

HAGSTONE

written by Guest Contributor | October 3, 2018



[Image Credit: "Hagstone" By Dev Murphy]

We begin the day again the day again the day again, and always with the same ending. The novelty Virgin Mary votive candles getting lower. A reaching out, his smell in the dark room, like cloves or like smoke, like Christmas a long time ago, like something that you remember being good—but it isn't; you're still waiting, your finger in the hagstone hole. Formed from violence, formed from waves crashing onto it, formed from snakes thrashing over it, all its power collected in its wound.

You've ordered a set of twelve small glass vials from the internet, each hanging from twine, so that they can be worn around necks or hung from windows. The morning of the total eclipse, you gathered pots and pans from your kitchen and from your friends' kitchens and put them out to graze in the backyard, and then stood over them, blank monkey faces and bald men with Pinocchio noses, and watered them. You did not fill each pot individually, but scattered the water over all at once, so that they all filled at the same time and equally. Now you're saying some vague sort of prayer in the minutes leading up to the eclipse and telling yourself you will not look at the sky.

You're holding a jar of water above your head and counting to ten as the moon overtakes the sun—giant shining star coveted and envied, and she's sitting there and she can see the moon coming for her, but she can't do anything. She can't do anything.

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Snakes possess venom of varying potency, and every animal reacts to venomous bites differently. Sometimes it will kill you. Sometimes it will only numb you. It's a slow death.

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Remember your grandmother's bed—the emptiness of it, the whole left side covered in books and plants? You wondered, as a child, if she reached out in the night to cling to her copy of *The Language and Poetry of Flowers*, if she said prayers over it, if she let it sing her to sleep. Remember the crystals

hanging from her windows and from her ceiling, the piles of hagstones in the corner of her study, in that small and humid room in Florida? You were assaulted by the scent of rosemary every time you entered the house. When your mother was about, your grandmother told you that only Jesus could save you—but when your mother left the room your grandmother told you that hagstones would protect you from the venom of snakes, and she put one in your pocket to take home with you. You watched *Scooby Doo* and ate microwave pizza and ran your fingers over the hagstone's hole and said prayers to Jesus to let the rock protect you.

You've still got that hagstone. You've found more, and you keep them in a decorative pile in the corner of your own office. You find them in ponds. They are made when water beats against stone, beats against it so much it causes a hole, and the hole is the source of the rock's protective properties.

Some cultures say that the hagstone is created when a group of snakes get tangled up together and form a knot. The hagstone forms in the center of the knot, out of the snakes' solidified venom. When your grandmother told you this, you were eight, and you dreamed of

coming upon a whirling mat of snakes and dodging their lashing fangs. You stepped on their heads and felt them crack under your heel. You felt the plump scaly flesh under your thumbnails

as you unwove the thing—reached for the stone—and realized, looking at the smashed skulls around you, that you had no use for it anymore.

You're using water now to create your own power. Your grandmother said there was a specialness to eclipse water—that it was holy, or magical, or both: you're twenty-seven, and you haven't yet discerned the difference between the two.

Set the water out during the eclipse, and as the moon stands before the sun and steals her light, the water becomes energized, empowered, capable.

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The eclipse has cast a darkness over everything. You think about how sins so often reveal themselves in the darkness. By making them known, they can be fought. So you stand protectively over your pots and pans of water and wait for the magic to happen.

Look at the eclipse reflected in the pools of water—a hundred tiny wrinkled moments—and think about last week.

The animals on the placemats at the Chinese restaurant weren't compatible, so you turned the placemats upside down.

The waiter came to ask you what you wanted.

The waiter left.

Your lover asked you if you really believe he is a snake.

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On your grandmother's bookshelf, with the trumpeting elephant bookends, was a book titled *That Great Wheel, the Sun*. When you visited your grandmother during the summer as a teenager, you spent an afternoon sitting in the sunroom where the geckos had crawled in under the door and your grandmother read aloud to you from *That Great Wheel*.

"The sun used to be female, and still is in some cultures.'" She licked her fingertips before turning the page. "Amaterasu Omikame, Sunna, Glory-of-Elves, Aditi." She flipped around from illustration to illustration: etched women with flowing black tendrils of hair, halos around their heads, floating in the air.

You reached out and lay a finger on the pulpy page.

"The Eddas say the sun will give us a daughter in the end times. See, here, its birth—" She held up the book to you, an egg cracking apart in the heavens. "A new world, a new beginning."

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It is the prayers we make as we move in the night, or are moved. Your lover reached out to touch your ankle, your shoulder, tonight, the night before, the night after—and you thought about how time is cyclical, and you want to break the cycle. You refuse to believe that sins are forever, or that they are all-defining: you told this to your lover, and he told you thank you, thank you, he is sorry.

That great wheel, the sin—turns over and over, and we wait for it to get better, and we pray that it will get better, and we hold our water to the ensconced sun, and we cross our throats and our chests and our fingers, and we say *It's all right, it's all right, it's all right*, and we listen, and we beg, and we speak calmly and tell ourselves we are doing right by our own good, and that we will forgive and forgive and forgive, seventy times seven, like the good book says.

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Oh Mary, oh woman clothed in sunlight. Did you ask to be blessed by the Lord?

What a trick, to call the sun a man. And so when he is touched by the moon, it is a kiss.

The moon comes and goes, a fickle father who does not stay long in the yurt.

It is the moon who determines impregnation, stalking the white egg of the dawn. Women are only safe during the day, and not even then, sometimes.

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There must be a way back. If you can travel to the outermost reaches of human experience—of insanity, of sin, of doubt—you must be able to travel back. Sometimes you can keep from falling off the edge by letting yourself fall off it, or by jumping off it, so you know in the future how to avoid it.

“The greater mistakes you’ve made,” your lover told you, “the more patient and understanding you must be. And humble.”

“Only if you’re very very sorry,” you said.

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Most snakes mean well, you have told yourself. Venom is defensive.

And not all snakes are venomous. And the ones who are cannot help what is inside of them.

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Your lover found the hagstone in the drawer by your bed. He had begun to feel more comfortable exploring your bedroom.

He picked it up, stuck his finger in the hagstone’s hole, his tongue. He held it up to his eye and looked at you through it. “What’s this?”

“A hagstone,” you said.

“Hagstone,” he laughed. “The stone of an old hag.”

“It’s used to protect you against snakes.”

“There are no snakes around here, certainly no venomous ones.” He puts his arm around you, turns out the light with his other hand.

You uttered into the dark, “But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be careful.”

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Even before you thought you were pregnant, you had dreams of giving birth. But the child did not emerge between your legs.

Instead, it swelled in your belly until you believed you would burst, and then it began to uncoil itself inside your body—moving past your bones and muscles, tucking its arms inside your arms, its legs inside your legs, its head inside your head.

Your skin began to break, to peel, as the child overtook you, became a new you.

You felt yourself fading and you thought, “Thank God!”

When you woke, the panic you felt was not because the child overtook you; it was because you realized none of it was real. You were alone.

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The sun is an egg that opens every morning.

Sometimes reliving the same day can be a form of rejuvenation, or an opportunity to reflect and understand, instead of a trap.

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You hold the jar above your head and imagine the water dancing and boiling, but it won't dance or boil.

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And so who loved Mary more, the God who used her or the child she nurtured?

Mary, your mercies are new each day. You forgive the Lord for the beautiful bounty he has bestowed on you with His violence.

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You imagine the snake weaving in and out of the hagstone hole; you imagine pinning him down, folding him against the hole, snapping his teeth off.

Imagine him gagging, crying out.

Imagine him impotent.

Imagine the feeling of being able to pet him on the head, to swim with him in the lakes, to see him baptized.

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There is a man in Wisconsin who lets venomous snakes bite him in order to find an antidote.

And so what are you waiting for?

An antidote? You will somehow be the one, you think, deep in your secret soul, the one to change the game, the one to change his ways.

You will be Jane Eyre tending to crippled Rochester. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Love the snake without the venom; love the sinner, not the sin. Wrap him round your wrist, let him weave his body between your fingers. Run your fingers over the hagstone. Throw your collection of hagstones at your lover's manhood.

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But sometimes, when you are alone together, in movie theaters or on road trips, or when you are alone among people, catching one another's glance from across the room, speaking to one another while you talk to different people—you feel a disjoint in your heart, a good arrhythmia, and you feel protective, and protected.

The trouble is uprooting is a difficult process, and loving—for the first time or again—and ceasing to love—and loving enough but not too much—and loving yourself—are difficult processes.

And you think of your grandmother, dead alone in her bed, found two weeks later with her ivy growing all around her, weaving its tendrils in and out of the triangles her arms make when her hands are at her hips.

You are never alone. He is with you always, even when he isn't there. He is with you in airports and in lecture halls, at bus stations, at the cafe, on invitations, in line at the bookstore, coming at you from all directions, on every plane, on every train, ripping your ticket, ripping your heart.

If it isn't about pleasure, it must be about sacrifice. When your grandmother became pregnant with your mother, she stole her lover's money and traveled cross country by train. It took becoming pregnant for her to realize what sort of man she didn't want to raise her baby.

And that baby grew up strong and God fearing. And that baby had a husband who left her when she was eight months pregnant. And that baby would brush your hair every evening, and say, "You'll marry somebody who's better than I married, just like I married somebody who was better than my mama got." Venom creating venom creating venom—is that what this is? Women raising women, strengthened by the venom that injures them.

When you thought you were pregnant, you hopped on a bus and let it take you to the next town over, and the whole ride there you imagined you were running away to give birth, and you would raise a daughter, called Apollo, called Ra, called Dažbog, called Jesus Christ, who would have your bounty of brown hair and her father's blue eyes. She would retire into the woods with you. Together you and Jesus Christ would raise wolves and grow tea; you would tell stories and paint by the light of a wood burning stove each night. And you would wonder how like her father she is. How like her mother she is.

Or maybe you would not run away. Maybe you would stay and grow big and full and round, and everyone would know that you have disowned him, that you would rather raise this child alone.

The bus stopped. You got off. Ran to the drugstore and took a pregnancy test.
Not pregnant.

You waited at the station for the bus that would take you back home.

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That great wheel, the Sun.

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You shut your eyes tight and say more prayers—prayers to God, prayers to the sun, prayers to the virgin Mary, prayers to the earth, prayers to the baby who doesn't exist, and you believe this might work—you have to believe in something, after all, so why not everything?—and you open your eyes and survey your kingdom of pots and pans and you don't see a sign of the enchantments working. Instead what you see is two young boys in the yard across the street, one of them holding an old cat, who's crying out, and the other holding the cat's eyes open to the eclipse.

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You imagine the egg cracking open in the morning and small snakes squirming out of it, more and more with every dawn.

But the minutes pass, and so much has happened already in such a short span.

You close the vial around your neck. You pack up your pots and pans, and tuck them away in the back of the fridge, the garage, the cellar.



Dev Murphy is a writer and artist from Ohio, now living in Pittsburgh. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Occulum*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Persephone's Daughters*, *Eternal Remedy*, *Anomaly*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, and elsewhere. You can follow her on twitter @gytrashh.