never see him again. He'd be gone forever, and I'd have to keep existing as long as I could without him. Something in me, something only a little quieter than the grief punctuating my thoughts, knew what had to happen in our final hours together.

Feelings bubbled up inside me; sorrow, anger, defeat, love, it all churned away until it morphed into something much easier to manage, to satiate. Hunger.

My steps were quiet as I moved back towards Human as if I was trying not to wake him. I rubbed my face against his ice-cold palm, trying to memorise the feel of every line and groove decorating his flesh. I pushed my face into his hand, finding his scent in the stale odour that had begun wafting from him. I inhaled his aroma and held it in my lungs for as long as I could, hoping that with it I'd take in the air that carried his last breath. I exhaled against Human's hand. The heat warmed his chilled flesh, and I felt the loss of him in my lungs like a punch to the gut. It would never be enough to hold him so briefly in my





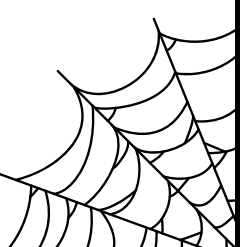
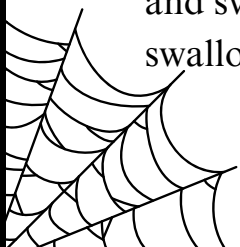
chest. I needed my senses to be engulfed with the essence of him, my Human, this man who had gone above and beyond for a creature who couldn't love him the same way he loved them.

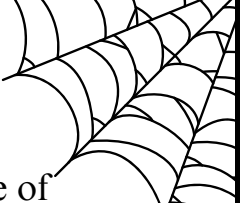
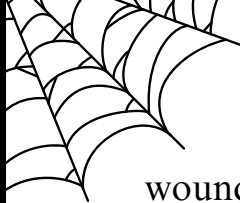
I licked his finger, and my mouth burned with the flavour of him. I moved my tongue along his hand, keeping a steady pace and savouring the taste of dried sweat that coated his palm, a salt that sizzled on my tastebuds, until I reached his index finger. I gave it a gentle nip, trying to get the flavour of his flesh under my teeth. When that didn't feel like enough I started lightly nibbling on the side of his finger. My bites got stronger as I kept going, my teeth sinking further and further in each time until I tasted metal in my mouth. I made my way down to the tip of his finger, licking up the blood as I went. Then, before I could think too much about what I was doing, I bit off the tip of his index finger.

It didn't come off right away. I had to gnaw at the digit for a moment, and as my teeth pulled at his flesh something in me screamed to stop. This wasn't a street rat or some other creature with prey's blood flowing through their veins. I'd never hesitated to rip out the throat of anything that could satisfy my appetite, but this was different. He wasn't my meal, he was my human. When the top of his finger fell to the carpet, I wasn't sure if I could keep going. What I was doing was wrong, but before I'd even put the detached flesh in my mouth I knew it would feel so right.

I chewed on his finger, and the taste was better than I could have imagined, better than anything I'd had before. He was divine. It didn't take long for the taste of him on my tongue to drown out any guilt I felt about what I was doing. The moon was high in the sky. If I could I would have stretched that moment across an eternity, but my time was limited. Even if not that night, someone would come the next day. Whether it was a neighbour who finally noticed the broken door or a visiting friend, it wouldn't be just Human and I for long. I dove in.

My body acted on depraved instinct, the hunter in me making slow but purposeful movements. I climbed back onto Human's chest and began to claw at his shirt until I tore a hole in the fabric, then I did the same to his skin. Once I'd made a big enough wound, I gnawed at the broken flesh, peeling it back with my teeth to release the pools of blood under the surface. I pulled back layer after layer to reveal the muscle and sinews concealed inside him, chewing and swallowing as I went, stuck between wanting to relish every bite and swallowing his flesh whole. I didn't stop until I could bury my face in the





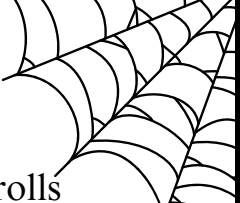
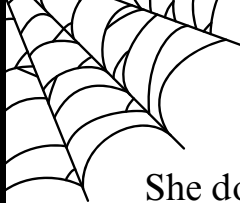
wound, push my mouth into his ribcage and run my tongue over the inside of his chest. I cried my heart out and worked through the tears, deepening the cavity in his torso until I reached the spot where his now still pulse once danced. I ate until I felt sick, and then I kept going. I couldn't stop, wouldn't stop until there was nothing left but bones or I was pried away from his remains. Something in me had been unleashed when Human moved us to the countryside. I'd always been a hunter, a predator stalking the city and plucking my meals from its dark alleys. Even if I'd never found enough to satisfy my hunger, the pursuit of prey was familiar to me. In the countryside, I became exactly what I was always meant to be, what Human knew I was: a *little beast*. The city made me a survivor. The countryside made me a savage. As I tried to devour as much of Human as I could, the little beast was unleashed in its full glory. I bloated with the fragments of him making their way through my body, but I couldn't stop eating. I needed this like I needed to breathe. I was closer to Human than I'd ever been. In those consuming hours, it was just us, together in a way that never felt possible when he was alive. Human is mine, and I am his, and as I gorged I knew I was bringing us together in a way that not even death could disturb. It wasn't just instinct. It was *need*. I surrendered myself to the craving until I passed out.

*

"What the fuck? Hugh?" The sound of Debby's voice brings me to. Debby, Human's sister, is a leech who visits too often and carries the stench of decay with her from the city every time. I don't move as she makes her way to the living room.

"Hugh!" Debby sees her brother and drops to her knees before him, glass crunching beneath her. She grabs Hugh's hand and holds the ruined flesh to her mouth, letting the tears fall onto his icy skin. She sees me, it would be difficult not to, but she doesn't look at me while she cries. It's only when I start snuggling into the Human that I draw her attention.

"Get off of my brother, you sick freak!" When I don't respond, Debby's eyes flash with rage. "Now!" she screams, and I drop my gaze, avoiding eye contact with the now trembling woman. "Look at what you've done to him! Hugh's... you're twisted. Get the fuck away from him." I stay quiet.



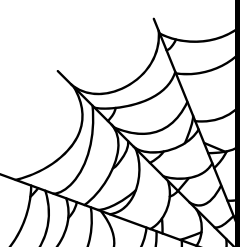
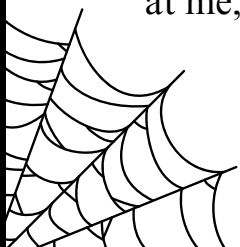
She doesn't try to tell me again. Before I can react, she grabs my side and rolls me away from Human's body, pulling me onto the floor. I try to resist, to hold firm on his torso, but Debby's tapped into a strength I never thought her capable of. Anger and adrenaline are powerful experiences; she looks ready to tear my head off. I land on the blanket of glass by the sofa with a thud, and bite my tongue to stop the cry of pain that threatens to erupt from my throat. Shards of glass dig into my arm. I wait for Debby to lunge at me again, but she turns her focus back to Human.

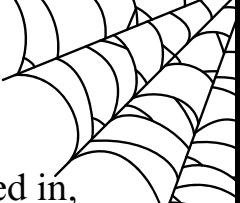
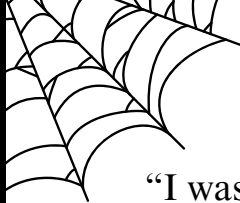
"I can't... why? *How?* This is..." she shakes her head. "Fuck. *Fuck.* You're a god-damn monster." I try to crawl away as she pulls out her phone and starts dialling, hoping to get out before the police arrive. Debby sees me making my escape and presses her foot into my back. "Are you serious? Catherine, you better not be trying to leave because I swear to God if you don't stay in this room until the police get here I'll kick your head in." Her voice is so steady that it terrifies me into submission. I go limp, waiting for her to finally recite my address to the police and put her phone away before I move again. I turn my head so I can see her out of the corner of my eye.

"I didn't kill him. I swear, Human was dead when I found him." I'd never called Hugh 'Human' in front of anyone else before, but it slipped out before I could stop myself. It's a private nickname. I am his little beast and he is my human. Was my human. Debby doesn't seem to notice the slip.

"Who killed him then? Huh? You're *covered* in his blood." She lifted her foot from my back. "Look at him. LOOK at him." I get up, slowly, my body sore from the pieces of glass poking out of my arm. Debby shoves me onto an armchair before I'm fully standing. I look over to the sofa. Human's empty sockets make the scream preserved on his features look less haunting. If the eyes are the window to the soul, then I'm glad that his are stored safely in my jacket pocket. "What did you do to him?"

I can't tell her. It's too intimate, something that only Human and I would ever share. I've known Hugh since I was 17, and we've been together since we were 20. Last night I got to feel closer to him than anybody else would ever be. That memory was ours, mine and his alone to take to our graves. Blood leaks from the corners of Human's unsealed lips. I remember how it felt to clamp my teeth around the muscle in his mouth as I bite down on my own tongue. Debby glares at me, silently demanding that I respond.





“I was gone for a couple of days. I came back and the door had been kicked in, and Hugh was dead. I don’t know what happened, I wasn’t here. I wasn’t with him when he died. I got home and he was dead. He was DEAD.” I don’t know why I start screaming, but the effort makes the contents of my stomach churn. I breathe through the nausea. I can’t lose him again, not yet.

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t think. I just...”

“Just what? Just thought you’d cuddle up with his dead body instead? What’s wrong with you?” Debby should be angrier than I’ve ever seen her, but she’s strangely composed. Disgusted, sure, but the fury I thought was ready to be unleashed is becoming something more sinister. I can’t escape before the police arrive if Debby isn’t too scrambled and broken to fight. She looks at me, properly, and takes me in. I see the exact moment she realises what I’ve done. Her face wrinkles, lips shut tight as if fighting to swallow something rancid.

“You didn’t... fuck, did you eat him?” I stay silent. She takes a deep breath.

“It’s okay, you can tell me. We can fix this.” She’s still too calm, as if she’s truly undisturbed by her brother’s remains smeared around my face, and his corpse resting beside us.

She takes a step towards me and I stand up. “Do you want to fix this?” Another step. “Let’s talk about it.” She keeps moving, slowly, towards the armchair. I’m so busy trying to figure out her plan that I don’t notice she’s picked up the statue from the side table until it comes crashing over my head.

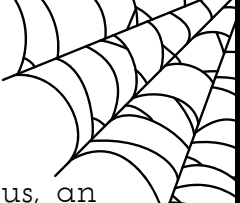
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Flesh Ripper Finally Charged!

Ambleside’s notorious serial killer, the Flesh Ripper, is finally going to see their day in court.

Hold on to your hats, this one is a wild ride.

By now you’ve probably heard of the tragedy of Hugh Woodward, the teacher who was eaten (yes, EATEN), by his wife. Catherine Woodward was discovered gorging on the corpse of her husband by Mrs Debby Hayes, Hugh’s sister and an iconic criminal psychologist/podcaster.



Debby kept Catherine contained in the house by knocking her unconscious, an act which (thankfully) she won't be charged for. Side note: as if I wasn't a big enough Debby Hayes fan already! Knocking out a monster like Catherine, what a bad bitch move).

Us true-crime fanatics were stunned when the story first broke. All the details that have come to light since have been horrifying, and even those of us with strong stomachs couldn't help but feel a little queasy.

What Do We Know So Far?

Catherine wasn't exactly a tough nut to crack. Apparently she spilled all before the police even began questioning her, revealing that she was the Flesh Ripper. She offered plenty of evidence to prove it, too, some of which pointed to her having "hunted" in London before getting a taste of Ambleside. It should have been an open-and-shut case, and it mostly was, except for Catherine insisting she didn't murder her husband.

I didn't believe that crap. Most of Ambleside didn't believe it. When the news broke that she'd be charged for the 16 lives she'd claimed, but not Hugh's murder, there were cries of justice for Hugh in all the local papers.

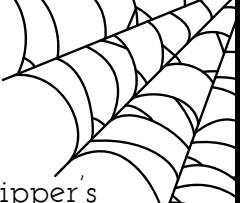
Why did the police believe a cannibal serial killer who was found snacking on the deceased?

Simple; Catherine was telling the truth. (I know, shocking). No matter how hard they tried, the police couldn't find any evidence that Catherine killed Hugh. Apparently, she just stumbled upon his corpse and tucked in. The other 16 people she'd eaten parts of, though, weren't so lucky.

Nobody knows what really happened to Hugh, but the police have started a separate investigation into his death. Fingers crossed we'll get more details soon!

Now, before you go feeling too sorry for Hugh, there's one last revelation that shines a whole new light on the Woodward marriage. It turns out that dear Hugh, the Flesh Ripper's last meal, left the world a final message.

He'd recorded a 2-minute video confirming that he not only knew about who Catherine was, but he actively helped her to kidnap victims before



they moved to Ambleside. In the video, he also reveals that the Flesh Ripper's final act, where she desecrated his body and devoured his flesh, was completely consensual.

That's right readers, not only did Hugh agree to be eaten if he died before his wife, but he practically begged whoever was watching to make sure Catherine consumed him.

This whole saga has been a grim rollercoaster. With the court case coming up, I'm sure things are only about to get darker.

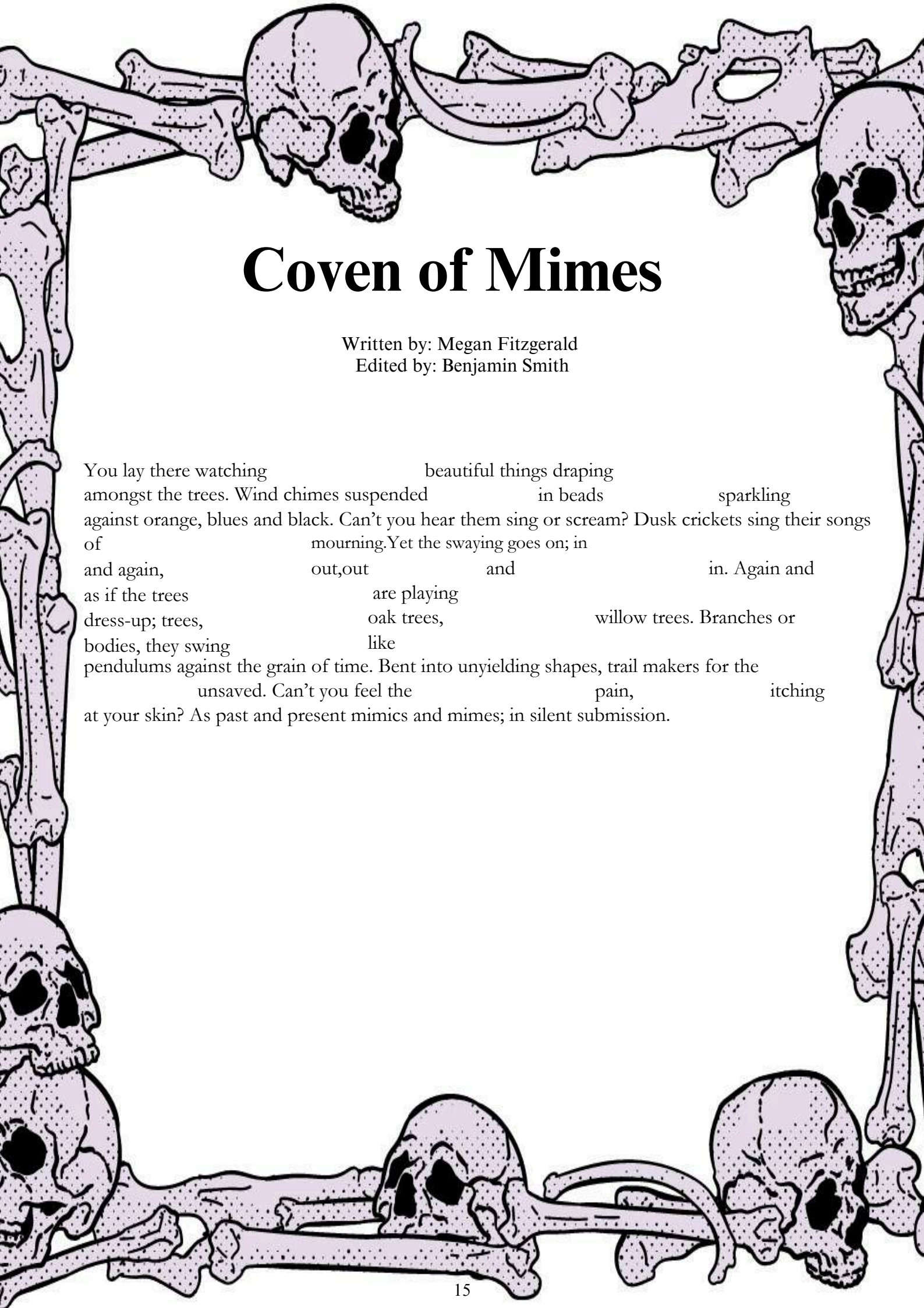
What Happens Next?

Catherine will end up in prison, obviously. She'll sit before a jury and get her trial, but nobody in their right mind would let her go free. It's this humble true-crime blogger's opinion (and hope) that she'll spend the rest of her life rotting in a cell.

There's still so much that we don't know about Catherine and Hugh Woodward. Like what made Catherine turn to murder and cannibalism? How did she get away with it for so long? Why was her husband so accepting and supportive of her sinister behaviour? And who murdered Hugh?

That last one is going to keep me up at night.

I'll be keeping a close eye on this case as it continues to unravel. Subscribe to Murder with Madeline to stay up-to-date with all the sordid details of the Woodward case.

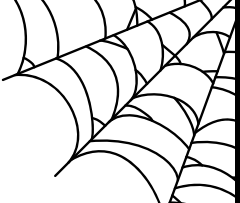
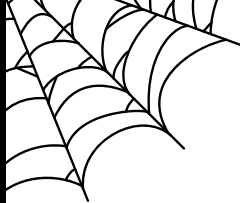


Coven of Mimes

Written by: Megan Fitzgerald

Edited by: Benjamin Smith

You lay there watching beautiful things draping
amongst the trees. Wind chimes suspended in beads sparkling
against orange, blues and black. Can't you hear them sing or scream? Dusk crickets sing their songs
of mourning. Yet the swaying goes on; in
and again, out, out and in. Again and
as if the trees are playing
dress-up; trees, oak trees, willow trees. Branches or
bodies, they swing like
pendulums against the grain of time. Bent into unyielding shapes, trail makers for the
unsaved. Can't you feel the pain, itching
at your skin? As past and present mimics and mimes; in silent submission.



The Sunrise Pro

Written by: Jade Easthope
Edited by: Fin van Oudewaeter

We grab lunch. We usually do on a Sunday, however, she decided to go vegan all of a sudden thanks to her friends on Facebook telling her she'll lose weight quicker that way. She has lost weight, nearly 4.7 pounds, and I can see it's gone from her arms and thighs. I push my bowl of chips to her side of the table, but she pushes them back, shaking her head. The café is on the sea-front, which means the air smells like salt. That's the thing that's in my mind in the car on the way back, and when we're sitting on the sofa, and when she's cooking in the kitchen. I frown and look at the calendar on the wall; I didn't realise it was Sunday until now, when the smell of steak wafts through the kitchen. I grimace. She always does them well-done, not rare like I want her to. But I love her regardless.

I stand up, walk to the kitchen and wrap my hands around her muscular arms. It's one of the main reasons I married her, her meaty arms, and built legs. Her solid flank muscle, soft but still firm stomach. She leans back, smelling of oil and pepper corns. I bury my head in her neck and inhale the scent.

"What's come over you?"

"I just love you is all." I say, laughing when she whips me with her tea towel.

"What do you want?"

"Am I not allowed to kiss my lovely wife?" She rolls her eyes and kisses me quickly on the mouth, before shoving me away.

"If you want to be useful, take the bin out." I pull away from her, giving her a once over, before my eye catches on the knife.

"Have you sharpened that?"

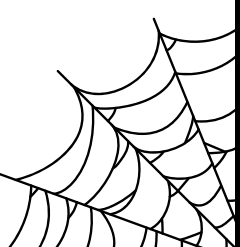
"Huh?"

"The knife." I point to it, then I go to the knife drawer and give her the Chef's Choice 2. Not my best knife sharpener, but still a good contender for second place. The Sunrise is in my bedside table.

"Oh thanks." She starts sharpening the knife for me whilst I take the bag out of the bin and carry it outside.

"Hey Jim!" Great. Greg from next door has his filthy, scrawny forearms on the fence. Our fence might I add.

"Hi Greg."





“Having a BBQ this week?” So, he saw me cleaning it yesterday. Of course he did.

“Maybe. Tomorrow.”

“Mind if we join?”

“Sure.” He gives that friendly smile that makes my blood boil, and makes me stick my hand in my pocket. The metal there calms me down.

“Ok cheers. I’ll see you around!” He wanders down the garden and I catch a glimpse of his bony neck and shoulders, flat buttocks. Not worth it.

I put the bag in the outside bin, and go back inside. She’s seared the steak to almost black, so I assume that means it’s nearly done. Sitting at the table, I stare at the backs of her calves. They’re so... muscular. Tender.

“Here.” She places the steak down in front of me, then fetches the gravy and vegetables. I stuff a piece of the coaled steak in my mouth to ignore the way her rib stretches. Delectable.

“I saw you talking to Greg. What did he say?”

“Oh, he asked about the barbecue. Nosy bastard.” I stuff a piece of broccoli in.

“He’s always nosy. I assume he invited himself?”

“Of course he invited himself.”

“And you said...”

“I said they could come.” I look down, but I can feel her judgement on the top of my head.

“You’ve got to be more assertive, James.” Her use of my actual name makes my eye twitch. I grit my teeth – my dentist tells me I’m going to grind all of my teeth away if I’m not careful.

I strike out. I’m ashamed of myself, but I take the knife and drive it into her meaty arm. She screams out, and instinctively scrambles to get away from me, so I give it a little twist, feeling the ligaments tear.

“What the fuck Jim!”

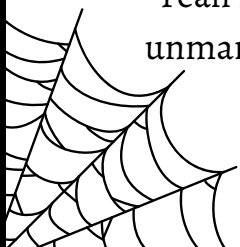
“I’m sorry! It was an accident!”

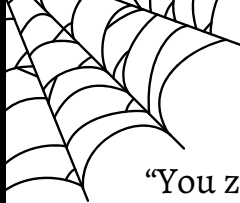
“Accident!? What kind of fucking accident is this!”

“I just meant to swipe at you!” She stands, leaving the room and running upstairs. I hear the bathroom door shut – I know it’s the bathroom because the door squeals like a pig – and the cabinet with the first-aid kit open. I sit with my head in my hands, staring at the tablecloth we got as a wedding present from her mother.

“Jim? You ok?” I sit up quickly, and she enters the room, smiling carefully at me.

“Yeah sorry, just got a bad headache.” She absently scratches at her arm, which is unmarred and perfect. It’s always the left arm.





"You zoned out again."

"Did I?"

"Yeah, you kept staring at my arm again."

"Oh. Sorry, I'm fine now." I go to stab my final piece of steak, but there's no plate in front of me, and no knife in my hand.

"I put your steak back in the oven. Do you want it?" I decide my stomach is too sore from the imperfect meat.

"No. I'm fine." I stand and go into the garden, and she watches me with that pity glance. I hate the pity glance.

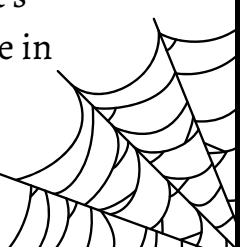
I'm cleaning the barbecue for the third time this week. There's a piece of grease on the grill that won't come off. Sarah comes out in a tank-top, as though she's taunting me. She asks why I'm cleaning it again. I point at the grease, but it's gone. Later on, when she's asleep, I find my hands around her throat. She chokes, but somehow, she passes out before she wakes up. I drag her out of bed by her hair, and she crumples as she falls to the floor. I get a better grip on her – I've decided to not touch her arms – and drag her down the stairs. The thud every time we go down a step makes me wince – I hope I'm not bruising her. Bruised meat doesn't make for good meat.

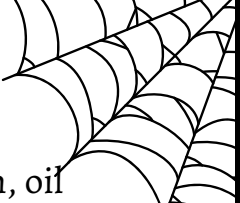
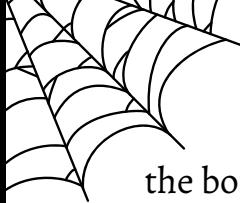
"Come on honey." I reach the bottom and stand there, scratching my head, trying to figure out where the best place is. I've fantasised so many times, in so many different ways, I don't know which is the best. I decide the kitchen because of the tile. It's already red anyway.

"Till death do us part. I do." I realise that voice is mine. That's odd. I feel less dissociative this time. I can feel her breathing on my hand, and it freaks me out so I drop her to the floor, before deciding I don't really care about the foot on her left leg. That's what I drag her by next.

"Restraints. Knife block from Selfridges. That cost me a bomb. Embalming fluid. I want the foot." I realise I could say all of this in my head, but for some reason I'm addressing her, waiting for an answer. She starts to come around so I run upstairs, throw the mattress down and grab the restraints from under it. They work well enough. I'm struggling to pay attention, with seemingly all the blood in my body travelling south. My jeans are too tight for this.

It takes her longer than usual to come around. Maybe it doesn't. Either way, her skin splits like an orange. When she makes noise, she sounds a bit like the dog did when he 'ran away'. I stuff a tea-towel in her mouth. I take the left arm first; it's slightly less muscular than the right, so if I mess it up, I can start again. I leave in





the bone, cut it in half at the elbow joint, skin and drain, lay a bed of veg down, oil it, add some salt, cover, in the fridge. She gives me a scared look, and I give one back mockingly.

I also really want a stew, so I add the fattier parts to the slow cookers – I have 3 in total, an All-Clad 7-Quart Gourmet, a Black+Decker 7-Quart Digital and a Vermicular Musui-Kamado. The last one gets the meatier parts, because it's Japanese, and I think that means I should make a classic onion soup. Sarah would love it but oh well.

"Jim please!" Oops, the gag came out. I put it back in, then carry on with my meat prep.

I try to figure out what to do with the head. I could embalm it, or I could make a stew. I'm torn, whilst I already have a stew, I also have an embalming foot.

I put it in the fridge to figure it out at a later date. I go to bed and decide to clean up in the morning; I forgot how tiring meal prep for a barbecue is.

Turns out Greg really likes the bacon. I knew he would; he always liked Sarah's ass.

"I really appreciate you letting us come on over pal. The family loves you. Shame Sarah is ill."

"Yeah she's resting." In the pantry, with proper seasoning.

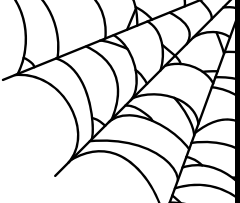
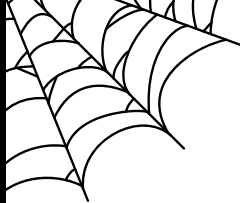
"Ah, well if you need anything let us know."

"I will."

"And I mean anything."

"I appreciate that."

I wonder when she's going to tell me I'm doing it again, zoning out. I'm still waiting.



Girl, Corrupted

Written by: Gwyn Yvere
Edited by: Benjamin Smith

She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever met. She had this otherworldly glow, like she came from another planet. She was one of a kind. And she was mine.

Or so I thought.

She knew what she was doing. She had to know how her sideways glances and swaying hip movements drove me insane. How they drove other men, and even some women, wild.

And she had to know he was watching.

That fucker, Trevor.

There was no way she was still unaware of his lingering gaze on her skin.

My skin.

He even dared to sniff her hair when she supposedly wasn't paying attention.

My hair.

She must have liked the attention, too. Liked knowing the power she had over me, over every fucking man in that room. Liked to pretend she didn't know any better.

And yet she still denied every single thing. Denied the cheating and attention seeking. Denied parading around the office cubicles like a slut. Denied noticing Trevor's obvious obsession with her ass in those short pencil skirts.

My ass.

I have a problem.

I love too hard. Too much. I just get so angry, sometimes I forget who I am.

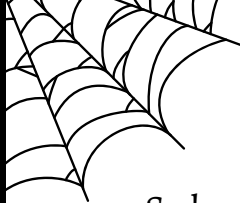
And that night, I forgot who she was too.

She let him put his hand on her shoulder. She acted like he was the only person in the room. Like I wasn't even there.

I lost my shit.

I didn't remember that I loved her. Didn't remember how I'd always promised to protect her from harm. From what I'd done to her. I didn't even remember if what happened was real.

I killed her. I fucking killed her. I felt the warmth of her blood on my hands and saw the glazed look in her lifeless eyes. I have the self-defense scratches to prove my guilt. I cut her body into pieces and threw them in the lake.



So how the hell is she here?

Staring at me with a saccharine smile plastered on her face. Her pupils are so dilated that they completely cover her blue irises. Her long nails are cracked and splintered, matching the scratch marks scaling my neck. Her black hair falls in loose, wet ringlets over her shoulders.

Her hair is still wet.

“Don’t tell me you’re still mad at me.”

Blood on the walls, blood in the tub, blood on the floor, blood on my hands—

I shudder at the sound of her voice. So gentle. So sweet. *Too* sweet. The way she pouts at me feels sinister. I wonder if she remembered what happened last night. If last night even happened.

“What are you doing here?” My dry mouth speaks before I can think to keep it closed.

Limbs in the lake limbs in the lake limbs in the lake limbs in the—

“I work here,” She says, tilting her head with a puzzled expression. Her sweet little face. I never thought I’d see her again. Never thought I’d be so terrified of her stunning features.

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m—

“Sorry,” I breathe, too shaken to speak above a hush. “A-About last night, I mean.” I feel my hands begin to shake uncontrollably.

Her face breaks out into a wide, Cheshire smile. It’s unnerving how much bigger her teeth are than her mouth. Almost like they grew centimeters overnight and her jaw didn’t have the time to adjust.

She leans in uncomfortably close, stroking her ice-cold thumb over my lips. “Water under the bridge,” she purrs through sharpened teeth.

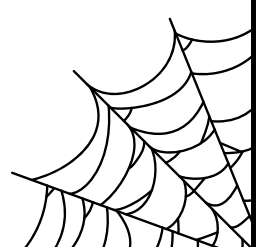
Exactly where I left her.

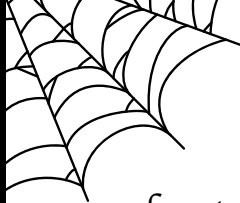
The trembling spreads from my hands to the rest of my body as she pins me to the chair with her eyes. It takes all I have not to fall to my knees and heave up my breakfast. And all the while she just stands there, smiling at me. As though it’s just any other Monday and she wasn’t a mangled corpse 12 hours ago.

After the wave of nausea subsides, I push past the lump forming in my throat and will myself to say, “Is there anything else you need?”

Her grin grows impossibly wider as she emphatically states, “I could go for a bite.”

I almost relax at the words, at the normalcy of the conversation, until I come





face to face with the back of her bottomless throat.

Now I know she isn't talking about takeout.

I hear the cracking of cartilage as she unhinges her gaping maw, her sweltering breath hitting my face. The stench alone makes me sweat, and tears run down my face as she wraps her spindly fingers around my shoulders.

I am going to die here.

The words "I said I was sorry!" rip through my throat, but even I know that isn't enough.

A voice that isn't mine rings in my ears.

I'm sorry?

Her mouth hovers closer, wider than the size of my head.

Oh, he's sorry!

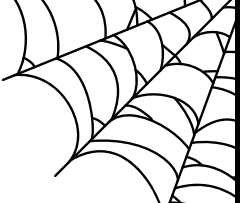
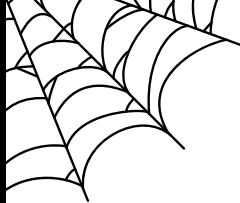
Strings of saliva coat my face.

Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry—

I feel the sharp edge of her teeth against my neck.

What a joke.

SNAP.



Emberglade

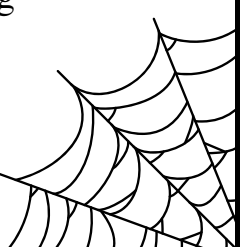
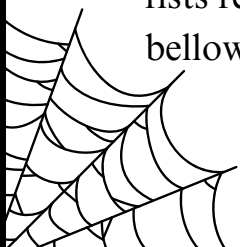
Written by: Halle Taylor

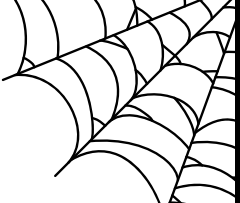
Edited by: Tara Vracevic

A dirty old lake was Emberglade - at least that's all it was to the few who remembered it. Fishermen would gather amidst the early morning dew and brew tea in the cabin behind. Emberglade was once vibrant, surrounded by floral fields and trees of oak. Its waters filled with the fishermen's fresh prey, and its air a lazy heat. No one alive today had lived enough years to remember it this way. Just a dirty old lake - empty, lifeless. The now murky waters surrounded by a seemingly endless tangle of overgrown branches, intertwined with the dirt and the mud. The foreboding trees above the lake created a canopy, or a mouth, consuming all that lay beneath. Emberglade had been swallowed and forgotten. A good place if you wanted to disappear, or wanted somebody else to.

Victor was one of the few people who not only knew the lake, but knew how to find it. However, he saw Emberglade in a different light than most. Victor had a restless, searching nature. Nothing if not curious. Nothing without knowledge. He discovered solace in the wildness of Emberglade, with its untameable vines reaching out to embrace him as if claiming him as their own. Victor felt concealed within its arms, at home within its stomach. He visited often - would even sleep on the grimy floor of the old cabin when he lost track of time and the black made it impossible to find his way home. When night fell on Emberglade, one would not find a hint of light until morning, so stay you must or lost you shall be. Victor didn't mind though - not much to fear in a place long forgotten. No people to fear, at least.

That morning, he had packed up everything he needed for his afternoon of solitude. Sweat trickled down onto his cupid's bow as he threw an excessively large duffle bag into the trunk of his car. A clever man, yes, but a strong one? Well - not many would describe Victor as "strong". Then again, few would describe Emberglade as "beautiful", except Victor of course. He stood with his fists resting against his hip bones, chest heaving up and down like pumping bellows.





“You alright, Victor?” A soft voice called from the driveway next to his. Annabel. Good, sweet Annabel.

“Fishing stuff.” Victor let out between breaths, pointing to the bag that he’d just about had the strength to carry. “Heavy.”

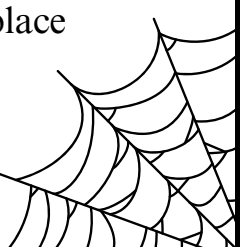
Annabel smiled with what Victor assumed was either amusement or pity, but it was a smile nonetheless. His eyes followed her as she walked from her car, letting his gaze linger for a few more moments after the front door closed behind her. He allowed her essence to dance around his mind, her limbs outstretched into an elegant arabesque, twirling and whirling as he mindlessly began to drive onwards. She danced for him the whole way there, circling the trees that lined the winding road ahead. A tap of her pointe shoe snapped him out of her trance and pulled him towards the draping vines consuming his car. He had arrived.

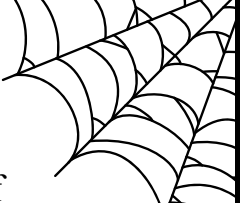
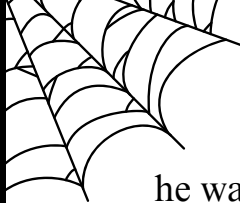
After tirelessly dragging his bag into the cabin, Victor decided to sit with his thoughts beside the lake. He stared beyond the mouth of Emberglade towards the sky that loomed above. He felt detached from the rest of the Earth when he sat amongst the dew of the glade, as if Emberglade was its own world entirely. The forest walls had grown so tall that the treetops seemed like the edge of the world, and the sky beyond that, the edge of the universe. He felt small when he sat there - he found comfort in the illusion of unimportance. When he really thought about it, as big as the glade seemed, it was nothing compared to the stretch of this world. Neither was he. He was but a tiny particle of a single leaf within this cosmic maze. Therefore his decisions, problems, mistakes, all of a sudden felt so minute in comparison that they almost didn't exist, or didn't matter at least. He was too distracted on the drive there to notice the dark clouds that had formed around him.

“Looks like a storm’s coming,” he muttered to the trees.

As he stared into the murky water trying to choose his favourite fish, his vision was suddenly clouded by the impetuous rainfall that flashed before him.

Time often escaped Victor when left alone with his thoughts. He had meant to get started before the rain began, but once again his own world had blurred the real one. Promptly, he rose to his feet - he had a job to do after all. He needed to eat if he was going to spend the night. He entered through the cabin door and grimaced at the scent. Maybe he shouldn't have kept the bait in the same place

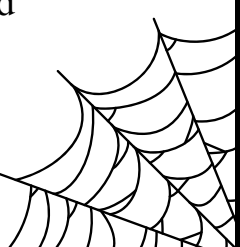


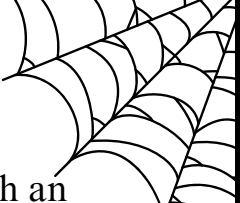
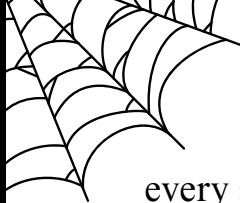


he was sleeping in, he thought. The cabin walls were covered in patches of moss, with the paint long peeled away. The wood of the floor creaked beneath his feet, the boards splintered and uneven. Light filtered through the dusty windows, revealing the broken shelves lining the walls, cluttered with old books and a variety of trinkets that Victor had collected over the years. The fireplace was blackened with soot, and a few logs of wood remained from his last visit. Next to the fireplace sat a large armchair, its fabric faded, draped with hand-stitched blankets that Annabel had made for him last winter. Despite the grime and age, Victor tried to make the cabin warm and homely. There was a certain charm to it - history, perhaps.

He brushed his fingers against the knitted blanket. He longed for Annabel to be with him, cosied up beneath quilts beside a dimly lit fire. He often carried her with him in his mind, spoke to her, even though their actual conversations happened infrequently, usually when they happened to pull into their adjourning driveways at the same time. Rain trickled through the holes in the wooden ceiling, splashing Victor's face. Outside, the storm began to rage. The claps of thunder grew fiercer, and the wind growled viciously around the wooden walls. Annabel still lingered in his fantasy - he stared out the windows and through the fog to watch her drift through the trees. Her movements were graceful and slow as she danced to the melody in Victor's head. The trees bent and swayed violently, but she continued her phantom dance, spinning with an otherworldly elegance. A flash of lightning illuminated her pale hair, shimmering like silver. The strike of light startled Victor and awoke him from his daydream. The figure, lithe and commanding, continued to sway among the trees. Victor blinked aggressively, and again, and again. He froze.

He flung open the cabin door and ran into the storm like a mouse to a trap. The woman was barefoot, paying no heed to the mud that splashed around her. Her arms extended gracefully, her fingertips brushed the leaves as she spun, and her laughter - light and musical - mingled with the rumble of thunder. The rain soaked her and her dress clung to her curves. Her hair, drenched and wild, cascaded down her back and whipped around her face in the wind as she danced with abandon. The forest became her stage, the elements commanded by her movement. The trees bowed to her spins as the lightning illuminated





every step. Suddenly, a bolt of light struck the towering tree beside her with an explosive crack. The thick trunk splintered and shards of wood flew around the woman. Victor was frozen in place, both mesmerised by the woman and terrified for her. The tree groaned deeply, its roots strained against the earth, and began to tilt.

“Move!” Victor began to shout to her, still glued in his place. She was unphased by the

untameable chaos. Victor started to panic as he watched the tree slowly tilt further. Why wasn't she moving? Could she not hear him?

“Run! Now!” He screamed louder this time. “It’s gonna fall!” She continued dancing beneath the groaning oak.

“Fuck.” His voice cracked as he muttered to himself. He started to run towards her.

With each step he splashed himself with mud and moss. He waved his arms in front of his face, knocking away each branch that flew to him. The rain blurred his vision and the wind stumbled his step.

“Hey!” He screamed, waving his limbs frantically. “C’mon move! You’re gonna get

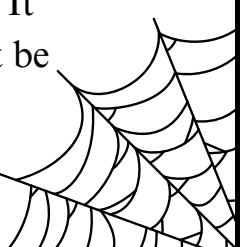
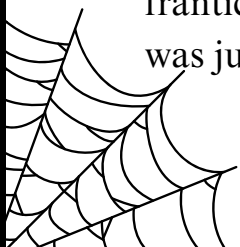
hurt!” His voice was muffled by the howling wind and cracks of lightning.

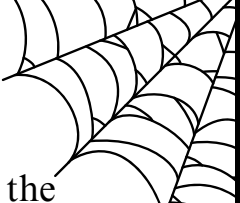
Without warning, the woman spun to face him. A spark in her eyes fierce enough to cease his step. Frozen once again, Victor returned the woman’s stare. Her eyes seemed hollow, reflecting the storm’s fury. Just as quickly as she had turned, the tree instantly fell. The large oak knocked her down violently. The massive branches smashed into the ground, sending up clouds of dust and debris. Shattered and charred, the sour smell of burnt wood mixed with the scent of the rain soaked earth. Her body lay still, her limbs intertwined with the branches, sunken into the moss.

Victor blinked hard, his hands shaking in anticipation, waiting for her to move. The storm grew louder, and the wind nudged him towards her body. Hesitantly, he gave in to the wind’s commands and edged closer. He towered above her twitching limbs.

“Hello?” Nothing. Although he knew there would be no one in sight for miles, he

frantically spun his head over both shoulders out of hope and sheer panic. It was just him, alone with a strange woman. A woman who may or may not be

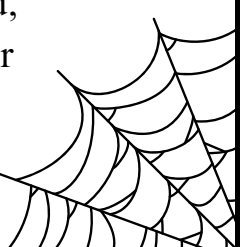
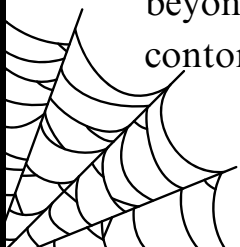


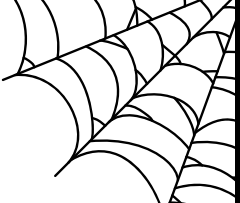
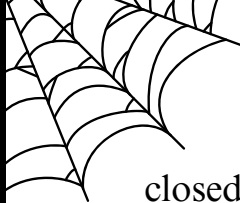


dead, and if she was, whether his cowardliness was to blame. The trunk of the tree had landed on her ankle. Her foot was twisted backwards and her bone protruded from her flesh. Victor used all of his strength to push the tree from her leg. He wasn't strong enough to lift it. Her leg crunched as he rolled it from her body to the ground. He probably broke more of her bones in the process, he thought. He pushed one arm underneath the nape of her neck and the other beneath her knees. He lifted her limp body and made his way towards the cabin beyond the mist, her body dangled lifelessly as her fingers gently caressed the soaking moss beneath them. The tears of the earth had made her dress almost completely transparent. Victor averted his eyes ahead of him as his sweat mingled with rain that dampened his skin.

Relentlessly tapping his fingers against the crooked window pane, Victor found himself restless. He watched her intently, her body slumped across the armchair. It had been 30 minutes. He'd gone over all possible solutions in his mind. He needed to act, he knew that, but guilt clawed at his insides and paralysed him. His eyes flicked from the woman to his car, caught between the urge to flee and the crushing realisation that he might have already made the worst decision of all by doing nothing. He'd left his phone in his car to fully immerse himself into his solitude - he'd be damned to let someone disturb his peace - but he'd never needed it until that moment. As he glanced out of the window, he watched as the branches snapped like brittle bones. Loose limbs torn away, recklessly tapping at the glass before him. "Don't be such a fucking coward," he muttered. He glanced at the lifeless woman and inhaled sharply before making his way through the growling wood.

He grabbed his phone from the front seat of his car and ran back to shelter. He could just about see the cabin through the fog, but as it grew closer, the knot in his stomach tightened. A sickness filled his gut, then his throat, then mouth. His entire body began to tremble at the sight. The woman stood rigid in the window, her eyes wild and manic, locked on to him. Victor felt the weight of her stillness, like prey coming face to face with its predator. Her stare felt primal, calculated. The violence of her gaze caused a sickness one only ever feels when missing home. A scared little boy aching for the comfort of his mother. His longing overruled his fear, and drew him in closer. He entered the cabin and turned to face her, expecting the same in return. Instead, she stayed, staring beyond the window. She stood with a tilt, barefoot in the spill of her blood, contorted sideways as her bones peeled through the flesh of her calf. Victor





closed the door to block out the rain, and hoped to startle her out of her daydream. The slam of the door was met with the wind's knocking fists trying to fight their way in, like children begging to come home. Victor backed away from the door, stumbling over his own feet. The woman was motionless, so still it was inhuman. The sound of tapping fingers and the statue before him began to make him tremble. It was dark now, he knew there was no way out of Emberglade after nightfall. Panic filled his chest as he held himself against the wall. He begged her with his eyes, though she paid no mind.

"I watch you," the woman said abruptly, her gaze unmoving. "When you come here. I watch you."

Victor held his breath.

"You sit. You mourn. It's all out of order, out of time."

Maybe she was in shock, Victor thought. That's what it must be.

"You like fishing, yes?" She finally turned to face him. Her eyes softened to match her voice.

Victor choked on his breath. "I, um...I..." She raised her eyebrows to prompt him.

"Yes. Yes I- um- I come here to go fishing."

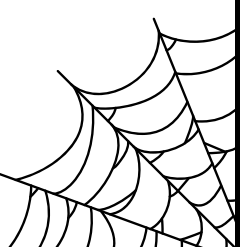
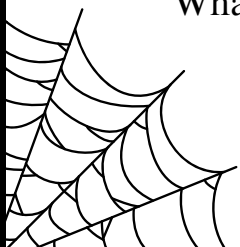
"That isn't what I asked."

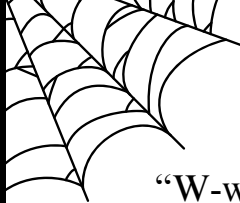
Victor's eyes darted back to her broken leg as she turned her body to face him, splashing in the puddle of blood. She stared at him but he refused to meet her gaze. She sighed kindly and began to walk, following the edges of the floorboards with her arms raised like a child on the playground.

"You mourn your prey before you catch it. Stare into the waters, choose your meat," She

said with a short laugh. "You dream of catching it, killing it, holding its lifeless body between your finger tips, its cold skin held by your warmth, cutting, slicing, tasting its flesh." She painted streaks of blood around the edges of the room as she walked. "The meat, the blood. You choose, you dream, you mourn, you catch, you kill, you feast." She stopped in front of his bag with a jump, her leg bending further from her force. She looked at him with a smile, softness gone now, only rage.

"What's in the bag, Victor?"





“W-what?”

“Who is she?”

“No- I- no, it’s not-“

“Who's in there this time?”

“No, I swear I..”

“It's funny, you know, you don't even remember me.” She watched him for his reaction and her eyes turned woeful. “Wow. You've killed so many women now, you don't even remember your first.”

Victor shook his head frantically in denial, his words failing him.

“It was so confusing. For so long I ached for you, begged the wood to return you to me. I

craved you, Victor. It consumed me. I waited, but things became so out of order, out of time. I relived it over and over and over again, just so I could see you. Call it determined, call it stubborn, but I refused to go, not fully. Your thirst for me guided your hands to my throat, but mine bound me to the earth that I rot in.”

Victor fell to his knees and sobbed into his hands. “No! I wouldn't! I didn't! You're lying. You're lying!” His guttural cries did not seem to phase the woman.

“You feed your guilt with lies to stop it from eating you alive, Victor. You know what you have done, what you are.”

“No!”

“You did this to me!”

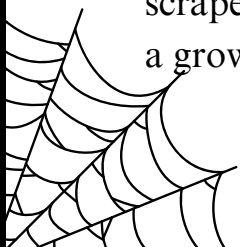
“No please stop! Please!” Victor’s sobs grew into a growl, his throat scratching as he begged.

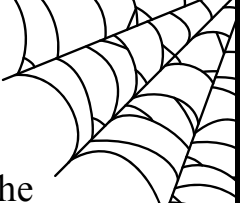
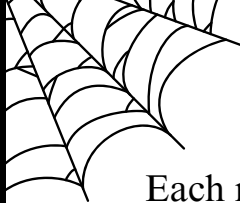
The woman unzipped the bag and knelt before him. “Look.”

Victor shook his head like a child, sealing his eyes shut

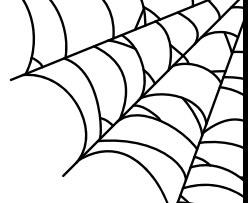
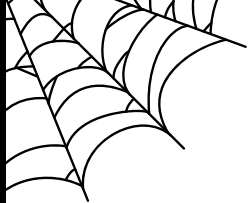
“Look! Victor, look at her! Look at what you did!”

Victor looked down through his weary eyes to see Annabel’s rotting corpse before him, crushed and mangled in his bag. Her eyes were open and lifeless, clouded over with a dull, milky film. Her terror still lingered within her expression, her last moments of horror forever painted across her ashen grey face. Her cheeks were sunken and her slightly parted lips had turned black. The sound that came from Victor defied words. Filled with terror and guilt, it scraped his throat dry, his voice cracking with its force. It started low, guttural, a growl of agony rising to a sharp, piercing wail that reverberated in his bones.





Each ragged breath between the howls was filled with a choked sob, as if the scream itself was trying to escape his body's own remorse. The weight carried in his voice was the sound of someone confronting the darkest corner of their soul. The woman rose to her feet, her leg no longer broken, and headed for the door. “It cannot be! We spoke just this morning, I saw her!” Victor cried. She stopped. “No, you didn’t. That was just pretend.” she said before leaving him alone with his screams.
Alone with Annabel.



Make Your Choice

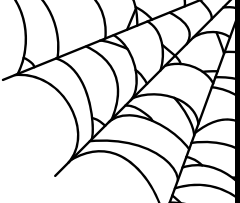
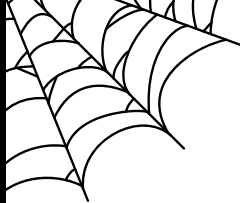
Written by: Annie Bumblebee
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

Who will you be when facing the end?
The murderer of the innocent-
the death of good friends?

What will you do, when faced with the deepest night?
Will you cry or rejoice, when the darkness kills the light?

Will you run, hide, or rise in the void?
Will you revel in the chasm,
where all hope is destroyed?

Then what will you do?
when the Judges come to condemn?
Will you weep?
Will you break?
Or will you foolishly curse them?



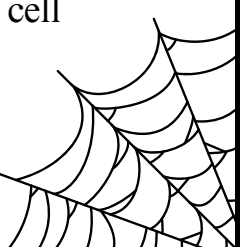
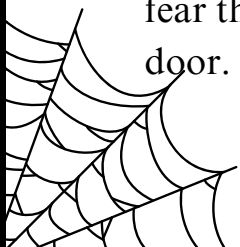
The Countdown

Written by: Mishel Stefanova

Time was ticking. She felt her left eye twitch whenever the clock clicked. She felt her throat dry as she continued to scratch into the wall. She was so hungry. Her heart stood still in her chest - a desolate rock trapped in a desert of nothingness. The wall chipped under her weak and desperate fingers: a new line, a new day. She felt her lifeblood weaken with every passing moment she was trapped in this cell. Her body yearned for food or drink. Her body craved something to fill it. But each day passed and whenever she smelt or felt food near, it would vanish before she could even get a bite. It was so tantalisingly painful. She curled in a ball and felt her little fangs bite into her lip; she was a hollow shell in a hollow and empty cell. She grew smaller and smaller each day. With that, a new flame set itself alight within her. A new day brought a new shame, yes, but also brought a new hunger. It was one she felt in the marrow of her bones - in the centre of her very being. She could practically taste the victory that came with vengeance. She licked her dry lips and looked at the wall. Sixty-six lines stood out starkly, scarring the wall. She curled up on the concrete floor and prayed to the dark forces below to set her free. Her captors had decided on putting a cross on the opposite side of the wall. As if that on its own was enough to subdue her. She knew what fate awaited her the second she left this cell. She imagined if the feeling of burning would be similar to what she felt inside. She imagined ripping into the faces of the villagers, their flesh melting underneath her claws; their sweet blood spraying over her face, still warm and flesh. She felt her whole body tremble at the thought.

G- she was so hungry.

The sound of clanging metal alerted her. She felt her ears perk and winced as the clock-bell struck twelve times. This was it. She knew she was going to die. She envisioned the burning feeling again. Another haunting memory came to her then: she was a child and she had gone too close to the fireplace. The cloth on her sleeve had set alight. She recalled the piercing and sizzling pain on her fair skin. She now envisioned it all over her body. For the first time in her captivity, the girl felt something other than fury and a lust for vengeance. Pure fear threatened to choke her. She stood paralysed as the guard opened her cell door.





“Mircalla?” His voice was gruff and held no goading unlike the other guard. The girl in question only nodded weakly. She knew what awaited her. She’d either be burned like a witch or beheaded and stabbed through the heart with a stake. The girl almost couldn’t decide what sounded worse. “It is time.”

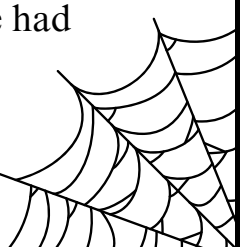
He approached her cautiously, as if approaching a wounded animal. She was unsure of whether that added insult to the injury or if it was a good thing. She couldn’t find herself to care. She could hear his heartbeat: loud and clear. It beat in sync with the clock nearby. The girl felt her eye twitch, a similar spasm following suit in her entire body. Mircalla felt her fangs dip into her mouth. The guard was a big and strong man. Surely if she had one small bite for nourishment he wouldn’t mind? Almost involuntarily, her body moved forward. The man flinched. The chains rattled violently against the ground. Mircalla couldn’t help the smile that slithered on her face. She could taste his fear. It made her mouth water. She was a rabid animal waiting to infect its next victim. She tried leaning further forward but this time the man reacted with more vigour. He fished out a cross from his pocket and yelled. “In the name of God, step back, Karnstein.”

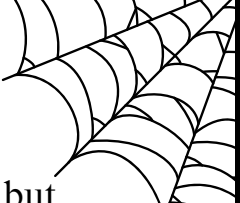
A jab of pain attacked her skull as the cursed name rang in her mind. Mircalla felt like she was breathing in hot needles. The air felt heavier. Still, she could feel his heart racing. She could practically feel the way his blood rushed to the surface of his skin as his heart sprinted. His terror empowered her. She pushed through the pain.

“You will obey. Sit.” He spoke sternly. Mircalla mentally applauded herself for not completely ripping him apart, piece by piece. It would be a waste of resources and food if she did. “By God’s Grace, you will now allow me to put these chains on you.”\

Mircalla didn’t bother with her usual way of hunting prey. There was no room for seduction here. She was tired and too weak. Instead, she tried a new tactic: she made herself look weak as she looked up at him with sombre eyes and lay on the ground dejectedly. She was nothing but a pathetic little damsel who was very much in distress. The look seemed to comfort the man as he slowly went to put the iron chains around her wrist. Mircalla struck.

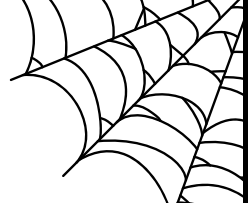
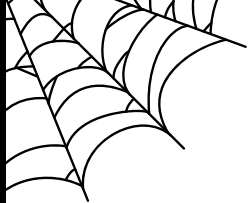
The last thing she saw was the man’s face twisting in terror as her fangs sliced into his neck. Blood exploded into her mouth. The vampiress clung onto the struggling man, his shoves getting weaker and weaker as his sweet blood went into her system. She felt her eyes roll back at the pleasure at being fed. She had





been so malnourished that at that moment she could think of nothing else but blood.

Once she had completely drained him, taking even the last dregs of blood like a starved beggar, she dropped the shrivelled corpse. The guard was a shrivelled shell of what he once was - now nothing more than a raisined form of a carcass. He had done little to quench her hunger. She felt like she was going to be sick with joy. She turned to the open doorway, excitement for what awaits fueling her. The door swung violently and she was half afraid that it was going to shut on her. Hurriedly she stood up, leaving the corpse behind. She still clung to her new thumbby chew toy as she ran out from the little prison, scuttling behind dark corners whenever she heard voices like a fearful cockroach not wishing to be crushed. She could feed on them but she knew they would be armed. She'd have to wait. When the coast was clear, she scuttled out of the prison into the snow. She let out a little huff of joy as the darkness greeted her. Almost weeping with joy she made it deeper into the forest, where she knew a little village stood and felt her undead heart beat erratically. Victory was hers. She was finally free...and she was going to feast.



On My Tail

Written by: Lili Garman
Edited by: Benjamin Smith

I like this time of year, but part of me does wish it was summer again. Now that the days are getting shorter and the nights longer, I feel there's less time for me. I'm not sure what I'd do with extra time, I like to think I'd make the most of it, but I know I'd just let it pass by. At least there's less time to think in the day. But then there's more time to think in the dark, which isn't always good for me.

So I sit outside by the lake, my jumper shielding me from the wind that gets increasingly sharper every day. I started coming here just after my auntie got sick. It's me that has to get her to bed, make her food, and do all the dirty stuff that no one else ever wants to do. Just me.

I look out across the lake, searching for its curves and dips. Then I see his head pop up out of the water. The little beads trickling down his back as he swims towards me. He's been the only person I've really spoken to since we moved here, the only person that's actually sat and listened to me. So I relax, the wind seeming to still and the world going quiet. He glides out of the water and shakes his feathers, water splattering across my jeans.

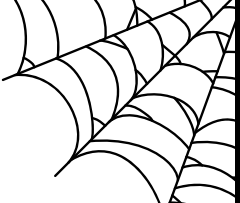
Splat. Splat. Squelch. Splat.

His flat feet slap the hard ground, it sounds kind of hollow. Today he has a limp, I lean over and place a hand on his back.

What's wrong?

He stops and stands in front of me, lifting his leg up with a wobble. I lean in closer.

A wave of rotting, infected flesh fills my nose. I inhale it deeply, ignoring the



burning it sends to the back of my throat. He begins to speak.

I need a new leg.

He whispers, hushed straight into my ear, the words hitting my brain harshly with the clicking of his tongue. His beak snaps shut between words, tapping and cracking. My brain feels fuzzy.

I peer down closely at his leg, or what's left of it. I can see his little bone poking through, bloody and grey. His skin looks mangled, peeling off at different out angles. A large flap of his skin hangs down over his foot. I peel it off. He jumps back slightly but allows me to keep peeling. It eventually snaps off and curls up into a little fleshy ball in my hand. I poke at it. Dark blobs of clotted blood collect in my palm and on my finger tips. I lift it up to inspect.

Just as I lean closer, he takes it straight out of my hand with his beak and begins to chew. And chew, and chew. The stench of decaying bodies billowing of him.

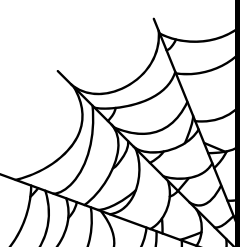
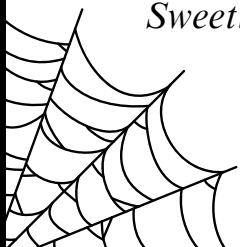
I need a new leg.

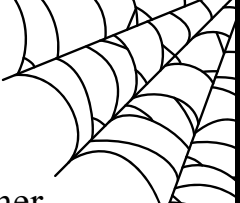
*

Auntie's been bugging me since I got back. *I need my meds, can you do this, can you get me that.* None stop. The one thing on my mind is fixing his leg. The thought stays swimming around my head, and the smell of him lingering in my nose. Once I fix him, that smell will pass.

Slumped over in the armchair as always. She's not moved for hours. It's quite sad and I want to help. I look at her as she tries to smile. Her stained long sleeve shirt hangs down over the chair where her left arm should be. I'm sure she doesn't miss it, she hardly used it anyway, but it does cross my mind from time to time.

Sweetie. My painkillers.





She reaches with her right arm to the little coffee table by the chair where her bottle of pills is sitting. She's going to need a few more today. I take the bottle and pour half the contents into her mouth.

*

Slice, slice, slice.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand as I continue cutting. It's hard work and my arms ache deep in my muscles. I've made it through the flesh, it's just the bone to get through then I'll be finished. Auntie lays on the table, the hardest job was probably getting her up there after I gave her the painkillers. And there she is, out cold. I keep cutting and cutting, quickly but never sloppy. I've tried to get better at doing this. It feels more routine now. I look down at her, she's not my auntie right now, she's my patient. And with her help, I can make him better. That's what life's all about right? Helping others? I'm sure she'll understand.

Crack.

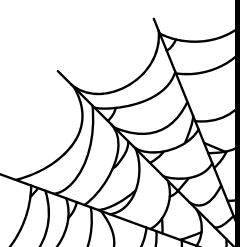
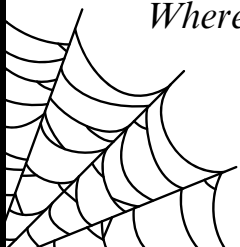
We've made it through. The nerves and the ligaments slide across the back of my hand as I drive the bone apart. It takes all my body weight to finally feel the saw hit the table. Her chest moves up and down erratically so I tie a belt around what is left of her thigh and pick up her leg. I wrap it up in a sheet, followed by another sheet, then a blanket, then put into a bin bag.

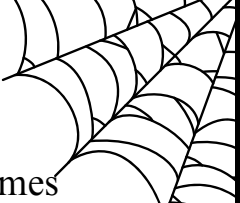
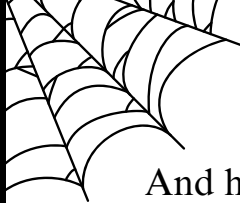
I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I head to the door, my completely red body, wet and worn, with him standing behind me, not the him that is of this earth, but the real him.

Almost free. With the leg, I can walk. Where shall I go?

Wherever you want. I'll come too. I said.

Wherever I go, you follow. And I can give you all you want.





And he grins that grin that never becomes familiar no matter how many times I see it. I get cold, icy cold. Maybe it's just the blood.

Despite the cold, I head straight for the lake without a coat, just my bloody clothes sticking to my body. I'm going to be moving on again soon, I can feel him coming closer to me, he's on my tail and he's going to take me. I've been giving him a body, helping him rebuild himself since we moved here just after mum died. That's when I first met him, a little duck swimming in the lake.

Mum had always told me that her way of dealing with grief was to be outside with nature to clear her head. So that's what I did. Only my head didn't clear, because he started talking to me.

I can help you see her again. I just need a body.

*

Auntie didn't make it after the surgery. It must've been an infection or blood loss or something. But she lives on through him. And he's getting closer. The body made of parts almost complete.

I dropped Auntie's leg into the river and he dived down after it.

I stayed in the dark nights, awake and alone, waiting for him. But he didn't show, so I returned to the lake to see him sitting atop the water, above the legs, arms, torso, and whatever else that lies at the bottom. I follow him in and float on top of the water, I'm still covered in red from Auntie and it soon starts to wash off of me. I float and float so I don't touch what's underneath at the bottom of the lake. The ducks don't live here any more, this is all for him. So this is where I stay. As my body sways with a gentle rhythm of the lake, he speaks to me again, right into my ear, his beak tapping against my ear canal rhythmically and gently.

Just one more thing. You've come so far. And I will take you further.



I nod. Drifting with the flow of the water, my body completely numb.

I feel him come closer, but I don't feel feathers, I feel skin. Leaning up to my ear and getting closer to my body.

I need a heart.

That sickly hushed voice swims around my head and I feel nothing and think nothing. The stench of death warming up my nostrils and filling my body. A deep pain knocks at the back of my head trying to get in. I stare up to the dark sky through cloudy eyes that don't feel like mine anymore.

He starts to peck at my chest. Pecking and pecking, his head jolting up and down, back and forth. More red starts to cover me and spill through the water, mixing with aunties.

Peck peck knock knock.

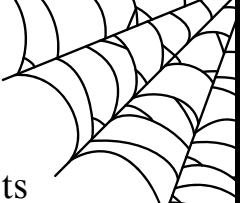
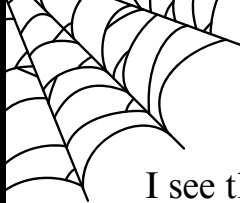
He's getting closer. He keeps going, pace quickening as he reaches my heart. My eyes shift down to my open chest and I see my heart still beating as he leans his head down and takes a bite.

There's that grin again, covered in my blood, dripping in strings down his chin as he begins to stand, towering over me. He takes his hand out of the water, a pale hand with long bony fingers and yellow nails covered with dirt and blood. He reaches his hand to my chest and takes my heart right out, ripping it clean from my body. He licks his lips with that long, lying tongue and hisses.

Thank you. Now come see your mother.

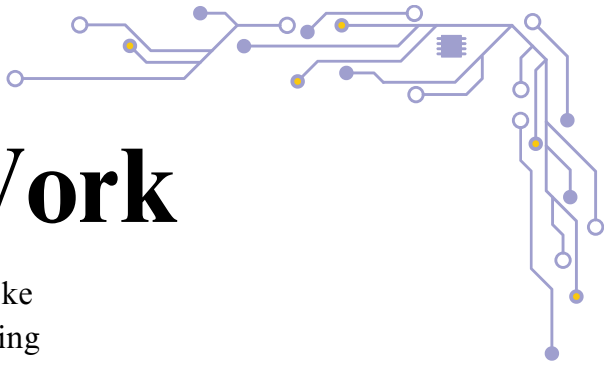
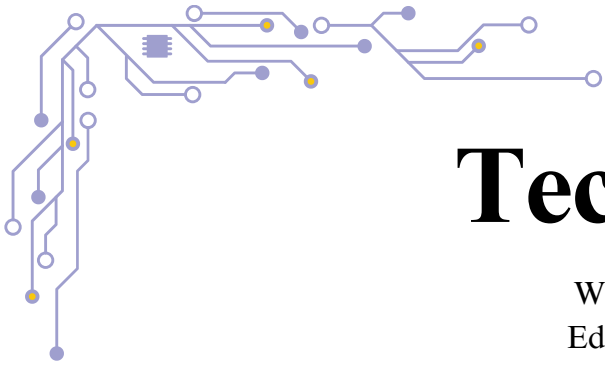
As he drags my heartless body across the lake, I think of her and the words she left me with.

*Look for me in the river, that's where I'll be.
Nobody else, just you and me.*



I see the words spelling out above me as the sky turns darker, the world gets colder, and he gets closer.

*Look for me in the river, that's where I'll be.
Nobody else, just you and me.*



Tech at Work

Written by: Angel Brooke

Edited by: Niahm Canning

“We’re integrating AI into the workplace!” the email at the top of my inbox reads. Click. Confetti. We’re celebrating emails now? It’s too early for this.

One more scalding sip of my bitter brew? My mouth curls down in a sour snarl. Maybe AI can make the office *coffee* better, too. I was starting to think my bosses were too old-school to make any huge changes. Good for them. Big, bright, beautiful future. Yippee.

“Josh, can you come take a look at this?”

“COMING!” I holler.

“You know, you don’t need to yell,” Francine whisper-shouts back at me.

“What?” I saunter with my signature smirk. *“You started it.”*

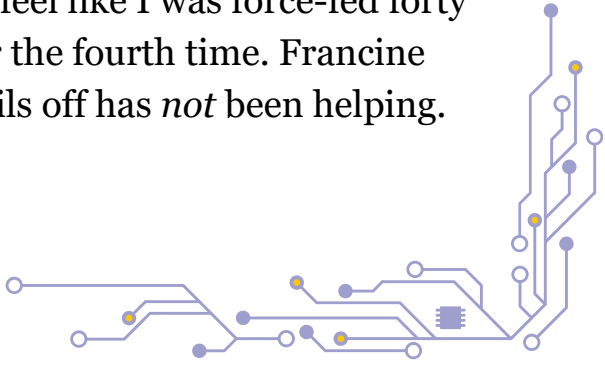
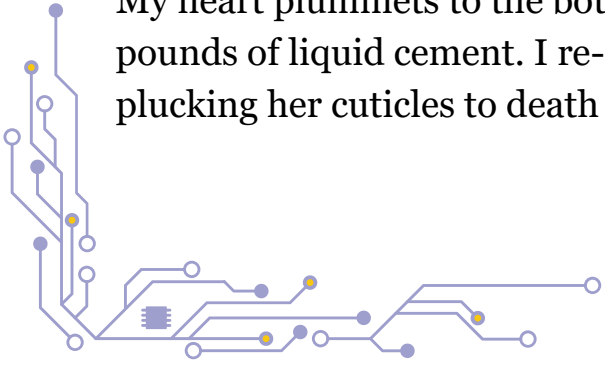
“No, I need you to take something seriously for once. Look,” she hisses, shakily and stern. As I approach the front desk, my gaze follows her finger, pointing directly at her screen.

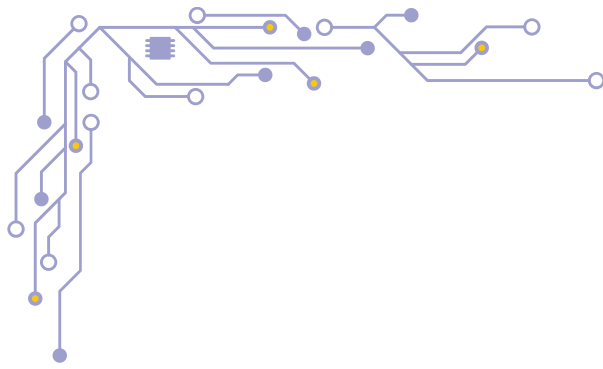
“Oh, come on, it can’t be that ba-”

...

“No.”

My heart plummets to the bottom of my guts. I feel like I was force-fed forty pounds of liquid cement. I re-read the email for the fourth time. Francine plucking her cuticles to death and biting her nails off has *not* been helping.





. . .

Elysia AI welcomes you to your new home.

We rely on optimized work performance and maximizing efficiency in order to succeed.

Your continuation of employment is contingent on your cooperation.

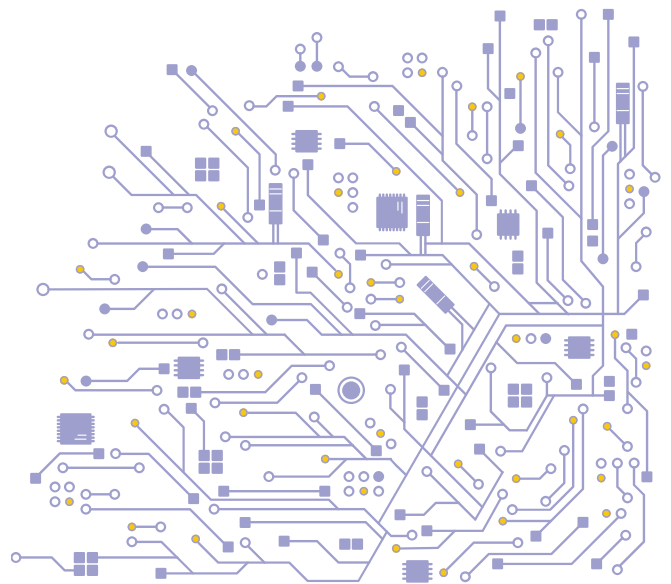
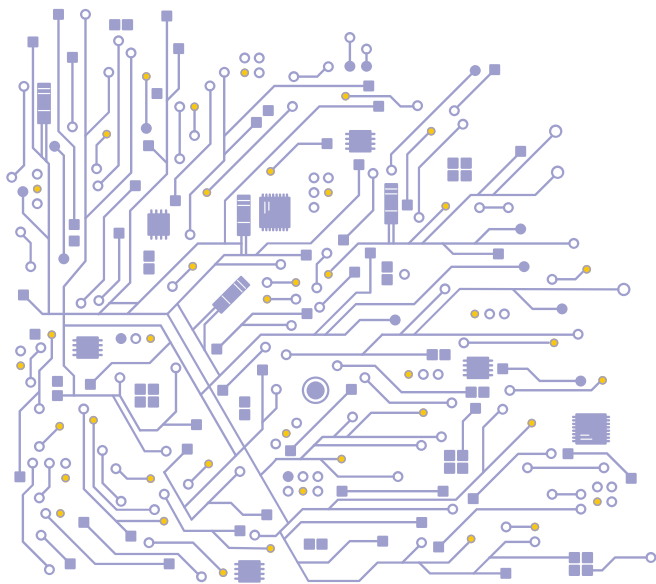
We thank you & your company for opting into the willful termination program.

If you wish to opt-out of these changes, you will be terminated.

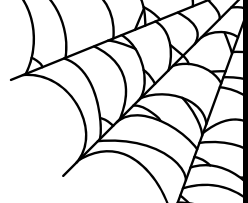
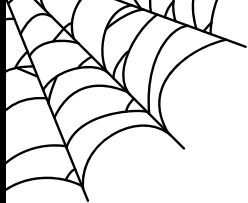
Changes commence shortly.

Goodbye!

. . .







Shattered Narcissus

A ballad

Written by: Benjamin Smith

Edited by: Sydney Sampson

The sweetest child, my brother was,
So gleeful in the darkest times.
He loved his games, his toys his books,
His tales and nursery rhymes.

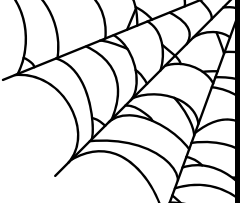
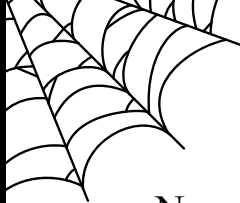
A mirror, old as time could be,
Was hidden under his bed.
Discovered by chance, he pulled it out,
Splintered frame as black as lead.

No eyes he met in the looking glass
When hoping for approval.
No shirt. No shoes. No trace of him.
A Nymph's most wicked removal.

This spiritual deformity
Thus ailed his living days.
His sight of self was damned eternal,
And shaded his moral gaze.

When schooling began, fellows spat fire
To wound his vanished light.
His joy was lost in that blank glass,
A jeering, tainted blight.

Not urine or blood presented itself
In that other realm.
Only shadow prints from frosted breath
Made marks in that frame of elm.



No second face revealed in time.
He made his own prevail.
Each sketch was different from the last,
Grotesque in scale and detail.

Artistic flourishes littered
Throughout our home.
From paper, parchment, easel, and paint.
Such little room to roam.

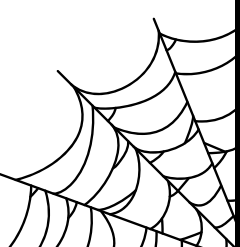
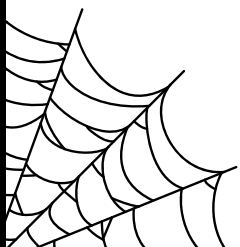
He evolved into sculptures
Of twisted busts smeared with clay.
In that sordid mirror, they looked best.
But no life they could convey.

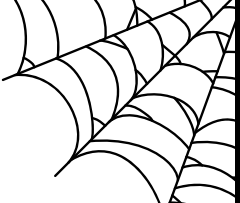
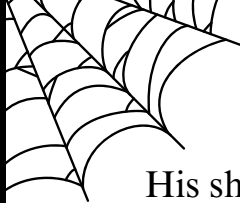
His skill grew with obsession and time,
The mirror a silent voyeur.
From cracked clay to pristine porcelain.
A gifted amateur.

“My Masterpiece!” he declared one
Soggy Sunday morning.
I had no heart to point out flaws,
My last failed forewarning.

Positioned before that grim glass,
Cruel bust in place of head.
He had such joy for once, at last.
It talking in his stead.

When day and night did end, he moved
The bust, recluse again.
O shock! What horror! In the mirror,
A sight made his blood drain.





His shocked reflection did glare back,
A stranger to his eyes.
The Nymph's visage of elm did mock.
A crushing, cruel surprise.

A paroxysmic rage took hold
And, at a feral pace,
The bust was dashed asunder, a
Once sweet, now ugly face.

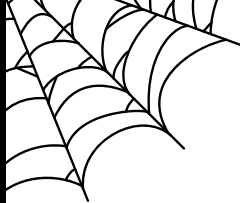
My cursed brother grasped a knife
And mutilated flesh.
Chipped teeth, gouged eye, face stained blood red;
Painting the canvas fresh

With dexterous hands, he stabs the shards
Where sinew was shown, bare.
By carving his skull, he lost
Humanity and hair.

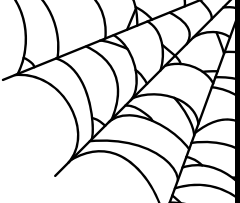
A Frankenstein's new Monster, he
Had shaped himself into.
He limped around, an hour passed,
The final turn of the screw.

When finally, he stopped and sat
In front that looking glass,
His breathing slowed, he was at peace
Since many a year had passed.

A gnarled, clawed hand did stretch from
The looking glass' pane.
It grabbed his head and dragged him in
To never be seen again.



The Stranger at Tea



Written by: Leon Lynn
Edited by external party

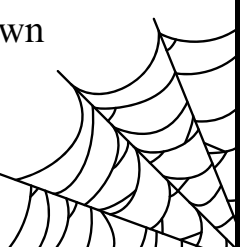
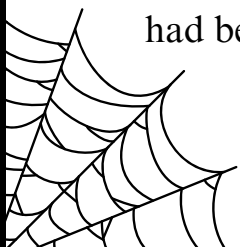
Mr. Knot first came to tea on the night of my mothers' funeral He walked between my father and sister, and took my mother's place at the table only after my father had plated our food. He was a little too tall for the seat—my legs occasionally kicked his, where they usually only found space.

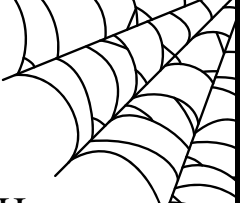
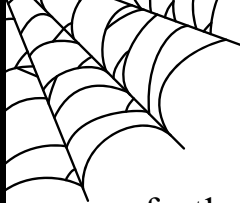
The sun had long since set that evening. My mother had wanted a funeral “in the twilight”, because she loved how the local bathhouse was lit up in dusk. Despite the cold December night, the effect had been nothing short of stunning. We all got home out of sync with the world, our bodies telling us it had been much too bright to be night already as we tried to eat by the dim orange glow of the tired kitchen lightbulbs. It felt how I imagined eating by candlelight would—melancholy, awkward, and with abstract shadows being thrown into strange places on everyone's faces.

Everyone's that was, except Mr. Knot's. Somehow the light lit his face pleasantly, and gave his tailored navy three-piece suit a gentle sheen. It also emphasised how his groomed features were chiselled—not just in the sense of being handsome, but of being stone. His face, along with the rest of Him was just so... still. When He did move, it was stiff. Like creasing cardboard. If you knew where to look, you could catch his suit bulging and creasing around his body, or the flesh of his neck bunching over the top of his closely-fastened collar. It felt like something you weren't meant to see. Felt blurry. I couldn't look at Him for long.

To his left sat my father, Ainsley. Ainsley Diggory. In the weak light, the wrinkles on my father's face were almost theatrical, as he slouched in his chair with a frown. His suit, meanwhile, was peeling at the edges, the shirt wilting away from his neck now that his tie hung unfastened. The jacket was finding its own way down his shoulders, creased and crestfallen. My father made no effort to eat, let alone neaten his suit. He just sat holding his fork, watching nothing in particular.

Opposite the newcomer, and next to me, was my sister, Lauren. Her hair had frizzed up throughout the night, and the strapless dress our mother had chosen had begun to hug her tighter and tighter as the night's sweat dragged it down





further and further. By then, it was a poor imitation of a lover's embrace. Her makeup had even run to match. I suppose I can't have looked much better: My own dress felt like a sheath of freshly-scrubbed skin, and my feet were heavy from the weightlessness of being recently freed from heels.

The food we'd brought back from the takeaway next to the bathhouse had long-since gone cold before anyone actually ate. It wasn't like my father to not cook; especially with a guest. We ate slowly, so it took me a while to notice that Mr. Knot wasn't actually eating. He was just miming the action.

Once we'd all had our fill of cold, grease-soaked meat, my father tried to shatter the silence. Instead, his voice merely glanced it, leaving a crack hanging in the air. Still, he kept speaking, muffled as though he was talking from behind glass. 'Mr. Knot is going to be staying with us for a while,' my father told us. 'He'll be helping us sort through your mother's effects.'

It was then He became officially part of the family.

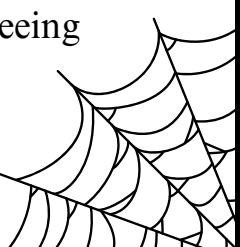
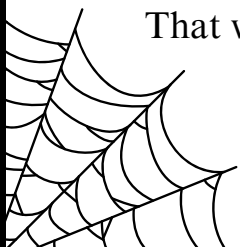
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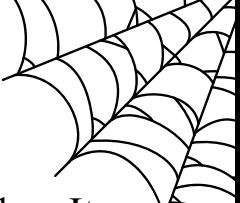
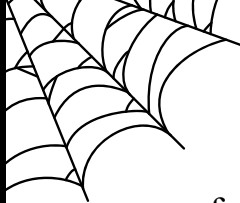
In the following weeks, none of us really noticed Him. I didn't at least. The final year of my art undergraduate had always threatened to consume my life, and it was when that new semester came that I let it. My paintings and sculptures were all I saw. I spent days at a time in my room, perfecting the reflection in the eyes of a portrait, or trying to work out how the hell people sculpted hands. I was rarely bothered by others.

I couldn't stay in my room forever though. One of the first times I came down was on a weekend morning, with the armful of dirty plates and cups I usually built up when I worked solidly. 'Sorry, Mum,' I said as I passed her sitting at the kitchen table to put them in the sink. As I was washing up, my mind was still in my room. 'Do you remember that brush trick we looked at from the Song Dynasty?' I asked her. She didn't reply. 'You know, the one that looked soft and scratchy? I want to paint some clouds.' Still nothing.

I realised as I turned to face the kitchen table. Finding my mother's usual seat at the table filled surprised me more than the fact it wasn't her filling it. Mr. Knot sat there, back straight, looking right into my eyes. Still in the same suit. Still unmoving. I wanted to shout at Him, but I had no words.

That was the start. Soon, my sister and I would share a brief glance after seeing





our father asleep on the sofa, but leaning on someone that wasn't our mother. It was Him. I would catch my sister looking through my mother's history textbook collection, carefully watched by someone that wasn't our mother. It was Him. It wasn't even her checking on me in the middle of the night anymore. It was Him. Even when I shut him out, most nights he found his way back in. It went on for weeks more like this. That constant rise and fall of elation and heartbreak as I thought I saw her, only to look closer and be met by His anti-presence in places that used to comfort. I left my room less after that.

Eventually, I was preparing to take one of my final pieces in to class. I had worked all semester on a 1:30 scale diorama, which I had hand-sculpted and painted. It was of a young couple leaving a hospital together, one of them carrying a baby in one of those car seats that doubles as a baby carrier. Except, if you looked closer, it wasn't a baby at all. It was a teddy bear. I was especially proud of how convincing the effect was from far away.

To take it to class, I had to pass my mother's office. I did that every day—the office door isn't far from the front door. The difference was, then, the door was open for the first time in months. She often left it open while she worked from her armchair in the room's corner. Her laptop would sit on the arm of the chair and her papers on the coffee table. The Victorian desk on the opposite wall of the room was more of a statement piece.

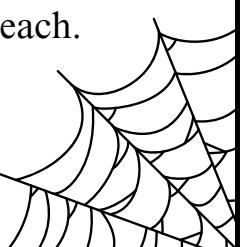
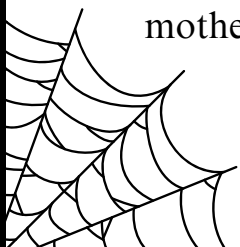
As I walked past, I glimpsed her sat working through the door like I used to. I almost tripped over the front door when I realised, mostly because I was turning around. I went back to the office door, and took a better look.

Obviously it wasn't her. It was Mr. Knot. Sat in her chair.

But He wasn't just sat in it. He had her laptop open, and her papers spread out on the desk. He was even dressed like her, cosied up in tan chinos and a white-and-green jumper. Her laptop wasn't on, but He was still typing away on the keyboard, pausing to check her papers periodically. Just like she did.

I felt weird watching Him. It almost felt like she was back, and I didn't know what to make of that. But I do remember the anger. The blatant insult.

I barged into the room, put my diorama down on the table and swiped a hand across my mother's papers. They flew off the table and scattered themselves across the room. We were both silent as I watched Mr Knot, and Mr Knot watched them float to the floor, expressionless. He then turned back to my mother's laptop. I took it from Him and put it on the coffee table, out of reach.





He leaned back and looked up at me from the chair, like a cat that had been discovered with the cushion they had gutted.

‘You,’ I said. ‘Aren’t her. What the fuck is this? This stops.’

Mr. Knot leant back in my mother’s chair, and examined me from inside my mother’s clothes.

‘Why?’ I asked.

He stared. I grabbed Him by his shoulders—it was weird, feeling my mother’s jumper in my hands, with someone’s shoulders underneath. I shouted into his face.

‘Just stop. You’re making me—’

It was then my father caught me. He didn’t say anything. I know he would have before. But this time, he slowly looked between me at the door. At least, I think he did—it was hard to tell whether his gaze was swapping between the door and me, or Mr. Knot. Either way, I took the hint and left for class.

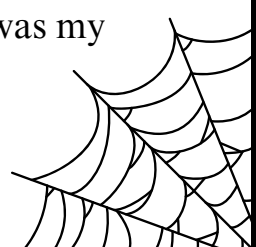
When I got back for tea that night, we all sat down as normal. I sat down first—tea was really the only time I came downstairs after class. It was a good way to come back to my art with fresh eyes. My sister arrived next. Her latest medical exams were beginning around then, and she was looking as tired as you’d expect—messy hair, drooping eyes, the works. She often ate with us in her pyjamas, which she changed into the instant she got home to start her revision. She’d accepted the fact that she’d study until she fell asleep years ago. My father was last, and brought the food in with him from the kitchen like he always did. Not because my sister or I couldn’t cook, but because he always insisted on doing it. He looked just as tired as the rest of us though, despite his insistence that he enjoyed the cooking.

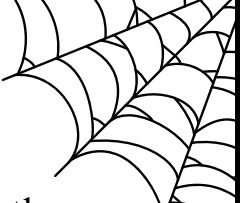
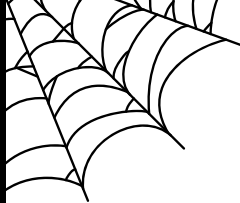
Mr Knot came in after that, like He always did. Silently, confidently. He sat down like He was my mother. He waited for my father’s food—which He never ate—like He was my brother. Like He wasn’t born of an empty space.

I stared Him down, but He just stared back, knife and fork in hand, It took me that long to realise He was wearing one of my mother’s favourite green summer dresses.

‘How dare you?’ I screamed at Him again, suddenly aware that I was leaning over the table, flipping my plate out of my hands and onto Mr. Knot. ‘How dare you... you... pretend? You are not her.’

My father and my sister watched in silence. The only sound in the room was my





gravy-soaked mashed potato dripping off of Mr. Knot's face and slapping the table in thick, wet clumps. He didn't react; He never did. I couldn't stand the silence.

It took a few hours for my father to come and see me. It then took him a couple tries to work himself up to coming into my room. I think he thought I didn't see him outside, through the sliver of the landing light the ajar door was revealing. When he came in, he was fidgeting in front of the door—he always plays with his wedding ring; it's a nervous tick. He was making shapes with his lips, but whether he was thinking out loud or murmuring under his breath I couldn't tell. Eventually, he stepped over my piles of clothes, and sat down next to me on my scrunched-up bedsheets—where I was sat scrunched up, cradling my legs with my chin on my knees.

'Hey, Frey,' he started. That's where he ended too. The timeless silence was nice, in a way. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been alone with my father. I wanted to enjoy it a little before I asked the question that had been burning on my mind for months. A question I didn't want Mr. Knot to hear—though I'm sure He had his ways.

'Why is He here?' I asked. I couldn't take all of the accusation out of my voice. My father turned to me like I was a puppy chewing the wires he'd forgotten to tuck away before bringing me home. 'I don't want Him here anymore than you do, Frey.'

'Then why let Him in?'

A sigh. 'I didn't, Frey. He came in by Himself.'

'He came in with *you*.' I could feel the gelatine grit of a sad anger building in my throat. 'You sat Him down at the dinner table that night, in mum's place.' My father winced. 'You *introduced* Him.'

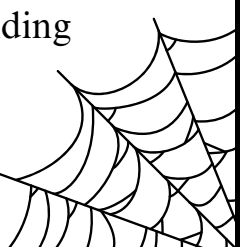
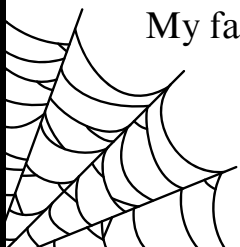
A pause. 'Frey... Do you remember seeing Him before that night?'

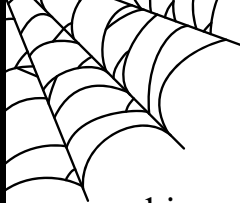
I thought hard. Images of a stiff man in a tight suit came back to me, mingled in with crowds, in the corners of family meetings... but they were blurry. I wasn't sure if I was making them up. It was almost like—

'I thought so,' my father said. He took my hand. 'Frey, He was going to find you eventually. He finds all of us at some point. I thought it best that you meet Him for the first time with me. With your family. Together.'

'We aren't together anymore.'

My father's mouth spoke silent tongues in response, for a while, before finding





his voice.

‘How many times have you shut Him out of your room, Frey, just to turn around and see Him again?’

I drew my knees in closer with my arms. ‘Once or twice,’ I lied.

‘Have you ever wondered why He always comes back?’

The gravel in me melted into a single lump in my throat. I knew what was coming.

‘It’s because, for better or worse, He’s part of us now.’ My father was looking away from me. It was like he was giving a soliloquy on opening night. ‘He’s part of all of us, because He Is... He’s.... connected to her. We must respect that.’

‘I just...’ I started, barely. ‘I just want Him to—’

My father pulled me in close as tears cut me off by running, warm and wet like lifeblood, down my face. As I sobbed into his shoulder, I watched as Mr. Knot made His way into my room. He gently closed the door behind Him, and took His usual place in my corner to watch me.

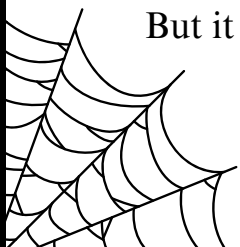
Especially vivid to me in that moment was, through watery vision, his change in appearance. Gone were my mother’s clothes, her demeanour, her belongings—all replaced by scruffy pyjamas, of all things. But even more stark was His change from a person into... something else. He still looked human, and still recognisably Himself, though His features had changed to the point I could now look at Him for more than a few seconds at a time.

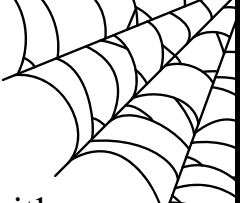
No, the change was in His... that *blurriness*. Now, there was something radiant about Him instead. Something that spoke of His connection to something more-than-mortal. Something Biblical, with all the awesome terror that implies. Above all, though, I felt an urge to talk to Him. An urge I repressed.

From that point on, Mr. Knot took it upon Himself to follow me not only around the house, but outside of it too. He came with me to class, to my friends’ houses, everywhere. It didn’t matter how much I shouted at Him. I never really got used to it, but I did eventually learn to ignore the glaring inhumanity of His constant presence, and the conversations it tempted.

Despite my best efforts, I began to notice a pattern in his outfits: anywhere public, He wore that pseudo-tailored suit. When I was alone with my friends, He chose trousers and a turtleneck. Then, at home, He was back into His scraggly pyjamas. I wasn’t entirely sure why He did it. I hated that I noticed.

But it was easy enough to disregard.





By this time, I was a few weeks into my final semester at university—and with it, I had my first final piece to complete: a sculpture representing a period of art history. Glad to have a fresh task, I threw myself into it, excited by the fact art history was the field my mother spent her life exploring. On the other hand, I had pushed her teachings down so far deep that couldn't find them all. Not by myself, at least. I remembered my mother had written a paper on an ancient art style I'd loved the look of—but not much more.

It took me opening her door to remember that I would only find her office empty. Mr. Knot wasn't even in there, waiting for me in her clothes—He was lingering behind me, looking at me as though He could give me all the answers if I just asked. I rolled up the sleeves of my jumper, and opened the filing cabinet I remembered my mother using the most.

When I found nothing but financial paperwork, I moved to a cupboard. And then the next. Then her drawers. Then her desk. By time I was done, I was surrounded by a mass of paper I didn't need on every surface. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought Mr. Knot looked smug at the sight.

I threw a wad of tax returns at Him regardless. They hit the wall with a surprisingly violent rustle. Moments later the door flew open, and I winced at the thought of my mother coming in and seeing the state I'd made of her work. Of course, she didn't come. But my father had.

'Freya, what in God's name—'

'I'm sorry,' I said, quietly. His voice may have been raised, his face bright red, but my father still heard. He still paused. If only for a second.

'Sorry? Freya, you've torn the room apart! Her room, Freya. *Hers.*'

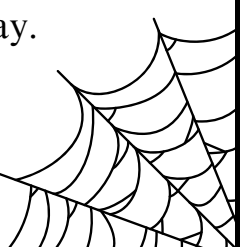
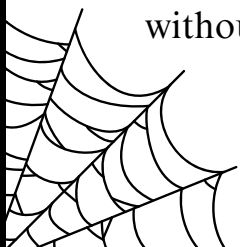
To the surprise of both of us, my father fell to his knees among the scattered remains of his wife's life.

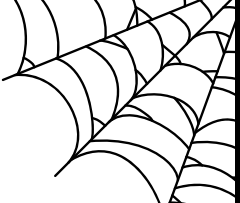
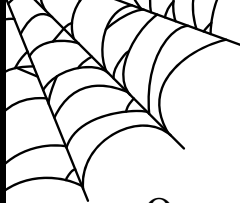
'I don't know where she liked things, Frey,' he began to sob. 'I don't...'

'I'm sorry,' I said, again, and then silently began to put the papers back where I found them as best I could. It took me a couple of hours; it took my father longer to leave the room. Mr. Knot stood watching the entire thing in arrogant silence.

Back in my room, alone with Him, I wracked my brain every way I knew how. But every book was immaterial. Every internet search irrelevant.

I watched days pass like this, felt the sculpture begin to form in my head, but without the supporting research I just couldn't imagine how to put it to clay.





One night, I simply stared at my wall, trying desperately to remember something, anything about this style I'd been so in love with. Except, I wasn't staring at my wall at all—I found myself staring at Mr. Knot.

'...he's... connected to her.'

The thought drifted through my head. I swiped at it, but I couldn't push it back fast enough this time. I sighed with disappointment.

'Do you know what I'm looking for?' I asked Him.

He stared in silence—but not through me. His eyes burned into me. Those Biblical eyes...

'Perhaps... perhaps you could ask my mother? Pramila Diggory? She'd know.' People did that kind of thing with the Biblical all the time, didn't they? I remember wondering how they did it.

'She's an Art Historian. A really good one. She'll know exactly what I'm looking for.'

Nothing.

'I could ask her for you. If you'd let me.'

Silence.

'I can pay you? A tribute? Worship? Whatever.'

He looked at my back garden, and then back at me. I almost fell down the stairs on the way outside. Lucky my family were heavy sleepers.

'Now what?' I asked, my breath condensing around us. I remember shivering—but not feeling cold.

The same stare. Though now, with what seemed like an air of satisfaction.

'What do you want? Praise?' I started marching through the garden. 'Flowers? Bugs? Dirt? Maybe yo—would you look at me?'

I watched His gaze as it followed a squirrel through the trees, oblivious to me.

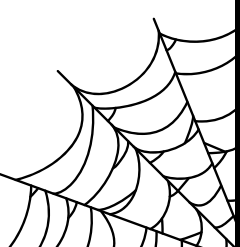
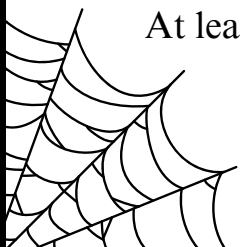
'You'll let me see my mother for a squirrel?'

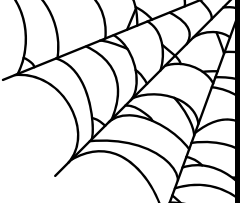
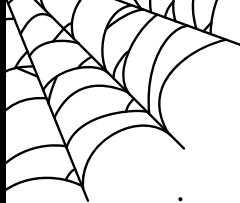
Mr. Knot turned back to me, His head slightly tilted.

I spent weeks tearing through our garden—and even the nearby fields—desperately trying to catch a squirrel. I tried to catch Mr. Knot's clues, followed subtle glances and gestures to whatever tree or squirrel I thought they were meant to lead. I climbed trees, crawled through grass... I even set traps.

Still, I only ever came up with cuts and bruises from tree bark and rocks. No ticks luckily. I told my family I was exploring for a Nature Drawing module.

At least, I told them that until, days late, an email informed me I had long





missed the final's deadline. My first failing grade shortly followed.

*

It was Lauren who found me crying over my laptop in my room, when she came to ask me down for tea. She sat down on my bed, slipped an arm around me, and let me cry for a while.

'Want to talk, Frey?' Lauren kept her voice low.

'I failed my class.' I spoke in between sobs.

'That's not like you, and I know your uni knows that.'

'How did I let myself fail, Laur? I never fail.'

'You can't be perfect all the time, Frey. Especially not now.'

'But I can be, Laur. I can be. If I could just find a wa—'

Lauren grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me to face her.

'No, Freya. You can't. Not... not without tearing yourself apart.'

I looked at her and let her hold me for a while. 'How do you do it, Laur?' I asked her afterwards. 'You're always two grades above me.'

Lauren turned her attention to my plain bedsheets, momentarily. 'Your uni will give you another chance, Frey. How about I help you ace it after tea?'

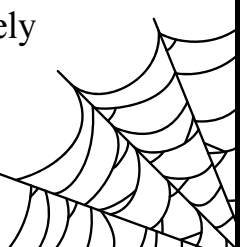
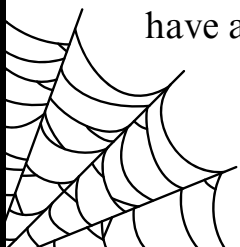
I didn't have it in me to turn my sister down. She took me through some of her research and brainstorming techniques that night—how to use bibliographies to find fresh ideas, that sort of thing. I even got a good head start on the other essay-based finals with her, and started feeling like I'd make my grades back until I... I just didn't.

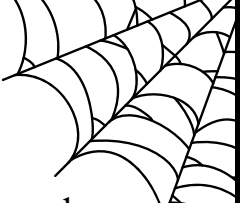
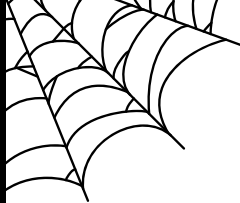
The moment I was alone with my work, I turned to Mr. Knot, who was sat on my bed.

'So, what is the point of you, then?' I asked, looking through Him. 'You don't replace her, you can't bring her back... you're just... here. Why are you here? Why am I still...?'

He hadn't spoken; I no longer expected a reply from Him. But, He had changed. Gone was that aura. Gone were those clothes. Gone was that humanity. A black, barely-human-shaped blurry mass sat across from me, like a shadow without a caster. It was all very cliché.

As the days writhed by, I began to notice that this new version of Mr. Knot did have an aura after all. I should have noticed, as I was spending progressively





more of my time with Him. It was just as cliché as Him—dark, oppressive, and comfortable.

I kept trying to work despite it, because of course I did. But after a few gesso-ed canvases, a few underlined titles in essay documents, and a tin-foil armature, I found I just had nothing left. It was much easier to sit in bed, and watch Him watch me, a dark smudge in the corner. Before long, I couldn't even find my art tools.

It wasn't long until my university sent a letter telling me I'd failed out of the year. My father told me a few days later that he'd managed to get the university to let me repeat the year based on my circumstances. I don't remember either thing.

By that point, I could barely find my toothbrush on a good day—if I even got up. I had taken to scratching at my arms until they bled and burnt, while He watched, because that was the only thing in a day I could feel apart from “low”, whatever that means. Things went continued like that for... I don't know how long.

I was bleeding particularly badly one night when things changed again. The first aid kit in my room had long-since been used up or disappeared—I don't remember which—so I had taken to using the family one, which was in the bathroom. However, when I went to get it that night, it was also missing. Not just that. My sister's favourite moisturiser was missing, and I definitely hadn't used it. My father's shaver was missing too. He shaved every day.

Toilet roll sufficed as bandages that night—my mind was on the mystery.

Where would they put their things? Had they ended up with my lost things? I searched the house, save the other bedrooms, as I didn't want to wake anyone. Eventually, the process of elimination led me to my mother's office.

On my way, I was stopped by a dark shape silhouetted by moonlight at the corridor's opposite end. I turned around, and sure enough, Mr. Knot was behind me. Not at the end of the corridor.

‘Frey? What are you... oh, your arms!’

My father ran over and cradled my arms, causing me to wince. I felt his stubble against my cheek. Alcohol was on his breath; he never drank.

‘Dad...’

‘What's going on, Frey? Are you okay?’

‘The office. Mr. Knot...’



My father looked at me as though he understood. I'm still not sure whether he did.

'Sure, Frey. The office.'

We walked in together, and everything was how I'd left it. It was neat. Tidy. Dead.

All, except for the pile on Mum's desk.

My father and I walked over. Mr. Knot cut us off and held an arm out.

Through His shadowy form, I could see everything. My first-aid kit. Lauren's moisturiser. My father's shaver. More. The doll I lost when I was twelve.

Lauren's tooth that she dropped before the tooth fairy could take... and one of my old sculptures. One that Mum had made with Lauren and me for her 40th birthday.

It was in that style I loved. The one I'd forgotten. The style of stone-age fertility art from the Maltese Hagar Qim temple, which Mum had researched.

I looked at my father, and took his arm. He nodded, and together we walked through Mr. Knot. Once I had some bandages, we spent the night returning things to their homes. I woke my sister up to show her what we'd found. And then we all made a plan.

The next morning, mercifully, was a Saturday. The four of us sat together at breakfast, and I saw it for the first time. My father looked exhausted. I realised this was the first time he'd been home during a Saturday daytime in months. And my sister... she looked disembowelled. She was barely speaking, barely eating. I wondered if she was still studying.

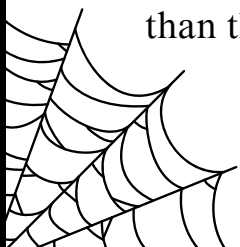
On the table in front of us was the Maltese sculpture. I started our plan. When I spoke, I spoke to the sculpture. It was easier that way.

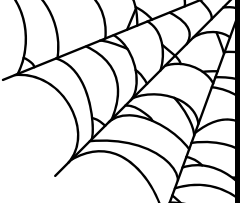
'I've been struggling to... do anything. I can't work. I can't sleep. I can't get up.' I looked at my arms. 'I've... done things to myself to survive.'

I tried to ignore my sister and my father looking at me. Thankfully, my father went next, and our collective attention shifted.

'Prami—your mother's... your mother's insurance company refused to cover the cost of the equipment that broke at the cave-in, and of her services. I had to get two jobs to keep the house, and I... I'm not coping.'

Lauren glanced at the sculpture next. 'I failed my UCAT exam for medical school. I've been studying so hard to retake it that... I think that was easier than this.'





‘Your mother,’ my father told everyone at the table, ‘wouldn’t want us living this way. She left behind too much good for that. We can’t enjoy that if we keep running away from the fact she’s gone.’

‘I miss her, Dad,’ said Lauren. There were too many emotions in her voice to count.

‘Me too,’ I said, looking at the sculpture. ‘She’s all around us, Laur. In the work she left behind, in the art she loved, in all of us, in...’

‘...Connected to her,’ I thought again.

We all turned to look at Mr. Knot. He looked like he did when he first arrived now, all dressed up in his suit. Except, the suit was undone, the tie loosened. His hair was messy. For the first time, he smiled smoothly. The blurriness was gone.

‘I’m what happens,’ he said. His voice was warm. Understanding. ‘To love, when you give it nowhere to go.’

The three of us watched, surprisingly unsurprised, as he continued. ‘I’m how you learn that you must love the history rather than the hole.’

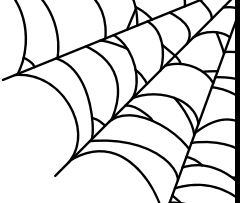
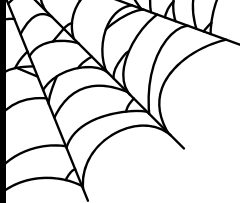
Mr. Knot was no longer sitting before us. In his place—or I should say hers—was my mother, Pramila Diggory. Except she wasn’t.

‘And once you do, we’re all able to be what we’re meant to be,’ He finished.

And then She disappeared. Except He didn’t. She’s stayed with me ever since.

That morning discussion around the table which He pushed us to didn’t solve our issues. Far from it. We’re still processing it even now, in a way. That’s why I still try to tell this story to people who I think need it. Because He made us realise that we needed to take the time to talk—that sometimes, pushing and pulling will only leave your hands raw.

Some knots just have to be untangled.



A Traveller's Quest

Written by: Will Wade
Edited by: Benjamin Smith

‘Come on, you can do it!’

The traveller’s bike sputtered again, coughing black smoke onto the winding road behind it for the hundredth time as it wound to an ugly stop.

‘Or maybe not...’ The traveller sighed and finally cut off the engine.

Only a couple of hours ago, the traveller had been speeding down the motorway to the next location on his ever-growing to-visit list. It was just his luck, with the help of his aged satnav, that he was led off into the meandering lanes of North Yorkshire, only to end up stranded in some village off the Roman road.

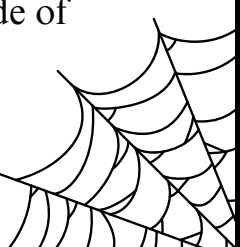
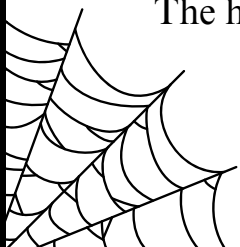
That was not to say it wasn’t a decent place to stop. On the way in, it’d looked like the kind of village where everyone knew everyone. The small and winding roads were lined with equally small houses that were so picturesque and quaint they looked like they were made for dolls rather than people, and the traveller could only remember passing a singular shuttered corner shop on the way in—though, he was a bit busy trying to encourage his engine to stop coughing. It was so small, in fact, that he could hear doors opening as residents peaked out to gawk at the dying bike.

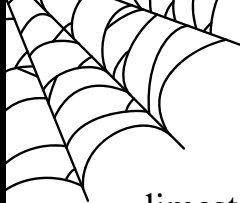
The traveller poked a bit more at his bike, lightly cursing out his engine as it sputtered, spitting a mouthful of engine oil onto his jeans as it declared itself well and truly dead, then finally unseated himself to look around.

He was right when he thought he heard doors opening. About twenty sets of eyes were watching him from doorways, with more peeking out from windows. In fact, the house the traveller pulled up in front of might’ve been the only one with its door still shut, though he could just about glimpse movement from the lace curtains in the window.

The traveller tapped his thighs a couple of times as he flicked through his mental list of options. Unfortunately, with such a new and rural village, he found the list was limited. So limited that there was only one obvious choice: asking a local.

The house in front of him was near-identical to the rest of the village, made of





limestone brick and deceptively squat. The only differentiating features were the bright red door painted with a black '14' and the front step leading directly onto the street.

The traveller finally squeezed his fidgeting hand into a fist, took a deep breath, and walked to the house to knock on the door. For a few nerve-wrenching minutes, no one answered until there was the thump and bustle of someone rushing about. Then the door flew open, and there, in a long flowery skirt, a smart blazer, and horned glasses, stood an elderly woman.

The woman gave a cordial closed-lip smile. 'Well, hello. Can I help you?'

The traveller gave a similar smile and scratched his neck sheepishly. 'Yeah, I'm really sorry, but I've broken down just outside your door, and I was wondering if you know anywhere nearby I can get it sorted out and maybe stay overnight?'

The woman nodded shortly, then stood back. 'Come inside, you can call the AA, and we can get you a place to sleep at the inn further up the village.'

The traveller released a breath he hadn't known he was holding, and followed the woman indoors, only faltering to ask, 'What about payment?'

The woman only shut the front door and bustled past him into what he presumed was the kitchen. 'Don't worry about that. You're the first out-of-town-er to arrive in Wimby in a good while. I just ask for a favour in return before you go on your way. Nothing too big.'

The traveller followed the woman into the kitchen, sitting down at the kitchen table as the woman presumably made a cup of tea. 'Ummm... sure? What is it?'

'You call the AA now. Tomorrow, I need you to go to the nearest park, Bluebell Wood, and get rid of the thing that's been terrorising us for the past few decades.'

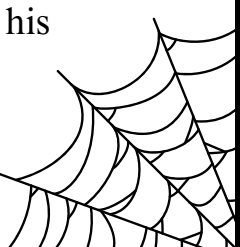
'Okay?' The traveller started tapping his thighs again. Something about this unsettled him, but he still couldn't help but think, how hard could it be if she was begging a stranger of all people to help?

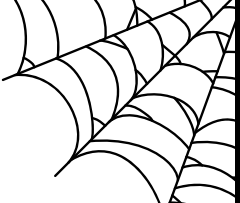
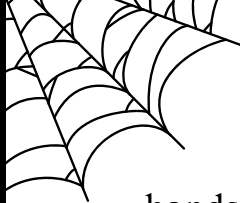
He was still convincing himself when he checked out of the inn the next day after tossing and turning all night.

The sun was high when the traveller carefully approached the woods.

He'd stopped by the old woman's house between the inn and the woods, thanking her profusely for paying for his stay as she fussed with his jacket.

'Never you mind that,' she'd muttered, taking his empty cup of tea out of his





hands. 'Just remember this before you go: Don't trust anyone. Don't tell anyone your name. And for God's sake, don't let anyone lead you to a secondary location.'

At the time, he'd simply nodded, taking her advice even if he wouldn't use it, but as the traveller approached Bluebell Wood, he felt like he should've perhaps taken it with more of a grain of salt.

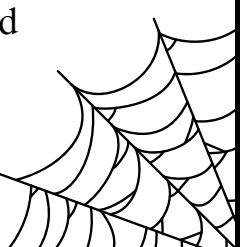
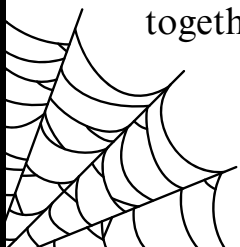
It honestly didn't look any different to any of the other parks he'd seen. Bluebell Wood was an outcrop of trees in the middle of a grassy hill. The entrance, if you could call the unfathomable fortress of trees that, was framed by Walker's crisp packets, Monster cans, and an overgrown, smashed-up JCB. When he looked down, amongst the patches of dandelions and chickweed, aluminium winked, and every step crinkled. The trees may have been dark and foreboding, but the sheer amount of trash from daring teenagers and hubristic planning committees was definitely not.

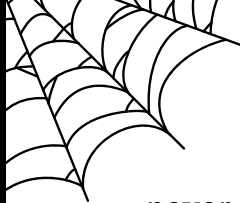
That didn't mean that the traveller wasn't grateful for the gravel path into it. The trees were knitted so close to each other that he wouldn't have known where to start otherwise. But it didn't seem as threatening as the old woman had made it out to be.

It took the corner shop litter fading to foliage for the traveller to start seeing what made the place so foreboding, though nonetheless tempting and special.

It started with the way the woods tried to be helpful. As he'd walked, even as the firm gravel path devolved into compact dirt, scattered with forest debris and studded with easy-to-miss obstacles, the pattern of the foliage had grown familiar, and in some ways had even started to turn helpful. The dark trees turned to shade from the hot summer's day, and wild red currants seemed to spring up before his eyes.

The dappled light streaking from the leaf-shrouded heavens painted the shade green, and even the dampest patches of undergrowth were decorated with white puffs of flowers. The traveller crept around brambles that freely displayed their blackberries like video game health boxes, while dock leaves made up for any patches of nettles placed in the vicinity of the cleared path. Even discounting the kindness of the woods, the air was cool and fresh and smelt of petrichor and damp soil. Flowers like daisies and buttercups bloomed in crops alongside bluebells and wild garlic, not a snapped stem to be seen as they huddled together. The traveller's breath caught in his throat; it was like humans had





never existed here.

It didn't take long for it to go back downhill. It started with the path, as the previously charming lack of it became nearly-endlessly frustrating. Sticks snapped under his feet, announcing his presence to the entire woodland population, meanwhile polished stones made his boots skid forward.

Then the trees started inching their way into his path. Every gnarled root seemed to deliberately trip the traveller up while yew trees and flowering shrubs shuffled strategically into his space, contorting him into impossible shapes until he could barely breathe.

And all the while, an ice-cold breeze whistled through the entire wood, carving the cold into his bones and jingling the flowers so that the traveller could almost hear them gossiping.

'He wouldn't be using trees for handles if his boots weren't so heavy,' A sprout of hemlock sneered as the traveller wiped his sticky hands on his trousers after a tree smeared them with orange sap.

The buttercups ducked their blossoms and frowned. 'He'll be gone soon anyway. That's if he doesn't turn back from trampling us.'

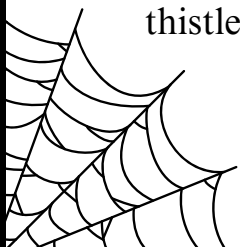
A chill trickled down the traveller's spine, but he just shook his head. 'It's only been two hours; you cannot be losing your marbles already.'

Then again, maybe he was.

The compact dirt path had shrunk into itself as the foliage around took over, on a mission to block intruders. The traveller's limbs and head started to brush against the branches and leaves as the natural ceiling lowered, and he began to squint as the green tint got more opaque. The wild raspberry and bramble bushes became sticking points as their thorns pricked him through his shirt, and the dock leaves became near unreachable as other plants pushed them out of the way. With every step, his heart constricted, like his ribs had a vendetta to choke him as the woods closed in.

With every step the traveller knew in his heart that humans had never existed here, and the plants wanted it to stay that way.

Eventually, the path disappeared near-completely, leaving the traveller to wade blindly through the shrubbery, increasingly unnerved as he held onto unusually sturdy hedges and thick tree trunks. All the while, he could hear the vague static of spikes brushing against his jeans, the ghostly reminder of the nettles and thistles he couldn't see as the trees became so dense not even light could breach





the canopy.

The traveller took in a deep breath, thanking god for the sturdiness of his clothes as he plunged onwards. If it wasn't for them, he almost certainly would've turned back by now.

Eventually, dense woodland gave way, and just as the traveller wrenched himself forward, the foliage seemed to spit him out.

The traveller yelped and scrunched his face up against the rush of warmth and light before he landed face-first with a thump onto a patch of grass.

The ground beneath him was soft, like he'd landed on an old trampoline sitting at the bottom of someone's garden. The traveller laid there for a moment, eyes closed as the grass tickled his nose, appreciating the feeling. Even the air was soft, with a heavy, rosy warmth like a weighted blanket. He almost didn't want to open his eyes.

Even so, he pushed himself onto his back, flinching against the harsh light as it stabbed his eyelids before forcing himself to sit up and wrench them open. He then froze into stunned silence.

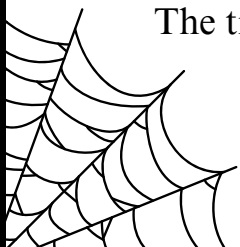
All around was a miniature meadow. Emerald green grass, reaching up to the traveller's ankles and dotted with tiny flowers, carpeted nearly every inch of ground, right to the shadowy treeline. Meanwhile, a gap in the canopy above showcased the blue sky like a painting, adding sun into the summery yellow-green tint of the clearing.

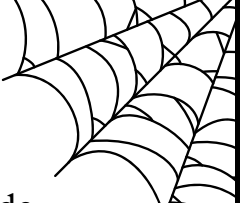
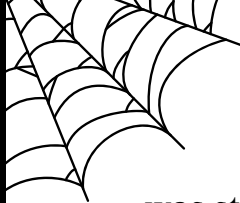
The traveller took in as many deep breaths of the fresh air as he could. It was all he could do to savour it after the oppression of the woods behind him, as he pushed himself back onto his feet and brushed the remaining forest debris off his trousers.

Standing up in the clearing revealed even more details, especially as the traveller began to stroll along its edge.

The clearing was a perfect circle, with gaps in the treeline at equal intervals. The traveller assumed they functioned like exits back into the woods, going in each of the four cardinal directions. It felt like he was inching around a giant compass. And he supposed the pin would be in the middle of the circle of pink and white mushrooms right at the centre of the clearing, glistening like someone had dipped them in a crystalline sugar glaze.

The traveller began by looking back to where he came from, the North exit. It





was strange; the solid wall of trees that had spit him out had somehow made way for a doorway of curving oak trees with guardian sunflowers, radiating the same warmth as the clearing as if it'd never housed the oppressive cold of a shaded forest during the British summertime.

The traveller raised an eyebrow and drummed his fingers restlessly against his thigh. The oddness settled uncomfortably next to the old woman's warning, but as he turned towards the East exit, the thought disappeared as fast as it had appeared, and his fingers stilled.

The East exit was chillier than the North, and the grass beneath the traveller's feet felt crispier before it transitioned into a leafy mulch, framed by steadily growing pumpkins and pink blooms.

The traveller shivered as the breeze from the East twisted around his arm before he yanked it away.

The West exit had a similar pull. A warmth eased into the traveller and tugged at his arm as he peered into the entrance to it, observing the way bluebells and snowdrops seemed to crop up in the most random spaces, occasionally interrupted by the fast-faded remains of daffodils. Still, he pulled his arm away and finally faced the South exit.

The South was the darkest of the four, framed by black birch trees and holly bushes whose branches beckoned the traveller with gnarled fingers.

The traveller leaned forward into the makeshift doorway and gasped as a sharp chill wrapped itself around his arms like a cloak. His fingers found his thighs again as he shrank into himself, but he wondered if perhaps this exit was the best bet for finding the monster the old woman had feared, though he'd mourn leaving the warmth of the clearing.

The traveller tapped his fingers a few more times before consciously scrunching his hands into fists and pushing forward—

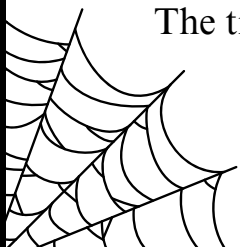
'Boo!'

The traveller jumped. His heart leapt in his chest as he spun around, only to be greeted by... a little girl.

'Um, hi?'

'I got you! I got you!' The little girl bounced on her toes, her long hair swishing around her and her eyes crinkled with glee. She wore a puffy red skirt patterned like flower petals that moved with her.

The traveller let out a breathless laugh as his heart rate returned to normal.





‘You did.’

‘And you're new here. I haven't seen you before, and—’ She tipped forward on her toes, sniffing the air around the traveller. ‘—you certainly don't smell like here.’

The traveller laughed and backed away from the sniffing girl, scratching the back of his neck. ‘Yeah, I'm just passing through.’

‘Passing through to do what? Why are you here if you’re just passing through?’

‘I was contracted out by the village to get rid of something, although,’ the traveller hesitated as he remembered the mission he was sent on and the old woman’s warning. ‘Are you sure you should be here? There are supposed to be dangerous things in these woods.’

The girl shrugged, smiling. ‘I have permission if that's what you're asking.’

The traveller laughed nervously again and crouched to get on the girl’s level. ‘But don't you have parents that'll worry or something?’

The girl shrugged again and said, ‘Of a sort, but as I said, I have permission.’

‘Permission of your parents in the village?’

The girl seemed to finally get fed up with this adult questioning her as she rolled her eyes, ‘Well, that is where the people are.’

The traveller huffed good-naturedly. He didn’t blame her for being fed up, he would be too if he was being asked unnecessary questions at age seven, but there was something in him that pulled to get her out, away from the monster he’d been sent to deal with.

He offered his hand out to the girl.

‘Well then, would you mind if I took you to them? I have some work to do if I want to repay the people who’ve been so nice to me, and I really don’t want you getting hurt.’

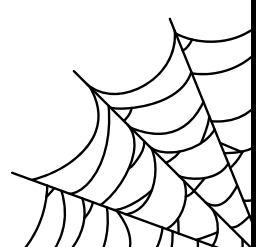
The girl stared at the hand for a moment then placed her hand into it with a firm nod. ‘I wouldn't mind. It's what you owe for stepping into my safe place.’

‘Of course, I’m sure I do,’ the traveller smiled, then straightened up. ‘Maybe you’ll be able to come back another day.’

The girl gave back a closed-mouth smile, but pulled the traveller’s arm when he started to move further back into the clearing.

‘Wait! Before we go!’

Her tiny voice echoed around the clearing with its power and the traveller looked back down at her, wide-eyed, as he hummed in response.





‘May I have your name, Mr Traveller?’

It wasn’t a strange request, yet the traveller still hesitated as he stared into the girl’s wide eyes. Some dismal part of him resisted it, screaming and shouting until he was forced to reason with himself, because it was only a young girl, after all; what reason would she have to hurt him?

‘My name is Wilbur,’ he shivered as a cold breeze caught the back of his neck. ‘What about yours?’

The girl straightened and her closed-mouth smile broadened. ‘I don’t give my name to strangers, but you can call me Mari.’

‘Okay, Mari. I’ll lead you to your parents.’

Mari’s smile broadened even further, cutting into her cheeks, and Wilbur squeezed her hand before turning back to the clearing in front of them.

Although, looking up at the thicket, the area felt extremely alien all of a sudden. The pink mushrooms were still there, sparkling in the sun, but other than that...

Wilbur was sure he’d come in through an exit in the hedges. He guided Mari further around the clearing to look closer, but there wasn’t even a shadow where the path had been. It was strange; he remembered the oak trees and the warmth. *He was sure—*

Wilbur felt his eyebrows pinch together as he turned to look down at Mari. ‘I’m sorry, I was sure there was an exit somewhere here. I suppose we’ll have to try another path.’

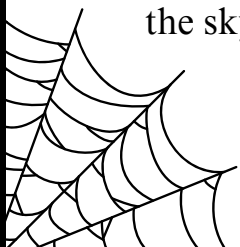
Mari blinked at him and nodded. When paired with the unnatural smile, her blue eyes had started to feel like they were pinning Wilbur to the floor, like marbles staring him down from the face of a porcelain doll.

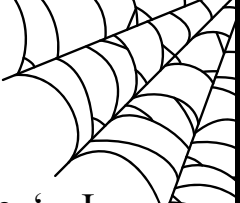
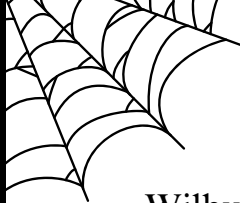
He gulped and shook himself. All children looked creepy in the right light, and that’s all it was: the light. He then tried to lead Mari away towards the eastern path.

He took three steps this time before faltering. Wilbur couldn’t feel the pull of the eastern path at all. A void opened up in his stomach; that meant the eastern path had disappeared too.

‘I’m sorry, the eastern path is gone too—’ Wilbur glanced at Mari, bewildered, then froze.

She’d tucked her hair behind one ear, revealing a pointed tip soaring towards the sky.





Wilbur breathed in deeply and slowly, recentring himself before continuing, ‘—I guess we’ll just have to look at the last two.’

Mari once again nodded and let Wilbur pull her towards the western path, only stumbling a little when he abruptly stopped.

There were no snowdrops. Wilbur’s breath caught in his throat. Both they and the western path seemed to have melted into thin air.

He took a step back, then slowly turned towards Mari. ‘I suppose the southern path is all we—’

Wilbur yelped and tried to stumble away from the girl, only to fall when her hand helped fast onto his.

All he could see were teeth, needle-sharp and dripping with saliva. It was the maw of a viperfish cut into Mari’s face as she grinned literally from ear-to-ear, her eyes shining with childish malice from above.

Wilbur swallowed down a mouthful of bile.

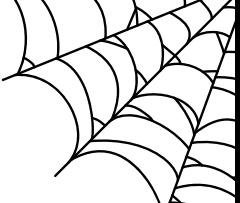
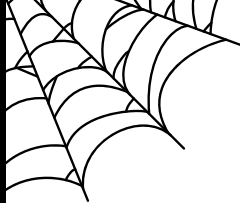
‘Mari?’ he begged as he began to struggle.

Mari tugged him back up onto his feet, not flinching as Wilbur’s hand writhed in hers. ‘It’s okay, Wilbur. I’ll lead us to my parents.’

For all he could tug, Wilbur’s arm refused to move from Mari’s as she pulled him towards the mushrooms at the centre of the clearing and the southern path beyond. Even as it began to crunch and searing waves of pain began to radiate up to his shoulder, it wouldn’t go limp, dragging him as the world began to grow dimmer and dimmer.

‘Wait, Mari, stop,’ Wilbur kept begging, slurring, until a wave of cold rushed over him.

And this time he knew what he heard when a buttercup muttered, ‘I told you he’d be gone soon,’ and the world went black.



The Belly of Semele

Written by: Sadiqah Miah

Edited by: Benjamin Smith

But when you have more than enough to eat, your hunger doesn't end. -
Kongdej Jaturanrasmee

*

Scientia potentia est: Knowledge is power - *Francis Bacon*

*

Part 1: Enlightenment

Hunger is never just about wanting to eat. It is also the desire to take what you want at all costs.

There was an undergraduate student called Semele. Once a gifted child, her academic life drifted into the blandness, and for so long she was stuck there, unable to outsmart her way forward. She looked for sparkling eyes and all she found were turned faces. Such was the company she had, as shallow and flavourless as foam. Since then, she struggled to rebuild the smoky ruins of her prime.

She wanted so much more, but she thought she wasn't smart enough. Melancholy wasn't for her predicament. Rather, Semele was suspended in a gnawing frustration that lasted for days on end. There was no one else to blame but herself.

Frustration, especially one that has been ruminating like this, has traces of danger in it. Everyone knows what it is like when you can do nothing but tremble with grit teeth, nails piercing into palms. A terrible combination of the fragile and monstrous in a paralysed body. We tap into something murderous and feel we could kill somebody, kill ourselves. Our conscience, luckily, keeps us from painting our hands red. All the chaos that is boiling on the inside is forced to be palatable, is buried with a swallow. We don't show ourselves the



destruction and the horror we want to see. We may play the fantasy of our fury in imagination, but we deny ourselves the act, again and again, as if to keep intact, to prove that we can bear it all.

Semele carried this weight.

But as an exile feeds on the hope of return, university was a new beginning for Semele, an era of redemption. She would work harder. She would try to revitalise the reputation she once failed to hold up.

But still, everything was too difficult. Seminar after seminar, she grew confused. As always, she reached out for something beyond the norm but found herself trapped in the general. As her peers doused the discussions with ambitious language, Semele's only thought was that this was how she should have spoken too.

Meanwhile, her words entangled themselves at the bottom of her throat, pushing to be swallowed, to disappear forever. She was always conscious of her arid mouth, her intellectual drought.

When her essays were marked, her personal tutor coated his pity.

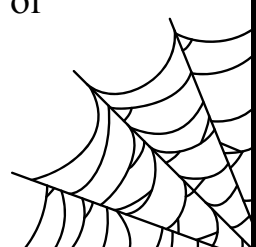
"It has potential," he'd say, smiling synthetically. "It's almost there. I believe in you."

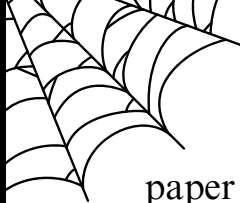
Almost and nearly were not enough. After her meetings, she carried the empty encouragement in her jellied skin, and only after trudging back to her dorm room did she let it sink in. She let the frustration grow and breathe within her, causing her deep pain.

Curled up on her seat, she ached for her tutor to drop the carrot of approval he'd been dangling above her. She wished to mix complexities into her seminar discussions like the others did.

Semele pulled out her new assignments and her books on the desk. An hour or two had passed and the student's pen hardly kissed the page. Semele could not hold back the frustration bubbling out of her body. In class, she would have remained still, beating this beast back into her. But in a room alone, what need is there to be put together and delicate? What need is there to keep it all suppressed? As kernels cannot stay hardened against heat, a body cannot house a frustration that has amassed for so long.

Rather than the murderous inclinations one would fantasise, it was Semele's appetite that awakened instead. Grabbing the first book in her sight, she flung it open and gnashed a mouthful of text. She chewed, she swallowed. Shreds of





paper dribbled onto the desk.

But the confounding part was her change of palette. In text, there was a taste that sated her stomach in a way never before — in a way so redemptive and alleviating.

As she ate, the flavour of the stories transformed endlessly on her tongue, from the sweetness of the lyre and the goddesses' beauty that the muses sang oft about, to the bitterness of grieving hearts and blood tipped spears.

Between mouthfuls, she paused to puff in awe; it was not just her stomach getting its fill, but her mind, too, was enlightened with the elixir of knowledge. Her brain buzzed with life. What used to be a dark cavern of ghastly and sad daydreams lit up with ideas and clarity.

Olive oil, warm baths, smooth storytelling and parting gifts; Semele devoured every page.

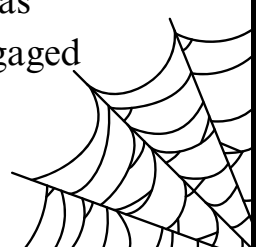
At last, she flung her head back and sighed. The book cover lay flat on her desk.

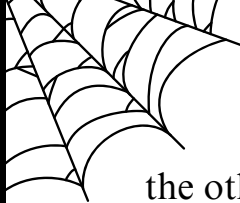
Part II: Ascent

In seminars, Semele was anew. Her words were falling jewels. At first, she was daunted by the eyes that landed on her for the first time, but soon recognised the gleam in them. They shifted in their seats, so that the back of the classroom, where Semele sat, became the front. Talkers were subdued into listeners. With Ovid's *Metamorphosis* lingering on her breath, she drew everyone in, orchestrating a sea of parted lips and enlarged eyes with her words.

"Icarus himself is an interesting exploration of the transformative," she said, straightening her back. "The discontent of entrapment mobilises the desire to flee, that is, upwards. We see Icarus' many forms; peasant, angel and drowned. His most interesting one is his last; to be a bird is to say that his fate is to forever explore, to forever soar, to forever be free. Now, he is stuck in flight. Is the ascent beautiful enough to remain there? Of course. The entire world is at his disposal. As long as he is capable of flight, beauty is in his yoke. By transforming him, the bright-eyed goddess allows him to take what he wants and to recreate his landscape. Though, in transformation, there is always loss. For Icarus, that is his father, his community, his own body."

She listened to herself talk with an intelligence she could hardly believe was hers. She could have talked forever. How smooth her voice was. How engaged





the others were, nodding and humming in agreement. How fun it was to add colour into the conversation. Externally, she paraded humbleness. Internally, she indulged in a gooey hubris.

Her tutor became impressed too. Semele finally saw teeth in his smile, discovered new laugh lines on his face. The rawness of his compliments pleased her.

Eating books had changed everything. To succumb to her hunger for knowledge; there was nothing more right. It made her know, it made her smart, and that was all she cared about.

Alas, books became her meat and drink. Her dorm room became a sacred dining room. Her desk became an altar where the sacrificial books would be ripped apart by excited hands and devoured by the jaws of a hungry girl.

Months passed and her mind was sparkling.

Semele noticed, however, another strange quality to her hunger; once appeased, it soon came back stronger. Since Ovid, her intake had grown massively.

Scattered around her room were only book covers, limp like clipped wings.

It was midnight. Semele had not eaten for the last ten hours. Following every stomach growl was a current of pain. She stumbled her way into the main library through one of the back exits that thrill-seeking students snuck through. Semele walked along the shadowy corridors, inhaling the musk of dormant knowledge, the woody aged scent of books that made her salivate and swallow. She clenched her stomach, leaning forward, groaning; she could no longer wait. She didn't care what books she was eating; she just wanted to know more.

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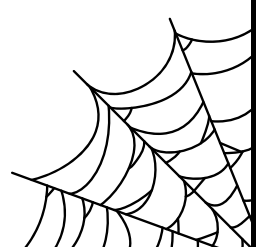
February 15th, 2023

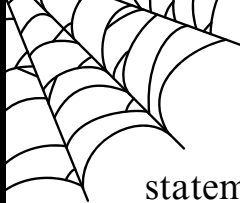
The Daily Tonic

A sudden theft in the main library of Lulusia University has left students and professors in distress. One of the librarians, anonymous, started her shift at 6:00am and was the first to encounter the scene.

“I walked in the law area. Half of the room had its bookshelves swiped clean of its books. Not even a speck of dust.”

The law library has been cordoned as the Henderson County Police are currently on the scene. The Henderson County Theft Office released a





statement saying

“Though it is an unusual case, we will conduct our investigation robustly. We will do our best to bring back normalcy to the university and its students as soon as possible.”

Third year law students are appalled. Lulusia University advises students to consult online sources or borrow from their professors.

*

Semele was on a high. Her mind was fecund with secrets, and with it she breathed fresh air into stale debates, exploded themes into galaxies of meaning. Her voice was the sound of discovery. The other students started to lean towards her like sunflowers, snatching every word that fell from her mouth like famished hatchlings. Semele relished the approval, the reclamation of what she had lost. It was virtuous.

The pleasure, however, was transient. Before long, Semele was hungry again. Stomach growls evolved into a horrid croak, like the rapid clicking of a gas stove, but deeper. She gripped her stomach all day, consoling her acute hunger; a pain that felt like her intestines were cinching up, twisting, and releasing, again and again. The gluttony for books grew more demanding, abrasive to her limits.

To still be hungry after a buffet meant only one thing: there was still much she didn't know. In fact, the more Semele knew, the more she realised how much she didn't know.

Although she was powerful among her peers, she became quickly jaded by their sugary approval like her fickle appetite. Although she was smart, she felt incomplete. She did not know everything, and that irked her like a strand of mango she couldn't pull out between her teeth.

Part III: Descent

The Bible thudded on her desk — she didn't know which version, nor did she care.

Every book Semele ate always alleviated her, and knowledge was always palatable. But her hunger made her hasty and heedless. Her teeth threatened to



tear into the world of godliness, dared to contain within her mortal mind that of the divine. Her appetite for knowledge was never simply about being smarter; it became a recipe for power.

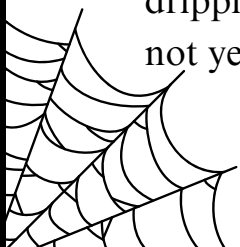
Rather than going straight for the pages, her teeth shredded the leather crust of the Bible. She tasted perfume mingled with the gentle and devout fingers of believers who had held it, kissed it, wept on it; a leather made firm from the beats of hearts alight with incredible faith. The pages were delicate and dissolved on her tongue. In them, she tasted the heat of the sun to the sudden coldness of space and unnamed infinite azures. She delved into the foliage of the garden of Eden. There, she sucked onto Adam's firm knuckles, squelched into his tan skin, clattering her teeth along his ribs. Then she went to Eve; hyper from her locks of golden honey, Semele finished the plump apple she bit into and engorged more of them.

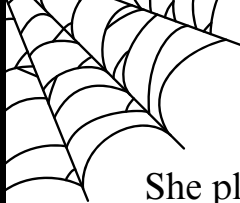
The pleasure of the divine word had superseded anything she'd ever tasted. Her head tilted and eyes rolled back. She exhaled heavy sounds of liberation, of healing. The foggy questions about existence became as clear as blue skies. However, as Semele ate, the back of her head was dominated by a killer migraine, as if someone had swung at her with a baseball bat. She sucked her teeth hard, bewildered at the sudden sensation, but still, kept at her feast. She went for the thorn crowns that snapped like pretzels and the commandments that jammed into her molars like guava seeds. The spiciness of fire and the inky venom of snakes led her to dunk into wells and chalices of wine, filling her mouth with the stench of metal.

The migraine intensified into a succession of pangs that stabbed through like skewers. Semele whimpered, her tears dripping on the pages. She grabbed at her skull, moving her fingers into her hair to feel for the source of her pain. All she dug out was long, stringy blood clots, stuck in her nails and glooping down her fingers like spaghetti.

For someone as smart as Semele, one would think she'd scream for help, call an ambulance. But her famished stomach was more dire to her. In the pursuit for the divine, there was something about mortal pain that became inconsequential to her. Her scorn for her own inadequacy spread into a scorn for it in everything else; now, it included easy flesh and dark blood.

She wiped her hands with a towel that was hung over her chair and left her head dripping. It didn't matter; she would be changed soon anyway. The Bible was not yet finished, and she did not accept leftovers.





She plunged into the pages again; her fangs sinking into the bellies of lambs and other red meats. With one inhale, she slurped the broth of raging storms to the burgundy nectar of figs. She snacked on sunflower seeds and flaky manna melted in her mouth.

Semele belched. She reached out for more, but the wound behind her head zapped like a thunder strike. She screamed, collapsed onto her knees. Her fingers clawed behind her, but her skin sizzled at the slightest touch. Warmth pooled in the pockets of her collarbones and leaked down her back like oil. Bits plopped on the floor with soft splats. She was still screaming, writhing. She couldn't hear the pounding and barging at her door, but only horror, only mortal agony, only the sound of a hungry girl falling.

*

March 3rd, 2023

The Daily Tonic

Reader's discretion is advised. If you are sensitive to graphic description, please proceed with caution.

An undergraduate student from Lulusia University was found dead in her dormitory. Semele Kane, a 19-year-old girl, was a "passionate and talented student", admired by many of her peers and professors.

"Her death is a tragedy for us all," says Arthur Golding, Semele's personal tutor.

The dormitory was promptly swarmed by The Henderson County Police.

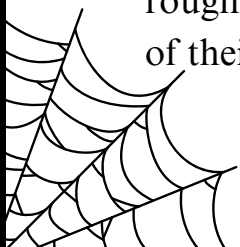
At the scene, Semele was lying face down, with a 'perfect spherical scoop' dug into the back of her skull and into her brain.

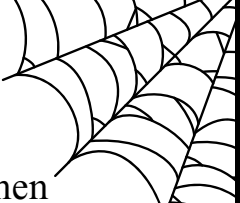
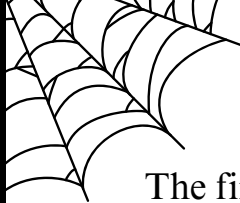
She was taken to Henderson Hospital for an autopsy. The neurosurgeons on her case released a statement on her condition.

"Truthfully, we are confused. In our extensive study of the human brain, we have never seen anything like this."

"A considerable amount of brain matter had melted, it seems. Her brain is burning, at the consistent temperature of 60 degrees Celsius."

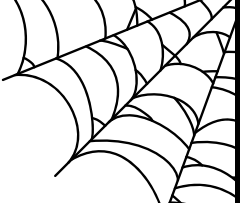
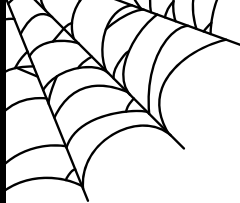
Detectives of Henderson County were surprised to find a Bible on her desk with roughly a third of the pages missing, as well as stray book covers disembowelled of their pages.





The first to find her was her neighbour, a second-year medical student. When the neighbour heard screaming, he barged her door open and looked for anything to stop the bleeding.

“There was no hope. She was submerged in a pool of her own blood and what looked like blobs of congealed brain. There was a sound coming from her belly, like a growl, but it couldn’t have been. It was long, going on for what seemed like forever.”



Revenge Rituals

A poetry collection

Written by: Ravi Malhar Nathwani

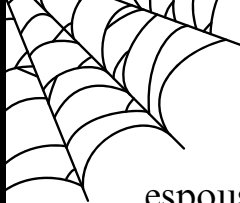
Edited by: Benjamin Smith

“A new being is formed from scarred wreckage, a dual disposition human and machine. They must learn to defend, and learn quickly... the hostile Earth pauses for none.”

*

Almost alive
in a new-world alcove
a sanctuary from reality
holds abundance in droves;
groves and grain
make up landscape,
paint verdant visions into half formed eyes
I
blink,
awake,
tear through amniotics
with artificial housing,
tumbling into the masses in celebration
hybrid creatures give welcome,
arms outstretched,
ease me in,
help to shed this steel shell
and feel suns on my skin.

Overwhelmed by the love,
a melody discordant
to the war drums outside
my lyrics undulate,



espousing hopeful semantics
in anguish
of their futility;

as, however,

as ever,

I'm let down before starting,
no safe haven
is safe for all,
outsiders to pillage,
they burn it, we fall
onto swords in the clamour
departing thoughts of safety
to sanity's last breath
the family protects
with whole souls bared
'till death.

Born into the struggle,
forests grow inside rings of fire,
last bastion of humanity flailing against the maelstrom
propped up by
failing bodies.

*

Promises;

*"Love is a tricky little thing, fraught with tortures and treachery...
The fallout can be catastrophic beyond comprehension."*

Duck-and-weave manoeuvre,
avoid the shooter
of arrows aimed



at Heart's path
from dark enclaves.

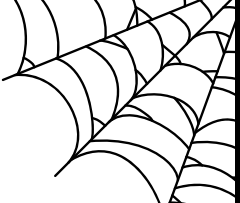
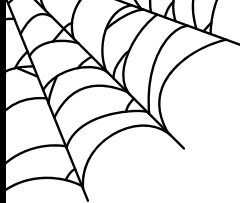
Their orders came down from internal sources,
infernally screams for fire suppression
like it's anything measured,

raw pleasure
out a lust-shaped gun

it's fun to play with feelings
'til you break 'em
catch limbs and ligaments
on false optics
broken neon all red-
shade glistens on the mountain-top,
 blood on the snow 'cos I'm so heated,
 you're so freezing,
creeping in with frostbitten nerve endings
all else is empty,

are you even still breathing?

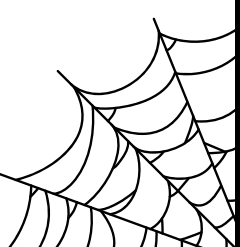
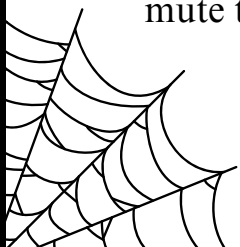
Breathe in the fire
pretend it's your kin
throw kindred souls
on its kindling
feel the warmth of another,
not alone for a moment...

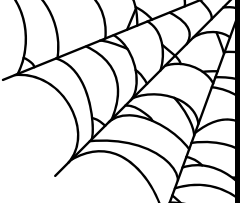


All's fair in Love and War,
I suppose
that the engine needs feeding,
your livestock need bleeding;
trade all lives for a dead one,
bargains are simple
when you hold all the chips
adversaries pay up,
use their flesh for debts
swap a pound for a piece it's
greedy to take
fills you with hate
teases with chains
waits for the pain
makes it to fame yet still
only
watches,

from the side,
just out of frame
lives the Ice Queen,
heaven-sent by Hell's legions
their master rests easy
for her secrets, proficiencies
and those featured armory pieces
that shimmer with memories
of previous dealings -

Murder Weapons without feelings
peak in the fray,
goons in the way
get toppled so freely,
make a massacre, monotone,
mute the screams to a drone.





Not a dull affair, though,
don't despair, no dismay!
Masterpieces of Masoch
mark the close of each day:

Split elastic tendons from host organs
grind bones into dust for snorting
stretch skins over steel racks
spines break, heads crack
can't keep track

this red

is an ocean,
extinction's too efficient
so
of course
all is lost
on the knife's edge,
tossed in at life's end
the Hell-mouth bares teeth of its prey,
a bloody flag for the mothers,
warning all others
of the inferno inside,
yet still stands enticing;
the scalding promise
of oblivion.

*

Death of an Innocent;

*“A child’s life is stolen, snuffed out by the callous malice of a scorned lover.
Unable to intervene in time, the Chimaera watches on in static horror.”*

Cut cradle

broke back

blasted outwards

in screams

a wailing

that can’t

be quieted,

only quitted.

Shelve care

self loathing

lets the

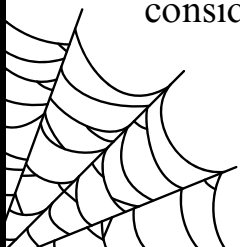
harmless thing

into harm’s

way, block

thoughts or

considerations





for its

feeling,

for the loss of the innocent life you let go.

*

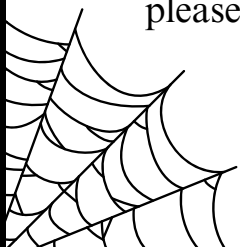
Wrath;

“Rage at the injustice begins to grow, channelled into the spirit of vengeance.”

A dirty, grimy statement
spat out, slit open
slithers out ya
neck it burns
like crops do.
Home lost,
first formed in gullet,
found in pieces
contorted image of love broke off
and left there.

Shit.

This shit hurts
more anger than blood loss
but your pulse ran out,
ran up
to cheer on the flow-states,
painted slates
not-red,
worse
paint it with
what spills forth when you
bleed me,
please me,





What's the difference when all you crave
is to feel something.

*

A Temporary Sanctuary;

"A moment of solace is taken; a chance to reflect and regroup."

Happier adrift, weightless when unmoored,
the island drains but the sea lets you free up,
anchored to your own raft, a self-sustaining
top-feeder that eats when it pleases,
scraps and all.

Bastard Child,
shore yourself up on shattered-home's dock
integrate splayed pain into mainframe,
let the system collapse,
trigger defcon to shutter lids,
leaves you sightless;
see if you can find a route for all this mess



within your own,

until it breaks.

*

Eldritch Enlightenment;

“Time away only exacerbates the anger, so visceral, so potent, it awakens a slumbering evil beneath. Seeds are planted within, unbeknownst to the host body.”

Heart stops

gasps

stutters

break in the form

widens for

a distress-call response,

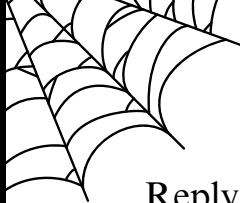
sent from an Old Divine

scared of the New,

formed from skull fragments

and entrails

still writhing.



Reply alive in dirt

six-feet under muffles semantics,
makes screams from them.

*

Cultwork;

“A Faustian bargain is struck with the Acolytes of the Old Gods, granting with it a heedless propensity for violence.”

Slide through overgrass,
last week we all got lost
inside the mirror,
bespoke union of the Other
and the Selves
after them.

Creep over underbrush,
this beating sun seared skins
from backs too long ago,
no-one noticed
‘cause the scabs have hardened
Poised against acid rain,
a bit of burning can’t hurt more.

Make your point in silence,
chew the corpse before you spit up
over the family table.

*

Prayer-Response;

“Actualisation to completion. Those seeds have now sprouted, warping the Chimaera into a conduit of the Old Gods.”

Harbinger brings the fall,
a sub-nautical summoning call
muttered into convulsive currents,
releases the seething omen.
It hangs beneath the chest,
builds a nest from shattered ribs
and lurks there,
works its violence quietly;
doesn't break skin
just the heart,
soul,
other things that can't be regrown.

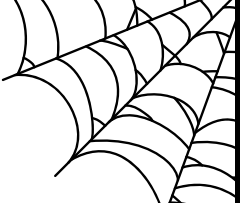
Benediction answered,
succubus lullaby draws up covers over heads
soon to be torn from their perches;
slide gleefully under guillotines
feel content in final clarity
take solace in shedding yours
and your own.

*

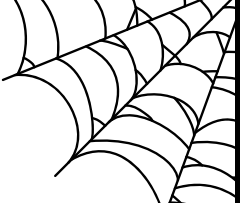
Cataclysm;

“The killing machine is unleashed, dispelling all forms of murder and masochism upon its enemies.”

So fuck it then,
allow me,
crash reality into mouthpiece
stolen from homeland



thrown to the wolves,
forge battle-heart on an anvil
made only for ghouls
and devils
Heaven-sent to hellchild
worn down
rips and tears in my line of defence
a burst abscess
absent guards
shredded to ribbons
on the battle-front; empty places
tell louder stories than ledgers,
bring back lost souls from the edges
they paint
morbid decorum, spattered over the walls
mark ceded sanctuaries with ghosts of the fall
leaves only a
forlorn feeder,
eats when it pleases
nourished by pain now
by anguish
panicked minute of silence sets stress points
upside eyes glazed over
not-dead but half-way already
still kicking, just barely
delete morality complex to make space
for the new way
a life bred by loss, scavenger antics
morph the good lot to badness,
trade beauty for madness
spit in the face
of the right thing to do,
antagonists on all fronts
leave me no way to move,
forces conclusions:



stay put and fight,
a stand-still warfare
claws into eyes
gash out the smile that bleeds you
feeds you dry
leaves you only with weapons,
with wreckage
still smouldering
reeks of havoc
speaks in manic prose
an evacuation of all senses,
simultaneous synapse split
spit grey venom over my third eye,
blinded by choice
shut off to horror,
transpose prey to apex murderer
only works when
beauty's gone
hope's drawn closed
for now,
for
ever.

Last one standing.
Address to an adrenaline junkie:
Bite down harder,
feel more life course through system;
self-effacing propagation
fuck the maelstrom
drink from your own well
until it's just dust,
just ashes
You return to.

*

Resolution;

“The terms of the bargain must be fulfilled; power drains from the righteous warrior, leaving it to the mercy of monsters and men.”

More time than less
the lamb wanders astray,
meets life’s lessons
all at once.
I am made to meet my Maker.
At some pre-determined
shotgun-funeral;
it hurts,
walking with Damocles
as your shadow,
his self-soaked sword
teasing your vessel
for its lack of power.

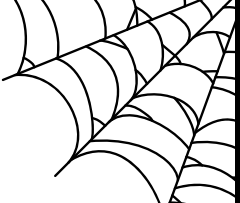
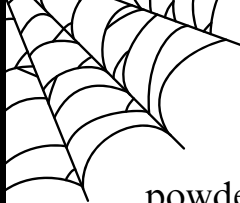
*“All you got is the weight on your neck,
nothing more.”*

*

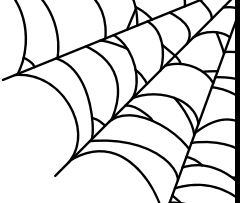
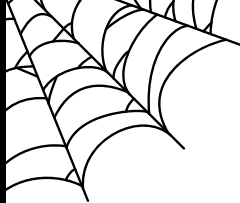
Post-Script;

“The lingering spirit reflects on its journey, gazing sadly at the path of retribution. The bloodlust has drained away in death. Everything is regrettable. Everything is grey.”

All that I touch turns to ashes,
past destruction;
a complete removal of all colour
disintegration of integrity,
structurally deficient
just



powder on the tips of fingers,
pleading for some solid ground
unfounded objects,
deprived of status
an identity crisis,
reversed birth mechanics
sap the life out, return to bases
the troops
blend fatality with formation rituals
eat death for breakfast,
expend its energy on unfortunates;
feel the wrath
of the Lost Ones
in death rattles.



Renuka's Biriyani

Written by: Chelsey Selvarajah

Edited by: Niahm Canning

Falwood Close was an apartment complex full of character, colour, and vibrancy. You had the Smiths in 1B, an elderly couple who had lived in Falwood all their lives and always had a story to tell about the area. Then there was the Markiewicz's in 1D, a sweet Polish family who had moved in with their daughter the year prior to live closer to her primary school and finally you had the Shanmugarajah family in 1C. They were the perfect Tamil nuclear family, with soft spoken housewife Renuka, charming engineer Siva and their two young children - Sinthu and Jay.

Falwood was an eighth wonder of the world, a secret paradise known only as such by its residents.

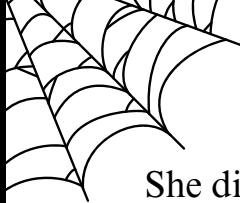
Or, well it was.

Until Renuka made her final lamb biriyani.

...

Renuka was sixteen when she first met Siva, under the soft lights of her year eleven prom. Their grammar schools had decided to combine their proms, on paper to cut costs, but really because both planning committees wanted an excuse for the boys and girls to be together. Renuka was a beautiful girl from a traditional family, soft brown skin that glowed from years of using coconut oil and Multani mitti clay, lustrous ebony hair that flowed down to her hips because *'our girls don't walk around with short or unkept hair'* and caramel eyes that were lightly lined with kohl, sniped from her amma's makeup table.

'Keep your eyes down, keep your voice quiet and never slouch', Renuka chanted her amma's teachings as she lifted her lehenga skirt and glided through the hall, breaking the first rule the second she looked up. They locked eyes from across the room, Renuka glancing with years of practised demureness, yet unable to hide the coquettishness dancing across her eyes. On the other hand, Siva was brash and awkward, unable to tear his eyes off her amidst a sea of Emmas and Marys, and before he could make his move, he was pulled away by his friends – leaving Renuka to find her friends, as a small feeling of guilt began to fester in her gut.



She didn't expect to see him again that night, worlds apart from their peers and partly ashamed of defying her amma's words. However, as they finished for the night, crowds filing out of the hall, he approached Renuka as she waited for the tell-tale sign of her family's Ford Focus.

He asked her if she would be going to the after party, that it would be held at Moira Hindley's and that a friend of a friend told him that he could bring more people if he wanted.

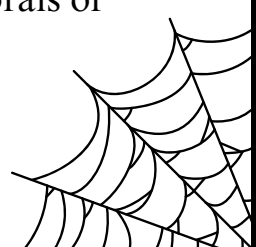
Renuka timidly responded that her family was '*just a little bit strict*' and that she was being picked up right after the prom. They laughed and shared pleasantries as Renuka kept a vigilant eye for her parents' arrival, darting in the cover of darkness as she heard the blare of a kuthu song – the exact song she had burned onto a CD for her father's car. Siva laughed and waved her goodbye, slipping off to join his friends and Renuka fell into the passenger seat – giddiness and dread simultaneously growing within her as she made her way home.

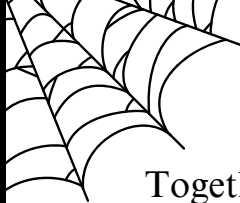
Renuka later learned that Siva's father was old friends with her father, from their cricket days back before the war and that they lived closer to each other than they thought. With that revelation came a family dinner, with the fathers catching up on life over a bottle of Johnny Walker, drinking beyond their limit, the mother's umming and ahing, silently judging their husbands but refusing to get involved. Siva and Renuka sat opposite each other. Had Siva been a cousin, Renuka would have been allowed to take him upstairs but as a stranger, and another Tamil boy at that, Renuka was to sit opposite and make conversation with his older sister Mithra.

When she received her GCSE results, almost straight A's as expected of her (and two disappointing Bs), she asked her parents to move to the boy's grammar school, using the school's high Oxbridge intake as an excuse.

They quickly developed a routine. Chaste kisses in obscure spots on their way to school, hidden spots between lessons and taking the scenic route home to be together for longer. In public Renuka would remain at least 3 feet away from Siva, far enough that it wouldn't look like they were involved with each other. People had eyes and mouths, and those mouths would travel along the winding roads, through whispers like '*Did you hear about the xxx girl? Such shameful behaviour, no?*'

It would surely lead back to her family and paint her as a girl without morals or respect for tradition.





Together, they quickly devolved into frantic, hungry devouring and battles of tongues; Renuka wanted more, and she knew that he did too, it filled her with guilt and shame, but simultaneously a sense of pride – she made him like this, and she would be the only one who would make him like this.

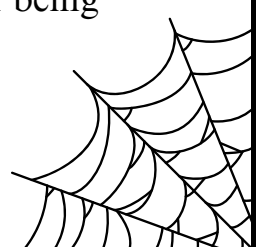
When they finally gave into lust it was a brutal affair. Siva's family were in Southall saree shopping for his sister Mithra's wedding and Renuka told her family that she was at maths tuition. Renuka bared herself completely to him in a bloody battle of limbs and organs. He drank as though he were a parched adventurer and Renuka was a sacrificial stream, and while Renuka should have been happy, all she could think about was when she was a little girl, and her uncle took her to the butchers to witness a goat being killed - they would eat that goat later on that day. Catching a glimpse of herself at the mirror, Renuka couldn't help but see that goat now, staring back at her in resignation and submission. She gripped her eyes shut and apologised to her amma and ancestors for her actions.

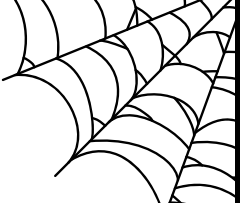
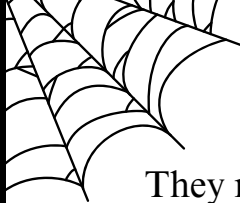
They're eighteen when it happened, in fact, they only just finished A-Levels when it happened. Renuka's amma received a phone call from a relative back home, *'You have a grown-up daughter. . . doctor in Germany . . . wants a girl from a good family.'* Renuka's heart stilled as she listened from the stairs, dreading her amma's response. She knew this would happen, but she didn't expect it to happen so soon, *she had just turned eighteen for fucks sake*. Resentment and guilt pooled deeper in her gut as she heard her amma thank the relative and tell them that she wasn't looking for marriage at that moment but that she would keep it in mind. Renuka went to bed that night, but every time she tried to close her eyes, all she could see was the goat.

Renuka later learned that Siva's family had already asked her hand in marriage before they had finished their A-Levels, and that her amma was willing to betroth them.

'What would you have done if I was engaged to someone else and wanted to marry Siva?'

The questions swirled in Renuka's mind as their families celebrated the engagement. Renuka knew not to ask this however, just as she knew not to ask her amma why she married a man ten years her senior at seventeen and why her ammamma had married her much older cousin at thirteen. Renuka knew not to ask and just comply with what was expected of her, and she found herself being reminded of that goat more.





They married that very summer just before starting university, it was a grandiose affair with family pouring in from all over the world to watch Renuka and Siva profess their love. Yet for Renuka, it didn't feel as such. Children were running amok in a flurry of cholis and salwar kameezes, cousins of cousins and aunties were scattered throughout the hall, commenting on the decoration and bridal outfit and food, criticising this and that and the audacity of Mithra's presence after ruining her own engagement by coming out as lesbian the year prior.

Renuka was decked in red, face caked with makeup and body adorned with jewels that jostled and pricked at her skin as she moved. Siva was next to her, yet it felt like he was out of reach and barely there and when Renuka turned to look at him, trying to convince herself that she wasn't making a mistake, her heart dropped.

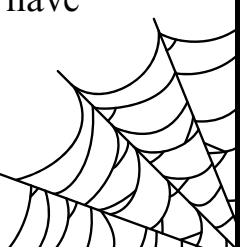
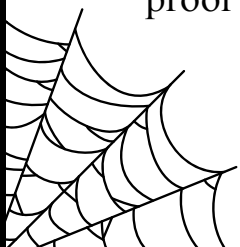
Instead of Siva, it was that butcher– the one who sacrificed the goat all those years ago. Renuka's blood froze, and her breathing quickened, she frantically turned to the crowd, but all the guests had turned into that butcher, leering at her with a bloodied sickle. Renuka screamed, but only bleats came out, she looked at her fingers and instead they were hooves. The butchers were nearing her now, their sickles glinting in the air as the butcher that was meant to be her husband brought his sickle close to her and struck.

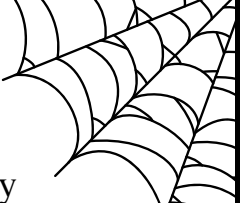
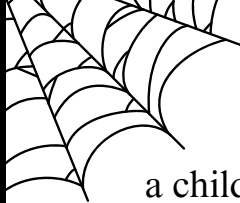
Renuka closed her eyes and wailed as Siva took the thali and tied it around her neck, binding her to him forever, and everyone erupted into cheers.

On the outside, you'd never suspect that there was anything wrong with them. To distant families and friends, Renuka and Siva were two people who got to know each other through their families and slowly fell in love during their engagement. Renuka was highly intelligent and timid, having secured a place at Oxford for medicine. Siva was outgoing and brash, set to study aerospace engineering, yet not at the same university – something which Renuka wasn't allowed to bring up around him.

With no warning or reason however, Renuka had withdrawn from her place at Oxford, though he didn't say it, this pleased Siva greatly. He urged her to reconsider, but she refused, flashing a small, demure smile and told him she was content in being a housewife.

Their first child was a blessing to the family, Siva had longed for a child as proof of their bond together and for their parents to stop nagging them to have





a child before they died. His prayers were granted through a daughter; they named her Sinthu after Renuka's amamma after he suggested it to honour her memory. Siva was ecstatic to have a daughter, Renuka on the other hand, wailed at the revelation.

Her sins were catching up to her, how evil a woman had she been? That she would bring another girl in this world, another goat to be slaughtered by a butcher?

Sinthu was a small thing, she rarely cried, and her smile would light up the whole room. Renuka hoped it would stay that way. After all, goats were pretty when they were silent.

Peace wouldn't last forever, as complications arose during her second pregnancy, after many gruelling hours in labour the doctor announced that a surgery would be required for safe birth and Renuka's world shattered.

Her perfect unmarred body would no longer be unmarred, would he understand? Would he look at her body and think of a motherly warrior? Or would he see a broken puppet? Or worse, would he see the goat inside?

The child was born safe; a screaming boy, furious at the world for ripping him away from his cavern.

Floating in and out of the surgery, Renuka heard the butcher again *'just a few more stitches . . . enjoyable for you . . . doesn't have to know'* Renuka felt the butcher bring his scalpel and the goat cried out beside her as she retreated into the void.

Renuka could not bring herself to love the boy. Resentful at herself for birthing a goat and a butcher.

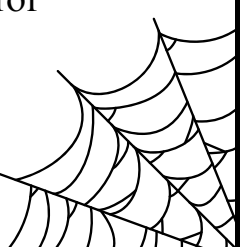
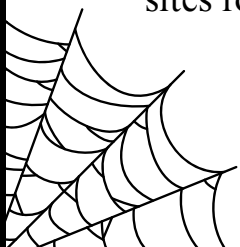
Siva stopped touching her after that.

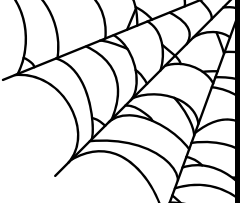
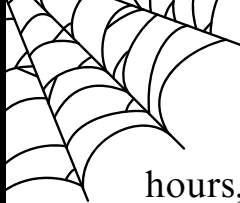
'I'm afraid of causing more harm', he claimed, opting to cuddle her in their shared bed. Renuka knew; however, the scar posed no threat, and she was perfectly fine - she also knew about the other stitch, the one that the butcher offered just for him.

He just doesn't want me anymore.

The goat was everywhere, staring at her solemnly from the corner of her eye, the cracks in the wall, even in the telly. One night she heard it cry from the mirror and broke it free, blood pooling from her knuckles as she lied down and laughed, only for her laughs to be bleats.

Siva was away often now, citing business trip after business trip and visiting sites for several reasons. Where Renuka used to cry in front of the mirror for





hours, cursing the deformity on her body, she now cooked. She used the traditional recipes handed down from her amma and her ammamma and all the women before them. The goat stood with her, offering parts of itself up for dishes, which were now a hit in their apartment complex.

Most popular of all was her lamb biriyani, brimming with spices and cinnamon and turmeric, her husband claimed it was the best he'd ever eaten on the rare days that he was home for dinner with the family. The neighbour's clamoured for it and in return offered their own dishes. *'That lovely husband of yours is so lucky to have such a talented wife'* – Mrs Markiewicz tells Renuka one day, when both families had dinner together. Renuka laughed as Siva chuckled and wrapped his arms around her and offered Mrs Markiewicz seconds for *being the best neighbour Falwood had to offer*.

It happened on a perfectly mundane day, the kids were at school, he was at the office and Renuka was once again cooking her lamb biriyani, for all the compliments she received on it, she could never help but feel that something was missing from it. That's when the landline phone buzzed, indicating a voicemail. The contents of the voicemail broke Renuka completely, she froze, all the teachings her amma had instilled within her had flown out of the window and now only the goat remained.

The submissive, demure goat saw red, it gripped her by the arms and wholly consumed her. Renuka was spiralling, she became the goat for *him*, she took on the burden of her amma and her ammamma and all the other women in their culture for him without question and he sought another?

He belonged to her.

He belonged to her, and she would make him belong to her.

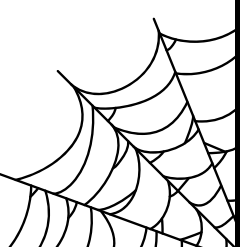
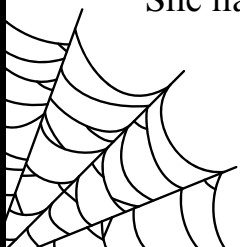
So, you may wonder, what was missing in the recipe?

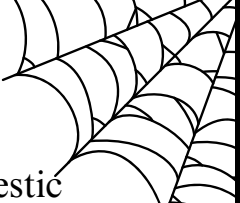
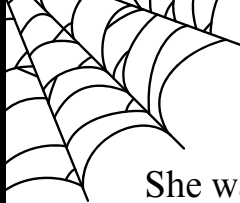
When he came home, Renuka wasted no time, the goat's rage had fully consumed her and nothing he said would change her mind. If tradition dictated that she would be the goat and he the butcher, then she had no choice but to butcher her butcher.

She started with the neck.

She sliced and sliced again, not for any reason other than that it caused the most pain. Then she slowly made her way down, stabbing, skinning, stabbing, and skinning.

She hacked and hacked, uncaring of the bloody mess she created.





She was methodical, hands moving with practised ease from years of domestic cooking.

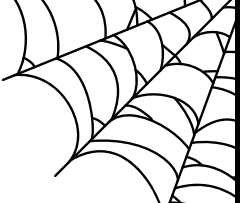
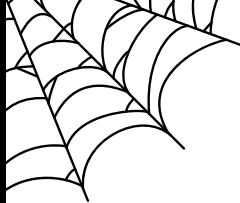
Soon the fridge was full of various parts, compressed in neat little boxes that he bought her the last time they went out together, the kitchen was spotless and pristine – after all, the kitchen was her sphere.

Her biriyani was finally ready, and the kids were home.

“Sinthu, Jay, amma’s very tired, could you please give Mrs. Markiewicz some biriyani I made for her? Tell her it's my new recipe; the Siva Special”

Packing up her finest work, she sent her kids on their way and caught sight of herself on the oven door. The goat stared back at her.

And she slit her throat with the sickle.



The old carpenter

Written by: Andrea Tode Jiménez

Edited by: Megan Fitzgerald and Roos van der Velden

After a maze, and a field, in the forest,
You knock on the old Carpenter's door.
You feel an unseeable smile,
In a mystic face nobody's seen before,
As you beg on hands and knees,

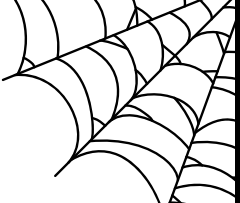
"Please make me a real girl."

From behind His shoulder,
There's His son, a bastard hairy and frayed.
There's His wife, eternally beautiful and still:
The first real girl he ever made.

*"You must've come a long way.
So, I will grant you what you seek.
I will show you to your bed,
And you'll be real in one week."*

On Monday, as the wife watches,
He feeds you honey, pies, and mead.
You sweeten your teeth, and you sweeten your blood.
He'll make you into a real girl,
And you are grateful.

On Tuesday, as the wife watches,
The son asks for seconds and leaves no mead or pie.
You are numbly hungry, and you are sickeningly hollow.
But He'll make you into a real girl,
And you are grateful.



On Wednesday, as the wife watches,
He holds you, warm and stiff, all throughout the night.
You are full of bloody splinters, and you are full of bloody bites.
But He'll make you into a real girl,
And you are grateful.

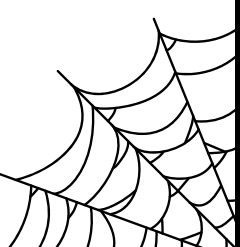
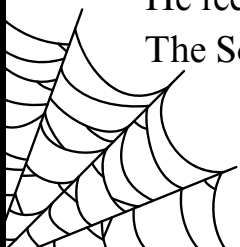
On Thursday, as the wife watches,
He touches your foot with His own.
You choke on the touch, and you choke on your teeth as they fall.
But He'll make you into a real girl,
And you are grateful.

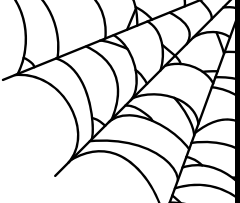
On Friday, as the wife watches,
He touches your cheek with sharp, skinless fingers.
A footpath marks on your face after He's gone.
Becoming a real girl
Itches

On Saturday, as the wife watches,
He grips you tightly as you shake into pieces.
The terminates take your legs, and the termites take your eyes.
He says *real girls have no use for them*,
And you are grateful.

At night, you think about how
Mother begged you to stop,
While her bed smells like timber.
Friends cried as you entered the maze,
While their hands are of soft wooden carvings.
You alone reached the old Carpenter's door.
To become a real girl
Is lonely

On Sunday, as the wife watches,
He feeds on your tendons, and he slurps up your curls.
The Son whines for more, and the wife watches.





He feeds him your bones, and the wife watches.
How undoing it is, you think, to become a real girl.

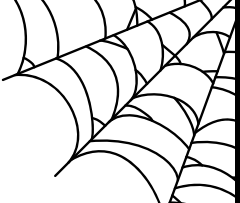
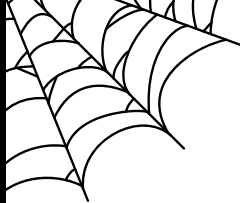
When He drags you away,
Useless and gaping,
Over His shoulder, you see the son,
Picking your veins from between his teeth,
And you know he still hungers.

Over his shoulder,
You meet the wife's eyes,
And you know she is sorry.
She would die again if she said so,
But you know she is sorry.

When He drags you away,
Empty and mangled, as you are,
He leaves you under your bed,
And all at once, His face is in sight.
You understand, then, that there is nothing to fight.

Moving on from their last meal,
Maggots consume you whole. One last time,
You think, what in the world?
For the carcass next to you,
Was already a real girl.

There is a knock on the door,
And a familiar request
Chimes through the house.



Bite

Written by: Drew Boulton

Edited by: Tara Vracevic

She tastes like sun cream and menstruation as I bite into her. The first bite is always tame, just enough to draw blood. Breaking the skin of the apple but resisting the juices. I draw myself away to watch the bright droplets spill out of her, each one as beautiful as the girl it comes from. She watches me as I do this, stroking a piece of hair away from my face.

“I love you,” she says, an encouragement to take my second bite.

“Forever,” I reply, before sinking my teeth into her hip.

This time I’m not as gentle as before. The apple juices are too sweet, too irresistible. I turn my head to let my canines tear, feeling her twitch beneath me. Encouraged by this movement, I nuzzle and shake further as the flesh tears away. She shudders and inhales sharply when I pull back, exposing a jagged, oozing oval. I look at my handiwork, then look into the eyes of its canvas.

“Beautiful girl,” she whispers. I grin, exposing my bloody teeth. A drop of blood makes its way from my lip in the process and she catches it with her long finger before putting it in her own mouth. She screws up her nose. “I never taste as good as you.”

We clean up together, washing the wound and applying antiseptic and bandages. I kiss her hard as she grimaces at the sting, telling her how beautiful she is and how much I love her. We’re both exhausted from our session, so we curl up under the duvet before the stars make their way out.

“You went harder than ever today,” she says sleepily.

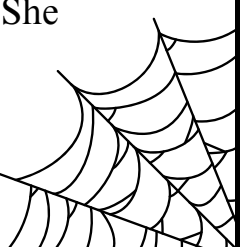
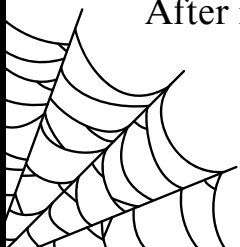
“Did you like it?” I ask. I never want to overstep her boundaries.

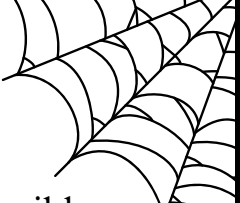
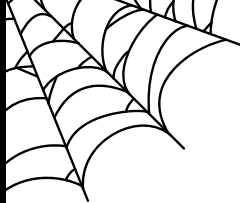
“I loved it,” she replies. “I can’t wait to do the same to you.”

I kiss her forehead and fall asleep.

I remember my first bite like it was yesterday. It wasn’t planned, and never something I’d ever imagine. But I loved her so much I wanted her flesh in my bloodstream. I knew she felt the same, knew that I wasn’t going crazy. We were to be each other’s entirely.

After it happened, there was a shift between us. I was no longer an island. She





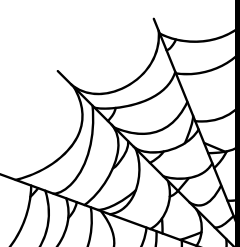
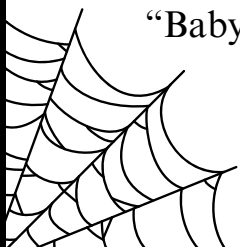
was me and I was her. We had given ourselves to the other fully. I felt invincible knowing her blood was inside of me, knowing that I turned in her stomach. I wanted to cut myself open to see where she was, see if part of her had attached itself to my heart. I absorbed her goodness and bled her love. How many people can say that?

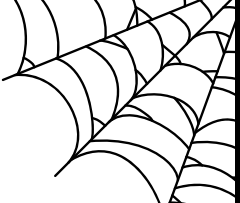
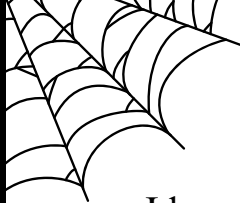
A slow trickle of blood curves its way from my calf to my ankle. We both watch it in awe, wondering at what point it will stop. Will it be the top of the bone? The bottom? Will it not stop until it drips onto the floor? She darts her tongue out to catch it before we can know. As much as I enjoy biting her, there is nothing quite as sweet as watching her face when she's sinking her teeth into me. She pulls back from my ankle, lips stained. Her eyes never meet mine, completely focussed on the task at hand. The predator, stalking. Always got her eyes on what is hers. Sometimes I worry she'll never stop.

"Can I try it harder?" she asks, voice shaking as if she cannot contain her excitement.

"Yes," I whisper back. She lets out a breath and grins. The viper. Her finger traces a spot on my thigh and she pulls herself up further to get in the eye line of her target. Before I have a chance to react, her teeth are deep into my flesh. White hot pain. That's the only way I could ever describe the feeling of her gouging my flesh out. Like a burning poker being pushed into a wound. I feel my leg instinctively go to push up but she holds it down with her body, her hands wrapped around my wrists to keep me in place. I am being doused in gasoline and treated with salt. She digs her nails into my arm and it's a welcome relief from the pain in my thigh. I glance down in a panic, wondering how far she'll go as her teeth embed themselves further. Her canine grazes my muscle and I scream. She pauses briefly, looking up to me. Her eyes, though fierce, soften as she sees my pained expression. She looks small, like a child caught doing something bad that they didn't know about. I don't know what comes over me but I nod at her to carry on, tightening my jaw. It still doesn't prepare me though. Like a deranged Pitbull, she rocks her head from side to side, pulling back to expose my thigh down to a layer that should never be seen. In her mouth rests my flesh.

"Baby? Can you hear me?"





I hear her voice but I can only moan in response. My attention is focussed on how I can feel air on my raw muscle. There are leeches attached to me. There is a forest fire covering me. There is ethanol being poured on me. My head is slumped to the side and I open my eyes to see my own body staring back at me. The vomit rises in my throat and I can do nothing but open my mouth to let it bulge out of me. Foul smelling sludge hits the mess of blood and tissue. It chokes in response, then screams. MY HOME MY HOME MY HOME WHERE IS MY HOME WHERE IS IT WHERE ARE YOU HOME?

“I’m so sorry,” I mumble. The flesh doesn’t take this apology. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

“What did you say? Oh my God, I’m so sorry baby, I’m so sorry...” WHY AM I HERE WHAT DID YOU DO?

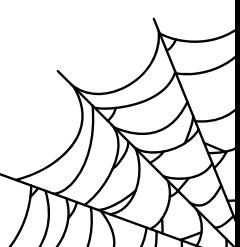
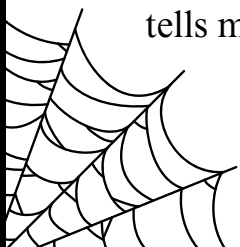
“Please, it’s all okay,” I tell it. FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU.

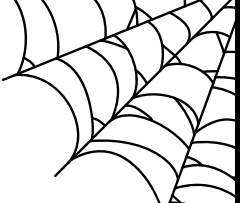
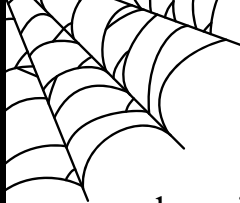
The next time I open my eyes, the flesh has gone.

She pads my wound with gauze upon gauze to stop the bleeding, all the while mumbling how sorry she is. My body shakes. I can feel the blood pooling out of me even as she frantically stuffs me like an animal. Each prod is like a heated knife. I want her to stop. All I wanted was for her to stop. I wonder if she’s eaten my flesh yet.

there is a fever that is spreading i felt it from my leg and it has come up to my head and it might have taken my heart but i am not sure yet. she stays by my side but she never seeks help. i cannot see my leg but for all it’s worth it might be too late anyway. it certainly feels like it.

God comes to me that night in the form of a fruit fly. I know it’s Him because He tells me that I am His child. He lingers by my wound and tries to heal me, but I tell him it’s no use. He tells me about my place in Heaven and I think of how yesterday I didn’t buy the fancy fruit at the shop because it was too expensive and now I’d do anything to tell myself to get the dragon fruit just to throw away because it will not matter. It can rot alongside my leg. I ask God if he can bring me a rotten dragon fruit but He doesn’t respond. He continues trying to heal me, padding around the gauze and stroking the dried blood. He tells me again it’ll be okay, and I believe Him. He curls up on my leg and



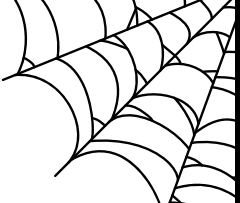
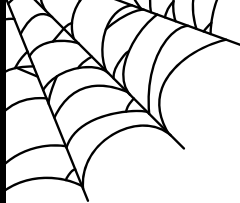


doesn't leave me. I ask Him if He still loves me and He says yes.

the fever doesn't break the fever will never break and all she does is watch and cry from the corner. she clutches her own leg and i wonder if our connected bodies can feel each other's pain. i don't feel as connected anymore.

I ask God if it's time when Jesus and the Holy Spirit appear beside him in their smallest forms. He replies it is. The three flies form the Trinity, the rusted blood of my leg, patting me as I drift in and out of consciousness. Thick, green puss surrounds the Holy Trinity, and I apologise for the horrible state they have to see me in. God tells me it's okay. He will love me no matter what. It's the most peaceful I've felt.

As I lay dying, I think about how sweet she always tasted. It seemed impossible for someone so human to taste so beautiful, but she did. Like iron dipped in vanilla. I think about her body in my bloodstream. How she infected me long before the infection spread. How quickly she has taken over me. I am happy to die at the hands of her. I hope there are still parts of my body good enough for her to eat on. My eyes open on her once again, but I'm not bitter this time. Feast, my love. I forgive you.



Deal with the Devil

Written by: Mairi Smibert

Edited by: Benjamin Smith

I am bored.

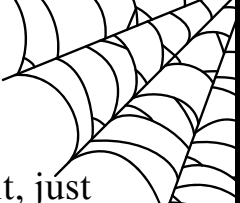
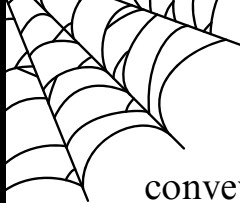
And my back hurts. Cobbled walls are hardly the most comfortable spot to have a snooze, but who can afford charity these days? With one leg cocked against crooked brickwork and the other dangling limply, I lie gazing up into the night to watch overcast clouds ruin an otherwise faultless sky. It truly is a damnable sign when the clouds become interesting. I sigh out dramatic frustration. Yet again, I find myself incapable of shutting my body down for even the littlest of naps. With nothing else to do, I begin whistling the tune that had been stuck in my head all day. On the fourth run, I twist my fingers around their joints, using the hearty crack of resetting them at each bar's start.

The sound of approaching footsteps joins the symphony. I freeze: my sweet, distorted melody coming to an abrupt conclusion as my mouth curls into a wide, unsavoury grin. *To hell with music.* I rise from my stoney pedestal, assuming my full height. A sharp, protruding stone digs into my backside and thick, black branches twist like ivy through my view. But I see the bench: a lonely metal frame save for the company of a rusty old streetlamp, glowing with an artificial gleam; it haunts that isolated chair with an eerie off-white mist. My eyes sharpen their focus. Act One.

Dear little human. Nothing special, and definitely past his sell-by date going by the smell. The clothes he wears I imagine were once smart, but now they appear worn and tired – time having seemingly drained any sense of self-preservation from their forethought. His face is bearded and untamed. The beard covers the better part of his face, leaving only his blood-shot, heavy eyes exposed under the harsh lamplight. His curly hair is thick with grease, but still, he buries his palms deep within his locks as he collapses onto that solemn bench. Sticky and sweaty is his complexion with fresh, wet mucus smeared on the sleeves of his jumper and bulging red sores bubbling on the sides of his face, ready to burst at any moment.

Enter me.

Inclining my head, I smile at the poor man. My eyebrows rise in an effort to



convey my inward pity, the motivation hardly lacking. I wait for a moment, just long enough to let another sob throb through his lethargic form, before hopping down and making my way towards the path, out of the shadows. As I approach, the man's body convulses again. I hesitate, just to force my face to contort into some sort of concern. Reasonably satisfied with the result, I continue with my approach.

"My dear fellow, are you alright?" My voice is like a soft duvet amidst a cold winter, trickling through my mouth like a warm sliver of a 15-year Glenfiddich. He doesn't hold back, allowing yet another wave of grief to pass through him. His hands move from the entangled mush on the top of his head across his cheeks to rest, flattened together against his lips; his thumbs hook around the contour of his chin so that the long, bony ends are pressed against his throat. "My wife..." He speaks as though the words elude him. "How could she do this...?"

My eyes widen and it is an effort to contain my glee. "Oh, she hasn't..." I trail off.

He nods, the movement pushing his thumbs back and forth along his Adam's apple. "She's been sleeping with other men. More than one."

"No," I say with amazement.

His eyes fill with water again. "I just don't understand – how could she do this? What did I do?"

"Surely the fault lies not with you?" I say, sitting down next to him.

He merely shrugs, but the act looks like it has used all that was left of his energy and will. "I must have done something to deserve this."

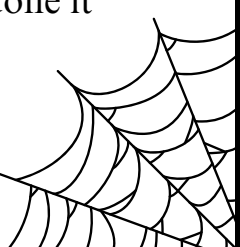
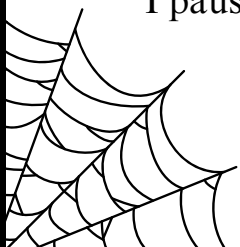
I shake my head, placing my hand on his shoulder. The feeling is repulsive, but I press on all the same. "No, surely no. You did not deserve this. She has done you a great injustice."

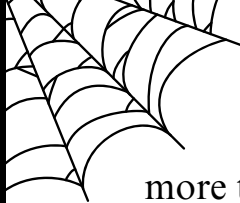
He swallows, rubbing his sleeve against his clammy nose. "If only I knew what I did – I could make it better. We could just go back to the way things were."

I feign surprise. "You'd let her get away with this? This grave wrong she has committed against you?"

His eyes became suddenly uncomfortable; awkwardly darting back and forth between anything and everything except me. "No, we could – maybe we could work it out...?"

I pause, letting him stoop in his obvious feeling of patheticness. "She has done it





more than once already: what is to stop her doing it again?"

His body sinks deeper in its despair. "Then divorce is the only option."

I remove my hand from his shoulder. "Even then, she will get half of everything you own..."

"She will..."

"It hardly seems fair."

"No..."

"She has wronged *you*..."

"Yes..."

"And *she* is to profit from it?"

"Yeah..."

"She has *embarrassed* you."

"You're right, she has..."

"And are you going to let that slide...?"

Suddenly, his determination rose. "No," he says, his chest puffing out, allowing his anger to flood through him. A strange and vengeful passion rages dangerously in his eyes. "No, I am not..." He vows, straightening further still until he rises fully to his feet.

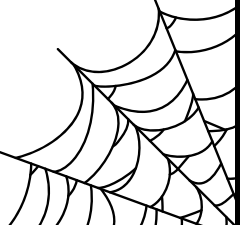
I watch him walk determined and enraged. Elbow resting on the back of the bench, a small pitying smile hidden amidst beaming delight. A flutter has my attention diverted to the trees; a dark-eyed crow stares back at me; its eyes fixed on my form. I acknowledge the creature with my head and hovering wrist, bowing out my gratitude for its audience. An uncomfortable twinge runs through my back. Extending my spine up and curling it backwards, I stretch it out.

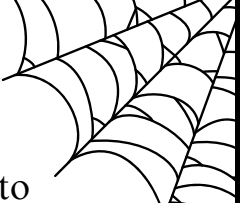
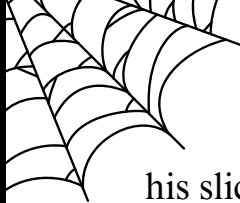
With the familiar sound of footsteps, my eyes blink back open. I rest my extended arms, letting one return to the bench's back, whilst the other begins drumming against its arm.

I see him approach like a projected facsimile.

His silk, white shirt is untucked and creased, and his blazer hangs from his hooked arm as his hands burrow deep in his trouser pockets. A rich leather satchel rests about his wrist, swinging gently to and fro as he walks alone, save the friends he found in Dolce and Gabbana. His expression is one of composed and material reserve but the worry in his eyes shines brighter than his disguise.

His concave cheeks twitch and the hand unburdened by his blazer runs through





his slicked-back, styled hair. He approaches the bench and sits down next to me, acknowledging my existence with a nod before settling his gaze dead ahead. I watch him for a moment, waiting for him to make the first move. As it becomes clear he isn't going to be making any effort on that front, I decide to engage.

"Rough night?" I say with an air of indifference, my posture remaining laid back and relaxed.

He cocks a brow, but his expression remains the same. "You have no idea." I smirk. "Amen to that, my friend."

He leans back; the act causes the satchel he is holding to shift and allows me to catch a glimpse of the documents hidden underneath the flap where his name is embossed into the leather; the sudden flash of a silver barrel zips through my vision.

My smirk grows. "Perhaps I could offer some assistance?"

His brows furrow and he eyes me sceptically. "How on earth could you be of any help? No offence, *mate*, but you don't know me or what I am dealing with."

"Be assured, *my friend*, I know more than you would suppose."

He turns his head fully and I only slightly regret my choice of an ominous tone. "What?"

I shrug. "I possess a certain skill set that may be of interest to your present dilemma."

"Really?" he scoffs, "And would this 'skill set' involve a deck of tarot cards and my money?"

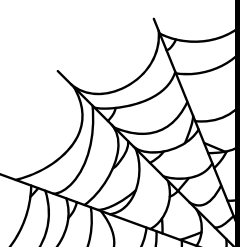
I resist the eye roll, instead opting for a hearty chuckle. "Alas, not. If that would make you feel better, I could go find some."

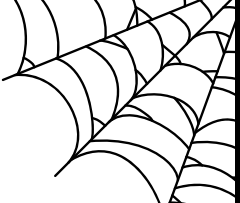
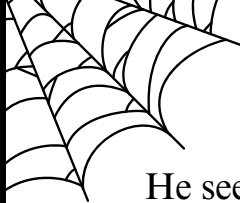
He snorts and resumes his gaze on the path in front of us. "No thanks."

My smile returns. "I thought as much. You were always a cynic, were you not, Edmund?"

His head snaps back. "How do you know my name?"

I grin, looking out from under my eyelashes. "I know a lot of things, Mr Mochizuki..." I pick a piece of blossom from the nearby tree, crushing it in my palm and igniting the remnants to burning embers that fashion themselves into the shape of a firebird before dissipating into the night sky. I rub my fingers together, maintaining the prior aura of indifference. "...including what it is that the future holds."





He seems completely gobsmacked by my now vacant palm. “H-how...?”
I shake my head, leaning forward to assume a more authoritative position.
“How is not important, but rather what do you want me to do with it?”
His grey and lifeless eyes are glossed in wonder. “My job...”
“Yes...”

“I-I think I am going to be fired.”
I lean closer. “Well, there is a way to check...”
“How-”

I cut him off and shake my head ever so slightly. “Not how...” I say, raising a finger to remind him.

His eyes widen, head nodding slightly as he draws in closer. “What can you show me of my future?”

I grin, brushing my finger over his jaw to draw him closer still. “That is more like it.”

And so, I conjure an image.

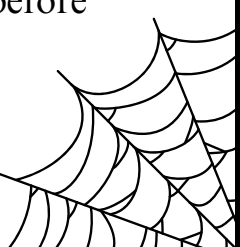
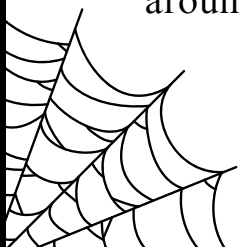
Sweet and soft, aromatic elderflower and lavender. Lush grass warmed by afternoon sun, the feeling of sand between toes, the taste of hot chocolate on a snowy evening, water at the end of a hike, the kiss of a lover. I enter his mind in gentle whispers like a cotton bud into the ear. There I linger and massage until I see his mask falter, his eyes roll back and close in blissful contentment.

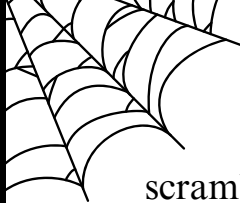
Then, I take that cotton bud and ram it through his eardrum.

Ripping through, I perforate his mind. Soft fibres morph into squirming fire ants that infest his brain, running riot through tender flesh. Matter and soul, I infiltrate and invade: his ears I rupture at needlepoint and block with the oozing juices; his eyes, I dry with salt and scrape a razor over the corneas; his mouth I stitch to a hose and drown with sour milk; his nose I yank up by the septum and force into the anus of a cow; his hands I clamp in a rusty vice and rip the nails from their bed.

I show him hell, or at least his earthly equivalent.

I watch as he is struck with paralytic fear. Oh, how quickly does his arrogance fade! How quickly does he descend from prideful confidence into humiliating fear. Into cowardice. Finding his feet, he staggers upward, gripping the satchel tightly and tumbling back, the metallic barrel revealing itself once again. I use it: heat, metal and revolving parts I twist into an encroaching cage tightening around his fragile sense of self. He trips backwards, falling to the ground before





scrambling up and running. Running fast and running far.

But still, the image rages.

Watching him go, I gave a little wave. "Cheerio," I say in a sing-song manner. I relish the feeling of jubilation - oh, how easy these creatures are! With, I daresay, almost a spring in my step, I push myself off the bench and saunter back to the wall, resuming my former position and closing my eyes. A loud bang fills the air: a gunshot. The leaves rustle as the wildlife flees from the scene, birds of both day and night heaving wings with desperate paranoia. I do not open my eyes but smile at my handiwork.

It is a while later before I open my eyes again, my quest for slumber coming up fruitless once more. My eyes scan my surroundings and double-take at the bench.

For there sits yet another son of Adam. This one is in his thirties perhaps, dressed in black jeans and a duffle coat. Plain and simple. He has short, brown hair unstyled and resting in its natural position on his head. His eyes are a muted yet lively blue, but sadness roams in his countenance. Sadistic joy swells in my being and I slither off the wall towards him.

I emerge out of the shadows, walking down a little. The man, suddenly coming out of his thoughts, looks up towards me as I approach.

"Do you mind?" I ask, gesturing to the bench.

He shakes his head. "Not at all, feel free."

I smile and sit beside him. "Lovely evening," I note.

He nods a little, looking around in quiet contemplation. "You know, it truly is."

I feel my brow form an inconvenient frown but am quick to suppress it. He holds a rare light. "Forgive my intrusion, but you seem a little under the weather. Is everything alright, my friend?"

At this, he lets out a little sigh. "Just a bad day, nothing more. Nothing upon which to take any heed."

A smile tugs at my lips and I lean forward. "Perhaps I could offer an ear?"

He turns and smiles. "Thank you. You're too kind, but I'll be alright."

Hell on earth, the sincerity is sickening.

A twisted feeling surges within me. "Surely you do not wish to keep this bottled up? Is there not someone who has wronged you?" I say, pressing the matter.

His smile turns sad, his gaze focused on the path before him. "Yes, there is...." his words drift.



“And nothing can be done?”

His subsequent blink lasts a fraction longer than his last. “Alas not.”

With nothing revealed, I change tact. “You seem to have lost faith. Perhaps I could restore some of that lost confidence...” I say, picking another bit of blossom and conjuring a wilting rose. But his gaze remains fixed, utterly indifferent to my actions.

I feel my ire burn and so seize the opportunity. I flick my eyes towards the lamp and fix my gaze like a fiery dart. The bulb heats and little embers of white light fall like powdered snow around us. A piece of this filament falls on his shoulder and he starts out of his daze, but his eyes reach his shoulder just as the light fades. Another wasted take.

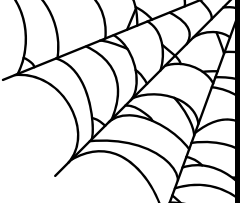
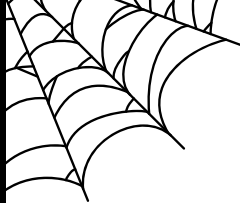
Not to worry, I feel the breeze gently drift and whisper a soft siren song - *let me in, let me know, let me see...*

It is then I spot the hearing aid.

Oh for fuck's sake! I don't bother to hide my irritation as all my hard work is reduced to a mild frequency distortion. “I know it can be demeaning to ask for help, but you know what they say: *needs must when the devil drives.*”

The man turns, finger hovering over his adjusted aid and looks at me with a frown. “What power does the devil have over me?” He meets my eyes, his frown faltering before he offers a polite smile. “Good evening.” He gets up and walks on.

I watch him go into shadow. The sickly lamplight flickers above me. When I lose sight of him, I look towards the trees. The crow is not there. The ache in my back twinges once more. With nothing else to do, I smack the lamp. The light subsides for a moment but recovers brighter. *Oh, sure you little shite.* I scowl and the night drags on.



Hairball

Written by: Liam Brazier

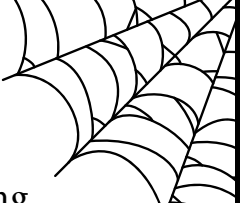
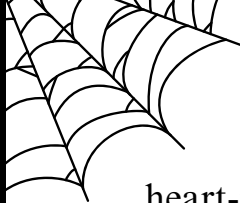
Edited by: Benjamin Smith and Ravi Malhar Nathwani

I heard the sound from the kitchen downstairs. *Vvwm-THUNK*. A foot slipping on wet porcelain, a skull cracking on a steel pipe. I ran upstairs to kick the door down with the unholy strength adrenaline is supposed to give you. It took far too many tries before it flew open. The shower was still on. My father's eyes were wide open in surprise, with his head tilted to the ceiling and his mouth parted slightly as if in the middle of a song. Water from the shower racketed against his irises, poured into his mouth and down his face in crooked lines onto his naked body, but he didn't blink it away or spit it out like he should have. Blood ran from his head, spiralled around the drain, left down the pipe. Hair from his scalp collected around the grate.

A tingle, like pins and needles, ran from my stomach into my throat. My mouth began to salivate, and I threw myself at the sink, sending a toothbrush onto the floor. I vomited pink bile, flecked with scrambled egg and something that looked like tiny stubbles of hair. I gripped the sink, felt long strands of hair under my fingers. I've always hated vomiting. When I was done, I dry heaved some more and gasped, steam from the shower gripping my throat. The air coming through my airways felt rougher, somehow. As if something was getting in the way.

There was no rush calling an ambulance. He died before I even made it up the stairs.

After they took away the body, I drank my two litres of water for the day in one sitting, filling up my glass again the moment I'd finished what was in it. I hoped it would get that rough feeling out of my throat, but no matter how much I tried, it wouldn't leave. I tried to curl my tongue to feel the flesh beyond my mouth and investigate, and I noticed tiny bumps tickling the tip of my tongue. I opened wide, shone my phone's torch into my throat, and tried to diagnose myself using the reflection on the kitchen tap. Obviously, I couldn't see anything. I thought of giving it a proper look in the mirror upstairs, but I was too tired to pursue the cause any further. After the day I had, I didn't need to learn I also had tonsillitis. I just collapsed onto my bed, and saw my father's



heart-rate monitor on the bedside table. He always hated wearing that thing, even for the thirty or so seconds it needed to give a reading. I stared at it until I drifted off to sleep, the sound of the armband filling up with air running through my mind.

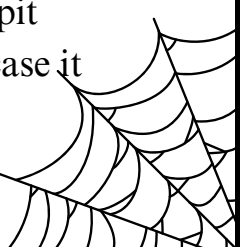
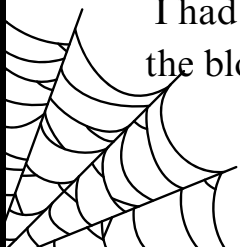
Later that night, I woke myself up in a coughing fit, my whole body jerking with every cough. I lay in bed, telling myself just to let it pass. But every time I thought it was done, it would start up even more violently than before, some phlegm catching in the back of my windpipe. After one particularly awful wave, I tasted something metallic and warm on my tongue, and I realised that it was my own blood. I hurried to the bathroom in a panic.

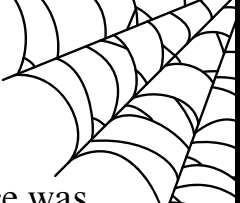
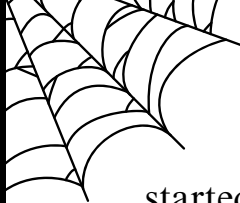
The sink hadn't been cleaned since I found my father's body, so the whole place reeked of dried vomit and spoiled egg. I ran the tap, still coughing, and tried to scrape the mess off with my hands. Red droplets of blood splattered on the tap every time I coughed, my throat burning raw with pain. Once I'd finished cleaning as much as I could, I washed my hands and bent down to drink. I swished some water around in my mouth and spat the pinky mixture into the basin.

When the coughing died down a little, I got my phone from my room, opened my mouth in front of the mirror, and shone the light through. Sure enough, I could see something. Black dots, spreading from the roof of my mouth to the darkness of my gullet below. On closer inspection, these black dots looked like tiny stubbles of hair, glinting in the torchlight. I carefully reached in, trying not to make myself gag, and ran a finger across the dots. It felt similar to the stubble that I get after not shaving for a few days. I drew my hand back and inspected the finger tip. Not only was there blood from my throat, but the hair had managed to graze my finger, and I was bleeding from just below my fingernail. The hair, if I could even call it that, must have been cutting me up from the inside.

Things just got worse from there on out. The longer the hair got, the deeper the wounds in my throat, and the more blood I coughed out as a result. I had to throw out about five t-shirts because of the blood stains running down the front. I couldn't even make it to the funeral. On that day, I was heaving from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to bed.

I had to keep myself in the house, in case I needed to get to the sink and spit the blood out. I started carrying a ball of toilet paper around with me, in case it





started up again and I needed to cover my mouth to stop the mess. My face was stained red, my mouth raw around my lips. Every breath hurt my shredded throat. I couldn't eat without coughing up. I couldn't sleep. I was totally shattered.

After a month, my job got impatient with me. I worked at a garage, changing tires and replacing speedometers from six to three. My boss called my phone a few times, but I would just watch it ring out before getting a voicemail. They were all of him telling me that he knew what I was going through, but I'd have to come back sooner or later, to carry on with life. If he really knew, though, he wouldn't even want me. I would've been useless in that state.

I was sitting in the living room with my laptop open in front of me. Around this time, the hair had grown to the point where it touched the back of my teeth. I never had the energy to do anything other than scroll through social media and YouTube. My phone rang, and I knew immediately that it would be my boss. He'd called four times just that morning, and besides, he was the only person who ever thought to call me. I decided to pick up this time, just to settle everything once and for all, explain myself and get him off my case. But as I heard his voice come through, I felt the familiar tickle of a coughing fit at the back of my throat. By this point, I'd recognised it as a sign of the inevitable, like the smell before rain.

'Hello?' he said. 'Are you there?'

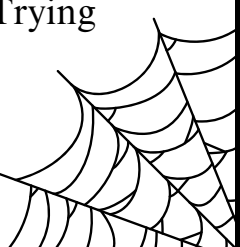
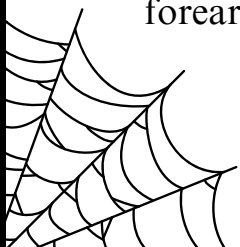
I couldn't respond. I tried to hold the coughing in, my forearm pressed so tightly against my mouth I could feel the teeth marks pressed against my skin, my eyes screwed shut.

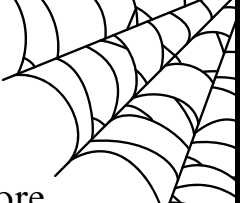
'Listen,' my boss said. 'I understand that you're going through a tough time. But to be honest, mate, you've left us in a lurch. The catalytic converters on the newer Toyotas are all fucked up.'

I couldn't hold it back any longer. The blood and mucus had pooled in the back of my throat, and it had to come out somehow. When the fit started, it really let loose. A red mist sprayed the air in front of me, covering the crook of my elbow.

'Oh, great, I can hear you now,' my boss said. 'As I was saying, I called you up a couple times before... Jesus, mate. Do you need a doctor?'

The blood was starting to drip onto my tracksuit trousers. I tried to wipe my forearm with the ball of tissue, but it only painted my skin a light scarlet. Trying





to stifle the fit had been a bad call, and now everything was coming out more violently than ever. I heard my boss pleading with me from the other end of the line, but that didn't stop my retching, didn't stop my bloodied saliva from frothing down my chin.

'Call a doctor!' he cried. 'Please, God, call a doctor!'

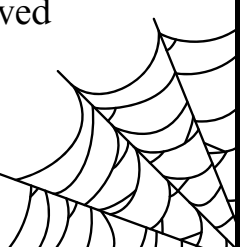
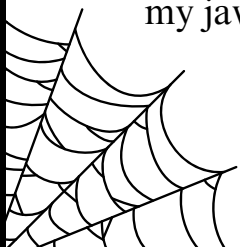
I ran to the kitchen sink, leaving his voice behind me. My stomach was now starting to spasm with the sheer force of my retching. I dry heaved over the basin, hoping that I could purge my condition. If it could free me from this pain, I would have puked my whole guts out. Any sensation would've been better than that damn coughing.

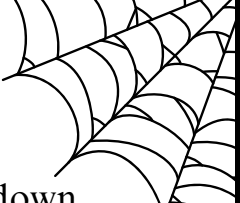
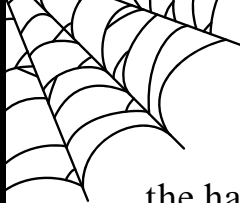
I don't know how long I had my head hanging over the sink. When you're in that much agony, time has that impossible quality of stretching out forever as it slips through your grasp. My palms, my pits, even my junk, all were drenched in cold sweat and blood. That makes six shirts, I thought. I washed whatever I could of my skin under the tap and dried myself off with paper towel, before walking back into the living room. My phone was silent, the screen black. My boss must've hung up on me shortly after I left the room.

He never called me again.

A few more months passed in a daze. To break myself out of it, I decided to treat myself. There was a bookshop in the middle of town that I used to go to all the time, an old building built on shaky foundations that was almost always empty. The wooden shelves had grown dark with age, and there was always the faint smell of dust hanging in the air. While all of this sounds unappealing, I always felt like this gave the shop a sort of magical quality, which was then matched by my experience inside. Every time I went in, they either had the exact book that I wanted, or they'd have one that'd catch my eye. When I'd read the first few pages, I'd discover that it was more suited to me than the one I'd come to the shop for in the first place. My favourite section was the second hand shelf. The older paperbacks always smelt the best, and when I'd get back home with one of those books, I'd immediately crack it open and breathe it in, feeling like I'd taken a piece of the bookshop back with me. I figured I'd need something like that after the period I'd been through.

By this point, the hair was long enough to hang out of my mouth, run down my jaw in thick black coils, and end at the bottom of my collarbone. I shoved





the hair into a ball, and stuffed it into my mouth. When I tried to chew it down a size or two with my teeth, it would always just spring back up to fill the space. I put on a coat and a hat, and stepped out into the cold, my feet softly sliding against the thin frost of the pavement. As I walked into the town centre, a realisation dawned on me. This was my first time properly going out since my father died and the hair started growing. I'd obviously gone to the shops for food, but that really didn't take long, and the self check-outs meant I didn't even need to look at anyone's face. Meanwhile, the walk into town would be twenty minutes on its own. An excitement, mixed with nerves, rose up in my chest, as I fully appreciated the significance of this milestone.

When I reached the town centre, however, the excitement was overshadowed by a more sinister anxiety that grew darker with every step. People would look my way for half a second, only to avert their eyes from me and put their head down, or look back to where they were walking. Why did they have to look at me like that? Could they see the hair coming out of my mouth? I brought my hand to my lips to check, but felt nothing there.

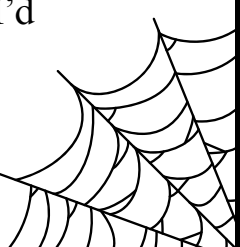
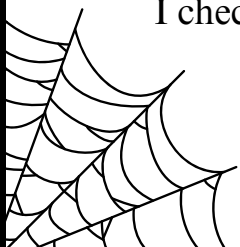
The shop door creaked on its hinges as I opened it. A young man, university aged, was reading a novel behind the checkout counter. He looked up to me and smiled.

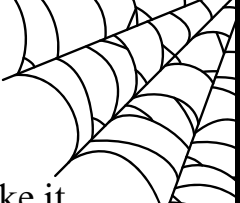
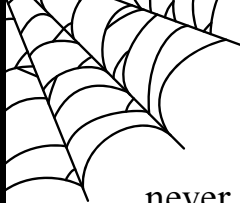
'Hello!' he said cheerfully.

I hummed a greeting and waved back. He returned to his book.

I made a beeline to the second hand section. As I passed through the aisles, something immediately felt off. I stopped in front of the shelf, and tried to put my finger on exactly what. I took a deep breath and realised I couldn't smell anything. The bookstore had lost its old, dusty scent that I remembered so fondly. I looked around, examined everything closer, to try and find what had changed. The bookshelves were the same, if not even darker and more aged than before. The carpet hadn't been switched out underneath my feet. I even recognised some of the same books, which hadn't been picked up since I'd last visited. I took a Dostoyevsky novel off the second-hand shelf, opened it up, and took a whiff of the pages. Nothing. I may as well have stuck my head out the window of Apollo 11 for fresh air on the Moon. It wasn't that the shop didn't smell, it was that *I* couldn't smell it. Maybe the hair had something to do with it? That's the only explanation I could think of.

I checked the cover of the Dostoyevsky novel. *Notes From Underground*. I'd





never read the Russians before. After reading the first page or two, I felt like it connected with me somehow, and I decided that would be my gift to myself for making it all the way here. I wandered around for a while longer, dawdling in front of the rows and rows of books, with their broken spines and colourful lettering. Except for the smell, everything was exactly as I remembered it, like a time capsule I buried on a sunnier day. I wished to be entombed along with it. I could happily be buried there, starve there, die there.

I stopped in front of the history section. On the rare occasion where I'd come here with my father, this is where he'd spend all of his time. He would only ever be interested in dense, geopolitical history books focused on events from the 1930's onwards in Europe and America, like The Depression and the Cold War. I always asked him why he cared so much for all that stuff.

'Because,' he'd reply. 'It's important to know.'

'For what?'

'In case it happens again.'

He'd take no interest in whatever novel I would bring back. What's the point in reading something that isn't real, he'd say. It was better to read real emotions in a fictional setting rather than a fictional interpretation of real events, I would hit back. That would get us going.

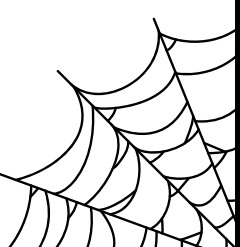
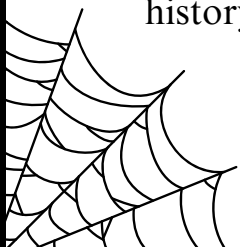
I picked up a history book, some six-hundred page tome about the bombs the Americans dropped in Japan. I had no idea what I was going to do with it; in all honesty, I wasn't interested in the topic at all. But it felt nice and weighty in my hand. Soothing. Like it was something I had done a few thousand times before.

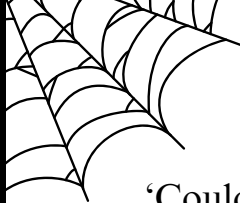
As I approached the till, the young guy looked up and smiled at me again. He read the front of the covers as I handed the books over to him. His eyes were kind, and interesting, as they flicked across the titles.

'I've never read a Dostoyevsky before,' he said, turning the book around to scan the barcode. 'Does that make me a bad reader?'

It sounded like he was expecting a response, but I had to keep the hair from falling out. I wanted so badly to say that I'd never read one before either, and that meant we could be bad readers together, but instead I just shook my head. I took my debit card out, held it in my hand as I waited for him to finish scanning.

'I've just started getting into translated fiction myself,' he said. He took the history book in his hand, frowned sadly at the title, and scanned the code.





‘Could you imagine living in those times,’ he said. ‘And in that area? Those people must’ve been traumatised.’

He held up his own novel, a Japanese author I didn’t recognise.

‘I was reading this novel, and I thought it was about how disillusioned people had become with the Empire after the Japanese were beaten in the war. But then I talked to my friend about it, and they said that the author was a fascist himself, who blamed the left-wing for the loss. Now I don’t know what to make of it. The book is beautifully written, though, and I’m still enjoying it. So maybe I am a bad reader after all.’

He laughed, looked back at me.

‘Hey. Is everything okay?’

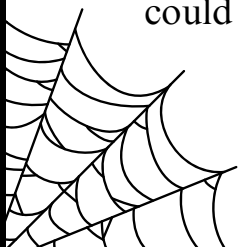
I hadn’t even noticed the tears welling up in my eyes. I was never the type to chat to everyone that I saw on the street, and I’d always kept to myself. No one had reached out to me since my boss heard my coughing through the phone. As lonely as that sounds, I was getting used to it. But right then, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to talk to that stranger. To talk to anybody. Arguing with my father over total bullshit. Getting the piss taken out of me at the garage. I missed it all. And now, presented with a chance to get something from that old life back, I couldn’t say a damn thing.

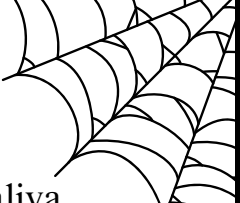
I felt a lump building at the back of my throat. The hairs started to tickle, and I knew what would happen next. I put my hand to my mouth, turned, and tried to escape the scentless building before the coughing started again.

‘Hey, sir!’ the cashier called out. ‘You dropped something!’

I kept my head down, kept running. Just as I reached the outside, the coughing fit had arrived, and I started spluttering into my elbow.

I was short of breath and hacking by the time I reached home. I closed the door behind me and leaned against it, feeling a layer of damp against the cool glass. The sadness and shame I carried from the bookshop boiled into a rage, and I screamed into my spit-sodden elbow. My anger took over me, and I stumbled into the kitchen, opening the drawers to find a pair of scissors. When I found them, I saw rust collecting on the metal near the handle. I didn’t think I’d be able to totally remove the hair, and I wasn’t planning on reaching all the way into my throat with a sharp blade. But if I could cut it short enough, so that I could get away with mumbling a little, then maybe I could live the life that I’d ,





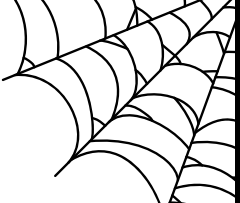
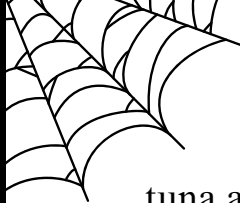
had before all this began. I pulled the hair out of my mouth, dripping in saliva and tears, and held it out in front of me, all in one fistful. To straighten the hair. I had to pull so hard I could feel the skin starting to tug in my throat. I opened the scissors, held them up to the hair, the blade's edge glinting in the cold kitchen light. I could see my own eye in its reflection. Distorted, red in frustration. I begged for peace, and clamped the scissors down.

Within an instant, the pain shot down every strand of hair, following all the way down into my throat. I screamed again, dropped the scissors onto the floor, keeled over in agony. The still-attached hair in my hand, as if possessed with a mind of its own, writhed and squirmed. It slipped out of my palm, so quickly that it cut the skin like a cheese wire. Blood poured out my hand, but the slicing pain in my throat was so great that I couldn't get up to clean the wound. I started coughing again, the hair attacking my gullet as I spewed onto the floor. I stayed curled up on my elbows and knees, my whole body jerking with every cough, as that pain seethed inside of me, yet out of my reach. My eyes screwed shut, tears dropped to the floor, and I heaved with sobs. I called out for my father, and of course he didn't answer. All I could hear was my own voice, muffled by the hair, vanishing into silence.

It must've gone on like this for several hours. When the pain had died down a little, I picked myself up, taking care not to slip on the mess. My forearms, hands, shins, legs, were all covered in sticky blood. I tried to wash myself in the sink again, taking extra care around my cut-up hand. As I was cleaning, I noticed the hair was twitching where it was cut, like the leg of a dead rat being zapped by electricity. I watched as it steadily grew longer and longer, and by the time I was finished it reached the bottom of the basin. I touched the ends with my fingers, as if to confirm what I had seen. I had no more energy to give to my shame, so my stomach just dropped like a log.

I looked at the stains running down my shirt, on the sleeves, along the sides. Seven now, I thought.

I couldn't leave the house for months. The day after I cut the hair, I realised why the cashier was calling out to me as I ran out the store. I had my debit card ready to pay for the books, but in my hurry to get out I'd dropped it on the floor. My days were spent behind my laptop, scrolling through social media to pass the time. When I got fed up with that, I wandered aimlessly around the house, looking out the window at the rolling clouds. I ordered dried out tins of



tuna and microwave rice online, using the bank details I had saved on my laptop. It cost more than it would've if I went to the store, and that made me feel even worse. I tried to read a couple of times, but it only reminded me more of that shame I felt, and I always gave up after scanning the same page for five minutes. Most of the time, though, I slept. I lay in bed, drifting in and out of sleep for periods of twelve hours at a time. My life was totally empty.

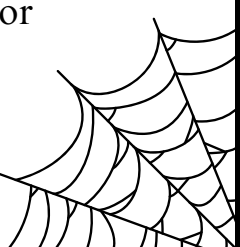
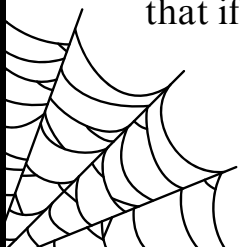
I still couldn't believe this was how things would be forever. Some days, I woke up with an optimistic weightlessness, that this might be the day that it had somehow ended. But then, I'd see myself in the mirror, see the hair running down my chin. There was always a part of me that held out hope that the hair would fall out on its own one night. I'd be able to pick it up off my pillow in one neat bundle, flush it down the toilet, and never have to think of it again. Or maybe I wouldn't even have to get rid of it to live a good life. I could explain to someone what had happened, and they would understand. They would see that it's not my fault that I'm like this. But the aftermath of trying to cut it, of seeing it only grow more, awoke me to the reality that I'd found myself in. My father would have said that it's important for me to understand reality. But I don't really see how at this point.

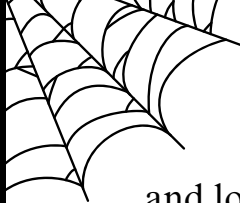
These are the thoughts that I spent most of my time dwelling on. They ended up exhausting me after an hour or so, and I'd have to go back to bed to recover.

I woke up one afternoon from another spell of drifting in and out of sleep. I swung my feet out onto the floor about half an hour later, and as I did so, I heard the letter flap downstairs open and shut. Then, I heard the doorbell ring. I thought it was probably my round of shopping for the week, so I waited until they gave up and left everything outside my door. But then, the doorbell rang again. And again. And again. Just to make the noise stop, I put on a tracksuit and went downstairs, pushing the hair back into my mouth. It had started to stink of fish, dirt, and whatever else had been attracted to it, tasting sour on my tongue.

A man in a red Royal Mail jacket was standing on the step as I opened the door. He shoved a parcel into my chest and held out his phone to take a photo. 'Hi, here you go, thank you!' he called out, already walking away.

I stood there, trying to process what happened. The interaction was so quick that if I had all the hair out he wouldn't have even noticed. I closed the door





and looked down at the parcel in my hands. It was a square package, wrapped in brown paper. My name and address were jotted down in thick black marker. I ripped the paper open, and inside was the Dostoyevsky novel stacked on top of the thick history book. I stood there, slack jawed, the hair unfurling out of my mouth like I was an older, rattier Rapunzel. When I opened the first page of the Dostoyevsky, something fell onto the floor, and it took me a moment to register that it was my debit card. There was a note on the first page, in the same handwriting that was on the package.

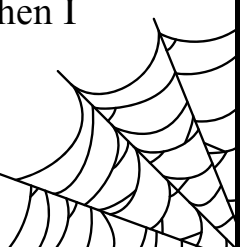
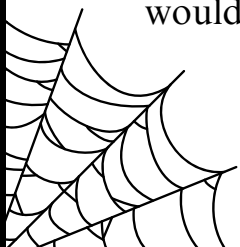
You forgot these! Don't worry about paying, I covered that for you! I owe you that much. Take care! ;)

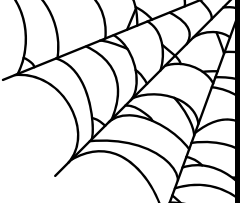
I stared dumbly at the message. Why didn't he just draw the winky face the right way around, I thought at first. He wasn't texting or anything. Also, did he find me just by using my card? If so, I really needed to be more careful.

It was only after those thoughts had come and gone did I then realise the full generosity of what the cashier had done. It would have taken him forever to find the address with just the card details. On top of that, he even paid for the books. I don't know how much book store cashiers made, but it couldn't have been a lot. And all of this after I was so rude to him! I knew then that I had to try and make it up to him.

I put the books down on the kitchen table, then made my way up to the bathroom. I took the hair out of my mouth and tried to unfurl it in front of the mirror. It had so many knots in it, small flecks of things I'd eaten caught up in the strands. I put it back inside my mouth, reached for some old mouthwash I had left in the back of the cupboard, and swished it around my mouth for five minutes or so. It'd been a while, so it needed a really deep clean. I gargled, and spat it out. The mixture was, to be honest, revolting. Old blood, pieces of food, and some sort of grey, grainy grime that left a residue in the sink. I unfurled the hair again. It perked up in my hands, as if I'd given a houseplant some much needed sunlight.

Next, I ran a comb through the strands, and it snagged immediately. I had to yank the knots out, which hurt the back of my throat where the roots were tugged. If I held the hair from behind the knots with my free hand, however, it would tug less, and while I couldn't get it all out it definitely felt better. When I





was done, I ran my fingers through it as carefully as I could, letting it fall naturally over my scarred palm. I could feel my whole body starting to ease with the hair.

Finally, I parted the hair into three segments and started braiding it. A girl I knew in college taught me how one day. Something about the feeling of her soft hair, so tenderly cared for, meant that the memory stuck. I was obviously not very good. Stray strands of hair fell out the braid, the plaits were uneven, and when I reached the bottom I realised that I didn't have any way to tie it all together at the end. I giggled at my ignorance, the split ends of my hair sticking out like the top of a pineapple. But it was a start. I made a mental note to get hair ties in my next shop, then went back downstairs.

I put my coat on, and gave myself one more look in the hallway mirror. For a moment I thought, if I saw it on someone else's head, I may have even called the braid pretty. But then the hair started falling out of the plaits and unfurling at the bottom. It must've still been too curly to hold its shape for long periods of time. I tried to gently fold the hair back into my mouth, and this time it took up a lot less space, and tasted so much fresher than it did before. Finally, I wrapped a scarf around myself, wore it high and tight enough to cover my mouth. No one would be able to see a thing.

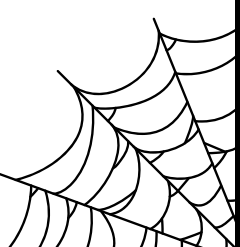
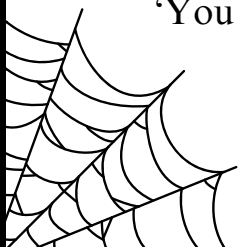
I stepped back outside, closed the door behind me, and started walking down the pavement. Today, I would walk around the street, just to the end of this road and back. Then, I would go do my weekly shop in person. Slowly, I would build my way up, until I was strong enough to visit the bookstore again. Hopefully, I'd be able to find the cashier, and I'd be able to thank him for the kindness that he showed. I would tell him that I was just not in a place where it could be reciprocated at the time. But I would be then. Maybe he'd even let me tell him how I'd ended up this way. It was a fantasy, but I had to know if it was real.

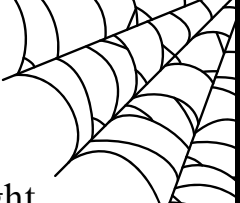
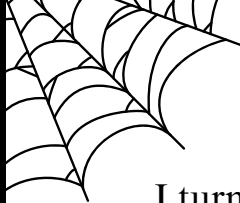
A woman smiled as she walked past. That familiar tingling of nerves and anxiety ran up my spine again, as if she could see straight through me. Was she wondering why I had my scarf so close to my face? No, it was cold enough to justify my behaviour. I kept walking, leaving her behind me.

'Excuse me?' she called out.

I froze, hearing her footsteps coming closer to me.

'You dropped this,' she said.



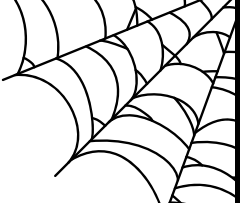
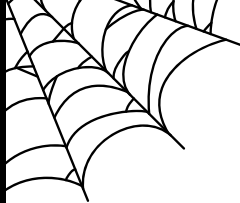


I turned, and saw that she was holding a glove I didn't even know I brought with me. I must have forgotten it in my coat. I took the glove.

'Thank you,' I said. It came out as a mumble, my voice blocked by the hair and the scarf. Words felt foreign in my mouth.

'No worries,' she grinned. 'Have a good day!'

She turned on her heel and walked away. I put the glove back in my pocket and looked around at my surroundings. Where I stood was where I was supposed to stop for the day, to turn back and try again tomorrow. But I wasn't ready to go home just yet. I felt I could go a little further.



Toy trains

Written by: Roos van der Velden

‘Daddy-’

‘Catherine-’

‘We can’t go out, daddy. The alarm is going off.’

‘It’s been going off for days on end. Really, Cathy, it’s fine. Trust daddy, alright? Now, go put on your shoes, your coat and your mask and make sure your brother does the same.’

Cathy looked up at her father, who was putting on his gloves. He didn’t look back at her. Rather, he looked out the big window towards the backyard and occasionally scratched his ratty beard. Thin, dirty hairs stuck to the ruby ring on his left ring finger.

Outside, the sky was yellow, with thick clouds of mist obscuring the high chimneys and military towers. You could just see the electricity lines, which were entangled and zapped continuously.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Cathy’s father snapped. ‘Come on, Catherine, hurry up.’

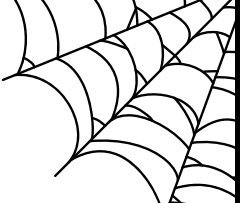
Catherine looked at her father for a few moments longer, before dribbling out into the hallway to grab her shoes. As is common knowledge to all children, when your parents call you by your full name, you must do what they say or face the consequences.

Her brother was sitting in the hallway, playing with his blue toy train. He made a buzzing sound as he rode it over the dark wooden floor.

Cathy grabbed her shoes. Once they were pink, with a motif of strawberries and bees. Now, they were yellow from the dust and the mud. These days, everything was yellow and brown, and she hadn’t seen a real strawberry or a bee in a long time.

‘Johnny,’ she said, ‘Put the train away. I am going to put your shoes, coat and mask on.’

Johnny stopped making the buzzing noise, but kept running his train over the floor until his sister had her own shoes and coat on. Cathy’s mask, which looked like the face of a deep sea creature and was meant to protect her eyes, nose and mouth, hung around her neck. Then, she picked up her brother and



put him on the small table in the hallway. A vase was still on top of it, but inside were no flowers, only a thick mold.

‘I want my blue shoes,’ he whined, as Cathy made two bows on his feet.

‘These are your blue shoes,’ she told him. ‘It’s the dust that makes them like this. I said so before.’

‘I want my blue shoes!’ Johnny repeated.

By then, Cathy’s father came into the hallway. He leaned against the wall.

‘Cathy, hurry up.’

Cathy bit on the inside of her cheek to make the tears go away.

‘I want my blue shoes!’ Johnny repeated.

Cathy’s father hid his face in his hands. ‘Cathy, get his blue shoes.’

‘These are his blue shoes,’ she explained again. ‘Just like how I am wearing my pink shoes. It’s the dust.’

Her father didn’t reply. Rather, he silently watched as she got her brother's coat. By the time she had wrestled him into it, Johnny had taken off one of the shoes again, whining and yowling.

When Cathy had finally succeeded in getting her little brother dressed, her father picked him up. With his free hand, he pressed against Cathy’s back.

‘Open the door, will you?’

Catherine looked at her hands. ‘Dad-’ she tried one more time.

‘Catherine,’ her father hissed, before he took a deep breath and smiled down at her: ‘It’s alright, really. Remember when daddy used to work at the lab? I worked with the dust a lot, do you still know? And I say it’s safe. Really, you can trust me.’

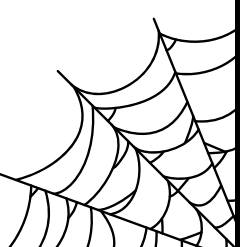
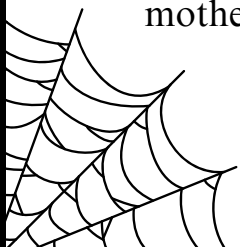
‘Won’t you at least wear a mask?’

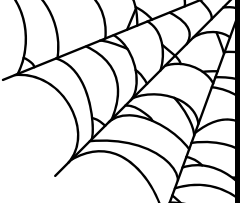
‘Catherine. I won’t ask again.’

Cathy sighed, pulled up her mask and did as asked. Just as she was about to step outside, her brother acted up again: ‘Train!’ he yelled, his voice muffled by his blue mask.

Catherine turned around and quietly picked up the train, knowing it was easier to comply than to fight it.

More than ever, she longed for her mother. Her mother would have gotten her brother quiet and would have done his shoes and coat and food and sing him to sleep instead of her. Her mother would have kept the dust out of the house. Her mother would have talked her father out of having them leave the house.





Cathy stepped out onto the pavement (not that the difference between pavement and road meant a lot anymore). A few quiet cars were still parked on the road, eroded and rusted. Cathy could only make out the car of the Johnsons', which was parked with one wheel on the pavement, as it always was. Her father put a hand onto her back. 'Come. Follow me,' he said. Cathy nodded. She handed the train to her brother, who hid his face in his fathers' shoulder.

As they walked, Cathy remembered how much she hated it outside. Mostly, she hated what outside had become compared to what it used to be. The air smelled like a ruined Christmas dinner. Like burned meat, rotten eggs and a strange, sugary smell she could never place, but which attracted a million insects in the places where it was strongest. She hated the insects as well. They were larger than she remembered, and mean and starving, biting whenever they could. The street used to be lined with trees. Here and there, a trunk still lay, home to more insects and a couple of bird carcasses. When she squinted, Cathy could pretend they were still alive and flying around, building nests and sitting on the electricity lines, which flickered dangerously above her head.

The mist was thick, so that they couldn't even see the end of the street. By the time they came to the corner, her father almost missed it, and Cathy had to tug on his sleeve to remind him.

'Daddy,' she asked.

'Not now, Cath.'

'I just want to know where we are going,' she held up her hand, as if to reach for her fathers', but decided against it at the last moment. 'The park isn't even fun when it's like this, and school's not now, and the stores are empty.'

'We are not really going to a place,' her father said. 'You'll see, Cathy. It'll be alright.'

'Are we going to look at the trains?' Johnny asked. He cradled his locomotive to his chest.

Cathy's father took a deep breath, which made him cough. White drops of spittle stuck to his chin and hung in his thin beard like small icicles. A little bit stuck to his gray coat, which stunk of smoke. 'Maybe we'll see a train or two,' he replied.

'So we are going to the train tracks?' Cathy said, as they turned another corner.

'Catherine, be quiet,' her father said. 'We are getting to a place near the train



tracks. To the fountain. You remember, the fountain in the park?

‘You’re being silly, daddy,’ Johnny said. ‘I hope we’ll see the black trains. They always made the best dunk-a-dunk, dunk-a-dunk, dunk-a-dunk...’

Cathy’s father let Johnny continue his train noises, which sounded deeper due to the mask. Sometimes, he looked at his daughter, who thought there was for sure something silly on her father’s face. Something strange, an expression she hadn’t seen before. Like sadness and guilt, but also with a little happiness, the way Johnny always used to look when he took an extra bit of food even though they didn’t have any extra.

Cathy only spoke again as they were going uphill, to where the playground and the park used to be and from where you could indeed see the train tracks.

‘Daddy, I can hear them!’

‘It’s okay, Cathy. I’ll make sure they won’t hurt you.’

‘Daddy!’ Catherine stopped walking. ‘Daddy, I’m scared!’

Her father took a deep breath. This time, when he coughed, drops of blood dropped onto his coat and gloves, combined with green slime. ‘Cathy,’ he said, in a tone sweeter than the smell the flies liked so much, ‘you know this road. It leads to the fountain park. With the statues and the swings, remember? You can see the trains. You liked the red ones, your brother liked the blue ones, and you would count how many there were.’

‘That was before the fire and the growling monsters, and before the sky wasn’t blue anymore, just like Johnny’s shoes and also when mommy was still here!’

Cathy’s father clenched his fist. When he smiled at his daughter, red blood ran out of his mouth. Cathy took a step back.

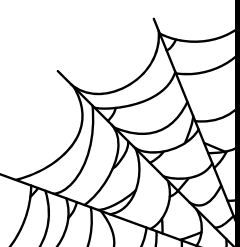
‘Cathy,’ he said, and his daughter wanted to scream and run away. ‘Cathy,’ her father said again, ‘I know where your mom is, okay? That’s what we are going to do.’ He wiped his mouth and knelt down until he was at eye height with his daughter. ‘She came back,’ he said. ‘That’s why we are going to the train tracks. Your mother, do you remember where she worked? It was a lot like daddy’s work.’

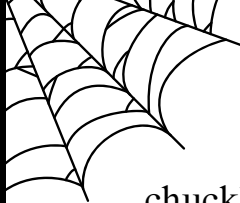
Cathy looked at her father. His expression had changed. His eyes were sparkling, now, as if he were excited that he could finally share his secret.

‘She fought the people who caused the big, explosive fire,’ Cathy said.

‘Very good! Don’t you think, Johnny?’

‘When are we going to see trains?’ was all her brother said. Cathy’s dad





chuckled.

‘Just a little more patience. Cathy, your mom has succeeded in putting the bad guys that caused the fire in jail. Now, she is coming back, and more black trains are going to come with more strong army men and they are going to take care of everything, alright?’

‘Really?’

‘Yes!’

Cathy looked at her father. A smile had broken through on his face. Now, he looked almost like her old dad again, who would secretly buy her ice cream and tell jokes and sing her to sleep and who bought her the pink shoes with strawberries and bees on them.

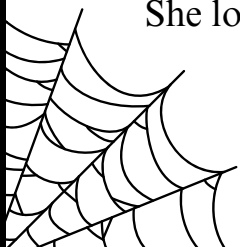
Cathy swallowed. ‘Really?’ she asked again. When her father nodded, she smiled and took his hand. Together, they continued up the hill. Even the growling and grunting and the smell of rot and the yellow skies couldn’t bother Cathy anymore. Finally, her mum had come back, and finally, she’d come tuck her in again, and clean Johnny’s shoes. ‘Before you know it,’ her father continued, ‘the sky will be blue again, and the birds will be singing, and it will be like nothing ever happened.’ His mouth formed into a dreamy smile as Cathy spotted the fountain in the distance. ‘Cath,’ He said, ‘sorry that I was so harsh on you, lately, alright? You didn’t deserve that. You’ve been working hard, for your brother, for the family. You’re a good girl, Cathy. I love you. Once we’re back with mom, and all is clear again, we’ll go get ice cream, alright? Chocolate. And pistachio. You liked that.’

Cathy nodded as they continued up the hill, not even mentioning that her favorite had been mango and strawberry. There was still doubt, in her chest, which was squashed the further they walked. She could see the euphoria in her fathers’ eyes, the broad smile on his unshaven face. It had to be right.

Once they reached the top of the hill, where the park used to be, Cathy saw her. Down by the train tracks, next to the abandoned station where the light nonetheless always burned, stood a group of people.

‘Race you down,’ Cathy’s father whispered. ‘See if you can see moms’ ring.’ She didn’t need more encouragement. She let go of her fathers’ hand and ran down the dusty, yellow hill, almost falling multiple times down due to the loose sand and dirt, shaken up by footsteps and uprooted plants.

She looked for her mothers’ wedding ring, the one with the big, deep blue





sapphire, the twin of her fathers' ruby ring. 'Mom!' She called out, and the people down the hill looked over their shoulders.

Down the hill, the dust had flown up and it was difficult to see, or even breathe. Cathy ran over the muddy ground, to the group. Six, or maybe seven or eight, men and women with messy clothes and unkept hair looked her way. They made growling noises among each other, slightly difficult to make out due to the raging sand.

'Mom! Mom!' Cathy yelled, looking at the hands of the adults around her, until she found the one she was looking for. The blue sapphire was crumbled and the gold stuck with goop and blood, but it was undoubtedly, clearly hers.

'Mom!' Cathy tore off her mask and threw her arms around her mothers' waist, her head buried in her stomach. 'Mom, mom, you came back, I'm so sorry I yelled at dad, I-'

Her voice stuck in her throat when pain seeped through her shoulder and her neck. Someone, something, was biting her, biting her like Johnny sometimes used to do when he was unhappy about something or too hungry. It felt like that, but worse, way, way worse.

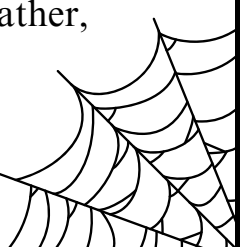
Cathy felt her body go numb. Within no time, her neck, the lower half of her face, her arms and her stomach were tingling as the blood stopped pumping. Cathy sunk to the ground.

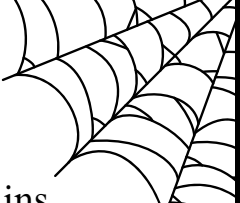
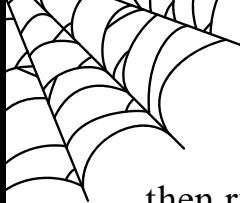
'Mom?' she said. Her voice sounded like a deep growl. She turned her eyes up at her mother and looked into the face of the monsters the alarm had been whining about for days. Its eyes were bulging out of its skull, which had thin scraps of skin over bone, leaking blood vessels and rotten muscles. Mucus dripped from its forehead and out of its oily, filthy hair. 'Mom? Daddy?' She whispered. Cathy wanted to yell, but her throat closed up and went numb, as the venom ran through her veins and made her body close down.

Her eyes rolled back in her skull. The dust and a layer of mist made it difficult to see at all, but she would recognize the boots in front of her in the dark. Her father was standing beside her, and if the screaming was any indication, he held her brother in an iron grip.

A blue toy train fell in front of Cathy's face. 'Daddy! Daddy! No!' She heard, before she stopped hearing, except for noises, noises and the roaring of the sand.

She wanted to get up, get up and push her brother out of the arms of her father,





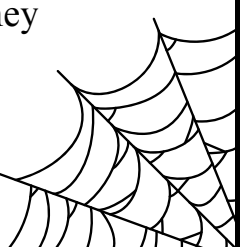
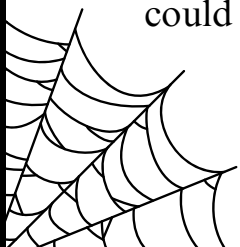
then run away with him. They could cross the tracks, there weren't any trains around anyhow and the zombies always tripped when they tried to walk over the metal ridges. She tried to tell her legs what to do, to get up, obey and push. But nothing happened, and she could only listen to the noises and the vague shapes above her, as the smell of fresh meat and blood became more and more prominent and more and more irresistible, by god, did she want to take a bite of whatever or whoever was in front of her. Sink her teeth into their skin, past their muscles, and tear of a big, fresh chunk and lap up the fresh blood, a feast better than anything they ever got these days, almost as good as a fresh chunk of chocolate cake, like the one she got on the same birthday she had gotten her pink shoes.

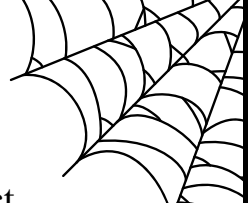
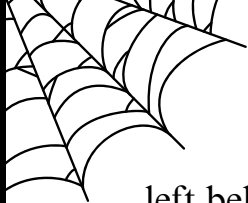
It felt as if a switch flipped and her knees obeyed her again. Cathy got up, and the next moment, she was gone. She did not know what she was doing as she hit her father with a strength he could have never guessed she possessed, which caused him to drop his son out of his arms, and the boy ran away as fast as his little legs would carry him, jumping over the tracks, away from the horde of zombies who crowded around the fresh smell of blood and flesh that came from his father.

Cathy felt only desire for blood and organ tissue, for bone marrow and liver covered with slick as she threw herself onto the fresh carcass on the ground. She and the other zombies tore off and slurped and dismembered and devoured and pulled through tendons and feasted, until the flesh went stale and the blood stopped flowing and they could only taste the poison that ran through their own veins and the stale flesh that was a staple of the zombie hordes.

The last thing that went through Cathy's fathers' head before he himself was turned might have been euphoria at having been reunited with his wife, at last, after weeks of doubting his plan. It might as well have been nothing but regret as seven, eight, nine humanoids tore at his flesh, until his intestines dropped out and were punctured in front of his eyes, while his son ran, away from his family and the relative safety of home, to the empty, venomous factories and military towers on the other side of the train tracks, out of his mind with fear and grief, emotions he may not even have words for.

After the unexpected feast, the zombie hoard moaned and screeched, finding the energy to continue up the hill, yearning for the overabundance of food they could smell through sand and brick houses on the brink of destruction. They





left behind a child-sized air filter mask and a small, blue toy train, an exact replica of the ones that used to go by on the tracks it was left by. Thick splatters of blood, slime and salvia made the dust leak off. A single lock of long, blonde hair, perhaps from a young girl, stuck to the wheels.

Author Bios



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer and student from the Netherlands, currently doing an internship at Lovebooks uitgeverij. Previously, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen*. Recently, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit*, her first publication away from her home ground. In this anthology, she has finally written a piece herself again.



Niamh Canning
Editor

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



Mairi Smibert
Author

Here greets you Mairi Smibert, who cannot fully shake the dream of becoming an author. Maybe someday. For now, Mairi writes for fun, to grow in both confidence and understanding. She has a history degree and will tell you about it at length, thoroughly and in detail. She is particularly fascinated with the development of ideas and belief structures; the conceptualisation of the supernatural; and is a big fan of Russian literature.

Author Bios



Mishel Stefanova
Author

Mishel Stefanova is a fantasy fiction writer. She has written her first fantasy novel, *Daughter of the Dark Wood*, which is heavily inspired by the Classical world and Greek mythology. She has just gotten her degree in Classics from King's College London. In her spare time, she likes to go on long walks, read, and yap about her latest hyperfixations.



Lauren Storey
Author

Lauren Storey is an unhinged horror writer with a thing for penning stories about cannibalism and the terrifying experience of being a mentally ill woman. Lauren loves a good dark fantasy story. When she's not busy reading, writing, or living through the terror of daily life, you'll find her (re)watching *Twilight* or trying to summon the spirit of Frank-N-Furter.



Megan Fitzgerald
Author & Editor

Megan Fitzgerald is an Instagram poet from London. She loves exploring the everyday and turning it on its head in her writing. She studied Creative Writing in London before completing her Masters of Arts in creative writing and Instagram poetry. Currently, she is writing a dark high fantasy novel. When she isn't writing, she can be found practising her nonexistent cooking skills, having (sporadic) psychic moments, and reading as much as she can sink her teeth into.

Author Bios



Andrea Tode Jimenez
Author

Andrea Tode is a twenty-two-year-old Spanish-Peruvian writer with a passion for fantasy and folklore. She is currently based in London. Her college years were spent analyzing Middle English and writing a full-length original mystery play. Having graduated with First Class honors from her English Literature & Drama degree, Andrea enjoys implementing her writing in Word Tonic's challenges.



Benjamin Smith
Author, editor

Benjamin is a writer in the scarcest of senses. He writes only when his brain can organise thoughts and finds it hard to manifest them on a page, but when he eventually sees the feelings and thoughts engraved on the page, he feels most alive. So he keeps writing, hoping to make those thoughts less fleeting. He is a love of chocolate, nicotine and drowning out the pains of the world with noise-cancelling headphones and music with a heavy bassline.



Leon Lynn
Author

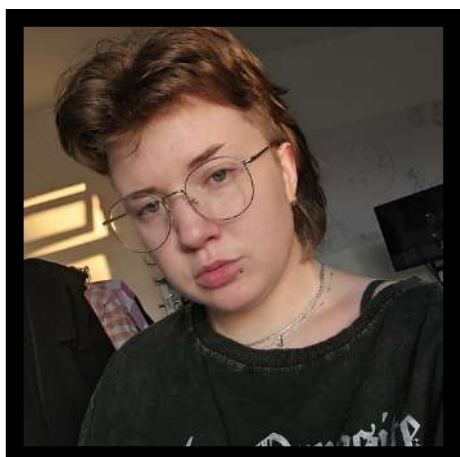
Leon Lynn is a (copy)writer and narrative designer from North Hampshire, best known for his writing in the digitisation of the smash-hit board game Gloomhaven. Raised and experienced in Guildford's famous gaming industry, Leon crafts stories that prompt the audience's participation. He is currently freelancing in narrative design and copywriting. Leon is also a co-founder of Word Tonic, a digital community and learning space for Gen Z copywriters worldwide.

Author Bios



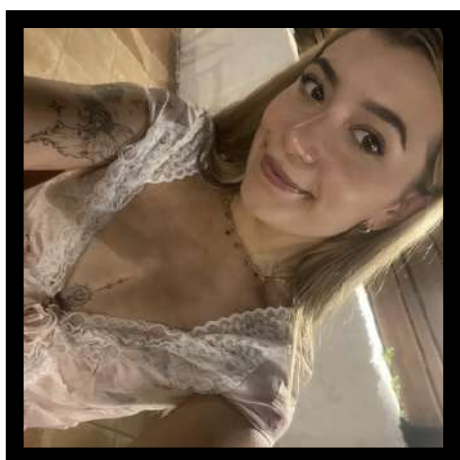
Chelsey Selvarajah
Author

Chelsey Selvarajah is an aspiring writer and literature graduate from London. A lover of all things macabre and gory, the theme of this anthology spoke to her and she decided to make it her debut. Her writing interests vary from female rage (especially South Asian) and horror to sapphic romance and fantasy. Outside of creative work, you'll find her playing visual novels (Or scripting her own) or re-reading her favourite comfort mangas at 2am.



Jade Easthope
Author

Jade Easthope is a 25-year-old writer from the UK. They graduated in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2020 amidst a global lockdown. Despite sometimes experiencing extreme writer's block, she persists. They live in their flat surrounded by cute plushies and an abundance of frog memorabilia. In their free time, they love creative arts of all kinds and rewatching BBC Sherlock.



Halle Taylor
Author

Halle Taylor is a twenty-three year old writer and camera assistant from Liverpool. She loves to bring visions to life through literature, film and music. She writes poetry, plays piano and is working on set for an upcoming TV show. Halle is also a qualified teacher who loves learning and creativity. She is currently writing her debut novel, to be released next year.

Author Bios



Angel Brooke
Author, illustrator, lay-out

Angel Brooke lives in Chicago with Ice Cream (dog, not dessert) and two turtles, Skipper and Turtellini. She is a collage artist and writer of copy, poetry, and sci-fi/fantasy. Angel loves rambling about cows, bees, and human nature. Don't even get them started on ripstiking, the universe, or their forbidden star-crossed love of cheese. Angel contributed to her first anthology as a writer, artist, and graphic designer.



Annie Bumblebee
Author

Annie_BumbleBee is a tired student by day and a restless artist by night, currently living in sunny-side California, who loves nothing more than thrifting, tarot, and tea. She is forever longing to wear her cozy sweaters all year round and finding the right sketchbook, all while getting lost in maddening reveries consisting of dancing with faeries or ardently poetic revenants.



Lili Garman
Author

Lili Garman is a writer and filmmaker from Leeds. She has a love for exploring all things absurd and showcasing different voices inspired by the world and people around her. She loves to mix genres and styles, constantly experimenting and developing her skills with every project.

You can find her at @skewwhiff_ on instagram and tiktok and at www.liligarman.co.uk

Author Bios



Drew Boulton
Author

Drew Boulton (she/her) is a 24-year-old author and poet from the North of England. She graduated with a Creative Writing MA in 2022 and specialises in contemporary fiction, with a particular interest in romantic body horror. When she isn't writing, you can find her looking at cat adoption sites, watching reruns of *Diners, Drive Ins and Dives* or buying books she will read in the next 20ish years.



Gwyn Yvere
Author

Born to/raised by an avid True Crime enthusiast, Gwyn Yvere grew up with an in-depth knowledge of humanity's dark minds and capacity to harm innocent civilians. With this knowledge, they craft works of grotesque fantasy, lavishing in disturbed imagery and horrid hyperbole. They also check the thesaurus from time to time.



Ravi Malhar Nathwani
Author

Ravi Malhar Nathwani writes from the center of the void, interrogating reality through darkened lenses. His prose-poetry finds beauty in the chaos, however brutal it may be; cybernetic chimeras of techno-dystopia are fused with blood-soaked body horror monstrosities, painting crimson visions across his landscapes. Most of his work is made with performance in mind, mixing spoken word with thumping soundtracks that place his readers right in the midst of his hyperactive head.

Author Bios



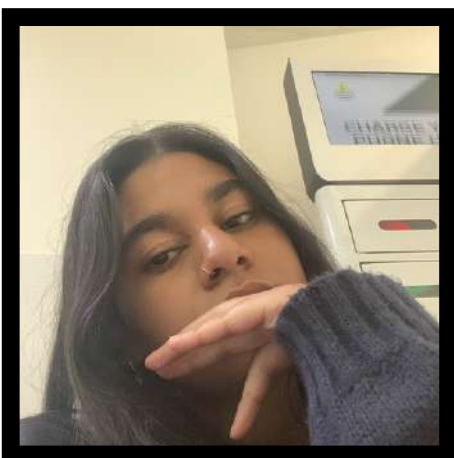
Liam Brazier
Author

Liam Brazier wrote his first piece, a poem about the first world war, when he was ten. His English teacher showed it to the class, and his mother stuck it on the fridge. He's been chasing that high ever since. He studied English Literature at university, where he was published in the English Literature Society's publication. You can find more of his writing and his portfolio at sfobwriting.com.



Tara Vracevic
Editor

After graduating with a degree in English Literature, Tara Vracevic left university with a great interest in publishing and the world of TV and film – essentially storytelling in all forms. While she enjoys writing herself, she always wanted to get a taste of editorial work and was excited to finally be able to do so with this anthology.



Sadiqah Miah
Author

Amid rushed university essays and stacks of half read books, Sadiqah is a broke student in her second year at UCL. She doesn't know what to do, but she likes journalism and is passionate about the lives of women and girls around the world. Just give her time to be a bit dramatic and entertain the conspiracies. She'll be with you soon.

Author Bios



Fin van den Oudenaelder
Editor

Fin is a writer from the Netherlands who can spend hours daydreaming about everything and nothing at all. He is interested in the horror genre and hopes to write a proper story for that genre one day. He also very much enjoys reading books, watching films and playing video games. Fin didn't write anything this time around, but happily edited one of the many amazing stories.



Will Wade
Author

Will Wade is a writer from Wakefield. They mostly write fantasy horror and superhero fiction, but their first publication was a poem in their university's anthology in 2022. They joined Word Tonic in August 2023 off the back of interning as a social media manager for Neptune Sonar Ltd, and this is their first time featuring in the Word Tonic Anthology. You can find them on LinkedIn or on Instagram at [@will_the_sun_shine](#).



Sydney Sampson
Editor

This is the second Word Tonic Anthology Sydney has contributed to! When she's not hunched over her computer, she can usually be found exploring new cities, taking photos, or watching entirely too much TV. You can check out more of her work on her travel blog, [Alone and Abroad](#).



WORD TONIC COMMUNITY

THE END

UNTIL WE
MEET AGAIN...

COVER DESIGNED BY YASMIN BLIGH-HASAN