

PREVIEW ISSUE

augur



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Kate Heartfield
Cathy Smith
Terese Mason Pierre
Saquina Karla C. Guiam
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a little augury: the futures we hold

Kerrie Seljak-Byrne

This is Augur's start, so let's start with augurs.

It took some time to find the right name for this magazine. I'm a picky perfectionist when it comes to titles, and when you add in neurodivergence you end up with many, many lists involved come selection day. But augur was the word that stood out to me first—and it was the one I came back to over and over again. Augur. An ancient Roman practice of reading futures in the flight patterns of birds. There is so much tangled in this: magic, myth, imagination, storytelling, and a clashing of the real and the unreal.

In the end, it was the one I came back to permanently.

My fellow editors did not object, which was a great first sign. The more I thought about it, the more I fell in love with it. Augury was everything I wanted from this magazine. Not the explicit kind of augury. I do not want to be a Roman man staring at the sky. But I do want to deal in futures; I think, really, that any writer or creator or editor is already dealing in futures. Not just the kinds bursting out from glorious space operas or quiet near-future explorations, but those tucked away in margins and glue and bent covers and punctuation. Hidden in the makeshift permanence of written-down stories, these futures are left to be found by someone after the texts have been published. From the moment it is written, a story is a creature of futures, continuing to exist only in the futures where it is next read.

When I was a high school student, and I'd just been accepted into the University of Toronto, I attended an introductory lecture. They talked about why books, reading, literature mattered—why, as they put it, lies mattered. This circling ouroboros of fiction and untruth got caught somewhere in my lungs. I was captivated.

I still like thinking of literature as beautiful—or sometimes very ugly—lies. It's a fabulous entry point into thinking about the mechanics of why we read. Especially when talking about speculative fiction, which must be even larger lies than "realist" work! I remain fixated on exploring what truths, almost truths, or very useful lies the stories around me hold.

But I also want to explore how the little truths, realnesses, dreams, and gestures can become a part of our canon, both literary and real. As we dig deeper into an era where the digital is the real, text overcomes us. What isn't a story, these days? What doesn't dig at our eyes and burrow into our minds, to be told another day? So when we collect fiction, when we build storytelling mechanisms that deal in cold, hard, truthy lies, there also must be a pull to look at the futurity nurtured within these pieces.

Whose stories are we telling. What work do they perform. What actions do we take by enabling them to be read.

What futures will they foster when they are read.

If you watch our kickstarter video, you'll see the slogan we landed on: our stories contribute to the futures we need. That "we" is not us, the editorial staff. Nor is it necessarily any given reader. It is about collective futures, made word by word by an intersection of voices—futures that pull together perspectives and celebrate difference. Not necessarily a real future, the one we live in, but the one we imagine.

More than anything, after all, it is the futures we imagine—the ones that coil in us long after we've put down the text—that have power.

So go. Read. Celebrate the reprint pieces that we have brought together for you.

And practice a little augury with us as you do.



Illustration by Ann Sheng

the man who killed coen

Lawrence Stewen

This piece was originally published in The Spectatorial.

Come now, *anak-anak*. Gather close and listen.

I know you've come to hear tales of fiery men who fly *garuda* through the eye of a typhoon, or of *naga* who rise from the sea to swallow the moon.

Yet this is a story set not long ago or far away, but right here and right now.

Listen closely, for there are cracks in my story. Cracks where the black magic seeps through.

Do not fall in the cracks, *anak-anak*.

Do not seek the man who killed Coen.



I lived alone in my workshop near a village, in the heart of the jungle. Once, the villagers came to me and I hammered tin slates for their roofs, smelted steel parts for their scooters, and beat copper for their *rebab* so that even the

old gods in the trees slumbered to their sweet song. In turn, they paid me with money and with talk from the village. In time, I knew who was chief among the elders, what the *dukun* advised for forlorn lovers, the name of the latest newborn, what *hantu* haunted the jungle, what trinkets I needed to avoid them, the newest phones the youngsters brought back when they returned from the city, and the ones who were exiled.

Then, one day, a road was carved through the earth by yellow machines driven by young men who could not stop smoking. I remember watching them as I curved a fish hook. They were distant, but I could see their shapes through the leaves: iron teeth chewed earth, dried lips breathed fire.

The first van came when the road was finished. It brought the village everything I already made, sold it all for less, and then drove away to the next village, full of money and nothing else.

Every week a van would come.

Every week I saw fewer villagers.

My tongs lost their warmth and became stiff while bird-shit coated my anvil. I no longer bothered to make the long trek to the bus station where I picked up my ore, my coal, my ardour. At times when the night was black and moonless, when the tapirs roamed the lightless village following the sweet stench of garbage, when the screams of a *penanggal* smothered any curious minds, I would kindle a little flame in my furnace and beat a lump of bronze with my smallest hammer until the dawn found me, grey-haired and red-eyed.

It was on one such night that I saw him approach.

He emerged from the foliage with nothing but his muddy shorts and sandals. His body was pale amber, with prominent ribs like a horrendous maw closing around his *sarung*. I thought him *hantu*, but the holy trinkets I was given by the villagers had long since lost their power. I pushed over my anvil and opened the iron box beneath.

“Bapak, forgive me, it is I—Arief,” he said.

I shut the box, replacing the anvil.

“Arief—Fauzi’s son, am I correct?”

“Not anymore, bapak.”

We shared a meal of rice and dried fish. At first he ate timidly, but the way his eyes watched the steam from the pot, the concave arch of his sunken belly, the layer of grime over his scratched and stung skin—it all spoke of days wandering the jungle with only mosquitoes for company and grubs for nourishment. I told him to have as much as he wanted, and he shovelled handfuls of food into his drooling mouth.

After he licked his *pincuk* clean, we sat in silence, listening to the fading flames of my furnace. Then he spoke.

“Bapak, I need you to make me a weapon.”

A juvenile monitor lizard scampered through a pile of dead leaves, and the music of the insects stopped.

"I will not help you begin a feud, boy. You can take some food, a shirt, and some money for the bus. Then you leave at sunrise. That is all."

"No, bapak, I swear by Allah's might that I intend no harm for my family or those who chased me from the village. I need a weapon to kill Coen."

The lizard snapped at a pale, formless thing tangled in the bushes.

"Boy, I've forged *parang* that have cut branches from the jungle's first trees and *keris* sharp enough for a man to shave. But even I doubt I could make a weapon that would puncture old Coen's granite hide. And even if I could, where is the great hunter who would wield it?"

The hands that gripped my shoulders held on like the talons of a *pontianak*. Arief's eyes were sunken and hollow, but they held a soul that burned with star-fire.

"Listen, old man. Three days ago my mother tied my hands behind my back while I slept, and my father dragged me to the elders' hut. There I saw Rafi, whose face had been torn and beaten by his grandfather's bamboo cane. I would have held him. I would have kissed him, but I was scared to even look at him, because the elders said that if I did so I could expect the same. There, my father proclaimed that I was no longer his son. There, the elders agreed that we were no longer welcome in the village. All this because a young girl saw us holding hands by the river. We were led to the village edge, at the jungle's mouth, where my friends and my cousins waited, boys who we played football with and who laughed with us under the swollen moon with smuggled rum. There, they held your *parang* and your *keris* and chased us into the jungle until our feet collapsed from under us because of the thorns and twigs that stuck through our soles. But even so, I was okay because I had Rafi and he had me, and on the second day we joked and smiled while we washed our wounds. We talked about finding work as sailors and visiting Singapore or Thailand where no one would glance our way. I did not see..."

He broke off as tears etched his features. His grip slackened, then he let go. He held himself now, curled up and shaking.

"I did not see... did not... there was nothing left—"

I clutched his head to my chest as he broke.

"We shouldn't have... shouldn't have slept by the water."

His sobs ruptured the night's silent skin. My scarred hands have handled molten steel and fiery embers, yet they felt useless against his cold, shaking back.

I held him until we inhaled the smoke of the dead fire and heard the insects resume their music. The lizard waddled back into the dark, a plastic bag caught in its teeth.

We were deep into the night. My furnace kept us awake with its heat, like that of a fallen sun, and my hammer, engraved with my father-in-law's blessing, tamed the glowing steel.

Was it the steel that would kill Coen? I admired Arief's confidence, but young men are fickle fires, and even the brightest may be blown out by a puff of wind. Even as my sweat mingled with the metal, I could not banish the thought that another morsel was throwing itself into Coen's waiting jaws.

Coen? An old name, a foreign name. A name that came from across the sea on ships bearing guns to erase us, clothes to constrain us, and a language to silence us. If you asked the village elders what they remember from that faded era, they would tell you how they were reduced to servitude, and how they were displaced within their own lands to practice customs not their own. But there would be gaps in those tales where the events are not so clear, a blurring where the shadows slip through, where reality distorts and bends. Ask anyone else and they will either recite paragraphs memorized from history books at school or just smile and shake their heads.

"Sorry, mas."

But these are not events to be passed through the mind and then fed to the past's hungry shadow. They are ripples from a distant time. They are rituals that call him from the jungle's depths, and give him an appetite for toxic waste and human flesh.

The villagers named him Coen. They said he was once a gnarled, old, white man who combined the stolen arts of dead *dukun* with the worship of the cannibalistic *Yesus Kristus*, and took the form of a great reptile to torment his *pribumi* slaves. Others have said that Coen is even older than this: the result of *Setan* walking the earth on the night of an eclipse and mating with a Jurassic abomination half-fossilized in the womb of a volcano.

But I will say that Coen is neither of these things. Coen is what slipped through the wrinkle of our history. He arrived when the yellow machines carved the village roads; he came with the silver vans full of empty wares; he appeared with the electronic devices that children hold with hands too old; he emerged with the empty hovels where the ghosts of craftsmen stand, as their bodies are replaced by distant factories churning out more things than any two hands could ever put together.

The red spearhead screamed inside the bucket of cold water. Metallic steam clouded my vision and filled my lungs.

"Bapak, what are these?"

Arief squatted beside the hole beneath my anvil. The iron box was open, and in his hands he held a bronze figure. It caught the sparks that flew from the flame.

I laid down the spearhead and knelt beside him.

Reaching for the box, I picked up an idol of a woman. As I traced the fine details of her hair and face, my callouses met the waves of her dress, the curves of her body.

“This one was my wife. We stayed in the village once, together. She left me when I refused to move to the city.”

I put her back, and one by one I examined each of the bronze figures I had created in my nights of solitude. My father-in-law, who taught me how to wield a hammer; my parents long passed; the villagers who once frequented my workshop; even some of the young men who dug the road and never came back.

Arief nodded as I put them away, his eyes vacant.

“Bapak, why didn’t you follow your wife?”

I opened my mouth, but my reasons and my excuses formed into an iron ball in my throat. I swallowed the ball and muttered something about how he should sleep. He didn’t ask again.

I continued to work on the spearhead, though it was already sharp enough to puncture three layers of hard leather. I brought it to the grindstone. It needed to puncture the hide of Coen.

The sparks flew skyward, returning to the stars.

The sky was white on the morning she left.

I saw her walk out the door in a dream, heard it close like an eyelid: swift, quiet, blinding.

Our television droned: a colourless cathedral filled with a crowd of people, their faces a blurred mass of pixels.

She took the bus at noon. She could hear the roar of the city from the bus stop. It was guttural and low, the moans of an animal in labour.

The bus was empty and the driver was a computer terminal.

“Ticket?” the driver purred, its screen struggling to form a human smile.

There was a television on the bus; she stared at it and refused to look out the windows.

I was on the television, still sleeping in our bed.

My face was missing.

The sky was white on the morning she left.

I turned it black when I burned our house down.

We left before the birds broke the dawn’s silence, while the scent of frangipani still lingered between the trees.

Arief led the way, the glittering spearhead fixed to a teak branch that glowed red in the patches of frail sunlight.

I brought my skinning knife with me. Arief did not question why I took the blade, and his bloodless face mirrored my own: the masks of dancers on death’s sharp teeth.

The twigs beneath our feet echoed like cracking ribs in the green maze. As the hours went by, the sun told me we were running out of time.

We did not want to catch Coen wide awake and hungry.

The trees vanished as we stepped into a clearing. The barren expanse stretched for kilometres until the distant edge where the jungle returned, a dark line against the horizon.

It was a vast scar, the remains of an old fire that burned out decades ago when a company from the city deforested the land to build a factory. Somewhere, somehow, they had lost their investors and their money. What remained was the plain of dried grass and the stumps of trees scattered like small burial mounds. Those mounds surrounded a malformed skeleton of steel piping, which lay collapsed where the aborted factory was meant to be. In front of its base was a circle of empty machines, paralyzed in a tableau of action as though their operators had jumped off and fled from some unforeseen and terrible force. One excavator still had its teeth sunk in the ground, and the depression had become a pond, a spawning pool for water insects and tadpoles.

Crushed cigarettes, dusty plastic bottles, a construction helmet, a dried bucket of paint, a woman in a bikini on the cover of a crumpled magazine: the detritus followed us like an old conversation.

We stopped walking when we saw the pit.

Lined with concrete, cracked and broken, the pit's intended use was forgotten. I could only guess that it was a site to dump industrial waste.

The dry inner walls were scrawled with long, jagged scratch marks. Black water, still with tar, gathered like shadows far below the rim. Rusted barrels floated in the mire with a buoyancy so still they seemed static. Along with the barrels bobbed an old rectangular slab of corrugated tin plate. The plate blinked –

ripples formed on the water, like muscles tensing beneath skin.

Arief stepped onto the pit's crude inner platform, a thin corroded ring that lined the rim. The platform creaked under his weight, bending inward towards the filth. He kept the spear raised, its tip angled to pierce.

A flash of teeth, a surge of dirty water, a pale grey blur covered in scales. Coen slammed onto the platform, which bent and snapped as he dragged the ruined metal into the water.

Arief jumped back to the grass, made jabbing motions with his spear, and yelled as a shade passed over his calm features.

Coen lunged halfway out of the pit, his claws scrambling to get a hold of the dirt, his jaws gaping.

The spear flicked and thick blood oozed from the creature's tongue. A reptilian hiss slithered through my bones.

Steel slid through scales, then struck again, twisting—and opened a hole in

Coen's belly. A puddle of brackish blood formed under Coen, who flailed and snapped. The hiss that had shaken me was now pitiful and soft, the wheezing of a balloon as the air squeezes out.

We waited a while after Coen stopped moving, listening to our breathing and the thrum of adrenaline in our hearts.

In his stillness, the blur that obscured his appearance dissipated. Those bright cobalt eyes slowly closed, and then opened again. Crimson tears trailed from their corners while the round pupils contracted, before dilating into shapelessness. Pearlescent scales shimmered beneath a layer of oozing tar, like patches of light in a fading storm. Rusty shards and rotten splinters protruded from that slender serpentine body: the remnants of previous hunters who contested Coen, and failed.

Then we saw his left leg. It was strangled above the foot by a length of barbed wire that disappeared down the pit and into the water. Shrivelled and atrophied, it was a wonder that he had possessed the will to even move.

Coen released his last sigh in a sound as soft as a dreaming infant's breath. The air that twisted between the gaps in his teeth follows me still. It carries the silence of something forgotten.

"Cut him open, bapak. I must know." Arief's voice contained no room for negotiations.

I bent over the pit and nearly dropped my knife as my eyes were flooded with the chemical reek. I sawed at the bit of wire until it snapped, then together we dragged the enormous reptile completely onto the matted grass.

We turned Coen over and I cut just below the ribs, sawing until I reached his pelvis. A repugnant odour gushed from the incision. It smelled like a garbage dump. Several times, my knife hit something solid inside him, but despite this and the smell, I carried on until the creature's organs were splayed beneath the midday sun.

The flies gathered like an afterthought.

Coen's insides were filled with gears, cogs, pistons, old batteries, wires, scrap metal, and a transparent liquid that shone rainbow hues at a certain angle.

There was no sign of anything that could have possibly been alive.

change as seen through an orrery of celestial fire

Michael Matheson

*This piece was originally published in the Superhero
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Shurui peels long strips of burnt skin off her shoulders in front of the bathroom mirror. She grits her teeth as they tear away down her back. The days between immolations are always painful; the moments in which she burns down to ash blinding, but nothing compared to the waiting — to the slow build of days before the fire frees. Her body a cage, too-narrow knit with bird-hollow bones.

The rest — the rebirth and what comes after —
The rest is agony.

Has been since she first rose, broken, garbed in lank, slick flesh. Since she tumbled to Earth in a scatter of pinions, remiges, and retrices, her sun-bright feathers ripped away in the heat of her descent. Since she spotted the first Xifeng bathing in a moonlit lake. And fell.

The whole of it, now and always, Chang'e's fault. A terrible gift she hadn't known better than to accept.

"You alright?" asks Zetian from the doorway. Her lover takes a step into

the bathroom to lay a glacial hand on Shurui's burning back. The frost of Zetian's fingers a momentary respite. *Like scorched, shed feathers brushing the surface of a distant, long-ago lake bathed silver.* Zetian's qi strong, but mortal. The ice coating her hand fades in a swift billow of steam. It fills the air between them. Zetian barely draws her hand back in time to avoid burned fingers.

"It's bad this time," she says quietly.

"Too long between burns," grunts Shurui, breathing through her mouth.

It's been a long time since their last trip to Mount Sinai Hospital. Most of those visits not long after they officially got together. After they decided to try living together instead of just falling into Zetian's bed most nights. After Shurui carted her couple of boxes worth of possessions on the TTC up to Zetian's Spadina and Willcocks apartment from her own place in the Market.

Shurui remembers the looks the nurses used to give her. How sure they were that Shurui was abusing Zetian. How sure they were she kept lighting her lover on fire.

Not that they weren't right. They just had the wrong end of it: not on purpose. Never on purpose.

Six years of relearning control after living so long alone later, and those years will mean nothing if she can't control the furnace raging in her now. If she can't quiet her qi.

So many centuries later, and she's still a co-opted version of her own Celestial mythology. A western phoenix burning and beginning again instead of her own radiant fenghuang self.

She knows what happens if she can't quiet it. Knows *exactly* where that leads. She learned the hard way. With the first Xifeng.

"You going to be alright?" asks Zetian – *Xifeng* Zetian. Always a Xifeng in her life. She's drawn to them like the sun. Always seeking their warmth. She nods. Exhales.

It's that care and that patience that have kept them together. Zetian the only one who doesn't think her condition a burden. Zetian the only one there for her when her body can do nothing but scream for days on end. That sense of unity, of co-operation, served them well in their separate careers, but much better once they struck out together. A life of crime far easier if you have someone to share it with.

Zetian waits until Shurui's breathing quiets before she leaves her to her ablutions. Says "I'm here if you need me," as she leaves the room.

Shurui listens to her lover's footfalls travelling away as she turns on the tap. She cups her hands under an icy waterfall and pours the water onto her back. The steam rising from her shoulders makes a sauna of the tiny bathroom.

This form was never meant to house the qi of a fenghuang. She didn't think that far ahead when she descended from the peak of Liushi Shan – when she left behind the Kunlun range and gave up the sky. She can't remember what her plans were then. Beyond Xifeng.

She pours more water across her back. Forces her qi quiet. So she can pass for human.



An hour later, Shurui sits in the Starbucks a few minutes from home, set just back from the southeast corner of Harbord and Spadina, waiting for Xinhua. Outside, amid all the concrete and slate grey, autumn paints the trees gold and the sky in pale drifts of cloud, darker at their edges. Darker still in the distance: rain not far off. The smell of it is in the air. Inside, the café is mostly empty, the decor cast in warm, earthy tones.

Shurui likes the muddy, arboreal feel of the place. It offsets the autumn chill, denies winter in its turn, and welcomes spring with fair familiar hands. Her jacket lies slung over her chair behind her. Soft against her back. It's quiet here; she likes the quiet.

A cup of tea steams between her palms. She bleeds off excess qi by keeping the tea's temperature constant. A trick she picked up from a wuyi, Chen Xifeng, not long after Shurui made her way north to the Colony of Vancouver Island. Back during the second BC gold rush, when the mass migration up from California began.

She learned a great deal from that Xifeng before the wuyi died: better methods for regulating her qi. How to make herbal medicine. The theory of acupuncture — the proper practice of which has always escaped her. She stopped peddling it shortly before she started working her way east, helping build the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s, disguised as a man.

—Had taken up, instead, the sole practice of making herbal medicines and teas by the time she'd found her way east to then-Muddy York's Ward District, back when Toronto's first Chinatown still lay nestled along York and Elizabeth, bordered by Queen and Dundas. And as the old city's Chinatown moved, as it did frequently, Shurui moved with it.

"Your tea's cold." Shurui startles as Xinhua settles down across from her. She slings her own folded jacket over the back of a chair and sets down her steaming coffee. The waft of it fills the space between them. "I'm sorry, am I late?"

The cup in her hands *has* cooled while her attention was elsewhere. "Not very much." Shurui sets her tea aside. Smiles at her friend.

Shurui watches her while Xinhua settles in, pays half mind to her friend's talk. This young woman, too, is a fixture in her life. Has been since Xinhua was an undergraduate at UofT in need of a history tutor. And their ties go deeper, though she doesn't have the heart to tell Xinhua the whole of it: the full body costume of the Xun Long — the Swift Dragon — conceals her face, but does nothing to hide her voice. Unlike Xinhua, Shurui does not speak when they fight in costume.

It means so much to Xinhua, not being known. And Shurui is so tired of having only enemies — of having only dead lovers in her wake.

It's been easy to stay friends, long though the tutoring has ended. Shurui will always look to be in her early twenties; something she has made peace with. And Xinhua, like her, is desperately lonely.

Sometimes, too, it's easier to talk with someone who understands so little, instead of Zetian who understands too much.

A sleek sports car and several police cruisers in pursuit hurtle past the window, and Xinhua stops mid-sentence. Both women track the rush of air that follows — the masked woman at its centre that streaks through the air. A visible wake of whirling leaves and air lit with bursts of lightning in her wake.

The rest of the café's patrons crowd toward the windows, trying to get a glimpse of the chase scene. "The Xun Long is out early today," teases Shurui, sipping at her coffee to hide the fear awake in her belly. She knows *exactly* who the flying woman is. Her heart races. Does Zetian know the Leiyu is out of hospital already? Shurui takes out her phone casually. Calls her lover. Tries not to panic as the words "This customer is not available" whisper in her ear.

Across from her, Xinhua shakes her head. "No. Costume's similar though. Looked more like the Leiyu. Guess she's out of hospital. And she's changed her look again," grumbles Xinhua into her coffee.

Shurui takes a deep breath. Makes mental calculations: three blocks. *Less* than three blocks. She could run it. Remembering it's her turn to speak, she asks quietly: "Seems soon for her to have been released." Doesn't add that what Zetian did to her skull should have left her in a coma. That when they brought the building down on top of her, the Leiyu shouldn't have lived.

Does the Leiyu know where they live? Could she?

"You read the interview in the *Star*?" asks Xinhua.

"Yes," lies Shurui. *Interview*? "How awful, what happened to her," she prods.

Xinhua nods. "She's lucky there wasn't a concussion. She heals fast, but after what Nepenthe did to her—"

"Nepenthe?" Not Nepenthe: Adaora in Arizona with Tomiko at the time.

"Yeah," says Xinhua, confused by Shurui's reaction. "The Leiyu says that's why she can't remember what happened. Must have been Nepenthe, because who else could wipe her memory?" Xinhua shakes her head and finishes her coffee.

A gift. *An extraordinary gift*. Unless it's a lie? Is the Leiyu that clever? Vindictive and cold, yes. But she does not lie. Has never lied. As far as Shurui knows.

Shurui rubs at sore eyes. At the heat pounding behind her skull.

"Are you alright?" asks Xinhua.

"Fine," says Shurui. Dons a false smile. Forces herself to remain calm through centuries of long practice. Forces herself to trust that the Leiyu is telling the truth; to keep playing her role a little longer, until she can reasonably excuse herself without giving anything away. Straightens in her chair and says: "Tell me how your mother is doing."



“Zetian? I’m home!” Shurui waits for the awful moment where Zetian isn’t there. Hoping today is not that day.

“Yes, I can tell,” answers Zetian from the kitchen. The sound of bubbling pots and the scent of tofu frying in black bean sauce follow her words, the waft of soy and garlic sesame lung-searing strong. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

Shurui collapses against the wall of their apartment, limp-boned with relief. She shuts the door behind her and shucks off her outerwear. The Leiyu has not yet come for them. She does not yet know who they are. Or may honestly not know who almost killed her. Zetian is still safe. She slips into the tiny kitchen and leans against the fridge by the doorway so Zetian can’t see her shaking. “You’re making dinner before a job? You don’t want to order in?”

Zetian raises an eyebrow at her and swishes the wok on the stove. “After what happened last time? How’s Xinhua?”

Shurui slips a takeout flyer on the side of the fridge out from under its magnet. “She’s okay. Too many hours at work and school. And Lin’s still on her back about cutting her hair short again. No, seriously, we could bring food in.”

Zetian covers the wok and turns down the heat. Sweeps out of her eyes steam-frizzled hairs that have escaped from her ponytail, and gives Shurui her full attention. “What is it?”

“What’s what?” Zetian waits, close-lipped, while Shurui fusses with the takeout menu in her hands, burns it to a crisp and lets the ashes fall. “The Leiyu’s out of hospital,” she whispers.

“She’s *alive*?” shouts Zetian.

“She thinks it was Nepenthe. It’s fine.”

“It is not *fine*.” Zetian’s hands flex, and the entire kitchen flash freezes as she struggles to regain control of her qi. “Why does she think it’s Nepenthe?” she asks when she stops quaking.

“She told the reporters at the hospital she can’t remember what happened.”

Zetian laughs. Pinches the bridge of her nose where her glasses used to rest before the surgery. “I’m not sure if I should be relieved or upset that I don’t get the credit for trying to kill her.” She looks at the pot, frozen to the stove, and turns off the element. “You’re right. We’re eating out.”

Shurui crosses the room and folds Zetian into her arms. Breathes in the cool, cassia-bark scent of her lover. “She will not come for us.”

“No, the Xun Long will come for us,” she mumbles.

“Because the Xun Long *always* comes for us,” smiles Shurui, eyes closed, chin resting on Zetian’s shoulder. “Xinhua’s always been reliable that way.”

“I’m not sure how much longer I can keep doing this,” Zetian says into Shurui’s neck. Shurui can feel the tightness of her lover’s jaw.

“Nothing lasts forever,” says Shurui. Brushes her lover’s stray hair off her face, and kisses her forehead.

For a time, they are the only two people in the world.





Illustration by Maybelle Leung.

Shurui hates the quiet before a heist. The waiting. With Zetian on edge, waiting farther down the Spadina strip, there is only the commotion of Chinatown and the rumble of streetcars to distract her.

It is not enough.

This place is too familiar to her. She's lived along the Spadina strip, or near it, since Chinatown migrated here in the 1950s — into what used to be a Jewish quarter of the city. This, the Chinatown she still thinks of as home, even though she's moved north along Spadina to be with Zetian. This, the Chinatown people talk of when they speak of Toronto's Chinatown, despite the five others spread across Toronto's amalgamated sprawl. The *Greater Toronto Area* she reminds herself. Those words still awkward on her tongue two decades later.

What is a decade to her, but a moment? She who has lived long enough in this too-small body that she sometimes struggles to remember which century she occupies.

A small child in a dress, thick leggings, and a miniature jacket, stops to smile up at her. The tiny mittens on the sleeves of the girl's coat flap in the autumn wind like wings. Shurui smiles back involuntarily as the girl's mother calls her. The little one waves and is gone, vanished back into the crush.

Shurui watches her disappear among the clutches of residents and late night interlopers wandering the streets looking for a meal or heading deeper into the city's downtown core. The street vendors have hauled their wares in for the night, but Chinatown's restaurants are still open. The smell of them strung down the strip is thick and heady. She and Zetian stopped at Mother's Dumplings before they settled in to wait, but her body burns through fuel at an absurd pace, and she's already hungry again. Her stomach rumbles, and she ignores it to watch the street and the crowds.

Still too many people. She doesn't like working with this large an audience. Once she starts burning she won't be recognizable — the coming agony not something she looks forward to, but necessary. It's Zetian she worries about. In costume as the Hei Jiang her lover's features are covered, but it's now, while Zetian's still in street clothes and mingling, that she might be a memorable face.

Then she catches sight of the Xun Long running along a rooftop across the street, shadowing the armoured car they've been waiting for. Her focus narrows in, until it is only her and Zetian and the G4S truck. Waits until the truck stops on its scheduled run at the RBC, National, and Scotiabank trifecta at the intersection of Spadina and Dundas — until the guard and the hopper leave the truck to start their ATM refill runs.

Shurui wades into the crowd, shouting "*Huǒ a!*" — *Fire* — to clear the street; gets only minimal reaction. Cars swerve around her and horns blare as she steps into traffic. Fire boils off her skin and catches on her flesh as she sets herself alight. As she assumes her role as the Fenghuang. She ignores the pain as the fire eats at her; as she has done for centuries. Lets the flames fan and

furl in her hands, and lobs a fireball almost as tall as she is at the armoured car.

It rips the vehicle into the air, crumpling its side. And now the crowd runs as the car crashes back down to asphalt. Smoke streams everywhere, onlookers screaming as they scatter. Shurui cannot hear them — the fire roaring in her ears. Her focus narrows further down to the Xun Long as Xinhua leaps from wall to lamppost to street. Shurui flares hotter, a pillar of fire, aware that she only needs to buy time for Zetian to freeze the security team, grab the money, and run. Sirens doppler in the distance as the Xun Long shouts something at her she can't hear.

Shurui stands her ground as the Xun Long rushes her. Xinhua's own qi crashing on the air like a wave ahead of her. And then there is only the commotion of combat, and restraint as she tries not to burn Xinhua.

All she has to do is hold. Until this body burns down to ash. And wait to resurrect. Zetian her anchor.

Always the Xifeng is her anchor.

Everything becomes this moment.



Somewhere in the darkness between bodies, there is a memory of bright wings. Of open sky. Of mountain ranges with a dawn so bright no mortal eye can behold it.

And there, too, is Chang'e, bound to the moon, ever waiting to descend. She speaks words Shurui cannot hear. Words meant only for her. Each time she is closer to hearing.

And then she is being pulled back down to her body.



Shurui struggles to keep her qi from overflowing the new self it's building to house her. Tendons burgeon and snap taut around hollow bones, light as air. The pain sends her floating up off the ground. Until the meat of organ and muscle tissue bubbles up out of her bones, coats them in bloody gristle, and her new weight drags her down to the hardwood floor. Presses her down into the grain.

She bites clean through her new-formed lower lip as fresh skin knits itself over raw nerve endings in fits and starts. Her lungs still too new, too weak, to scream with.

Zetian is there beside her. Cool hands steady on her half-finished back, keeping her from setting this new body on fire before it's done forming. Zetian sweats from the heat her lover throws off.

When she is done being born, Shurui gulps down air and peels her bloodied nails back from the long furrows they have made in the floorboards. Her breath forms steaming puddles on the wood. Beside her, Zetian sits down and splays her legs to massage cramped thigh muscles.

In the quiet that follows, broken only by the settling and creaking of their ancient apartment, Shurui wishes things were different. Hates herself for thinking it — for Zetian not being enough to tie her to this place. But still, always, wishes she'd never left Liushi Shan. Wishes Chang'e had never shown her that first, beautiful, unattainable Xifeng.

—That she weren't going to lose Zetian and the rest of the life she has built here. Because she always loses her Xifeng.

When her muscles are strong enough she rolls over on her back, rests one arm on her stomach. Her new chest rises and falls. Sweat plasters her naked skin. Each body identical to the last. She wonders if she'll ever be allowed to truly die.

Zetian brushes soaked, matted strands of hair from Shurui's face. Shurui's cellphone rings, and Zetian strokes Shurui's shoulder and levers herself off the floor to go answer it. Shurui hears her "Hello?" as through water; tracks the slap of Zetian's bare feet back across the floorboards. Opens her eyes to find Zetian, hanging upside-down in her vision, leaning down above her. "It's Xinhua."

Shurui nods slowly. The phone is heavy in her hand as she takes it. She croaks to clear her throat. "Is everything alright? You don't usually call this early." Her voice is a whisper as her new vocal cords acclimate to speech.

Xinhua's voice is softer still than her own. "I'm sorry. I just really need to talk. I can't talk to Lin right now. I mean, eventually, but, she's not—" Xinhua's voice catches. Her inhale shaky. "I shouldn't have called."

"No, it's all right." Zetian helps Shurui up to a sitting position. She leans on Zetian's proffered shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Xinhua pauses so long Shurui wonders if she's hung up. "I can't ... deal with carrying this secret anymore. Can I just talk to you — do you have time?" And there it is. One more burden to bear. Or is this the one Xinhua has already told her? Will this be the day Xinhua tells her of the mantle she carries — a secret shared that can only divide them if spoken aloud? Or will this be the day Xinhua finally means to tell her mother, Lin, that Xinhua cares for women? Shurui cannot imagine what Lin will make of that knowledge; knowing that her daughter will be the last of the Xun Long. She remembers well the days when Lin's own voice issued from behind the blank mask of the Xun Long's costume. The Fenghuang and the Xun Long have been at odds a long time. But she does not know Lin well enough to know if she can make peace with that legacy's end.

Whereas Shurui already knows all too well that everything ends.

How long will it be before this Xifeng at her side, too, is consumed by her fire. Before she has to leave behind Xinhua, and the rest of the life she has built here. How long before the next Xifeng? And the next. And the next...

For now, there is only this moment. This time. *This* Xifeng.

It is enough.

Shurui lays her head on Zetian's shoulder, closes her eyes, and lies. To herself. To Zetian. To Xinhua: "Always."

old and new

Saquina Karla C. Guiam

This piece was originally published in Sea Foam Mag.

Old fashion is the malong Yasmin's mother keeps tucked away in her closet. It smells like the soil after rain visits—*petrichor*, her mother tells her, *the land blessed after a dry spell*—and there are little spiders making homes in the edges, little bridges connecting the fabric to the wood. She tells Yasmin she will wear it on her wedding day. Yasmin thinks *I do not want to be buried alive*.

Old fashion is Yasmin's father telling her what to wear and what not to wear. No crop tops, *men turn away from the eyes of God to flashes of flesh*; no shorts, *the flesh is the Devil's work*; no mini skirts, *the Devil and his army have led men to their damnation through the flesh for centuries*. Yasmin takes to hiding the shorts and the skirts (she didn't think she could pull off crop tops) amidst her dresses and pants and jeans and hijabs.

Old fashion is one of Yasmin's babus repeating what the Christians say about men loving men and women loving women: *Our Lord the Most Merciful did not create man and man to grow the land, nor did He make woman and*



Illustration by Mari Zhou

woman to name the beasts in the Garden. Family dinners get awkward each night the conversation circles around to it. Yasmin can feel herself shrinking to the size of a pea. She always finishes first, excuses herself, locks herself in her room, and asks the Most Merciful if He really hates people like her.

New fashion is the new girl in her class. Her name is Tala—*my parents thought I was born from a star, you know*—and Yasmin can feel herself falling into somewhere with a light that warms the cages of her heart. Tala and Yasmin become friends as soon as they meet. Tala is a sun on a cloudy day, her laugh echoing with the air all around them.

Tala meets Yasmin's parents. They like her. Neither Yasmin nor Tala speak of the flowers blooming on Yasmin's chest, or the nearly-there clutches of touch shared under the dining table. Yasmin stares too long at Tala as the darkness of the night surrounds her; her parents think she's worried about the bad men roaming around, Yasmin thinks *what if they steal her shine?*, and that fear—coming face-to-face with a Tala desaturated and dim-haunts her dreams.

New fashion is Tala knocking on Yasmin's window around the hour when everyone's asleep. This Tala is not the Tala of her nightmares nor the Tala of her everyday life. The Tala before her is all moonlight and stardust. She touches Yasmin's face. *I didn't think I'd fall for someone like you* slithers inside Yasmin's head, and the smile on Tala's face is sad, as if this confession is also a finality.

I love you, Yasmin whispers to the pale hand on her cheek. *I always will*. Tala shakes her head, removes her hand. The smile never leaves her face, but Yasmin sees an eternity of melancholy etched skin-deep: from the lines on her face, to the shapes framing her hands, to what passes as a heartbeat echoing in a ribcage that's not there. *Always*, Tala says, *but even forever doesn't last*. Yasmin wonders if there are choirs in the heavens; Tala sounds like she'd be a part of them.

New fashion is an old god forgotten, supposedly sinking into the waters of memory, but sun-warm and a blinding beacon—alive in a way that her heartbeat joins in the chorus of other, pulsing songs.

New fashion is... an old god finding someone brighter than herself, and a young girl learning to take love's hand in flight.

the wedding of snow, earth, and salt

Kate Heartfield

This piece was originally published in audio by Podcastle.

The North Wind raised his glass, a tall flute clouded with cold, filled with thick yellow wine so sweet it stung the tongue. All the guests raised their glasses and waited through the speech, which was a warning.

“What is done, undoes. You will not leave here as you came.” All the guests drank, and their eyes opened wide as the ice wine coated their throats.

In walked Snow alone, in a long white dress. She brought a gift of crystal for her bridegrooms, and a curse of chills. Snow made her vow: “I am white and crisp today, and tomorrow I shall be grey and soft.”

The East Wind was brash in her floppy hat, known to be wealthier than she looked, dressed in zephyrs. She took Snow’s skinny chin in her hands and asked, “What do you three desire that a marriage can give you?”

“We want to be strong,” Snow muttered. “Strong enough to survive.”

The East Wind shook her head. “No such thing in this world.”

“Strong enough to leave a mark, then,” said Snow, pulling back out of the East Wind’s grip.



Illustration by Ann Sheng

“Ah,” said the East Wind. “On each other? On the world?”

“Yes,” said Snow, as two defiant pink blotches bloomed on her pale cheeks. “We are stronger together. We are ready to sacrifice everything we are now, singly, for what we might be, together.”

The East Wind shrugged and dug her hands into her pockets. She sprinkled sand onto the bare feet of the bride and spoke the lines of poetry she had composed herself: “Let there be no parting/Though the breezes play rough.”

In walked Earth alone and naked, skin gleaming like brass. He brought a gift of gravity for his bride and groom, and a curse of weight. When he came Snow lifted her chin a little, stood straighter. He made his vow: “I am warm and fertile today, and tomorrow I shall be cold and poisoned.”

The South Wind wore his encircling finery of feathers, still bright though they were frayed at the edges. He gave advice that no one could remember a moment after it was spoken, and he looked sad in the candlelight. Once he was finished, he joined the hands of Earth and Snow together, and waited for the final groom.

In walked Salt alone, dazzling in his zirconium suit and purple top hat. He smiled at Earth and he smiled at Snow and they smiled at him. Smiles were his gift and his curse. Snow began to melt just looking at him; her long white hair was plastered to her face and dripped down, darkening her dress.

Earth looked nervous.

The South Wind joined their six hands. As the candlelight broke in pieces upon him, Salt spoke his vow: “I am bright and sharp today, and tomorrow I shall be dull and scattered.”

The West Wind was old, bent, her grey hair sweeping the floor like a cloak. She walked around the three as they clung together.

“You have chosen to die in yourselves and live in each other, and no one may unmake you now. No more may you visit the clean forests, no more may you play in the rich gardens, no more may you lap the warm beaches. You will cling to the skin of the world and consume whatever you touch, freezing and cracking, numbing and corroding, mounting and mounding, stronger than you ever were apart. The drear city I give you as your home and your food, and the briny rivulets of spring shall be your children.”

And all the strange wedding guests raised their glasses again, and this time the glasses were heavy, warm and squat. It was, they imagined, the sharp sip of whisky that brought tears to their eyes, not the sight of the three celebrants in their embrace, for they had seen that so many times before.

Still, was there not something to pull at the heart in that small mound of wet lace and black hair that had been the lovely Snow a moment before? Something in the musk of desperation as Earth dissolved into the humid air? Something in the swirling rime of salt like hoarfrost on the obsidian tiles of the floor?

Only the West Wind downed her whisky without a tear, and walked a few shuffling paces over the floor where the three had been, leaving footprints. She was old enough to have forgotten the trappings of ceremony that marked a wedding from a funeral.

pretty white snake

Cathy Smith

This piece was originally published in Anthropomorphic Dreams and in the author's collection of short stories, Kateri's Tales: Based on Haudenosaunee Folklore.

The woods were full of interesting trails created by men and beasts, but Pretty White Snake only cared about the dreampaths. He ran errands for the other luck charms, and they paid him with portions of their feedings. This kept him from starving, but he would never grow to be big and strong himself if he did not have his own witch to feed him.

He was drawn to the strongest unattached mind on the dreampaths, one that was wide open and receptive to medicine. He gravitated to a well-made cabin. Much to his surprise, the dreampath led to a young white man. He blinked in confusion. *A white man, a witch? White people have a jealous God who forbids witchcraft. Then again, witchcraft is forbidden among the Haudenosaunee too, but that doesn't stop them from using bad medicine.*

Pretty White Snake gazed at the sleeping young man wistfully. This white man was pale of skin and hair, but tall and well-shaped. White men's paleness always made them look unhealthy to Pretty White Snake, since their skin burned too easily from the sun. But this young man was a prime physical



Illustration by Mari Zhou

specimen, and Pretty White Snake could taste the ambition in his mind. In the old days, Pretty White Snake's penchant for choosing pleasant-looking humans was thought to be strange and inappropriate by the other luck charms, but he found that his particular gifts worked best with attractive witches. *He would be quite a prize if he were Haudenosaunee.*

Pretty White Snake gazed at the young man for a long time, then finally shook his head. *Tempting—but the Haudenosaunee will never stop seeing me as a bad omen if I take a white man as my witch.* Pretty White Snake left the young man to his dreams and ambitions, and continued his search.

The dreampaths turned up something more appropriate, a Haudenosaunee man who wanted a luck charm. Pretty White Snake crawled into the man's dream. The dreamer saw a pile of glitter at his feet. "Silver," the dreamer said. The Haudenosaunee used to say that Pretty White Snake's scales were like sunlight on fresh fallen snow, but now they compared him to this metal that white men had taught them to prize. The dreamer's hands reached out to touch the treasure he had found, but retracted when the silver writhed.

"It's a snake," the dreamer said with a frown. Pretty White Snake opened his eyes beseechingly. The dreamer looked at him thoughtfully. "A pretty white snake with silver scales," he said. The dreamer stood up and backed away. "Let the pretty white snake starve! The last time someone fed you, you and your appetite grew bigger and bigger until only an entire village could satisfy you."

Pretty White Snake reared up to spit at the dreamer. Since he did not have sharp fangs and poison, he spat out words instead. "The hunter said he saw me starving on the side of the road and fed me out of pity, but he didn't tell the Haudenosaunee that I was his luck charm, not his pet! He said he had to keep giving me bigger and bigger animals to satisfy my hunger, but he didn't tell them that he was a poor hunter before he met me, and that the only reason he could bring down those larger animals was because he had my help! He didn't tell his village that he kept expecting more and more from me, but wanted to give me less and less..."

The dreamer only heard the hisses of an angry viper, and Pretty White Snake slithered out of the dream when he realized that his words were futile.

Who would've thought disciplining a lazy witch would have this effect on my life? He had hoped the Haudenosaunee people's memory of him would have faded, but the story about the Pretty White Snake's greed will never be forgotten while they are still Haudenosaunee.

Pretty White Snake had not planned it, but he returned to that young white man who was still sleeping. Pretty White Snake watched him for some time. *Perhaps a white man is the most suitable witch for the Pretty White Snake.* He entered the young man's dreams as a pile of silver at his feet. The young man started when he saw the silver writhe and open bright red eyes. For a moment, Pretty White Snake could smell the young man's fear, but when the scent faded, he knew he would be fed soon.

leapt

Terese Mason Pierre

This piece was originally published in The Spectatorial Zine.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said for the third time that evening.

The mall would close in about an hour.

“You want to look good, no?” my mother asked.

She told her boss she’d work overtime tomorrow to make up for the few hours she took off to go dress-shopping with me. It was my fault she didn’t have enough time to sew something. I’d kept the reminder slip in my backpack for two weeks before I told her: picture day, where, once again, I’d be singled out.

“This shop here, or this other one?” She pointed. “L-Le Chateau?” She pronounced it *Lee-Chat-ee-you*. “It says that?”

Before I could respond, she pulled me in the direction of the store.

“Too expensive,” I said when I checked the price of a short burgundy dress.

My mother held the tag up to her face. She swallowed. “Is fine. Too grown-up for you, though.”

I found a rack of discounted sweaters at the back of the store, and looked

through them for something less expensive than the dress. "I can wear jeans. No one will see them."

She waved her hands in frustration. "Choose something nice."

She moved over to a red satin dress, bright and simple. "I had one like this when I was young." She touched the fabric, smiling in a way that stretched her laugh lines, adding decades to her face. "You like?"

The dress was beautiful. I nodded, eager to leave. I would wear the dress once and then push it to the back of the closet I shared with my brothers. We headed for the cashier.

"Is on sale or we pay full price?" my mother asked, holding up the dress.

Behind her, I covered my eyes.

"I'm sorry," the cashier said, laughing awkwardly. "What?"

"Sale," my mother repeated, trying to dampen her Ukrainian accent.

"Oh, no, full price," the other woman said. She took the dress.

I felt my mother tense beside me when the cashier scanned the price tag. "\$50.83," she said. My mom turned to me. "Agnes, I'm sorry. I can't..." It was 83 cents more than she could afford.

My face flushed with embarrassment and guilt. "No, no, I think I have some change," I said before she could finish. The cashier didn't need to know our problems. I dug through my pockets and pulled out a handful of dimes and quarters, counting what we needed. As we walked to the exit, my mother squeezed my hand but didn't look at me. She was embarrassed, too.

It was dark outside, and snowing. I let go of my mother's hand to grab the thin gloves in my pocket. Our car was parked far away. I followed her down the parking lot, the bag with the dress swinging from my fingers. My mother stared straight ahead, but I knew she was listening carefully. I was not as good a listener as she was, but she promised me that once we'd gotten a little more comfortable in Canada, she'd teach me to hear things as sharply as she could.

Suddenly, my mother sped up, lithe legs swishing inside her long coat. I ran to catch up with her. "What is it?"

"Hush." She grabbed my hand, pulled me along.

I kept quiet, heart pounding. I heard the chatter of other shoppers in the distance, but we were alone. My mother reached into her pocket and pulled out the keys—the car was just up ahead, dingy and small in the light of the parking lot lamp.

My mother stopped. I let go of her hand, kept walking. "We're almost there," I said. "Come on."

My mother's face seemed paralyzed: eyebrows furrowed, mouth twisted with disgust and helplessness. She was looking at something past my head.

"Agnes, don't," she said.

"What?" I asked, fear growing. I turned back to the car.

A man stepped out from behind it, sliding his hand across the roof. He was dressed in a grey suit.

He headed quickly toward me, arms outstretched. I staggered back. "Mama!"

And then she was there, blocking the man's path with her body. He stopped, growled low and swiped at her face.

My mother leaned back, but the man had managed to nick her chin with his claws. She pressed two fingers to the wound, wiped away the blood before I could see it.

"Enough," came a voice from the shadows.

Four people emerged, seemingly from nowhere, barring our car from sight. They had to have been following us. All were impeccably dressed; none wore coats, despite the chill. A man with blonde hair stepped forward beside the man in the grey suit.

"Where's your Leap?" he asked.

My chest tightened—I knew exactly why he was there. Shame burned inside me. They were so much cleaner than we were—healthier, too. The only way they could withstand the cold was if they were being fed, in more ways than one. I wondered what they sold, or stole, if anything, to have amassed such wealth and power.

"We don't want trouble," my mother said. "We leave now."

Holding me to her body, she stepped toward the car. An angry wowl rang out, and a large black Panther surfaced from the shadows to slink across our path, yellow eyes fixed on my mother's face. It padded back and forth, leaving wide footprints in the snow.

"You're not leaving until we get this sorted out," the blonde man said.

"Please," my mother said.

The man waved his hand. "It'll only take a minute. Do you have a tribute?"

"We don't want to join Leap."

The man smirked. "That's too bad. Every Panther in Toronto has a Leap."

"We don't have tribute to pay," my mother said. "Perhaps you can bend rule? Your Leap clearly has money already."

"You pay now, or you leave." He slid his hands into his pockets as the Panther came to sit beside him. "Unless we can work out another sort of arrangement."

My mother closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped. "Whatever you want."

The man frowned. My mother presented no challenge. He stepped closer. "What's your name?"

"Frieda Hall."

"Hall?" the man asked, and I felt my mother stiffen. "As in Gauvin's Hall?"

"We are not his."

"And how do you think Gauvin will react when I tell him his doctor's wife's run off?"

The fact that this man spied on other Leaps was amazing and maddening.

My mother narrowed her eyes. "If he'd wanted us back, he'd have taken us before we set foot in airport."

"And here you are, unscathed."

"He owed us."

The man's eyebrows rose. "Owed you?"

“Yes.”

My father, a Panther and a doctor, had travelled to Tallinn over thirty years ago, ready to pay his tribute to one of the most established Leaps in the region, until Gauvin got to him first. The head of a ruthless Leap just outside the city, one either paid Gauvin Dare or died. So my father joined. My mother was one of Gauvin’s prostitutes, trafficked over the border from Ukraine in childhood, a prize to my father for his great work. My mother fell in love with my father for his undying hope, even in the face of Gauvin’s murderous methods.

“What happened, if I may ask?” the blonde man said.

“Our son was murdered,” my mother replied. “And my husband, he did nothing.”

“Was he not offered retribution?”

“Yes, but Gauvin does not fight fair. We wanted to leave. For better life.”

“So my Leap has nothing to fear, then?” the man said.

Even the Canadians’ Leaps were afraid of Gauvin. “No,” my mother said.

“Excellent.” He turned to the rest of his members, arms open. “They check out,” he said. Some of them snickered. The Panther swished its tail across the asphalt, kicking up snow. I looked around—the parking lot was still empty.

“We leave now?” my mother asked. Fatigue coloured her voice.

“Not so fast,” the man said. “The fact still remains: you are Panthers with no Leap.”

“And?”

“Panthers with no Leap do not exist.”

“First for everything.”

“Not for this.” The man crossed his arms. “You can’t have been here too long. How are you going to survive with no protection? You’re too new.”

My mother straightened her body. “I think we will make it.”

He frowned. “I will ensure that you do not.”

“I thought Canadians were nice.”

“You earn niceness.”

My mother touched my cheek. “We have dealt with threats before. How we know you’re not Canadian Gauvin?”

“Gauvin would have taken you and your children the moment he saw you. As you can see, I have respected your personal space.”

My mother said nothing for a moment. “You offering us refuge?”

The man’s voice softened. “Mrs. Hall, I am offering you a real life.”

She weighed her options. “I must speak with my husband about this. But, for my children, I am willing.”

“Good decision,” the man said.

“What I need to do?”

I heard that Gauvin made his pledges kill.

“Change,” the man said.

My mother looked unsure. “Is...is that all?”

The man chuckled. "Your strength may be all you can offer us." He gestured vaguely at my mother. "Clearly you have nothing else."

My mother removed her scarf. It was too thin and bright for this weather. "Why?" She pushed me away a little, and unbuttoned her jacket.

"I want to know how strong you are, how experienced you are in your cat form." He pulled out a stopwatch. "You'll need to do it in under two minutes."

My mother stared at the Panthers in the lot. She was not worried about her nakedness, or the cold. She knew that, no matter what, there were things she didn't have a say in. I knew this lack of control made her angry—but I also knew that she had her priorities in order.

When she had finished the change, in under twenty seconds, the difference between us and them was even starker. My mother's fur, like mine, was matted and rough. There were a few long scars along her back from when she'd gotten in fights over food, and several small but deep ones from those who were rough in sex. She was gaunt and frail. These Canadian Cats were stronger, with shiny coats and lean muscles. They were beautiful. My mother looked at them, saw the differences herself, but did not seem embarrassed this time, even though we were poor trespassers in their territory.

"Good," the man said. He slowly circled my mother, arms at his sides as he examined her. My mother grew agitated, pressing her legs to her body, her tail wrapped around her like a boa. After a moment, the man nodded once, and she was allowed to become human again.

She put on her clothing, grabbed my hand. "Let's go," she whispered.

"No," the man said. "Her turn."

My mother pulled me to her body. "She's a child!"

"A Cat as well."

"You can't demand that!"

The man looked at her, smiled like he was forcing himself to. "I'm not demanding. I'm requesting." When my mother did not calm, he said, "She joins the Leap, too. I assume you will not abandon your girl."

It took some time before I realized what was going on. By the time I did, I'd found my voice had left me. The man bent down, held his hand out.

"Come closer, little cub," he said. "I want to look at you."

I looked up at my mother, and her tense, lined face gave a short smile. She let me go, and I took a few steps forward.

"That's right," the man said. "Just a little closer."

My body shook; the bag crinkled as I clutched it to my chest.

"What's that you got there?" the man asked. He knelt so we were eye-level. "Hold it out. Let me see."

I turned to my mother again. "Do as he says, Agnes," she said.

I opened the bag and pulled out the red dress, holding it flat against my body.

"That's beautiful," the man said. "I'm sure it will look great on you. Do you think so, too?"

I nodded.

"Now, can you change like your mother?" the man asked.

I nodded again.

"How well can you change? Have your parents taught you?"

My lips felt dry as I parted them. "Yes," I said. "But I don't do it all the time."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to get into fights."

"I'd like you to change now, darling," the man said. "No one here will fight a child."

His voice was calm and confident. I looked back at my mother again, received the same response. A part of me understood why she was following orders like that, but another part of me wanted her to be more defiant. I was her child, and these were strangers.

I took off my jacket. No one said anything as I peeled off layers. The cold bit my skin, and I wanted to cry, but I kept going. My shoes were the last to be discarded.

"Go on," I heard my mother whisper.

I dropped to my hands and knees. In the corner of my eye, I could see the man press a button on the stopwatch. I willed the change to start.

Nothing happened at first, then, there was a tingling in my lower back, which quickly turned to shooting pain as my body reshaped. I had heard that some Cats could change in seconds, those who were trained for battle or stealthy escapes. A cry ripped from my throat as the change continued, and I feared I would be silenced, kicked. But I passed through the other side, throbbing, face against the cold ground.

The man pressed another button on the stopwatch. "Just in time."

I stared up at him, this stranger who had us at his mercy. I sat like my mother had, feet close together, tail wrapped around my body. He walked around me, inspecting. I looked at the ground so I wouldn't have to meet his eyes.

"There," my mother said from behind me. "Is that what you want? Are we done here?"

"I'll decide that," the man said.

He knelt in front of me, reached toward my face.

"No! Don't hurt her!" my mom screamed. She ran forward, but the large Panther leapt out and pinned her to the ground. Her struggles were laced with cries of pain, and I smelled her blood.

My heart beat quickly. I stood, started to back away, but I was quickly hauled off the ground by someone behind me: the man in the grey suit.

"Don't struggle," the blonde man said. "I want to know how much she loves you."

I bared my teeth, hissed. He was a liar.

The blonde man ran his fingers through the fur on my head, on my nose. He held my face in his hands. He pressed his forehead to mine. "I have a daughter, too," he whispered, "the same age as you. I think you two would be great friends."

He saw the fear in my eyes, felt my quivering body.

“I will not hurt your family,” he said. “I promise you.” He held my paws. “I was once lost like you, and someone took a chance on me.” His eyes were warm. “You may join us. You are safe in Canada.”

Later, in our car, my mother pressed her head against the steering wheel and cried.

palingenesis

Megan Arkenberg

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Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.
– Dante Alighieri, *Inferno, Canto I*

Every city has an explanation. A strike of coal or silver that brought the miners running, or a hot spring that holds the frost at bay. A railroad or a shift in the current. Most people say this city started with the river. The water is everywhere you look, sluggish and brown most seasons, bearing the whiskey-smell of peat out from the forest, and carrying nothing downstream except mats of skeletal leaves. Seven bridges straddle the river between First and Barton Road as it winds through a downtown of antique stores, the crepe-streamered American Legion, the purple house advertising tarot and palm readings. One of the bridges goes nowhere, ending four feet above

the ground behind a solitary Chinese restaurant, and no one has ever been able to tell me what it used to reach. On the east bank, sitting mostly by itself between the paved river walk and the ties of an abandoned stretch of railroad, you'll find the county art museum, a sliver of white concrete and glass.

Most people are wrong, as it happens. I've lived in this city all my life, and the real explanation has nothing to do with the river. In the early 1840s, a pair of hearty Dutchmen were surveying for the highway that would link the port and railroads of the urban south to the farmland and sawmills of the north woods. Here, nestled among the ridges and kettles that the glaciers' icy fingertips carved out eons and eons ago, they planted the sign that marked the halfway point along that road. A resting place for weary travelers. A city born of exhaustion.

I am so fucking tired.

The thing is—and I'm finally starting to admit this to myself—I don't believe there's a puzzle here. There's no way to turn these jagged pieces into a smooth picture of something that makes sense. First you'd have to crack off the extra material and file the edges down, like you're shaping a mosaic from pottery shards; you have to break away more and more to even get the right shape. This story is like a vase made from other, broken vases. And maybe it will hold water when you're finished, but probably it won't.



The painting is still there, hanging at the top of the main staircase in the county art museum. The landing makes a shallow triangle between the main collection, the American Indian gallery, and the eternally empty corridor labeled "Special Exhibits" on the map. You can use up all the fingers on one hand counting the number of times I've gone to that museum in the last year, and I find myself pausing in that tight and windowless space every time, hoping to see something different. I'm always disappointed.

Both the printed and electronic maps call the painting *White Moose*, but the name on the museum placard is *Katabolism*. The word has something to do with digestion, with the extraction of energy from chemical compounds. The first time I saw that title, I thought the artist was a pretentious fuck. Now I'm not so sure.

In any case, the title on the map is an accurate description. The oil painting shows a white bull moose, lumbering through a landscape that looks not unlike the glacial moraine that gnaws perpetually at the city limits. He's no local fauna, though, and he's bigger than life-size on the canvas: seven or eight feet high at the shoulder, his antlers spread off the edges. The antlers are thin and asymmetrical, with six points on his right and seven on his left. His eyes are the same color as his coat, slightly filmed.

Every time I see him, I think how much better I would feel if he were an albino, a lovely red-eyed creature like the rabbits and sometimes deer that I find stumbling in my backyard in winter, when the snow-reflected sun is

too bright for them—something natural, fragile, and not-at-all sinister. But the white of the moose is not an absence of pigment. His color is something creeping over him, coating the duller, natural life underneath. Every time I see him, the white has spread a little farther.

The placard gives only three initials and a year: Y. L. H. 2012.

If you're one of the people who believes that Blair is dead, then near as I can tell, this is the painting that killed them.



I'm not certain, yet, if I'm one of those people. But then, I'm certain of very little where Blair is concerned.

They were not my son, and they were not my daughter; but what they were remains unfathomable and changeling. I'm not talking about sex, those hundreds of quiet and not-so-quiet confusions that stalked my child for the seventeen years of their life in this city. I am talking about how hard it is to even think of Blair as *my child*—to claim Blair as mine, when they seemed so determined to be anything but.

(Speaking of Blair in the past tense has started to come naturally, and maybe that's the most fucked-up thing about this whole mess.)

When I get home from my shift at the library, I stand in the laundry room at the back of our little bungalow, take their t-shirt from the hamper, and smell the cinnamon scent of their shampoo. I can't remember their face, not really: only pale skin, dark eyes, red hair that was always too long and always faintly damp. White as daisy and red as sorrel, or however that fairytale goes. I don't even have a photograph.

I stand in their bedroom beneath the pitched roof of the eastern gable and smell the stinking richness of their favorite myrrh candle, which is still cemented to the window ledge with its own gray wax. The desk beneath the window is littered with sheets of the cheap, yellowish paper that the secretary at the Catholic church on Kilbourne let me rescue from the recycling. I can't see any words or lines of ink, perhaps because whatever was there has faded after so many months of sunrises. Or maybe there was nothing there to begin with.

Alone in Blair's bedroom, I cover my mouth with both hands and say things that a mother should never say to her child. The words tear their way out of my throat like knives. I beg them to come home, *you little bastard*, come back and stop all this bullshit about the paintings, about Y. L. H. and the things we see in the forest. Please, come home. You're killing me.

Finally, when I am too tired to beg, I tell them to go fuck themselves.



But to begin at the beginning.

January, grey and dreary, and school was back in session after a

tempestuous winter break. I found out from the newspaper that a membership card for the art museum cost twenty-five dollars, fifteen with student identification. I got a letter from Blair's art teacher and that was good enough for the woman at the ticket counter. Unlike me, Blair never had a talent for words. They pulled Ds and Fs in one English class after another, losing books, failing to turn in essays. I thought art might give them whatever we try to get from stories.

Once upon a time there was a forest, 'savage, rough, and stern...'

From that first afternoon, all they could talk about was the White Moose.

"I think he's one of *them*," they said.

We were walking home along the east bank of the river, where shards of brown ice ground against the shoreline. On either side of the path, the Rotary Club's rosebushes slept under cones of yellowed Styrofoam. I was cold and only half-listening.

"One of what?" I asked.

"You know. One of *them* from the forest."

And in the savage forest there lived a mother, and her child...

I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye. Their hood was pushed back despite the cold, and their hair glinted like copper. *Hair like a lost penny*, my mother always said. She was a woman to whom anything beautiful looked lost.

"In the painting, I saw ripples on the leaves at the bottom," Blair said. "The light's distorted, almost like they're underwater. But it's just him. He fills the whole kettle—the whole canvas. It's just that he's denser in the shape of the moose."

No, I thought then, *it's impossible*. In the January daylight, I wasn't even disturbed.

"That's only the style," I said. "Don't make something out of nothing."

On our left, a brick staircase ran from the river walk up to the Fourth Street Bridge. I began to take the steps two at a time.

"It isn't nothing," Blair said stubbornly. "Whoever painted that picture must know about them."

"No one else knows about them, Blair."

They weren't following. I looked back over my shoulder and saw them staring, not at me on the stairs, but at the glimmer of black water threading through the ice.

"Who do you think the artist is?" Blair asked. "Y. L. H.?"

... a mother, and her child, and a witch.

"I don't have a clue," I said, and kept walking. I meant: *I don't want to know. Let's not find out.*



Or maybe it began before that.

Maybe it began the day Blair told me that they were not a boy, and the

only thing I felt was relief. Does that sound terrible? Does admitting that make me an awful mother? I don't know. But I know that I had never wanted a son. I didn't grow up with brothers or cousins, only with the faces on the news, and the broad and smirking faces in the bars south of the depot, the hungry faces trailing tired women in convenience stores, the post office, the high school gymnasium. *Savage, rough, and stern*. When I imagined having a son, I imagined him growing up like that. I'd never wanted to deal with that kind of man, and I can't help but feel, guiltily, like I was granted an unspoken wish.

Blair's father had that particularly male helplessness, sucking and draining, pressuring and pleading, and both the best and the worst you can say is that it doesn't leave bruises. I can remember all those nights in supermarket parking lots or under movie theatre marquees, when he had followed me somewhere on the bus because he *just had to be sure*. "I'm such an idiot, Joan," he would cry. "I always knew I'd do something stupid like this and make you leave me." And because he was pitiful, because he needed saving, I had to tell him *I'm not going anywhere, baby*, and hold him while he sobbed.

In the end, he was the one to leave. He found the energy somewhere, and followed the freeway south. Maybe this all started the day he left, and I stayed. The day the forest pulled me stronger than he had pushed, in the way of every fairytale without a happy ending.



One evening in February, a week or two after that first visit to the museum, Blair was late coming home from school. Not late enough for me to really worry; merely a dress rehearsal for everything yet to come. I sat by the kitchen door, watching the sky darken and considering whether to call, when I heard the front door snap against the siding, and Blair swept in with a slushy gasp of twilight. They were looking at something on their phone as they stepped into the kitchen and flipped the light switch.

I closed the book whose pages I hadn't turned in half an hour.

"Where have you been?"

They shrugged. The shoulders of their thrift-store jacket were fuzzy with dust. "Downtown," they said.

"Anywhere specifically?"

It was a chance laugh, to break the tension that wasn't quite thick enough to acknowledge. They looked at me without smiling.

"Victor's."

Victor's was a café on Rhodes Avenue, the very edge of downtown. I don't know what the cavernous pile of red brick had been originally, with its alcoves and square turrets like the growths of some rhomboid crystal, but the interior space glowed with recent renovation, all waxy yellow wood and bare Edison bulbs. The coffee was mediocre, the pastries gluey and

flavorless, but they housed a spectacular collection of shit: knock-off Tiffany chandeliers, assorted sporting equipment signed by virtual unknowns, and musical instruments missing strings or vital knobs. The café was a garage sale written by H. P. Lovecraft and illustrated by Virgil Finlay.

“What’s that on your phone?” I asked.

Their fingers tightened around the pale blue case, an almost undetectable moment of hesitance. But they passed me the phone without a word of complaint.

I don’t know what I was expecting to see. Dim and indistinct, with the hallmark shallowness of a cheap cellphone camera, the photo showed a woman sitting at a high table at Victor’s pastry counter. The first thing I noticed was her scarlet leather boots, the black heels hooked over the rung of her chair. The second was her hair, white as milk and hanging down to her thighs.

I felt a creeping chill up my spine, like the sensation you get when you swim into water that is suddenly deeper than you expected.

“It’s her,” Blair said. “Yelena Linden Hersh.”

I handed the phone back. “How do you know her name?”

“I asked, after I took the picture.”

“How did you know who she was?”

Instead of answering, Blair swiped their screen and passed me the phone again. It was still Victor’s—I recognized the pounded tin on the wall. Blair had tried to photograph a painting, but the phone camera wasn’t up to the task. The texture of the canvas stood out prominently. So did the globs and ridges of paint caked along the bottom. It looked like a painting of a bog, some vast surface of black water, and the thick knobs of paint bobbed along it like something alive.

“It’s brilliant, isn’t it? Look at that one towards the front.” Blair tapped a red-enameled fingernail against the screen, on a pale blur in the foreground. “It looks like a frog, doesn’t it? But there’s a woman just under the water. That white thing rising to the surface is her breast.”

The sick feeling had traveled to the pit of my stomach. “Blair,” I began, but I couldn’t finish. The painting was at once too strange and too dreadfully familiar.

Blair slid the phone into their jacket pocket without another word. They tucked a lock of flame-orange hair behind their ear and stepped into the living room. I heard the static click of the analog television turning on, and took a slow, shuddering breath.

What do you call the opposite of *déjà vu*? Not the sense of a recurrence, but its inverse: The feeling that this is a moment to which you will return. That was what I felt, envisioning that painting by Yelena Linden Hersh. That small breast in the water, beckoning like a ghost.



The things in the forest are still there: still filling the kettles like mist and twisting the light like water, still pulling at my heart like every hunger in hell. They haven't gone away just because Blair did. It's not that I thought they *would* leave—just that it wouldn't have surprised me if they had. I don't know the shape of this puzzle, remember. I can't begin to imagine how all of it does or doesn't fit together.

But they are still here, as much as they have ever been. Vaporous and vast, they seem as much air as flesh, although sometimes I can make out a shape—a deer or elk, or else some long-snouted, carnivorous thing. Soft black eyes emerge from the places where they are densest, and nearly human mouths shape words I can almost understand. Sometimes I think they are drawn to me, although this might be abhorrent self-flattery.

Still.

Some mornings, just after sunrise, I walk down to the woods behind the bungalow. For an hour or two, I sit very still on the remains of a farmer's fieldstone fence, holding out my empty hand. They come to me out of the water, out of the air, and they kiss my palm as though tasting for sweets.

Some of these mornings, I have seen Yelena Hersh in the forest, walking in her scarlet boots. Her black jacket is buckled to her chin and she walks briskly without looking down. I called to her, once, but she didn't even look my way.

There is nothing strange about her being there, I try to tell myself. It's a small city, and the trails through the forest are popular. I have seen a lot of people walking. But she's the only one I've ever seen when *they* are around.



In March, the art museum hosted a show of local women artists. It was mostly watercolors of cats and pencil sketches of tractors; also a quilt, a ceramic beehive, a few mercury-glass sculptures that I couldn't figure out. The latest offspring of Yelena Linden Hersh's brush hung just outside the gift shop, between a pastel sketch of sleeping kittens and a rack of dusty scarves.

It was called *Anabolism*. Which is the opposite and complement to katabolism; it's a kind of reassembling, the re-linking of molecules after the body grinds them up for energy. Anabolism is how the body lengthens bones and grows muscles. How it makes more of itself, I guess, out of everything it takes in.

The painting showed Blair emerging from a pond in one of the larger kettles. The water came up only to their knees, but there was a weirdness about the ripples that made me think Blair was *floating* rather than standing on the ground underneath. There's no telling how deep that water is in the moraine; geologists say it can be as little as two or as many as two hundred feet.

In the painting, Blair was naked. Each skinny muscle tensed in the cold, layering blue shadow on pale skin. The slight tuck of the waist looked like a teenage girl's. The flat thighs, even larger than life on the canvas, seemed

small enough for you to cup your hands around—to snap with a flick of your wrist. I don't remember the face.

"What if people recognize you, Blair? What if kids from school go to the museum?" Arms folded across my stomach, I sat on the sea chest in the corner of their bedroom. Despite the asthmatic chug of the heater, everything felt cool and damp to the touch. The candle on the window ledge burned greasily, leaving a myrrh-scented streak on the ceiling.

"Blair?" I repeated softly.

They looked up from the spread of paper on their desk.

"What do you think people will say?"

"Fuck people," Blair said. The thing that lurked in their eyes was tense and coiled, too ravenous to be fear.



Here is the damned thing, or one of the many damned things in this whole hellish business: I can't prove that Yelena Hersh had anything to do with Blair's disappearance. I can't even prove that Blair began meeting her. Those fucking paintings might have been proof once. They aren't any more. They still exist, but they aren't *Blair* any more. And maybe I'm mad for thinking that they ever were.

People in this city, they have all the answers they feel like looking for. Blair was a sad kid, a confused kid: it's all there, wrapped up in whatever was or wasn't behind the zipper of those weathered black jeans. "Kids like him disappear all the time, Joan," the secretary at the station said to me. "They just do. Don't go dragging a woman's name through the mud over it."

So where do they go, the kids like Blair? Do they evaporate into thin air? Wash down the river, get carried out to the lake, like all the other flotsam and jetsam from exhausted cities like this? Sometimes I imagine Blair has gone to find their father; other times, while walking over one of the bridges downtown, I think I see their face in the river, floating between mats of leaves. Sometimes the fantasies comfort me, and sometimes they don't.

Maybe the kids like Blair start spending their evenings with strange women twice their age—women who wear scarlet boots and black wool, who dream of ghosts and monsters, whose hair is white as milk. Maybe they spend too much time wandering in the forest, snooping in the ruins of barns and sugar houses that the maples are slowly reclaiming: maybe they get lost in the woods. Or maybe they get eaten by witches.

Maybe you're getting frustrated with me now, with my increasingly evident disregard for the facts. What really happened? you may well ask. What's the true course of events? But the only truth I know for certain is that I am fucking exhausted. You cannot begin to understand how tired I am. And I don't think that having the answers will let me sleep any more soundly.



Palingenesis. In its simplest translation, it means *rebirth*. Sometime in the nineteenth century, it got picked up to describe the now-discarded hypothesis that *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*—the development of the fetus proceeds along the same lines as the evolution of the species. Or, in another version, that children become educated by passing through the earlier stages of human society. From barbarity to civilization. Another discredited Victorian idea.

In the painting, Blair could almost be sleeping. Their eyes are closed, the lids wet and purple. Their limbs are folded up, almost fetal, the dry pink of knees and elbows picked out with the medical detail of anatomy plates. The setting sun is at their back, and the blowing leaves have started to mound up around their feet. You can feel the wind gusting from that direction: a bitter, northern wind.

Why is *this* the image burned into the back of my eyelids? Why do I remember this, and not their face? I'm afraid that's a question to which I already know the answer.

(Another riddle: If *Katabolism* is the painting that killed Blair, what does that make *Palingenesis*?)

I don't know if there are other things in that painting, or if the bending of the light along the forest floor is just an accident of style. I must admit that I haven't brought myself to look too closely. The one unforgivable piece of strangeness—the part that would tell you the name of the artist, even if you didn't see the stark initials in the corner—is the sapling that sprouts from Blair's genitals. It is slender, leafless, and almost the same color as their skin: a sickly, peeling white with scabs of pink. Where the bark pulls away, the pulp that shows beneath is black as rot.

In the second week of April, at Yelena Hersh's request, the directors hung *Palingenesis* at the top of the main staircase in the county art museum. They put the White Moose back before the end of the week, after unspecified complaints.

By then, of course, it was too late. By then, Blair was gone.



In our last conversation, the day before they failed to show up for school, Blair told me a secret about Yelena Hersh.

"She has a son," Blair said. It was Sunday evening, and we were loading groceries into the trunk of the Nissan: cans of beans, boxes of macaroni, and a half-gallon of skim. Everything teetered on the edge of the mundane, precariously normal, until Yelena intruded like a ghost.

"A son?" I repeated, and Blair tipped their head in a nod.

"When she was younger than me, she got pregnant. She gave him up for adoption."

I frowned, at a loss for the proper response. Blair slammed the trunk,

disturbing a layer of late, powdery snow.

“She says the news terrifies her now. It’s all men with guns, men with knives. Men who run over women with trucks and strangle children by playgrounds.” Blair watched me wheel the cart to the side of the car, sliding their hands into the pockets of their jeans. “She’s afraid she’ll see him on the news one day. Or she’s already seen him, just didn’t recognize him as hers.”

The next day, Blair was gone. And I wonder, now, if the news is something that terrifies every mother with sons. Or if we were just the strange ones, Yelena Hersh and I—the Pasiphaes of our century, afraid that we would give birth to monsters.

To early-twentieth-century sexologists, *anabolic* and *katabolic* were gendered terms. The female was anabolic, conservative and preserving. She consolidated the evolutionary adaptations of her species, passing them to her offspring. The katabolic male, creative and destructive, was responsible for the mutations, for everything novel or monstrous—two sides of the same coin.

All of that is bullshit, of course. If Blair has taught me nothing else, it’s this—the creative and the destructive chase each other perpetually, like blood and bathwater swirling around a drain. But preservation, that’s the most ridiculous fantasy of all.



Sometimes, I imagine that Blair’s father saw those paintings. That he recognized his child and came to find them, that he offered Blair a better life than I could give them here. This is improbable. As if Blair’s father could be in this city without me knowing. As if he had any interest in art. It’s easier to believe that they left with their father, though, than what the school counselors try to tell me about suicide and statistics and ‘kids like him.’

It is easier, also, than imagining that the forest had something to do with it.

There is a new tree, now, where the dead farmer’s fence runs to a halt some fifteen yards from my property line. A skim of peaty water pools over the fallen leaves, and the tree grows from it, white as milk. I’ve gone so far as to step into the water, reaching for the bark, which looks so warm and soft. But the mud beneath my boot gave way, and my foot sank far enough that I knew the water was something more than snowmelt.

Maybe if I hadn’t stepped back onto solid ground, I would have something closer to an answer.

Or maybe Blair ran away. Maybe you ran, sweetheart, all on your own, without your father, without ghosts or monsters or Yelena Linden Hersh. You were never good with words, and you wouldn’t have left a note. You left me paintings instead, and maybe all the explanation I’m searching for is there. If only I could bring myself to look.



“I know why you don’t like her,” Blair said to me once. It was a morning in late March, before they left for school. We stood on the back deck in our jackets, and with cold, bare hands, they held the birdfeeder steady while I poured in the mix of seed.

“You want to be special, don’t you?” Blair said. “That’s why you won’t believe that she can see them, too. You want them all to yourself.”

On a sudden impulse, I pressed a kiss to their forehead. Some of the seed missed the feeder, pouring out into the slush, but they didn’t turn away.

“Yes,” I whispered, mouthing the words against their skin. Maybe they heard me, and maybe they didn’t. “I always have.”



Katabolism should not be confused with *katabasis*, which means a journey into the underworld. *Katabasis* is Dante and Aeneas, Orpheus and Psyche. It’s revelation and love and disaster. *Anabasis* would be the return, if a return from the underworld is possible—a suggestion for which I haven’t seen much evidence. The words can also mean, respectively, a retreat down to the water, and the journey back inland or uphill.

Some of the reviews in the papers and the online magazines misprinted the titles of Yelena Hersh’s paintings. *Anabolism* and *Katabasis*, digestion and descent. The pieces from two different puzzles pushed inelegantly together, and that makes as good a metaphor for me and Blair and Yelena Linden Hersh as any other I could come up with.

The word *palingenesia* appears once in the New Testament. It describes the new creation, in which the order of the old will be utterly overturned. I’m not holding my breath. But I guess every city has an explanation, even the divine ones. And I guess creation requires destruction—revelation, uncovering, *apocalypsis*—before everything else.



If you were here, sweetheart, I’d tell you to run.
This city is not for you. You are not tired yet.



Today, by the white tree in the brown water, Yelena Hersh is sitting on the remains of the fieldstone fence. Her scarlet boots are speckled with mud, and a vast white creature like a moose leans down to nuzzle her shoulder. She does not seem to see him. She sees me on the trail and raises one hand, a trembling salute, and her white hair falls around her face like a curtain.

The things in the forest—I don’t think that they are older than us. Not

exactly. I've begun to think they *are* us, or us as we will be. That is why the painting called *Anabolism* has started to look like something else: not Blair anymore, but a white canine thing, a carnivorous thing rearing on its hind legs. Another stage in our evolution. Perhaps the things in the forest are nothing better or worse than our children.

That's all the Minotaur was, in the end.

I worry, sometimes, that I will wander into the woods one morning and they will no longer be there. It will only be the trees and water and dead leaves, and the unrelenting anabasis and katabasis of a landscape birthed by ice. I think the reason they frighten me is not because they are so strange, but because they are fragile. I am afraid that they will disappear.

Or that one day I will look, and look, and have forgotten how to see.

shortly before the end

Kim Goldberg

This piece was originally published in Ryga.

Shortly before the end, their minds turned sleek and black and were last seen bobbing and diving among small, open fishboats in the harbour. The golden light scattered diamonds atop the sea whenever a lean mind broke the surface. Each mind had a tight band around its neck and a string on one leg. This allowed it to continue searching and biting down on anything slippery it might encounter while scouring the murky depths. But the collar prevented the mind from assimilating its catch, thus rendering each mind into an immaculate self-propelled satchel that was relieved of its still squirming bounty by a higher power every time it bobbed to the surface and the string was reeled in. By afternoon, the collars were removed and the ravenous minds were allowed to eat just enough of their catch to remain conscious and nourish brain cells. Then they were shut away in wicker crates until the following day.

i received a lost minute invitation

Christa Couture

This piece was originally published on the author's blog.

An invitation to the minute that slipped between the cushions

That was right where I'd left it

That I searched for, sulking and accusing, until you softly pointed out it was here by the door and I blushed at my impatience.

The minute that we postered the neighbourhood for

"Please call with any information."

The minute that fell behind the stove

to be found only on moving day when – with the appliance pulled from the wall, sweat on our brows, and time before the movers arrived running out – we will notice that we have become used to living without it and strain to remember where it came from, exactly.

The lost minute that we heard about on the news

And we said "oh, how sad"

and "can you imagine?"

The one that, having been untouched all these years, remains intact

A remarkable specimen

The one covered in dust

The one faded from sunlight

The minute I put in a place for safe keeping and told myself I wouldn't forget

(I created a mnemonic, just in case)

The one we lost the directions to

scribbled on the back of an envelope

that we both blame the other for putting in the recycling

That I thought you had

That you thought I had

The one made illegible by the wash cycle

(always check the pockets)

The minute left outside overnight

blown away by the wind

or the rain

or woven into a bird's nest

or stashed for a squirrel's winter

The minute that was

right

here

I swear

moments ago

The one I'll wonder

If I hadn't looked away

would never have been lost at all

oct. 27th 70 to union station 07:35

Emily Izsak

This piece was originally published in the author's collection of poetry, Whistle Stops.

Salty reason trips across
the mutant landscape

yellow with foliage
our track mother
renders municipal
terminus unremarkable

The next station is
an other galaxy

*La prochaine station est
une autre galaxie*

where upturned hills
serve as punch bowls
and a ride away
is to slink back

to pre-dynastic vagrancy
one crimped antenna left
to navigate the topsoil

in-between home

Janice Liu

This piece was originally published in *A Side of Rice*.





The rabbit whisked her away to the moon, where they went straight to the palace of Chang E, the Moon goddess.

Explain yourself, little one.

I do not see ill will in your heart, but I must know what motivated your behavior.



What exactly was someone like you doing in the rabbit's burrow?



Your Highness, I didn't mean to trespass. I am looking for my home.

I was inside the burrow because I... I thought that maybe I could live there.



Looking for your home?

That ought to be a simple matter... for most.

Rabbits' homes are in burrows underground.

Birds belong in the sky.

And people live on the surface of the earth, in houses made of wood and straw.

But tell me, which are you? Bird or human?



Well, I'm not really either of those things. I don't seem to quite belong in either the skies...

... or on the earth.



Perhaps you are, like me, someone at the crossing of two realms.



You're a deity, and yet you don't live in the Heavenly Palace...

That's right.



A long time ago, I was an immortal, but I was banished from Heaven and sentenced to live my life as a common human on Earth.

I sought to become immortal again by taking a magic pill.

That was a grave mistake.



But by the time I realized this, I'd ceased to belong in the earthly realm, too, because I could elude death.

The pill floated me up into the sky, but I found that I couldn't return to Heaven.

It had been beyond my reach from the moment I was banished.



So I ended up here on in this empty palace on the Moon.

A desolate place, but the only one where I am able to exist between Heaven and Earth.



The rabbits keep me company from time to time.

But otherwise, I'm here alone.



Your Highness, I have a request...



You know, I've never been on the Moon before...

But somehow... I feel at ease... as if it makes sense for me to belong here.



Do you think I could live here with you,



and make this my home?

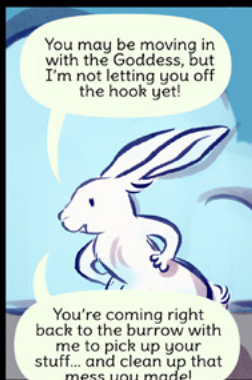
Why, that's...



A wonderful idea! I will have a room prepared for you, and you can move your belongings in immediately...

My very own room?

Now hold up one sec!



You may be moving in with the Goddess, but I'm not letting you off the hook yet!

You're coming right back to the burrow with me to pick up your stuff... and clean up that mess you made!



Be right back, your Highness!



Thank you so much, your Highness!



No, thank you...

... my friend.

the end

contributors

Lawrence Stewen is a writer who is fascinated by weirdness and hybridity. At various points in time he was an infantry lieutenant, a statue digger, and a cafe waiter. Currently he is the Online Editor of *The Spectatorial* blog, and a third-year English major in the University of Toronto. He has fourteen articles published in the Singaporean newspaper *Tabla!*, and two other works of fiction that will appear in *The Spectatorial's* zines. He hopes to one day kill the world with pure empathy.

Michael Matheson is a genderfluid Clarion West ('14) graduate with work published in *Nightmare*, *Shimmer*, and the anthology *Upside Down: Inverted Tropes in Storytelling*, among others. Their first anthology as editor, *The Humanity of Monsters*, was published in 2015, and they're co-EIC of *Anathema: Spec from the Margins*, a tri-annual speculative fiction magazine of work by queer POC/Indigenous/Aboriginal creators. Find them on Twitter @sekisetsu, and at michaelmatheson.wordpress.com.

Saquina Karla C. Guiam is a Best of the Net nominee from Mindanao, Philippines. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction (Volume 11)*, *Outlook Springs*, and others. She is currently taking up a Master's degree in English. She's also an editor for *Rambutan Literary (Roots nonfiction)*, *Umbel & Panicle*, and the *Cotabato Literary Journal*.

Kate Heartfield's first novel, a historical fantasy called *Armed In Her Fashion*, is coming from ChiZine Publications in 2018. Her short fiction has appeared in magazines including *Strange Horizons*, *Lackington's* and *Podcastle*, and in anthologies including *Clockwork Canada*, *Blood and Water*, and *Monstrous Little Voices: New Tales from Shakespeare's Fantasy World*. She is writing an interactive novel for Choice of Games based on the *Canterbury Tales*. A former newspaper journalist, she lives on the outskirts of Ottawa.

My name, **Cathy Smith**, sounds like white bread, but I'm Mohawk. Since I write I use "Khiatons" in my online venues which means "I'm a writer." in Mohawk. I love myths and see modern and scifi as modern myths. My stories end up combining mundane details with the fantastic. This is the traditional storytelling approach of my people so I'm carrying on with their traditions even if I'm writing futuristic scifi, though this approach is more obvious with my fantasy stories like *Pretty White Snake*.

Terese Mason Pierre holds a degree in Bioethics from the University of Toronto and aspires to be a physician in a teaching hospital while cultivating a healthy writing career. She has been previously published in *Young Voices Magazine*, *The Claremont Review*, *The Young Adult Review Network*, and various student publications at UofT and Ryerson University, among others. Her interests also include music and volunteering. Pierre lives in Toronto with her family and her cat, Benjamin.

Megan Arkenberg's work has appeared in over fifty publications, including *Asimov's*, *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *Clarkesworld*, and in anthologies such as *The Apocalypse Triptych*, *Heiresses of Russ*, and *The Best Horror of the Year*. She has won or been nominated for the Rhysling Award, the Asimov's Readers' Poll, the Seiun Award and WSFA Small Press Award. She edits the fantasy e-zine *Mirror Dance* and served as the nonfiction editor for *Queers Destroy Horror!*, a special issue of *Nightmare Magazine*. Megan currently lives in California, where she is working on a Ph.D. in English literature.

Kim Goldberg is the author of seven books of poetry and nonfiction, and a winner of the Rannu Fund Poetry Prize for Speculative Literature. Her off-kilter poems and tales have appeared in *Superhero Universe (Tesseract 19)*,

On Spec, Riddle Fence, Prairie Fire, Urban Green Man Anthology, Imaginarium 3, Dark Mountain, Zahir Tales and elsewhere. Kim lives in a 1940's miner's cottage in Nanaimo, BC. She finds inspiration while wandering the forests, shoreline, alleyways and forgotten places. <https://pigsquash.wordpress.com/>

Christa Couture is an award-winning performing and recording artist, a non-fiction writer, a digital producer, a cyborg and a halfbreed. As a singer-songwriter, her fourth album "Long Time Leaving" was released in 2016 on Black Hen Music; her creative writing has been published in Room Magazine, Shameless, and the anthology "The M Word;" and as a speaker and storyteller, she has addressed audiences for CBC's DNTO, Moses Znaimer's conference ideacity, and at Imagine in Port Hope, Ontario. She is currently an associate producer for CBC Digital and completing her full-length collection of personal essays, "How to Lose Everything."

Emily Izsak recently completed The University of Toronto's MA in English and Creative Writing program. Her work has been published in Arc Poetry Magazine, The Puritan, House Organ, Cough, The Steel Chisel, The Doris, and The Hart House Review. In 2014 she was selected as PEN Canada's New Voices Award nominee. Her chapbook, *Stickup*, was published in 2015, and her first full length collection, *Whistle Stops: A Locomotive Serial Poem*, was published by Signature Editions in April 2017.

Janice Liu is an illustrator and kids' comics creator. She is the artist of Chicken Soup & Goji Berries 中药鸡汤 (chickensoupcomic.com), and her latest project is a short for Wayward Sisters, a comic anthology to be kick-started by TO Comix Press. Her work often combines the flavours of her two favourite things: fantasy and Asian history. When she's not working or drawing, Janice teaches art classes for teens at her studio in Vancouver, BC. You can find her on twitter, tumblr, or instagram as flutterdoodle, or check out her website at janiceliu.com.

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