

Tree And Stone



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Issue 1

Marc A. Criley

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Koji A. Dae

Paula Hammond

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Sarah Little

Morgan Shank

Avra Margariti

Léon Othenin-Girard

Srilatha Rajagopal

Alyson Tait

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Letter From The Editor

Dear Reader,

Nature is art. Nature is magic. Nature is my inspiration.

Every year, I pilgrimage to a state park, but I don't think I ever noticed the uprooted tree, tendrils clinging to a shale stone, at the end. Fortunately, this year I did! Because a title was born.

Then, I had the opportunity to guest edit *Boundaries* by *MYRIAD* and found how much I enjoyed gathering stories together, editing and designing an issue, and providing a platform for beautiful tales. One idea after another hit me, and I birthed this magazine.

In this inaugural issue, I had a particular story style in mind as I was reading through submissions. I wanted to merge literary and speculative elements and venture into the minds of otherworldly characters with everyday experiences. The same went for the art in this issue. I wanted beautiful images of fantastic worlds and landscapes, and I got incredible art I couldn't have imagined!

Please enjoy this first issue of *Tree And Stone*!

Sincerely,

Kevin M. Casin
Editor-in-Chief



Mountains

Dr. Sara L. Uckelman is a writer and artist living in the north-east of England with her partner, child, and two cats.

Where True Power Lies

Koji A. Dae

I'm a head taller than the other girls. They clutch their empty baskets and talk in whispers. Mama gave me roots to stop my blood, and now I'm almost two years late, but neither my basket nor my head is empty.

The path is too well-worn to only be used once a year. None of the other girls notice, though. We're almost late, some of the flowers are already blooming. But where the forest is damp and dark, the plants are slow, waiting for us. The other girls giggle and set to picking the shining blackberries that will usher them into adulthood. Or not.

No one talks about the not.

The ones who live will squish their berries in presses that can never be used again. Some will use the juices for beauty. Some for death. Those are the strengths of our village—women pleasing enough to lure in any man and strong enough to keep them in line.

The berries hint at their power, and the girls babble nonsense. Some scream and cry. Some strip their dresses, ripping when buttons frustrate their movement. Others curl into the earth, quiet, nearly catatonic.

No one pays attention to me—the girl born strangely to the witch on the edge of the village. Never allowed in. Never seen.

I take a spade from my basket and dig at the thick roots of a large plant. They pull easily out of the rocky soil. I snip them into pieces, each stronger than a dozen berries.

The girls rave of monsters. Shadows stepping into the light. Things they've never seen before—things I've grown up with.

I place a bundle in the hole I've dug. Bread I've kneaded, brandy from our stills. An offering of sorts. Also, a tether binding me to this plot of earth and all the poison growing in it. The poison the girls collect today, and the poison their daughters will collect. Their power is mine.

On the edge of the clearing, a shadow of a man watches the ecstasy and terror of the girls. He nods at me as I steal his roots. My mouth is dry, my vision blurred. The man is hungry this year, and I can see which of the girls will die so the others might be pretty and powerful.

I bury my bundle and collect my basket, grateful witches give their daughters time to learn where true power lies.

About the Author

Koji A. Dae is an American author living in the fairytale woods of Bulgaria. She has work in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Clarkesworld*, and forthcoming from *Apex Magazine*. When not writing, she's hiking, tending the family, or working in the fiber arts.

Salt

Srilatha Rajagopal

Appa died in his sleep Tuesday night. Charu ignores the flood of WhatsApp messages from her sisters asking why she wasn't answering her bloody phone, in all caps for as long as possible before calling Ro in Bangalore, who she is closest to. He didn't suffer. No, amma is fine, taking it stoically. With the pandemic raging, there's no question of Charu going home.



On the thirteenth day after Alamelu patti, her grandmother died, they made her favorite foods. Without salt. "The soul is attached to earthly matters," the priest explained to a stricken 15-year-old Charu in Tamil-flavored English. "How to tell them they need to leave, don't be in limbo? You offer their favorite food, but without uppu. The atma eagerly tastes the food..." He made a face. "Gets sad, disgusted. And would be on its way to the next loka or janma." Charu imagined her loving patti, eager to eat her favorite rasam rice, turning away, sad, hungry. Charu, whose love language has always been food, couldn't stop crying.



Appa was charismatic, playful, a funny storyteller. He was the raging madman chasing amma around their matchbox-sized house because the rasam was oversalted. Breaking amma's violin to pieces, yelling "mundai, you spend too much time at the violin whore's house" about the kindly neighbor who gave amma free

lessons, the children freezing at the first contact of palm against amma's beautiful skin. Appa taught Charu to play chess. He slapped her hard when she refused to eat her brinjal curry. He was the generous appa who bought her sarsaparilla root sherbet at the corner store, which always made her cough after the first sip of the ice-cold drink which would then trigger a rant—she was thin, sickly, with a rat's tail for hair, with dark skin—she was a failure as a child.

When appa got a lucrative offer in Kenya, Charu was thirteen. She wondered if he'd be able to learn Swahili for a fleeting second, forgetting him in the trips to the beach with the neighbors, Vijay Softee ice-cream on Sundays, film songs on Radio Ceylon that appa forbade, and amma's smiling face.

For the next few years, appa was the blue aerogrammes, he was photos in his first car, on a safari. Charu liked this appa—too far away to hurt them, while still available as a show and tell figure.

When Charu found a well-paying job as a programmer right after college, appa quit his job in Kenya and came home. The years of living alone and the fat savings had softened him. Or so they thought. The newly affectionate appa who took them to movies and restaurants disappeared the night she came home from working late as he waited by the door to hit her on the legs with her grandfather's walking stick. What would the neighbors think of a girl coming home so late?

Appa canceled himself daily.

*

Nothing is as surreal as a distant death. The sun rises and friends plan lunches as Charu examines the idea that appa is dead. She's imagined this day a thousand times. A life no longer darkened by appa and his eternal discontent. About amma's refusal to socialize and her constant sleeping; about his grown daughters bullying him in his old age because he's now dependent on them financially. Now that it's here, she is terrified of acknowledging it. He's become her Schrodinger's cat.

Charu's days are a root-canal haze, thoughts like a bull plowing a field in its endless circles.

Ram, who's been her rock, who appa predicted "won't even look at you, he's out of your league" when he met him at an office party, who proposed to her after three months of knowing her, can't take this anymore.

"Charu, come on, let's get out of the house. We are eating out tonight and going to the beach." As she watches the Atlantic Ocean, the memory of another beach, the Bay of Bengal in Pondy, rises unbidden. Appa sitting on the parapet wall, Charu climbing down to the beach. Appa being patient, watching her play in the sand, running into the waves and back, *"just one more big wave, appa. Last wave, promise."*



It's the thirteenth day, when the soul needs to break earthly bonds.

Charu sifts through old photos, not sure what she's looking for, desperate to find it. She finds the one from an age she doesn't remember, black and white, edges

tattered. Appa carrying her and her sister Ro on his arms, smiling crookedly, crinkling his eyes against the sun. He is movie-star handsome, a lock of hair falling on his forehead. The pride on his face and the love that he could never manifest in real life.

The priest's words about the soul stuck in limbo haunt her. She feels like she's the one in limbo. She calls Ro in Bangalore.

"Charu, try to forgive him di. Not because he deserves it. But because you need it. I read that people with unfinished business with each other will be born together again and again. Today, amma told me she forgave him. Do you really want him to come back as our father, our mother, husband, child? CHILD!!"

She places the photo on the altar in their home and lights a lamp.

She soaks tamarind to make rasam. Extracting the juice from the tamarind, she flavors it with cumin and pepper, and chops two large juicy tomatoes into it. White rice cooked to perfection—not too mushy, not too dry. How many days had he thrown the plate because the rice was overcooked? And potato curry, seasoned with turmeric, hing, chili powder, roasted to a crisp golden hue. Appa used to fight with his own children for the crispiest pieces of potatoes.

Her fingers fight the muscle memory to salt the food.

She sets out the saltless food, tasting salt in her tears, tears that finally flow.

About the Author

Srilatha Rajagopal lives in Florida with her husband of thirty plus years. She loves to read, write, cook, garden, experiment with her iPhone camera, and watch birds in her backyard. She was an IT Project Manager in a former life. She has words in *Shark Reef* and the parenting magazine *Grownandflown.com*, and a photo in *Rejection Letters*.



Reflecting at Doyle

Morgan Shank, dark fantasy writer. Landscape Photographer. Searching for the Green Place. For more photos, see: <http://shankbooks.com/>.

Mango Fire

Celeste Rita Baker

When me Farda come down last time, Ah axe he why Ah couldn't go live wid him in he country. He say Ah too young, too headstrong and willful yet. Ah tell he Ah gon' be good.

He laugh and he say he must see it and not just wid he ears.

Ah push out me lips and pout, carrying on wid everyday foolishness, dat only serve to throw pepper in he eye, but he ain't pay me no mind.

Ah axe Mommy how come we ain' go stay by Daddy in he country what so full wid people like she, kind and gentle, smiling. People who nah 'fraid so ain't got no cause to bully and beat. Mommy good. She does make de best fry bread and comb me hair widout making me cry. When we playing we does dance like de wind and we laughter does carry til de sky change she outfit. When is lesson time she give me de learning so easy Ah ain' self know Ah now know it.

Is only dem, dem others who does give me de hard knocks. And not one and only, but over and again, de same, den different, den same again. Everywhere Ah turn, knocks can't done. Ah does limp back, weary and bloodied, throat raw from yelling for reason. But Mommy mango breath does dry me tears and she share sweet words for me and all.

Not like me, who so does want to loose me own fire dragon and pick up stick to bust clout on me enemies head til dey skull bones crush like coarse sand and dey brains dry up in de sun, because it so long Ah been beating alla dem.

But Ah does watch she and she good, Mommy is.

Mommy say tain't time for we to venture to Daddy country, she gon' stay wid me, stay me hand a while, learn me dragon to breathe a mango scented fire, hold me hand while Ah run dis race, see what de end gon' be.



I nevah make it to Daddy country. Not wid me own body de way Ah was used to. Ah was just coming to learn to appreciate me own self. Ah had like me eyes, different from dem oddas. Mine was pink, which for a long time Ah regard as an unnecessary color, but Ah been noticing de range, since Ah been lookin at meself tryna determine what make dem hate me so. Ah had see me pink slide through magenta into crimson so me ain dislike me eyes bad bad no more. Me hands, what dem oddas call paws and claws, and me ain no why since alla dem does have de same five digits on each of dere's too, some of dem furred. Me hands Ah ain fully accept yet. Dey look dangerous in truth. De nails dem bright white, like de blinding snow dat does sting you eye. Fine thin and pointy sharp, dey could cut deep wid a playful swipe. So Ah does be careful. Is why Ah hadn't quite accept me hands, because dey had cause harm before when Ah ain mean to do it.

Ah ain't had no complaint against me wings though. To say glorious is only a third of it. Beautiful, strong and useful. Especially when me hands ain't do.

But alla dat done now. Sometimes Ah had fly away. Sometimes Ah had fight back.

De last time was bad, Ah fight back, yes, try to defend meself, preserve me life, but Ah lose.

Now me body gone, destroyed by me enemies. Dey tear out me eyes first, as if me and mine wouldn'ta remember dem. Me nails dey bite off wid dey own teeth, gnash off de sharp ends in dey own mouths, me blood gushing hard wid me hearts pain, mixing wid dey vile spit. Me glorious wings dey leave for last, shredding dem to small small, like de thoughts dey Mama and Daddy had feed dem, small small like de thoughts they feeding deyself.

Me body gone, Ah leave me pain behind, and not by me own hand, nor by surrender. T'was taken from me by force of hate.

Ah reach Daddy country wid me mind only. Is a colorless ting, shapeless too, yet mutable.

Ah had used to tink Mommy and me was dancing like de wind but Ah know now we coulda reach much further.

So now, when you feel eyes watching you and ain't no eyes to see, it could be me.

If you belly trembling maybe is me fluttering in there. Ah nah calling for fight or flight, but minding you to mind you claws, try make you breath mango sweet, even as you fire hot. If not, you gon learn, is a 'why' behind every 'what happen' and is not you and you alone who gon feel de heat.

About the Author

Celeste Rita Baker is a Virgin Islander currently flitting between the beach and the grocery store as she tries to survive the 'Rona pandemic. Her short story collection, Back, Belly and Side, includes Speculative Fiction, Magical Realism and Reality Based Fiction, some in Caribbean Dialect and some in Standard English. A 2019 graduate of Clarion West, proud member of the Harlem Writers United and winner of the 2021 World Fantasy Award for her short story 'Glass Bottle Dancer, Celeste used to love doing performance readings, often in costumes she makes herself and hopes to again one day. celesteritabaker.com

Mother of the Sea

Alyson Tait

One winter day, a strange woman named Temse arrived at a seaside village, begging for shelter and work. The elders obliged, offering leather clothes to replace her seal-skin dress and a list of children to care for.

Long red hair swished around her smiling face, and children told distracted relatives that she smelled of cold-caught fish and deep blue saltwater.

On the anniversary of her arrival, Temse wrangled the neglected youth onto the snowy tundra. The air filled with laughter as they threw handfuls of soft, bundled snowflakes. She smiled. The sounds reminded her of home, and her heart wrenched with longing. The time had come to finish her task.

Once tired of the snowball fight, she beckoned the kids closer and offered a choice. "It's time for me to go. Come with me for never-ending adventures and love. Or... say goodbye, returning to your parent's huts."

The obedient ones sulked home while the wildest followed her past the village. When they reached the frozen shore, she dug up her hidden treasures, donned her selkie skin, and handed enchanted furs to the children—a token to help them transition.

They slid under the ice, and their legs transformed into fins.

She felt the ocean fill. It would be less lonely with the youthful pack arriving to swim, hunt, and bark together.

She took one last look at the footprints of the village's few loyal children. They would survive, in their own way, until she returned to try again.

About the Author

Alyson Tait lives in Maryland where she got married, had her daughter, and began her writing journey. She has appeared in *(macro)mic*, *Wrongdoing* magazine, and *From the Farther Trees*. You can find her on Amazon, and Twitter @rudexvirus1.



Into the Narrows

Morgan Shank, dark fantasy writer. Landscape Photographer. Searching for the Green Place. For more photos, see: <http://shankbooks.com/>.

Visiting

Avra Margariti

Calla stares at the sky, pink as Grandma's rose-petal jam. She puffs out her fifth strategic sigh of the trip, which elicits a sigh from her mother in turn. The airplane is actually a Chinese festival dragon. Its sinuous body is red and gold, made of papier mâché, bamboo, and undulating magic. Calla has been given the window seat, but this does little to improve her sour mood. All her friends are staying back home to watch the spirits arrive. But no, Grandma has to be difficult as always and expect Calla and her mother to make the yearly trip themselves, when the veil between worlds is at its thinnest.

Calla's mother is named Lily. Grandma came up with both their names, thinking it a funny anecdote to tell her garden club. Calla wonders if Grandma has a garden club now, then reminds herself that she was brought here against her will, therefore she doesn't care what Lily or Grandma do.

"Will you *please* be good and not recount to Grandma all the ways I've disappointed you as a mother?" Lily asks.

She sounds tired, like she wishes this flight was a regular flight, or at least a place she could order a stiff martini. An old spirit lady offered Calla some liquorice candy earlier, which Lily slapped out of Calla's hand. "What did I tell you about accepting food and drink here?" she whisper-shouted. "Unless you'd rather stay with Grandma in the spirit world forever."

Calla hissed her frustration like a cat. It made the front seat's occupant shake with silent laughter, black velvet ears twitching.

Now, just to spite her mother, Calla makes a mental list of things she could complain to Grandma about.

1. You always buy the wrong cereal brand and forget the milk.
2. You never show up to parent-teacher meetings or help me with my homework like Grandma used to.
3. Your boyfriend chews his food too loudly and talks to me like I'm five instead of nine.

Because this is the spirit world, and spirits are known tricksters, Calla's mental list manifests in airborne letters of seafoam green smoke. Lily reads them and purses her lips. Before Calla can either apologize or dig herself a deeper hole, Lily yanks her headphones in place and screws her eyes shut.

With her mother asleep, Calla no longer has to feign disinterest in the spirit world. She presses her nose to the cellophane window. Below, a field of purple corn is dancing the cancan. The surrounding farm houses are shaped like geckos and wrens.

The cat-eared girl from the front seat turns around to smirk at Calla.

"Are you a demon?" Calla asks.

The smirk turns into a toothy grin. "Not when I'm on vacation. And you?"

Calla looks down at her lap, then at her sleeping mother. "Only sometimes."

She removes the neon-yellow shoelaces of her sneakers and weaves them between her fingers.

"Cat's cradle," Calla clarifies, pushing her hands toward her new friend.

The part-time demon laughs and hooks her fingers around two lengths of string.

Lily stirs awake as the flight attendant arrives. He has shiny goldfish scales and a rattlesnake tail with which to rouse the passengers.

"This is your stop," the flight attendant tells Lily, handing her a rainbow parachute large enough for two.

As they fall down the rosy sky, Calla and Lily cling onto each other. Daughter tucks herself into mother's arms and mother squeezes daughter close as they rush to meet the ground. Calla hasn't allowed herself to hug her mother like this since Grandma's death. If anyone asked now, she would blame her tear-wet eyes on the whistling wind.

"I don't want to see Grandma," Calla says as she stands outside the constellation-strewn door of Grandma's bungalow. She pokes at a star, and it explodes in sparkly dust, raining down the woodwork.

Lily doesn't sigh as Calla expected. "And why's that?"

Because it'll only make things more difficult when we leave again and she has to stay here, Calla thinks. Out loud, she says, "She's always pinching my face and finding things wrong with my clothes."

When the door swings open, Calla steps right into Grandma's soft embrace.

"Calla!" Grandma exclaims, cupping her cheeks in origami-wrinkled palms. "Have you been looking after my flower for me?"

Calla mumbles a greeting, then sprints farther into the bungalow, ducking through the door she knows leads to Grandma's bedroom. The curtains are drawn tight, sinking the room in grainy darkness. As Calla dives onto the bed and burrows under the covers, she hears Grandma repeat the same words to Lily, only this time she's talking about Calla.

Have you been looking after my flower?

The bed smells of mothballs and patchouli; Calla inhales deeply and rubs her cheeks against the pillowcases. She used to hate sharing a bedroom with Grandma back home. But after Grandma was gone, Calla found she couldn't sleep, too unsettled without Grandma's wheezy, old-lady breath keeping the nightmares at bay better than any dreamcatcher ever could.

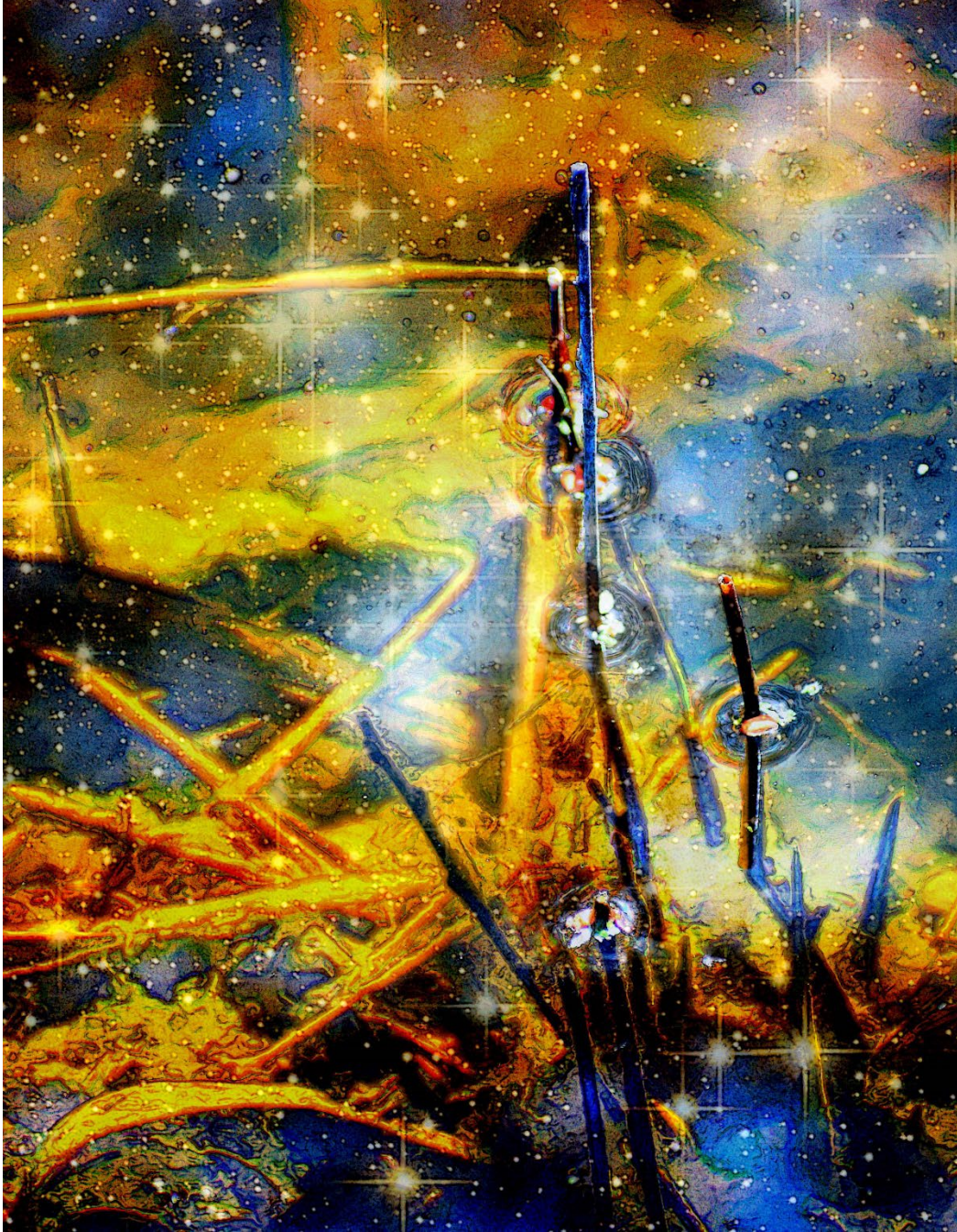
Lily and Grandma bicker in the kitchen, at turns fond and irritated. They're cooking Grandma's secret family recipes. Lily brought the ingredients from home so

that they can eat without becoming trapped in the spirit world. In her fist, Calla holds a secret of her own: a piece of liquorice candy Lily didn't manage to confiscate earlier. She turns it round and round in her hands, rubbing it like a lucky coin. Calla doesn't intend to eat the candy, but it feels good to know she has options.

When both women call for her to set the table, Calla gets up, but not before hiding the liquorice candy under Grandma's pillow.

About the Author

Avra Margariti is a queer author and poet from Greece. Avra's work haunts publications such as *Cast of Wonders*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Future Fire*, *Best Microfiction*, and elsewhere. You can find Avra on Twitter (@avramargariti).



Star Pond

Paula Hammond is a professional writer & digital artist based in London, England. Her fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and a British Science Fiction Association award. Her photography has featured in numerous magazines and non-fiction books. She reads too much and sleeps too little.

welcome, caller

Sarah Little

"hello, and thank you for calling. how may i direct your call this evening?"

you dial three to speak to the past, and no-one answers. there's hold music, instead, humming through the phone, loud enough that the clunky receiver feels like it's vibrating in your palm. it's the song he did once for you, posted it to instagram so he knew you'd see it first thing in the morning.

it got seven likes, none of which were your own.

this is how the story between you goes, always: that he puts more into the universe for you than you do for him.

breathe in. out. let your voice catch on a whistle of air and sigh, let the exhale rough up the receiver. it crackles dully at you, displeased.

in reply, you thrum your fingers on the body of the receiver, feel the rain-drop patter reflecting back at you a dozen times before it stills. "it's me again," you tell the music. it stops, cuts off in the middle of an instrumental warble, and you sigh at it, bang the receiver clumsily onto the cradle.

it sits there crookedly, whining.

at home, you pace and type, type and pace. upload the photo into the internet, a cool-eyed selfie of yourself in a phone-box, "going back to when it was easier," you tell them. he might not be listening, but that's alright.

the longer you talk and the louder you whisper, the less he will hear.

(the less he hears, the more he won't know)

was the phone box blue or red? your hands twist through the hem of your jumper, and you pace without counting the steps: it was blue. down the staircase: it was red.

along the hallway, to the hook where you leave your coat: it was grey.

you go five days, this time, before retracing your steps to the phone box, and it's raining. your feet fall into sync with the raindrops, which soak into the leather of your boots and the box isn't where you left it. no matter—you keep walking. it'll be here somewhere.

and when you walk inside, it's a dull reprieve from the rain, and you lift the phone from the cradle.

"hello, and thank you for calling. how may i direct your call this evening?"

you dial five to speak to the future, and it's icily silent on the other end. just as you're growing nervous, phone trembling in cold fingers—you really should've brought your mittens—a voice answers. "you have half an hour left," and you sit on the little stool that you brought in for this, thudding it against your knees the whole way.

the half hour passes, and you blink at the receiver when it tells you "pens down, close your booklets, and place them to the side." you've been here before, you did this already, but you asked for the future, so are past and future going to overlap?

you let your thoughts drift, suddenly, absently, and remember the university brochures hidden under your paperwork, the quickly-bookmarked pages on the web browser informing you of your student loan eligibility and the half-filled application for.

and if you close your eyes, there you are, in the exam hall, student-desk-student-desk as far as the room will allow, cracking your knuckles together with the satisfaction of a task done.

(and if you close your eyes again and he's not there, well, there's only so many things you can let yourself focus on as you file out of the hall with the rest of your potential classmates.)

at home, you fill in the application again, and the website politely doesn't mention anything about your failed five prior attempts at doing this. this time, you complete it, hit SUBMIT NOW and navigate to the loan-application pages.

and you pace back to where you left your coat, because now that you think on it, the phone box was red. as you're hanging it up, and putting the kettle on, you think it was grey, and as you're carrying tea and toast to the sofa, it was blue.

definitely blue.

it takes two weeks during which your loan and student application were accepted, and you applied for a scholarship, and you go back into the pouring rain to investigate the box.

just one more time, is what you tell yourself each time, and everytime you don't mean it. or maybe you don't have the conviction left to mean it, but you don't mind, really.

and you get to the box, greeting it like it's a companion you miss even though you could never keep them with you forever.

"hello, and thank you for calling. how may i direct your call this evening?"

you dial fourteen to speak to the future, fingers stabbing the buttons in a haphazard mash, and for a second you're concerned that you dialled forty-one.

instead, there's your own voice parroted back at you, and you let the receiver droop, press your temple to the glass window. "hello, and how can i help you today?" and you've never heard yourself sound quite so commanding.

you see yourself frown into the window into the phone, and his voice streams out. "it's me. i tried calling and texting, but—well, you're a hard woman to get hold of," he chokes a bit now on an exhale, "and i miss you," and both of your mouths curve into smiles.

one of you just looks more supercilious.

(one of you just looks more reconciliatory)

and you hang up, both of you, because he's not someone you remember to miss, and you're not someone he can forget that he ever missed.

and you go home, meet a friend on the doorstep, and as you pace inside together you wonder—blue or red or grey? no, it was all. and you broach it to your friend, describe the box as best you can, and they say:

"oh, that old thing? i didn't know it still worked."

About the Author

When she's not browsing through stacks of books or watching mysteries, Sarah Little is a poet and sometimes story-teller. Her second poetry collection is forthcoming with *Exeter Press* (May 2022) and most recently she's been exploring fairy-tale motifs while branching out into fiction. Her most recent publications have been pieces in *Roi Fainéant*, *Perfumed Pages* and *Pink Plastic House*.

The Paleoneirologist's Dreams

Marc A. Criley

Dreams persist in the bones.

The paleoneirologist raises the rock hammer above his head, holds for a breath, slams it into the fossil. Chips of chert and limestone spray. A colleague, observing too closely, yelps as stone fragments strike and draw blood from cheek and chin.

"If you seek a paleontology of dreams," the near-manic man holding the hammer says, panting and spitting out bits of rock, "it begins and ends with the bones."



The paleoneirologist smashes dreams and stones; shatters bones of calcite and quartz, grinds the shards to dust. He mixes the dust with wine. The dust does not dissolve—the wine thickens. It must be stirred, then drunk. Stir, drink, stir, drink. Dreams coat the teeth with grit, wine cleans the palate.

The dreams then, the dreams, they overwhelm, they invade, they infect the senses—fetid swamps, the reek of death, raw meat and rot. A burning sun, super-oxygenated air, fierce life and fast death. Thundering giants, echoing howls of the hunt. Predator, prey, fear, terror, sex.

In twisted sheets the paleoneirologist wakes, gritty and besotted with sweat and wine. He swelters in the heat of his dreams.



The paleoneirologist abhors secret knowledge—he is a *scientist*. He shares his wine, the paleoneirological wine of *Old Dreams*. His colleagues imbibe; they spit, gag, retch. "What is this? Are you trying to poison us?"

No one will share the paleoneirologist's dreams. He is ridiculed. "Fine," he mutters. "I alone will know the Old Dreams."



Alarm! Alarm! trumpets across the tundra. Tusks savage the barking, howling pack; muscled trunk thrashes blindly against claws, against snarling fangs ripping at belly and throat. Heat and musk, tangled hair and matted fur, steaming blood and breath, smashed bones, the whimper and wheeze of pierced flesh and torn throats beneath ice-point stars.

The paleoneirologist wakes, moaning. Powdered mammoth tusk coats his face, cut through by rivulets of tears. His heart is pierced by the cold stone bones of the dead.



The paleoneirologist spins his hammer, strikes the chisel head against the chevron stone, cleaves it smartly in two. One piece he sets aside; the other he

shatters, grinds to powder, moistens to a gray-white slurry, spoons it to his mouth; he chews and swallows mud. He sleeps.

Immersed in a body heat sea. Rapacious, meat-lust hunger. Frenzied slaughter, predator and prey, the snapping of bones and the flood of blood gorges full in the throat. Insatiable.

An interloper, blood-drawn, ablaze with hunger, cuts in; slashed shark fins and razor teeth savage a red-ribboned emerald sea. None survive.

The paleoneirologist wakes; vomits rancid bile, mud and salt. He rolls out of twisted sheets, seeks the remaining megalodon half-tooth. He grasps the rock hammer in mud-sweat hands and smashes it down again and again—coughing with each gritty breath—until he and his dreams are enveloped in dust.



On a sunny weekday afternoon the paleoneirologist visits the Museum of Natural Origins. There are no school field trips this day; only a handful of visitors; the few docents are bored. He buys a rock hammer in the gift shop. A color coded track on the floor guides him to the Hall of Hominids.

Beneath a sunlit dome, in a paleontological cathedral of dreams, lies the museum's marquee exhibit: a nearly complete three-million-year-old *Australopithecus africanus*. The paleoneirologist peers through protective glass, scrutinizes calcified bones.

He reaches for his hammer. He yearns for the Old Dreams.

About the Author

Marc A. Criley avidly read fantasy and science fiction for over forty years before deciding to try his hand at writing it. He has since been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Abyss & Apex*, and elsewhere; so rest assured it is never too late to start writing. Marc and his wife "manage" a household of cats in the hills of North Alabama. Marc tweets about writing, space, Alabama, and other shiny things as @That_MarcC. He maintains a personal website and blog at kickin-the-darkness.com.

Dark Night By The Sea

Léon Othenin-Girard

Sitting by a broken bridge, I dangle my legs over the edge of the chasm. Heights terrify me, but knowing I could die on this “adventure”—but die gloriously, be remembered—looking down feels so... I don't know. Inconsequential? I guess that's the right word for it. Took me three hours to find the energy to cross that bridge and now it's just snapped.

Never got my magic, either. I was supposed to find some hidden power on this trip, they said I'd know when I had it, that it'd feel like electricity flowing through my veins. But there's no power here. Just me, and you. A skull I found at the roadside.

Were you like me at some point, thinking you'd die heroically on your quest? We always expect that, but never the spiders, scorpions, or just running out of food because the bridge broke.

Ha. I know what it feels like now. A bad joke. But even if I laugh about it, I can't help but feel disappointed. Maybe if I start walking back now, I can make it. Nothing wrong with a bit of shame.

But this chasm calls to me. I can almost see the wine-bottle-green sea that lies at the bottom, and the scent fills my head. It almost makes me want to jump, not to end this life, but to start a new one. Lord of the Sea, that'd be something.

I can already feel the jolt of saltwater running through my veins.

About the Author

Léon Othenin-Girard loves writing queer speculative fiction and has been obsessed with Greek mythology since shortly after he learned to read. They're a big fan of video games and tabletop RPGs, musicals, and forgetting their schedule for uni.

Behind The Tree

Ai Jiang

"The tree out back." He picked at the piece of chicken floating in his bloated noodles.

"What about it?" I watched in irritation when he allowed the chicken to fall from his chopsticks back into the soup, liquid jumping out from the paper cup it came in.

"Should we cut it?" He wiped the soup from the table with his fingers rather than the tissue next to him, then licked his thumb.

I cringe at the sight before registering his words. "And why would we—should we—do that?"

I picked up my own tissue and blotted the remaining liquid from the table before he could swipe his fingers across the surface again.

"It's getting too tall. Casting too much shade over the house." He finished the chicken, leaving the noodles floating.

Outside the dining room window swayed the tree and its branches in the heavy wind. Specks of raindrops dotted the window's glass, making it look as though it was snowing rather than raining outside. A dreary snow globe with unclear skies and clear snow.

"We should do it after it rains," he said.

We carved memories into that tree. Height lines of our children, our names, our thoughts in obscure symbols that no one else knew but ourselves.

"Where's the sun?" I asked.

He looked at me, confused. "Behind the clouds."

"And where are we?" I asked.

"In the kitchen?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"Behind the tree."

"And?"

"We don't cut the clouds, so why should we cut the tree?"

He abandoned his noodles all together and shook his head, swirling his chopsticks, thinking.

"Where are the children?" I asked.

"Behind the tree." He pushed the paper cup away. I had stopped eating before, but now I continue eating.

"We'll wait for the sun to come out," he said. "Then we'll trim a few branches."

I dropped chicken, slurped soup. He reached over and bloated the excess with tissue.

There was a long pause, silence, as he watched me, expectant, with almost a sudden urgency in his eyes. Impatience. Breath held.

"Yes, just a few branches," I finally said.

He released his breath. "Yes, like the clouds."

About the Author

Ai Jiang is a Chinese-Canadian writer, an immigrant from Fujian, and an active member of HWA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *F&SF*, *The Dark*, *PseudoPod*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Hobart Pulp*, *The Masters Review*, among others. Find her on Twitter (@AiJiang_) and online (<http://aijiang.ca>).



After Tolkien

Dr. Sara L. Uckelman is a writer and artist living in the north-east of England with her partner, child, and two cats.

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