

MARIGOLD



AN SWC ANTHOLOGY

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

Preface

I'm beyond proud to present SWC's second semesterly publication, "Marigold." Our Liaison and all the contributing writers have put in hours of work to make this anthology what it is, and we are all so excited for you to read it. "Marigold" contains the spirit of our student body, and all the creativity (and chaos) of our club. As President and as a club member since my freshman year, I've watched SWC grow from a lively but unchartered group of friends, to an SA-recognized club capable not only of publishing works created by its own members, but by students from the wider campus community as well. I'm proud to be a part of a club so dedicated to shining its spotlight on student creativity. Though I am graduating, I am confident that SWC will continue to grow and achieve even greater things. I hope you enjoy!

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

This is our second semester with an official physical publication! I'm once again so excited to have something that we can share around campus to show off everyone's writing. I've been apart of this club since my freshman year, before it was even chartered and I've loved seeing it grow into what it is now over the years. It has been a constant in my undergraduate career. A place 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. I'm so sad to be graduating and leaving this club behind, but I'll always treasure the memories and friends I've made with the club. I look forward to seeing where our new e-board takes the club in the future!

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*

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Marigold Meanings

from <https://www.flowermeaning.com/marigold-flower-meaning/>:

Despair and grief over the loss of love

The beauty and warmth of the rising sun

Winning the affections of someone through hard work

Creativity and the drive to succeed

Desire for wealth

Cruelty and coldness due to jealousy

Sacred offerings to the Gods

Remembering and celebrating the dead

Promoting cheer and good relations in a relationship

Nevermore, Ohio

By Jeffrey Purnomo

TW: Dead bodies, gore, graphic imagery

Nevermore, Ohio: a town located in rural Ohio, semi-adjacent to the Appalachian mountains.

Population: ~8,000

Containment Procedures: Site 21 will distribute undercover agents into Nevermore Township. Undercover Guild agents shall relay relevant information to site command. Any threat that may result in a possible Broken Woge Scenario is to be dealt with immediately, with appropriate discretion.

The Nevermore town doctor, a fine gentleman by the name of Mike Augello, was found dead this morning from an apparent animal attack. His throat had been ripped open, leaving his face in a look of abject horror. Sheriff Charlie Kriegshauser discovered Augello's body when the doctor hadn't arrived for his morning shift at the town clinic. No suspects have been named.

The Sheriff found a temporary doctor the next day. A strange man, who lived a solitary life in the woods, by the name of Dr. Xavier Mensch. He was tall and wiry, with dark skin and even darker eyes. He spoke with a slight, indiscernible, accent that seemed to wipe the emotion from his voice. Whenever the man walked, his strides seemed too long and too wide, as if he were exaggerating human movements.

When he arrived at the clinic, the sheriff asked if he could examine the late Dr. Augello's body.

He grimly accepted.

He could see the eel, its massive body coiling around the underwater spire. An array of bubbles flooded out of its mouth, drifting toward the unreachable surface. He watched as it aimlessly floated, its glassy eyes cutting through the suffocating darkness. He liked to believe it couldn't see him, that the water was far too dark, and that its glassy eyes were well and truly blind.

And then the eel looked up at him.

His vision shifted and the world swirled around him. He could briefly see the universe expand before him. He saw a million worlds collide with each other, he saw a billion suns consume themselves as they imploded into white dwarves.

He saw a bloody knight, with a blazing sword, sitting atop a throne of skulls. Some of the skulls were human. Most of them were not.

He saw a dark figure, hunched over and gaunt. In their hand was an ax, and reality shattered in its wake. It looked at him with one terrible, sapphire eye. It was looking for his fears.

There was the twisted visage of Erebus, the Abyss Bringer, who swore to overthrow the Universe's rulers and become a dark and terrible god.

Another shift in the world, and he saw the winged form of the Worm King, alongside his Four Horsemen. In the distance, a spiny beast was burning gods and beasts alike in a great and terrifying pyre.

His world was twisting again. Colors blurred as reality bent backward, sending him spiraling toward some unknown destination. The next thing he knew, he was on a beach. He'd been to this beach before. It had been a secret gathering spot, where he and his friends spent summer afternoons drinking liquor and skipping stones. He remembered this place from his dreams too. He looked up and saw the all too familiar image of a cracked and broken moon. He could hear the whispers now, another detail he always remembered. He could never decipher what they were saying, and yet he knew they were calling out to him. Like a mother calling for their child to run home.

Then a loud, blaring noise drowned out their siren call. He crumpled to the ground, his hands grasping at his ears in a futile attempt to block out the noise. The world around him was melting now, colors bleeding together in morose rainbows.

"Wake up"

What was that? It sounded like a voice, but it was so distant. Barely audible over this terrible noise.

"Wake up"

There it was again. Was it getting closer? Or was he just noticing it more now? Wait, where was he? Where did the beach go-

"Mateo!" his mother exclaimed, shaking the sleeping boy. His alarm clock was blaring loudly in the background, with the number "6:30" blinking rapidly on its glass surface.

"Come on Mateo, you'll be late for school!" his mother said, tossing off his covers.

Mateo, in response, curled up his spindly limbs as the September chill grazed his pale body. Webbed fingers gripped at his sweatpants, as he contorted himself into a crude ball.

"Come on Mateo, andale!"

Mateo could only groan, scrunching his eyes in annoyance.

"I'm going," he mumbled.

That seemed to be enough to abate his mother for the time being, and she turned to leave him to get ready for school. As she left, Mateo couldn't help but glare at his mother with his piercing blue eyes. Despite his parents' urging, he never was a morning person, especially when school was on the table.

And right now, he'd take weird, probably prophetic dreams over high school any day.

The good doctor couldn't help but grimace at his notes. It wasn't because of their grim nature, he'd been privy to enough warzones that gore no longer mattered to him. No, it was the seemingly contradictory observations that disturbed him.

There were clear signs of an animal attack, yes. Deep wounds to the carotid artery, with puncture marks clearly left by a canine of some sort. There were bits and pieces of him that had been removed, and the crude, angry flesh left behind clearly showed it was torn rather than cleaved. The almost infinite amount of claw marks should've been a dead giveaway to most doctors.

But there was a strange irregularity that tickled a part of Dr. Mensch's brain. A singular puncture wound, near the center of Dr. Augello's chest. He would've assumed that it was some wound made post-mortem, an accidental nick in the flesh when the animal was feeding on him. But when he went to measure the wound, he found something odd about it. Most puncture wounds tend to be completely vertical, with only slight bends to account for the natural curvature of some canines. But this wound bent at a forty-five-degree angle, far too acute for any known canine.

It left the good doctor scratching his head. Such a wound could only be caused by a creature with opposable thumbs, the angle was simply too steep for any tooth to have done it. And yet, the obvious cause of death was the deep wound to his carotid, a wound that could only be made by a predator of some sort.

Dr. Mensch could only sigh, before marking the cause of death as an "animal attack."

The sheriff and the town desperately needed answers, not questions that would leave them awake at night,

Roy hefted the garbage bag over his shoulder. A long day's work at a diner always amounted to an even longer night cleaning up. A neon sign hung high over him, perpetually shining with the words "Roy's Diner."

Roy wiped the sleep from his eyes as he kicked open a door to the dumpster. It was dark and dank here, the evening's drizzle certainly not helping matters. A street lamp lay adjacent to the dumpster, but it had died long ago when the diner was still a fledgling restaurant. Roy had given up on fixing it a long time ago.

He took a step out of the diner, before taking a quick cursory glance around. He was out in the open here, with nothing but empty parking lots and darkness meeting his gaze. It was a reflex if anything. Nevermore was a safe town, but the darkness always brought uncertainty with it.

He silently mused about what he was gonna cook for tomorrow's special. Roast beef was always something tried and true, but he wasn't sure he wanted to get up early tomorrow. Chicken Parmesan? He shook his head at that thought, he always hated frying stuff during service, and it was too much of a mess for him to clean up.

A sudden rattle ripped him out of his musings. It was akin to metal settling, like the sound his air conditioner made when it sprang to life. He felt the wind shift around him in a moment, could hear the snarling calls of some unseen predator. It was upon him in second, clawed hands ready for his supple flesh.

There was the sound of wind parting, of fleshy gore being ripped to shreds. Blood cascaded across the drab wall of the diner, followed by the long and terrible roar of something alien. There was a solid thud on the ground.

Roy looked back at the mess he made. The creature, whose canine-like visage stared back at him lifelessly, had been reduced to pieces. Blood had been sprayed across the ground and adjacent walls. It pooled into the shallow puddles, it stained the abandoned trash bag.

Roy grumbled, before dematerializing the blade in his hands.
It was gonna be a long night.

Kind Glass Eyes

By Katherine Quinn

TW: Self image issues

“You have to promise me that you’ll love her forever.” She said, kneeling down to my level.

“I promise.” I replied, complying with the seriousness in her tone.

She picked up the doll by its chunky plastic arms. “And take the best care of her.”

“I will.” I nodded

She held the doll at a distance, studying its deep brown eyes. “Enjoy her.” She said, before her tall leather boots scampered back to their shift behind the museum gift shop counter.

Katie was the name of my first American Girl Doll. I remember the day I bought her with my own money, which I had saved for nearly a year. I stood in front of the plexiglass case, analyzing each doll carefully. It was very important that I made the right decision. I looked at my pale skin and mousy brown hair in the reflection of the display, contrasted with the sea of skin tones, hair, and eye colors-- dozens of unblinking glossy

eyes, welcoming my scrutiny. They stood like a little infantry, clad in pink Mary janes and plaid headbands. “She had to be *blonde*.” I thought, my own insecurity informing this decision. I felt that brown hair just seemed too plain for a purchase, or rather, and event this special. I knelt down and picked up a berry red box from the shelf, labeled “#24.”

I named her Katie because she was an extension of me. But better.

I took only the best care of Katie. As the years passed, she remained in as good of a condition as a doll of her age could be. I brushed her hair with a special brush and propped her up on a special doll swing when I was not playing with her. In many ways, she was primarily for display. The words of the woman from the museum gift shop rang loud and resounding in my mind. “You have to promise me that you’ll love her forever... and take the best care of her.”

I showered her with love, I threw her a birthday party, and made us matching outfits. “I swear that doll is glued to your arm!” my grandmother would say.

Even at 22 years old, I keep Katie perched on a bench in my childhood bedroom, there to greet me on my visits home. When her hair became too straw-like and sun-bleached, I bought a replacement wig from a doll shop. And now she is brunette like me.

I recently came across an old photograph of my mother from sometime the eighties. She looked ready for a dance, with her short hair piled on top of her head and a black velveteen dress sweeping off her shoulders. I said, “you look so beautiful here!”

She responded, “You’re much prettier than I ever was.”

As if I am not an extension of her.

Sometimes, when I worked my old restaurant job, little girls would come in with a doll under their arm. I would always offer the doll a chair, always offer to take her order, always indulge in the fantasy. Those silly little dolls seemed to take on a life of their own. But that's girlhood, isn't it? The beauty to nurture all that surrounds us, such that we have the power to give life to these objects. And part of us wishes better for them. I look at Katie on her perch and feel... sorry. I feel as though I imbued her with my own insecurity and self-doubt. I wish I knew then how to be kinder to myself and love myself as I had loved her.

I hope you treat all extensions of yourself with a nurturing hand. I hope that the memories of imagined friends greet you with warmth. I hope that perhaps you can look at yourself through kinder eyes, filled with the life you've given them.

Target Acquired

By Ella Connors

Walking through the exit to enter was bold, but not nearly as bold as the man with the flushed face and the human sized pikachu pillow walking swiftly past you after his card was just declined two times. You head to the wire rack with the plants that are so intensely green, they appear to be violently dissolving the air around them. Of course, they aren't real, these plants. They merely fit your college dorm aesthetic, thus, you take two and place them in the cart even after cringing at the price tag.

Although it is merely September, you cannot help but to visit the land of mistletoe and nutcrackers. It is a comfort to know that holiday spirit persists even in the depths of the Fall. The middle-aged woman with a good amount of wrinkles in her brow limps past you with the sweaty child clinging to her knee, head thrown back in fashion reminiscent of an exorcism or violent mind invasion.

There is a sense of *deja vu* as you walk through every aisle, a feeling indescribable but all consuming. You swear you've seen that exact pot before. And that exact plate. And that exact pillow. The one with the ruffles on every corner and the strange origami-like shape in the center that kind of reminds you of your grandma's dead dog (specifically once it was already dead). The teenage girl next to you scans something, takes a quick look at the price that eerily pops up on the screen, and then her eyes slowly bulge. She disappears shortly after to put the item back on the shelf.

You swear you've seen that one guy with the facial hair that looks like it must be hiding some rapidly spreading rabies before. The way that he holds himself very upright, almost too upright to be human at all. His shoes look too tight. He appears too rich to be here, but you don't question it. You watch as he continues to speak on his phone in choppy, tense sentences to some guy named Paul.

"Paul."

"No, Paul, I said *not* the maroon sweater."

"Helen's not like other girls *Paul*."

"Jesus Christ Paul, call your attorney."

"Over my dead body Paul."

"Paul, she used to be a hooker! No, like a *real* one!"

"Fuck you Paul And fuck Helen!!"

You think Paul cried himself to sleep that night. Although you suppose you cannot speak on his behalf.

You smell the chocolates. Not the fancy kinds of chocolates, as you find that paying double for special chocolate is the equivalent of paying extra for organic bananas. You fill your bag with an assortment of Greek yogurts. You see the squeeze go-gurts, and you are tempted to add those to the collection. You remember them exploding all over you when you were eight years old in the elementary school cafeteria. You remember your friend laughing at you and then running to get napkins to wipe off your jeans.

You see the kid ecstatically riding on the side of the shopping cart and remember playing "Garbage Truck" with your sister during long Sunday trips to get a week's worth of groceries with your dad. You add the squeeze yogurts to the bag.

You go to check out. You load your items into the bagging area. You insert your card. You wait a short second and then take it out. There's an abrupt beeping noise. "Thank you for shopping at Target."

You look behind you. Everything is exactly the same. Nothing has changed.

Time seems to freeze for a second. Every sound seems unmoving. Before getting back onto the bus, before returning to a land of seemingly random emotions, random people, and foreign identities, you soak in the familiar smell of the air and the familiar view layed out in front of you.

For only a second, you are comforted by the presence of strangers, the company of capitalism, and the strange face of a friend called Nostalgia.

An Elegy From Your Favorite Instrument

By Anonymous

TW: Maggots, slight body horror

Shriveled up and died,
The center-left of my chest has been inverted
I could dip my hand through my rib cage and feel my fingers touch my shoulder blades.
Maggots would nibble at my knuckles, hungry for more of me
When my friends sing of you with warm, dulcet tones
They can tell that I am disgusted, but they still serenade
I rage and froth like a mad man
I cannot afford to look pitiful, to appear to miss you
But at night I cling to my pillow, trying to weep
I have learned a terrible thing
You cannot cry without a heart
The maggots lick your tear ducts clean.

I've been told the second stanza of an elegy praises the dead they speak of
And once I could have filled libraries with my love for you
I could write about the spark in your eye when you saw me
About your voice, low and warm and a comfort when I couldn't sleep
How you'd laugh so hard you couldn't breathe around me
Your compassion and humor, your everything, your everything
But none of that is there anymore
And looking back, I don't think it ever was
You are air and eggshells in the shape of a man

But you were a good musician, of this I am proof
Because you used to pluck my strings and I used to serenade
Now my throat croaks out of tune from the memory.

I write love stories now, and lots of them
Sweet, sappy things about people who may not be perfect, but love each other
I ache for that love in the center-left of my chest
But you are made of eggshells, and I will not sing of you
I will not let nimble hands near my strings
I clear away my maggots, sew up my chest
I rip apart chunks of my thigh and reform it into a heart
It functions, but it can never truly beat like it did before
And maybe that's a good thing,
That I will never sing and love like a mad man again
I play doctor with this replica that rattles in my ribcage
I let my maggots eat your tombstone.

Static

By Madeline Loiaconi

I look at you and see
A television set to a static screen
Solemnly serving your role
Hoping not to get too bold
With your eyes full of stars
Yet staring aimlessly afar
Wondering how time will solve
The puzzle of a life forestalled.

I'll look at you and see
A ferocious working bee
Fully aware of your goals
While anticipating getting old
Trying everything in your power
Not to waste another hour
Determined to make your mark
Refuting those who smothered your spark.

I look at you and see
What the world can do to thee

Who push away their dreams
As an attempt to live in conformity
But defy the logic of chance
To develop their own stance
And prove their ambitions to be true
For what else is one supposed to do.

Vert City

By Jonathon

Leon was plummeting towards a painful and a messy death. Splashy colors from the assorted mess of lights that hung out of people's windows or were connected to the sides of buildings took over his vision as he fell from nearly 200 stories above the floor of the Sixth Layer of Vert City. He tried to look in front of him, to see if there was something he could grab in order to slow or stop his fall, but all he saw was a quick glance of his reflection in the window. The air was exerting so much pressure on his neck and eyes as he tried to look around that he worried he was going to get seriously hurt. Well, on top of the whole being-about-to-die thing. He squeezed his eyes shut.

A tinny voice burst out of the comms-earring he was wearing, but it was hard to hear over the rushing sound of air blowing past him as his descent accelerated.

"What?" Leon shouted, almost choking on the air that forced itself into his mouth.

"Engage the El-mag harness!" The voice repeated. It was Detective Watters, his handler.

Right. The El-mag harness. The electro-magnetic harness designed to prevent situations exactly like this one.

Leon never got trained in how to use that harness. Technically, he was only a consultant with the Detectives of the Sixth Layer, only being brought in for cases involving his expertise – his knowledge of the maze of alleyways in much of the Inner Ring of The Sixth. As a result, the higher ups at the Detective Academy on the Seventh Layer didn't want to waste the funds on training him.

He grasped at the straps around his torso and legs, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do, until finally his fingers closed around something that felt like a button. This button, once pressed, might engage the El-mag technology, pulling him against the side of the building and arresting his downward motion. Or it might unclasp the harness and kill him. Leon hesitated only briefly before pushing the button. There was no one left to miss him anyway.

Nothing happened.

The harness didn't unclasp and the El-mag tech didn't engage. Leon was still in free fall. He cautiously opened one eye, and guessed there were maybe 100 stories left between him and fate.

"We've got hostiles!" Detective Patterson called over the comms.

"The kid's still falling!" Detective Watters replied.

The chatter in his comms-earring was suddenly replaced by static. The terrible, skittering sensation of dread crawled across his body. This was all his fault.

They weren't even supposed to be on a case today, but Leon had finally managed to convince Detective Watters and his boss, Detective Patterson, that the Inner Precinct would benefit from aerial mapping of the labyrinthine alleys scattered throughout the Sixth Layer. It seemed like when the original architects were planning this layer of the sprawling vertical city, someone had taken the blueprints and cut them into thousands of pieces, only to be stitched back together by a toddler who cared nothing for efficiency or order. The result was a chaotic mish-mash of shapes and patterns, and occasionally a few-block wide district that was actually laid out in a grid. Weaving between the main streets and the buildings were the mazes of alleys, often creating shortcuts or isolated spaces that could only be accessed through those alleyways.

Detective Patterson had taken a small team, which Leon had to fight to be included on, to the top of one of the tallest buildings that didn't extend straight up into the Seventh Layer. They brought one of the Precinct's drones with them, as well as some other gadgets Leon wasn't familiar with, but was told that they would help with the mapping. He was used to them keeping details from him so he didn't push.

Leon had never been up that high before, so he didn't know what to expect, but the view from that rooftop was surreal. He had never seen so much of the city at once. Most of his life was spent confined in alleys or at the precinct, and he never realized how *big* each layer of Vert City was. Standing at the top of this rooftop in the Inner Ring, he wasn't even able to see The Edge. It looked as if the city stretched on infinitely, an inescapable mass of mazes and buildings and people. The people looked so small from up here. Was this how the people on the higher layers thought of him? After all, his ceiling, the highest point of the world he'd known all his life, was just a floor to them.

His sense of wonder had only lasted a few more minutes, until he tripped on a loose stone and went tumbling over the side of the building.

"--concentrated EMP blasts!" Patterson shouted through the now reconnected comms, bringing Leon's thoughts back to the present. Only 50 stories left now.

"None of the harnesses are working," came Watters's voice. "I think they were sabotaged."

In a strange way, that comforted Leon, knowing that his harness not working wasn't his fault for hitting the wrong button or not asking for an explanation beforehand. The blame was on someone else.

“They’re getting away with the laser mapper!” Patterson’s voice rang in his ear.

“The drone?” Watters asked.

“No, the *real* mapper!”

Leon wondered if the haughty voice of Detective Patterson was the last thing he was going to hear. 20 stories.

15.

10.

A thick cord came up from underneath him and wrapped itself around his waist, the two weighted ends locking together after fully entangling him. Leon opened his eyes in time to see the cord light up a faint blue and the next thing he knew he was being pulled sideways, against the wall of the nearest building. This was El-mag technology.

Leon glanced down, trying to see who had saved his life, but everybody he saw was rushing past as if they didn’t watch him almost die. At the last second, one of the people passing by stopped and looked up at him, as if to make sure he was alright, before ducking around the corner. Leon couldn’t be sure, but he had a suspicion that whoever that was had been the one that threw the cord up to him.

“I-I’m okay,” Leon said into his comms-earring. “Someone had some sort of modified El-mag harness. They threw it up to me when I was nearing the ground. I didn’t catch a good look but they’re heading northeast, same direction as the precinct.”

“Well at least there’s some good news,” Patterson muttered. “There was some mapping tech that I requested from the Seventh Layer that got stolen. This isn’t gonna end well for the precinct. Someone knew we had that tech down here.”

“I think the drone got a partial facial scan,” Watters said. “We might be able to catch these guys if we move quick enough.”

Leon sighed. This was going to be a long day.

Held in Two

By Bri Thompson

TW: Descriptions of blood, death, self harm

The setting sun holds the world in red, putting an end to this blood-smeared day and pulling back the curtain on an ash-strewn night. Skaði crouches on this brink, cupping the face of their beloved Njör with all the care of someone holding the world in too-tiny, too-fragile hands. They stifle a sob as they hold him up, his neck slack, *his* face slack, his hands – which once entwined with theirs in the most natural of ways – slack.

“Please,” they beg the sky, “Please, please, please. Take me instead.” Deep down they know this offer is a pretense. Njör died protecting them. What an insult it would be to his memory to insist upon trading again, another life for another life. No, they can’t

die now, but they aren't satisfied with living alone either. So they need to get *their* attention.

"I know you're out there. I asked you for help once before, but you ignored me. Since then, I've prayed every day. I've slaughtered in your hallowed names. I've done everything you ever could have asked of me, and I'll do it all again. Just please. Help."

It is not a question or a plea anymore. It is a truth, in the same way that Njör's empty grey eyes are a truth they would rather ignore. Their fingers skid to obscure those eyes behind unfeeling eyelids. Then they let their hands slip, slick with blood and slack with cold, from Njör's face. The pressure of his skin replaced by a pressure in their chest.

Without him here, they feel unchained or untethered. It is getting harder to understand the difference. They know it manifests in a looseness of the limbs, a pointlessness found behind every action, even that of breathing and pumping blood.

They stand. It is better if his body stays here, on this bloody tundra of a thousand bodies who didn't have anyone who cared enough to try and heal them – not that the intention ever mattered more than the result. Njör's corpse could melt into the snow if it stayed here, meld into the natural world from whence he came. That's what he would have wanted, what he asked for, even. Whispered in their ear that night of magical dancing lights and wandering fingers finding far more than the fire could ever bare.

He should be allowed to simply cease in this unceasingly vast and shivering expanse. But that's not what Skaði can give him. They will not, *cannot* live alone.

The world shifts around Skaði, murky memories giving way to the madness of nostalgia, and then they are home again. In a village at the edge of a country that was made up long before either of them was born. It is lonely here, on the outskirts. No one to watch over them, no one to guide them, beyond the invisible strings in the sky that whisper words out of the elders' mouths. Words to be repeated. Words to be revered.

"What are you doing out here all on your lonesome, huh?" The warm voice is as welcome as it is jarring on these plains of ice. "You're gonna give yourself a cold, Skaði."

Skaði looks up with younger eyes at a Njör from before the war, unscarred and unfettered in his smiles. "I could say the same of you," they remark, "You look like you've been out hunting again, if that hair is anything to go by. All by yourself?"

"I was just about to go and invite someone along," Njör says, "but now I'm thinking better of it. This hunting partner-to-be might not be all that cooperative."

"Is that so?"

"In fact, I've heard they're quite the pain in the ass."

"Come now, Njör. Such language. Your mother would be ashamed."

“I’ve got more where that came from, witchling. Do you wanna hear a tale about this hunting partner-to-be? Once, I heard they ruined a party by bringing a full-sized—”

“I don’t think I do,” Skaði cuts in, a little too hastily.

Njör grins, putting his hands up in surrender. “Do you want to tag along, witchling? I could use a hunting partner, and as difficult as you might be, I don’t have many better options. It’s either you or the dogs at this point. And I don’t like the way they smell.” He makes a face like he’s in deep thought. “Not that you smell much better.”

Skaði looks down at their hands. A small ball of light emerges from their palms. Whether it had been hiding there, waiting to come out, or whether they had to force it to exist has never been clear to them. Nothing is clear, their vision greying out to focus on that single spark. It rises into the air between them, before abruptly fizzing out when it reaches Njör’s waist. “I still have work to do,” they say, lifting their eyes to meet his.

“I understand. But you know you deserve a break, right?” Njör says, soft in that way he is learning to be whenever he says things he knows Skaði doesn’t want to hear.

“I know, Njör. But you have to understand why I can’t take one. Not yet.”

“This better not be about your father. I know his death hit you hard, but—”

“But I will find a way to make it right. If I can learn to heal people faster, *better*, than I can make sure it never happens again. And if it never happens again, then it happened the first time for a reason: To teach me how to make it right. Do you see?”

It’s not really a question, so Njör doesn’t treat it as one. He simply nods and smiles down at them. He is so forgiving. He is so kind. He is so beautiful. He is so tall.

“Since when are you taller than me?” Skaði asks, jumping to their feet only to find their worst fears coming to life. Njör is not only taller than them – he’s taller than them by a fair margin. There’s no way they’re going to be able to catch up to him at this rate.

Njör shoves their shoulder, knocking them into the snow. They grab his leg as they go down, and then both of them are tumbling face first into the barren white, scrambling to get the upper hand in a war of flakes and fondness. Skaði pushes Njör’s face into the snow deep enough for his shouts to become inaudible, and Njör finally relents, tapping on the back of Skaði’s hand until they let him back up. Immediately, he begins to ruffle the snow out of his hair and onto their lap. Skaði laughs and helps him by dumping an entire handful of snow onto his head, followed by another and another.

Slowly, steadily, they bury each other in snow. It’s only when both are sufficiently covered and numbed that Njör says, “You promise you won’t work yourself to the bone?”

“Promise.”

“Okay. Then I’m gonna go hunting, and when I come back, you’re gonna—”

Skaði's anticipatory frown must be all too sharp, because Njör sighs. "You're going to have to take a break to eat dinner eventually. And that's all I was going to suggest, I swear. Just a *little* rest and some mutton soup. What do you say to that?"

"I agree!" Skaði shouts at the sky in answer to a bargain that has yet to be offered. But the answer would always be the same, whether they liked the terms or not. As long as it's for *him* – they would do anything, sacrifice anything, believe in anything.

The only things that are important now are that he is alive, and they live to see it.

The sky shouts back in a rumble of thunder, a crack of lightning. Skaði offers up a single ball of light to the sky – too tiny to heal their father, too fragile to heal Njör, too pitiful to be good for much of anything. Except, perhaps, convincing *them* to help.

"I can give you this – my magic. Take it." It's all they've got left, and all they can afford to lose. Which is why they're not expecting the thunder and lightning and blood-red fire of the vanishing sun to rumble a different command as question to their answer. "Would I— you wish for me to use my magic in service of you? To what aim?"

They receive no response. The sun's fringes slip beneath the horizon, leaving the world as dark as they had found it. In that same moment, Skaði brings a knife down on their palm, slitting it open and allowing the roiling black inside to be exposed to the ice-crystal air. The sky drinks it up, pulling it upward in writhing tendrils like a greedy child.

Skaði collapses to the ground, hands trembling and shackled by bonds beyond their ability to comprehend. A gasp of breath, of life, of not-being-too-late fills the air from the space beside them. *He's worth the world*, they remind themselves as they gather his face in their too-fragile hands. *So he must be worth burning the world for as well.*

Hag

By Skyler Sharpe

TW: Homophobia, misogyny, murder, human sacrifice, religious fervor

The haggly old tree just off main street stares menacingly into the distance. The soft breeze caused the final leaves to fall to the ground. Brassy colors of reddish brown flutter down in a pile near the roots and they are soon picked up by the breeze again, carried elsewhere. As all the leaves depart from the tree it slowly becomes devoid of color. The thick trunk grew bare in patches as old bark began to rot away. The tree's mangled branches stood strong against the wind. They looked like long fingernails against the dark sky. It was an eerie sight. The tree loomed ever present like the thoughts in my mind of what's to come.

Five days. Five days and I will never have to be alone again. All those sleepless nights alone shielding myself from an unforgiving world comes to an end. The next chapter of my life is soon to begin. With the love of my life by my side I believe the future can be good. Five days and I will finally be married to my love, Maria.

Three days. Three days and I can leave this wretched town. I will run and never look back. I leave behind my old life and everything I ever knew, yet I know it will not be missed. In this town I am trapped, hiding who I am. One wrong move and I know the wrath of the town will be upon me. Three days and I will be free.

One day. Tomorrow the ceremony will be over. Tonight the tree claims its victim. Tonight, the 29th of October, is the final day of Kahhamen Fest.

Kahhamen Fest is a ten day festival of drinking and parting. It is a ten day nightmare. The high priests of our town say it appeases Vermathor, god of the harvest and pleasure. The priests say that our parties please the all mighty god and allow a more charitable harvest. However, our drunken stupor is never enough. On the final day the town must choose one victim at random to sacrifice to the tree of Vermathor, the haggly old tree just off main street. In the summer it is a peach tree, but now at the end of fall it barely shows any signs of life.

I think the gods are bullshit. Omnipotent beings who see your every move and judge your every action. How could they possibly see everything? And even if they could, why would they let the world be so shitty? If these supposed gods were all powerful how could they allow so much hate in the world? Shouldn't those who are all powerful want to make their followers happy?

The issue of the gods is the one place Maria and I disagree. She has a deep faith in the all powerful beings above. I think it's the way she was raised, but she believes that the gods value our capabilities of free will over their divine abilities. Every time this conversation comes up she always stares me right in the eyes and with her sly, but sweet smile she will ask me, "Would you rather live in a world where everyone is always happy, or in one where you have the ability to make those choices and create your own happiness?" Every time she says that I just want to give her the biggest hug of my life and tell her how I just want to create my own happiness with her, but I can't. Not in this town.

Maria was born the daughter of a long line of priestly legacy. Only sons can continue the line of priesthood, but daughters can still endow children with divinity. Maria's father is Damon Thorax, high priest of Vermathor. Her mother is Adelaide Thorax, daughter of the high priest of Seivea, the moon goddess. Or at least she was. She died in childbirth with her only child, Maria. Damon would never admit it, but everyone knows that he was more devastated that Maria wasn't a boy then he was for the untimely passing of his young bride. His only hope is that Maria marries a well off man and has a son before he dies, or else his lineage will lose the title of high priest. Unfortunately, that could never happen because I'm poor, but mostly because I'm not a man.

I take one last glance at the tree before I return my attention to the walk ahead. I clutch my groceries close to my chest, the weight of them finally becoming real for the first time since I bought them. I may not be staying long so I won't need much, but I have to keep up appearances, and who can beat those end of Kahhamen Fest sales? I readjust the paper bag in my arms when an apple slips out of my grasp. I try to catch it but it rolls out in front of me into the street below. I chase it until it finally stops rolling. It stops right at the feet of Damon Thorax, with Maria close behind.

Damon glares at me with an ugly smile that makes one feel sick to her stomach. I was so consumed in my thoughts that I must not have seen him approach. Around me, I can already tell that everyone has already taken the ritual bow position that is required in the presence of a high priest. I hurriedly stumble to the ground dropping the rest of my groceries in the process. For a brief moment, there is silence, but soon Damon begins to cackle. A low and daunting cackle that reminds one of the sound of grating metal.

"Get up you hag!" Scolded Damon, his words sharp as a knife, "It's women like you who are the scum of the earth."

I slowly rise to my feet, keeping my head bowed low. Suddenly, he grabs my chin and jerks my head close to his.

"I know what you do with my daughter," he whispered, inches away from my face. His breath was hot and smelled of garlic. It was suffocating, but just as suddenly as he grabbed me, he threw me away. My head jerked around as I landed to the ground with a thud.

"My people!" he shouts in his priestly voice, "The great Vermathor has chosen his sacrifice! Robina Goethe, you shall die in service to your gods. Praise Vermathor!"

"Praise Vermathor!" cheered the crowd in unison. In an instant I'm surrounded by a mob. People of all ages, people who were my neighbors, people I looked up to, they surrounded me with vicious intent in their eyes. I knew at that moment my fate was sealed, but still I hoped that I could do something. I could kick, I could scream, maybe I could knock one of them down, I could run. But there was nothing I could do. They were already pinning me down with pressure so immense it hurt. They were scratching, they were punching, they were tearing at my skin. It began to come out in chunks in their hands like I was made of butter. I screamed. I screamed so hard my lungs burned, but no one came to my aid. Everyone was blinded by the moment. They all believed they were doing the right thing.

Maria didn't flinch. She closed her eyes and turned away. I wanted her to scream, I wanted her to plead for it to stop. But she didn't, she couldn't. That would get us both in trouble. At least I know that she can live on. All of our plans crumbling down before our eyes, but she still has a life to live. She can still find her happiness.

In that moment where I finally accept my fate is where someone brings out the rope. They tie it tight around my neck and I can no longer scream from the sheer pressure. The coarse fibers scratch and irritate my neck. I can no longer struggle. Every muscle in

my body hurts. It hurts where they hit me. It hurts where they broke my bones. It hurts where they took my flesh and threw it away.

The mob secures me to the haggly old tree and they all back away to admire their work. The edges of my vision are slowly going dark. The last thing I can see is Maria's watery eyes. She looks up at me and slowly scratches the tip of her nose. Our sign. She still loves me. I just want her to be happy. The light leaves my eyes and the darkness envelops me.

Bright white light surrounds me. It is pure and blinding. My muscles no longer ache, I am in no pain, I am free.

"I'm so sorry my child" said a booming voice, yet it was warm and comforting. "I never wanted it to be this way."

I open my eyes and I am presented with large floating beings in front of me in a void of white. One was in front and the rest floated behind them in a large semi circle. "I just wish to make my children happy."

Suddenly a wave of recognition flowed over me. "Vermathor?" I squeak out. "But why?"

"My poor child. I never wanted anyone to hurt, I never wanted sacrifices. I want my children to prosper, but not this way."

"So why don't you stop them? You are a god!"

"They chose this. The people. It is their free will."

"Maria-"

"Maria was right. Free will is what makes the mortals special. And I know what you want to know. Maria lives a long life, she never leaves the town. She marries a wealthy merchant and has a son. Her father is happy with this. Maria is content, but never happy. She never forgets you. You will see her again. She will be old and wrinkly, but the same woman who loves you with all her heart. But now for the harvest. The haggly old tree will soon bloom."

Hands

By Dayana Lucero

TW: Mentions of suicidal ideation

In my Sophomore year of high school, my English teacher assigned us all an essay at the conclusion of the last chapter of "Of Mice and Men." We were told to pick a theme from the book, and although he didn't speak of it as much, I chose hands. I've always been a sucker for symbolism. Something about just sitting there and ending up in a

spiral over something like hands always intrigued me. It was a simple essay, but I didn't expect it to come back to haunt as it did, much less at the kitchen table with my dad.

My dad taught me there is no such thing as a perfect parent. There are words I wish he could take back, actions I wish he'd never carried out, and memories of countless arguments I wish I could erase. If I were to go into detail of those words, actions, and memories, the average person would think I hated him, but that is not the case.

My dad came to this country with nothing, but the hopes of pursuing even a smidge of the American dream. I remember always wondering why he came here in the first place and whenever I asked him, he'd always say the same thing. "I came here so you could have every opportunity I couldn't have," he'd say, "I came here so you could be someone." I grew up in a family where the concept of gaslighting was ingrained into our DNA, but every time he said those words I could feel nothing but the warmth of the dreams he had for me.

If actions speak louder than words, then my father's scream bloody murder over a crowd of thousands. Ever since I can remember, my father was working down at the workshop where he built cabinet after cabinet from the minute the clock struck eight in the morning. and only got back at 5:30 in the afternoon. This was our normal. I was always grateful for what my father did, but it never hit me as hard until he'd come home with gauze and silicone tape around his finger. The initial reaction was always to gasp, ask what happened, and then offer to help re-wrap his wound. I'd watch him bite down on his lip as my mom wiped down his injury with a cotton ball doused in rubbing alcohol. I'd thank God for only letting it be his finger. That was the first thing I would do

as I'd hear my dad go on and on about how it wasn't as bad as it looked. "I want you to be someone," he'd say, "Until then, I have to keep working and you have to go to school."

Mental health are two words that do not go together in my family. When my grades slipped in middle school, my parents assumed it was because I was getting lazy. I insisted it wasn't, it was something else, but they weren't raised understanding anything that had to do with things like depression or anxiety. I blamed them for it. Everytime I spiraled or found myself wondering what would happen if I was just gone, I blamed them for raising me the way they did. I blamed them for shoving cruel worlds into my head. I blamed them for disciplining me the way they did and for so much more. When I got into high school, my relationship with my dad took a turn for the worse. Every time he came home I was all set with counter arguments and insults to throw back at him at the dinner table. I don't even remember what half of those fights were about, maybe about school or some stupid deadline coming to close for comfort. When the common app opened up in my senior year, things only got worse. Recommendation letters, college tours, SAT's— all things we knew were coming one day, but were not prepared for. This was my moment. This was my moment to finally step up so I could be the someone my dad dreamed of, but I couldn't bring myself to care when all of my dreams ended with me gone.

My dad got hurt again that year. He got a nasty cut on his thumb, probably one the worst wounds I'd seen him with. We went about the usual routine. Cue the gasp and the questioning, and of course the re-wrapping. We sat at the kitchen table as we always did, and this time, I was the one who removed the dressing to see how bad the damage was. It was bad enough for my sister to turn away with a gagged "Oh god," but I'd watched enough "Untold Stories of the ER" to wrap the gauze and silicone tape around

his thumb without gagging. My dad kinda just sat there as I worked and asked him about his day before he got hurt. I remember what he said when I was finished. “Thank you my doctor,” he’d said with that goofy smile of his before I scoffed and told him to hush. It was then that I realized the extent this man would go for me. Even after all those things we’d said and all that built-up resentment I had for him, he was still willing to risk getting hurt so that I could be someone.

As I got older, my dad worked for longer hours. What used to be the end of his day became the mark of his new one hour break before heading back to his own workshop for another four to five hours. Unlike my younger self, I don’t pray to a God anymore to thank him for sparing everything but his fingers. Instead I wish for a life where our circumstances were different, and where he wouldn’t have to come home with grime and sawdust under his fingernails the way he does everyday. Overtime I’ve accepted that wish will forever remain nothing, but what it is. Just a wish.

The summer before I moved to college, I caught my dad picking at the grime under his nails again at the kitchen table. I was going to scold him for trying to get it out with his teeth again only for an idea to pop into my head. I made my way to my room and came back with a nail filer, and proceeded to give him a whole at-home manicure. Cleaning away the dirt on his nails, filing them into a similar shape— he even let me paint a clear layer of polish over his nails. Sometimes we’d talk, other times he’d just watch the news as we sat there in silence, leaving me back to my thoughts. It was while I was filing my father’s chipped nails that I thought back to that essay I wrote about how something like hands could speak such volumes.

When I look at my father’s hands, I see the hands of the hard-working man who raised me the best he could. I see the man who is willing to take a few close-calls with

that intimidating machinery he works with, and who won't stop until the day I can look at him and thank him for each and every sacrifice because "I am someone now." Looking back, I regret arguing with him as much as I did, but I'm glad it happened. Although it took me hitting my breaking point, my relationship with my dad has started to heal, and we now take a minute to evaluate whether or not there's a good reason to start shouting back and forth. Younger me chose to go away for college because I wanted to get away from my old life, but now, as I sit in my dorm room writing this piece, I wish for nothing more than to sit back at that kitchen table cleaning the dirt from my father's hands.

realistic human heart

By Gabby Lipkin

TW: Mention of suicide attempt, implied self harm

you're not my favorite person. i don't have one right now. i think that might be why i feel so weird and numb so much because my life almost feels purposeless. but maybe it means i'm getting better. i miss how happy i was able to get, even if it was fleeting. i miss how hard i could love.

he bought me flowers once. had them hand-delivered by some guy right to my dorm room door. it was for our six month anniversary but it was all the flowers with bad meanings, marigolds for death and white lilies for mourning and yellow carnations for unhappiness. back then i didn't believe in omens and signs from the universe but i should've known. god, i should've known. because who would buy someone flowers in the hope that they die from it? (he introduced me to smoking. my lungs have never taken in breath the same.)

today i wondered when - or if - i'll ever say i love you. i said it after eleven days and he beat me in three. i said it in the back of the car ice bags taped to my legs from all the cramps from track. i said it when the cops dragged me out of his car screaming crying because he knew i found him out and he couldn't accept the fact that he was wrong

when they threw me in the back and i looked back at him, his face bore nothing and he didn't cry like he always did. and i realized that those tears might have never been real. maybe they were at some point. but not then. never then.

you make me so cripplingly sad. my heart is a dead, cold thing in my chest that cannot beat or breathe. i don't know if i'm capable of falling in love again. i can't survive it again unless it lasts forever. those nights in your bed, all choked back tears at the fact that i feel like i'm not doing something right because i don't know how to do this without teethandbloodandstitches in my arm. (hospital room in september) cutting the heads off the flowers that meant death with kid scissors because maybe then that would initiate all the bad things that those flowers were meant to cause. both of us would be able to die and not have to be so sad or angry anymore. in that moment it would've been perfect.

(my therapist asks me for five things i can touch)

weighted blanket, pils of fabric on your pillow, sheets, phone, you. in this moment you're peaceful and your godawful snoring has simmered down into a deep and rhythmic breath. i kiss your head and you don't move, and pressed up where your shoulder meets your arm i've never felt warm like this in a while. and maybe in the morning i'll be sad again but when your heartbeat is murmuring softly in my ear i can never cry. maybe it's my meds. maybe it's you and you're bad for me. maybe you'll be the best thing in my entire life.

lips on your forehead. lips on your fingers. i just want someone to take care of me for once in my life.

3 A.M.

By Blake Tochilovsky

TW: Body horror

It was a Friday night, or I guess a Saturday morning. I got off work at 3 am back then, you see. I worked the night shift at a bar in a college town so it was loud and chaotic up until we kicked the *very* large group of stragglers out.

Before I continue, let me preface with the fact that I was fully sober. We're not allowed to drink on the clock. You could try to chalk it up to fatigue due to a late night, but I slept during the day, so I wasn't that much more tired than someone working a 9 to 5.

Anyways, I was walking home from the bar as usual. I take the same route every work day and probably could do it with my eyes closed. It's so ingrained in my muscle memory. Taking a taxi back would've been ideal, but that late, it'd cost too much.

A few blocks from my work, I go to round a corner and a blaring "OPEN" sign blinds me with how bright it is. I remember thinking to myself that the place must be new since I've never seen it before. The bright sign isn't something to be forgotten.

I was still pretty wired due to the noise and general energy of the early 20 somethings I'd been surrounded by for the last 6 or so hours, and my curiosity got the better of me. I figured I'd see what this place was. Other than the "OPEN" sign, there were no other signs or posters indicating what kind of place this was, but for some reason, I didn't pay it much mind at the time.

I tried to peer in through the windows, but they were tinted pretty heavily, so I couldn't make much out. Curiosity not at all satiated, I pushed the door open and a bell jingled, signaling my arrival to the room. Nothing could've prepared me for what was inside.

The smell hit me first. Heavy rot and decay. A faint hint of gasoline. My hair stood on end and I didn't step any further in. My eyes scanned the room and from top to bottom, it was covered in what looked like pieces of leather sewn together. The floor was scattered with the 'leather' in varying sizes and shades, but they were all individual sheets. As I looked at the pieces closest to me, they seemed to be covered in writing, but I couldn't distinguish what they said. It was a language I didn't know nor recognize, but it seemed to be the same words over and over.

My blood froze when I made eye contact with a man standing at the back of the room. I don't know if I could even call him a man. He was vaguely humanoid, but everything about him just seemed a bit off. Thinking back, I don't even think he had eyes. I just

looked at where eyes should be and felt like he looked back. He was looming over what looked like it had once been actually human. Square shaped pieces of skin were missing from the body and it hit me then what the leather must be. It was dimly lit which is why I hadn't noticed him immediately upon entering the building. I was only there for maybe a few seconds, but it felt like hours as I felt him staring back at me with the blank eye sockets. The smell became exponentially more pungent as we paused in our stand still.

A car suddenly whizzed past on the street, snapping me back to my body. I ran away then, glancing behind me to check if I was being followed by whatever it was I had seen. I don't think I was. Once I was more than a few blocks away, I phoned the police and kept running. My legs carried me home, and I locked the door shut behind me.

I didn't sleep for a few days after that, kept phoning in sick to work. I didn't feel safe leaving the bounds of my locked apartment. The building had gone up in flames that night, but according to the news, it had been uninhabited and abandoned for months. The police paid me a visit and questioned me about the fire, but concluded I wasn't responsible after some time. They told me they found no evidence of human remains or leather, but that they didn't have a source for the fire yet.

I changed my path to work and my boss let me switch my hours so I no longer worked the night shift. The morning didn't pay as well, but as long as the sun was up, the streets still bustling, and I didn't come within sight of that place, I didn't care.

Excerpt from “Sweet Innocence, Gentle Sin”

By August Witkowski

TW: Homophobia, religious trauma

Agnes kissed a boy for the first time at the middle school dance.

She felt so proud to be there in that cramped cafeteria, floors sticky and air acrid with the scent of red Kool Aid: she was a woman now. In sixth grade, old enough to be out at night, to be asked by Leonard to dance, to feel his hands slick with sweat on her waist and pretend it's what she wanted more than anything in the world. That's what women do, Grandmother had said. They say over and over that something is true and one day through God's mercy it is. Agnes wasn't pretending to feel a thrill of excitement, watching the other middle schoolers grind on each other, sneak off to kiss in the bathroom, away from the teacher chaperones' hawk-like eyes. She loved watching the kids she saw in the halls go wild once the lights dimmed. She wanted to go wild too.

So when Leonard said, “I really want to kiss you,” Agnes kissed him. He tasted of fruit punch and pretzels and it couldn't have been over too soon.

Later, Agnes found Ellie slouched in a corner, fingers laced daintily around a red Solo cup. Ellie was in eighth grade, but the sisters had only been born a year apart; Ellie had skipped fourth grade.

You'll go work at NASA one day, Agnes had insisted. You'll go fly to the stars to see where God lives.

Ellie had laughed, You can't take a spaceship to Heaven, God doesn't really live in the sky. It's a metaphor. Besides, I'm just glad I never had to dress up for All Saints' Day.

Their school didn't celebrate Halloween; instead, every year on All Saints' Day, the fourth graders dressed up as saints and paraded around the halls singing "Oh When the Saints Go Marching In." Agnes had dressed up as Joan of Arc and missed every note.

Now it was Bruno Mars singing: "Cause you make me feel like / I've been locked out of Heaven / For too long, for too long..."

"This song sucks," Ellie said. "This dance sucks."

"Of course it sucks if you aren't dancing," said Agnes.

"You looked like you were having fun with Leonard. Why'd you leave him?"

Agnes blushed as red as Ellie's cup. "Dunno."

"Are you done? Can I have Mom pick us up?"

"I want to dance." Agnes stalked back to Leonard, just to prove a point.

On the weekends, Agnes would choke on incense, kneeling lightheaded in prayer.

"My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart," she'd pray. "In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against You, whom I should love above all things."

Sitting, standing, singing, kneeling, all with the heavy scent of incense burning her sinuses until the room spun. When she was little, she used to pass out. Now she could clench her thighs and take deep breaths until her vision cleared.

The only part she liked was the Sign of Peace. She loved the big hugs from Mom and Dad, vigorously shaking Ellie's hand until the two girls dissolved into giggles, composing herself and shaking hands with the other families sitting in the pews around them. They always sat in front of the Simmonses, and Ellie would take Mary Simmons's hand last, squeezing it gently before giving her, too, a big hug. Ellie and Mary were best friends, and during homilies Mary would reach forward and weave braids into her hair.

Afterwards, the whole family would visit Grandmother in the nursing home. Mom and Grandmother would compare homilies: which priest interpreted the Gospel better, which told the best jokes.

One Sunday, Agnes caught Ellie chewing the Host; Mom always said you weren't supposed to, so Agnes asked Ellie why she was. "I always chew it," Ellie said.

A couple weeks later, Agnes saw Ellie kissing Mary behind the big oak tree on the school playground. She didn't tell Mom.

Micah from math class was cool. He was a junior and she was a freshman, but he still treated Agnes like she was human. He'd invite her out to the park where he and his friends would drink and smoke weed. Agnes liked the alcohol, how it made her skin tingle and her fears run and hide, but the first time she hit a blunt she gagged, so she never tried smoking again. When Micah kissed Agnes she thought it was what she wanted, but even tipsy she couldn't make those butterflies take flight.

She kissed him back anyway. She couldn't imagine surviving ninth grade without him.

Sometimes she'd see Ellie and Mary in the park and catch her sister's withering glare. But Agnes knew Ellie's secret, and it was about time she had one of her own.

She liked Micah, she did. She liked the smell of his hair and the hand-sanitizer taste of cheap vodka on his lips and the coarse calluses on the tips of his fingers he got

from playing guitar. She liked it when he touched her thighs with the promise of something more, soon. Always soon, never now. She liked to make him wait.

They almost got there, one day. They were in Agnes's room, Mom and Dad were out on their own little date, and in a sudden heat of passion, she'd let Micah pull off her shirt, her skin flushed down past her collarbone, but cooled by the winter breeze coming through her window. She gasped when he touched her in places she'd never been touched before. She told herself she liked it, his calloused fingers finding their way beneath the wire of her bra, his hot, wet lips on her neck.

She liked it. She did. But when Dad opened her door without even knocking, his "Agnes, we're home—" cut off in shock, as Agnes and Micah scrambled for their clothes, she couldn't help but breathe easier, even as her face reddened further with shame.

Dad kicked Micah out of the house. He'd probably have beaten him if Agnes hadn't begged him not to. Agnes didn't get off so easily. Her phone was taken and searched, she was grounded, and Mom and Dad lectured her within an inch of her life about how dangerous all that was. That's what they called it: "all that." As if Agnes had to be protected from boys and sex, as if she'd been preserved as an innocent lamb ever since she left the womb.

Dad and Mom wouldn't talk to her for weeks. They wouldn't let her see Micah, or any of her friends. She stayed in her room, doing homework out of the way, where just the sight of her wouldn't provoke Mom to yell at her. Ellie would come visit her sometimes, as if she was a prisoner in her cell.

"Stop crying," she said one day. "It's your fault you got caught."

"I don't see you being careful waltzing around with—" She couldn't finish the sentence. Who knew if Mom or Dad or Jesus was listening?

"You're so pitiful," Ellie said. "You know that? You're a pity."

That night at dinner, Mom and Dad were doing their best to ignore Agnes when Ellie tapped her fork against her milk glass.

"I have an announcement," she said. "I'm agnostic."

Agnes didn't know that word, but she thought she liked it. It had a nice ring to it.

"Agnostic?"

"It means I don't believe in any specific God, but I think there probably is one. Really I just don't care."

"You don't care? You don't care about God?" Mom grabbed her rosary from the fruit bowl and thrust it at Ellie. "Pray to the Lord so He might forgive you."

Ellie snorted. Snorted! Agnes couldn't believe her nerve. Her blasphemy was thrilling. "What part of I don't care don't you understand, Mom? I don't think the Abrahamic God exists. I think he was made up by some old men back when you could sell your daughter for a couple goats so they could keep it that way. I'm not praying the stupid rosary, and I'm not going back to church."

Mom and Dad wore equally comical looks of disbelief on their faces. Ellie grinned at Agnes.

"Oh, and also, I'm a lesbian."

Ellie really did have a flair for theatrics. Having sufficiently broken her parents' minds and hearts, she left the dining room. Mom and Dad found it in them to talk to Agnes after that.

Perfect

By Adriana Stasiak

Jia gnawed on her restraints.

They weren't tight. She was smart enough to "cooperate" as she was being tied up so that they'd be looser, but things are always easier in theory than in practice. She hadn't exactly practiced because she hadn't exactly been kidnapped before.

Even then, there was still the issue of figuring a way out of the giant, human-sized birdcage (with convenient widely-spaced jail bars)...

At the sound of clicking high heels, she raised her head and leaned to look out of the cage. Ten feet up wasn't that high, but it was enough to make her dizzy whenever the definitely-not-OSHA-compliant contraption swayed in the air.

The stranger looking up from the ground had skin so vampirically white that it looked like a printing error. It contrasted starkly against her ebony black hair – so voluminous and wild that it resembled something scribbled on with permanent marker. One of her eyes, err, *stunning ocular orbs* was red, the other had demonic black sclera and seemed to constantly be leaking an unidentifiable form of liquid darkness. Dark chains, spikes, fishnets, and red pentagrams adorned every one of her limbs, including her black cat ears/tail, angel/demon wings, and long infernal horns, which were surrounded by a dramatic shattered halo.

Jia had Converse shoes and a bun.

"FOOSH-HIE OILS" cackled the stranger, who looked to be about the same age as her. She pointed up at the cage with a maniacal grin. "You were so blinded, by your pain, TIC/OVI that you fell right into my EVIL TRAP!"

Jia blinked. "Wh-what?"

"That text message you received instructing you to come here wasn't from your girlfriend? It was from ME! BAM! Now I shall force you to watch me play as I WIN!"

Jia shook her head. "No, I – could you tone down the Zalgo text? I can't read what you're saying or anything."

The girl blinked, then huffed and crossed her #FFFFFF arms. "Is this better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The girl took a deep breath, then posed villainously with a hand on her chest and resumed her laughter. "I am NGYLLYRAM-HGAYNNAZZUS EBHOUGHNNIE PSMYTHE!~ You may not know me, but I am your dumb prep girlfriend's EVIL TWIN!~"

Jia went back to chewing on her restraints and letting the sun from the cloudy warehouse windows shine right in her eyes. "Uh-huh."

"Suzzannyagh has been a thorn in my side for far too long!~ So I've come up with an EVIL plan to get rid of her! When she finds out you're in danger she'll risk her life running to rescue you like a stupid dog! That's when I'll strike!"

Jia leaned towards the cage with evil glee.

Jia got the impression that, if the cage wasn't so high up and didn't have the bars so close together, Yram would reach in and caress her face.

"...Eh, um, you're not my type, sorry."

Yram frowned and stepped away. "When did I say you were mine?!~ I'm just using you to kill my sister!~ Don't make this all about you!"

"What makes you think she's even gonna show up, anyway?" Jia wasn't entirely listening at this point, it was just a matter of keeping the villain talking to buy some time. "And even if she does, what makes you think you can kill—"

"*DESTROY!*"

"—destroy somebody as flawless as her?"

Yram laughed a high-pitched anime noblewoman's laugh with her wrist held under her chin. "FLAWLESS'? Ha! LOVE truly has blinded you! My goody two-shoes twin is far from PERFECT! She is as flawed as can be!"

"She won a Nobel Peace Prize for exposing One Direction's criminal empire."

"Hm~ Well, think of it this way,~" Yram sneered. "We're twins!~ That means we're evenly matched!"

Right.

Suddenly, right on cue, a loud clatter came from the other side of the abandoned warehouse.

"*hold it right there, vllnyan!*~"

Yram whipped around to look over her shoulder as if she hadn't expected this at all. "EHHHHHH???"

Standing triumphantly in the doorway was none other than Suzzannyagh-Maryllygn Sakhura Psmythe (or Sue for short). She looked the way she always did, emotionally and visually bright. Unlike her questionably-emo twin, she had a neon pink seifuku, questionably-scene gold hair with bright rainbow streaks, heterochromic color-changing eyes, a shining intact halo, and a single white angel wing (because the other one was demonic and dark to symbolize her complex dual nature and dark side, obviously).

Her orange tabby tail flicked behind her as she posed with one hand on her hip and the other in a peace sign over her forehead like Sailor Moon. Her hair dramatically trailed in the breeze. "I AM SUZZANNAH-YAGH-MARYLLYGN SAKHURA PSMYTHE, THE PHAMRI-NYAN of love! I fight in the name of love, hope, and dreams! I shall right wrongs, and triumph over hate and evil. and that means you, fyer!"

Jia sighed, put a hand over her flushed face, and sardonically grimaced in what she hoped was the direction of the audience. (It wasn't.)

"FINALLY!~ I've been waiting for you to show up, you FOOLISH child!~" Yram maniacally sneered as though they weren't *definitely* the same exact age. With a brilliant flash of darkness, the villainess drew a purple-black shadowy blade out of thin air, then lunged at her good twin. "**slashes at you**"

Sue leaped aside and drew her own sparkly, opalescent katana from hammerspace. “*θσθges αηθ φαsts ραιηβω fλαε at γου ησ miss*”

Yram parried the resulting weird magic light beam effortlessly. “*summons Cthul’hubub the Blood Demon no miss no dodge no block no nothing*”

Jia tried to be careful as she leaned against the bars, but the chaotic fighting made the cage sway anyway. Not that she was that worried. *The good guy always wins.*

Sue crashed through a wall.

Right?

Yram flashed her vampire fangs and ran at the neko so quickly it tore up the tile floor, sending cubical debris everywhere.

Or... Jia winced and his behind her hand again. ...*the hero needs some encouragement first...* She flinched as some more shrapnel flew into the air. *What was that cliché again? A Heroic Second Wind? The Power of Love?* She fished into her hoodie pockets. *Might still have some—*

“Sue!”

The rainbow neko girl turned her head, which was bruised and bloodied, but only in that dramatic way that did not affect her youthful beauty. “εη?”

Jia tossed a handful of withering cherry blossom petals into the air, half of them landing unceremoniously in her dark umber hair and several more in her oversized pewter hoodie’s cowl. Hopefully the light of the setting sun behind her made the scene look a little less cringe. “Sue! I know you can do it! You’re my friend, and I believe in you!”

Apparently, this didn’t look as silly as it felt, because Sue pounced at Yram with the renewed fury of a shark sensing blood in the water.

The neon menace yowled a battle cry. Sparks and sparkles flew. Chunks of scenery flew into the air.

Damn.

Jia didn’t notice the fight was over until the pink neon rainbow angel catgirl slashed the birdcage down from the air. It anticlimactically shattered on the ground, and the ropes ripped like wet tissue paper. Blinking and sheepish, she stood up.

Sue tackle-hugged Jia, smudging her hoodie with a somewhat terrifying amount of unidentifiable anime substance. “γαυυ! ηαι, ηαι! >ω<”

Jia sighed, but smiled back. “Hey. You okay?”

“ye!! χ3” Sue smiled and fixed her hair. It was only slightly windswept by all the fighting. Conveniently and supernaturally pretty, as always. “αλλ γσσθ μεσω!”

A demonic cackle from the other side of the room startled them out of their happy reunion and back to reality.

Yram laughed demonically and slowly got to her feet. “*You cannot defeat ME!~ As long as there is DARKNESS in your HEART—the DARKNESS of a D. eEp. DaRk SECRET— you shall always be weak!~*”

Sue, surprisingly, wrapped her arms around one of Jia’s.

Jia glanced at the catgirl from the corner of her eye, then lightly nudged her with her elbow. “Hey. If you have something you need to say, you can just say it.”

Sue averted her star- and heart-filled eyes – one of which was a melancholic blue. “B-BUT IT’S SOOO ΕΜΒΑΡΥΑSSΗG...”

“Nothing about you is embarrassing! You’re unapologetically yourself and confident about it, why start doubting that now?”

Sue hummed quietly.

“You don’t need to hide anything from me...”

The catgirl was quiet for several moments. Then, she took a deep breath, stood up straight, and stomped her foot. “I like girls!”

Yram paused.

“S... seriously? That’s not a secret! Everyone knows that!”

“αηθ σταя тяεκ!”

Yram wailed and fell flat on her back. She clawed the air like a dying roach, wildly flailed her wings, and crawled, snarling, into the shadows of the shady abandoned warehouse, leaving an ominous dark trail on the floor.

After several long moments, Sue lit up. “heyuu!~ φαη ωε γετ βοβα?~ χ3”

Storytelling Workshop Club E-Board

Spring 2023

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Goaeoth Drawing by Adriana Stasiak