

PASTEL PASTORAL

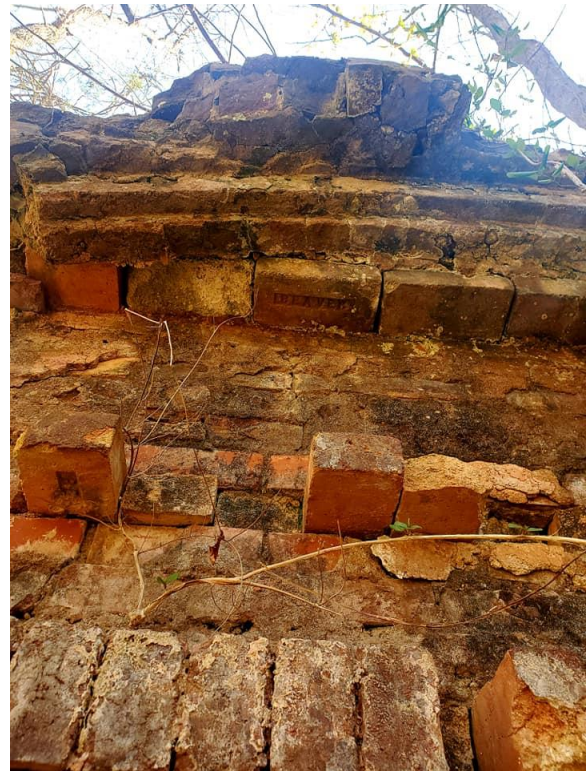
Fall 2021 / Issue 1.5



PASTORAL
GOTHIC

Welcome to the Gothic Pastoral issue of Pastel Pastoral! I've had so much fun working on this issue, and I hope you thoroughly enjoy the stories and poems within. From new takes on classic poems, ballads, and myths; to original spooky tails and tails of lost love. Please enjoy each and every story within!

Editor Bio- Roxie (She/Fae) is a queer nonbinary femme writer and editor. Her words can be seen in *Southchild* and the *Minison Project*. When not writing, fae enjoy hiking, reading, and going on adventures. A Midwesterner at heart, Roxie currently resides in NC.



A special thanks to everyone who submitted to this issue

Cover- Roxie Geering

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The Highwayman's Revenge By: Aidan Redwing

Aidan writes speculative fiction and poetry. This particular piece, *The Highwayman's Revenge*, is inspired by Alfred Noyes' work, *The Highwayman*, expanding on the story as it explores the afterlife of Bess and her lover. Aidan's other works include *The Wind Through the Fields* (Heroic Fantasy Quarterly issue 47), *The New Moon Gambit* (forthcoming from Gwyllion) and several other pieces. Links to his works can be found on his social media at <https://www.facebook.com/aidan.redwing.5>, @a_redwing or, contact him at a.redwing.writing@gmail.com



CW- Revenge, death, murder

The night was a shadow around her.

A cloak of mist rolled in from the moor

and the bells tolled the witching hour,

rang the witching hour,

across the misty moor.

Ding-dong, ding-dong from the churchyard, the
ruined inn appears.

Ding-dong, ding-dong from the churchyard, hooves
echo down the road.

Her ghost appears at the window, a face in the broken
glass.

Ding-dong, ding-dong from the churchyard, their
spirits do not rest.

A musket flash in the window, blazes in the dark.

A light sparks in the window,

and kindles his rage once more!

<p>Clip-clop, clip-clop down the highway, his ghostly eyes ablaze.</p> <p>Clip-clop, clip-clop down the highway, can they not feel his rage?</p> <p>Riding out for vengeance, he gallops across the purple moor.</p> <p>Clip-clop, clip-clop, can they hear him?</p> <p>He comes for blood this night, and the bells ring the witching hour, toll their final hour, They'll not see the morning light!</p> <p>The fire shines in the darkness, under the full moon's light.</p> <p>Their coats are red in the evening, stained with blood from the evening - that accursed evening, they broke down the old inn's door.</p> <p>The road is a ribbon of moonlight, and it leads him straight to them.</p> <p>And the highway man comes riding - riding, riding,</p>	<p>The highwayman comes riding for blood this night. Up they leap from the fireside, their muskets primed to fire. As the bullets rip through his body, he recalls their iron bite. But they can't shoot down the spectre, who loved the landlord's daughter. He rides them down on the highway, cuts them down on the highway. He puts them down on the highway, down like dogs on the highway. His rapier slits their throats. Ding-dong, ding-dong, mourn the church bells, as he returns to the dark innyard. A face peers out from the window, peers from the shattered window, And Bess sees the highway man come riding, riding, riding, she sees her love come riding, up to the old inn door.</p>
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Fairy Carriage by Avra Margariti

Avra Margariti is a queer author, Greek sea monster, and Pushcart-nominated poet with a fondness for the dark and the darling. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Vastarien*, *Asimov's*, *Liminality*, *Arsenika*, *The Future Fire*, *Space and Time*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Glittership*. "The Saint of Witches", Avra's debut collection of horror poetry, is forthcoming from Weasel Press. You can find Avra on twitter (@avramargariti).



You will hear the infernal clicks and clacks
Of the fairy carriage before you see
Its darksome form, lustrous as a casket
Flitting on the path flanked by fir trees.
The ebon wheels rattling over underbrush,
The skeletal joints of mares—a necromancy from the
grave,
The rendering farm.

When the carriage crosses the countryside,
Children, sequester yourselves in bed;
Underneath dust-bunnied wooden frames is best,
But cicada coats and layers of blanket insulation
Will do at a pinch.
Shove crude-cut cotton in your ears,
Lock and bar all your doors and windows.

Some primeval part of you will wish to seek out
The carriage, see for yourself how dark the wood,
How pale the bone.
You will wonder: is the carriage's upholstery
As velvety as moss and blood?
Will it cradle you, will you have
Sweet dreams at last flayed from life's worries,
Cream and chocolate bugs awaiting inside
And a self-filling bowl of goblin fruit,
An entourage of specters to help you
In and out of nightclothes,
Wispy lullabies and stories of wars and wild hunts
Recounted on demand?

You will be stolen, child; the fairy carriage
Makes no exceptions.
But still you leave the door open just a crack.
Still you peek between the blankets and your own
fingers,
Ears straining for the grave click-clack
Of bones and wood.
Waiting for the fairy carriage to spirit you away
To winter or summer courts,
Heavenly halls or chthonic realms,
Above or below
And widdershins, too.

O'er His White Bones by Rick Hollon

An adaptation of "The Twa Corbies," a traditional Scots ballad.

Rick Hollon (they/them or fey/fem) is an intersex, nonbinary, bi/queer writer, editor, and parent from the American Midwest. Feir work has appeared or is forthcoming in *perhappened*, *(macro)mic*, *Whale Road Review*, *Stanchion Zine*, *Pareidolia Literary*, and other small-press publications. Find them on Twitter at SailorTheia



CW- Death, blood, mention of scavengers eating a body.

The living fail to see what a bird is. They see wings and pinions, not the ghosts that unburden its bones.

I don't remember how I died. I don't remember much at all from before I struck the ground in heart of the woodland, my armor and shield pressing me into the hay-scented bracken. I had a love, somewhere, and I had hounds. I had birds of my own, hunting-hawks wicked with skill, eyes like coals banked in the coldest turn of the night. They flew off as I lay dying, our contract broken, away to hunt game more to their own taste.

The ravens knew I was dead before my soul had become unhitched, before I knew I had hit the ground. Birds see much that mortals miss. Two ravens perched on my breastplate, claws tapping and scratching the metal. One hopped in his eagerness, eyes only for my waning flesh. The other stood sober, cocking her head, aware of my ghost even as I rose.

Begone, I shouted at them, but my throat was a void in the air. I made no sound.

At this even the eager one stilled. Two ravens eyed my untethered spirit. I beheld my mortal self beneath me, broken and bloody and shrunken in death. I wouldn't have known myself had it not been for the device on my shield, the lock of my lady's hair at my throat. I longed to grieve for myself, but I couldn't recall how.

The sober raven made a hop toward me where I shivered in the center of the glade.

"Newmade ghost," she said in a voice of stormwind, a voice of winter dawn. "No one knows where you lie.

Your hawks have flown. Your hounds hunt new masters.”

My lady, I whispered, though the pretense of speech felt like choking without a throat, gasping without lungs. My lady will come.

She tilted her head and gazed through the heart of me. I knew the truth even as she shook her head, knew I had known for a long while. “She knows comfort in the arms of another. No one will come.”

I wanted to flee, to fly, but as in the dreams that steal to us on the chill verge of spring, I could not lift a muscle. I could not stir, could only watch as the eager raven hopped toward my skystruck eyes.

The sober one checked him, but the same hunger his eyes held for my flesh was in her eyes as she watched my ghost. “I would offer you a kindness,” she said.

The kindness of ravens, I choked, drowning in a sea of air.

“The kindness, indeed,” she said, “of rebirth.”

My hands reached for a rosary that wasn’t there. I tried to resurrect the cathedral of my faith, the compassion of our savior, the love of our father, the names of any saints, but all of it seemed as distant as Rome, as fragile and strange as its ruins.

There was no god in this glade. No saints turned joyful eyes to my spirit. No gates opened to admit the light in my soul.

There were only the trees I couldn’t smell, the wind I couldn’t feel, the rocks I couldn’t touch. And the ravens.

“We will eat you,” the sober raven said, hopping toward me, inexorable and calm. “We will peck out

your eyes. We will feather our nest with your hair. We will bring your meat to our young, crop by crop, until your flesh is spent. The wind alone will mourn you. The wind will moan over your white bones when they are bare.”

This, this is no kindness.

“Ah,” said the raven, “but the kindness I offer is this.”

I felt myself soaring, a joyful vertigo of updraft and mountainside, a rush of canopy and field beneath practiced wings. I knew the warmth of the sun on my plumage and wept with the relief of it. I smelled such wonders: a crack of marrow, a richness of blood beyond measure, the pure sweet wind that spins across the loch at the close of day.

Then I was a ghost again, and could no longer weep, though I felt emptier and more lost than I had ever known in life.

Please, I croaked.

“We will eat you,” the raven said. She jumped into the air and drew my spirit into her, spilling and spooling me into the hollows of her bones. Her mate joined her and together they knit my soul into them. I could feel again, and smell. I breathed the cool hay-scent of ferns in the glade. I raised my beak to caw my joy.

The living fail to see what a bird is. They see omens and scavengers, not the ghosts they unburden within their bones.

Govi Jar Books by Matthew Schultz

Matthew Schultz is the author of the illustrated Gothic novel, *We, The Wanted* (Cosmic Egg Publishing) and a study of the tarot titled *Joycean Arcana: Ulysses and the Tarot de Marseille* (Eye Corner Press). His recent work appears in *Not Deer Magazine*, *The Minison Project Sonnet Issue*, and *Glitchwords*.



You had just finished your coffee and thrown the paper cup into a garbage can when the brass band finished playing their tune. Silence in New Orleans is long and strange and dangerous. It send you searching.

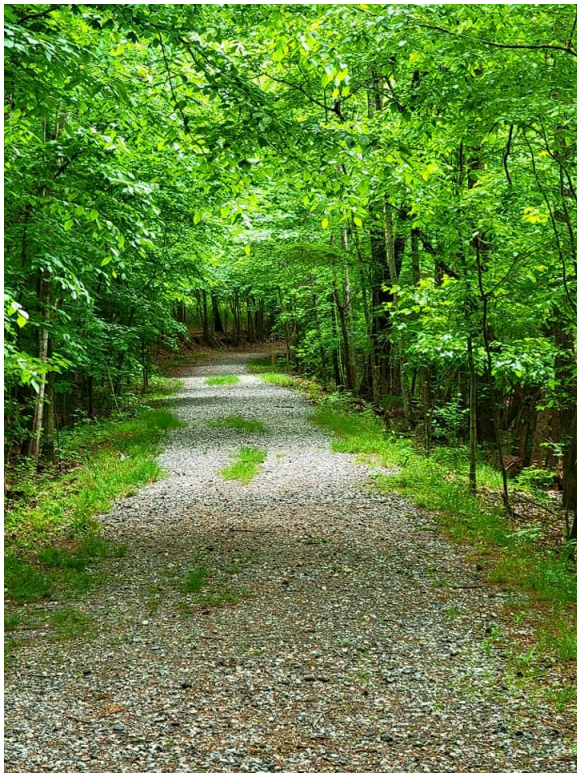
You slouched, unknowing, into an open door that led into the dank, lean bookstore. Paperbacks lined the shelves from floor to ceiling on either wall and in-between them hung a brass chandelier shedding electric candlelight. At the back, a window looked out upon a narrow rose garden adjacent to the St. Louis Cathedral.

The clerk invited you to sign the ledger that sat open next to a dipping pen and inkwell upon his small cypress desk. A mailing list. And when you pressed the pen upon that paper pulp to scrawl your lengthy name, the warm light from the chandelier became the color of death in the afternoon.

Scores of people began to appear in the blue-gray brume--pallid and disconcerting. They strayed about the shelves, reading the spines of books like lines of poetry. No one seemed to notice that the clerk had locked the door.

Secret by Andrew McSorley

Andrew McSorley is the author of *What Spirits Return* (Kelsay Books). A graduate of the MFA program in creative writing at Southern Illinois University, his poetry has previously appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *The Minnesota Review*, *UCity Review*, *HAD*, *Poet Lore*, and many others. He lives in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he works as a librarian at Lawrence University.



The soul of another is a dark forest,
root-soaked ground and canopies
top heavy in thick wind, muttering
the song of air, building their budded
branching bodies one by one. The idea
is we can never see it full, not really -
but listen - there's a clue in the leaf
rattle, the bird call and pebbled rain,
there's a hint in the fire's whisper,
the deer hoof trampling sedge grass
in the midnight clearing; there's the owl
and the pinprick stars trading secrets.
Make no mistake, it is there, waiting,
the restless truth to rouse you from sleep.

Tangled Web by Estelle Grace Tudor

Estelle is a full-time author from the wet and wild South Wales coast in the UK. She has been published in *Mslxia* and *Paperbound* magazines and has self-published four fantasy novels. She has also longlisted in *Blinkpot* and Retreat West's micro fiction competitions and had an honourable mention from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest.



CW- Spiders

I pull another box off the shelf causing a cloud of dust to cover my hair. Coughing and spluttering I turn to face Tristan's amused gaze.

"You could do with a bath," he says, taking the box from me.

"Does the hot water even work?" I ask, wiping my grubby hands onto the thighs of my jeans.

"I'm not sure," he admits. He opens the box and rifles through an odd assortment of old hairbrushes. "Just junk," he mutters, closing the lid.

Clearing out Tristan's grandmother's old house was not quite the dirty weekend I'd had in mind.

"Come on, let's see if the hot water works." Tristan raises an eyebrow at me and pulls me from the room. I give a reluctant laugh and allow him to lead me into the bathroom.

"Wait there, I'll get you a towel." He gives me a brief kiss and leaves me standing on the cracked tiles. I stare at my reflection in the grimy mirror, my black hair a tangle of curls, streaked with dust.

Tristan returns, the fluorescent light casting shadows across his face. He looks up at me and for a moment a calculating look enters his eyes. I give myself a shake, this old house is giving me the creeps.

Tristan smiles and I'm relieved as I take in his usual handsome face. He hands me the towel and a bar of soap and bends to turn on the taps. A jet of water shoots out, the heat causing steam to fill the tiny room.

“There you go,” Tristan says, “I’ll grab you some clothes from your bag.”

Still feeling slightly uneasy, I watch him leave the room. Keen to get out of my dirty clothes, but even keener to be done with this creepy house, I hurriedly undress and step into the bathtub. As I tip my head back to soak my hair, I shudder despite the warm water, for cobwebs hang in loops from the ceiling, finishing in a dark mass in the corner.

Making do with the rose-scented soap, I quickly lather up determined not to think of what could be lurking above me. I rinse off and step out onto the cold floor. Grabbing the towel, I drop it with a scream as a large black spider scuttles over it.

Tristan bursts into the room, looking preoccupied. “What is it?” he asks.

“Sp...spider!” I gasp, pointing. Water drips off my hair, pooling around my feet.

Tristan’s eyes follow the spider’s progress with a strange look on his face. “They won’t hurt you,” he murmurs.

He tears his eyes away and meets mine, there’s a gleam in their depths that does nothing to calm my nerves. He picks up the towel and gives it a shake before handing it to me.

Reluctantly I wrap myself in the threadbare cloth.

“Come on, your clothes are in Grandmother’s room,” Tristan tells me as he takes my hand and walks me down the corridor.

My skin is prickling with unease, and I can’t wait to get dressed and leave. Rain batters the window as we enter the room, the overhead lights flicker, and I cast a worried look at Tristan.

“I think we should get out of here before the storm gets any worse,” I suggest, hastily rubbing myself dry and dressing. I wrap my hair in the towel and look around for my bag. Seeing it on a chair, I grab it and rifle through it looking for my brush.

Tristan is staring out of the window, distracted. “I think we should go,” I repeat.

“What? Oh, I don’t think we’ll be going anywhere tonight,” he replies, gesturing out the window, “the road’s flooded.”

“You’re kidding,” I moan, still looking for my brush.

“Don’t worry, we can cozy up in here.” Tristan finally turns his attention to me and notices me going through my bag. “What have you lost?”

“My brush - I’m sure it was in here,” I say in frustration.

“You can borrow Grandmother’s, I’ll go and get it,” he says. His eyes rest briefly on my towel-wrapped hair before leaving.

Hugging my arms around myself I sit in the chair to wait; something digs into my thigh, and I put my hand down the side of the seat. My fingers touch something hard, and I pull out a black hexagonal frame. I stare down at the old portrait. My blood runs cold as I see my own face staring back at me, my black curls tumbled in an elaborate hairstyle. I’m dressed in an old-fashioned gown, festooned with bows and lace. But what chills me even more is the man standing next to me; it’s Tristan. But how can this be? This painting must be over a hundred years old, at least.

A noise from the corridor has me stuffing the picture back down the side of the chair and standing. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm my swirling thoughts, it must be a coincidence or a trick of the light, surely! Tristan enters the room carrying a silver hairbrush inlaid with mother of pearl.

Silently he removes the towel from my hair and runs the brush through my tangled curls. Mesmerized, I watch as he gently picks stray stands of hair from the brush and inspects their long black lengths. He lays them out onto the dresser top and turns his attention back to brushing my hair. I feel frozen, unable to move or speak, the rhythmic brushing hypnotizing me.

A chill enters the room as the window blows open with a bang, breaking the spell. I take a step back and laugh nervously.

Tristan takes the last strands from the brush. “I think that will be enough,” he murmurs, not looking at me.

I head over to the window, latching it closed. I turn around and find I’m alone. “Tristan?” My voice sounds high-pitched. I walk towards the door, passing the dresser, the strands of my hair are gone but the brush lies on top. Tentatively I pick it up, it’s ice cold so I drop it with a clatter.

Flooded road or not, I’m getting out of here. I grab my things and head out into the corridor. The lights flicker again, and I make my way down the shadowy staircase. Something crawls to my right, but resolutely I carry on. I reach the door and I’m just about to open it when a hand clamps down on my shoulder making me jump.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Tristan tells me as he turns me around to face him, I raise my eyebrows and he adds hastily, “not in this weather anyway. Come on let’s go to bed, I made some hot cocoa.” He presses a steaming cup in my hand, tendrils curling up from the brown liquid.

I hesitate, then follow him back up to the bedroom.

The room is freezing, my breath comes out in puffs of white. Seeing me shiver Tristan helps me into the bed, tucking the musty smelling covers around me tightly. “Drink your cocoa,” he coaxes, watching me with hooded eyes.

Needing the warmth, I comply. It tastes bitter on my tongue, and I swallow with a grimace. My vision wavers as instead of heat filling my body a paralyzing sensation overcomes me. I try to speak but find I can’t.

“Sleep now,” Tristan’s voice reaches me from far away as my eyes droop and close.

Skittering sounds bring me back to my senses. I stare around in terror at the glossy webs holding me down. My arms and legs are wrapped tightly

in its threads. I thrash about, trying to rip out of my silk prison.

“Hush, it’ll be over soon,” Tristan says, standing over me, holding the brush. He removes even more strands and with dawning horror I realize that I’m not just in a web, but a web interwoven with strands of my own hair.

Bile rises in my throat making it burn. “What are you doing?” I croak, staring at him with accusing eyes.

He cradles the brush. “Do you know how long we have been waiting for someone like you to come along?” he says coldly, the loving act completely dropped.

“We?” I quaver, trying to look around the room.

“Yes, we, my Rose’s ghost has been trapped in this brush for years, waiting until we could find another suitable host.”

“But why are you doing this to *me*?” I hear the desperate note creeping into my voice as I struggle against the tight bonds.

He pauses, indecision written over his face, before bursting out, “Because none of the other hosts worked, and I, cursed to live forever would have to watch as my Rose would die in my arms over and over again until I could bear it no more,” he pauses, breathing heavily, then, “until you came along, I couldn’t believe it when I first laid eyes on you - you could be Rose’s double,” Tristan muses, roving his greedy eyes over my face. “I know that this time it will work. It has to,” he adds, a touch of mad desperation in his voice.

I feel sick as I think of the hidden picture, my mind screaming, and my body desperate for escape.

Tristan withdraws a vial from his pocket, more thick black strands inside it. Removing them, he brings them to his nose and inhales deeply. “My Rose,” he croons. I try to shrink back as he lifts one of my curls and braids the other strands into my own hair. A weakness starts working its way through me as Tristan lays the silver brush on my

chest. Ice pierces my heart and I struggle for breath, grey clouds the edge of my vision as Tristan's face hovers above me.

"No..." I moan with my last breath...

Delighted laughter reaches me, but I cannot see where it is coming from. I feel stiff and cold, and whatever I'm lying on is hard and unforgiving.

"What shall we do with this old thing?" I'm lifted and tossed into the air.

A girlish voice answers dismissively, "Oh, throw it in the box with the others."

**Missive No. 27089, Found in a Bottle on
Margate Beach by Morgan L. Ventura**

Morgan L. Ventura is a writer and ex-archaeologist from the Midwest now based in Northern Ireland. Ventura's poetry and fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lackington's*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Augur Magazine*, among others, while their essays can be found in *Best Canadian Essays 2021*, *Geist*, and elsewhere. Ventura currently serves as an editor for South Broadway Press. You can find them on Twitter: @hmorganvl.



I looked for you in the wilted, cavernous cliffs,
those porcelain
treehouses for sheep and wayward crabs,
but you were not there.

I looked for you in the abandoned harbour, the
lulling waves
licking rotting dinghies, algae blooming and
hissing,
but you were not there.

I looked for you beneath the silt and clay, the
soil
that only spits clover or weed,
but you were not there.

In the plum-perfect red seeping sunrise of
a world shattering beneath me,
I looked for you.

I listened for you in the warble of the sparrow,
ululations

from nimbus and cumulus,

but you were not there

I grasped for you in the heavy shadows of

our former home, a shade in mourning,

but you were not there.

There is no corner, no grain or stone unturned,

no melody or symbol I have not followed.

You are not here.

Where are you? Gone and spread yourself

between these drifting isles, those jagged cities of
Nordic ice.

I'll keep looking. Beneath the flames, behind the
moon, inside the kettle.

I'll keep looking.

Captain Moses Harris by Corinna Schulenburg

Corinna Schulenburg (she/her) is an artist and activist committed to ensemble practice and social justice. She's a white queer transgender woman, a mother, a playwright, a poet, a Creative Partner of Flux Theatre Ensemble, and the director of communications at Theatre Communications Group. As a playwright, actor, director, and community builder, Corinna has worked on over forty plays in New York City and across the country. She has poems published or upcoming in *86 Logic*, *Arachne Press*, *Canned*, *Capsule Stories*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Oroboro*, *Lost Pilots*, *LUPERCALIA Press*, and *Zoetic Press*. <https://corinnaschulenburg.com/>



If you leave the dark
under the floorboards long enough
it will grow a voice

not so much a creak as the crack
of whale-song splitting open.
He hunted them,

the captain, back when the island
skipped the souls of sailors
like stones across

the ocean; when widows paced
the air on webs spun from
braided salt. Souls

are for reckonings, she thought,
as she caught sight
of herself in the dress she found

in the attic, all lace, lace.
There are certain spirits who can scent
a loneliness from far distance,

who can leap on the wind from leaf
to upturned leaf, to land
in the longing of the woman

in lace, lace, who can put their hands
on the wheel. Possession

is a kind of love that is also

a kind of violence, she thinks,
but it always cuts both ways. She smiles.
The captain loses hold

of the wheel, hers, his;
he can only watch as the woman
sails the phantom that is now

his only ocean, can only listen
as she raises the stolen songs
in a clutch of keen

and scatters them like flowers
onto the great heaving graves
of the ocean, where they find

the ghost throats of the whales
and in a howl, in a hymn, they sound
the depths of violation

and the sky does what it can,
which is witness, which is grieve,
which is wind, water, salt, rain.

Drowned Girl by Susan Swavely

Susan Swavely is a recent graduate of the University of South Carolina, where she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a B.A. in English and Theatre and a minor in Spanish. Her other published works appear in *The Nasiona*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *Nine Cloud Journal*. She currently lives in Anderson, SC.



Every morning was exactly the same: wake up before the sun, trudge downstairs, wrap a scarf around my head and put on my coat, grab the water jug, and head to the river. Walking fast, I could always get to the river before the sun came up at all—and I always walked fast in the creepy woods between my house and the water. Something about the river was comforting, maybe it was that the woods were dead silent, and the river was loud and rushing, and it made it feel like I was no longer alone in the woods in the dark, even though I very much was.

My mother joked that it was a good thing I was set to marry a wealthy man, so he could hire out someone to do all the work for me. I'm not sure how, really, seeing as my family wasn't wealthy, but a few weeks earlier, she took my knitting out of my hands and said, "Elisabeth, I have wonderful news."

And then I was betrothed. Promised. Doomed. At first, I'd pitched a bit of a fit, of which I am now a little embarrassed. Mother had held her composure—she's always been the model of a woman, really, I should be better at being one from watching her—and said that I should listen to her. So, I did, and she told me about him. Mr. Ackley Banbury, who was young and wealthy, an heir to a large estate in the country, not far from home, was in want of a lovely country wife. She looked like she was telling me a fairytale. I sulked the rest of the day—rest of the week, really—but then resigned myself to the fact that I knew this day would come. And at least he was young. And wealthy enough that I wouldn't have to lug water around.

I didn't feel dread so much as indifference about the ordeal anymore. My fate was sealed, and I would go seamlessly and resistance-free from my father's home into my husband's. I could hear the river—moving water, gurgling over smoothed rocks.

I leaned down to the river, getting on my hands and knees, like always, to get water from the ledge where it looked the cleanest and tried not to let the cold water touch my skin.

"Hello," a small voice said.

I jerked my head up and screamed—a woman was sitting on a large rock only a few feet in front of me, staring at me. I dropped my water jug, cursed, and then tried to get up to run, only I tripped on my damn dress, and fell back down.

"I didn't mean to scare you," the girl said from the rock, "I'm sorry."

I turned back around slowly. She was very pretty. She looked upset by something, and she twisted her hair, which was nearly white it was so blonde, in her pale white hands. She wore a simple dress—it looked like a cotton nightgown, also white, and pressed to her body in a way that made it look like she wasn't wearing anything at all. I felt my face heating up for some reason.

"Are you... who... what are you—who are you?" I didn't even know the right question to ask. Who the hell was this girl that I'd never seen before and what was she doing in the woods at dawn?

"I'm called Estelle."

"Okay, Estelle. What are you doing in the woods—it's freezing out here. Have you been in the water? Are you out of your mind?" I felt hot, which I just assumed was anger. I didn't know why I was demanding all these things of the poor frightened girl.

"I'm not sure."

"What?"

"I don't know why I'm here, in this river. But I'm not cold."

I sucked in icy air to reinflate my lungs and shivered. I also wasn't cold, for some reason.

"Your lips are almost blue—you've got to be cold. Can I... give you my jacket?"

Estelle reached up and covered her lips, as if she was self-conscious of them.

"Come with me," I shed my coat, one of the many layers I had on, and tried to hand it to Estelle.

She shook her head, "I can't."

"You can't wear a coat?"

"I can't come with you."

"Why not? Is someone mad at you?"

"No—well, not anymore."

"Someone's always mad at me too," I said. I didn't know why, but I wanted to stay. I stooped awkwardly and picked up the water jug that I had dropped.

"Would you like to sit with me?"

"I'd love—I mean, sure, uh, if it's no trouble—I mean it's a river, so anyone could sit—I mean, yes. Yes. I'll sit with you for—" I forced my mouth shut. The girl was giggling—it was the first time I'd seen the slight frown on her lips flip into a smile. I felt my face and neck get very hot again.

God, I've got a fever, I kept thinking over and over. I sat on a rock next to her.

"You're sure you don't want my coat?" I asked, now I almost couldn't make myself look at her body. She was too naked. How many times had I seen my mother naked, or myself, in the mirror as I dressed? Why was this suddenly different, to where I couldn't even look at her body without feeling a horrible wave of heat and nausea?

She must've seen the expression on my face, because she took the coat and slipped it on.

“Thank you—”

“Elisabeth.”

“—Elisabeth.”

I smiled, I had to remind myself that I came across as hostile a lot of the time, so I put on a ‘pretty face’ as my mother calls it, and asked, “Is your family new in town?”

“No. And I don’t have a family.”

I wasn’t sure where to go from there. I stared at the water.

Estelle continued, “I like your hair. My hair used to be dark like that, but I’ve never had curls. They’re very pretty.”

I wanted to tell her thank you or ask about what the hell she meant her hair used to be dark, but there was something lodged in my throat. I was choking—I was choking! How?

“They frame your face so nicely,” she filled the silence. I thought I was going to die.

“Are you a witch?” I finally gasped out.

Her eyebrows shot up, and something very pretty overtook her pale features; she laughed again, a sounded like a tinkling bell.

“I am not a witch.”

“What do you mean your hair used to be dark?” I reached up to feel my own hair, and in the process, knocked over my water jug into the river.

“Fuck—I mean, damn—uh!” I said, scrambling down the rock to get it before it got too far. I was going to be freezing now, with my boots soaked.

“I’ll grab it—I’m already wet,” Estelle said, and nimbly waded into the river, careful to keep my coat dry, and retrieved my jug.

“Now you’ll be cold again. Uh, thank you,” I said as she handed me the jug, freshly refilled with water.

“I’m not cold.”

“I’d better take this back, I guess. Do you—hang around the river a lot?”

“Unfortunately.”

This girl was driving me crazy. Nothing she said made any sense at all, “Okay, well—I come here every morning, and I haven’t seen you before—”

“I know. But I’ll be here tomorrow morning too. I’ll see you then.”

“Okay,” I felt lightheaded. And sweaty, “Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Be safe, Elisabeth.”

“Uh, you too.”

“Take your coat back,” Estelle smiled, slipping it off, “You’ll need it.”

“No, no keep it—”

“No, I don’t want to get it wet. Bring it back to me tomorrow morning.”

I nodded. The ability to speak had apparently left me again.

When I turned and put on the coat, I noticed it was freezing. It was a wonder that girl was still alive—she was ice cold. I hoped that she had a warm place to go. I thought about turning back and insisting she kept the coat, but when I looked over my shoulder, Estelle was nowhere to be found. I was overcome with energy, and I ran home. The smile never left my face.

When I got home, my mother was pacing the floor.

“For the sake of all that is holy, Elisabeth, where have you been? You’ve been gone for ages!”

“Sorry, Mother. I was—” for some reason, I didn’t want to tell her. I felt strangely defensive of Estelle, “I had trouble with the jug. I

dropped it in the water and had to get it out, but I didn't want to get wet, so I waited for it to float to—"

"That's enough. Set it down here, and go put this on," she fished a dress out of a crate and set it in my newly jug-less arms. It was dark green, like an emerald, and had lots of delicate golden embroidery.

"What? Why?" It felt light and silky. And expensive.

"Just do as you're told. Mr. Banbury sent it for you to wear to the wedding—isn't it beautiful?"

"I don't know—I don't really—"

"It'll make your brown eyes look golden, darling. It's going to be so pretty on you. I've never seen a dress this beautiful—"

"I thought I was going to wear your light blue one for the wedding—"

"My old wedding dress? Elisabeth don't be silly. Go put it on so I can see if I need to take it up anywhere."

"Mother!"

"Now, Elisabeth," her mother had a finality in her voice that would have made babies stop crying.

"Okay."

I tried on the dress. It really was pretty—the skirt hung perfectly on me. It wouldn't need to be altered at all. The bodice gave me curves, and the sleeves fitted evenly around my wrists. I looked like a princess. I looked like someone else.

Mother walked into the room and gasped, "Oh."

Her eyes welled with tears. Mine did too, but I was sure we were tearing up for different reasons.

"You look so grown up," she whispered.

"It feels like it's meant for someone else."

"What?" my mother looked scandalized, "It fits you like it was made for you—it was made for you. What do you mean? You don't like it?"

"No, no, I'm not being ungrateful—it's lovely. It's," I couldn't think of anything else to say, but the look of betrayal on Mother's face prompted me to keep going, "it's so lovely."

She smiled, "It's normal to be nervous about getting married, Elisabeth. I was too. But you will make such a wonderful wife and mother. You were made for this, just like this dress was made for you."

I smiled as widely as I could. I needed her to leave before I broke down into tears. I felt the panic tugging at my heart—new panic. It must have been the dress, making me see how real this all was.

"Thank you, Mother. I can only hope to be half the woman you are."

"Oh, you'll be even better. Now, I know you must want to wear it forever, but take it off and put it back away, so we keep it nice. There's something I want to give you."

She left the room, and I felt the sobs in my chest, heaving against the tight silk. I took it off and placed it carefully away. I was just lacing my dark blue dress back up when my mother came back into the room with a small box in her hands.

"What's that?"

"Open it," she said.

I popped the little box open and saw the most beautiful set of earrings I had ever seen. They were simple and small, smooth like river stones, and amber-colored.

"They're topaz. Your grandmother gave them to me when I was about to marry your

father, and now they're yours. And if you're very, very lucky, you'll have a daughter who you can give them to when she marries."

"Mother, these are—thank you," this time, I didn't have to pretend to sound genuine. I picked up the delicate gold and put them in my ears, "I love them, thank you."

"You're welcome, Elisabeth. You make me very proud; I hope you know."

I hugged my mother tightly. Something wasn't right. Something was eating at me.

The next morning, I snuck out earlier than usual to go get the water. I wanted more time to ask Estelle about her life. I had rehearsed it over and over: I was going to say, "Estelle, if you're not a witch, then what are you? You're freezing cold and you say your hair used to be dark like mine, but it's white. I won't tell anyone if you're a witch."

I nodded to myself. This was a good plan, and then if she was a witch, I would... well, I hadn't actually thought that far. I was hoping she was not a witch.

"Hello," her voice sounded like honey. She saw me before I saw her, sitting on the same rock she had been the day before.

"Hi, Estelle—"

"You're earlier than yesterday."

"Yeah, I just thought..." fuck. I completely lost my train of thought. She wasn't wet this time. She sat on the rock, completely dry, her hair falling in a wavy pool of white around her, and her cotton dress no longer clinging to her naked body, but rather, blowing gently around her. Her skin looked like milk. Her eyes were like a glimpse of pale blue sky through the white-gray clouds. She smiled.

"You thought what?"

"Witch are you?"

"Which what am I?" Estelle cocked her head to the side, making her hair fall over one shoulder.

"No—I mean—you are a witch. Aren't you?"

She laughed again and patted the space beside her on the rock. I felt something shock through me. Excitement. I wanted to sit next to her. I fumbled up onto the rock with her. When I was close, I noticed that, even though she wasn't shivering and didn't have goosebumps, the air around her was cold.

"I'm not a witch," she said once I was sitting still.

"How come you said your hair used to be dark, then?"

"Hair changes."

"Not that much. You mean when you were a baby?" Now that I thought about it, my youngest brother had been born blonde, but it had faded into brown the older he got.

"Your earrings are new," she marveled. She reached up to touch them, and suddenly it didn't matter how cold she was, because my entire face was on fire. When her fingertip brushed against my ear, I thought I was going to burst into flames.

"Yes," I managed to say, "They're for my wedding."

"You're getting married," she smiled, "That's lovely."

"Lovely." Something sunk inside me.

"When?"

"A few days, actually." I counted in my head. Five days.

"You look sick."

"I must be nervous about the wedding, is all. I've never met him—but he's very rich. And my parents are very pleased. I'm not sure why he

would want to marry me, not knowing me at all, or anything, but he told my parents that he saw me at a party, a dance, and thought I'd be his perfect partner and—

“You are the type to attract love at first sight.”

I felt like I was going to be sick, “You know—I might actually... be ill.”

Estelle put her hand across my forehead, as if to check for a fever. My body felt like it'd been struck by lightning. But in a... good way.

“Who are you?” I blurted out.

“Estelle Ash.”

“Please tell me.”

Estelle looked at the water, bubbling around the rock we were sitting on. She sighed.

“I won't tell anyone if you're a witch,” I reassured. She laughed again.

“Elisabeth, you're very caught up on witches. Did you bring along a pitchfork?”

“No, but I can run home and get a torch, if you'd like. I think you probably need some fire. You're freezing.”

“I'm worse than a witch.” She said it like she'd been practicing it over and over.

I waited for her to continue, but she didn't.

“How are you worse than a witch? Are you a fugitive? A runaway murderess?”

“You're very funny,” Estelle sounded amused, “No—I'm not a murderer. Quite the opposite. I'm... you're talking to a drowned girl.”

I froze. She was dead?

“Dead?” For the first time I reached out and touched her. Her shoulder was ice cold, “How are you talking to me?”

“Bodies float and spirits linger. And mine has been here... a while.”

“How?” My voice was not afraid, like I thought it would be. I felt angry.

“It's a bit of a sad story.”

“I want to hear it.” I really did. I felt every part of my body listen to her, “I mean, of course, if you'd like to tell me.”

“Well, a lifetime ago, my father moved our family—me, my mother and my little sister, Etta—here from London. And Etta and I were playing in the woods when I heard my mother screaming from inside our house. I told Etta to stay in the woods, and I would go and help her.”

I watched the way she fidgeted with her dress.

“He was angry, my father, and drunk, and when I came inside, I saw how he had my mother by the hair, and he threw her on the ground, shouting something about her infidelity and adulterous mistakes. She was crying. She wasn't denying any of it. The smell of whiskey on him—I will never forget it. And I yelled for him to stop it, but all I did was divert his attention to me. He started screaming about how there was no way I was even his daughter—and at this, my mother started disagreeing, saying that she was sure I was. And then he asked how come he and my mother both had blonde hair, and Etta did too, but mine was dark, like soil. And my mother's eyes... another thing I can never forget. She looked at me like she was sorry. He dragged me out to the river, and...”

I didn't realize I had tears in my eyes until she stopped and said, “I'm sorry to have made you upset.”

“Your father drowned you?” I whispered. I couldn't imagine.

She nodded a little, “And then I woke back up, as if I'd just been asleep for a while. I looked in the water and I didn't have any color

anymore. I was a ghost of myself. Maybe I was even a ghost completely.”

“I can see you.”

“I stayed a ghost until a girl started coming to the river every morning, afraid of what was in the woods. Humming a tune or whistling—very unladylike, by the way—” she smiled, “and then I started to feel solid again. And I thought that if I had the courage to say hello to you, maybe I would be real again.”

And then it hit me. I was not sick, and I was not nervous about my wedding. And she was not a witch casting a spell on me. I put my hand on her neck, a sheet of ice, and leaned toward her. Her lips were like frozen berries, parting against my warm ones.

I could have kissed her forever. I planned on it, but she pulled away from me and smiled sadly, “This is not fair to you.”

“What? Why not? This feels more than fair to me.”

“You’re alive.”

“It seems like it’s not fair to you, then.”

She laughed quietly, “You’re engaged.”

“Right. But if it helps, I’ve never met him. And there’s no way he’s as beautiful as you.”

“But he will make you happy. He is alive—he will buy you pretty dresses and give you children, and dance with you, and travel with you anywhere you want to go, and eat delicious food with you and—”

“Maybe he’ll do all those things, but he will not make me happy. Come on, run away with me somewhere only we know about—and I’ll learn everything about you, and we’ll be so happy. I think I could make you really happy.”

“You just met me.”

“So? I haven’t met him at all.”

“Elisabeth, I... can’t.”

“No,” For the first time, I felt like fighting for something.

“Come and see me tomorrow.”

“And the next day, and the next day, and the next day forever.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. I felt cold.

I carried the jug back home and did my chores quietly. I washed laundry, scrubbed the table, cleaned the silver. My mother gave me a funny look.

“Sweetheart, are you alright?”

I nodded, “I’m going to take a walk.”

“Run into town and get me some more butter, while you’re out,” she said, “and get yourself some candy or something. You deserve a little treat.”

“Thank you.”

Every step I took felt like a wilting flower. I went into town and got the butter and candy. I came back home. I went to bed early. And I woke up early.

“Oh, don’t worry about it today,” Mother said, putting on her coat, “I’ll get the water. You should rest.”

“No, I have to,” I said, the sleep draining out of my voice.

“Hello,” she said when I got to the river.

She sat in her usual spot. I joined her, but this time I sat closer to her. I leaned my head against her shoulder.

“You know, you are worse than a witch,” I said.

She was quiet.

“You’re a heartbreaker.”

She didn’t move or speak. She ran her fingers through my hair.

I felt so frustrated, “It isn’t fair!”

“I know. I shouldn’t have done this. I’m so... sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” she said, “I never meant to hurt you. I had no idea—no hope—that you would even be able to see me, let alone like me.”

“Like you? I don’t want to spend a single moment away from you! I want to—if I could—I wish I could marry you. Instead.”

We sat quietly while she ran her fingers through my curls, shaking her head.

“Wait—you can’t, can you?” I suddenly realized. The pieces finally shattered together in my brain.

“Can’t what?”

“You can’t leave the river. And you can’t grow up, and you can’t... you can’t come with me.”

She shook her head, “I’m tethered here.”

“How can I set you free?”

“What do you mean? There’s nowhere for me to go—”

“Yes, there is—I don’t know where it is, or what it is, but you deserve to go where everyone else goes. You don’t deserve to stay here and suffer forever.”

“Maybe I do.”

I kissed her again. And again. If I was her true love, maybe that would set her free from this place.

“I’m falling in love with you,” I said. She smiled, and I forgot to be sad for a minute.

“I think I was in love with you before you even knew I existed.”

But she did not fade away. She stayed tethered. So I held her cold body in my arms for an hour, until the sun was high over our heads.

“You have to go back,” she whispered.

“I know. But you’ll be here tomorrow,” I said. It came out more like a question.

She nodded, pressing a kiss to my palm, “and always.”

For the next few days, we tried everything we could to set her free. And we spent a lot of time accepting the fact that it was not possible. And that our time together was over.

“Tomorrow morning is my wedding,” I said. We sat beside each other on our rock. She had her knees pulled up to her chest.

“This week has been the best one of my life,” she smiled, “Thank you for that. I feel like it’s all been worth it.”

“I won’t ever even come close to this happy again,” I said. I pressed my lips to her shoulder.

“Promise me you’ll try.”

I didn’t want to. I wanted to dig my heels in and be obstinate. I was hurting. But I didn’t do that, instead, I said, “I will try.”

She turned my face to hers and kissed me on the mouth again, a deep kiss, one that felt like a balm to the painful splinters in my stomach. She was stitching me back together just as fast as I was ripping apart.

“I’ll always care for you,” she said.

I nodded, “Promise me back—promise you’ll try to be happy too.”

She looked me in the eyes, “Whenever I am sad, I will remember this moment, and I will not be sad anymore.”

I kissed her for the last time.

The next morning, my mother woke me up with a whole buffet of breads and sweet meats and wine.

“It’s the big day!” she said excitedly. She was wearing her best dress, with her hair already done up in an elaborate updo.

“I sent your brother to go get you one final surprise. He’ll be back any moment! Let me braid your hair!”

I obeyed. I faked happiness as she excitedly twisted my curls into a beautiful crown of braids, weaving in flowers and gold ribbons to match the dress. She made up my face with her own beautiful makeup and got out her prettiest lace gloves. When my little brother came in the door panting, he made a funny face, like he didn’t recognize me for a second.

“Wow, Elisabeth,” he said, “You look like a princess!”

I thanked him. He handed me the box, and I opened them up to see a brand-new pair of shoes—dark green and gold—that looked like they belonged to the actual princess.

“These are so lovely,” I said, shocked with how well they matched the dress. I slipped them on. They pinched in the toes but looked lovely.

“Mr. Banbury had them made by the same tailor who made the dress, so it all matches.” My mother helped me into the wedding gown. The wedding was soon—it was one short carriage ride away.

“Oh, darling,” my mother said, “You look complete. And the earrings I gave you just go perfectly.”

Something dawned on me.

“Mother, may I have a moment to myself?” I asked.

She looked puzzled, “Last minute jitters?”

“Yes, I just want one last walk in the forest, to say goodbye to my past, and welcome my future.”

“Oh. Of course,” Mother smiled.

As soon as they left my room, I bolted for the river. I ran like I never had before, through the woods, a deer pursued by a wolf.

I got to the river, and she sat there, turning a smooth stone over in her hands.

“Estelle,” I said. It was the first time I got her attention first. She looked up, and then looked like she had the wind knocked out of her.

“Oh Elisabeth, you’re stunning.” Her jaw hung open.

“I don’t have much time,” I said, coming to the edge of the river. She came down to me, her feet in the water.

“Here,” I took one of the earrings out of my ear, and then tilted her chin away from me, to loop it through the hole in her earlobe, “My mother gave me these. They have been passed down the line through every woman in my family, on the day of their weddings, for as far back as anyone can remember. If I could marry you today, I would. But I cannot. So, I want to give you this earring, for you to wear forever, to show that you are mine. And I will wear the other one to show that I am yours.”

Estelle’s bottom lip trembled. She fell into my arms, “Thank you.”

“Now I have to leave,” I said. I swallowed fire.

She felt the earring with her fingertips,
“Oh, Elisabeth. I think...I think I do too.”

I felt a numbness icing over the stab
wound in my chest. She was fading away.

“Let’s meet in a dream,” I said.

“I’ll see you there.”

“Wear something pretty.”

“I will.” Her eyes were red on her
otherwise colorless body. Tears pooled in her
eyes, and ran down her cheeks, but she laughed.
She pressed her hand in mine. It felt lighter, like
it was a sigh of wind instead of a human hand.

“I can’t wait.”

She smiled. It was like looking at a gasp
curved into the shape of a woman.

I took a breath that felt like a gulp of
candle wax. I squeezed her hand as tightly as I
could. She disappeared.

I thought for one second about following her.
About throwing myself into the river and
following her the one place I knew I could not.
But I stood on my feet instead, counted the
seconds in a minute, and then the seconds in
another one. I ran back through the forest the
way I had come, and I climbed into the carriage
that waited for me, hooked up with two massive
white horses.

The whole journey Mother chattered
about how kind it was that Mr. Banbury had sent
a carriage and how beautiful I looked. I
responded politely and appropriately. I stared out
the window, lightly twisting the topaz earring in
my ear, and smiled.

Candlewright By Eren Harris

Eren Harris is a genre- and gender-fluid creator. Their debut poetry chapbook, *Chrysalis*, is forthcoming from Lupercalia Press. Their short story “Bodies in Flight” won the fiction prize for Please See Me’s Spring 2020 contest. Eren’s recent poetry has been published in *Claw & Blossom*, *held.zine*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, and elsewhere. When not immersed in editing their first novel, Eren assists high school students with college application essays. They live in Los Angeles with their husband and two cats.



The power was not coming back on. Through the window, the prairie landscape bristled. The too-close sky was the color of a new bruise. Wet wind churned and rasped through seas of grass that had usurped the fallow fields.

Katherine could have endured this; Katherine, who grew up with soil under her fingernails and thunder in her blood. But Sasha, city-born, was at her wits’ end. And Katherine was gone. Only the bone-white candle on the mantle remained.

Katherine had been making candles before her fingers failed. Sasha had watched her fragile hands work like glass crabs, pouring paraffin into salvaged glass, perfumed with lavender and orange drops.

By now, Sasha had sold most of Katherine’s candles in town. Moving through the market stalls, she pretended not to hear the whispers. That was why they lived on the mountain, she reminded herself. Because town talked. The candle on the mantle was the last she’d crafted. It stood tall and slender, like the woman herself, though paler; a pale Katherine had kept just for Sasha, secreted away in soft-skinned pockets that the cancer sucked to cobwebs. Her dying hands had gripped Sasha’s, her eyes afire in their purple sockets. Sell the house, the fields, if you must. But you keep this candle as long as you can. Burn it and keep it.

Burn it and keep it. It hadn't made much sense.

There was still enough bruised light through the windows to cast shadows. As she reached for a silhouetted matchbox sitting on the stove, Sasha felt a heaviness take hold within her. She brought Katherine's candle to the table in the center of the room. The match bent in her fingers as she swiped it, and the flame nipped her as it took hold in the wick's white floss. The bright flame skipped and sputtered, then held steady, butter-colored with a vein-blue heart. She could feel the heat of it on her face. Smoke rose and rose in a thin, pale plume, and suddenly Sasha smelled something, something long lost.

The smoke spiraled toward the low ceiling. It did not dissipate. It spread into a thin screen of cloud, then took on dimension, depth. The scent of honeysuckle, river stones, the prelude to rain. A face translucent as an insect's wing. Katherine's face, Katherine's long, untamed hair around her shoulders, full as a summer tree. Katherine's eyes, colorless, but somehow shining.

"Katherine..." Sasha said, not as frightened as she should have been, not as surprised as she expected she should be.

"I knew you'd keep it," Katherine said, and her voice was unchanged. Sasha longed to touch her, but she couldn't move; she was pinned in place by fear. It was not the fear of her lover's spectral nature, only of her loss, her dissolution.

"How could I not?" Sasha said, staring. Hovering above the table, Katherine flickered. She was beautiful again. The tabletop cut through her torso, at her hipbones right where Sasha's hands belonged. Sasha took the candle to the center of the floor and stood facing the spirit of her lover lost.

"I miss you so much," she said. "It's been awful. I can't do this. I can't do this without you."

"Sasha." Katherine reached for her, solidifying by the second as the candle burned, extending her smoke fingers towards Sasha's face.

"You can. You can." Katherine's hand against her cheek was candle-warm. Sasha realized she was wiping off a silent tear.

"Nothing grows," said Sasha, and each word felt slowed down, dragged through mud. "Just this...this nasty grass, choking everything. Everything's ruined. It's desert-dry for months and then all storms."

She stood stock still as Katherine embraced her, as though she were solid and not spectral. "I haven't gone. You kept the candle."

"How did you do it?"

"Can't say I'm proud of it."

Sasha wanted to shake her. "How?"

The ghost sighed, the forlorn shudder of wind through wheatfields. "A man came to me the night before I died."

"A man? You don't mean Doctor McNeill?"

Katherine shook her head, her luxuriant hair. "This was no doctor. He was...well, to tell the truth he was no man at all. But he told me I had the chance to see you, to watch over you for as long as you walked this earth. If I poured my soul into this candle I could live as long as the white wax burned."

"Poured your soul...? I don't understand."

"Don't try." Katherine's hands encased hers in a honeyfog. Sasha did not ask what it had cost.

Katherine glanced down at the dancing flame. "You got no other light?"

Sasha swallowed. "Not right now."

"Then go to bed, sweet pea. There'll be light enough in the morning. Always is."

Sasha nodded, in a trance. She picked the candle up from the floor, still burning, and set

it beside the bed they once had shared. “I want you to stay with me.”

“I will. But you must blow the candle out, sweet pea.”

All around, soft warm vapor bathed her skin. Somehow it hadn’t hit her yet. Katherine was as mortal as ever, cast in wax, granted time on earth but not enough. She had to blow the flame out. Say goodbye again. For now.

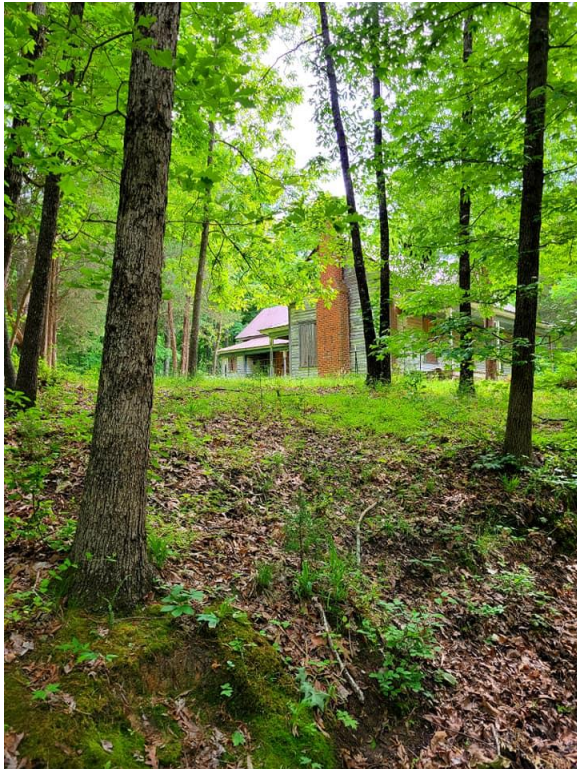
She kissed the flame out, savoring the sear against her lips. The smoke soul that was Katherine lingered, surrounding her even as she muddied and blurred.

Sasha woke, as always, to the braying fracas of the crows. Her shirt was soaked in sweat. She’d dreamed.

Then, on the floor beside her feet she saw the bone-white candle, warped with melt. Its charred wick winked at her; eyelash black. And Sasha smiled.

Lilith by Emily Benson

Emily Benson (she/her) lives in Western New York with her husband and two sons. Previous publications include Blue River Review, Five Minute Lit, Hecate Magazine, Hey, I'm Alive Magazine, High Shelf Press, Moist Poetry Journal, Other Worldly Women Press, Sad Girls Club Literary Blog, and Unstamatic. Her work can be found at www.emilybensonpoet.com.



I am a dark and wild thing
Sailing through the night
On wings of wind
Clouds like torn silk
Clothe me in chill splendor
And nighthawks keen with me
Like banshees to the stars
I seek warmth
At lighted windows
Vivid behind the pale moon
I am alone
Oh, let me in
To wind about your bedposts
And hang upon the heat of your lips
Feel my icy touch
Raise shivers on your lovely skin
While your white dog cowers and
Whines in the corner
Put him out
Let me in
I crave the taste of you, love
So warm on this cold, black night

One Day You Will Understand by Melody Wang

Melody Wang currently resides in sunny Southern California with her dear husband. In her free time, she dabbles in piano composition and enjoys hiking, baking, and playing with her dogs. She tweets @MelodyOfMusings



These answers, though in reach,
are better off left alone. Tucked away
in the darkness, in a locked wooden box
far from desires and prying eyes.

In the distance, ghost-chimes
echo their soft lament:

my life was not
your story to tell

It seems you are always ascending
but can never reach the lovely
sanctuary of home just beyond
the top of the staircase.

You draw in a shaky breath,
your light footsteps on floorboards
leave no traces, as if the cunning past
had swept you up in its cold embrace.

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As if it somehow knew that you would always
belong here. Downstairs, the library awaits,
your beloved old books softly illuminated
by a flame that can no longer hold you.

You turn slowly, descend the staircase,
through the narrow hallway, each sad sigh
an unheard plea. You grasp the tiny brass
doorknob and turn it only to find —

these answers though in reach
are better off left alone

Death of My Family by Emily Hessney Lynch

Emily Hessney Lynch is a short story and memoir writer. Her work has been published in *McSweeney's*, *Sad Girls Club Literary*, *Five Minute Lit*, *Spellbinder Magazine*, *Spine Magazine* and *Gastropoda Lit*, and is forthcoming in *Sledgehammer Lit*. She lives in Rochester, NY with her husband and their three rescue dogs. You can follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @EHL_writes.



CW- multiple deaths with varying causes.

“When we moved into this big old house, let me tell you, that was the beginning of the death of my family,” the girl said to the detective placidly.

“Oh, don’t listen to little Sarah,” her mother said, elbowing her forcefully in the stomach. “She’s been watching too many crime shows.”

“Martha, I’m here to talk about the deaths,” the detective replied, rubbing his temples with his thumbs.

“It’s the house,” Sarah said.

“They were accidents,” Martha added.

“Four people have died in your household over the past two months,” the detective said sternly. “Why are you smiling?” he asked the child.

“Mom said I can have gummy worms after this if I’m good.”

“You know, I’m going to need to question the child too,” the detective said, eyes roaming between mother and daughter, trying to assess their relationship.

Sarah smiled to herself. She knew she would ace this one. He seemed easy to deceive. Too

trusting of perceived reality. How was he even a detective?

“I’m not a child, I’m *nine!*” she exclaimed.

“Let’s get started with the interrogation, Martha. We need to move swiftly.”

“Is that what this is? An interrogation?”

“No! It’s...an interview. That’s all. An informational interview. I misspoke.”

Martha narrowed her eyes at him. “Why don’t we chat over some peach pie?” she asked brightly.

He gulped. “Sure, ma’am” and followed her into the kitchen.

Sarah stayed in the living room and sprawled on her back on the dusty maroon carpet. She flapped her arms and legs, making snow angels and thinking of the brothers she lost this year.

Richard, the oldest, was 16 when he fell out the window and cracked his skull on the front walk. That was at the beginning of October. Joe, just 14 years old, was found dead in his bed on a cold morning three days before Halloween. Bradley, only 12. Sarah missed him the most. Allergic reaction to shellfish. It was their first time trying lobster. The special occasion was ruined when Brad’s throat closed up and his eyes rolled back. Sarah heard footsteps and bolted back to a seated position. She brushed dust motes off her skirt as the detective clomped back into the foyer.

“Ma’am, I do believe that’s the best peach pie I’ve ever had the honor of tasting.” He winked at her mother. Martha was not a blusher, but she curtsied and laughed. Were they flirting?

“I’ll come back another time to speak with the child,” the detective said as he reached for the glass doorknob. He wavered for a moment like he had thought of a vital question, then crumpled.

“Again, mother?!” Her father’s death by the same method attracted the cops’ attention in the first place. The medical examiner was quick to find the arsenic in his bloodstream; it was up to the detective to determine how it got there.

“Oops!” Martha said with a sly smile. “Help me with this,” she said, gesturing vaguely at the body on the floor.

“I swear that stuff acts quicker every time,” Sarah said.

Disposing of the men of the household was an easy choice for Sarah. None of it required much thought or planning, and yet she was far better at it than her mother. Subtlety was her strong suit; her mother’s maneuvers were too obvious.

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In some ways, Sarah loved being the youngest. She was free to do as she pleased, reading until well after midnight, taking walks by herself in the cemetery, chatting with strangers on the internet, and eating all the Goldfish from the pantry before dinner. But more often than not, she loathed being the youngest. It was always *Richard-got-a-trophy-for-his-science-project-this* and *Joe-won-the-debate-tournament-that*.

At dinnertime, her father only cared about the achievements of his three sons. He was always talking baseball with Joe or World War II trivia with Richard. He was a history professor at the local college, specializing in military history, so he was chuffed that Richard seemed to have taken an interest in history as well.

“My little history buff in the making,” he would say as he clapped his oldest son on the shoulder.

Their father never knew that Richard spent his evenings reading up on Nazi Germany, researching the latest QAnon drops, and talking to his fellow Proud Boys on Discord. When Sarah was snooping under his bed and found a gun in an old shoebox, she knew it was time.

The only thing she had in common with her brother Richard was that they both adored cats. On a cool October night, she let their tabby loose. Racing into Richard's room, she shouted, "Reggie got out! Help! He's in the front yard, I can see him now!" The panic in her voice was convincing. She had practiced in the shower all week.

Richard rushed to the window, threw it open. "Reggie! Reggie!" he screamed, head whipping back and forth and eyes roving wildly as he searched for his dear cat. He was hanging halfway out the window, yelling Reggie's name. Richard glanced over his shoulder, about to run downstairs and into the cold, when he saw Sarah barreling toward him with the desk chair. There was a sickening crunch of wood on flesh on bone and then he was soaring through the night air and onto unforgiving cement.

Sarah found the atmosphere in the house refreshing with Richard gone. Her mother cried her head off and her father shed not a single tear (though the sappy Christmas movies had started airing and it didn't count when you cried at one of those). Many weeknights Sarah would pad down the creaky walnut staircase to watch the flicker of Hallmark movies and listen to her father's sobs and chokes. His tears were mostly silent, but she could see them stream thickly down his ruddy cheeks in his reflection on the TV screen. Her brothers seemed unperturbed and spent more time alone in their rooms. Joe played games on his Xbox all the time, killing hookers and cussing out the competition over his headset. Bradley wrote songs on his guitar for a boy at school he thought was cute but had never spoken to.

Sarah was lonely and her family seemed too sad to pay attention to her. She thought that having fewer siblings was probably the answer. A few weeks into their mourning for Richard, Sarah appeared silently in Joe's bedroom.

"I had a bad dream, Joey. Will you rub my back?"

He was already in bed, but his face was illuminated by the glow of his phone screen. He was texting this girl, Becca, who he heard had given his buddy a blow job on the first date. He figured he could get one too.

"Go away, dingus. You're too old for backrubs from your brother. That's weird."

"Sorry I asked. I'll go," she said with a slight whine to her voice. "By the way, someone at school told me to give you these," she said, handing over four blue pills.

His eyes widened. "Thanks! Now get outta here," he said, ruffling her hair fondly. Joe decided to save two pills for later and test drive two now.

In the hallway Sarah giggled. She had slipped him extra strength Tylenol PM and not Viagra. Two hours later, she snuck back into his room. She laughed softly at his thunderous snores, put a pillow over his face, and leaned forward with her full body weight to press and press. Before she snuck back to bed, Sarah wrapped a tie snugly around his neck. She would let people draw their own conclusions. Joe already had tissues and lotion on his nightstand, and anyone could smell the semen drying in his boxers. All the coroner saw was a hypoxic brain injury; given the circumstances, the cause of death was ruled to be autoerotic asphyxiation. When Joe didn't get up for school the next day, Martha's shrieks about being late swiftly switched to mournful cries.

"Why? WHY? It's this fucking house!
*SOMETHING IS KILLING MY
CHILDREN!*"

Martha knew something was horribly wrong but had no reason to suspect Sarah. The house itself was a more likely culprit. This fall marked their third year in the house on Elmcroft Drive. Nothing had changed, but the place had always had an eerie vibe. Or maybe that was just the windchimes. The house was royal blue with black shutters and white flower boxes. Some of the flower boxes had broken off over the years and Martha never got around to replacing them, so it looked like the house had some unfortunate rows

of broken teeth. The house creaked often and loudly, but it was built in 1902 and that was to be expected. Sometimes a glass would break in the middle of the night, favorite sugary snacks would go missing, or the bedroom doorknob would twist and turn inexplicably. Sure, there were odd occurrences, but they were easily explained by logic.

Bradley's death was an accident. They planned a celebration of life for Joe and wanted to have a nice meal as a family after all the relatives left. At the store, Sarah helped her mom pick out lobster. She and Brad raced them in the backyard together before her father boiled them up for dinner. Sarah's lobster won. They had potatoes and corn with their meal and their dad slugged back beer after beer. Brad's throat felt scratchy, and his eyes widened. He gasped for air; it felt as if his throat was collapsing in on itself. Sarah stared at him in horror as red splotches ballooned across his cheeks. Brad couldn't say a word, his lips and tongue swelling like mad.

"DO SOMETHING!" Martha yelled.

Her husband gave Bradley the Heimlich. It wasn't what he needed. His eyes frantically darted from his mother to his sister, desperation coursing through his bloodstream, craving air that wouldn't come. His throat closed and his body stilled.

Sarah went to bed early that night and felt very alone.

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Her bedroom door clicked open. The clock on the nightstand read 5:07am. Martha was drunk and full of ice cream, hiccupping. "Should we get rid of your father too?" she blurted.

Sarah opened one eye. Was her mother onto her?

"He never cries. Never ever. Three sons gone and he's still giving lectures at the school! Take a leave of absence, you moron!" she screamed.

Sarah laid still, her mom folded across her chest like a doll. Slowly, Sarah raised her hand and stroked her mother's auburn hair.

"It would be better if it was just us, Mommy."

Her mother did not answer. She was finally asleep.

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The weeks marched on slowly. They did not celebrate Thanksgiving. What was there to give thanks for? Their continued health? A roof over their heads? It hardly seemed worth acknowledging the holiday when they had lost so much. For Sarah's birthday the first week of December, though, her mother baked two pies.

"Two pies for three people?" the father asked sourly.

"Banana pudding for Sarah since it's her favorite, and cherry for you since you can't stand banana."

He stopped his grumbling and ate two large slices heaped with whipped cream in front of the TV. Sarah took her second slice up to bed and savored it while reading a mystery novel. When she came down in the morning, her father was dead in his recliner. She grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen table, dropped a kiss on his temple, and dashed out the door to catch the school bus. Her mother was nowhere to be seen.

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The morning after was a Saturday, and Martha and Sarah curled around each other in the breakfast nook. They were subsisting on leftover banana pudding pie and hadn't spoken much. The father's body was gone now.

"Things will be better now," Martha said in a small voice as they rocked together. It was unclear who was rocking who.

"We never needed all those boys," Sarah murmured back to her mother, grateful and basking in the attention. Sun shone through the

kitchen windows and they both felt gloriously warm and whole. Then the doorbell rang.

Untitled by Rae Stone

Rae Stone is a queer poet from Boston, Massachusetts. They have pieces forthcoming in with *confetti*, *Moss puppy Magazine*, and *Corporeal Lit Magazine*. When they aren't writing they can be found people watching, cuddling their dog, or crocheting too many items at once.

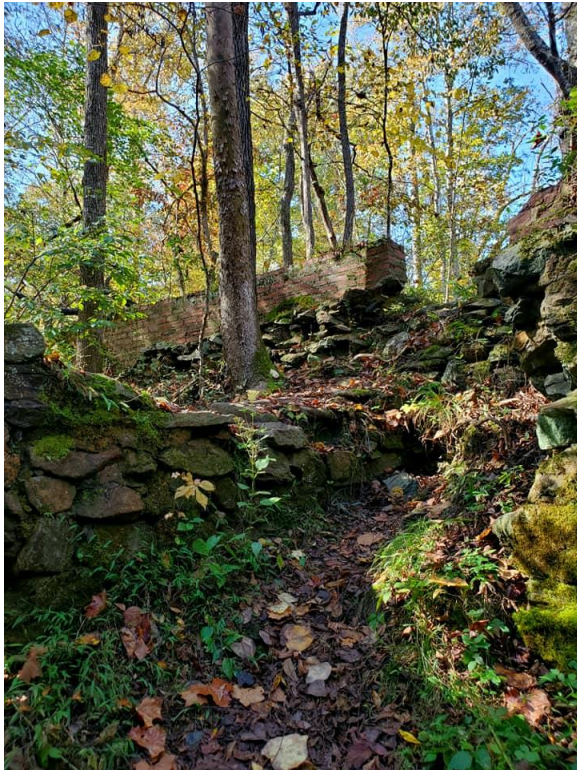


This undisturbed necropolis
sits frozen in time; perpetually on the precipice
of collapsing into the ground
from the weight of the weary souls it houses.

It has seen villages grow
into towns, grow into cities
yet it has kept it's peace.
Only when tragedy occurs
do we remember it's existence,
only in our death masks
do we feel it's tether.

Internment by Sarah Malini

Sarah Malini is a poet living in Southern Ontario with her dog. She has work to be published in the forthcoming anthology from Propertius Press. When she is not wandering about barefoot in her garden she can be found skulking about on twitter @smalini9.



Some people have skeletons
that they've shoved in their closets,
but I've got ghosts at my back
shadowing my footsteps.
They say the past haunts us
and mine likes to trail along behind me,
debts stretching back toward the horizon
where the sun rises.

I pretended for decades to prefer the night,
was far too busy focusing on the starlight
when really all I wanted was to wake with the
dawn.

As an adult I chased the sun's rays east,
hoping the fingers I could feel clutching
at my shoulders would loosen their grasp.
I turned my face toward the heavens
to avoid the figures creeping
in the corners of my eyes.

They say you can't escape your past,
specters weighing on every step
as I roamed the globe.

But now I know that my place
is in the dirt with the morning sun
enshrining all this loss,
interring the ghosts with the snowdrops
and the crocuses and the daffodils.

Graveyard Watch by Claire Loader

Claire is a New Zealand born writer now living in Galway, Ireland. Her dark fiction has appeared in various publications, including *Harbinger Press*, *The Ginger Collect*, *Massacre Magazine* and *Dark Moon Digest*.



CW- Animal death, mildly descriptive mention of blood

They buried the dog in the southwest corner of the churchyard. An unwilling participant, he snarled as they pinned him, gnashed his teeth as blade found flesh. They were God fearing people, did not kill for pleasure but of fear – the dog’s bones now a guardian to their own, a sacrifice to the newly built church, a first soul given to ward off evil, until the next came to take its place.

Soil cloaked matted hair, blood congealed as it seeped into its subterranean resting place, and William watched as amber eyes were lost under their earthen blanket, felt the coolness of the evening air as it reached to bite his neck.

“There is ale due now William, let us wash this deed away.”

They drank in the warm glow of Duncan’s cottage, the men quietly singing into the glimmering coals as wife and bairn lay sleeping in the shadows. A clay bottle passed between them until it emptied into the night.

William stumbled slowly toward home, the half-moon barely lighting the narrow pathway, his muddied boots scuffing well-worn stones. He made towards an empty cruce, his cold bed not so different from the one just freshly dug, his mind gone to the black tangled fur, the gaping flesh of a severed neck.

A branch brushed his face and he jumped, chiding his nerves, laughter closing his eyes for him, only for them to open again to darkness. "Come on ya sodding vapours," he growled, tilting his head to the flagging night, "you're blocking me bloody light!"

A breeze whipped about his ears and the moon flickered back to the path, to a shaggy black shadow, its piercing yellow eyes two sunken holes upon the track.

"I know you." William stumbled, his arms flailing as he tried to keep his balance, drunken legs unsteady, head set to meet with stone.

He awoke in the dim light of his cottage, the morning sun breaking through the cracks in the stone walls, temple pulsing with the sound of his own breath. He reached a hand to the wooden slat, felt the beam wet on his fingers.

"Christ, I've pissed the bed."

He felt grit beneath his nails, lifted both hands to his face, stared at the mess of blood and dirt that greeted him.

William sat up slowly, the pressure of the night shooting out into his head, hands feeling back to search beneath hair, fingers scraping a gaping hole; he could hear his nails scratching inside his skull, like claws pawing at a mangled mess of flesh.

A bark sounded suddenly from outside the door, the old planks rattling, it peeled beneath the dusty boards, landed like a bolt between his ears.

"Son of the Devil, we buried you!" He yelled into the empty room, clambering towards the shaking door, his own legs buckling, vision gone to black.

The door lay ajar when his eyes finally opened, the dark mist of a seeping night slinking its way upon the dampened earth.

"This is becoming a painful habit." William lifted himself to his knees, eyes pausing over freshly scoured dirt, a thin set of paw prints leading off into the trees.

He scrambled back inside the cottage, laid hands on lantern and wick, set a path towards the church. The way was not long to the new enclosure, yet he wondered at the night, felt a thickness in the air, a choking about his being as if he waded through current - thin tendrils of a midnight hour, teasing about his coat, branches brushing the path like hands within the fog.

He walked for what seemed like hours, the lamp light a low hum amidst the dark, until its glow finally fell upon the churchyard.

The new church was small, yet it loomed high in the darkness, its tiny bell tower extending long shadows across the grounds. William went straight to the southwest corner, eyes to the small mound of earth dug but the night before. He stopped, dropped the lantern low, watched as it lit upon the ground, blade after blade of grass already hiding the small grave to the earth, as if days had passed and not hours.

"How in the..."

It was then he saw it, dark shaggy fur, those luminous eyes staring from beside the low stone wall. William tried to blink away the unholy vision, but the dog remained, cocked its head, barked into the frigid air before bounding behind the church. William gave chase, the flame in his lantern flickering as he rounded the bend, only to stumble upon a different mound - fresh soil laid before his feet, the outline of a wooden cross stabbed into its top. Seven rough letters hewn upon its crest.

WILLIAM.