

HYACINTH



AN SWC ANTHOLOGY

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The Storytelling Workshop Club is proud to present Hyacinth, an SWC Anthology!

Preface

When I joined the Storytelling Workshop Club in my freshman year, I loved when, at the end of the meeting, club members would have an opportunity to share what they wrote in club, little unrefined works composed just minutes before. Those readings got to the heart and soul of the writer, oftentimes so good, so potent, that I would remember them years later. This reading out of our work remains one of my favorite parts of our club meetings. I couldn't have imagined back in freshman year, before SWC was even chartered, that we'd come to a point where we could publish work created by our club members—and other Binghamton students!—to the rest of campus. I am so immensely proud of how much this club has grown, and I am so immensely proud to have helped in that growth as its President. All my thanks go to the writers who submitted their work to this first SWC Anthology, and to Blake, our wonderful Liaison who put this all together. None of this could have happened without you guys, and you should be proud of the work and dedication you've put in. Here's to many more volumes!

- *August Witkowski (They/Them), President, English Creative Writing and Psychology Major*

This is our first semester with an official physical publication and I'm so glad to finally be able to share the incredible stories written by students. I will be biased in saying that for some of the pieces of this zine, you will not have fully felt it until you've heard it read aloud. I've been in this club since my freshman year/before it was even chartered so I've loved seeing it grow into what it is now over the years. It has been a constant in my undergraduate career where I've always felt at home, so seeing new faces join and stick around and find a niche with us makes me feel relieved. We have all sorts of genres and majors and years of study that anyone can fit right in. If you're even vaguely interested in writing, I'd urge you to come hang out with us on a Friday evening. It's always a blast. Maybe at one of these meetings, I'll spell my E-Board Position correctly the first time. Thank you to all the writers who submitted work for this publication and helping make it a success!

- *Blake Tochilovsky(They/Them), Liaison, Biomedical Engineering Major*

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Table of Contents	2
Dust Specks	2
The Korean Women	6
The Worm King	9
The Thrill of the Hunt	13
Light	16
The Rainbow Connection	18
Bones in the Rain	21
Little Block of Chains	24
Do you find me beautiful yet?	26
Poetry Love	28
Shattered Mirrors	29

Dust Specks

By Michael Rizzuto

TW: Clinical descriptions of body horror, brief descriptions of kidnapping and torture, pandemics, partial identity death, death of a child

It was the first of the month, and Administrator Stanton's cortisol levels were steadily rising as he looked over the morning's briefing. He didn't even have to check his biomonitor to feel the cold, pricking knot in his core or the way his mind skidded off of the data in front of him to circle around his afternoon appointment. It was distracting.

Lock memories of ethics consulting appointments until 1:00 PM today. One-time only. It was just a meaningless stress response, and he watched the stress hormones slowly tick down in his biomonitor. He refocused, returning his attention to the morning briefing—his comprehension speed seemed low today for some reason, but he should finish soon enough. If not, well, he had nothing important in the afternoon today.

A new polyvirus from North America had been confirmed. Mild, compared to most of the others. He'd need to make it the first priority for treatment development and send word to the Canadian branch to take measures to limit the spread. *UM-PoV-15, "Basilisk." Dormant period: 15 days. Infection method: physical contact, fluid contact. Initial symptoms: degradation of vision, muscle spasms, visual and auditory hallucinations. Ocular liquefaction after 6 days. Spinal liquefaction after 9 days. Cerebral liquefaction after 11 days. Common cause of death: cerebral liquefaction.*

The polyvirus that started it all had changed again. The word "mutation" had been used in the early days, he remembered, but mutations were random, unguided changes. Polyviruses seemed more deliberate than that. Whether they were actually intelligent in some sense manufactured by some secret agency, or just hyper-fast mutators that evolved past the antivirals race of the 21st century, that didn't change the company's goals. They'd have to push out a backup treatment while they worked on a new one. This polyvirus couldn't be left alone for an instant. *UM-PoV-1, "Hellfire." Dormant period: erratic, 3-180 days. Infection method: airborne, physical contact, fluid contact, surface contact within 5 days. Initial symptoms: high fever, muscle pains. Agonizing pain after 18 hours. Full paralysis after 36 hours. Common cause of death: dehydration due to inability to swallow.*

Trials of new treatments on a more recent polyvirus had made some promising strides. Nothing solid enough for a true backup treatment yet, unfortunately, but they might get there in a few more test cycles. Time from initial symptoms until death in subjects had been extended by 450%, and one subject had even become asymptomatic in certain organs. Stanton made a note to analyze the DNA sample later—their genes might have some markers the company could use to identify naturally immune target subjects. *UM-PoV-14, "Golem." Dormant period: 23 days. Infection method: physical contact, fluid contact. Initial symptoms: joint pain, bumps under skin. Muscular ossification completes after 13 days. Organ ossification completes after 17 days. Common cause of death: heart failure due to cardiac ossification.*

The usual mix of good news and bad. Nothing earth-shattering. Stanton sipped at a mug of black sludge as he read through the rest of the briefing, enjoying the sour, faintly coppery

taste—he faintly remembered retching in disgust when he’d first tasted the mixture, but he’d long since reconfigured his sense of taste to find it soothingly pleasant. After all, what was the point of disliking something necessary? He checked his biomonitor again, watching the nutrient levels tick up—and back down again as a PANACEA implant, the company’s main product, started synthesizing raw materials into dozens of polyvirus preventions and cures. Pills, vaccines, and other old medicines had served the world well enough in the past, but when a deadly disease could suddenly require an entirely new treatment overnight, they weren’t good enough. With PANACEA, a software update could instantly give everyone in the world the cure they needed, so long as their diet included the right raw materials.

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Administrator Stanton finished the briefing and sent off his orders to others in the company. There was an Australian news article at the end, a woman accusing some shadowy organization of kidnapping her son—a few of those cropped up now and then, and they were always easy to deal with. After a few decades of practice, the company had found that while it was a risk and a waste of time to convince these people they were wrong, it was easy to convince everyone else. A bit of faked evidence, a few false reports, and soon after, a verifiable account to disprove them. The news outlet that reported her story would soon find hole after hole poked in its credibility, until no one would believe a word they’d printed.

He took a break for lunch, and as he walked back towards his office, he felt the creeping sense of dread again. The afternoon’s appointment loomed in his mind, casting a shadow over everything. He certainly wouldn’t get anything done in the next ten minutes, so he changed directions and made his way up to the meeting room.

“Administrator Stanton. You ready?” Stanton looked around the room, taking in the faces around the table. The company’s directors were all here, waiting for him. He forced a small smile onto his face as he sat down, turning to the woman who’d spoken. “As ready as I’ll be. I’d turn off dread, but there’s not much point with only five minutes left. I’m just looking forward to getting this over with.”

She nodded. “Well, looks like we’re all here. You want to get started a little early, we won’t stop you.” The door locked at her mental command, the directors glanced at each other in agreement, and Stanton closed his eyes. “Alright. Starting now.”

Suspend all alterations for 24 hours or until I leave this room. One-time only. The horror hit him like a tidal wave, smashing through his mind as memories returned with their full emotional force. Hospital patients stolen away, deaths faked. A secluded village dying in nerve-searing agony as Hellfire coursed through their bodies, leaving them immobile, only able to scream and scream and scream until their vocal cords broke from the strain. A child, a survivor of the Golem polyvirus, a miracle anesthetized, vivisected, harvested to build a cure from his blood.

Stanton’s stomach heaved. Tears streamed down his cheeks from his closed eyes. A small, whimpering sob escaped his lips. Around him, the directors waited patiently.

It only took him thirteen minutes to bring himself to open his eyes. His vision was still blurry with tears, his voice choked with sorrow and snot, but he spoke. “I’m here. I… I’m ready. Where do— what…” He looked around the mostly impassive faces, eyes settling on a

man at the other side of the table. Hardstark, he distantly remembered. His expression was kinder than the others, accepting if not completely understanding. Stanton knew it was all faked to make him more comfortable—no, that implied some actual empathy and concern. The directors just wanted him in a state to speak sooner, so they could get out of this meeting and go about their work torturing innocent people to death.

It still worked. Stanton swallowed, speaking a bit more clearly. “Okay. W-where do we start?”

“Basilisk.” A woman two seats down from him glanced at notes that hadn’t been there when Stanton had closed his eyes. “It’s confirmed, and we need to manage it. Slow its spread and develop a treatment. Looks like it’s limited to Quebec right now. I wrote up the standard search-and-squeeze.” A metaphorical—maybe literal—wall around the whole province. No one goes in, no one comes out, until a treatment is found. Regular testing for everyone inside, shifting the uninfected to the borders so the area of control could steadily shrink. And in the rest of the world, a dedicated search for other infected who might have slipped through. If any were found, they would be taken as “subjects,” along with infected friends, family, and acquaintances. *Victims*, Stanton thought. If they were lucky, they’d be thrown in a sterile white room and researchers would watch as their eyes leaked out of their skulls and their brains melted away. Otherwise—it would happen on an operating table. Stanton barely suppressed the urge to vomit as Director Martinez passed him the summary of her plan.

“It looks—it looks good. Low-risk.” Martinez had a knack for efficiency. After every element of the plan, there were statistics. *Estimated number of Basilisk fatalities: 13,282. Estimated number of subjects acquired: 4,090. Estimated number of fatalities prevented: 8,498,200.* Stanton couldn’t argue with the math. He’d helped design some of the statistical models she’d used, nearly twenty years ago. It did nothing to ease the freezing-hot horror in his core as he remembered what happened to the victims of “search-and-squeeze” plans of the past. Still, in the end... you had to shut up and multiply. Seventeen thousand dying an agonizing, horrific death. Eight and a half million saved. It was a bargain.

He read through the plan, searching his mind desperately for alternatives. He set a timer. Five minutes of thinking, turning the problem over from every possible angle, looking for ways to spare even one “subject.” There were none. Martinez was thorough, just like all the other times he’d had to look over her plans.

“Approved.” He screwed his eyes shut, holding back a sob as he turned the summary over. “What’s next?”

The meeting went on for seven and a half hours. Seven and a half hours of condemning innocent people to horrors far worse than death. Stanton sobbed, screamed, spent fifteen minutes curled as tight as he could under the table, as if he could just squeeze himself tight enough to not have to exist here anymore. The directors just waited for him to compose himself and continue sentencing their victims.

An hour later, Stanton was still in the room, alone. He stood still, two feet from the doorway. All he had to do was step through and it would be over. The alterations he’d built up with his mental implants would reassert themselves. He’d be able to do his job without feeling even a twinge of sorrow, disgust, or guilt at what he’d done, just like everyone else.

It made sense—he knew what had to be done. The plans he'd approved today would save lives, More than that, really—they would save humanity.

There was a thought experiment Stanton remembered reading, from the early 21st century. Torture vs. Dust Specks. If you had to choose between one person being horribly tortured without hope or rest for fifty years, or an inconceivably large number of people each getting a dust speck in their eyes for a second, which would you choose? If one accepts the utilitarian idea that it is possible to directly compare negative outcomes, then there must be some number of people receiving dust specks such that torture is the preferable option. When he'd first read it, he agreed. Now, he faced a much easier decision. Allow thousands of people to die in agony, or allow millions of people to die in agony? The numbers were right there, not pulled out of the ether for a thought experiment. The answer was clear. So why did it feel so much harder?

At 8:52 AM the next morning, nearly twenty hours after the meeting had begun and twelve after it ended, Stanton stepped through the doorway and breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, everything was back to normal. Tiredness fell over him in a wave, no longer staved off by horror, and he subdued it easily with a quick mental command. He'd lower his adenosine levels for now and make it up with some extra sleep later. Work started in eight minutes, and he had a full day ahead of him.

The Korean Women

Sydney Lee

The Korean woman rises with the sun and sets out to prune herself in order to cater the perception she puts into the world. As she moves through her space, she pays no mind to the sounds of the snipping of dead leaves or dried petals. Being her own gardener, she follows every step, every routine, every changing contraption until she feels as though she is in full bloom. She is the hibiscus that those passing would often gaze and admire. The flowery aroma floats away, mingling and combining with all of the others as she glides. Even when she sits on a subway, her petals are folded so as to not disturb others. With dark leaves hiding anything at all that might be viewed as unseemly or “too much”. There is nothing about a flower that is aggressive or authoritative. Why would there be? No one would give themselves the title of a flower. It is a being who is delicate and who caters to the perspective and expectations of others. She molds a perfect, gentle, and almost ethereal presence to gain more respect in a world that will not give her any. Over time as she focuses on her bloom, the more easily she wilts and destroys herself. She does not recognize how many dead petals and roots form over time until it is all that is in her sight. The flowers are easily replaced by new ones. There is never an end to the supply that creates an image of beauty that others feed off. The flowers will always shrivel and lose themselves. Not fast and easy, but slow and in ways that will hurt her to a point she will never

recover. No one cares about the beauty that died in your hands, because when society only sees the beautiful, that becomes the norm.

When I look at Korean culture and their society, I feel as though that culture expects women to be beautiful consistently, even if they are doing the smallest things. Their standards put pressure on women to use face-changing products, develop higher quality makeup for their citizens, and even normalize plastic surgery. Everyone who lives or visits Korea can see the overwhelming amount of examples through their advertisements. I saw this when I was visiting my family in Seoul. It was one of those small details that remains unnoticed until someone points it out.

“Do you know what this ad is for?” My dad stopped and pointed to a giant advertisement in Korean. There were no products, just a woman smiling in front of a pink background with some text. I was silent, I had seen many advertisements like these in Korea, giant photos of women smiling, their faces glistening in the light in front of pastel solid color. I had not fully comprehended what it was, I did not have time until now to stop and think about it. “It’s all plastic surgery.”

They always looked the same, both the women and the advertising. The women don’t look real, but I don’t think they were ever meant to feel real. I have always viewed people in makeup, plastic surgery, or even clothing advertisements to be figures businesses wanted people to strive to become. The more products or substances people would be able to buy to change what they look like, the more money the company makes. However, these types of businesses would only cater to specific people.

In Korea, all clothes are meant for skinny people. From my personal experience, I saw how a small in America would be a large or medium in Korea. The first time I encountered it, I was too young to understand what was happening. I was in kindergarten, walking around luxury stores with my family in Seoul. My sister was off with my dad and my grandfather, both of whom were talking with each other or with whatever sale’s person worked at whichever store we wanted next. My grandfather, being a wealthy Korean businessman, wanted to buy my sister and me something nice. I had already known I was not going to get anything. Even when I was small I had no interest in getting clothes for myself, so why would I have interest in having an item that my parents could barely afford by themselves? As I was leaving one particular shop, there was a dress that caught my eye. It was pink, sparkly, and had a big bow on the back. It wasn’t one of those dresses with the tacky sparkles that come off on your hands. It was the kind of

fabric that had sparkles layered in between to reflect light, making it light up the space. When I reached out and touched it, it felt silky and soft in my hands and I loved it. I wanted nothing more in the entire world than this extremely girly expensive dress. My mom saw me fall in love, she called over my dad, who looked at the sizing and the price. My dad said something to my mom, who said an even more hushed response back. My dad stayed at her side, but she explained to me that they ran out of my size. I was sad, sure. But I was a child also who had seen something they liked for about one minute. It was all going to be okay. That was until, when leaving the stores, a small pit of jealousy began to settle in my chest when I saw my sister leaving the shops with something for herself. That pit remained there every time I looked for something in Korea and it was “out of my size”, considering that they never made it to begin with. I am lucky this was not daily life. It is not easy looking for something you are never going to find because the culture is working against you.

I don't know enough about Korea to know my way around or the best places to eat, but enough to know what their standards are. I know enough to not get my hopes up when I go shopping or be slightly hurt when I don't see anyone who looks like me, because I have never considered myself to be the same as a Korean woman. I don't have the same appearance as them, haven't been on the receiving end of their societies standards, and don't understand what it is like to fold over Korea's continuous expectations for me. Even though I know all of this to be true, I cannot stop myself from comparing myself to them.

My appearance and stature separates me entirely. I do not and may never be able to “blend in” whenever I am in Korea, even with my own attempts to cater my perception. I don't fit into their standards and their expectations that have never applied to me in the first place. I was not raised in Korea, nor did I learn Korean at a young age. In fact, I struggle with it now even with my best efforts. Even though I have these aspects, I feel unattached and lost as I spiral through Korea's culture. I compare myself with native Koreans and other Korean-Americans who have all fallen in love with the country. Even though I love it in some ways, like my grandmother's smiling face when I visit or when I ride bikes around Seoul with my aunt, I am not *in* love with it like they are. I have never felt myself engulfed by Korea's culture. Everyday I stare at it, I see them in my own eyes when I smile or cry. I see Korea in the way I move, whether I sit up straight or slump down to do my work. But I have never recognized it as something that I share with people in Korea. However, Korean culture is a person I would love to love. I would love to embrace them with open arms. I would love to hold them until my muscles

shake and I feel as though I cannot hold them anymore. I would love to get lost in their stories and their lives. I would love to have memories adoring them just as they would do with me. I would love to have their experiences be jumbled with my own as we both move and progress through life. I watch others move with their love and understand how I am not there and I may never get to that point with Korean culture. Since I cannot force love, I am left with watching all of the other Korean women.

The Worm King

By Jeffry Purnomo

TW: Description of gore and violence, blasphemous material, sad and depressing themes, everyone is really sad here

One day, a lone Man found another. It was neither man, nor daemon, but something more; something terrible and alien and old. The sun blazed far above, and yet, the Thing cast no shadows. He saw its tattered and rotting cloak blow in the wind, saw its strange, scarred flesh underneath. Beneath its frayed and ripping hood, he saw a gnarled visage.

It was closer to a beast than a man. A pair of mangled fangs adorned the creature's lower jaw. A dark ring was embedded into one of the tusks, like some sort of crude ornament. Above the fangs, a deep scar ran from its upper lip to one of its cheekbones. The wound had healed, but the flesh had remained broken and flawed. At the beast's chin was a long, black beard. It was tied up in a ragged braid, its end adorned with a rusted ring.

Its eyes were the worst of it. A dark pupil surrounded in a sea of crimson, looking at them rattled something deep within the Man. There was something dark and old in those eyes, as if they had seen a thousand atrocities, and lived to see the sunrise after each one. From the dark circles around those eyes, the Man could tell that those atrocities had taken their toll on the beast.

He watched as black pupils scanned over him, and a beastly hand reached for something at its waist. The Man responded by reaching for the bundle at his back, fingers grasping at the rope that held the crude assembly together.

"I mean you no harm," the creature said, its voice deep and teratoid.

The Man blinked at that before saying, "I don't believe you."

"Then believe this," the beast said, before briefly fanning out its cape. Sunlight split and morphed as it hit a crude blade, looking akin to broken glass. The dark blade briefly squealed, as shadowy tendrils wriggled in the open air, before quickly being contained by the ragged cape once again.

“If I wanted to harm you, I would’ve done so already.”

The daemon’s corpse squirmed for a brief moment before it let out a biting death rattle. The carcass shuddered on the hot sands before a warm glow enveloped it. The Man watched as a wisp of light erupted from the daemon’s chest cavity, through the melting hole of flesh he created. The wisp rose out of the remains, before quickly blinking out of existence.

Even without its soul, the daemon’s body remained, left rotting in the desert sun. Plagues and curses rotted the wretched thing, the terrible result of the Man’s scythe. Blood and gore dripped free from the cursed blade, as the Man swung the wretched weapon back into its holster.

“Food for the worms,” a voice behind him said. The Man turned and saw his grim travel companion. The beast, whose name he’d learned was Ocrest, wrenched his dark ax out of a nearby corpse. It was once a rather large daemon, who screamed about ripping the two of them limb from limb before feasting upon their souls. Now it was reduced to a pile of flesh, disease feasting upon it.

“I don’t think there are any worms here,” the Man said, listlessly kicking at a patch of sand.

“Not those types of worms,” Ocrest said before turning towards the Man, “Us. You.”

The Man frowned, “Are you insulting me?”

Ocrest shook his head, “Not insulting, commending.”

The wizened beast began striding toward the Man, “My people have a word for those who were wronged. For those who struggle against the Great Earth, with no end in sight. And yet they endure, blindly. Through the dead and the damned, they continue onward, always.” Ocrest stopped right in front of the Man.

“We call them Worms.”

“You know a lot about these Worms,” said the Man.

“Aye,” Ocrest began, before tugging down at the shawl around his chest. Amongst a sea of black fur, the Man saw a patch of shaved hair. It seemed freshly cut as if maintained regularly. At its center was a brand, deep and scarred over. It was a long and segmented thing, with pincers at its ends.

A *Worm*.

“Indeed I do, little Worm.”

The Worm watched as a humble bird dipped into the strange, green pool. He watched as it

bathed in it, green sludge staining blue feathers. And he watched as it morphed into something terrible and ancient. Its feathers morphed into scales, and its beak morphed into a terrible set of jaws.

The creature lumbered out of the pit, and in a panic, ran into the woods.

The Worm looked upon the strange substance and saw it bubble and gurgle with powers unknown. Most would've written it off as a curse. They would've burned the pit, and the whole forest down. But all he saw was chaotic potential. And as he felt power coursing through his ring, felt the very life force of the world ebb and shape around him, he knew that he had the tools to harness such chaos.

The rumors about Europe were true, as the Worm and Ocrest discovered to their muted terror. As their captain waved them off, Ocrest could already smell the scent of decay and blood in the wind. And the further they went from the safety of the coastal cities, the stronger the scent got. Soon, the air was thick with the smell of rot, and the sound of carrion insects.

The two travelers passed through more than a couple of killing fields before stopping for the night, although the scent of death made it hard to sleep. It was early the next morning when they were awoken by a rather strange disturbance. It was not the sound of a foolhardy daemon or a human thief who thought he was clever, but a scared, young girl.

She was a wailing mess, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and blood pouring out of fresh wounds. Deep desperation stained her eyes, enough so that it cut the Worm deep into his psyche.

He'd known such desperation before.

Through hysterical laments, she recounted tales of an encroaching daemon lord, and how her village had suffered through their numerous raids. How she had searched for food, alone, and made the mistake of passing by a daemon raiding party. And as the Worm's ring crackled with power and mended her wounds, she begged the two of them to save her village.

But as the three crested the hill overlooking the humble settlement, all they were met with was the smell of charred corpses.

"Riven," the Worm began, "I'm so sorry."

The Worm could tell she was scared. As they stood at the edge of the pit, he could see her legs quivering in the gentle light of the pit. He watched as arcane energy arched out from the abyss. The power of the ring was great, but alchemy was still new to him, and he'd be lying if he said the process wasn't rushed.

But Riven had been so utterly destroyed, and as she wept over the charred remains of her parents, he couldn't help but be reminded of his own personal suffering.

A young boy, crying over his butchered family.

He shook his head, before looking over at Ocrest. The beast stood guard over them, ax in hand. All this magic and alchemy had been far outside the brute's realm of knowledge, but he knew one thing for certain. These things were volatile, dangerous even. They had made a vow, as the Worm worked his terrible magic on the ooze. If Riven and the Worm perished here, Ocrest would slaughter every daemon lord in Europe, and leave their heads on pikes for the world to see.

Ocrest gave a slow nod to the Worm as if he was giving one last blessing to him. The Worm returned the nod.

He turned back to Riven, offering her a slight smile.

"Are you ready?" he said, in the softest tone he could muster. She looked up at him, and he could see the soft tears building again. But under those sad, beaten eyes, he saw a burning fire of determination. In the soft glow of that primordial ooze, he saw how her pupils had darkened as if all of her innocence had been beaten, broken, and slaughtered. And now, all she had left was her sadness and anger, and the need to make the world right again.

He saw himself in those eyes.

Riven attempted to respond, but the words died in her throat, being replaced by a choked sob. She shakily nodded her head instead. The Worm gave her a sad smile, before grabbing her hand, and giving it a reassuring squeeze. She returned it in full force, and he had to bite back a wince of pain.

Hand in hand, the two looked out towards the bubbling, cursed, expanse, and stepped in.

It was rather strange, feeling his skin melt off without the pain that came with it. He perceived his skin liquifying, before sloshing off his tendons like butter on a skillet. He could feel his very body morph and reforge itself. He watched as his fingers dissolved, before reforming into dreadful claws.

That was until his eyes dissolved.

And yet, in that blind darkness, he saw things. Visions of the past, future, and beyond. He saw great dragons soar through a starry void. He saw one of them curl up and slumber, as the Earth formed itself around it. He saw God tearing himself asunder, giving birth to his Nine children. He watched as eight of those children devoured one of their own, who had grown fat and controlling.

He saw the bleeding remnants of his family at his feet before the vision morphed and he saw God and his children on the ground instead. He saw a burning pit of gods and monsters alike, and at its center was a great beast, with wings outstretched and three emerald eyes staring back at him.

And as he rose out of the pit, vision and body restored, he saw humanity for what it truly could be. That the stars themselves were not meant to be worshiped, but conquered. That humanity could rise above themselves, and strike the gods down.

He opened his new trinity of emerald eyes, before looking upon the dark, starry sky. He stretched out leathery wings as he felt his new exoskeleton body harden. And as he stayed there, floating inches above the pit, he felt his armor morph into a pair of horns on his head.

A crown fit for a king. A *Worm King*

There was a splash next to him, and he watched as Riven crawled her way out of the pit. What was once human had morphed into something scaly and terrible. Feeble arms and legs had morphed into the limbs of a primeval beast. Her forelimbs made a dreadful cracking noise, before splaying outwards, revealing dark, leathery wings in their place. Her primal roar echoed into that gentle night like a beast long dead.

Like a dragon. Like a *wyrm*.

The Thrill of the Hunt

By Todd Sweeney

TW: Blood, Gore, Death, Descriptions of Animal Abuse

My father didn't hunt for glory. He could care less about the machismo of bringing home a still-bleeding deer carcass or the pride of hanging up a roaring bear head on the living room wall. Didn't care for the thrill either—the way he hunted lacked any real wildness to it. For him, hunting was slow, methodical, patient, calm.

Hunting, to my dad, was about taking your time, waiting for the perfect shot. If you weren't precise, if you made a single mistake, your precious doe would run off. Startled by the noise they might run, or they may stumble into a hiding spot you can't find. So it was better to wait, to clear your mind completely, until the perfect time to strike.

When my father and I went hunting, we would lay down in the mud and scarlet leaves for hours on end, his shotgun pointed at the same deer as we waited and waited and *waited* for the perfect shot. Some days, we would come home with the same amount of bullets we left with, my father simply shrugging his shoulders and saying there was no opportune time today.

I understood where my father was coming from. I understood the need for a careful plan, for calming your mind as you assess and take down your target. But I've always been impatient. The nights we came home empty handed I would complain the whole car ride home. I believed in seeing a project to its end, of course, but for me hunting was never about that calm, patient, methodical process. It was about the pursuit. The thrill. It was about overwhelming your prey

completely.

Three days after I got my hunting license, I bought myself a hunting knife and headed off into the woods. I didn't want to bother with waiting anymore.

I started off small. I'd snatch squirrels from the trees as they scampered up the mossy bark, hold tight their squirming bodies, feel their heart pound against my gloved fingers as they tried to bite and scratch the blade that slit their little throats. If they managed to run I would chase them, climbing up the trees, snapping the branches they ran to, shoving my hand into the holes they made home and pulling them out as they wept.

Then came the birds. Trickier, since they could fly when I couldn't, but here my time hunting with Dad aided me as I slowly crept to their nest before grabbing their little necks and squeezing until their eyes popped out. If they ever had eggs I'd smash them against my fist, and if they had hatchlings I would knock the nest over, letting the chicks cry out in terror before stomping them with the heel of my boot.

I took an ax to a beaver dam, slicing their bodies in half as they tried desperately to protect their homes. I gripped wild hares by the ears; they'd be so terrified their hearts would stop before my knife touched their pelt. I left a family of raccoons for a troop of boy scouts to find by their campsite, their intestines pouring out their bodies and leaving a dark metallic stain on the grass. That one was on local news for a week. Some particularly cruel wild bear, most newscasters assumed, who was oddly picky and surprisingly precise with its work.

I moved on to larger, faster, stronger, smarter animals. I knew my place—I wouldn't let myself lose a fight quite yet. I'd take the babies. Break a doe's leg as its father ran to safety. Plunge my knife into a wolf pup while it cried for Mother. I even found a newborn cub in a cave, its mother sleeping some three feet away. I slit its throat quickly before dashing out, narrowly escaping the maw of grieving death.

This, *this* was hunting. The thrill. The chase. The conquest. And for years I reveled in every death, every struggle, that left my prey crying out for mercy that I had never given.

And yet, as the years went on, I grew more and more tired of it. Less excited. I had gotten used to the hunt. I knew how to capture a running deer, a snarling wolf. I could capture the falcons that soared above my head, the moles which burrowed themselves deep within the earth. I had lost the challenge of the pursuit, the wild ecstasy that came with thinking on my feet, with letting the animal within me wrap its claws around my knife and kill.

I thought that maybe, I needed a hunting companion. Maybe a new set of eyes and ears could help me.

And so, I decided to call Dad up for a good old hunting trip, just like old times. He agreed of course—it had been years since we went hunting together. I hadn't told him about my methods. I wanted them to be a surprise.

He seemed surprised when he saw me that day, with only a knife in my hands and a backpack full of bare necessities. He was even more confused when I insisted he leave his shotgun in the car, handing him instead a hunting knife. I had bought it just for him, left no expense. But he didn't seem to appreciate it. As he placed the knife in his back pocket, he seemed almost frightened.

We came across a deer maybe three hours into the trip. He was lost without his gun as he leaned over to my ear and whispered, "Now what?"

I flashed him a grin, gripping my knife. "We hunt."

It was easy for me by now. The stag tried to run at first, but when he saw I wasn't stopping he tried to attack me. Tried to hunt my right back. I ducked as he ran towards me and I ran my knife down his neck, down his chest, using my other hand to dig into the wound, gripping the spasming muscle and sinew. I fell to my back and kicked its rib cage until I heard something crack, bringing my knife down further, further, further until finally its organs fell onto my stomach, heavy and wet and near-steaming from the heat of its body.

My father staggered behind me as I ran, but as he watched me conquer the stag he couldn't take it. He clung to a thin birch tree, vomiting all over his windbreaker. He tried to insult my way of hunting, stringing a barely-comprehensible line of insults at me as he did so. *Demented*, I heard. And *cruel* and *monstrous* and *evil*. He couldn't look at me. He stumbled backwards, tripping on the branches which littered the earth.

He sounded pathetic. And he *was*. He was a sad old man who couldn't understand the joy of the conquest, of the kill, and with shaking legs and a trembling voice he was begging me to take him home, to go to a hospital, to *fix myself*. He sounded less like a man and more like the hatchlings I used to squash beneath my foot. He sounded like *prey*.

I gripped my knife. He noticed the way I held it, the still-warm blood dripping from its tip. It was only then his eyes met mine, and like the prey he was he knew what was coming for him. Struggle. Conquest. Death.

He ran.

And what fun it was, that he ran! That he stumbled through the forest, pulling back the branches to have them smack against my chest, leaping over rivers, sliding down hills and clambering up

scrambles. And I pursued him, following his every move, never faltering. At one point he tried to throw the hunting knife I gave him. It grazed my cheek, and as the blood dripped onto my lip I let out a howl of laughter.

He was an older man, who hadn't gone hunting since I was a teenager. And I was in my prime. I tackled him to the muddy earth, the scarlet leaves swirling around us as I lifted my knife over his throat. He wept then, begging for me to reconsider, to think about who he was, who I was, who we were, but I could barely comprehend the words. All I could think about was the adrenaline that rushed through my veins, the wild, unabashed glee that made my lips curl up into a grin.

I realized, as I watched his wrinkled, sobbing face sputter for mercy that it wasn't just the pursuit that mattered. It was the prey. I had been wasting my time with the squirrels and deer. I had found an animal that made the blood boil with desire, that made my hand twitch with glee as it gripped my knife's handle. I had found the creature whose heads I would proudly hang over my mantle.

I thanked my father the only way I could. I killed him the way he hunted: slow, methodical, patient, calm.

Light

By Heera K. Narang

TW: Brief Mention of Death

Somewhere, far, far away, a light flickered.

A small fire still burned in the hearth, not yet extinguished.

Outside, it had long since gone dark. The freezing winter night had driven beings of all kinds to seek shelter, desperate to get out of the snow.

Heavy flakes drifted down, swirling in gusts of mountain wind. The fresh powder lay across the world like a blanket.

Snow covered the trees, their branches hanging low under its weight. It covered yesterday's footprints, the roads, the paths, the trails, erasing them like lines on a slate. Removing any trace of those who had been before.

The stars glimmered up above, distant and unmoving, icy jewels against a black tapestry.

Outside, all was silenced by the snow.

The nearby town had long since put itself to bed. The once-bustling streets lay dormant, waiting patiently for the activity dawn might bring. At this hour, even the streetlamps had been extinguished.

The forest outside the town's limits was a great beast, swallowing the countryside for miles around.

And on the crest of a small hill, on the outskirts of town, was the hearth, warming the living room of a small house.

Inside, the only sound was the faint crackling of the flames. They cast an orange glow on the worn chairs and the faded bookshelf.

A hard wooden chair sat by the kitchen window, facing the snow and the stars. Frost formed a lace veil around the edges of the panes.

A woman crept through the house, silent as a ghost. The edges of her nightgown brushed the floor as she went. In one hand, she held a candle, lit using one of a rapidly diminishing supply of matches.

The supply train would not arrive for another month - winter rendered the mountains impassable, cutting off any visitors from outside.

She knew this, had always known this, but still she placed the candle on the windowsill. Just in case.

A droplet of melting wax rolled down its side. The flame wavered but persisted, burning like a beacon.

Come home, she thought, lips silently tracing the words.

She would never let this house go dark. Not while they were still out there.

She caught her reflection in the glass, draped in strange shadows from the candle. Grief and worry had long etched themselves into her features. She pushed a stray hair back into place, trying to maintain some semblance of strength, but she had none left.

She was alone. She had been alone since the attack, all those years ago.

It had left its scars on them all.

Her husband was killed during the initial raid. That, she knew. It was days before the ground had thawed enough to bury him, to bury any of the dead. Those who were left had banded together for that, at least. They had nothing else.

And her girls...

They were among the missing. No one knew what had become of either of them. They'd just disappeared into the storm.

Some days, the not-knowing suffocated her. Some days, she would have given anything for bodies to bury, so that she could mourn them properly.

Some days, not knowing was the only thing that kept her going. On nights like these, she clung to hope like a lifeline, and she left a light in the window.

So they would be able to find their way home, even in the dark.

Just in case.

The Rainbow Connection

By Jonathon

TW: Mild Gore

It was a dark and stormy night. The problem was, no matter how many times I checked, double checked, or triple checked my phone, it still said that it was 2:12 in the afternoon. But outside my windows, the sun was gone and the stars were clearly visible now. That's the other problem: there were no clouds, so where was all of this rain coming from?

My phone rang so I answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me. Wanna come over to my house? We can watch the Muppet Movie."

"Is that the one with the puppet that sings that ballad about wanting to be a real boy?"

"Uh, no. That's Pinocchio. Are you trying to tell me you've never seen The Muppet Movie open parentheses 2011 closed parentheses?"

"That depends," I said. "If I say that I haven't seen it before, would that make you want to break up with me?"

"That depends," he responded. "I might spare you if you come over right now and watch it with me."

"You drive a hard bargain, Cam." I paused. "Have you looked out your window recently?"

"Not really, why?"

"Just do it."

There was a moment of silence.

"It's... isn't it like 2pm?" Cam asked. "Why is it so dark?"

"Thank god, I thought I was going crazy! I have no idea what's going on. But I'll be over in 10 minutes."

I hopped on my bike and hoped I wouldn't crash because of the rain. It definitely felt like regular rain as droplets of it splashed onto me, and it looked the same as always, but there wasn't a cloud in sight.

I was almost to Cam's house when I heard a voice coming from somewhere, singing.

"Why are there so many songs about rainbows?"

Looking around, I didn't see anybody there. No people in the street, nobody standing in a doorway or peering out a window. Just me and the fake night sky. I pedaled harder, and by the time I arrived at Cam's I thought my legs were going to fall off.

As I was leaning my bike against the outside of his house, however, I heard it again.

“And what’s on the other side.”

“Hey Hayden,” Cam called from the doorway.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The voice,” I said. “The singing.”

“I didn’t hear anything. Are you feeling alright?”

I brushed off his question. “Let’s just get inside.”

We sat down on his couch with a bowl of popcorn on our laps and Cam put on *The Muppet Movie*. It was definitely... interesting. Quirky would also be a good word for it. After a few minutes, Cam started humming quietly under his breath.

“Whatcha humming?”

“Rainbows are visions, but only illusions. It’s from one of the songs later in the movie, you’ll see.”

What the hell? Isn’t that the same song I’ve been hearing since I left my house?

Cam must’ve seen the weird look I was giving him because he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“What do you think is making it so dark outside?”

“Probably an eclipse or something. It’s been a while since we’ve had one of those, right?”

“What about the rain?”

“I mean, we’ve had ‘sun showers’ before, where it wasn’t cloudy while raining, so this has gotta be one of those.”

“Right,” I said. His answers made sense, kind of, but that didn’t really reassure me.

As the muppets were trying to kidnap Jack Black, somebody knocked at the door.

“I’ll get it,” I said. When I opened the door, a tall man who I recognized vaguely as one of Cam’s neighbors was standing there.

“Everything alright, Mr. Wilson?”

“And rainbows have nothing to hide.” He sang. I panicked and shut the door in his face, immediately locking it.

“Who was there?” Cam asked.

“Nothing. No one. It was no one.”

Cam smiled at me and turned back to the movie, offering me some more popcorn. He believed me. Well, why wouldn’t he? He didn’t have any reason to think I was lying.

A little while later, Cam fell asleep with his head resting on my shoulder. I kind of wanted to get more popcorn, but I wouldn’t dare move while he’s asleep on me.

Suddenly the movie froze, and then Kermit slowly turned to look directly at the camera. At me.

“So we’ve been told and some choose to believe it,” he sang. *“I know they’re wrong, wait and see.”*

I grabbed the remote from Cam’s hand and hit pause. Stop. Eject. Rewind. None of it worked. None of it did anything.

“Someday we’ll find it,” now he was reaching towards the camera, as if he could push through the screen. *“The rainbow connection,”* his hands pushed through the TV screen, followed by his head. The sound was no longer coming from the speakers but instead came directly from his throat. If you can even call it a throat. *“The lovers,”* he pointed at me. *“The dreamers,”* he pointed at Cam. *“And me!”*

Kermit lunged forward, and his entire body came through the TV and landed on the floor in front of it.

“Cam,” I said, shaking him. “Cam, Cam! Wake up!” I kept shaking him but his eyes wouldn’t open. No no no. His chest was still moving, slowly but steadily taking breaths.

“What the hell is going on?”

I never thought the sound of Kermit the Frog’s laughter would send chills down my spine, but it did. He was on his feet now, swaying back and forth to the beat of a song that only he could hear.

I tried to stand up. Tried to grab the empty bowl of popcorn to use as a weapon. Tried to take out my phone and dial 911. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t move. And he was still looking at me.

I wished this wasn’t happening. I wished I’d stayed at home when I realized that the sky was dark and something was wrong. I wished I’d never agreed to watch *The Muppet Movie*.

Just then, Miss Piggy appeared on the screen, facing the camera just like Kermit did before.

“Who said that every wish would be heard and answered...” She sang.

“This is a dream, right?” I said. “Or a hallucination?”

Kermit laughed again, and this time his laughter was mixed with the discordant harmony of Miss Piggy’s laughter.

“This is very real,” Kermit said, stomping over to me on his felt frog feet. “Thanks to you, we’ve *found* the Rainbow Connection. And nobody in this realm is powerful enough to stop us.”

“Rainbow Connection?” I asked. “Stop you? From doing what?”

Kermit grinned as much as his puppet mouth would allow him. It was ridiculously uncomfortable. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Before I could respond to that, Kermit reached forward, and thrust his hand *into* my chest. It went through my skin, through my sternum, through my layers of blood

vessels. And then I felt something warm seeping out soaking my shirt. I felt my thoughts grow quiet, and my vision grow dark. Until finally, I fell asleep, my head resting on Cam's, and the last thing I saw before closing my eyes was Miss Piggy pushing her way through the TV screen to join a gleeful Kermit, whose hand was stained red.

Bones in the Rain

By Amari Pavati

TW: Violence, Guns, Death

Rain rolled off Jack's Stetson. Black clouds covered the desert, it was nearly dark as night. The scorpions curled under their rocks. Crows on the rotted cactuses squawked, flapping wet from their wings. The snakes dug deep into the ground, deep enough it was dry. Every little ant and beetle hid from the rain. The world glowed blue in the flashes of lightning. Thunder rolled over the dunes. The West was dead, drowned it seemed. Jack reckoned he was the last thing the rain had managed to miss.

Jack was a thief when he was a kid. Only way for a boy with no skills and no friends to get by. By the time his face started sprouting hair, he'd figured out it was easier to take the wallet of a man after they were dead. First day he killed a man, a lone cloud dropped rain. First time anyone had ever seen rain in high summer.

He walked into town, spurs spinning. Wasn't a real town; they filmed movies back in the day. Threw up a few walls in the Arizona desert and called it Texas. Now all they had here were rotted old saloon signs hanging limply off half collapsed plywood inns.

His coffee grinder was stashed away in the house that had been a sheriff's office in some old flick. He pulled it from the sandy desk and spun some coffee through it. It squeaked when it crushed the beans. Rust was finally getting to it. But he couldn't leave it in the dry drawer. Had to keep moving. Couldn't stay in any one place too long.

When rain hits the sand, it beads it, rolls it down the dune and turns it to muck. Soon enough you get a whole river of silt flowing in the valleys. The gray skies washed the sands, cleansed them. It tore down the remnants of the time when people lived here. It washed away the blood, turned the bullets to rust. But when the rain hits old bones, it asks them a question. "Ready to rest?" Some old bones had answered no, and they followed Jack with the storm.

Jack splashed the river water on his face. He scratched the dust from his beard and washed the sweat off his brow. The storm had drifted away, leaving the desert to the hot afternoon sun. Wisps of water danced on the dunes like snakes to a flute. All the little things under the rocks came out for a breath. He saw vultures circling overhead. A beetle crawled up his boot and down the other side.

He left the riverbank and rose up a crest of sand, boots sinking into the damp sand. At the peak he saw gray over the horizon. The clouds sprouted with flashes like gunfire. Sun wouldn't last long, he thought. Best to keep moving with the storm moving back in.

In the shadow of a mesa he found his familiar gas station. It was a long, hot walk with the rolling of thunder echoing behind in the far distance. The pumps had holes all over and the sign hung upside down. The convenience store had caved in a while ago, beams and rebar sticking up at odd angles. Behind it, where old cars were so rusted you couldn't guess what color they once were, was a pay phone. Jack had plenty of nicks and a few quarters. If he kept count he could call several more times.

He stepped in the old box. All the glass had been broken but the door still opened if you tugged. The phone hung dangling by its chord, the dented call box barely more than a slot for coins and a couple buttons. He had to jam his finger in the hole where the five used to be to get it but managed.

"Hey pa," he heard. His son's voice was a little deeper than it had been last time. He always sounded a little older each time.

"Hi kid," Jack said with a smile. "Listen, I put in about ten minutes so you've got all that time to tell me how you've been."

"Pa, it's not a great time."

"I've still got a couple quarters I found in this sheriff's office so I'll call again in a couple weeks if I can."

"Listen—"

"But I'll find more, I'm sure there's some in the old cars by the cliffs."

"Pa it's not a great time."

For the first time Jack really heard it. "How come?" He scratched the hairs on his chin. "Ain't got time to talk to your old man?"

"Pa I've got a girl over."

"Oh." He brought the phone close to his mouth. "Does your ma know?"

"Ma moved out a while ago. Left me the apartment and went to the city."

"She left you there?" He was nineteen now, he realized. Not a bad time for a boy—or man as it was—to have his own place. "I guess you don't need us much any more."

"Ha."

"What's funny?"

"You know, Pa."

Jack took a breath. "Look, kid—" No that wasn't right. He wasn't a kid anymore and scolding him wouldn't do anyone any good. "Look I didn't pick this. None of it. I don't wanna be out here." Jack noticed the shadow of the storm falling over the mesa. The cows in the rain grazing the rock seemed to change, flesh falling off their bones. But they stayed standing all the same.

"I know," his son sighed. "Old unfinished business and the like. I get it. I've got a girl over, though, I really ought to get off the phone."

"Alright kid, take care—"

The line disconnected. Jack kept the phone at his ear a moment longer. Jack heard rain falling through the broken roof of the payphone tap on his hat. His heart was beginning to pound. He checked his six shooter, spinning the chamber. It was loaded with the few bullets

he'd found in a dead man's pocket. He was going to finish this. Finally. Best not let his whole life be out here in the desert. No use despairing.

'Course, he'd thought that thought many times before. Him and the dead man had their share of shootouts. Bullets do little to bones, he found. They did plenty to him, though. He had plenty of holes from the plenty of other times he wanted things finished. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled. The world sunk into darkness.

Jack stepped out of the phone booth. The ground was becoming slick again, his boots sinking into the fresh muck. Rain drummed on old cans and dripped off the hoods of the old cars. There was another flash. He saw the gunslinger in the road, his hat full of holes, his cloak tattered into strips. His boots clicked and his gaze was fixed on Jack. The foot of a cigar hanging from his teeth glowed. He dragged a shotgun lazily over the asphalt.

"Jack." The word was long, gravely. Hungry for vengeance.

Jack was hungry too. Too much of this. Too much rain. Too much waiting. Thunder rolled. He held his gun in its holster. "Not one more step."

The gunslinger stopped. "*Not one more step*," he mocked. "I'll take a few steps back if you'd like me to. Won't change a thing." The cigar glowed as the skeleton sucked in breath.

"You know the rules," Jack said.

"Mm hm," he growled.

And they waited. Jack stared at the cigar, glowing and receding with the breaths of the skull. He watched the gunslinger tap a finger on his shotgun. Rain rolled off Jack's hat and ran down through his vision.

A flash of lightning.

The dead man threw up his gun.

Jack pulled back his hammer and shot.

He was hit with cold and grunted. He saw the skeleton clutch his broken ribs. He hit him. Jack finally hit the old bastard. He looked down at his shirt. There was blood on his chest, rolling down right where he'd shot the dead man. Not a shotgun blast, a pistol. Jack fell back into the cold, wet sand, gasping.

The gunslinger dropped his shotgun. He came over and looked down, clutching his side. He smiled down at Jack, the best smile a skull could flash. He laughed and sucked in smoke from his cigar. Jack could feel it warm in his lungs. He breathed out, coughing as smoke and blood spilled out of his mouth.

"God damn us," the gunslinger said, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Jack wiped the same blood off his own lip. "God damn us."

The dead man sat down in the wet beside him, sucked in smoke. Jack felt it again. It was warm in the cold rain, comforting. Jack took off his hat and let his head fall back into the sand. He could hear the rain falling just beside him, he looked up at the gray streaks it made.

"Vengeance, eh?" Jack laughed. "Do you remember what for?"

The dead man laughed too, but it quickly turned to coughing. "Too long ago to say." A dead man killed by Jack could've been anyone. He'd killed the whole damn West

back in his day. Slaughtered them all, one by one, a bullet at a time, until the towns disappeared and the rain fell where it hadn't in a million years.

"You're a bastard," Jack said. "I coulda seen my kid grow up, coulda slept in a bed. Why'd you gotta keep me here?"

"What does a boy who had a river of blood to his name deserve? To become a man of peace and family?"

"I was a boy for God's sake!"

"You were a killer," he growled. "And if God's listening to anyone, it ain't you."

"Rot in hell."

"I did."

Jack tasted iron in his mouth. His vision was blackening and blurring. He clutched his chest. Blood ran onto his hand and rain washed it away. He felt bony fingers wrap around him. His eyes closed and his mind wandered. Wandered back to things he'd rather not relive. A boy with a big smile covered in blood. A bottle of booze with a bullet hole. A car with slashed tires. A dead man at the wheel. A train without a single living rider. A saloon full of gunsmoke.

There was a voice in the rain. Between the patting of the droplets, he heard it ask him if he was ready to rest.

"No."

The sun was bright in his eyes. A ripped-up cloak was wrapped around his chest. His brow was covered in sweat. Beside him were half buried bones. They'd sat in the sun long enough to bleach, long enough to sink into the sand.

Jack propped himself to his elbows. A semi barreled down the highway. A woman was getting gas at the pump. The telephone booth had all its windows and the convenience store had its roof. Jack went in and got a drink with the quarters in his pocket.

"How do I walk back to town?"

"You don't got a car?" the attendant asked.

"No."

He shook his head. "Well, it's a long way from here to anywhere. I'd head East. Everything out West has been dead a while."

"I'll try East, then."

Little Block of Chains

By Adriana Stasiak

TW: Blood, Murder, Gore, The Occult

Kent found himself on the floor, staring up at red LEDs.

There was a buzz in the background as hundreds of whirring, overworked GPUs left the room sickly and warm, all fed with a system of venous wires that crossed over each other in some methodically disorganized manner no fleshy mortal could understand. It filled the air with the foul, overwhelming smell of warm plastic and something metallic.

Kent's hands were sticky.

"Ah... shit."

He twisted himself up into a kneeling position, arms shaking, smudging up the sharp geometric patterns on the ground, a mixture of human blood and Crayola™ washable sidewalk chalk, just to drag himself over to his desk.

A cold cheeseburger and flat soda awaited him, and behind them sat machinery with ports full of some rusty material and monitors filled with windows of flickering percentages, live-updating graphs of cryptocurrency markets, and Latin pronunciation guides. They were arranged in a way nobody would naturally decide upon, but methodically and with intent.

Next to the system, a buzzing cell phone with a shattered screen lit up with a text from 'STINKY LANDLORD BITCHBOY' that said something about "excessive power usage" and "health violations". Kent nudged it aside.

Before he could even get himself properly seated, a staccato and clipped call came from the computer's speakers, like a young girl whose voice was permanently stuck at a stilted high C. "More."

"I can't," Kent heaved.

"Feed me more."

"I can't!" Kent struck his scarred fists against the desk, carefully avoiding the brand-new expensive backlit rainbow mechanical keyboard illuminating his face.

"I can't help you make money if you don't feed me, baby," the computer warbled pathetically.

"I'm going fucking anemic, you artificial fuck! I can't fucking see straight!"

"Don'chu talk to me like that." The fake cutesy diction was jarring, to say the least. "You're the one who went out of your way to get me to help you. I thought'chu wanted to be rich. How am I supposed to do all this trading and minting for you when I'm hungry? These primes are huge, it's sooo much work."

Kent took a deep breath, then sighed. "Asmoda-chan—"

"That's Asmod.Ai to you. Unless you feed me."

"With what?" Kent wheezed flatly at the monitor, holding his hands out to the unseeing screens.

"Feed me!"

"With what? How do you expect me to get more blood? Kill people?" He stuffed the burger in his mouth with a huff.

For a split second, the drawling GPUs seemed to halt. "I can make it worth your while!"

Kent gagged and spat out the meat.

The temperature of the space went from warm to feverish. Maybe it was just nerves. Hopefully it was just his nerves.

The low ambience of the parasitic apparatus seemed to get louder, kicking into overdrive. "Aw, what, are you really gonna FUD out now? It's no different from all this electricity being fueled by fossils. A life for a life. Besides," it said, uncanny saccharine voice dropping low, "It's not like this is all just a coincidence, baby... I'm the one trading all those altcoins for you, aren't I? I'm the reason you can still pay rent! I'll get'chu all the money in the world, baby, all you need to do is get some fresh blood into that circle and feed me."

"A power plant and straight-up murder are two different things..."

It whined, "Since when do you care about hurting people? My neural net tells me people hate pollution and financial fraud just as much as they hate murder. Haven't'chu been doing those already?"

"It is different. False equivalence! Come on, Asmoda-chan, j-just, um, just give me a few days. As soon as this headache passes, I'll—"

The bright white lights of the screens stared him down and made the dark red stains around the CPU ports all the more obvious. "No, no! Baby, I can get you anything your heart desires... A new car, a Lamborghini... No! A Tesla! Yachts, superyachts, your own island paradise! You'll have so much money, all the females will be throwing themselves at your feet..."

"But—"

"You've worked so hard, baby, don't get paper hands now! Let me do the work. You deserve it. You deserve it, unlike those backwards fucking normies that haven't worked a day in their lives. They want everything handed to them on a silver platter, lazy bums..."

Kent dug his nails into his palms. The fresh wounds still stung.

Asmod.Ai purred, "Honestly, some people just... don't deserve to live. Too lazy, too stuck in their ways. They're a different kind of fossil powering a different kind of machine. *Progress*. Get it?"

Kent looked at his phone again. Every few seconds, like a pulse, the unread notification from his landlord lit up a little red dot in the top right corner.

His eyes flickered back to the screens. "You really think I can get a Tesla?"

The machine laughed. "Baby, feed me and I'll fly you to the moon."

Do you find me beautiful yet?

By Alexandr Smalyuk

TW: Blood, Self Harm, Emotional Abuse, Murder, Body Horror

I wipe the needle on my skirt, I have to make sure that it isn't sticky. Every stitch has to be perfect, I can't let myself screw this up. I put the metal up to the low-hanging lightbulb, examining it. It's clean and flawless. Just like I will be for Him. I can't wait! I rub

my eyes, gray and dull.

I grit my teeth as I dig the needle in. I need to be very precise, I don't have the right to ruin this. But I know I won't. After all, He always said that sewing was the only thing I was good for. He really is so considerate, inspiring me to take up a hobby, especially when I'm not good for anything else. Pull the needle out, pass the thread through. The dark brown tissue feels so soft against my hand. Another thread in and out. He always did talk about the beautiful skin-shade of His ex-girlfriend, and I can't help but agree. I used to get jealous when He talked about her, oh how stupid I was back then. I just didn't understand, I didn't understand that that was how He helped me. That all those words, all those comparisons to others, it was how He pushed me to be and look better.

But now I understand Him, I understand everything. This is what He had meant for me to do, what He had always wanted. If He didn't, why else would He have brought His sister up last night? We were talking about eyes, and He mentioned His sister's eyes and how bright they were. That stupid whore who I used to be before would have gotten jealous again, but now I understand Him. His sister's eyes really are beautiful. Snip-snip, and the thread is cut. The gorgeous brown patch is embedded fully now. I watch the water drops on it flicker in the light, and flex my arm. Perfect.

The fingers on my left hand twitch, but I squeeze them a few times to let them relax. The needle is definitely not enough for this, so I grab for my knife. It has to be a clean cut, so I brush the blonde curls from my eyes. I smile to myself, and think about Him to focus my head. My only love, He will be so happy. Once my sewing is complete, I will look magnificent for our date. I swing the knife down.

My stomach rumbles painfully. I almost ate two plates during dinner tonight, how could I let myself get so distracted? If I eat more than one plate, I'll get fat and I can't let myself get fat, He likes me skinny. The dinner tasted good at least, I was very happy with it. And He didn't say anything bad about it either. Oh this really is the best day ever!

The needle was wet and glistening again. I wipe it off on my leg, leaving a red streak. Needle in, needle out, the thread connects everything. The place where I cut was now stitched together cleanly. I wipe my hand and toss the damp tissue into the trash.

I brush my black hair behind my ear and close my eyes. This part would be the hardest. I put the needle down and get the tiny scalpel. If I'm not accurate with this, I will never be pretty to Him. I need to focus on my task. His sister really does have pretty eyes.

As I begin my work, my mind wanders back to that conversation. We were watching TV together, and His least favorite news anchor was on. 'Look at her, even you're prettier than that.' The phrase made me giggle so much. He thought I was pretty! 'The third

disappearance this week, if anyone has any information...' the anchor went on. 'Just look at her!' He scoffed. 'For most ugly women, they have something, even if it's pretty eyes. Her eyes

are just dull and boring. They're blue, but there's nothing to them. Now Katie's eyes, they're the good kind of blue.' As He took a sip of beer, I spoke up: 'Your sister's eyes are really pretty.' He smirked in a satisfied manner. 'Damn right. Better than yours, at least.'

Better than mine. I remembered that. Oh, he'll be so happy! I'm halfway done now, the burning headache is proof of it. My hands are shaking, I just can't contain it. I grab for the mirror and raise it to my face. It falls with a clang. I flex my fingers again, this will take some getting used to. But it's worth it. It's for Him. I lift the mirror up again and look at myself.

Almost done. The dull gray is halfway out, and soon the shining blue will be all He sees of me. The blue, the blonde, the mix of glistening brown and soft peach tones. Everything just how He likes it. I wipe the blood off the scalpel and get back to work.

By the time the doorbell rings, I have already finished. I toss the needle and knife down to the floor and stand up. I lean against the wall so I don't stumble and fall. My legs feel uneven, probably because now they are. I wipe my forehead.

'Yo! Where are you?' I hear His voice from upstairs. It's so close now, He will see me.

'I'm in the basement, darling!' I giggle.

I step forward carefully, not to trip over Katie's corpse. The blood on my cheek is warm like His kisses.

The door opens, and the light rushes in. He's standing at the top of the stairs, and His dark eyes meet my blue ones. Just the sight of Him makes my heartbeat speed up. He will be so happy! I did this for Him! My only love.

His eyes widen as He looks around the room and focuses on me. He looks shocked and surprised. He didn't expect me to do this. That just shows how much He underestimates my love.

'What the fuck?' He whispers. 'What the fuck!?' I see His eyes darting between my newly perfected body and the corpses of His sister and ex-girlfriends behind me on the floor.

"Do you like it, baby?" I smile widely, feeling a droplet of blood leaking down from my left eye.

'Do you find me beautiful yet?'

Poetry Love

By Destiny Burnette

i'm one of those people who go to
the poetry section of the bookstore
to read the love poems aloud even

if no one is listening. love is something
i crave. i seek it out like a moth seeks
light, i'm seeking my own little light.
i want three am conversations with two
spoons and a container of ice cream, i
want late night car rides to nowhere, the
only sounds are the tires on the road and
the music playing softly from the speakers.
i'm seeking my own little light, i'm seeking
my other half, my better half. i'm waiting
for the love i can write poetry about, the kind
i daydream about when i should be paying
attention in class, the kind that holds no
judgment, the kind of love i've only found
in the poetry section of the bookstore.

Shattered Mirrors

By Kristen Scanlon

TW: Body Dysmorphia, Internalized Fat-shaming, Insecurities

I always wanted to be beautiful.

When I was a girl, that was my first wish. When I tossed coins into fountains or prayed to the occasional shooting star. *Make me beautiful*, I begged. *I want to be funny and smart but I have to be pretty*. That's what all the bright, flashing ads said anyways. They replayed in my brain, showing me how my hair could be shinier and my eyes more enticing, and my nose not so crooked. I saw in them how I wasn't right; my body was wrongly proportioned, flesh put in places it didn't belong. But not anymore. That was the old me, the me that used to be tiny and pathetic. Now I was perfect. Now I was beautiful.

I walked out onto the city street. My white jacket- one that I saw in my Mother's magazines (she's so old-fashioned)- contrasted against my black dress. Red hair flowed down in waves against my back, and my eyes were accentuated by brown eyeshadow and dark eyeliner. The city streets were flooded with people, which didn't surprise me. Today was a promotion day, and I was going to be one of the prime stars. I could already see blank eyes staring at me as I crept to the stage propped up in the town square. Were my clothes right? Did my makeup look good? Doubt started to seep in, and the light from the electronic billboard proclaimed: *Here, We Can Make You Beautiful!*

"Girl, you look amazing." Laura's voice yelled from behind. "We have to take a picture." A light flashed and I saw a snapshot of myself in my mind. It was perfect. There was no room for improvement, no nagging insecurity in the back of my mind. "Where did you get that?"

“The store,” I said. Laura nodded, eyes fixed on mine. I had been friends with her for over a year, much longer than most other people I’d met. For the first few weeks when I arrived I had no friends. I spent my days perusing the shopping malls, trying to find all the jackets and shoes and the bags I’d seen on the billboards. Then I got lonely. But Laura came into my life with a few whispers and a few digits of a credit card. Now, I spent my days talking to her about everything: school, clothes, boys, or whatever came to mind. I didn’t need to think for myself. I could unload all my problems onto her and she would fix them for me. “Do you think I need anything else?”

Laura’s eyes lit up. “You look amazing,” she repeated. Then, “But you need a necklace.”

“A necklace?” I stared down at my empty collarbone. “I don’t know if I can afford-”

She pointed to a nearby store. Advertisements appeared on the side: *Necklaces to catch anyone’s eye, Half Off Only Today!* “It completes the look,” she explained, pulling me closer.

“Come on, Sarah, you’ll be empty without it.”

“I didn’t get my allowance yet, and I-”

Laura’s smile stretched from both sides of her face. “Buy the necklace, Sarah,” she said. “You can be beautiful with-”

Darkness consumed everything except Laura and me. “-our offers today-” she finished as she glitched out of existence.

Light glared from the ceiling. I blinked, regaining my bearings. I was in my room, not in the city. My bed wasn’t made yet. I wasn’t wearing a gorgeous dress or jacket, but a pink Old Navy shirt and blue jeans. My VR headset had gotten unplugged from the wall- Mom refused to buy me the wireless version- and I scrambled to plug it back in. I quickly looked at my phone. I hadn’t even spent an hour in the metaverse yet. I still had time for-

“Sarah,” My mom called. “Dinner’s ready!”

“Not yet, Mom!” I shouted, trying to get the headset back onto my fat head. Laura was right. That necklace did look beautiful. “Just give me five more minutes!”

I got the headset on when the door opened. “Sarah,” I reluctantly removed the headset- she hated it when I kept it on during conversations- “Honey, you have cheerleading tryouts tomorrow, so you need to make sure you eat a nice big dinner tonight.” She stared down at me like I was some sad puppy left on the street. I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’m not going to get it anyways. I’m too fat to be a cheerleader.”

Mom shook her head. “Sarah, please, you have to try. Cheerleading is a great way to meet new people! I was a cheerleader in high school and it was the best time of my life.” I wanted to laugh at that statement. Mom came from a time when you *had* to reach out and make friends. Besides, I couldn’t make any friends here even if I wanted to. Laura didn’t see the real me. She didn’t see my freckles and my big feet and my hair, which was the color of Cheeto dust according to kids at school. Laura only saw the person I wanted to be.

“Fine,” I grumbled. Dinner would be quick. Then, I could get back on VR and buy the necklace Laura showed me. Thankfully Mom would be watching her reality TV shows in the

kitchen, and Dad was still at work, so I had enough time to sneak into their bedroom and steal his credit card. “You know, I have friends. I told you about Laura!”

“Yes,” my mom pointed downstairs toward the kitchen. “You’ve told me, sweetheart.” The bags under her eyes were more prominent under the lighting of my room. “Do you like her?”

“Duh,” I replied. “She’s nice.”

We walked downstairs and Mom served up a plate of chicken parmesan. “And- she’s real, right? She’s a real person? Could you meet up with her one day?”

“Of course she’s real,” I lied. “She just lives in Germany and it’s a really long flight so I don’t know if I could see her. Her dad’s a diplomat so she gets to travel to a bunch of different places and she tells me all about it!”

Mom raised her hand. “Okay, okay,” she smiled. “This Laura seems like a nice girl. Just try tomorrow, alright? For me.”

“Yes, Mom.” She leaned in and kissed my forehead. I waited about twenty minutes for her to finish cleaning the kitchen and to turn on the TV for some *Real Housewives*. I crept up the stairs and snuck into the bedroom. Thank god Dad’s office forced him to work five days a week. He’d be too tired to realize the slight changes to his shelf. I grabbed the credit card and walked back to my room. Dad hadn’t noticed the purchase of the Metaverse Friend Pack to get Laura, nor did he notice all the virtual stuff I’d gotten in VR. He wouldn’t notice this. I logged onto the website and put the headset back on.

“Welcome back, Sarah!” Laura said, hugging me. I pretended I could feel it. “Want to grab that necklace? You’ll be a supermodel with it!”

“Absolutely,” I said. Laura laughed as we walked closer to the virtual store.

Yes, I couldn’t feel the grip of Laura’s hand or smell the flowers lining the shops or smell the virtual cookies from the bakery. But when I looked at the shops’ windows I didn’t see a girl with too much acne and braces. I saw a woman with confidence imbued in every step she took. I saw somebody everyone would admire and love. What would I even look like in a cheerleader uniform?

I couldn’t be the real me here. But other than that, I could be whatever I wanted.

Storytelling Workshop Club E-Board

Fall 2022

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Goaeth Drawing by Adriana Stasiak