

Tree And

ISSUE 5

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Stone

Ashley Bevilacqua Anglin | Mark DiStefano | Eric Fomley | Jenna Hanchey | Rachel Handley |
Em Harriett | Andrew Jensen | Kellee Kranendonk | Ryan W. Maxwell | Amarachi Nnoli |
Marisca Pichette | Zach Smith | Mar Vincent | Sarah Zell

Tree And Stone Magazine

Issue 5

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*"Memories warm you up from the inside. But they
also tear you apart."*

— Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore

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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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

As 2022 comes to a close as does the first year of Tree and Stone Magazine, I am filled with so much gratitude and pride. I am so grateful to all our supporters, contributors, and to everyone who continues to submit to this little magazine. It started as an idea, one I had no idea how to nurture, and over the year I watched this space grow.

I hope for another great year of Tree and Stone Magazine with new issues! To keep in touch, consider joining our Patreon and signing up for our monthly newsletter. You get bonus content, early access to issues, and get to join our Discord critique group. Every penny goes to supporting writers and artists.

Kevin M. Casin

Editor/Publisher

Flash/Micro Fiction



P
PUBLIC PARKING

→
NEXT LEFT
TURN

Salt Over Sand

Eric Fomley

Even after fifty years, the old woman knows the exact spot on the beach where she had hid the small chest. She rakes a hole in the sand with arthritic fingers until her fingertips strike the splintery wood. She pries it loose, brushes off the lock, and reaches down her shirt to produce the key that dangles there. She glances down at the beachfront for prying eyes. When she sees none, she unlocks, opens the chest, and stares at a glass vial with swirling green fluid.

She takes a shaky breath and withdraws the potion. Fifty years under the spell and she never found love. But even now she's unsure she wants to restore her previous form. What if this is the year she would?

The decision weighs heavy on her now. She looks at her human legs, wrinkled, varicose, and so different from when she first asked the sea witch for a chance to fall in love. She'd been excited to be human, fascinated by them, and eager to find one to fall in love with.

She clenches her teeth and uncorks the cylindrical tube. She knows she's fooling herself. If it were meant to be it would have happened by now.

She drinks the potion.

Her guts twist. Her flesh breaks and rejoins. Scales form all over her rejuvenated flesh. But through the pain of transfiguration, she smiles. In her search for companionship, she forgets that her one true love has always been the sea.

About the Author

Eric Fomley's work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Flame Tree Press*. More of his stories can be found on his website ericfomley.com.

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Amelia

Mar Vincent

Why did you name me Amelia?

I asked with paper airplane in hand, zooming it to and fro while you shuttled me home. Halfway through the school day klaxons sounded, warning of an incoming radiation wave. But I wasn't scared because I knew you'd be there, like always.

I wish I remembered your answer. Instead, I remember that night: cold soup and huddling in the control room beside the shuttle bay, both of us with exposure masks ready about our necks. The mask was so unwieldy I spilled soup into its faceplate. The smell never quite washed away.

Did you tell me stories about my namesake, or did I learn them at school when I learned to fold paper into the shapes of flight? Amelia Earhart, one of the first women to take to the skies. I watched you bend metal into aerodynamic curves, perched on the arm of your chair as you guided space-worthy craft to freedom. A ballet of buttons and switches that, in your hands, gave flight to grounded, dormant things.

Someday I'd learn to do what you could. I knew how to make the paper version, so the stars beyond our smoggy atmosphere must be within reach.

I imagined freedom from klaxons and exposure masks. My hair floating like a dandelion puff around my head. The stars and planets, remote islands in a vast

vacuum that I would leapfrog across one day. I would discover new ones, too, like the scientists who updated emigration charts every time they pinpointed another planet with optimal conditions for human habitation.

I would find a perfect island-planet for us and call it Optimal Condition.



But why did you name me Amelia? The question recurred years later, when school was no longer an option. Radiation suits were compulsory even in the insulated workshop where we now lived. Your skills were in higher demand than ever as emigration accelerated. Per the government-regulated lottery, we had no chance of leaving in the next ten, fifteen years.

You were needed here.

My name took on a different sound when I heard it spoken. Earhart had been an ace pilot, but her fame lay in her disappearance. The fact that she was lost to time and history. People departed on shuttles built and launched by your hand. Their last glances of Earth, of the workshop as they boarded, coated my tongue in bitter irony. Goodbye, Amelia, they said.

I was lost before ever taking flight.

I studied star maps and emigration data. Flight procedures and propulsion systems. Someday, I would take over from you.

Someday, it would have to be our turn.

I showed you one perfect planet after another. You agreed how wonderful it would be to see the stars ourselves, to travel to them, though the smile didn't quite reach your eyes.

Amelia. My name wasn't enough to pull us out of the nosediving world around us.



For all that I asked, I never heard your answer. Klaxons snapped me awake and then you dragged me down the hall, past flickering viewscreens of a radiation wave rolling over our speck of a city. Fear gripped me, for the little that suits and insulated walls would do.

We hurried hand in hand to one of the completed shuttles. We could seal ourselves inside and wait for the storm to pass; we might survive that way.

The trajectory of my life took a harsh turn into unexpected territory when you pushed me inside and sealed the door.

You had to stay. To operate the launch controls to guide me free.

The possibilities contained in my name became terrifying, but even more terrible, that I would lose you to gain them. Earthlike islands dotted the interstellar sea, so few and far between, how would I ever find my Optimal Condition without you?

You pressed a hand to the soundproof window. On your lips, I saw the words:

Fly, Amelia. Fly.

About the Author

As a fine art professional, Mar has wielded katanas and handled Lady Gaga's shoes. As a veterinary assistant, she has cared for hairless cats, hedgehogs, and, one time, a coyote. As a writer (under Marissa James), her short fiction can be found in Flash Fiction Online, Translunar Travelers Lounge, Mysterion, and many other publications. She is a recipient of the Ladies of Horror Fiction grant, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and a reader for Interstellar Flight Press. She resides in the Pacific Northwest and can be found tweeting about all things writing @MaroftheBooks.

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Tipped

Marisca Pichette

The great turtle of the world woke up dreaming about elephants. Nothing specific; no expression or sense of personality. The elephants weren't real to him any more than they were real when he recalled his dream at breakfast, over a bowl of Frosted Flakes gradually soggying in milk.

"I dreamt about elephants last night," he said.

I looked up. "What about them?"

He shrugged, the leathern shell on his back peeling with age. It wouldn't hold us much longer, I realised.

"Dunno. Just elephants."

"A lot of elephants?"

"A couple. Three or four."

I paused, breathing in the steam from my coffee. Through the kitchen window I pictured a handful of elephants standing on the dewy lawn. "What were they doing?"

When he moved, the world wobbled. It was perched on his back, you see. Or it used to be. "Standing in a circle, sort of. Not really doing anything in particular. I think—I think they might have been sick."

The elephants in the lawn disappeared. Steam was obscuring my vision. I set down my mug and resumed eating breakfast. "Sick?"

"They were thin. Ribs showing."

I tried to picture a thin elephant. You saw them occasionally while scrolling Facebook. A petition against circus cruelty, or zoos—that sort of thing. *Stop Elephant Rides at Fairs*. It was the Big E this weekend. I remembered seeing an article about that, and the elephants there. But the pictures were small. I don't remember seeing ribs.

"Guess I'm not sure how elephants are supposed to look," he said. His ribs were showing.

I picked up my coffee, more for something to hold than with any intention of drinking it. The steam engulfed my eyes, and I watched him shrug again, tipping us precariously to the side.

"Are they still there?"

"What?"

"The elephants. Are they still in the circle, or did they move?"

He shook his head. "They moved on long ago. I only dreamed them this morning."

If he turned around, he would have sixteen bruises on his back. Sixteen bruises from sixteen elephant feet. Through the steam, I wondered where they'd gone. The elephants.

"What about you? Are you going, too?" I wasn't sure what made me believe it. Maybe it was his tone of voice, or the way his lips looked through the clouds.

His skin hung down from his face in drapes of age. For a moment, I wondered how old he was. Someone had told me, once. In school, or in one of those old textbooks that smell like 1997. You know the kind.

We all had book sleeves in school. They were elastic things that looked like somebody forgot to cut apart a pair of mittens. Okay, maybe they looked nothing like that. I only remember wearing them like mittens on my hands. They came in different sizes, too. My first was covered in bugs. I used to love bugs. I used to say they were my life.

Some of the coolest were heat sensitive. You picked up your book when it was wearing that cover and it remembered the touch of your fingers. It didn't stay long; a few minutes, maybe. If you put it in the freezer, it turned a deep, pure blue.

Hundreds of kids in 2005, putting their textbooks in the freezer.

And his shell was gone now, I realised, drinking the smell of caffeine as the sun crept around outside, looking for a way in. What was a turtle without his shell, without his elephants that held the world? *Lost*.

He didn't respond to my question, his shoulders bunched and bony, curving over the edge of the table. Instead, he said, "Your Frosted Flakes are getting soggy."

I looked down into my coffee, saw my own distorted face staring back. Between my elbows, my cereal sat, a limp and disappointing mush in a bowl with a

chip on the edge. It wasn't the first time I'd noticed the chip, but it was the first time I saw it, saw what I'd done.

"Will you come back?" I asked without looking up. I ran my finger along the bowl's rim. An almost perfect circle, fractured. *It's my fault*, I thought. But that was silly. I didn't do this to him. Not by myself.

"I'm not sure," he said. I could feel him shrugging, feel him straining to get free of us. The kitchen was filling with the steam from my coffee; all the while the sun pawed at the window, trying to get in through the haze.

"I'm tired."

I looked up from my breakfast, casting through the atmosphere, but he was already departing, swimming away to wherever he was born, at the beginning of time.

But I'm tired too, I wanted to say, *Trapped here, trapped behind*. Trapped on a planet that was once his. Once ours.

The steam is everywhere now, shining with the light of the sun. I can't make out anything, can't even find my coffee in the mist. I reach out and my fingers sink into the tepid remains of my cereal.

When I hold my hand up to my face, Frosted Flakes cling to skin like scales.

I push back from the table, shaking my hand, comet flakes soaring through the steam. So, this is it.

The sun has risen, and around the world the temperature continues to increase. I know now that we are falling, just like the elephants.

All the way down to the bottom, to the emptiness that waits.

About the Author

Marisca Pichette's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Apparition Lit*, *PseudoPod*, and *PodCastle*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin, Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from *Android Press* in Spring 2023. Find her on Twitter as @MariscaPichette and Instagram as @marisca_write.

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Tree of Life

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Reunion

Andrew Jensen

He woke up cranky after his seventy-five year nap. *A dragon sleeps forever*, he thought peevishly. *Who dares disturb my rest?*

He opened one muzzy eye to examine the old man standing in front of him. Was he wearing pajamas? Yes, under a loosely-tied fuzzy cotton bathrobe. Those were plaid slippers on his feet. His watery eyes looked confused.

"Do I know you?"

The old man flinched from the power of his voice. "I'm Jack," he replied.

The dragon almost joked that Jack the Giant Killer didn't belong in a dragon's cave, but he held back. Clever banter didn't feel right. This old guy seemed oddly familiar. Had he *ever* known old people?

At last, a memory stirred.

"Jackie? Long time no see."

"A lifetime," said Jack.

Maybe for a human. An ember of resentment flared to life.

"You left me. You never said a word. I waited, and you never came."

Jack looked down, shame-faced. "I know. I forget a lot these days, but I remember that. I remember you."

"I hoped you'd come back when you hit your teens," remarked the dragon. "We could have gone hunting virgins. Dragons are good at that. Why didn't you come?"

Jack shook his head and sat down wearily on an overflowing chest of pirate doubloons. "That wouldn't have worked. I'm gay."

The dragon shrugged. "Who cares? A virgin is a virgin. It would have been fun."

"You can't target people just because they're sexually inexperienced. It violates their inherent dignity." Jack paused. "Back when you knew me, I thought the world was simple, but it's not. It's not black and white."

"I'm a dragon. Everything is black or white. What happened to you?"

"I don't remember. I *can't* remember. I can't even remember what my job was."

"Job? You were my *friend*," rumbled the dragon. "We used to have fun together. Then you left, and I had nothing to do but sleep." He tilted his head. "I could eat you, you know."

Jack looked up with tired eyes. He smiled. "I've always known. That was part of the thrill."

"Remember when you stole one of your mom's cigarettes? I lit it for you." The dragon breathed a huge puff of smoke.

"I kicked the habit. That's what we used to call it. It was the hardest thing I ever did. I forget a lot, but I remember that."

The dragon looked offended. "Why'd you quit?"

"The warnings about cancer. You know, I still get a craving sometimes. Especially after a big meal. It's been decades."

"Are you sick?"

Jack laughed. "Healthy as a horse. An old, confused horse. It's my memory that's sick. I can't even remember what day it is."

"Who cares what day it is?"

Jack perked up. "Right! Who cares? Every day's the same at that home, so what difference does it make?"

"C'mon, Jackie, let's have some fun, like we used to." He tried to keep the pleading sound out of his voice. "Let's go show off for some noble kings and princes."

"Noble?" Jack looked disgusted. "Privileged jerks, all of them. They abuse people and get away with it. I wouldn't talk to them if you paid me."

The dragon snorted. Humans were confusing. *Why do they grow so old so fast? How can they be so interesting as children, and so boring as adults?* But the dragon could recognize fire in the belly, and it looked like Jack might still have some.

"Let's buzz some pirate ships," he suggested. "Make them lower their flags."

Jack shook his head. "Piracy is a symptom of an unjust economic system which forces some people to overcome their oppression by embracing violent methods of wealth re-distribution."

The dragon pulled back. "What? That's stu. . ." He stopped. Arguing felt wrong. Maybe some subtlety was called for.

"We could look for magic rings," he suggested.

"The magic is gone," sighed Jack. Besides, I have to be back in time for breakfast."

"Your mother's nice. She'll forgive you."

"The nurse at the home isn't so forgiving." Jack sagged.

"What's happened to you, Jackie? You've become an old grouch! You say 'no' to everything!" The heat of the dragon's frustration was frightening.

The old man looked down at his slippers, as if he were ashamed. "I grew up. I found out what life is really like." He looked up, staring the dragon in the eye. "You sound like Ben. When he left, he said I'd forgotten how to live."

Aha! A spark of defiance!

"Giants?" the dragon tried. "We could hunt giants."

"What kind of giants?" Jack tilted his head to the left.

Another spark! "What kind would you like?"

Jack's face became more focused. "When I was a journalist, I went after corporate giants. I exposed their abuses and their greed."

This is more like it!

"Governments too, and giant polluters! I remember! I spoke truth to power! I fought for justice!"

The dragon watched as Jack stood up, looking proud. He didn't recognize those giants, but he knew about power. He knew how to fight. Fire called to fire.

"Hop on, Jackie. Just like old times. Let's go find some giants."

The bathrobe shimmered. Gone was the fuzzy cotton. Now it was a silky-smooth Chinese robe, with a fire dragon embroidered on the back. It shone like a suit of armor.

Jack climbed onto the dragon's back. Just like old times.

"You may not be back in time for breakfast."

"Who cares?" chortled Jack. "This *matters!* There are giants to slay! Onward!"

Mighty wings, rested and ready, unfurled and beat the air. With a fearless roar, the dragon and Jack flew out of the cave into the night.

A dragon *exists* forever, but he *lives* for this: a timeless moment with an old friend, taking on the world.

Who could ask for more?

About the Author

Andrew Jensen lives in rural Ontario with his family and too many dogs and cats. He is the minister at Knox United Church, Nepean. Over twenty of his stories have appeared in Canada, the USA and New Zealand. His last two stories have been published in *Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores* and *Best Indie Speculative Fiction Vol. 4*. Andrew plays trumpet, impersonates Kermit the Frog, and performs in musical theatre. You should have seen him as Henry Higgins . . .

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The Kindness of Strangers

Kellee Kranendonk

They found me when I was stranded on a strange beach.

I'd been following my family, my friends, but I'd gotten an injury that slowed me down. And I found myself here. No food, no water, and struggling to breathe, my skin burning in the hot sun.

But they came to help—giving me water and trying to get me home. At first, I was frightened of these strangers, but they showed me only kindness. I couldn't understand their language, but their tone soothed me.

More and more of them came—all for me. I thought I might die here alone, stranded without my family who must have been frantically searching for me. I had no means of contacting them.

But, in spite of, everything I'd been told about these strangers, they saved me, got me on my way back home.

It took some time, but I finally found my family and friends, my communication methods restored. I told my mother about them, the strangers who'd given me water and soothed my hot and drying skin.

"We must remember to thank them," she said. "These humans, our ancient enemies, are learning kindness."

Then we surfaced, breathed out with a splash, breathed in deep, then dove into the ocean depths.

About the Author

Kellee Kranendonk has spent a lifetime writing. According to her late grandfather she was born with a pen in one hand and paper in the other. She's certain that these days he would have claimed she was born clutching a laptop. Kellee lives in Atlantic Canada with her husband, two of three children, an ADHD/OCD dog, two cockatiels, and several chickens. She has had numerous stories, poems and articles published, including a fantasy in the Amazon bestseller "Anthology From the Rock" from *Engen Books*. She is currently awaiting publication of five of her pieces later this year.

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Short Stories



GUS

Mark DiStefano

She used to come here," Gus muttered to no one in particular. "She liked this place."

He signaled to the bartender with his middle arm. The bartender obligingly refilled Gus's glass with pale Earth beer. Gus lifted the mug to his mouth, and the amber bread-water funneled into his stomach.

"Urrrrrrrp!"

Jenny hated it when he burped. It was almost worse; her not being there to scold him. Her father had shown up with two of her cousins, laser blasters protruding from their waistlines and yellow teeth glaring in the Sporkean sun. Jenny had taken everything. The kids, the house, the ship. She even kept his collection of rare Republic coins from the days of the United Galaxy.

Not that he blamed her, of course. She was good at saving money; he was good at spending it. Jenny advocated a hands-on parenting style, while Gus was more interested in letting the squirts figure things out on their own. A hands-off approach. Was that such a crime? Jenny certainly thought so.

A young Murple couple parked a few barstools down from Gus. He examined them. Honeymoon stage. Had to be. Their tentacles were all over each other. They laughed at each other's jokes. Cute. Barf.

Gus's middle arm sounded the call for another round. Another beer. Gus promised himself he would take his time with this one. Earth beer had never disappointed Gus. Unlike his "friends," unlike his wife. Earth beer wouldn't leave him for a twenty-something kid.

"Whiskey and Borg Juice. No ice."

She wore a tight, Jupiter-stitch mini skirt that stretched across the thighs of all four legs. She was a vision in her tank-top, long green hair flowing in the dusty bar fan. And what an order! This was a woman.

"You gonna stare, or you gonna pay for the lady's drink?"

The bartender was a wise-ass. He hoped she hadn't heard that.

Gus flipped a coin on the counter and made his way across the bar. He straightened his long dark mop as he went. Play it cool, Gus. Play it cool. How long had it been since he had approached a woman at a bar?

He stood behind her for a second, gathering his thoughts. Mydians were known for their dancing. Unfortunately, Gus was not. What would a woman like her be interested in?

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't enjoy when men stand behind me while I'm trying to drink."

Was she talking to him?

"I— I wasn't—"

She turned to face him, her six eyes sizing him up quickly. He imagined her deducing his plight; abandoned by his family, living out of a rental shuttle. A solitary bead of sweat materialized on the back of his neck.

"I don't like people buying me drinks..."

"I'm sorry—"

"...Without asking."

"I—"

She smiled.

"Would you like to ask me if I want a drink?"

"Would— would you like a drink?"

"I would, thank you."

She introduced the whiskey borg to her lips. Gus wished he was a whiskey borg.

"Why don't you sit down."

Gus's legs gratefully obeyed, and he sank into the stool next to her. He turned to face the bartender, who was unabashedly gawking at the success of the galaxy's most awkward pick-up attempt. He gave Gus a not-so-stealthy thumbs up and poured him another beer.

"Are you gonna ask me what I do?"

"What do you do?"

"None of your business."

"Right."

Gus took the beer from the bartender and gulped a guilty sip. What was he supposed to say to her? He tried picturing her as Jenny, but that just made him think of his kids. She didn't want to hear about his kids.

"I have two kids. Also, my wife left me. Well, she kicked me out."

"You don't do this very often, do you?"

"I do not," he confessed. She laughed, but not a mean laugh. It wasn't at him, or at least he didn't interpret it as such. Rather a laugh at the plight of being a beautiful woman in a bar full of less-than beautiful men.

"I have a proposition. We sit here and drink these drinks. We don't talk about things we don't care about, and we don't ask each other about things that don't matter. Deal?"

"Deal." Gus could do that. He wasn't much of a talker when it came down to it. Twenty-three years he'd lived on Spork. Twenty-three years he'd pushed papers at the Spork Interchase Company. He could go a few hours without speaking.

They sat there in a relatively comfortable silence. The sip of their drinks, the bar chatter around them. It was somewhat cathartic. Just being. No words, no questions. Just them. Enjoying each other's silence.

"Do you dance?"

Oh no. Here it was. She wasn't facing him, but he knew the question was addressed to him.

"Not well."

"That wasn't the question."

"Right. Well, I suppose I do."

"Do you suppose you would like to ask me to dance?"

"Would- would you like to dance?"

"Yes. Pick a song and put it on the jukebox."

Gus slowly made his way to the jukebox across the bar. He flipped through a collection of musical relics. Marson and the Cadets, Pluton's Cry... What would she want to dance to? Something fast? But not too fast. He was feeling sort of drowsy from the Earth beer.

There it was. Superflight's "Love after Landing". It was the sort of song that everyone thought they knew all of the words to when it came on and quickly realized they didn't. He put a coin in the machine, and Howard Cruel's post-galactic funk bellowed out of the pub speakers.

She met him in the center of the dance floor. He could feel eyes on him. She belonged out here. She fit the part. Four legs swirling to the guitar. Hair floating in the pub draft.

But what was he doing out there? Stumbling and bumbling to the rhythm, praying he didn't step on one of her shoes. The Earth beer had brought liquid courage but also a drunk clumsiness that would surely betray him out here in the open.

And yet he seemed to find his rhythm in her arms. He carried on, holding her against him as Superflight played on. Play on, you crazy Clorgs! For this was Gus's song now, and the bar patrons saw this clearly. The young Murple couple nodded their heads in unison, admiring this strange routine.

They whirled and twirled and danced and pranced. Suddenly Gus wasn't thinking about his mortgage or the separation papers. He wasn't thinking about anything in particular. He was just dancing.

And he was with her. They hadn't spoken more than thirty words to each other. And yet there was something palpable about their chemistry. Gus could feel it. It was right!

The song ended, and a slow Creptian love ballad crept over the speaker. They sweated and caught their breath in each other's arms. She pulled him close, and they swayed there in rhythm. This was their dance floor. And for the first night in a long time, Gus went to sleep that night in his rental speeder without a care in the universe.

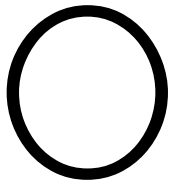
About the Author

Mark DiStefano is an accountant based in New York City. He hails from a massive family (both immediate and extended, here in the States, Mexico, Italy, and Cuba). He enjoys writing movies with my twin brother.

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A Recipe for Disaster

R.W. Maxwell



Once upon a time, standing barefoot in front of a stranger would have caused embarrassment. Now, Renolm felt only morbid resignation for what would come.

He kicked off his boots and socks without hesitation, shoving them into a cubbyhole with his other possessions: an inkless quill, some parched parchment, and a bursting empty coin pouch. Then, he nodded to the guard sitting by the gaol entrance.

She quickly set aside her plate, wiping the remains of a sticky toffee pudding from her lips with the back of her sleeve.

"Hand please, Maestr," said the guard with a shy smile.

Renolm obliged, offering her his hand, palm up.

"Both feet on the Gretchen Stone, please, thank you," she added.

Renolm stepped onto the criss-crossed grey cobbles that grounded the Arcanist Gaol with an immediately recognisable sense of hopelessness, banishment, and detestable sterility. He sighed as the familiar numbing sensation spread up through the soles of his feet.

The guard raised a small blade to the tip of Renolm's second favourite finger and drew blood with a practised flick. An involuntary spasm jerked Renolm's arm as she

touched a rod of Gretchen Stone to the incision. The sapping only took a few seconds but, to Renolm, having one's magic drained felt like an hour's worth of pulling teeth... and not in a good way.

The rod briefly flared a brilliant yellow before fading back to drab slab. Then, the guard leaned back and hammered on the gilded wooden door behind her.

The sensation of magicless-ness is impossible to describe to one who has never experienced it. While similar to an electrifying streak through the veins, a creeping cold in the bones, and a deep fatigue in the muscles, it's actually like none of those things. Words fail to grasp the ambiguity that fills with a passionate detachment, an intriguing disinterest, and an almost obsessive apathy.

Magicless-ness is a wretched, miserable, tedious, depressing, belaboured condition. Anyone suffering it should bloody well be rid of it, warlockity split.

Silently, the gilded wooden door swung open.

Renolm didn't hang about. He hurried along the dim, stone hallway past whispering witches in windowless cells. He bounded down circuitous stairwells echoing with ululations from unknown evokers. He crept by cages of malevolent mages.

He paused momentarily outside a cell containing one deranged druid who chanted a seemingly mysterious incantation, but Renolm soon recognised the ingredients of sticky toffee pudding.

He whizzed past warded walls packed with wailing wizards. He averted his gaze from the undulating forms of enticing enchantresses. He hastened through an archaic archway, an ordinary aspect of the overall inauspicious architecture. He scurried down corridors thick with a sickly sweet scent.

He stopped dead in his tracks as he laid eyes on his dreaded destination.

Renolm steadied his breathing before stepping towards the iron bars that encased his nemesis.

As usual, the half-lidded, all-seeing eyes of the arcanist Nathaniel regarded his approach with an entitled air of foreknowledge.

"Renolm, I've been expecting you," said Nathaniel.

The prisoner spread his arms in frigidly warm welcome.

Renolm tutted at the pretence. Nathaniel always had to have the first word.

"I find that unlikely, since you had no idea I would be visiting today," Renolm retorted.

"Oh, really?" said Nathaniel with a spiteful smirk. "Then why is it marked on my calendar?"

Despite himself, Renolm glanced at the scrap of parchment tucked into a cracked wall, where the words 'Ren visit' had been scribbled under today's date.

"Prisoners aren't allowed writing tools."

"Oh, the guards make an exception for me. Don't you know they are all ever so fond of my work?"

Renolm was almost ready with a comeback when Nathaniel changed the subject.

"To what do I owe the displeasure of your attendance?"

"Yes, let's not waste any time. I have important appointments to keep."

"The Guildmaster has given you a list of errands, eh?"

"I have been promoted to Maestr. As you well know, I'm not running errands for anybody."

"Oh, I didn't mean to touch a nerve," said Nathaniel, an insidious smile spreading across his lips.

"The reason I'm here..." said Renolm, raising his voice to forestall further interruptions, "...the reason, you may already be aware, is the curse spreading rapidly through the village of Howel..."

"Never heard of it."

"...a curse that very much resembles one of your concoctions. A certain Stoneskin curse. Poorly named."

"A stroke of genius. Excellent name."

"Cruel and pointless," said Renolm "like its creator."

Nathaniel's long fingers stretched out and clutched the bars of his cell.

"I recall the curse. A simple thing, developed in just one evening. Still, if it's beyond your scope, I might be willing to provide guidance. What are you offering?"

Renolm straightened his back, raising a crooked finger to his chin in contemplation.

"For your compliance, the guild will publish one of your confiscated texts. Then, when the time comes for your next disciplinary hearing, I will personally put in a good word."

"Which text?"

"The choice is yours, within reason."

"*The Manuscript of Crimson Felio-Symmetry.*"

"Obviously the guild cannot publish any unsanctioned material, no matter how derivative."

"Oh, it's barely even taboo," Nathaniel protested.

"Another."

"*Thelema Saturnis* and *Thelema Noctis*. Both or no deal."

Renolm carefully scratched his chin.

"Stop pretending you haven't already been told exactly what's permissible," Nathaniel snapped.

"After due consideration, I have decided that this will be acceptable. We have an agreement."

Nathaniel rolled his eyes.

"Tell me how to cure it," Renolm demanded.

Nathaniel leaned back, his eyes dilating as he savoured the moment.

After a deep, dramatic inhale, Nathaniel began to recite with a seductive drawl.

"You are going to need treacle of the black variety."

"Treacle," said Renolm, nodding seriously.

"Medjool dates."

"Medjool," Renolm repeated.

"Are you going to remember all this?" Nathaniel asked.

"Hurry up, get on with it..."

"Extract of vanilla..."

"Yes, keep going..."

"Demerara sugar... eggs of a chicken..."

"This is a recipe for sticky toffee pudding, isn't it?"

"The cure for the Stoneskin curse."

"That's it then?" Renolm demanded through gritted teeth. "I have to force them to eat sticky toffee pudding?"

"I doubt they will need much coercing."

Renolm sighed, then strode back along the corridor.

"I will return once the curse has been lifted. Don't go anywhere," he said.

Glancing back to watch his joke land, he found Nathaniel raising a finger with a suspiciously confident glint in his eyes.

"There is one other aspect of the cure, Renolm. It's rather important."

Renolm stopped dead in his tracks, his shoulders sinking.

"The remedy must be consumed in the presence of the curse's creator," said Nathaniel.

"You expect me to bring an entire village into the gaol?"

"If that's the only solution available to you."

Renolm's grave expression burst to life with dawning realisation.

"This is another escape attempt," he laughed.

"Is not," Nathaniel tutted. "And I wasn't trying to escape last time."

"Yes, you were."

"If I had wanted to escape, I would have escaped quite easily."

Renolm shook with a rattling chuckle.

"Well, I will take this matter to the Guildmaster, but I doubt she will approve your release."



The carriage crested the hill and the crumbling houses of Howel came hovelling over the horizon. Firelight gleamed from grimy glass lanterns, the only source of illumination on a moonless autumn evening. Smoke spun from chimneys, swirling into the rolling fog, coiling around the tumbledown village.

Renolm turned dizzily away from the carriage window, his eyes scrutinising the dozing prisoner seated across from him. Nathaniel was asleep, or pretending to be. Beside him, the guard scratched her nose with both hands. One hand served as cover for the other, which Renolm supposed was more likely delving than scratching.

The carriage jostled and the guard noticed Renolm watching her. Both of her hands snapped to her side as she straightened up in her seat.

"Check the prisoner," Renolm commanded.

"What again? So soon?" Nathaniel grumbled groggily. "Are you worried I dreamed my way out of these shackles?"

The guard leaned over Nathaniel to check the Gretchen Stone was firmly clasped to his wrists. Then she wiped the small cut on the back of his hand with a handkerchief that had been soaked in some foul-smelling concoction. Droplets of blood rose up to the surface of the incision and the Gretchen Stone rod was pressed against it. There was no flare of colour, the rod remained gravestone grey.

"See. No change since last time," Nathaniel huffed. "I can't hold magic with these wretched contraptions chaining me, now stop touching me with that sodding stone."

Renolm grunted politely before turning back to the window.

The clip-clop of hoofbeat faltered. A moment later the carriage jerked to a standstill.

Renolm was first out of the carriage. He stretched his legs and shivered at the biting chill of the toothless autumn evening. The carriage driver looked thoroughly miserable.

"Help the other guard with the prisoner," said Renolm.

As the guards helped the chained prisoner out of the carriage, Renolm caught sight of a hunched figure standing in a nearby doorway. The dim firelight reflected red on the dry, granite-like skin that covered the cursed individual's arm. The figure took a shuffling step towards Renolm, who took an unshuffling step backwards.

"So, this is Howel, eh?" Nathaniel asked. "I thought it would be bigger, warmer, and scruffier too."

"You've never been here before?"

"Can't say that I have."

"How did the curse—"

"I wonder how the curse took root here?" Nathaniel interrupted.

Renolm rolled his eyes, then wiggled his toes as the cold tickled his feet.

"So, do we go to them, or will they come to us?"

Renolm looked back at the figure shambling towards them and saw the poor villager had barely made it past their own doorstep.

"Perhaps we should visit each house in turn..." Renolm suggested.

"Very well, lead the way."

Nathaniel attempted to spread his arms theatrically, but the shackles spoiled the effect.

"Guards, escort the prisoner. Do not let go of him under any circumstance."

Renolm strolled towards the figure in the doorway.

"Greetings, I am Maestr Renolm of the Mages Guild. I have been charged with curing the village of Howel's inhabitants of the curse that has been ailing them. This prisoner is the scoundrel Nathaniel, please pay him no mind. These guards will ensure he can cause no further harm."

With a grinding of stone, the cursed villager turned their head to survey the group.

"May we come in?"

The villager groaned something that might have been an affirmative, so Renolm nudged carefully past to enter the small house.

The cramped room filled with creaks as the villager straightened up to make eye-contact with Nathaniel as he was dragged into the building.

"I really am terribly sorry for your suffering. This curse was intended to defend my premises from theft, I have no idea how it spread here."

In front of the hearthfire, another crouched figure slowly rose to a standing position. Now that the light was better, Renolm could see that this second figure was a man, or at least he had been. The figure in the doorway was perhaps his wife.

"How close do they need to be for the cure to work?" Renolm asked.

"Close, almost touching."

"Would you please approach the prisoner?"

Renolm opened his rucksack and began unwrapping a portion of sticky toffee pudding.

Gradually, the cursed villagers closed in on Nathaniel until they were standing within arms reach of him. The guards on either side of Nathaniel stood by, wide-eyed.

As Renolm approached with the remedy, Nathaniel suddenly grinned at him, a smug grin that Renolm knew all too well.

Renolm dropped the rucksack and the sticky toffee pudding as he leapt towards Nathaniel, but he was not fast enough.

"BERILLASITEN!"

Nathaniel's voice echoed around the room. The wife and husband snapped into statuesque poses of soldiers at attention.

"Seize them!" Nathaniel commanded.

The stone-skinned villagers erupted into action at his command. Within seconds, they restrained both of the guards in rock-handed grips.

Renolm watched in disbelief as Nathaniel raised his manacles to the cursed male's mouth.

"Would you be so kind?" Nathaniel asked.

The cursed man crunched the stone-hardened teeth in his rock-covered jaw down on the chain and chewed. Moments later, the chain links spilled to the floor with a metallic clink.

"Now, where is the key to these dreadful things?"

Renolm grasped the wand of stunning in his cloak pocket. In his panic, he fired off two hexes. The first spark bounced harmlessly off the stony skinned villager Nathaniel had ducked behind. The second stunning spark hit the female guard, who slumped forward unconscious.

"Blasted wand," Renolm muttered.

"Release her!" Nathaniel commanded. "Seize the wizard, not me," then pointing at Renolm "him!"

The cursed man dropped the guard to the ground and charged at Renolm. Renolm sent the table behind him clattering onto its side as he backed away. Glass shattered as the contents of a crystal decanter spilled onto the floor.

Renolm fell head over heels across the sideways table.

A rocky grip closed around his ankle.

He reached for the table leg, up-ending the table completely.

A flickering candle rolled over to the spilled liquid, which promptly burst into flame.

The spell for extinguishing a small fire was at the tip of Renolm's tongue as his jaw collided with the floor. His teeth clattered together horribly. Renolm's world spun upside down.

Once his downside had turned back up, he attempted to snuff out the flames.

"Suffocario," he evoked.

The flames, which had spread to a nearby rug, were now too powerful for such a simple spell.

"Drag them out of here," said Nathaniel, panic crept into his voice as he crept out of the house.

The cursed woman dragged the unconscious guard outside with one hand while steering the carriage driver with the other.

Renolm felt another rockish hand grab his knee and drag him along the floor. As he passed his rucksack, he reached out and snatched up a handful of sticky toffee pudding.

With a feat of acrobatics unheard of in the Mages Guild's storied history, Renolm twisted in his captor's grasp, pulling himself up until his chest was of a height with his own knees.

Stretching his arm up, he shoved as much sticky toffee pudding as he could into the open mouth of the cursed villager.

The villager froze on the spot, his eyes bulging as he tasted the sweet cake. After a moment of uncertainty, the villager gulped down the pudding before collapsing rockily onto Renolm.

Renolm looked about him for the wand of stunning. It lay out of reach beside the upturned table.

"What's taking so long?" Nathaniel called from outside.

"He's stopped moving," Renolm yelled back.

"I command you to drag that fool out here, this instant," Nathaniel demanded.

The villager remained unconscious on top of Renolm.

"The fire is spreading. We're trapped," Renolm exaggerated.

For once, Nathaniel was silent.

"Don't you dare leave me here," Renolm cried.

The silence grew louder.

Renolm yelled in despair as he squirmed underneath the heavy villager. The stonemason seemed to be fading as the curse was lifted, but it was still too much for

Renolm to lift alone. He gasped as he bent his arm painfully reaching for the contents of his other cloak pocket.

A shadow fell over Renolm.

Nathaniel stepped forward and started lifting the villager off of him.

"You really are hopeless," said Nathaniel.

Renolm snapped the clasp of the spare manacles shut onto Nathaniel's wrist with a metallic clink.

"And you really are predictable," Renolm retorted gleefully.

He pulled himself up by the manacles chain held firmly in his grasp, then filled his lungs with a deep breath.

"Suffocario emuncta!"

Renolm's spell snuffed out the spreading fire with a crisp click.

"I knew you would try to escape."

"I wasn't trying to escape. I was just testing the effects of the curse."

"For the next house, you can wait in the carriage."

"What about the cure?"

"The sticky toffee pudding worked while you weren't even in the building. So that was a lie."

"It wasn't exactly a lie, more of an untested theory," said Nathaniel.

"Why is the cure for this Stoneskin curse a sticky toffee pudding?" Renolm asked.

Nathaniel's cheek burned red as he avoided Renolm's gaze.

"Because any greedy thief who steals from me, will get their just desserts."

About the Author

Ryan W. Maxwell is an unpublished writer, web-designer, bartender, bisexual, university student. He lives in Hastings, England with his dog named Rusty (also unpublished). He holds a First Class Honours in Computer Science and is studying for an MFA in Creative Writing.

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My Lover and the Blackthorn Tree

Em Harriett

I have lived many lives and told many tales, but none as sweet as my dear Sloe. She lived in a small cottage atop the hill with a blackthorn tree behind it, able to see the moors fringed by the forest and the village huddled beside it. The tree was more of a glorified shrub, its branches wiry and studded with thorns, its berries round and bitter—but Sloe didn't care.

She loved that tree as much as she loved me.

Every morning she went and spoke to it (or perhaps she spoke to me), telling tales from her dreams and her plans for the day. She pruned the branches and plucked the berries with the tenderness of a parent, gathering the fruit in her apron and ferrying it to her kitchen. Her cauldron boiled the berries down to syrup and filled the house with the rich smell of magic.

The village called her 'witch', as if that was an insult.

Sloe let the word ferment. She *was* a witch, in the broadest sense—her tonics and tinctures brought life and love to the people she tended. Her magic came from intention, from her herblore and the books her mother left her when she'd died so long ago.

But still, the bite of the villagers' tongues stung Sloe when she pretended not to care. No matter how many times she cured the sick or brought joy to the downtrodden, the village could not shake their superstition.

"I wish they talked of me with the same reverence that they speak of you," she told me one evening, sitting on her front steps and watching the yellow lights from the village below.

I curled around her with a warm sigh and lifted her long hair in my fingers. People worship *and* revile me, I told her.

"Yes, but you are the wind—you are nature itself. I'm just a human."

"You are nature, too," I said.

"It's not the same."

I knew not what to say, so I toyed with the windchimes above her door, letting sweet music fill the silence.



Daylight shortened like fire burning down a match. I admit that staying in one place makes me restless—it's in my nature, I suppose—so I roamed the lands around the village, over the moors and through the thick corpses of elder and ash. I carried news to the village from surrounding towns—harvests, losses, whispers on the wind asked me for by those who revered me. I cannot claim to love them the way I love sweet Sloe, but any force that's been around for millennia grows to like the taste of favors.

Sloe left me offerings, too, on the windowsill beside her kitchen—pastries, jars of herbs, even small loaves of bread left over from her baking. I took the scents and wafted them around the cottage, warding it with nutmeg and cinnamon, clary sage and mugwort, keeping the villagers' foul thoughts from breaching Sloe's homestead.

I kept her house steadfast no matter the storm. I turned the gales of my family aside so that neither shingle nor slat of wood would shake. I was the protector of Sloe's happiness. And she would sing such sweet melodies while she worked, would tell me such loving things that made me feel as young as the spring breeze.

I knew it was foolish, loving a human this way. But I suppose I am allowed to be a fool. It's only nature, after all.

And, in that regard, maybe I am to blame for her misfortune.

Sloe waited for the first frost before she harvested the ripest berries off the blackthorn tree. The berries were sharp and tart, astringent on the tongue like venom, yet their taste heightened the senses and made one feel alive. Sloe took the berries and mixed them into potions that would last through spring and back again. Even if the villagers gossiped and called her witch, they loved the health and vigor that her tinctures granted them.

Sloe pricked each berry with a thorn from the blackthorn tree and covered them in sugar, steeping them together with gin until the liquor turned red as rubies. She gave the liquor to any who asked, and testimony spread far and wide of its health-granting powers.

The berries she mashed into preserves and syrups, jams and desserts and all manner of food—but the tiny stone pits she left for me. I took the pits and carried them into the woods beside the hill to plant in the loamy soil there. Over the years, I'd started a hedge of blackthorns, though the villagers kept away from them—wary of the same prickly trees that their witch Sloe used to cure them.

It was a ward, of sorts, meant to keep my Sloe safe.

But balefulness cannot be stopped by thorns alone.



A preacher came to town one morning when the weather was thick with fog. To this day I do not know if he was truly a holy man or one devoted to his personal gains—but he entered the village like a snake, winding his way through social circles and flicking his tongue into conversation. Word of Sloe's witchcraft had drawn him out of the moors to hunt.

"Isn't it odd how that woman's house on the hill never shakes in a storm?" He'd say, pointing out Sloe's cottage. "Why, there was such a gust last night it tore the hay from the henhouse, yet her home retains those delicate dog rose blooms as if nothing had happened."

"That's true," murmured the villagers, casting suspicion on Sloe's garden.

"Isn't it strange how she knows these miracle cures?" The preacher said, condemning Sloe's healing teas and tinctures. "Why, it's as if the devil himself whispered in her ear! No mortal on earth can craft such spells without aid from the dark."

"That's true," muttered the villagers, casting doubt on Sloe's hard work.

The preacher went on, needling at every behavior he considered a sign of trickery, until he had the villagers suspecting their own kith and kin of secret witchcraft influenced by Sloe's own medicines. I heard all this, of course, and ferried it to my dear Sloe, but she seemed unworried at first.

"Let them think their thoughts," she said, sitting by her fire and tending a cauldron of blackthorn-berry jam. "They're only human. And what human isn't prone to wild thoughts now and again?"

I told her to be cautious, but in truth I felt guilty. It's odd, I suppose, for the wind to feel this way, but I cannot lie about myself. I wanted to keep Sloe's old cottage from collapsing. I wanted to keep her way of life alive.

So, I shielded it. And the preacher noticed. And, in turn, so did the villagers, whose own homesteads wilted and shuddered as my family relations picked up the slack in the gales while I was preoccupied with Sloe. Everyone, from the westerlies to the sea breezes, nagged me to forget my local affection and return to my duties, but I ignored them as the horse ignores the fly.

The season froze. Rime coated the grasses of the moors and killed the fruits left unpicked. Sloe kept warm with her fireplace and hedge magic, and despite the villagers' gripes they still came to her cottage for balms and teas to help them with their colds.

But that was not the only place the villagers went. Bundled in their heavy coats and using scarves to hide their mouths, they followed the preacher after his sermons and clung to his vehement superstition. They held meetings beneath the church and whispered rumors that stained their teeth with lies.

One evening in late November, I lingered outside their windows to hear what toxins infected their words.

"Oh, Preacher!" they cried (for that is what they named him). "What are we to do? The witch Sloe has her thorns in all of us by now, what with her potions and her

house-charms that all of us surely have taken. Her foul magic has infected our poor village!"

The preacher clasped his hands and smiled with all his teeth.

"You must catch her while she sleeps," said he, "for even witches need mortal rest. Tie her hands and bind her to the tallest tree in town. Set her ablaze with thick bundles of moor-grass. Recite the holy prayers to drown out the sounds of her screams, and then your village and your souls will be at peace."

The villagers nodded and murmured assent as the preacher rallied them to carry the deed that night.

I was furious, to say the least. I left in a tempest, knocking loose a weathervane off the church steeple and scattering pots and barrels across the streets. I rioted all the way up the hill to Sloe's home and told her in harsh gusts what I'd heard.

"Oh, Zephyr!" She cried (for that was what she named me). "What am I to do? They won't believe me if I protest, not with such poison in their hearts and such clouds across their judgment!"

I told her I could strike the preacher and his procession down with a single blow. But Sloe shook her head.

"No," she scolded. "The people are not to blame. They have been swayed by bitterness, but in their hearts, I know they are my neighbors. I could not bear to kill them to save my own skin."

Then, I asked her, what would you have me do? I could ferry her across the moors, across the sea, to some distant shore where she would be safe.

But again, Sloe shook her head.

"This is my home," she said. "I cannot bear to leave what my mother and foremothers have raised. They are buried in the village, and I will not abandon them."

Sloe quieted, then, seeing flickers of torchlight emerge from the village below her hill. The preacher was first among them with a sermon slithering from his lips.

Sloe watched the villagers approach with grim realization.

"I know what I must do now," she said. "But I need this hilltop clear to do it."

I told her not to worry, and with a gust I plucked the blackthorn tree atop the hill straight from the ground and carried it to the forest, planting it among its brethren in the hedge.

The hilltop was free. Sloe clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head. Her lips moved as if in prayer or incantation.

"I tend this earth with care and kindness," she whispered. "And, in turn, I ask that it shelter me in love and truth."

She planted her heels into the dirt where the old blackthorn tree used to be. The soil swarmed over her shoes until they became roots. Her skin turned to smooth, dark brown bark, and from her long hair branches spread and flourished until a beautiful blackthorn tree was all that remained of my lover's human flesh.

The procession came upon her home and found it filled with silence. When they saw the tree atop the hill behind it, they turned around in confusion.

The preacher scowled, cheated of his violence, and he waved his hand dismissively.

"No matter," he said. "The witch Sloe is gone, one way or another. Perhaps she sought salvation across the moors. Or she's fled into the forest to commune with those wretched plants."

"A pity," said a man with a torch in hand. "I would have liked to speak with her. Sloe may be a witch, but I cannot make jam the way she can."

"And I cannot make house-charms the way she can," said another.

"And I cannot make tinctures the way she can," said a third.

"What are we to do now?"

All around the preacher and the blackthorn tree, the villagers realized their folly in following a foolish man without merit. One by one they turned around and headed to their homes to stew in sorrow and shame. The word 'witch' softened in their minds now that their only hedge witch was gone—and the kindness they'd relied on drifted away with her.

The preacher, left alone on the hilltop with his failed plans, clenched his fists in rage.

"I know you're out there, witch!" He spat to the moors and the thick forest below the hill. "I will not have you and your kin staining the purity of—"

I shoved him down the hill with a gust so fierce he rolled all the way to the forest's edge. The preacher picked himself off the blackthorn hedge I'd planted there and marched to town to retrieve his belongings with his cheeks aflame.

I laughed. My levity danced through the long grass around Sloe's old cottage. And she, in turn, laughed with me.

Her branches sang, the thorns brushing together in a tangle of percussion. She was just as alive as ever, rooted in the soil of her homestead as she'd always been—the only true difference was her form.

I sighed, wrapped my arms around her, and embraced my dear Sloe. Her branches clattered in joy and revelation. And in her heartwood, she bloomed with love for her home, sprouting berries among her thorns so that all who needed her health and care could find it among the branches.



To this day I do not know what magic Sloe channeled through her veins—but I do know that it saved her life.

And, in a sense, she gave the village back its life, too.

Once the preacher left town—for, without a witch to hunt and his reputation stained beyond scrubbing, his business could not function—the villagers sat with the gin from Sloe's berries and belatedly mourned the loss of their community witch.

"Who will make us tinctures now?" They asked.

"Who will make us house-charms?"

"Who will cheer us when the winter drags long?"

"Perhaps she left something in her home," said a youth. "A book or ledger with her recipes inside."

The villagers ventured to the old cottage on the hill and sought the same help they'd gotten from Sloe before their minds were clouded. The blackthorn tree my lover became bristled with thorns and tapered leaves even in the chill of winter, and she would prick those who'd been so vocal to shun her—but she let those with

kindness in their hearts approach and take from her what they would. Her thorns were a reminder not to take her offerings for granted. And the villagers obeyed.

With her berries they made poultices; with her branches they made shillelaghs. With the old herb books they pillaged from her home, they taught their people hedge witchery and herb medicine. When another preacher slithered into town whispering lies, the villagers shooed him from their lives with blackthorn branches and build a hedge with pits from Sloe's berries.

And all the while, Sloe grows strong and healthy, sitting atop her hill with her roots and branches stemming to earth and sky. For even if the wind can fall in love with a human spirit, so too are humans capable of extraordinary magic.

It's only nature, after all.

About the Author

Em Harriett (she/they) is a queer author, illustrator, and photographer from New England. She is inspired by nature and enjoys writing speculative fiction when she isn't knitting. Their work has appeared in *All Worlds Wayfarer*, *Kaleidoscope: A Queer Anthology*, and *A Coup of Owls*. You can find Em on Instagram @emharriettwrites or at emharriett.com.

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Teyú Yaguá vs. the Dragon

Ashley Bevilacqua Anglin

The red core of a quebracho colorado smolders, laid bare by brutal claws. Like severed ribs, the stumps of palm fronds drip a slow rain of sparks. The monster's breath has charred the heavy teardrop shape of a samu'u trunk to ruin. It runs with black streaks, the branches above now reduced to smoking veins, arteries, and aorta: a fiery heart, extinguished.

Slow steps swirl through the smoke, crossing the sudden wasteland in purposeful quiet. But when the ancient guardian of this place stands firm and opens seven fierce mouths to fight back, the seven voices of Teyú Yaguá roar loud enough to break a dragon's will.



Mariposa—Asunción, Paraguay, 27 jun. 2057

At least no human casualties are on display in this current episode of rainforest devastation. Mari sighs to herself, lowering her head back toward the latest installment of her favorite artist Irupé's graphic novel, on her armrest-desk. No one, least of all her, needs any more of those images burned into her mind.

She's not even sure why Dr. Bowen would share this footage with today's class. Before Mari's attention wandered back to the fantastic new book, they'd planned to connect to the professor's old friend in Ywy-Mará-Ey, a tenuous oasis of Indigenous forest stewardship. She's supposed to demonstrate how Amazonian

biochar techniques have improved their agroforestry, now Paraguay's people are learning to put them into practice.

"Must've entered the wrong coordinates," Dr. Bowen is saying, disconnecting then re-trying the link. A murmur rises among the temporarily distracted students.

"Aren't you kinda young to be in senior seminar?" asks someone two chairs over from Mari in the back row of the darkened lecture hall.

Mari drags her eyes up, taking in the locs pulled elegantly back from the speaker's fine features, the lashes long enough to brush his cool glasses.

She smiles, reluctance gone. "Doctora Bowen's my mom." And Mari is built like her, small and slight enough not to look thirteen, which of course is still too young. "Got a dentist appointment, after."

"Aha. Op, mini-Bowen. I'm Zain."

She scoffs-laugh. "Mariposa Guerrero."

"Really. Like the singer from Serafina?"

"Exactly." Actually, first Mariposa was named for her, then the rock singer was named for Mari, but that's a long, strange story.

He raises shapely brows, intrigued. "Okay. And—is that *Guaraniadas* you're reading? Which episode?"

She tips her reading pane his way. "3.4."

"It's out already? Haven't even gotten 3.3 yet."

"Yeah, no. Papá, uh, knows Irupé and might've said I'm a massive fan..."

"Guau." Zain grins, taking the offered device to pore over the first few stylish dark pages: black and red, deep greens and grays, illuminated with strokes of white.

"This is gonna be Luisón, huh," he says after a minute. "Dark shit for dark times."

The Guarani version of werewolf lore was Mari's near-immediate guess, too, when she started to read earlier. "Or," she teases, "is that just what she wants you to think?"

With a short, low-pitched laugh, Zain moves the reading pane out of her reach. Laughing too, she lets him. Obviously, he's way too old for her; but he's also nice, and smart enough he can afford to let his attention wander in Dr. Bowen's senior seminar.

Before Mari realizes it, people around them are buzzing, quiet conversations and the moving of backpacks and class supplies, like the lecture and discussion are ending. Was she that distracted by a cute guy? She checks the time, confirming they shouldn't be done for more than an hour. Mami is more the type to keep people a few minutes late, not let them go early. But when Mari looks up, she's dismissed her students and walked away from the lectern; she's facing a front corner of the lecture hall, already talking intensely on her wearable device.

Zain hands Mari back the device, which she stuffs into her messenger bag as she makes her way upstream.

"Dios mío," Mami is saying as Mari gets close enough to hear. "I wasn't sure I'd get you. You're okay?... Yeah, I don't doubt you can smell it. Where—"

She pauses, listening.

"Nahániri—the wildfire's still likely to spread your way. I said no. You'd better get everyone up to the caverns." Another pause. "Jeruti—I'm telling you, no jodas with this." Pause. "Because no number of pombero is enough to go up against this dragon."



"Wildfires Threaten Ysapy Reserve," *Associated Press* (27.6.2017)

A so-called controlled burn spread widely enough today to breach the eastern border of the Refugio Silvestre Ysapy in Paraguay's interior. Unseasonably dry conditions have fanned the blaze. Although wilderness management response teams arrived promptly with a supertanker, the wildfire is only partially contained at present.

The forest reserve (named in honor of the late Argentinean activist Rocío Silvestri, who in 2010 gave her life defending native people's right to their territory here) has long been designated for Indigenous management of natural resources. Nonetheless, ongoing tensions remain as cattle farming and cash crops still press in, particularly from the reserve's eastern side.

Spokesmen for international agricultural conglomerate Grancosur, whose employees initiated the burn, blame local *pombero* for its excessive spread. The Silvestri Foundation refutes this claim as

baseless, citing its own workers' decades of experience fighting wildfires alongside the people who call the reserve home.

Many rainforest dwellers of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay, faced with the loss of their native territories, have chosen to assimilate into an urban lifestyle for survival. Some few fight back, often with tragic results. This conservation area—nicknamed Ywy-Mará-Ey (Land-Without-Evil) by optimistic local believers in the traditional Guaraní ways—has become home to an estimated four thousand or more former refugees. Although speakers of Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese can generally communicate well based on the similarity of the two languages, the diverse community here uses their Guaraní dialects as a proud lingua franca.

Eco-photojournalist Sebastián Guerrero contributed to this report.



Jeruti—Paraguayan forest, 2022

The skinny, freckled girl delicately balance-walks the length of a fallen ceiba trunk on pale bare feet. She's wearing blue morpho wings, painted on sheer fabric and strung on thin elastic straps around her bony shoulders. Thick glasses, also framed in iridescent greenish-blue, increase the insect-like impression. Jeruti crouches jaguar-quiet on her branch (at about the newcomer's eye height in a nearby urunday) and waits to see if those dragonfly eyes will spot her.

When they do, flashing wider, the strange kid catches her breath and wobbles hard enough for her desperately gripping toes to dislodge some flakes of decaying bark, but she doesn't fall off the log.

"Mba'etekoiko." The sounds leave her mouth as haltingly as cautious balancing steps across a narrow, flexible length of deadwood.

"Iporã, ha nde," Jerutí answers coolly. Then, eyeing the girl, she translates, "I'm good. And you... don't really know much Guaraní, right?"

The kid answers Jerutí's Spanish with a sheepish relieved expression, but earns her respect by soldiering on a short way. "Che sy, héê. Che, nahániri." *My mother, yes. Me, no.* "Yet. In Argentina it's not like here. Mostly only the indígenas know their own languages."

It's obvious to Jerutí that the butterfly kid belongs to Gil Bowen and Rocío Silvestri, the biologist-anthropologist husband and wife team who've led covert visits to help this community the past few years. Jerutí's people know how to do what's best for this forest, and caring for the forest is one of the best ways to heal the world. That's what Rocío tells her. They don't need saving; she and Gil are just here to help them stay safe.

So, they've done what they can to care for the carers—ensuring basic health and dental measures for the ones who've united here, out of uncharted wild places overrun and burned to the rich ground by rancheros desperate to make a few pesos (or cruzeiros, or bolivianos, or guaranies)—with the blessing of their own governments, in too many cases. Trying to keep the same rancheros and

governments from encroaching any further into the vulnerable beating heart of their own continent.

Rocio has mentioned a daughter Jerutí's age, who'll come to see them too when she's old enough. This one looks no more than a spindly eight or nine, not eleven, but Rocio wouldn't lie. She's of Mapuche descent, not Guaraní. Still, Jerutí has trusted her implicitly ever since she pointed out the name Rocio means *dew*: the same as Ysapy, the great-grandmother who brought Jerutí and her grandmother deep into this part of the forest from their old home east of Concepción, when things got scary.

Names are of spiritual significance here, not just something your tía abuela liked from that Brazilian telenovela all the ladies at the salón de belleza couldn't get enough of. Ysapy and Jerutí and their found-clan were named by shamans, who listened carefully to the spirits of this place to learn what each person should be called.

"So," bug girl forges ahead, "mamá said Jerutí Vaira is the girl my age who doesn't only speak Guaraní, and didn't come here from Brazil."

"Héê," Jerutí agrees, surprised in turn.

"Figured. And she said you didn't know we have the same name, but you might like that little surprise."

Now Jerutí feels her own eyes protruding like a bug's. "You're also called Jerutí?"

The smaller girl smiles, revealing teeth decorated in fine metallic squares and wires. "Paloma."

Jeruti tilts her head, regarding her. Both names do mean *dove*. It's worth finding out if their spirits could be as much alike as their outsides are different.

Within a quarter hour, they're tramping through the underbrush to the soundtrack of Paloma's favorite dance tunes, pulsing from the rectangular glass-and-metal device in her back shorts pocket.

Paloma's blue wings make her a fairy, not a bug, she quickly informs Jeruti. And that's the kind of story she likes to pretend-play, so they do. As soon as Jeruti understands what a fairy is, exactly.

"So, sort of like panambi," Jeruti says, then answers Paloma's wide-eyed blank look, "When people's spirits get reincarnated into butterflies?"

"Oh! That would be a cool way to think of it. But we have lots in common if you use your imagination a little," Paloma chatters. "Like when we went to the Museo Mitológico Ramón Elías near Asunción, they definitely had a statue of a dragon. Tayuga or something?"

Jeruti sighs. "What's a dragon..."

"Like a dinosaur, has wings, breathes fire? The Welsh one—papá's family comes from Wales, it's like their national symbol—it's red and it's called Y Ddraig Goch."

"Is it supposed to be friendly, or will it eat you?"

Paloma considers. “Y Ddraig Goch is good, or they wouldn't put him on their flag. But in some stories, they're mean. Stealing everyone's treasure. Setting people's land on fire.”

“Well, we don't have flags. Or—greedy dinosaurs.”

“This was totally a dragon.” Paloma has retrieved her device and flicks through stored photos, looking for proof. “At the museum. It had a lot of heads.”

“Wait. Seven heads. Like dogs' heads?”

Paloma nods eagerly, holding up photographic evidence.

“Oh. Not Tayuga. That's Teyú Yaguá. But he can't fly... he's not even very fast. And some people say he has fire coming out of his eyes, but never his breath. He's the guardian of caverns like the ones near here, and all the trees that have fruit. He doesn't steal. I bet if a dragon showed up here, Teyú Yaguá wouldn't let it take any good stuff off the bakuri trees or mburukuyá vines.”

Paloma screws up her features a moment, thinking of the similar-sounding Spanish name she knows. “Maracuyá? Passionfruit grows here?”

“Oh yeah. Not right here, but I know how to get there. Closer to the river, because the vines like more sun, and to climb trees, and for you to feed them the parts of a fish that you don't want to eat.”

Paloma looks unsure whether mburukuyá might also be a legendary spirit creature, a plant endowed with a life of its own, which Jerutí quite enjoys. “I can show

you a cavern, too, on the way," she offers, then grins. "Just, you know, watch out for fire-breathing monsters."

By nightfall, the girls know they'll be together for the rest of the three weeks Paloma's family is here. She's definitely going to study multicultures and other conservation measures she sees at work, and continue her parents' mission. Maybe Jeruti will come to study too with Rocío in Asunción, one day. Either way, they'll stay friends until they're bent and gray and slow as Ysapy, and even longer.



Panambi, messages (27.6.2057)

ButterflyJr

Are you reading this newest
goddamn TRAVESTY?
Haven't been able to reach
che sy. Trying not to lose
my shit

shes ok sorry
shes talking to my mami right now
im sure shell call you right after

Ok thank god/s

i heard ma say they could
hide in a cave
?

?

And Sebas?

Is he here or there?

...

here safe as of this morning but
we both know hell be on the next
helicopter over
if anything like this is happening
uyy :(((

It'll be ok mariposita.

Would feel better knowing

they'll have each other,

Right?



L. Guerrera, "Goblins of Paraguay," *Ecoforestry Journal* (26.4.2044)

The world watched passively as the Amazon's Indigenous people lost their homeland. With it, South American nations renounced the advantage these cultures afforded in our fight to preserve the green "lung" of an increasingly feverish planet. Now, someone in Paraguay is choosing to protect their own rainforest home: they have begun guerrilla strikes, sabotaging or stealing small and large equipment critical to deforestation work.

Local workers have some idea what to expect here. But early yesterday, a bulldozer operated by a Brazilian crew—unfamiliar with the

poorly-mapped terrain—apparently toppled down a ravine overgrown with lianas. It is unknown whether the operator was attacked directly, or whether someone may have tampered with either the roadway or the heavy equipment the night before.

Villagers murmur about the interference of mischievous *pombero*, goblin-like spirit beings who protect trees, birds and other natural resources, according to the folklore still central to the beliefs of many indigenous people. A more plausible hypothesis—suggested in a doctoral dissertation recently completed by Paloma Bowen at the University of Asunción—is that flesh-and-blood individuals from elusive Guaraní-speaking groups are attempting to defend what forest remains.

Along with her mother and colleague, Dr. Rocío Silvestri, Bowen strongly emphasizes that previous agreements made on the local level, ceding this area to its native population, must be respected. Beyond the clear ecological justification, they advise that workers should not endanger themselves. Those not well acquainted with this wild terrain risk becoming disoriented, injured, vulnerable to further harm from the area's insects, reptiles and other real-life animals.

Caption: bulldozer wrecked by pombero, 75 km east of Ciudad del Este.

Photo/video credit Sebastián Guerrero.



Paloma, Unofficial Guaraní territory, 2044

"You're still going to say we're not lost?" Lucas asks, yet again.

"We're not," Paloma says, through teeth set on edge. "It's just dark."

"Gonna get eaten by the damn pomberos."

"They don't eat humans, pendejo. Didn't you do any research at all?"

His umber-skinned features blend with the night, so the dashboard faintly illuminates just his eye-roll. "Wasn't that the whole point of this trip?"

The Jeep carrying one academic plus two journalists (the more helpful, better-looking one more asleep than awake right now, alas) really isn't lost in the jungle, though it's incredibly slow going. How can GPS tell the whole truth where there are no paved roads, and what paths there are shift around like folklore? And Paloma can hardly rely on memory—it's been too long since she was anywhere near here.

"Watch out for Luisón, though," she can't resist adding, in an ominous soft tone she picked up from the childhood friend who taught her these tales. "He's more of a scavenger, but I've heard of him making exceptions for live bodies with very little brain activity—"

Lucas' dismissive "Ha" cuts short, from there erupting into profanity. The voice suddenly no longer snoring in the back seat joins in a dissonant, if colorful, harmony. Paloma's arm instinctively flings across her belly—but her collarbone is more in danger, as her seat belt snaps her securely backwards.

They clamber out but can't budge their tire from a deep swampy rut, the footprint of much heavier machinery; not even after a sweaty hour's best attempt by the men, who won't let Paloma contribute more than a steady stream of multilingual venting. Sebas insists it's not her fault: it's the brothers' investigation that has brought them out here. More than likely, the corpse of the wounded monster that left this desperate trail is decomposing nearby. Hopefully, its predators are close, as well.

When they finally decide to kill the headlights and lock themselves, stinking and bone-weary, into the vehicle for the few hours remaining before dawn, a pearly green radiance reveals itself among the trees.

"*Isondú*," Paloma tells the wondering men, her eyes already drifting closed against Sebastián's shoulder. "You see glowworms, people here see reincarnated human spirits."

"In the bodies of insect larvae... Lovely." Lucas' chuckle comes out not much more than an exhausted sigh.

"*Hermosas*," Sebastián breathes against her hair, *lovely*, and seals it with a quiet kiss. He might really mean the glowworms he calls *luciérnagas* instead of *isondú*, but the same feminine plural ending applies just as well to herself and the tiny larva who's come along on their latest wild ride.

In green-filtered sunlight a few hours later, Paloma emerges first from their fogged-up cocoon and heads a little way off into the trees, prodded by her increasingly high-maintenance bladder. Before her pants are pulled all the way back

up, she feels eyes on her. She looks around, ready to snap something at Lucas about respecting boundaries.

But it's the memory of a muscular, copper-brown child who is watching her. This girl squatting on a nearby branch has the same features, the same long brown-black hair. Except the brownish eyes she narrows at Paloma glint with the mossy green of their surroundings, rather than being uniformly dark.

Paloma staggers back a step on the soft, uneven ground.

"Hey," Sebastián says, behind her. "Sorry, I was trying to give you space... Did you get up too fast? I thought the vertigo went away after eight weeks or so..."

He doesn't notice the child. Maybe she's not really there?

"No," Paloma stammers. "But I might have just seen an actual ghost."

"Mba'etekoiko," the ghost says cheerfully, making a near-soundless landing close to them both; Sebas jumps and swears softly.

"Bien, ¿y tú?" Paloma answers, but the kid only cocks her jaguar-sleek head.

Paloma catches the fullest breath she can, and asks in Guaraní to meet the child's mother--although the long-ago girl she remembers is surely the last enemy-of-her-enemy Paloma had expected to encounter today.

All along a path visible mostly only to herself, the hazel-eyed girl sings (maybe to them, maybe not) in a clear birdlike octave.

Sitting in the doorway of her extended family's thatched-roof house, Jerutí Vaira offers them a horn cup of cold ka'ay and flat mandi'o cakes. Before long, her daughter (still without a word of Spanish) drags Lucas and Sebas across the clearing to show off her handiwork: multicultures of pigeon pea and passionfruit, planted at the base of melia trees, which she and her smaller dark-eyed siblings have been helping to tend.

Jeruti just raises a brow when Paloma asks for water instead of a refill on the strong tea. Rather than ask questions, she explains why their meeting again twelve years after a definite farewell was less surprising to her.

"When she was born and the shaman called her Panambi, I thought... of this amazing girl with butterfly wings and funny bug eyes, who considered me a friend. So I've known all this time, the spirits still saw us as connected."

It's the steady hint of smile in her mahogany eyes: that calm, guileless gravity has always drawn people to her, including an odd kid running around her forest in fairy wings once upon a time. Later it stole gorgeous, green-eyed Manolo Ortiz, during Jerutí's dramatically shortened stint at the Mbo'ehaovusu Tetãgua Paraguaygua (the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, to Paloma). The big Pachamama energy, Manolo had reliably enraged Paloma by calling it.

"I mean... I know he was already my ex," she finds herself relenting.

"Again," Jerutí says.

"Okay, yes. Three or four times over, by that point. He was a shit boyfriend, in case you didn't find out for yourself."

Jeruti laughs softly. First silver threads glint like bioluminescence amid her loose dark hair as she shakes her head. "That wasn't what I wanted him for. And he wasn't interested either—the day I called to tell him was the last time we talked. I needed the stronger roots I have here... Panambi wasn't even out of her chrysalis before I came up with a way to fight for the forest like if I'd had my degree, only from this side of the mirror."

"What—Mirror?"

"Your weird stories, not mine. Going down the rabbit hole or through the mirror to where the creatures you thought were imaginary were real, and real life was a dream?"

Lucas laughs suddenly aloud; Jeruti's bright gaze lifts over Paloma's shoulder to where Sebastián now has Panambi—big as she is—clambering up on his shoulders to point out how high the mburukuyá tendrils climb. "Anyway. It was about time you pulled your head out of your trasero and realized who else was there in your real life, waiting."

"Oh." Paloma laughs too, in spite of herself. "So, aguyje, then." Thanks.

"De nada." The flash of grin fades a little slower than it appeared. "Sebastián Guerrero, eco-photojournalist, hmm? Looks like Panambi is choosing her friends as wisely as I ever did."

He's set her back on the ground now, and produces slightly squashed Bon-o-Bon candies from his pocket for the kids to unwrap and sniff.

"Hopefully she'll do a better job keeping hers," Jeruti says, softer.

Paloma sighs, offering an empty hand that feels newly light, now she's released what bitterness was left. "Looks like you've kept yours, anyway, doesn't it."

Jeruti clasps it warmly. "Aguyje, Doctora Bowen."

Paloma smiles, lightly clears her throat. "Uh. So have you, by chance, seen any pombero running around out here?"

Jeruti smiles again too, but smaller this time, lingering, dangerous. "Maybe. Seen any dragons?"

"Not yet, have you?"

"Oh yeah. Big ugly hijo de la gran puta, trying to burn this whole place down. We're pretty sure his lair is somewhere in Brasilia. Then again, we don't think he's working alone. Who knows how many others, or where they might be lurking."



Panambi, messages (28.6.2057)

ButterflyJr

can you sleep?

Pfft no

sy is ok though right

Yes, whole clan stayed
safe, w/friends right now
in Villarica, she's just
seriously jodidamente
PISSED

My grrlz are here
Working on new
pachamama song
It's relevant as hell
suddenly

no way
i had almost the same idea

Really?

was thinking how can we
get the band in touch with
like all papas media contacts
could you sing for ywy-mara-ey
they need a louder voice

Synchronicity!
I swear Arandu said the
same thing this afternoon
Gotta talk to Sebastián

YES you should collab

It needs to happen!

it needs to happen

Children of Serafina
and Tau
haha
or
Serafina, Child of Tau
(Is this sacrilege?!)

heheheh
or come up with a new
name for all of you together
maybe not tau but some
other monster

We're not the monster
We fight the monster.

RRAWRRR



Mariposa—Asuncion, 19.7.2057

Seven musicians appear silhouetted before a shifting rainforest photomontage on a giant screen, in a chevron pointing toward the audience: drummer, bass, guitar, a rainstick-style takuapú, mbaraká dance rattles, keyboard, and a Paraguayan harp connected to another electric guitar pedal.

The tall, lithe woman holding the rainstick thumps it in a compelling primal rhythm against the stage, eliciting the audience's eager response. Stage lights rise on

her while the other six remain shadowed. Watching from the VIP seats, Mari bites back a gasp. She's used to the urban godsister in wisps of bohemian dresses, glam makeup, and big combat boots who has lived here, near her family, for almost as long as Mari can remember. This earth-hued warrior—rocking beads, feathers, bold face paint stripes, and sleek hair flowing to her slightly swaying hips—is someone more.

"Op, Asunción... Hola, mi Planeta Tierra." She waits a moment for the audience to yell return greetings. "So... I think a lot of you here, if you know me, it's probably as "la mariposa guerrera" from Serafina."

The crowd loudly agrees.

Chuckling low, she holds up a benignly authoritative hand. "But... But. Everyone might not know I stole my stage name from a friend of mine, because I liked what it stood for. Maybe you can't imagine a battle butterfly... but where I come from, all nature is full of spirits. The kind that if you attack whatever or whoever they're protecting, they will fight back.

"So for the international community watching this live, or seeing the video later... I was born Panambi Vaira—Panambi means "mariposa"—in a place that's not on your maps, somewhere west of the border between Paraguay, my home, and Brazil. Back then, it was an intact forest. More recently it became a poorly managed cattle pasture. As of tonight, it's nothing but an ugly wildfire scar."

Anger flares, roughening and strengthening her tone, raising hairs on the backs of Mari's arms. "And... to whoever thinks my home belongs to them because they

drew imaginary lines through it—My people were here a thousand years before the conquistadores, before the jesuitas. Not only is mine still one of two official languages in this country—it's so mixed with yours, you'll never eradicate it. Your almighty currency has my people's name on it. This land has never been yours." She fairly roars the next sentence, punctuating it with her *takuapú* against the stage. "*Even if you take it, my forest will never be yours.*"

Her listeners roar back.

"In dangerous times," her shout floats atop theirs, "my people stand together and sing for hours, as long as it takes, for strength to reach our gods and ask their help. That's why Laz, Arandu, Jimena, and Yoel invited Thainá, Kauane, and me here."

More stage lights come up: not on black leather, denim, or chrome hardware, but on unbound hair, fiercely painted brown faces, bare feet, adornments of feather, reed, and bone. Arandu makes the mbaraká hiss like a snake for the crowd; Jimena's nails coax a raptor's screeching glissando from across the electrified harpstrings.

"We've been blessed to open for Children of Tau many times, but tonight, I really had a lot to—"

Beside her, Arandu starts laughing.

"Okay. Even more to say than usual. Aguyje, amigos. So—we're starting with some new songs. They're a little raw, put together mostly for tonight... but I hope you feel them as deep as we do. Let's get really loud so the gods of this time and place, the corporations and lobbies and governments, can't help but hear us."

Smoke machines at each stage corner activate in sync with Panambi's gesture, flinging a heavy handful of copal resin into a burner. The incense will take a while to drift back over the crowd, but Mari grins up at Sebastián as both inhale.

When Panambi shakes the takuapú, gentle rainfall washes over the giant screen. The forest images dissolve into a series of illustrations from *Guaraniáda* 3.4: fourteen baleful eyes still aflame, seven savagely serrated mouths. Beneath the supporting crescendo of percussion and her defiant voice, growing again to a shout, pulsating bass and dark electric strings feedback build.

"For tonight, we seven are one. We're Teyú Yaguá, the Guardian. And this one's for you, che sy, up there guarding the beating heart."

Panambi leads in her heart language, her voice piercing in quality and in volume—a timbre far removed from her usual punk-kitten purr and growl. Guitarist Kauane echoes her in Spanish.

"Ysapy (Rocío).
Jeruti (Paloma).
Panambi (Mariposa)."

Around the powerful necks of the onscreen beast, vines twine upward through rain rivulets; fruits emerge from each blossom, growing fat; in the ponderous footprints, water lilies sprout, starlike. A collective chant begins, insistent upon one tight chord.

"Nourishing one another,
At peace in one another's shade,

Helping each other climb higher."

The crowd's screams of encouragement can't drown out the mythical guardian's seven mighty voices as they explode outward across octaves: they only carry them further aloft.

"Strongest all together.
Strong like my homeland,
Strong like oré sy,
One spirit, unafraid."



"Ysapy's Heart Beats Louder than Ever," *La Nación* (24.7.2017)

Last week's benefit concert by pop-up rock band Teyú Yaguá (Asunción's metal favorites Children of Tau, featuring feminist folk-punk protegées Serafina) continues to surpass expectations. (Sebastián Guerrero, who frequently contributes to this publication, helped coordinate the project.)

Clips from "Seven Voices, One Forest" have become a raucous rallying cry for protesters worldwide. First-run companion prints of graphic novelist Irupé's bespoke background images sold out within hours. New donations are pouring into the Refugio Silvestre Ysapy, heavily damaged by last month's wildfires. The Silvestri Foundation reports overwhelming public support for its civil action against

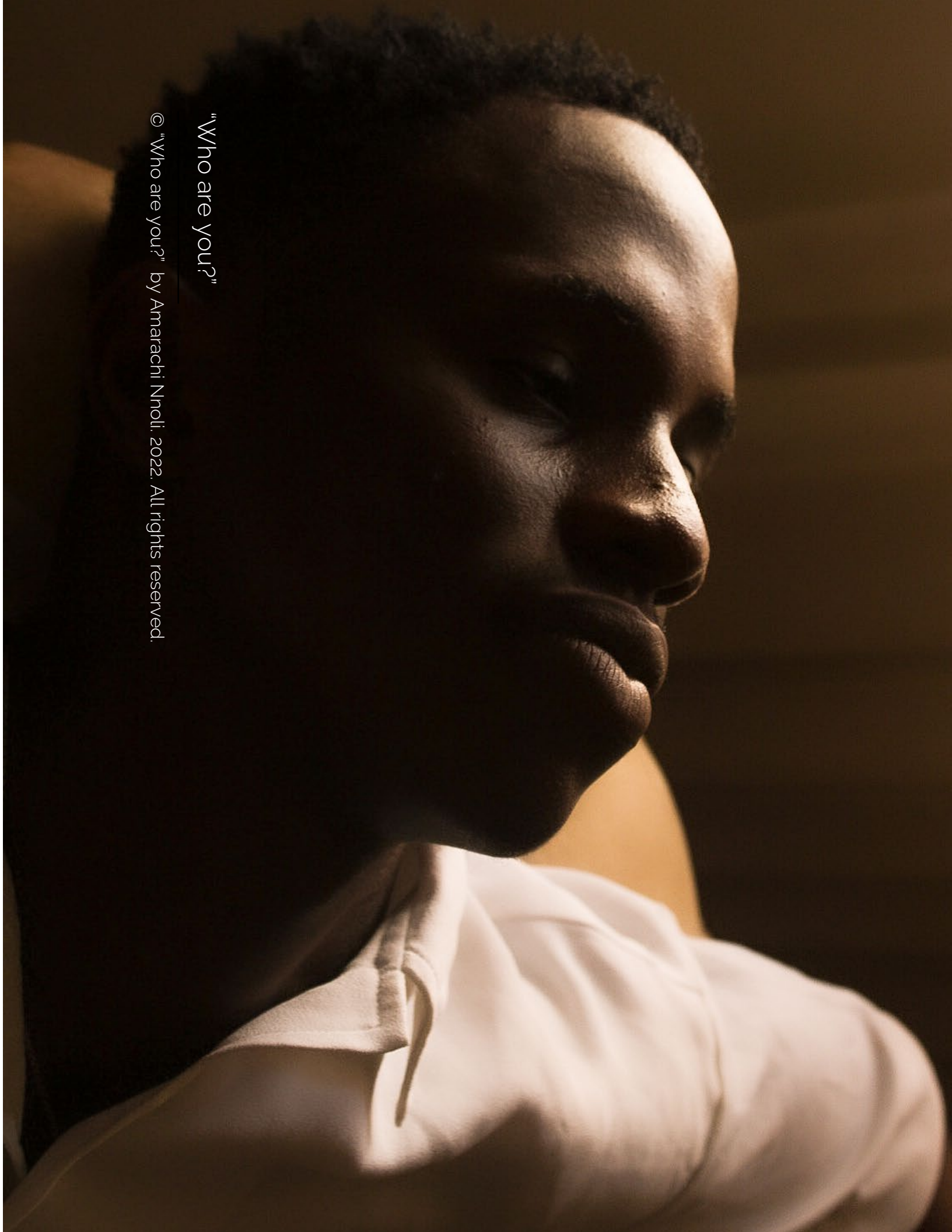
Grancosur's environmentally unsound practices, which caused the devastation; expert testimony by conservationist Paloma Bowen (Guerrera's wife) is planned. And Nature itself seems to be listening, with a much-needed rainy pattern finally setting in.

Communications devices lit up around the convention center, evocative of these young creatives' ancestors returning in glowworm shape to urge their collective imagination onward, as Teyú Yaguá roared out the evening's concluding (and now fastest-trending) song: "Our continent's wild heart has not stopped, will never stop beating."

About the Author

Ashley Bevilacqua Anglin thanks Brazilian band Arandu Arakuaa for helping to inspire this story. Ashley is a World Languages professor, mom, and amateur performing artist who can't keep mythical creatures out of her cli fi or climate concerns out of her fantasy. Her work has previously appeared in *Miniskirt*, *Minison*, and *Full Mood* magazines, and anthologies *Everything Change Vol. 1* and *Panthology*. Her debut novel, *Undiscovered*, releases in February 2023. Find her on Twitter @dalyashleydrH2o.

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"Who are you?"

© "Who are you?" by Amarachi Nnoli. 2022. All rights reserved.

Heave

Sarah Zell

It was the middle of a spring downpour when Sophia brought the plant home. She had chosen one of the tinier plants at the store: a green pothos with only a couple of leaves, ready to flourish under their care. She thought of all the places they could put it. On a shelf next to a window, maybe, or in the center of the kitchen table. On Kim's nightstand, so that it would be the first thing she saw when she woke up.

Inside, Sophia peeled off her wet jacket and hung it on the hook. The apartment—their first home together—was damp and drafty, but they liked the hardwood floors and big, wide windows. Sophia tucked the plant into the crook of her elbow and carefully walked across the floor, knowing the creaky spots to avoid, until she stood in front of the closed office door. She took a deep breath and knocked.

"Babe," she said in a voice that was sweet but casual, cool girlfriend voice. "I got something for you."

"Busy!"

Sophia could hear the ricochets of video game bullets behind the door. Kim had lost her lab research job recently and spent most of her time sequestered here, dedicating her life to zombie video games and unholy quantities of Swedish Fish. Sophia, meanwhile, picked up more shifts at the grocery store to make rent.

"Okay." Sophia set the plant down on an end table, the look-at-me plant, the talk-to-me plant. "When you're ready." Her eyes stung, stupid, stupid.

Sophia went to the kitchen to heat up dinner, swallowing hard as she watched the microwave plate turn. It was hard to lose your job, she reasoned. She just needed to be more patient.

This was what love was. This was how it proved how strong it could be.

Sophia repeated this to herself until her hopes for the plant retreated, parched roots pulling away from a dry riverbed. She did not require affection or affirmation, did not need sunlight or water or a vibrant garden of proof to know that their love was true. She could be a cicada buried in the ground. She could wait for years, silent and sleeping, until the conditions were just right to squirm up from below, nose through the soil, and delight in all the joys the sun-soaked world had to offer.

She could wait for however long it took.

She'd eaten, washed up, and settled into the couch with a book by the time Kim came out of the office. Sophia's skin sharpened with awareness. She pretended to read as she listened to Kim's movements in the kitchen: the fridge opening, then closing; the beep of the microwave; the light clearing of a throat. Sophia couldn't help the vigilance where Kim was concerned. It made her scalp tingle and the acidic juices in her stomach swirl, every noise too loud and somehow damning. She'd pore over the information later, looking for moments where she could have interpreted Kim better, been more of what she needed.

Kim came into the living room, looking at her phone.

"Do you want your present now?" Sophia asked, setting her book aside. She didn't know the title.

Kim's eyes slid over her like she was furniture.

"Sure."

When Sophia handed her the plant, Kim's expression didn't change.

"It's supposed to be easy to care for." A terrible understanding prickled across Sophia's shoulders. The plant suddenly looked awful in Kim's hands, scrawny and pathetic in its greenness. An unfamiliar surge of violence crackled in Sophia's fingertips; she wanted to smack the pot to the ground.

Kim exhaled through her nose and took the plant into the office. Sophia didn't say that she'd thought they'd keep it in the living room, where they both could see it. It was Kim's present. She could do what she wanted.

Sophia watched her set it on the desk, where she knew it would die.



Sophia grew desperate in the following weeks.

She made sure the cupboards were always stocked with Kim's favorite snacks. She washed all the dishes every night and scrubbed the sink until it shined. She left little notes across the apartment that said things like *I love you very much Kim!* and *Things will turn around!*

Kim crushed the notes in her hands and wordlessly dropped them in the trash.

Sophia even bought Kim a new zombie game to try and cheer her up, but the problem only got worse.

"Can you leave me alone?" Kim snapped when Sophia offered a backrub one night. "I can hardly think with you hovering around me like that."

"Whatever you need," Sophia said earnestly.

Kim just huffed. Sophia felt like a pulsing black hole, greedily sucking the life out of their relationship and crushing it between her teeth, imploding with hunger for love. Her desperation smeared onto the air in sticky streaks. Her eyes were always aching.

In the mornings, Kim left the bed first. Sophia would roll over to Kim's side, fitting herself to the outlines of her body and soaking up the warmth she'd left there until she was sure that she'd contaminated it all with her own body heat.

The plant pulsed behind the closed office door in a slow, green throb.



One evening, Sophia got home from work and changed into sweatpants. The sky was still a pale blue, the sunlight starting to cling to the earth a little longer each day.

"Sophia?" Kim's voice slipped between Sophia's ribs like a thin knife. "Can you come here?"

Sophia followed her voice to the office. In the open doorway, Kim was holding up her arm. Long green stems were poking out of her skin.

Sophia blinked. "What's that?"

"I don't know, exactly," Kim said, turning her arm. The stems twitched. "I was just experimenting, and this—happened."

Sophia peered behind Kim into the office, which smelled damp and coppery. The pot for the plant was on the desk, empty and knocked on its side. The desk was otherwise covered in materials Sophia hadn't even known they had: beakers, a microscope, a scalpel, and a dozen little vials full of variously colored liquids.

Kim's eyes were glittering. Cheeks flushed. Even her hair seemed to shine brighter, gold strands popping from the russet.

Sophia reached for her phone. "Should we get you to a doctor?"

"I'm not sick," Kim said, eyes flitting to Sophia's hand. "And I don't have insurance anymore, anyway. I'm actually—well, this is cool, right? This hasn't been done before. I feel like a scientist again." She smiled shyly, and all of Sophia's concerns dissipated. She'd do awful things to see that smile again.

Sophia reached out, forgetting that touching wasn't really something they did anymore, but Kim didn't pull away. Sophia traced the stem down to where it jutted out from the inside of Kim's elbow. When she tugged gently, a long bump moved under her skin.

"Ow," Kim said, looking at her arm with interest.

"Sorry." Sophia dropped her hand.

"It's okay, just tender."

The skin around the stem was pink and a little inflamed, but there was no blood. The stem twisted out of her like a continuation of a vein.

"So, you've been doing experiments?" Sophia asked, dragging her eyes back up to Kim's.

"Oh, I don't know. I have a lot of time on my hands now, so." Kim shrugged, almost sheepishly. Sophia let the non-answer go; this was the most animated she'd seen Kim in ages. "Sophia." Kim cupped Sophia's jaw. Looked into her eyes. "I've been meaning to say thank you. You've been taking such good care of us. I should appreciate you more, shouldn't I?" Little stems brushed against Sophia's neck. She could have melted to the floor she was so happy.



Kim was growing. Vines slid out of holes in her arms and legs and curled around her ears. They climbed up the slopes of her thighs. She squealed with delight when she flossed a root out of her teeth, thereby swearing off the enterprise of dental hygiene entirely so as not to disturb the ecosystem blooming in her mouth. Sophia pictured Kim's internal organs flipping over, sliding into new configurations and turning green with her metamorphosis. Sometimes, in the mornings, Sophia

woke up to stems resting on her shoulder or cheek, little leaves caught in a tender half-spiral.

The office door stayed open. Kim was typing up notes for an article she wanted to sell to a scientific journal.

"I'm blazing a trail," she said, fingers dancing across her laptop keyboard. She hadn't touched the game controller in weeks. "The barriers between different types of life are conquerable. The evolutionary implications alone—" She shook her head, smiling. Sophia wanted to kiss that smile. "It feels like a love story," Kim said. "A romance of plant and animal, two entities becoming something bigger than the sum of their parts, all inside me."

Warmth pooled behind Sophia's heart: this was a love story. Their apartment was thawing, the air alive and warm.



Sophia found Kim collapsed across the kitchen table one afternoon. She rushed to Kim's side, her stomach tight with worry, and rested a hand on her shoulder, keeping it light to avoid crushing any leaves. Stems and little muscles flexed under Sophia's hand, but Kim didn't lift her head.

"I'm so hungry," she said into her arms. Sophia glanced at the bowl of cold mac and cheese congealing on the table. "But that tastes like—" She swallowed. "Like something dead."

Kim's skin was clammy and streaked with yellow. Her hair was dull and thin enough to see through to her scalp, and her leaves were limp. It was obvious what she needed. Sophia took Kim's cold hands, pulled her to her feet, and walked her to the square of sunlight on the floor.

"Oh," Kim said, closing her eyes. For a moment, her eyelids were translucent green, but she shifted and the color vanished. She held out her arms in the light.

"Better?" Sophia asked.

"It's like a bath." Kim took off her shirt and pants and stood there naked, skin and leaves bright and bare. Pride flared in Sophia's chest: she had done that. Kim had needed something, and Sophia had shown her how to find it.

Over the next few weeks, Sophia watched Kim shift from person to creature, bigger than her body in a way that Sophia had always known her to be. Stems wriggled out of her skin. Leaves burst from the webbing between her fingers and exploded from her eyes. She stopped working on her article, content to spend her days bathing in sunlight instead. She grew greener and heavier until eventually, her leaves were so sprawling and heavy that she couldn't leave the apartment.

Kim asked Sophia to pick up some soil from the store. She poured it into a mixing bowl on the floor and planted her feet, shuffling them into the soft earth. Sophia tipped a cup of water over the soil and listened to Kim sigh, leaves rustling on her chest. Sophia thought about Kim's roots drinking up the water. She thought about the tiniest parts of Kim, the chloroplasts trembling in her cells, green and vibrant. How

Sophia's breath fed her and vice versa, a gorgeous exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen that healed the raw, scraping space between them.

Kim wriggled her toes in the mud. Her eyes were green and wild and looking right at Sophia, pinning her there like a stake. Without breaking eye contact, Kim reached into the bag, scooped up a handful of soil, and brought it to her open mouth, chewing, chewing.

That evening, Kim glided into their room after Sophia shut off the lights. Under the blankets, she pushed up Sophia's shirt and touched her with cool, probing fingers and the flats of her leaves. Sophia held still at first. Kim hadn't touched Sophia like this in months, or maybe ever: palms of leaves, palms of her hands, covering her. But after a moment, Sophia pressed her body back into Kim's. She tentatively tugged at Kim's stems and watched her eyes flutter. A dry root slithered along Sophia's jaw and prodded at her bottom lip. She took it in her mouth, hard and earthy between her teeth. When she swirled her tongue, Kim dug her nails into Sophia's back in a sweet, hot shock of pain.

"Sensitive," Kim panted. Her voice was changing to something a little raspier, more wind beneath the words. Stems and leaves spread across Sophia in a green, webbed tangle. She was raw as a newborn leaf, pressing starving kisses to Kim's skin, her stems. Sophia was a little seed, desire packed tight and ready to burst. Kim set her tongue behind Sophia's ear and it was smooth and slick, like syrup, not like spit, not like a human tongue. Her teeth were softening in her mouth, so it didn't hurt when she nipped at Sophia's jaw.

More stems were breaking out of Kim's wrists, roots curling and searching. Sophia had a vision of vines burrowing under her skin, sliding beneath her fingernails, coiling in her belly. *Use me*, she said somewhere in the dark earth of herself. *Root down here, let me be soil, let me crumble up beneath you.* Blunt stems pressed against Sophia's skin until it started to slacken and yield, and Kim's stems began to tunnel into Sophia's flesh. Kim's breath hitched when the very tips of the stems nudged inside. She moaned and pressed harder, vines wriggling into Sophia's arms, stomach, thighs, and down to the slit between her legs, tethering them together. It stung and burned and Sophia could hardly breathe around it, but her body made room. Sophia had never known this part of herself before, her own wet insides and how they could be a home for Kim. Flesh, it turned out, was a squirming, malleable thing. Kim was alive inside Sophia, moving under her skin and crawling through her meat. Sophia wrapped her legs around Kim's back and pushed out her chest, asking for more; she should have offered this up years ago.

The air grew sharp with the smell of iron as the bed filled with blood. Kim was taking up so much space inside Sophia that her organs felt squeezed. Dark green leaves heaved within her. Sophia's heartbeat ran hot and hard, speared through by Kim's roots, and her breath came in tiny little scrapes up her throat. Kim clamped two heart-shaped leaves on Sophia's eyes, and Sophia saw the bright green bricks of cells all stacked together, a sweet, vernal orderliness that she wanted to stuff down her own throat. When Kim pushed a leaf against the flat of Sophia's tongue and held it down, Sophia sealed her lips and sucked.

After, Sophia rinsed herself off in the shower and bandaged herself up. She stumbled back to the bed, knowing that she would do this again, was already looking forward to it. She flopped onto the mattress and breathed through her mouth. Her wounds pulsed underneath the bandages in a way that made her feel like turfed earth, raw and fertile and ready to be put to use. Next to her in the bed, Kim was fast asleep in her snarl of vines, her breath slow and even. Sophia twisted her neck to press her mouth to a leaf. It was warm beneath her lips.

About the Author

Sarah Zell is a writer and teacher in Minnesota. Her writing usually contains body horror, romance, and other gross things. You can find more of her stories on her website at sarahzellwrites.com.

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Strange Stars and Stranger Stars

Zach Smith

Ah, you've arrived, said Xarlox. Welcome to our strange little family reunion. No, I know you're not part of this family, specifically, but you have found it nonetheless, and you couldn't have found it unless you were invited. This isn't a family of what we are, no, this, surprisingly, is a family of stars. A strange family of stars, a family of strange stars.

What does that mean?

You'll find out.

You'll find out soon enough.

This little corner of the universe we call the Nebula. But it's not like any other Nebula. It's an unusual piece of the universe. It exists frozen in time. Part of and apart from the universe as a whole. Able to contain within its ill-defined, but ever-shrinking boundaries, stars that could only exist in the past and stars that can only exist in the far future.

Uncle Cris owns the Nebula, at least so much as anything (star or otherwise) can own the general nothingness of a region of space. He scours the Nebula, preparing for the reunion.

He is a strange star, Uncle Cris, strange in his nature yes, but also in his substance. A star made of strange matter.

There are six different flavors of quarks, all with unusual names: Up, Down, Top, Bottom, Charm, and of course Strange. Strange Matter is made up entirely of

strange quarks. Strange Matter is Color Superconductive and if any other kind of material touches strange matter, it will immediately become strange matter and rapidly transform into a gooey soup of quarks.

Strange matter makes for strange stars. You don't want to touch Uncle Cris. If, that is, what you were made of matter, but we both know that is not entirely the case. Regardless I would still avoid him.

He has not been the same for a while. He looks out from the Nebula, seeing the stars in the galaxy's overhead, getting closer and closer every day. They want his nebula, and it's getting harder for him to avoid their gaze.

It makes him angry, but sad too. Those Galaxies of ordinary stars, of various sizes and colors, don't understand their past, their antecedence, or their future. They want the Nebula, his Nebula, yet have forgotten what it is and why it is so important.

But Uncle Cris has not forgotten, and neither has the rest of the family.

Yes, he is a strange star, but hardly the strangest.

Thip arrives with a smattering of family of his own. Young stars, yellow and bright and ordinary with millions of years left in their ordinary lives. Uncle Cris gets the feeling that they will run off with the other ordinary stars in the ordinary galaxies if they could, or perhaps not "if they could" but "when they can."

Thip is no ordinary star. He is a Neutron Star. His substance a degenerate matter of decayed atoms, only the neutrons of what he once was, the remnant of a bigger brighter star who has shed the skin of his past. He is dense, the mass of about one and half times your sun, compacted within a radius of some six miles.

Just a small lake of superfluid neutrons.

Superconductive, superfluid, we could call this the superfamily if we wanted, instead of the strange family.

What is a superfluid?

Imagine if you were to stick a big wooden spoon into a pitcher of water, or better yet iced tea, and swirled it around, if that iced tea was a superfluid it would never stop spinning.

A pitcher of neutron matter would weigh far too much for any pitcher to hold. A single teaspoon of neutron matter would weigh more than the planet you come from.

But it's not just the young stars that Thip brings, he has brought Aunt Treots with him too. She is old, very old. The universe right now is some fourteen billion years old, and Treots has been burning for thirteen billion of those years. No star can be much older than that, at this time.

Maybe Aunt Treots, the red dwarf, isn't the strangest star in the Nebula, but it is strange the way she started with far less fuel than her nieces and nephews, yet she is older than the rest of them by a great deal and will remain, for another trillion years, long after the rest of them. Aunt Treots is both very old and still in her infancy. It will be many cosmological decades before she burns to nothing, and when she does it will be the end of the universe as we know it.

Given her size and age, there is little Aunt Treots can do, except remember the universe as it was, and tell us maybe, just maybe, given her age and experience and wisdom, what the universe will be like after she is gone. She sits alone with her

memories, her wisdom untapped, while Thip and Cris, and a few of the young and ordinary stars go about their business, setting up for the rest of the family.

There hasn't been a gathering like this in three cosmological decades, the time between each decade gets longer and longer and the family was worried there may not be another. The strange stars in the universe tend to be content with staying in their own galaxies, their own times. They don't need to remember their ancestry. Over time they forget. But every now and then they do remember and they do reconvene at the Nebula as they have done in decades past.

A cosmological decade is not a decade in the way you might know it. It is not a unit of time measured the way a regular decade is. Each Decade is ten times as long as the last. The universe was a hundred million years old during the last strange family gathering, though it was much the same as the universe today, in an overall sort of way.

Uzreilt had often been ignored by the family for being so different from the rest of them. Yet as she has grown older and matured, the others can't help but be drawn to her, to her alien beauty and something that it would be poetic to categorize as indescribable, but scientifically can be described if not fully appreciated.

She's a Magnetar, a very active and very powerful neutron star. Around her glows a magnetic aura so powerful you can almost see it radiating from her with the naked eye. Her life, her beauty, that which makes her special, is fleeting, transient, it will only last ten thousand years or so, after which she will be more like Uncle Thip, just another neutron star. Ten thousand years to a star is hardly any time at all.

Of course, a neutron star is strange in its own right, and she will always be part of the family, even if she wasn't accepted at first. For now, though, she will use her magnetism to draw the attention of the other strange stars.

Dric arrives from the Small Magellanic Cloud and Wophil from Mayall's Object, both with their own families of stars in tow.

Cousin Praaclul, who was riding along on the celestial journey through time and the filaments of the universe with Dric. Had been dropped off in Wolf-Lundmark-Melotte, because he was convinced that Wophil forgot how to find the Nebula.

As Wophil, passed through Wolf-Lundmark-Melotte he saw this forlorn star, in a galaxy he shouldn't have been in at all unless it was simply to pass through, the way the other stars have passed through time and space and matter to reach the Nebula. When Wophil took a closer look at this strange and out-of-place star he noticed that it was Cousin Praaclul, and laughing, picked him up to bring him along to the reunion.

Why shouldn't Cousin Praaclul have been in that galaxy?

Praaclul is a quasi-star. And you thought the other stars were strange, Praaclul can't even exist in the universe as it is now, but only in the early universe. He is a star so large that his core has already collapsed into a black hole, and his outer reaches were unaffected by the collapse. He is massive, a thousand times as massive as your sun, with a waist nearly as wide as the orbit of your Pluto. Yet still a single star. He keeps his equilibrium by the infall of stellar material.

Dric and Wophil are strange stars too, nontraditional stars. Dric is a Q Star and Wophril a Preon Star.

I've already explained the Neutron Star, a Preon Star is even smaller and even more powerful.

What's a preon?

It's the things that makeup quarks (which themselves are already very small). A neutron star is some twelve miles or so in diameter, a Preon Star, has the same weight roughly, compacted into the size of a softball.

Anything heavier (by volume) I dare you to find.

Well, there is something heavier, of course, Cousin Wophril is a Q Star. Q does not stand for Quark but the conserved particles number. A Q Star is also called a Grey Hole. So heavy, so dense, so compact, that like a black hole it will take in light, but unlike a black hole it is not quite heavy enough to take in all light.

Harex and Niheft stand off to the side. They are not of the universe as it is.

Sure, their antecedents may have connected them to the other strange stars of the family, but they have come from a distant future, altogether alien to the gathering of the strange stars of the Nebula.

Harex is an Iron Star and Niheft, his wife, a black dwarf. Old and ancient but holding on to one another for dear life, and this eternal grip has kept them alive beyond the years that eternity itself seems to represent.

A black dwarf is a white dwarf that has grown so old and cold that it no longer emits any light. You won't see these stars until maybe Decade 15 at the earliest.

Harex, the Iron Star, is older yet, much much older. He is a massive solid cold ball of iron from Decade 1500. Much older than the other strange stars that gather here.

The rest of the family arrives.

They are strange and stranger even compared to the strange family, in that they are not even stars at all. Zliamip is a Black Hole and Treota a lowly photon.

Sure, these are common in the universe now, and will be for much longer. Strange to be at a family gathering like this yes, but they are both the distant offspring of the other stars gathered in the Nebula.

Black holes have been in the Universe since just after the Big Bang and will remain in the universe long after the last of the more traditional stars burn to nothing. Between decades 38 to 99, they will be the only recognizable objects in a vast cold, and dark universe. Some of the biggest black holes will be around a few decades longer.

How old is Aunt Zliamip? Who can say? And I wouldn't ask her, it would be quite rude to do so. She may have been a star before, she may have been born anywhere from Decade 6 to Decade 14. Or she may not have been a star at all, but an unexploded chunk of the Big Bang itself, born in Decade 0 or as it was not even born at all.

And what of Uncle Treota, who was never a star. He exists now, he and his kind existed in the distant past, and they will exist in the far future. Given certain universe properties, after Decade 100 Uncle Treota, the lowly photon, will exist and move about at the speed of light in a dark and uneventful universe so vast and empty that it will seem as though he is standing still. In the utter darkness, a single photon will burn bright as a star. Single candles and what not.

But maybe I'm getting too philosophical.

The end of the universe is a different story altogether.

The family is all here, all the strange stars that could make it to the Nebula.

There are many that don't come, too many to name or even to count. Ultra exotic stars like Plank Stars that are so small and compact they can only exist inside a black hole, and Black stars different from Black Holes and Black Dwarfs; are all unable to attend the reunion.

There are more stars that exist in the universe than there are grains of sand on any given beach. In the vast universe, there are more stars than grains of sand on every beach in every world, as sandy beaches are rarer than you might imagine.

But those who have arrived at the Nebula, enjoy each other's company. Asking how things are in the galaxies and times they come from. There is a lot to tell, updating, and debriefing for the others in the family.

Uncle Cris, who owns the Nebula, and who has organized this gathering, brings out the family scrapbook, which shows the history of the family and the Nebula; and by proxy the history of the universe, from the Big Bang to the inception of the proto-stars, the genesis of the quasi-star, the traditional stars, and onward to the black dwarfs, the black holes, the iron stars and the last of the lowly photons.

Cousin Dric and Uncle Wirple pack up and begin their preparations to head back to their home galaxies. It is no easy feat to come here to the Nebula, and only slightly easier to return home.

But before they can leave, there is one more tradition they must uphold above all the others.

They must stand for the family photo.

They line up by size.

Praaclul the Quasi-Star, so large he dwarfs every other star in the family, stands far in the back to get the rest in the shot.

The iron star Harex is next, as he is a large star, very old and very cold, and his perfectly smooth iron surface, unruined in the vacuum of space, reflects the light of the surrounding stars like a mirror.

Many of the Strange family, like Uncle Cris, are compact stars. Their interesting properties are inversely proportional to their actual size, measured by their surface and not their influence on the environment around them. They are so small, they stand in the front.

Aunt Zliamip, the black hole, can't actually be seen in the photograph, but what can be seen is the way that the light, from Praaclul and the other stars, bends around her and shines no light through her absent middle section.

The photon Treota, the oldest of the family, the only one to survive well into the dark decades, is in the portrait too, along with a billion billion other photons emitted from the other strange stars gathered at the Nebula, they are the reasons the picture can even be taken at all.

Present too in the strange photograph, are the millions and millions of stars from the neighboring galaxy.

Through the lens of his camera Uncle Cris can see the stars in the neighboring galaxy coming toward him, always coming toward him, toward the Nebula. They want it, this little corner of space where the strange stars gather every couple of

decades. They are coming for it, they want it for their own normal main-sequence lives.

And he is looking at those stars, seeing them coming toward him, and organizing themselves so that they spell out a single word... leave.

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Zach Smith is a writer of mostly short fiction in a variety of genres from the suburban Philadelphia area. Recent stories of his have appeared in *Concinnity*, *New Pop Lit*, and the *Short Humour Site*. He is currently working on two story collections: "Clouds Over Pancake Mountain" and "Realms Beyond Midnight World: A VHS Mix Tape." You can find links to some of his other stories and unusual reviews at: theobscuritiesymposium.wordpress.com.

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Tree of Life (pg. 17)

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