

Tree And Stone



Issue 3
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Edward Lee

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Belicia Rhea

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Tree And Stone Magazine

Issue 3

Table of Contents

Patreon and Ko-fi Supporters.....	3
Letter from the Editor.....	4
In the Garden of Past Tense by Edward Lee.....	5
My On Fire Girl by e rathke.....	6
Our Hole is a Bed, an Ocean, a Grave by Belicia Rhea.....	9
A Light in the Storm by Christine Amsden.....	12
A Butterfly Effect by Gustavo Bondoni.....	16
Day One Deities by Kathryn Reilly.....	22
After the Eggs are Laid in Autumn by Gwen Whiting.....	29
Hard Rain in Dinosaur City by Rick Hollon.....	33
Truesword by Pauline Barmby.....	37
Seven Iron Spikes by P.G. Streeter.....	43
Petals of Hope and Sorrow by Kai Delmas.....	49
Copyright and Disclaimers.....	51



Patreon and Ko-fi Supporters

This magazine would be nothing if not for our amazing contributing writers and artists. I want to thank our incredible Patreon and Ko-fi supporters for their contributions.

Rod Mannix

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Clarke Doty

Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

These past few months have brought some terrible things from the attack on abortion rights, to tragic, horrible mass shootings and so many other problems. Yes, the world is really shitty, but it's not all bad.

We have a new issue of Tree and Stone!

Let this be an escape from all the awful things. Give yourself time to rest, to find joy, then rejoin the fight. Burnout doesn't help anyone.

With this issue, along with the incredible stories and art, we have bonus content on our Patreon. Elizabeth E. King has a new art piece to share with the world.

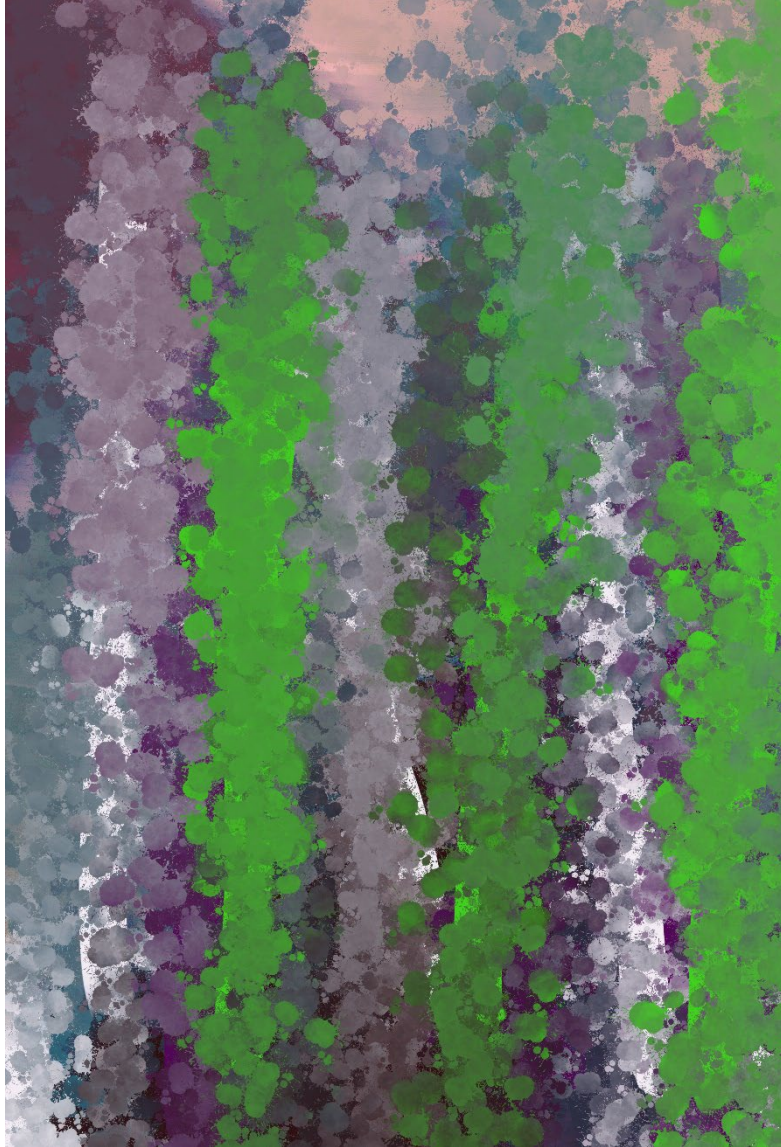
Thank you to all who support us and if you don't subscribe, it's never too late to join our Patreon or donate through Ko-fi. I don't seek any money for myself. Every dollar supports the publishing of more stories and moves me toward my goal of one day paying more and commissioning cover art.

I want this magazine to be a place where creatives can come together. Where all of us can make something really magical together. I think we're achieving this goal and I hope to continue for a long time.

Please enjoy this issue!

Kevin M. Casin

Editor-in-Chief/Publisher



In the Garden of Past Tense

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: 'Lying Down With The Dead' and 'There Is A Beauty In Broken Things'.

He also makes musical noise under the names *Ayahuasca Collective*, *Orson Carroll*, *Lego Figures Fighting*, and *Pale Blond Boy*.

His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

My On Fire Girl

e rathke

My lady's story is one of desolation.



Everything turned to pyre. The kiss of her skin, the song of her lungs, the life she bled all caught in flames from the same fount.

She had a name but not the one I called her.

Her blood was the ocean of fire and her skin the smoke and steam.



Too young to care, she scorched her name on my skin seven layers deeper. Old enough to know better, she drew me in the sky. Each drop of blood, a patient star. Each heartbeat, a pulsing nebula birthing suns. Her heart of a thousand supernovas sustaining the body forged for me.



I watched you from the sky since before your birth, she says. I have watched you grow and burn brighter than any of sister Sun's children, and I longed for you, waited for you to look heavenward and see me dancing, singing, glimmering for you.



Never touching, only loving. Her sulphuric breath, inferno eyes, to touch, to melt, to breathe in her, even if never again. I say her name and she says mine, bound by nothing but desire and fire. My heart cremating from only the thought.



Her burning skin and smoking heart fill the air. An aberration, the space between vibrates and the temperature soars.

I tell her to kiss me.

We can't, she says.

Your touch is enough.

A thousand suns too much.

And like that she stays away but watches close. An ember in the darkness, aglow for me no matter how far we cannot go. For a lifetime I've begged for her lips, for her tongue, only for forests to burn and houses to melt. Together since we cannot remember, her body always on the other side of a barrier. I put my hand flat against it and so does she, the burn of her skin seeps through and into, boiling my blood and melting my veins apart.



On fire from the inside, her skin contains her light. The holocaust heart torching every atom and converting her to ash from the inside. Every night she burns alive and every morning phoenixed anew. Her instant heart, forever young, the hairline of light and night, death and life.

My On Fire Girl.



Touch me please, I whisper and she simmers.

The skin melting from her, bubbled from the smoke rising from the cindered veins until it embers and leaves the pile of ash beside me. The only moments we can touch. The only moments I feel alone. No matter how I rub the soot and ash into my skin, wash my face in what she once was, she returns whole, elusive incandescent love burning a hole.

Don't try to touch, she says, inferno irises shining through her eyelids.

She tells me that I am a pale purple light flickering forever just beyond her fingertips. A taste she has longed eternally for but never able to touch.

Then take me, I say.

She says perfection exists best as itself, when you try to control or create or possess beauty, it rots and fades, rather than ignites.

I don't want to consume you, she says. I won't. Can't.

There are days when I wait for her to give in and convert my life so that I may join her eternal flame. I tell her I will tie myself to her pyre and remain always within her, that I won't burn up and fade like all the rest but burn with her forever.

There never was another, she says, the tears melting her cheek to blistered bone.



Afraid my touch will leave her without me, she flies far away to live amongst her sister stars.

I love you, my On Fire Girl.

Her tears incinerate the earth at my feet, and she turns, promising to never look back, but returns every night to smolder in my bed beside me. Awakening to the sweet sulphuric haze, she scalds her blown kisses into the wall and traces my name on her new skin.

A tattoo to always remind me of you, she says and flashes past the unborn dawn.



My On Fire Girl.

About the Author

e rathke writes about books and games at radicaledward.substack.com. His fiction will appear in *Queer Tales of Monumental Invention*, *Mysterion Magazine*, and elsewhere.



Our Hole is a Bed, an Ocean, a Grave

Belicia Rhea

You keep telling me about your dreams, how I'm gone and buried, stuck underground, how you mouth out words but I don't understand. Then you dig a hole so deep you get lost inside. You shout my name, panic, and worry that I'm dying, because I am—suffocating under shifting rocks, sand filling up my mouth, a pile of wriggling earth.

Last night you were shaking in your sleep. This happens, comes in waves. You wake up yelling, disoriented, or other times you sink, too heavy to put your feet on the ground and pick them back up. Light pours in the curtains at sunrise, but sometimes you're still gone. You're in other realms, swimming and digging and flying and trapped, and even if you float out—you're strapped to the mattress because this world is too dangerous and you worry you won't make it home if you go out the front door.

You mumbled like you were lost. I wanted to touch your shoulder, tell you it's all right, tell you I'm not going anywhere, that I would never leave. But I was afraid to startle you, drag you somewhere worse. Then you went silent, became still, and I stared at you a long time.

And I'm sorry, I don't know why our hands don't clasp fast enough, why you can't break the window before the seawater fills the car. What happened that night on the beach? The tide pulled faster than I could swim. After the soil dried and you shoveled through the earth, couldn't you breathe life back inside of my body? Would you have held dead me in your arms? You said you shouted as loud as you could, but when you turned to look at the faces peering over the hole, you were alone.

Today you couldn't get out of bed. You weren't you when you opened your eyes. The aquamarine blanket draped over you looked heavy, your body tiny underneath. The TV flickered in the corner and you laughed, but I don't know if you were really laughing or just pretending—you looked like an imitation of yourself, checking in from away.

I worry about the ways you've vanished, how each day deflates you to nothing. You talk about wings, but they aren't beautiful, and I can't figure out what you're staring at because I never see anything when I look.

You said you were ready for the big sleep. I said no, I'm still here, just look for me, I'm here. But off you went, grabbed your shovel, fingernails dirty again. I yelled at you to stop, that you'll hurt yourself, that you won't be able to crawl out this time. But you never listen to me, not now, not then, not when we skipped the railing and plunged into the bay.

So I have to dig my way out. Punch at the bitter air, claw for you, float around in the breeze that I can't remember anymore after the sea and soil ruined me, grip at your wrist, pull you down, hold you close until your lungs shrivel. Then I'll cover us with the dirt. Pack your nostrils with soil, and you'll breathe it in, the arid perfume of my decomposition.

Your eyes are wet like the sea, like our last earthly night, like how it felt underwater.

How many nights has it been? I can't remember anymore. Our hole is a bed is an ocean, and I'm dreaming, seeing you in the far distance of the shore, the pinks and purples above meet in coils. Your hair is flying in the wind and you're smiling, even as your head hits the steering wheel, mine slams against the window. I'm confused why the sky looks like it's taking over the sea, glistening bright and blinding—how everything's blurry, too heavy, no air, and you're getting smaller, disappearing, and I can't reach you. If I don't blink, I can still make you out. I'm feeling hazy, like I think you're looking at me but I can't tell because you're just a speck, and I'm not sure if I'm seeing your hair, or eyes, or body, what part of the

dark is the you I'm looking at, how to know if you're looking back, which piece of you is which. I can feel your breath on mine, and like I always tell you, forever, I'm here. I just need to concentrate, dig around for our bones, inhale your sweat, the rot of your underarms, keep looking for you in the grainy dots of this casket.

About the Author

Belicia Rhea was born under a waning crescent moon in the Sonoran Desert. You can find her at beliciarhea.com and read more of her work published in or forthcoming from *Bending Genres*, *Miracle Monocle*, and *Frozen Wavelets*, among other places.



A Light in the Storm

Christine Amsden

■ didn't expect them to come, not after the bitterness and harsh words, but I hoped.

Outside, the wind has already picked up and rain pelts the roof. Each drop is a vivid reminder of how I failed, and how it's costing me now.

I hate you, Mom, the rain seems to say. You never think of anyone but yourself.

My hand shakes as I pour hot water into a tea cup, sloshing boiling liquid onto the hand clutching the side of the cup. Tears fill my eyes as I set the kettle down and go to the sink to let cold water wash away the sting of the heat. I've always been clumsy, but I haven't always had to clutch the side of the tea cup so I can feel when it's full. All I can make out now, when I return to the ceramic mug I've used for years, is a bright white blur and spots of pink I know to be flowers.

Clutching the cup once again, I successfully fill it, wait for it to finish steeping, then take it with me into the dark living room to await the coming storm.

The tea smells strongly of jasmine and grass, and tastes bitter on my tongue, but I never sweeten it. Because my kids were right. I did this to myself.

At least it isn't wine. It hasn't been for two years, but they don't know that. They never will. That's what happens when you run out of chances.

From a nearby end table, my home assistant screams yet another emergency alert: "A mandatory evacuation is in effect for Charleston County."

There's no way to turn off the warning, at least as far as I can tell. My husband used to help me with that kind of thing, before he died.

I consider turning on the TV, but they're only going to tell me what I already know: That the hurricane is poised to be the first in history to reach category 6 and everyone needs to *get out*.

Easy for them to say. It isn't as if I can hop in a car and drive out of here. It isn't as if there is anyone left to care.

And whose fault is that?

The wind begins to whistle and shake the house, and I wonder when the evacuation order will change to shelter in place. I've ridden through hurricanes before – so many I've lost count – but never one like this.

I ask the home assistant to call my son again. I've called my daughter too, but he's more likely to answer. I don't need or want them to come. There's every chance the storm will kill me, and whatever they think, I'm not so selfish that I want to take them down with me.

I just want to hear their voices one last time. To say I'm sorry. Again.

The call goes to voicemail again; this might be my only chance. Who knows how long I'll be able to get a call out? But it's not that easy. It never is. If "I'm sorry" fixed anything, it would have done it by now.

When I hesitate for too long, the assistant disconnects.

I'm sorry is easy to say. So easy it's manipulative. Or so my daughter told me the day I drank my last glass of wine. *You can't just say you're sorry anymore, Mom. You have to prove it...No, I don't know how you do that.*

I hold the cup of bitter tea in one hand and think. If I left a message, what would I say? I've rehearsed it a thousand times and still have no idea.

There's a rattling sound outside, and the house shakes. I startle, sloshing more tea onto my hand, but it's not too hot now.

The dim lights flicker, but don't go out. Like they're warning me that this is my last chance.

I call my daughter. When I'm prompted to leave a message, I hesitate, clear my throat, and begin. "Hi, it's Mom. Hi. I-I just called to say I miss you. And I-I love you."

I tap the assistant to disconnect before I can say anything else. Anything that would even hint at our old pattern. When my meds were working, things would be okay. When they weren't, when I found other crutches, well, the mistakes I made could fill a library.

The wind rattles the house again, bringing with it an unexpected pounding from the front door. That last message to my daughter still rings in my ear so it can't be her, but for a moment, I wonder...

Setting the cup down near the home assistant, I rise to my feet and go to the door. Opening it a crack, but leaving the chain in place, I ask who it is.

"Police, ma'am. We got a call from your son asking to check up on you and help you get out."

"He called you?" I ask.

"Yes, ma'am. This house isn't safe. I can take you to a shelter."

I think of refusing. I think of demanding to talk to my son first, before agreeing to leave. To hear his voice for myself.

I think of staying, of completing my self-imposed penance.

Then I think of the chance, however remote, to say *I love you* in person, not just in a voicemail.

"Ma'am," the officer says.

"Yes. Let's get out of the storm."

About the Author

Christine Amsden is the author of nine award-winning fantasy and science fiction novels, including the Cassie Scot Series. In addition to writing, she is a freelance editor and political activist. Disability advocacy is of particular interest to her; she has a rare genetic eye condition called Stargardt Macular Degeneration and has been legally blind since the age of eighteen. In her free time, she enjoys role playing, board games, and a good cup of tea. She lives in the Kansas City area with her husband and two kids.

A Butterfly Effect

Gustavo Bondoni

The ground shook. Hard.

"This can't be." Rita grabbed the table to stay on her feet as equipment crashed to the floor around her.

Edwards stumbled into the room, sporting a cut under one eye. "Did we get any warning?"

"No foreshocks, no tremors," Rita replied. "This is a big one."

"How big?"

"Too big for the seismometer," she replied, pointing at the machine which was well off the measurement scale. "We'll need to check the strong motion unit in Gerardo's lab."

As they contemplated trying to walk the ten yards to the next office, from outside came a crash. Rita looked out the window; an office block across Wilshire collapsed. "Oh, God. That was a modern building. Utterly to code."

"It's the big one!" Edwards screamed.

He tried to run to the office holding the strong motion unit.

He'd barely taken four steps when the floor buckled hard and launched him headfirst into a table. The crunch echoed around the room and Rita feared the worst as she crawled in his direction.

In the end, it made little difference. Seconds later, the building crumbled and she was flattened by several hundred tons of concrete and steel.



The sea had calmed enough Wu Cheng felt safe coming to his feet. The succession of enormous waves had pitched them around. They must have knocked them well off course. It nearly swamped them. Water ran off the deck and he ran up to the bridge of his 80-foot fishing vessel. He always told his crew: "Take care of the *Tiāntáng*, she'll take care of you." Wu was sure they were dead.

Every window on the empty bridge was broken. Hsu should have been there. The same surge that had torn the windows out must have washed him away.

He tried the intercom to see if his engines were working, but it was waterlogged.

The sea was calm now. He would go below and talk to the engineer in person, and also check on the rest of his crew. He was particularly concerned about Hsu. The man was more than an employee. He was a friend who'd sailed the Pacific with him for seven years.

He turned to check that the sea ahead was clear. He'd already looked, and seen nothing, but he looked again. A dense fog rolled in. It was such a thick and noxious-looking thing that he half-expected the stuff to be poisonous, to dissolve the ship out from under him.

It wasn't. It was warm, and smelled of water vapor, like the steam in a shower.

But it felt thicker than shower steam.

The wind howled through the open windows of the bridge. It took him several moments to realize that it wasn't wind but that the ship itself was picking up speed, impelled by the water.

How could water in the middle of the ocean suddenly accelerate?

Wu tried to turn in a different direction, but without engine power, there was no way he could fight this current. He only understood what was happening when his ship reached the enormous crack that had opened in the crust beneath the ocean. Water, billions of gallons of it, fell onto the magma below and turned into thick steam.

That was the last thing Wu saw.



Dmitri Pachenko watched in horror as the blue marble below slowly cracked open. As the commander of ISS expedition 74, he'd been on the radio with Johnson Space Center after the first big quakes struck.

At first, Mission Control had reassured them that, though the quake had been massive, the damage was under control and everyone was fine.

Then another quake hit.

The last thing Dmitri heard was Evelyn Carter's voice, the one that had guided and calmed him since the first days of the mission, rising in a terrified scream.

After that, no one on Earth responded. Not Brussels. Not Baikonur. Not even the usual radio cowboys who clogged up the comm waves.

"Are you seeing this, Dmitry?" Francesca asked.

"I'm seeing it."

"What's happening?" Her face was drawn and pale... and even so, she was taking it better than he was. He wanted to cry like a baby.

"The end of the world," Dmitri said.

The Earth now resembled a cracked egg, a jagged crack splitting the two slowly separating halves. The magma inside seemed to be spilling out near the North Pole.

"The center of the planet is leaking away," Francesca whispered.

Alarms lit up his control panel, but he ignored them. Dead men didn't need to check their instruments. Orbital decay would kill them now, even if nothing else did.

He watched the glowing molten rock. It looked like the entire core of the world was rushing out into space for no reason. There hadn't been an impact, which was the only explanation he could think of for something like this.

Yet, there it was, flashing off into the distance, leaving behind nothing but a thin freezing husk.

They watched it go, glowing through the vacuum of space.

Suddenly, the rock appeared to expand. Thin parachute-like screens opened onto either side of a central glowing tube, built on a planetary scale.

"Feeding membranes," Francesca said. "They can capture atoms across hundreds of thousands of square kilometers."

"No," Dmitry replied, staring in fascination. "Wings. That is a space butterfly. Earth was just a cocoon. And only humanity's pride made us believe we were ever more than parasites on its husk."

Francesca was about to argue, but her biologist's mind had already analyzed the creature and its environment and theorized how it would survive and live. Theories emerged fully-formed: it would use floating interstellar gas to build its structures, maybe combine them with oxygen taken from earth to keep itself warm. Or maybe the membranes could absorb sunlight. Yes, that would make sense. The energy came from the sun, the building blocks from the gas clouds. Would it then lay an egg in another planet? Mars, or venus? Or a moon of Jupiter? That was how life propagated.

But she just nodded. "You're right. It's beautiful."

They watched as the mammoth creatures swung in their direction. They watched until they died.

About the Author

Gustavo Bondoni is a novelist and short story writer with over three hundred stories published in fifteen countries, in seven languages. He is a member of Codex and an Active Member of SFWA. His latest science fiction novel is *Splinter* (2021), a sequel to his 2017 novel *Outside*. He has also published four monster books: *Ice Station: Death* (2019), *Jungle Lab Terror* (2020), *Test Site Horror* (2020) and *Lost Island Rampage* (2021), two other science fiction novels: *Incursion* (2017) and *Siege* (2016) and an ebook novella entitled *Branch*. His short fiction is collected in *Pale Reflection* (2020), *Off the Beaten Path* (2019) *Tenth Orbit and Other Faraway Places* (2010) and *Virtuoso and Other Stories* (2011). In 2019, Gustavo was awarded second place in the Jim Baen Memorial Contest and in 2018 he received a Judges Commendation (and second place) in The James White Award. He was also a 2019 finalist in the Writers of the Future Contest. His website is at www.gustavobondoni.com



Day One Deities

Kathryn Reilly

W hat should we do with the body?"

"Let's create a world."

"Come again?"

"Well, I mean why not? Let's create an entire new world and be its deities."

"That's crazy."

"More crazy than the Aztecs' Tlaltecuhтли or the Mesopotamians' Tiamat or the Vikings' Ymir?"

"In those stories the sacrificed were gods. This body is human. Sorry. Was human. This body was human. Plus, it's spongey."

"Okay, so we'll make a smaller world; it doesn't need to be as big as Earth. What if we just create two oceans and three continents and a handful of lakes and rivers and a lot fewer rocks and stuff."

"There's no magic in this body."

"Just because humans forgot they came from magic and lost the use of it doesn't mean it's not there."

"Fair point."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"So, you're in? It'll take the two of us."

"Yup. On two conditions."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Okay...get on with it then. Name the conditions."

"First, I want to be the god of all weather stuff, but no beard. People need the weather to survive, so I want them to worship me for my rain and sun and wind and all that jazz. I'll use the sun to burn them. Sun burns suck. Second, we'll never be naked deities. I've seen those ancient Greek statues and I'm not sure if it's hard to accurately depict a penis in stone, but no one is disrespecting my anatomical gift. I mean, I know mine doesn't look like theirs, but I don't want any gross misrepresentations."

"Fine. I'll be the goddess of art and inspiration and sex and creativity and discovery and logic."

"Wait. I want to be the god of sex. I'll totally inspire our new humans."

"Nope. You had your chance and named your conditions. I get sex."

"Just because I didn't think of it right off the bat doesn't mean I shouldn't get a shot at it."

"That's exactly what it means; it wasn't important enough to you to claim it. I claimed it. It's mine."

"Whatever. Fine. I'm adding pleasure to my god powers. I'm claiming sensual pleasures."

"Childish, but I'll let you have it."

"Let me?"

"Ready?"

"Sure."

"Wait! What if this human was horrible? What if their vileness taints everything?"

"They're all a little vile don't you think? Gasses and fluids leaking out all the time, and they're pretty self-centered. Oh, wait, you mean what if this one killed people? We'll just make sure vileness isn't allowed in our world. Pavlov training and such. Besides. What if they're born with darkness and choose light? Then we'll know we've done something correctly; we'll be great gods."

"God and goddess."

"Sure."

"Okay. So on three we'll both think about the coordinates and pop over to that part in space. I'll hang out and you sort out any gravitational stuff that needs to shift since we'll be building a planet. Two moons will be there, so that will be cool. Then we'll each start grabbing parts and calling out what they'll become."

"Sounds good."

WHOOSH.

"Here we go. Oh my god, this is gross. Pulpy and wet. So squishy. It stinks with open skin. How long has this body been dead?"

"Not sure? A little bit. I don't think anyone knew it was dead. Think about the world. Rinse your hands off later."

"Spine for the world core!"

"Eyes for the stars!"

"Eye crustiness for sand!"

"Hair for grasses!"

"Teeth for the mountains!"

"Wait, how many teeth do humans have?"

"I'm counting 31. It looks like one is missing"

"31 mountains isn't a lot. Did you make mountains or mountain ranges?"

"Mountains."

"Will that be enough?"

"I don't really care. They get what they get."

"Right. Okay. Nostrils and ears and belly button for caverns!"

"Blood for oceans!"

"Oceans can't be red. They should be blue."

"They're only blue on Earth, remember? Earth oceans are actually clear; they just reflect stuff. Well, unless something is growing in them like algae and then they could be green or red or pink."

"You just made our oceans blood red, actually it's darker. This blood is kinda stagnant."

"It's a new world; I can make them any color I want."

"Blood is thicker than water and it'll feel weird."

"Maybe, but we don't have to get in it, so not really our problem. Besides, the water on Earth is so polluted with other stuff at this point, it's thicker than it should be. No one will care. Besides, they can frolic and drink from the rivers I'm going to make from tear duct matter."

"Point. Let's wrap this up. Can we just think everything else? It's so much quicker."

"Yup."

"This place is pretty gorgeous! I like your idea to use the nails for trees. The clear trees look pretty next to the redbrown waters."

"Thanks! I loved how you took the joints and made them connectors between the continents. That was clever."

"I thought the connectors were brilliant; now everyone can walk everywhere. Good exercise means no obesity. I love how all the tiny microbes are huge animal versions of themselves. Kinda weird and wonderful."

"Oh my goddess! We FORGOT to make the people! Who's going to worship us?"

"Let's go find some bodies."

"Okay, but living ones. I don't want to breathe life into clay replicas or Frankenstein them together."

"If we did the molding and breathing thing, we could make them more equal! Wait. Hear me out. We could make them like clownfish and they could change sex when they wanted. Or maybe model them after the yellow-bellied water snake. Parthenogenesis seems pretty cool."

"Okay. So we could do it ourselves or just grab clownfish and yellow-bellied snakes and some humans and mush everything's DNA together. We'll make better humans."

"Deal. We'll have to watch them for a while to choose rightly. Let's choose ones with happy pets; they'll be good people. This should be fun!"

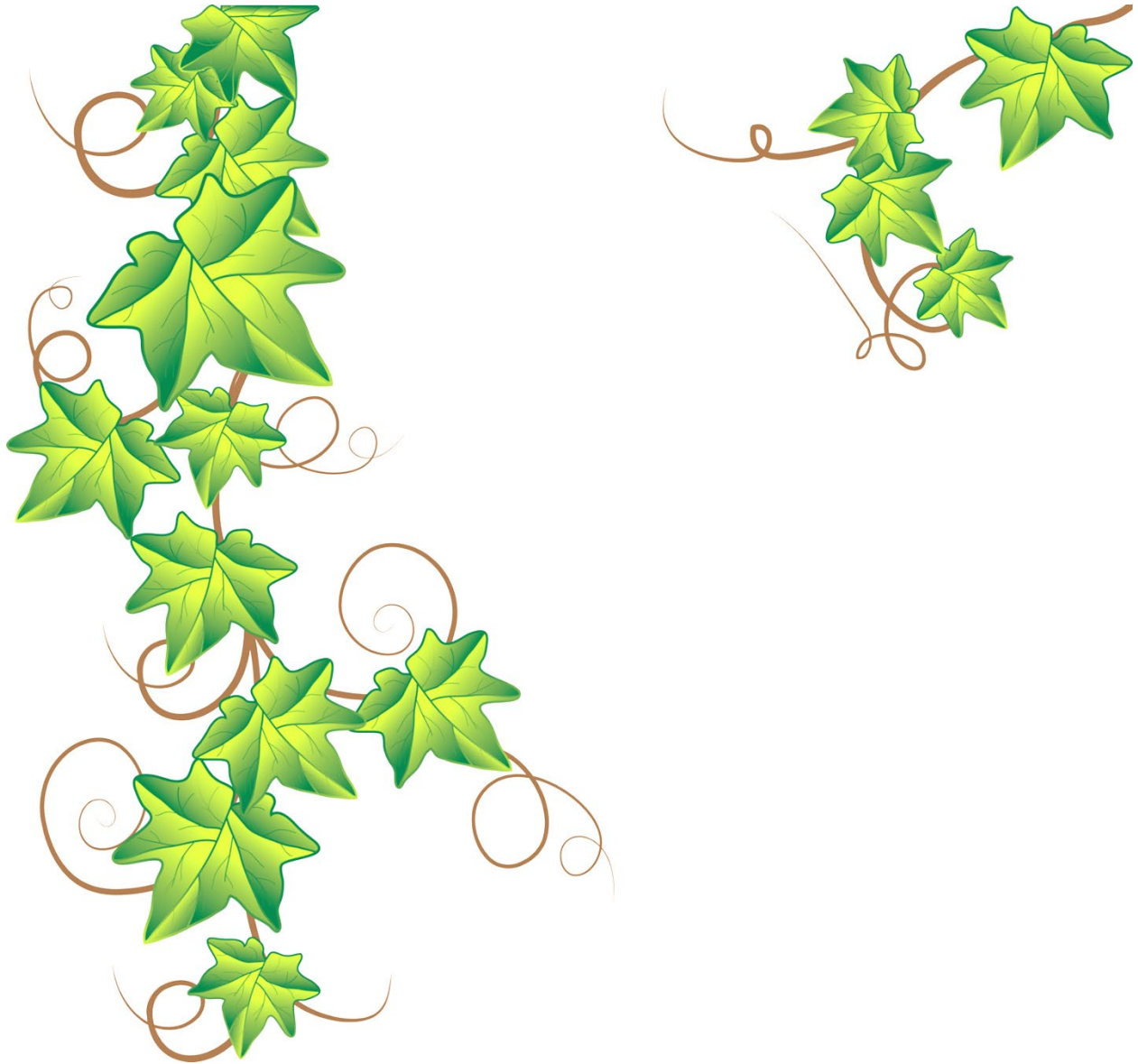
"We'll have to bring the pets though."

"Of course."

WHOOSH.

About the Author

By day, Kathryn helps students investigate words' power. At night, she reads retold myths and sometimes spins new ones. Enjoy her poetic adventures in *Shadow Atlas*, *Willow Tree Swing*, *Blink Ink*, *Whiptail Journal* and more. She has short stories forthcoming with *Elly Blue Publishing* and *Oddity Prodigy Productions*. Her rescue mutts Savvie and Roxy Razzamatazz hear the stories first. Twitter and Instagram: @katecanwrite



After the Eggs are Laid in Autumn

Gwen Whiting

I spent hours that summer searching the bushes and trees for praying mantises. There was no one else to play with, except for a mother who lay in bed crying and a father who smelled like rotting peaches. I pilfered mason jars to keep my insect friends in, hunted bits of fabric for the tops, plucked rose petals to put in the bottom, and hoped that my mother wouldn't notice the random way that her flowers bloomed. Everything else disappointed her.

But it was now fall and the leaves on the trees were dying and the roses had long gone. My father mowed them down on a day his walk was so unsteady, it made me seasick to watch, though we hadn't gone to the ocean since before my mother was ill. Today was much the same, although there were no more flowers to mow down, and my mother had moved from her bedroom to a hospital.

I missed my short-lived mantises. I never kept them for long before letting them go, but at least in the short time of their visits, the mantises listened when I talked, folding their limbs, and cocking their heads. It felt good to open their jars at the end of it, watching them catch flight and disappear into the clouds.

I asked my father for something to eat, but he was sleeping. There was nothing to do and I was afraid to turn the television on for fear of waking him, so I walked into the kitchen and found a jar. Maybe there was a mantis hiding in the garden.

We were out of most things to eat. The only fruit left in the kitchen was a few lemons, limes, and a jar of pickled onions. I picked a lemon because I liked the color and put

it into the jar whole. Perhaps it was bright enough that the mantis would mistake it for a flower.

The trees were just a mess of stray branches tangled with the fence that separated us from the neighbors. I trailed my hand against the metal as I walked to the back yard. Leaves rustled like whispers, but there were no bugs nibbling at the few green shards that remained.

I sat down on our tire swing and set the jar on the ground. My foot bumped the jar and I heard something rattle. A flash of green beat against the glass, dwarfed by the bright yellow lemon.

I picked the jar up. A mantis clung to the lemon, the last insect I might see that season. I smiled at it and tried to think of a name for it as its forelegs lifted, pressing together. It hissed, antennae twitching.

I thought of all the other insects I had caught over the summer.

"I guess I should let you go. But maybe you can come back and visit?" It wouldn't happen. You had to care about someone to visit them. Not like my father, who never wanted to take me to my mother in the evenings, complaining that she cried too often when she saw us. If people had a hard time loving you back, surely it was impossible for bugs.

I knelt in the dirt and set the jar down. The mantis didn't stir. My heart squeezed. Was it afraid of me? Was it dead? I closed my eyes and folded my hands, like mantises did, and wished. That school would start. Or my mother would come home. Or even just that my father would start talking to me, making lunches, or doing any of the things that fathers did—whatever those were. I left the glass there to molder and walked into the house.

It smelled good. Like bread in a warm oven and glass cleaner. My father was washing the kitchen counter with an old rag as the washing machine rumbled in the distance. Even my jars were clean, lined up in a neat row, their punctured lids screwed tight. It choked me up to see them, empty and gleaming, all traces of leaves and egg sacs disappeared.

"You wouldn't believe what woke me up," my father said, wonder in his voice.

"Mantises," he continued. "It seemed like thousands. But it's so late in the season, I can't imagine how they're still alive. They came in, hissing and, just as sudden, they died."

I ran to the garbage can and lifted the lid. The trash was full of their broken bodies, green wings and legs now only brittle husks buried in a mess of eggshells and coffee grounds. My eyes welled up. Every year, the mantises disappeared after laying their eggs, but I had never seen so many at once. My father's hand clapped down on my shoulder. His breath smelled of black coffee. I looked up at him. His eyes were still shot with red, but they were kind.

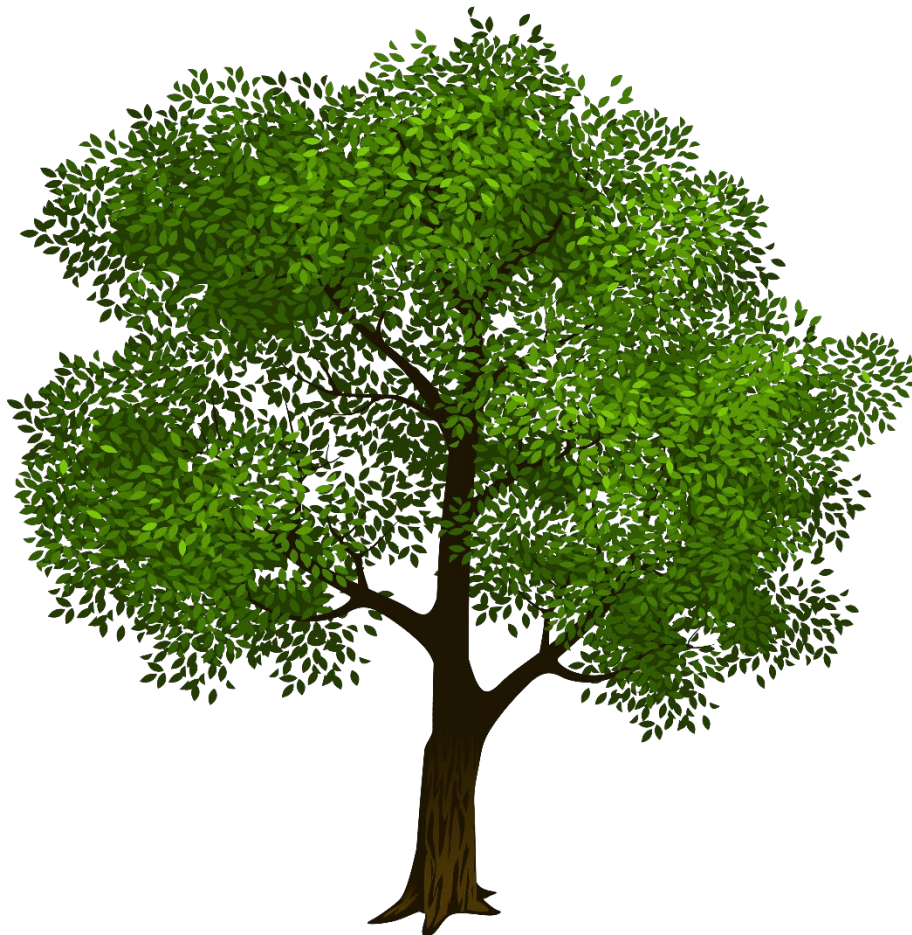
"I'm sorry. I know you loved them. Maybe we can start looking for bugs together. We could... catch a butterfly for your mother. For when we bring her home." He gestured at the jars on the counter. He had cleaned them, not just for me but for us. Was this the reward for letting the last mantis go? For caring for them all summer long? Had the insects given themselves so that we could now live? As I looked up into my father's tired face, I saw that the mantises had cast a spell over us all. That, by spring, we would be a family again.

"We don't need jars. I'm done hunting mantises." I crushed my cheek against his chest as I hugged him, rubbing my nose into his old flannel shirt. The following year, when the roses exploded into bloom as my mother baked bread in the kitchen and the mantises

began to peek and hiss from behind newly-green leaves, I kept my promise. Instead, we planted a bee garden.

About the Author

Gwen Whiting (she/her) is an author and museum curator living and working in Tacoma, Washington. She has previously published flash in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Every Day Fiction*. Learn more about her work at gwen-whiting.com.



Hard Rain in Dinosaur City

Rick Hollon

Content warning: mention of death, mention of sex work, violence, smoking, drinking.

You can just smell it when your former gent slinks his way into Dinosaur City. It's a scent that means trouble.

Even the rain doesn't wash out the smell. It sticks in the air like sap hardening its grip around the wings of a dragonfly. All the bars and dives are closed except for the kind you just stepped out of, the kind where brontosaur ladies keep you company for your last few dollars and most of your cigarettes, the kind where the booze gets you where you don't want to think, but you can't stop. For that you need the good stuff, the gut rot that'll lay you cold on a nameless slab in Our Lady of the Holy Nest's basement for the long snooze. Never been a gent yet that can ruffle a raptor when they're that far down.

The wind kicks up, but the rain presses down on everything like the way *he* used to weigh down on you on the squeaky dirty mattress you once shared. You tap your last cigarette out of the pack with the tip of a claw and scowl out at the night. The hot city, its lights like drunken eyes, red and blurred in the rain. You reach for a match so you can smoke the smell out of your brain but your claws slip and the cigarette shreds into feathery bits of paper and dead leaves and blows out of your fingers.

You crumple the pack and let it fall, hunching your shoulders and stalking out into the storm.

You can't tell if it's the rain or the pounding behind your eyes, but the pavement doesn't seem so straight as it used to. Your killing claws snag into some kid's battered old bike and you spend a minute clattering and kicking and cussing until you get free. Rats and shrews and possums laugh at you from the steps and windows above, chittering out insults like Two Legs and Bird Brain. Snarling, you kick the broken wheel out into the street. Your trenchcoat sags and your feathers are limp and the color of cheap whiskey. Your killing claws flex.

The case. You gotta think about the case.

You force your misgivings down. You wouldn't be working this case if you didn't need the scratch. It's not good business to stick your snout where it isn't wanted, and the birds alone know how high the stink of this one goes, but a raptor's gotta eat.

What's more, a raptor's gotta drink and have a tail or two for company to keep the smell of a certain gent out of mind. Hard times lead to bad decisions.

Like walking through the storm to the docks. That's the last place anybody admits to seeing the late unlamented Andrei Tarbovich Rex—a.k.a Stubby, a.k.a. the Pinch. Not so much a kingpin as a clothespin, holding his little corner of the racket between his two claws like his life depended on it.

Obviously, his life depended on something else, something that didn't agree with him.

The docks reek of fish and swamp mud and rotten secrets floating out into the Inland Sea. Once upon a time it was your kind of place. You made your name here, brawling against ankylosaur bruisers and running errands for the dame who

broke enough laws they made her mayor. But she was the sort who didn't like to reminisce about old times, see, and you've been swimming against the current ever since.

Your claws tap against the wood. You catch his scent again right before he catches your temple with a bean-shooter. You slump down like meteor, and the next thing you know you're a damp fish strung from the beams of a nameless warehouse, and *he's* looking mighty chummy about it.

God, but he's still a trim bird. Lips smiling predator red, shimmering blue dress worth more than your apartment block, feathers fresh as a canary's. The gun leans up against a chair as if its role in the festivities has ended, but you know it's there and *he* knows it's there and goddamn but you still wish you could kiss him one more time.

"I'm not enjoying this," your old gent lies.

"I take it this goes to the top," you say, or you try to. The booze and blood rushing into what's left of your old skull chokes your words more than you'd like. No good for the reputation, though you've begun to doubt you'll need it much longer.

You make the attempt anyway. "Who killed Rex?"

He stalks you across the warehouse floor, trailing a single claw across your rumpled rags. His scent chokes you up with memories of fine summers before either of you fell into this game, of stealing fish from boats and learning how to wrestle each other in the privacy of the old library. It also brings up the day he broke your toes and sent you packing from the docks, courtesy of Madam Mayor.

He glides that claw under your chin, still smiling, as if his thoughts swam the same channels. "My meal-ticket wouldn't want me to say," he says, exaggerating a pout.

He turns and rifles through what's left of your overcoat, kicking aside your little sidearm, but comes up with nothing more than an empty crumpled pack of your smokes.

"Still your brand, babe?" he drawls, but something finally softens in his eye, and before coming back to you he saunters to his pocketbook draped beside the gun and fishes out a pack, square and new, like a lungful of the old days. He offers you one and lights it, and the two of you smoke there in the warehouse under the steady drum of the rain.

"What a way to end up," you say. Your noggin is clear. Outside it's nearly dawn.

"What a way," he agrees, and bends down to kiss you one last time.

About the Author

Rick Hollon (they/them or fey/fem) is a nonbinary, bi/queer writer from the American Midwest. Feir work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Prismatica*, *Idle Ink*, *(macro)mic*, and elsewhere. Find them on Twitter @SailorTheia.

Truesword

Pauline Barmby

gh!" Nele cried.

U

Clang! The sword's flat smacked against the dummy's side.

"Again!" the trainer called.

Swish! The momentum of the missed second blow spun Nele around. The wind nearly swallowed the sound of the practice sword's movement as it rattled the tin shacks at the edges of the training yard.

"Again!"

"Yaaaah!" Nele bellowed. She skewered the sword's dull tip through the openwork mannequin, ripping the dummy from its suspension. It fell to the ground with the sword embedded. She kicked the metal skeleton in frustration.

"Progress, very slight progress," the trainer commented, shading his eyes from the daystar's searing light. Holding the dummy down with her foot, Nele extracted her sword. She ran a scarred forearm across her sweaty forehead, leaving a rusty smear.

"How long until I can fight with a truesword? I need to be out there hunting bereveks, avenging my brother, not poking hollow steel into a tinman."

"Patience," the trainer replied. "You still have much to learn. Hang up the dummy and begin again."



Sword blows rang out over the dusty courtyard. The trainer circled the pairs of students, barking instructions here, correcting posture with a tap from his cane there.

"Noooo!" Nele's yell echoed off the walls. The trainer turned his head to see her lying in the dirt, eyes wide and face flushed, facing a boy two years her senior whose sword point was aimed at her throat. The trainer limped toward the pair, his shadow falling over Nele.

"What mistakes did you make?"

"I ... uh... I let him trick me!" Nele spat. "I thought he was going for my sword arm and at the last minute he hit the side of my knee."

"You should have seen that coming, Nele," Ari laughed, unkindly.

The trainer leaned on his cane and regarded the boy. "And what mistakes did *you* make?"

Ari faced the trainer. "Does it matter, when I'm the one standing? I'm ready for a truesword now, master, I know I am. I can do what has to be done. I won't fail, like Nele's brother."

The trainer shook his head. "You are not the only one who believes himself ready. We do not yet know who the truesword wielder will be."

"Yaaaah!" Nele surprised them both, pushing up from the ground and driving a shoulder into Ari's middle. Suddenly, he was the one in the dirt.

"*That* was for my brother," she snarled.



The whistling wind made a few dry leaves dance in the ever-present dust. The training cycle's cohort ringed the yard, watching silently as Nele and Bora faced off in the final exercise. Forehand, backhand, sidestep. Thrust, parry, clang. Blows thumped on leather armor. From the edge of the combat ring, the trainer watched intently, taking notes on a small slate.

Bora rolled under one of Nele's swings and tried to knock her off balance with a foot sweep. She narrowly avoided the trip, leaping over Bora's outstretched leg. Holding her sword's hilt two-handed, she attempted to bring the point down to Bora's chest before they could rise. They rolled again and dodged her blow, struggling to their feet.

The two swords crashed together again, Nele driving forward, Bora backing away. They winced as one of her blows struck a thin spot in their armour. Nele's fierce expression was broken briefly by a grin. She turned her head to follow the trainer's motion and Bora took advantage of the momentary distraction, dealing a wicked blow to her knee. Nele staggered backwards and almost fell. She heaved a great gasping breath and surged back toward Bora, raining blow after blow against their sword. Pushed off balance by Nele's relentless drive, Bora finally fell to their knees with the blunt point of her sword against their throat.

"Yield," Nele growled, her eyes hard.

"I yield," Bora gasped.

She grinned and held out a hand. Bora grimaced and let her pull them up.

"Nele has earned the opportunity to wield the truesword," the trainer announced.



The next day, Nele stood side-by-side with the trainer at the edge of the sacred grove. The wind lifted Nele's black hair into a halo; she impatiently smoothed it down.

"Why are we here, master? I thought I was to receive a real sword—shouldn't we be at the armory?"

The trainer regarded her sadly, then glanced toward the thicket of straggling saplings and hollow stumps. The grove was a little smaller, again, this year.

"The sword needed to vanquish a berevek must be made not of iron, but of wood. The last step in your training is to cut down a tree and use it to create your truesword." He handed Nele an axe, its blade solid and sharp. Her face crumpled.

"Cut down...a sacred tree?"

He nodded.

"But that's forbidden. I'll be exiled. You mean my brother wouldn't have been able to return even if he hadn't been killed?" Tears formed in Nele's dark eyes.

The trainer nodded again and his voice went soft. "The truesword cuts those who wield it. Sacrifices are a part of the life you wish to pursue. Henceforth we ask you to kill deliberately and sacrifice knowingly."

Nele was silent. She turned her gaze up to the treetops and then down to the memorial cords around her wrist.

"I'm ready."

"Then go, with our thanks."

Nele swung the axe over her shoulder and entered the grove. She didn't look back.

About the Author

Pauline Barmby (she/her) is a Canadian astrophysicist who believes that you can't have too many favorite galaxies. Her fiction is published or forthcoming in *SFS Stories*, *Martian*, and *Flame Tree Press' Compelling Science Fiction* anthology. When not reading or writing she runs, knits, and ponders the physics of curling. Find her on Twitter @PBarmby.



Seven Iron Spikes

P.G. Streeter

*D*amien Jeffers did not plan to pull off of the main highway, to wind his car through Kentucky backroads, to stop at this particular crook in the road. He had no intention of entering the woods, scrambling through the ravine, and standing at the foot of this monumental tree.

Yet, here he stands, as if bidden, in a pocket of the world he hasn't occupied in twenty years.

Plywood boards lie warped and splintered at the tree's base. Seven iron spikes line the trunk like metal vertebrae. The seventh is crooked, and a jagged radial scar mars the bark around it.

Damien puts his hand on the trunk—and remembers.



How many hours had Dame and Jack spent exploring those woods, that summer when they were seventeen?

Which of them first discovered their tree, had first felt its magnetic pull?

It was certainly Jack who got the idea for the clubhouse. With his usual nonchalance, he announced that he had "come upon" several rail spikes—sturdy, footlong iron nails—which he proposed they drive into the dense gray trunk,

creating a series of handholds for scaling the forty-plus feet to the tree's lowest branches.

There, they would place the platforms, salvaged lumber to be set in a series of cantilevers that made Dame nervous.

Still, Jack had a certain mystique about him. He seemed otherworldly to Dame—just like their tree. Jack knew every arcane fact about the world—snippets of history or theoretical physics that Dame took, faithfully, as truth.

So, if Jack McCannon said the plan would work, it would.



Getting the spikes to penetrate the dense trunk, however, proved challenging. They wailed at that first spike with all their strength, taking turns at it with a heavy mallet. It didn't yield.

After an hour, Jack let out an animal roar. He swung again, missed, and fell on his ass. Dame broke into astonished laughter, and soon his friend followed suit. Something in the air relaxed.

Smiling, Dame leaned back against the tree. Its outer layer of bark seemed softer—more supple than before.

So, he tried again. This time, Dame was able to drive in the first handhold, just a bit. It wasn't *easy*, but it was no longer *impossible*. Soon, they'd fully embedded the first two.

Dame couldn't shake the feeling that the tree had subtly changed, had *allowed* them to breach its exterior.



The next afternoon, Jack threw piles of lumber at the tree's roots. He pulled out a notebook with sketches he'd made, replete with cryptic equations in the margins.

Dame could not describe the joy he felt as the two worked together, even as the task got more difficult. The lower holds, after all, had at least been easy to reach. Now, they had to balance on those lower rungs and keep their footing as they drove subsequent spikes into the trunk.

They hammered and talked and laughed and hung on for dear life.

And, once again, Dame couldn't shake the feeling that the tree was helping them, pulling them into an invisible embrace as they worked.

Soon, in the time it had taken to drive in two spikes on the day prior, they'd nailed in four more.

That night, Dame dreamed of iron and wood and Jack's easy laughter.



On the third day, Dame practically sprinted through the bramble and underbrush, scrambling along the trodden trail to their clearing. As he approached, he heard that laughter he was so familiar with—met by another, airier voice.

He slunk behind some tall brush and stared into the clearing to see Jack and Nat, standing closely, staring up at the tree.

Our tree, Dame thought, a lead weight sinking in his gut. How could Jack let someone else be part of this?

It was a betrayal of an unspoken trust between them.

Dame hid, breathless and dizzy. He heard their laughter, their muffled words, the other sounds they shared.

After a time, darkness fell.

Later, Jack led Nat through the ridge and away, his hand on her waist.



By the halfmoon's light, Dame clung to the tree, leaning his weight against its trunk. Teetering, he furiously hammered away at the seventh spike.

A white-hot feeling coursed through him as he struck. The tree resisted, but the sting of betrayal fueled his blows.

Finally, a loud crack echoed. The spike, radiating red as if heated over a fire, stuck out of the tree, which crackled with deep scars at the base of the nail.

Dame climbed down, collapsed to the ground, and wept.



Dame stayed in bed all that next day. He didn't come out until the sheriff came by.

Jack was missing.

Dame had nothing to say.



That night, he dreamed of a foot catching on a crooked spike, of the feeling of air escaping lungs, the impact of a thirty-foot headlong fall onto root and jagged rock.

He saw it from above. From the perspective of the towering tree, he saw his friend's broken body.

He felt the tree's open acceptance of their shared ease and excitement—and then, of something else. Anger. Hurt. Betrayal.

The tree had felt what he felt, and it had acted accordingly.



After Jack's body was found, everyone took pity on Dame—the dead boy's best friend.

He never told a soul that it was all *his* fault.



Now.

The iron spikes, the solitary tree, the plywood wreckage—these alone remain, desolate memorials to the past.

Damien climbs. When he runs out of handholds, the tree creates more. They emerge as he ascends.

He cannot quantify the hours that pass. When he looks down, the ground is impossibly far below him. Above, the trunk stretches unendingly into a gray sky.

He climbs and climbs, until he cannot distinguish where his hands end and the nails begin. Skin becomes iron becomes bark becomes sky.

The world melts away, and an echo of soft laughter lingers in the absence of air.

About the Author

P.G. Streeter lives with his wife and two sons in Maryland, where he teaches high school English and philosophy. His prior publications include stories in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Pulp Literature*, and *Cast of Wonders*, among others. His goal in writing is to tap into those uncanny—often unsettling—worlds we encounter in our dreams!

Petals of Hope and Sorrow

Kai Delmas

Words are wind unless they are bound to a wish. And if that wish is bound to a petal of a heart flower it will come to pass.

I remember the beauty of your rose when I was little, Mama. The flower was encased in glass upon a pedestal in the living room for all to see. Its red petals gleamed with vibrant life, a testament to your and Papa's love.

One day, petals began to fall. Only one at first but more thereafter. I remember the day you removed the rose in its glass case—so very few petals remained—and hid it in your closet where no one could see. It was my seventh birthday.

You and Papa kept yelling at each other until one day you fell silent. You could no longer utter a word and all I saw in your eyes was sorrow. I snuck a peek at your rose—only three petals remained.

Today I must plant my own heart flower and I can think of nothing that I have dreaded more. I remember the words you taught me so long ago.

May my flower grow rich with petals for my love to wish us well. But beware: words spoken cannot be broken. Only when the last petal drops is the heart set free.

I hope I will choose a better love to give my heart flower to. But more than that I wish for your last petals to drop, for you to be free.

About the Author

Kai Delmas loves creating worlds and magic systems and is a slush reader for Apex Magazine. He is a winner of the monthly Apex Microfiction Contest and his fiction can be found in *Martian*, *Tree and Stone*, and several Shacklebound anthologies. Find him on Twitter @KaiDelmas.



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