

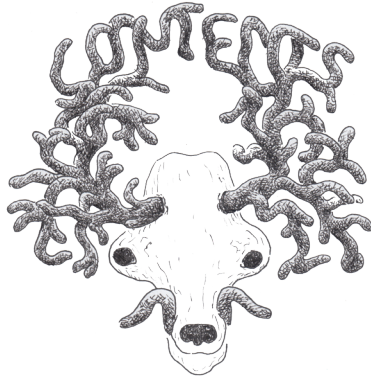
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WORDLY WEIRDED

*a messy collection
of myths & legends*



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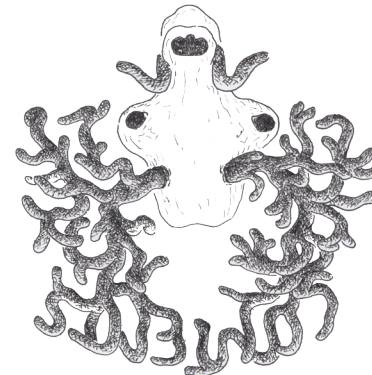
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It was no fault of mine to come upon this,

yet the goddess tells me these are the words sworn
by all sinners; I am fussing
with the strings of a hospital gown when I see it.

I have always been afraid of bodies,
my own more than most. Like all young things
I have seen prosperity on a platter before me

and deemed it an offering rather than
sacrifice, left it out for the maggots
and sacred prey to stumble upon.

What a thing, like a bone,
to find licked clean.

*You are hunted by the things
that make you, she tells me,*

Diana in glory, thorn
by a wholly other name, skin still damp
and glistening from the forest waters.

She looks above me as she speaks,
whether to a halo or horns or a great crown of antlers
I can't be sure.

She sprouts words
like arrows, precise and replaceable,
rooted somewhere deep:

suffix *-oma*, Gr. *mass*
prefix *infra-*, La. *beneath*

and I shiver at the prospect she presents me,
a caryatid draped in a canopy of sickly blues
and the curse of Actaeon,

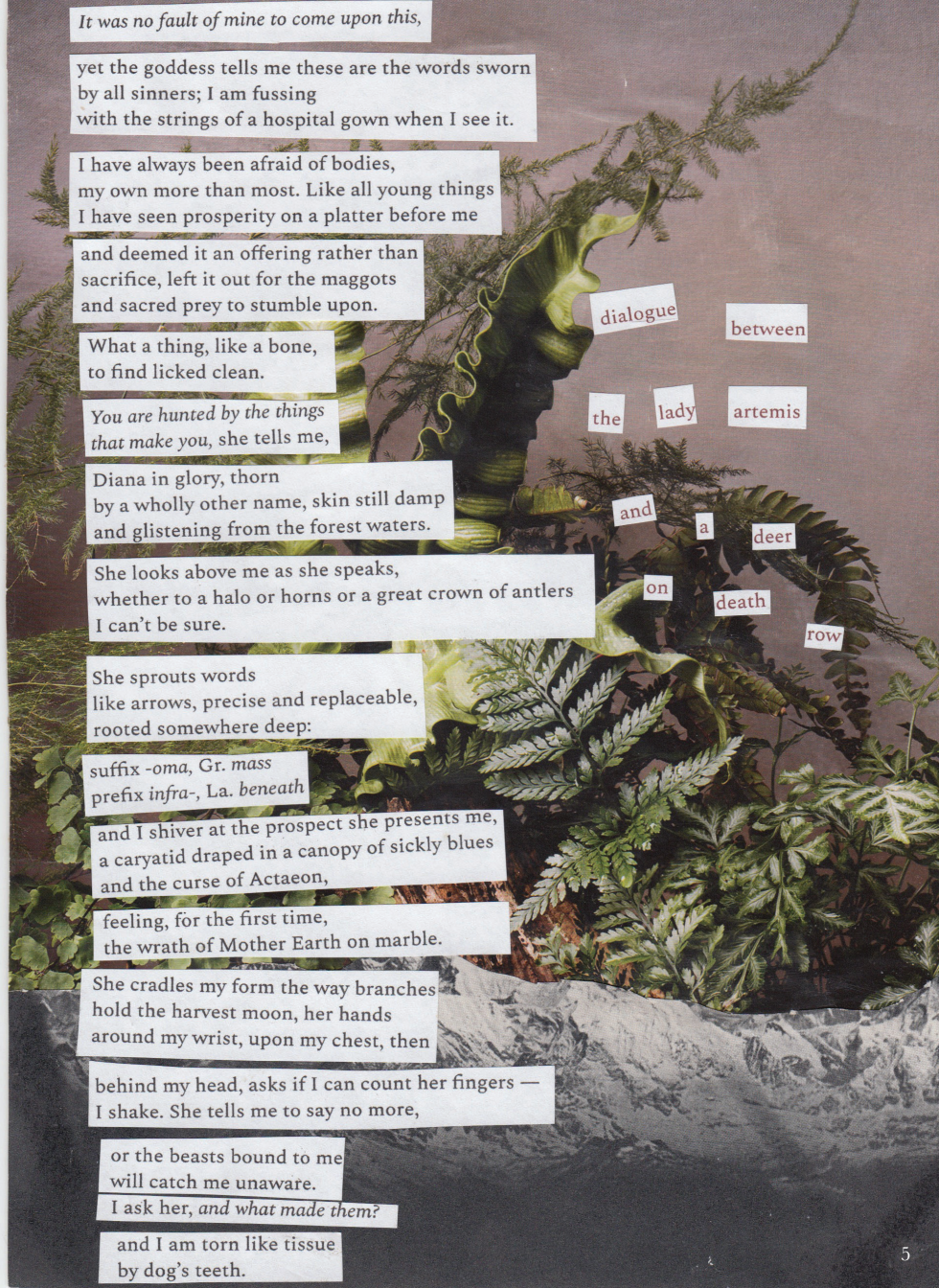
feeling, for the first time,
the wrath of Mother Earth on marble.

She cradles my form the way branches
hold the harvest moon, her hands
around my wrist, upon my chest, then

behind my head, asks if I can count her fingers —
I shake. She tells me to say no more,

or the beasts bound to me
will catch me unaware.
I ask her, *and what made them?*

and I am torn like tissue
by dog's teeth.



dialogue between

the lady artemis

and a deer

on death row

The Incident

An ancient and gnarled tower of stone sat evilly among the rugged peaks known (quite lovingly) as the Bloodvengeance Mountains, and atop the tower, a storm was brewing.

It seemed to be no ordinary storm, for the sky was clear save for the malicious black clouds that spiralled around the topmost part of the tower, which stuck up there like an angry finger. The reason was clear to see to any purveyor of dark magics, or else anyone savvy to the nosy antics of clouds and their tendency to manifest wherever tensions are the highest; inside, two masterminds of conjury and incantation were engaged in a serious confrontation.

"It isn't you," said Augustus the Mind Emperor, "it's me." He was hovering placidly at his desk, which was covered in cool symbols he'd carved himself with a bargain 2-for-1 artist's stencil at Michaels. Now, Augustus had two stencils, and absolutely no idea what to do with the identical second one.

This troubled him.

"It's mostly you, though, actually," he said after a thought.

Josh, standing across from him, was fuming, physically, with smoke, because he was on fire.

"You- but- you can't-" he sputtered. Josh spat when he was angry, and the result of this was a comical *hiss* interspersing his dialogue as his excessive saliva made contact with the flames. The room smelled like bad breath.

"I can," Augustus interjected. "Your apprenticeship wasn't working for either of us. You know that."

"I don't. I- I worked hard for us."

"One time you slept so hard for so long that you opened up an illicit Dream Realm and all of my thumbtacks fell into it. My whole thumbtack collection, Josh. Not to mention the Realm fine, which you didn't even slightly help pay. I lived on off-brand Hot Pockets for a month because you

didn't know how to act like a responsible adult. I'm your dark magic mentor, not your hot babysitter."

"I was conjured into being at age 26, Augustus. I never had a hot babysitter."

"My mistake. But let us consider the babysitter. What is the purpose of a babysitter, Josh?"

"Um." Josh thought hard about this, screwing up his face like a screw. "Putting infants into their infant-cages. Chanting the baby chants until they rest. Not letting them die, or kill. Box mac n' cheese?" This last one was a guess, because Josh was lactose intolerant.

"Precisely," said Augustus, nodding gravely. "And what would you do if you returned home to your many babies to find that their babysitter had not fulfilled these requirements?"

"I'd ditch the babysitter, because a babysitter shouldn't babysit if they're not good at it."

"Consider this your ditching, then."

Josh's eyes widened like cereal left in a bowl of lukewarm (soy) milk for several hours. He spoke in a low, shaking voice.

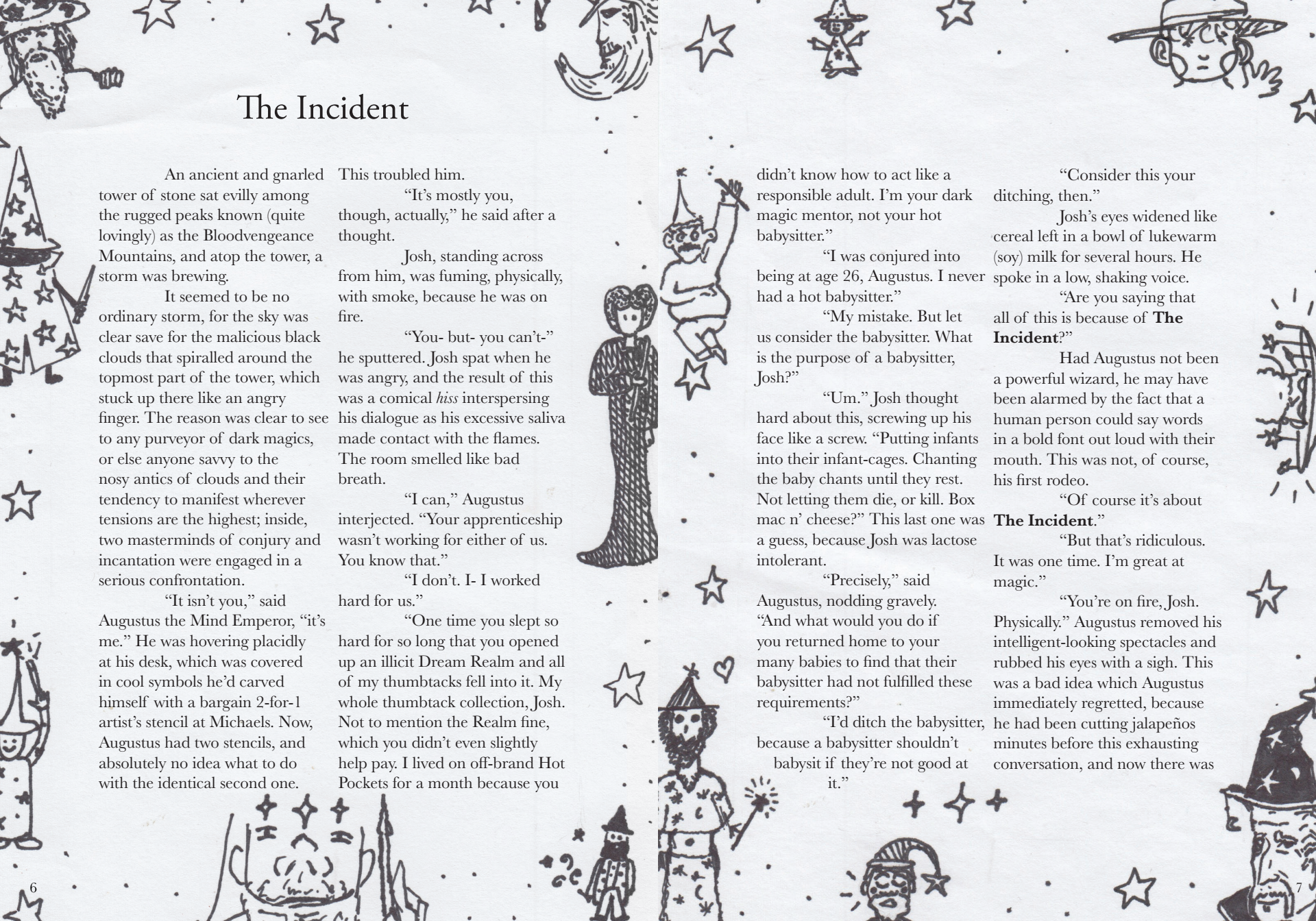
"Are you saying that all of this is because of **The Incident**?"



Had Augustus not been a powerful wizard, he may have been alarmed by the fact that a human person could say words in a bold font out loud with their mouth. This was not, of course, his first rodeo.

"Of course it's about **The Incident**."


"But that's ridiculous. It was one time. I'm great at magic."

"You're on fire, Josh. Physically." Augustus removed his intelligent-looking spectacles and rubbed his eyes with a sigh. This was a bad idea which Augustus immediately regretted, because he had been cutting jalapeños minutes before this exhausting conversation, and now there was






jalapeño juice in his eye. But he powered through.



“I’ve already filled out the paperwork, which was mostly just a bunch of word search puzzles filled with aspects of your personality that I don’t like. I found every single one of the words, Josh. You’ll be back to your family tomorrow morning.”



Josh’s flames vanished and were replaced by depression, and his gaze fell sadly to the ground. He was silent for several moments.

“My wife is pregnant.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’re right.”

He was silent for several more moments.

It was at this time that an idea came to Augustus, like a record deal comes to a person after they have an idea that causes them to write a very good song.

“Josh,” he said. “It’s possible that we could make an arrangement.”

Josh looked up at him. “An arrangement?”

“Yes. That’s the exact word I just said. But I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, because

that fire that was enveloping your whole body probably damaged your eardrums. Anyway, there’s a way you could make up for your mistakes, should you choose to accept my demand.”

“What is it?”

“I was getting to that.

Place a hand atop my head, Josh”

Hesitantly, Josh did

this. Augustus’s head was like the Sahara desert with warts.

“What do you feel,

Josh?”

“A head.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”

“Not a hat, perhaps?”

“Definitely not.”

“And how do you think that makes my head feel, when it is so used to having a spectacularly dashing hat on it?”

“Breezy.”


“No, Josh. Exposed.

It feels exposed. It feels lonely, knowing that the hat it used to know and love could be anywhere. A cold, wet cave, for example. Or a vat of grease.”

“I’m sorry, Augustus.

That must be hard.

But I’m also not sorry, because



your hat problem really has nothing to do with me. I’m not the one who made the incantation for color-changing sound almost exactly the same as the ancient hymn of long-distance teleportation.”

Augustus swatted Josh’s hand away like a hand-shaped moth.

“Do you want this job back, Josh?”

Josh sighed. The bad breath smell returned with a vengeance. “Yes.”

“Good. In that case, I want an extravagant hat in my size on this desk by no later than 9:30 tomorrow morning. I want glamour, Josh. A chartreuse trim. Ancient sigils. Bedazzled. If it isn’t ten times the hat that was taken from me, you’re just another hot babysitter.”

Augustus scratched his nose, his unblinking stare sinking into Josh’s skin in the way his moisturizer never had.

“What do you say?”

Josh paused for a moment, weighing his options. One of them, he calculated,

weighed about as much as seven very large automobiles stacked on top of one another and teetering quite precariously, like a wizard tower, or the average wizard apprentice’s emotional stability. The other option was unemployment.

“Fine,” Josh said. “I accept. Are you crying?”

“No. I have jalapeño juice in my eye,” said Augustus. He also was definitely crying a little bit, because he was thinking about **The Incident**. But magic is a patriarchy, and so Augustus had a deeply ingrained fear of expressing his emotions.

“Good luck, Josh. I hope you will not disappoint me.”

“Okay,” said Josh.

They both remained in an uncomfortable silence for several seconds before Josh, who wasn’t well-practised in social cues, realized that he was supposed to leave.

And it wasn’t until he finally exited, in pursuit of his begrudgingly accepted quest, that Augustus allowed his mildly spicy tears to slip down his cheeks.

The Selling of the Sun

Freya sits at a table upon which four candles burn, thinking *I am not a woman, but a bargain.*

It is a summer night, the kind that makes the skin pulse from beneath with a captured heat, harvested, like the plump and heavy peaches in the gardens, accepted like a sacrifice she has been taught only

to receive. She bites her nails and picks at the skin of her hand. It is the sort of heat that makes her loathe the sun and realize just how much she would miss it were she not to vanish alongside it;

a woman who resents that the only reassurance she is given has been dealt in illusion. Each day more stones are collected, paving her way to a possession, and each day sweat makes her gowns cling to her like fruit

A goddess must not simply count her blessings, but ration them. Odin in his glory became no wiser when nine days had passed, for even in torture the man was held fast and given purpose,

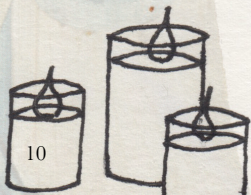
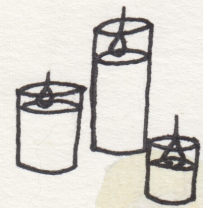
even in a certain death given life, and as he hung the sky churned above him, and he was not confined to the unbearable heat of what is

celestial, replaceable. Freya watches the wax drip. She wonders when she became nothing but a hand for offering, when a woman became a tree bough.

the sun, the moon, the honor of the Aesir and, as the price of fortification, the hand of a beautiful goddess in marriage. A woman who sits in silence and curses her perfection,

She wonders, the fire dancing before her, if her hand could melt like wax if subjected to something burning or whether she would simply flicker, like an illusion,

and the myth would save her, as the goddess must always be saved.



The necromancer tried to tell Mrs. Reyes that she was booked through next Wednesday, but it was a quick sort of thing, anyway, and Mrs. Reyes was a hard woman to say no to.

“Okay,” sighed the necromancer after a few halfhearted protests. Her name was Sara, but she rarely told people, concerned that they may spell it with an -h in their heads. But Mrs. Reyes, it seemed, knew everyone. “I have an appointment in ten minutes, though, so it’ll have to be fast. What seems to be the problem?”

Mrs. Reyes huffed irritably, and opened up the shoebox that had been tucked under her left arm to reveal the frail body of a very dead rabbit. There was a gash in its side, and its legs were bent at despicable angles. She set the box on the desk.

“It’s just, my daughter, she saw this thing all sprawled out on the ground, and she started crying her head off. Just screaming. Said she wouldn’t stop until I fixed it, you know how kids are, and I normally would’ve just told her to can it but the spelling bee’s tonight and she needs to be at the top of her game, you know? Crying over roadkill, honestly. You know how kids are,” she repeated, pulling out her wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh, sorry, Mrs. Reyes, but we actually only do bargains at this location. No cash. Thought you knew about that.” Sara pushed up her glasses and gave her best apologetic smile, which was quite a good one. “I can give you our downtown address, if you like. By the new smoothie joint. They’ve started taking other forms of payment.”

“No, thank you, I’ll just get it done now. Um, I didn’t bring my own.”

“That’s fine. We’ve got plenty at the moment. Just as long as you’re the one who does it. You know the drill.” She gestured toward a cage toward the front of the shop inside which several crows were perched, watching their exchange with mild interest. Sara passed Mrs. Reyes a key, and Mrs. Reyes retrieved a bird with little trouble; she reached for the closest one, which didn’t resist when she grabbed it save for a slight ruffling of feathers, and it remained silent as she brought it back up to the desk.

Mrs. Reyes winced as she wrung the bird’s neck.

For a moment, it struck her how strangely light a dead thing can be. Then it was gone, and a rabbit sat wide-eyed in the box in front of her, curiously sniffing the air. It looked quite healthy.

“I believe that does it,” said Sara. She checked her watch. “Perfect! Still have three minutes left. Hope the spelling bee goes well, Mrs. Reyes.”

Mrs. Reyes grabbed the box. “I hope so too.” She looked down at the rabbit and chuckled. “Cute thing. Thanks for your time, Sara,” she called over her shoulder as she left, the box and its contents cradled in her arms like a newborn.

Sara smiled again. It did sound nice to hear her name out loud. She started humming, and began to sort through some paperwork as she waited for her next client. From the front of the shop, the birds watched her in silence, never flinching, never fearing death.

EYE
for an
EYE



CLINICAL LYCANTHROPY

wolf moon again,
and it seems they're becoming
more frequent now; I wonder what mercy
the moonlight shows to stray dogs,
like the one in Taos that ran
when we called to it, whether for one night
they walk on two legs
and remember what they called home.

I have only met the desert
at her best. here dust drifts and settles
like a houseguest, and I add
an extra teaspoon of water to the bread dough
to satiate the inherent wanting
of elevation. in the mountain-land

I crave wildness,
and the girl I love asks between kisses
if I am something of the woods —
not these ones, I think,
evergreen drunk on immortality
and the bounty of sun, of snowmelt.
when I drive south the sunsets
are drought-stung and animal,
pooling light like liquid
into ghost towns

and rousing the spirits and skeleton-trees
from their rest. here the desert
becomes absence, swift and lean
with a mouth full of dog teeth. I, too,
have found sunlight hard to speak to
at times

the heavy presence of shadow
and things that come full into focus,
vitality and viscera, the undeniable form
of bodies; better at night,

when listless utterances and urban legends slip
like shapeshifters into something more comfortable,
ravaging outlines of houses
in a vision of a city
in a clumsy cardboard cut-out of barren,
wanting land

howling in agony
at that which wanes.



DEATH IS A REGULAR

there's a huddle of something unbreathing
that nearly slipped my notice,

almost blended with the flora and the fauna
and the tar they poured last week
and the tough-love turning corpses of autumn
that break like glow sticks,
make the smog smell like maple;

it's lying in the place where the wolves watch
and vultures cross themselves,
beasts nothing beyond drooling onlookers,
no witness to the molecular second-funeral
of the decomposers, a final meal,

and a block down the forks are pushing
over subdued chatter, rising and falling
like skin above a makeshift ribcage
where a woman's fingers pitter-patter
on a marble countertop

she asks for something gritty and real

something more than a bundle of atoms
that falls at the place viscera and spittle
fleck sugar-scented concrete—

she licks off the sauce that has dripped
down her palms, across her wrists
and throws what is left to the whimpering outside
where it lands on cement in a pitter-patter
like teeth on bone

(feed it and it will be back for more)

and outside there's a thing like autumn, unbreathing
that swallows itself whole.

I look for stained glass in strange places —
in moments and in ephemeral things that beat,
like veins and wings — and so it is no wonder

that I still catch my breath
at tricks of the light. I do not know where
I come from, only that returning

is a pilgrimage. sometimes a cathedral
will pool before me like nectar, like *lux nova*,
and faith will send me fluttering

through the simple act
of presence, of metamorphosis
and immortal impermanence

or the turning of one miracle
to another (water to chrysalis to wine)
and the hollow question *what do you believe in*

is enough to fill my stomach
with butterflies.
a confession:

here among the milkweed is a resting place
for when the pews are crooked smiles
and the body of Christ is stale

and the journey home is a nimbus
that stumbles over itself
and doubles back upon the cross.

at night, when the earth is sacred again
the miracles move like insects; wavering,
resting,

and then gone again.



mi casa, su casa

JORDAN is waiting for a table. LIAM walks up to her, looking distracted, but he pauses when he sees her face and smiles flirtatiously.

LIAM: Table for one, darlin? It's a joy to see you again.

JORDAN: Yes, please. And the same goes for you.

LIAM: Right this way.

LIAM leads JORDAN over to a small, candlelit table.

JORDAN: This is perfect, thank you. And it's a beautiful view.

LIAM: It's a beautiful view, for our most beautiful customer. (winks)

JORDAN: (smiles) Always the charmer, Liam.

LIAM: I'll give you a moment to look over the menu.

LIAM walks away as JORDAN examines the menu, then returns a couple moments later.

JORDAN: I think I'll have the fajitas grandes for one. It was a difficult decision though, it all looks so delicious!

LIAM: We do take pride in the exceptional quality of our food. And along with the food, we offer the best entertainment. You could just spend your whole life watching those speedo-clad cliff divers penetrate the preternaturally green water. It's all about the experience here at Casa Bonita.

They gaze into the distance as they watch the cliff divers for a few moments.

LIAM: I'll get your food.

LIAM leaves for a few moments and comes back with food.

JORDAN: It must be such an honor to work here. You do your job so well.

LIAM: It's been my dream ever since I was a boy, when I first came here with my father. It was a life-changing experience.

JORDAN: It's truly special.

LIAM: Yes. (looks sorrowfully into the distance) But such grandeur comes with repercussions.

JORDAN: What do you mean?

LIAM: (wipes away a tear. pause) I'll leave you alone. It looks like the gorilla and pirate scene is starting.

JORDAN: (touches LIAM's wrist) No, wait. Is something wrong?

LIAM: I wouldn't want to dampen your spirits at the blissful time of the show.

JORDAN: I care about you, Liam. I want nothing more than to know what plagues you.

Dramatic pause. LIAM sits down at the table.

LIAM: It started that night I first came here. I wanted to make this place my home, as it was so peaceful, so magical... but at the same time, I felt a shadow fall over my soul. I knew it would be not choice that made me work here, but destiny. You don't go to Casa Bonita, Jordan. (grabbing JORDAN's shoulders) You end up at Casa Bonita.

JORDAN: That couldn't be so bad, could it?

LIAM: You don't understand, Jordan. I love this place. My spirit only rests when I tread the wooden boards of the Haunted House or walk the caves behind the waterfalls, but I am sworn to it. I've forgotten the color of the sky, the sweet smell of earth after a rain.

JORDAN: But why can't you just leave?

LIAM: It's an addiction.

JORDAN: But you seemed so happy every time I've visited. Your eyes just lit up at the sight of pasty families enjoying their sopapillas in peace.

LIAM: They celebrate forty years of family fun today. I've lived every second of it.

JORDAN: Forty years? But you look so young.

LIAM: I'm 27.

Dramatic pause.

JORDAN: But how long have you been 27?

LIAM: Time doesn't show its gnarled face to the people of Casa Bonita.

JORDAN: (Stands up) You deserve none of this treachery, Liam. Run away with me. We can escape this salmon-shaded prison of a palace together.

LIAM: You don't understand. I can't leave.

JORDAN: Have you ever tried?

LIAM: I guess it never occurred to me that I could escape this fortress's iron grip. But I've been here so long now... I'm not sure if I could face the outside world again...

JORDAN: I've always thought that this place's 85 foot pink tower facade was a beacon in the dark with its glimmering 22-karat gold leaf coated dome. But there comes a time to say goodbye.

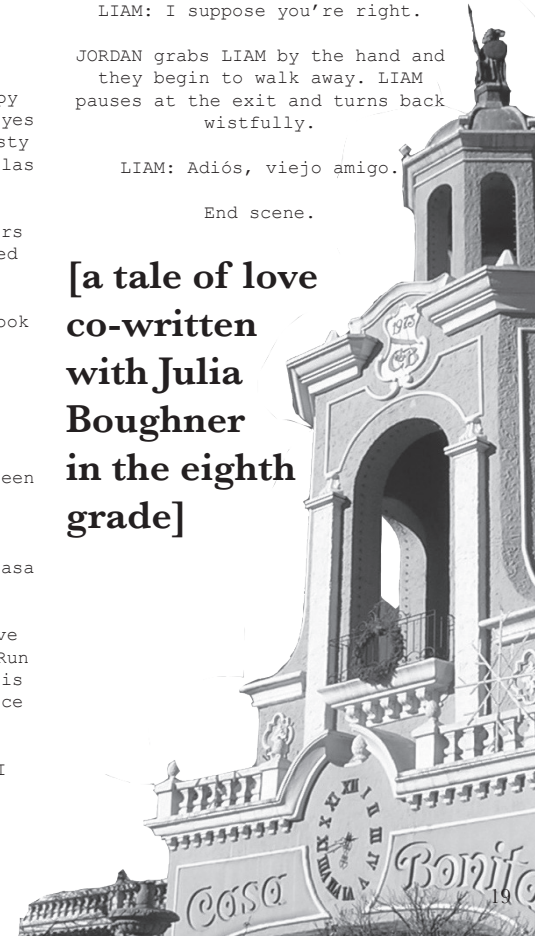
LIAM: I suppose you're right.

JORDAN grabs LIAM by the hand and they begin to walk away. LIAM pauses at the exit and turns back wistfully.

LIAM: Adiós, viejo amigo.

End scene.

[a tale of love
co-written
with Julia
Boughner
in the eighth
grade]





I am not afraid of death,
but of mirrors; how one can turn
a dying thing on its head, make it think
it will last.

The first blessing of vanity — darkness
looking in upon itself and finding light.
Some weeks ago, I was listening to an Alan Watts lecture
in which he describes God as the Hindu goddess Kali,
tongue out and limbs splayed like a great spider on a white wall
where the universe ends, its absence of light
shedding life on all that surrounds it. I thought,
for the first time, about how death is not always
a guarantee in future tense, how it is something
that strikes snakelike in the moment,
the same one made for living in, made for popping bubble gum
or mixing dusty-smelling pigment or a needle in the arm
to draw blood, *you'll feel a pinch*
like the hard and disbelieving kind

to bring reality back from dreamscapes. I'm daydreaming
about a piece in the Denver Art Museum, which looks something
like brightly-colored animal carcasses
on a clothesline spilling down
after something strong and final like a windstorm
or an unrelenting tremor
of the earth, spelling VANITAS. What do I have, what

can't I lose? I think it's only wise
to take stock sometimes, like counting sheep,
counting holy lambs that bleed
into ruby-encrusted chalices.

I see white lilies in everything,
mortality more than most, mercy
and purity and angel wings
like tropical birds, like missing
the ocean each time I can't see it,
a funeral a thousand times over.

Ashes to ashes. This shore
to another, the being and non-being in everything
as told by the Heart Sutra, the reincarnation of
planting new lavender sprigs or trimming my split ends
with safety scissors.

In "The Night Face Up", a man cannot tell
if he is dreaming the Aztec war
of blossoms

or the hospital, but it doesn't matter,
because he is going to die anyway and at least
there is some sense of solitude
to ritual sacrifice. I don't want to end up on a bed
among rows and rows of beds
thinner than lily pads and whiter
than teeth. An infirmary;
a mouth, smiling. I suppose I am a skull

on a mantelpiece, or else on the carpet,
dilated beyond the point of recognition, and each moment
moves slowly *s l o w l y* sideways like a sinking ship
until anamorphic perspective gives way beneath
my feet and my lungs fill
with wretched saltwater.

Water; the paper was thrown in the gutter this morning
so the pages are hung up limp
and dripping all throughout the house, but it's too late,
the words have gone moldy and there's no place to go

until the snow has unstuck. Van Eyck wouldn't be surprised,
spring stolen thirteen times like the altarpiece at Ghent.
Winter is greedy, recycling her beauty. Offered immortality,
I would not be like her, would never take it,
but never isn't everything.

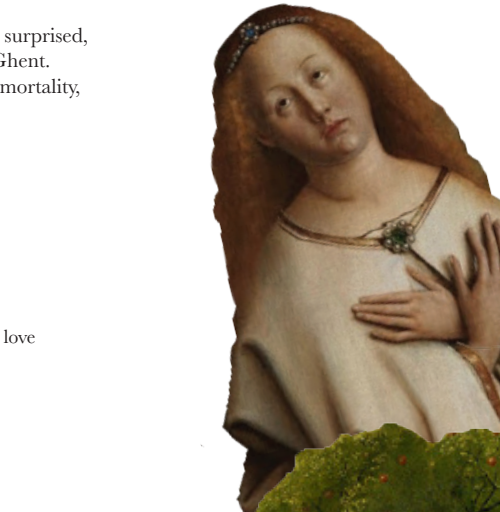
This is not, I must stress, an existential crisis,
though it may resemble one.

To be, I must not be,
and certainly I am, I know because
I am caught constantly in the downfall
of earthly delights and desires, like for warm breathy love
like for being someone else like for
an extra quarter for the RTD, and all around me
is Bosch's Eden.

Could it be so wrong, to hold color
and motif like a gentle galaxy cradling
her celestial bodies, a bird's nest
of tender and breakable world eggs?
Or a spider's sac of squirming legs — bearers
of eventual venom, like the rest of us.

Nothing could be so easy,
being born, maybe,
again.

VANITAS



red sky

The siren's throat was dry, and this she blamed on the weatherman; she and her sisters had been clicking irritably through the channels for days with a forecast for nothing but sun, and she was worried that her tongue may shrivel up in her mouth from lack of use.

Nothing powered the TV, of course, just as there was no source from which the kitchen sink could acquire its water and no exception of gravity to allow their home to teeter atop the cliff that faced the sea. But the house's inhabitants saw no reason for these impossibilities not to work in their favor, and so, miraculously, they did.

But none of these things changed the fact that the days had been far too clear for any seafarers to veer away from their route and come near the island. No fog to shroud the air in mystery, no storm to toss the sea. No all-consuming thunder that would break into a chorus of perfect voices, entrancing, enthralling. The siren, picking a rotting bit of fish from her teeth, kicked a can of something at the TV screen. It cracked. It did not break.

"You know that won't help anything," came a fluttering voice from the kitchen, where Licia was kneading bread. The siren—Ala—turned her head and watched as her sister plucked a feather from the dough, fallen from one of her ragged and rust-colored wings.

"Better than waiting," Ala retorted. Her words were sharp, yet sedated, edges washed until smooth like the rocks at the shoreline.

"We've always been waiting," said Licia.

They both fell silent. They were unused to such speech without song.

"Suppose it's another curse?" asked Ala after a moment.

"What have we done to be cursed?"

"You could ask the dead men."

"Sailors are not gods."

"But in disguise, maybe."

"Then they'd know better than to steer toward our shores. Oh, turn that thing off, would you," Licia said, clicking her tongue and nodding toward the television. The weatherman still spoke at them in electric tones from behind the cracked glass, holding his hand out to the continents like an orator.

Ala sighed irritably, then searched for the remote, finding it in the space between the cushions along with the sand and popcorn kernels that had likewise gathered there. She cut the oracle off at the word "morning".

From upstairs, she heard the faint humming of her other sisters, a disheartened harmony of hopeless deities, and she wondered at their miraculous longevity. Those of them that were left were borne of a streak of luck over centuries; Molpe and Ligeia had been the victims of Hera, flinging themselves seaward when their voices had not matched those of the Muses. Leucosia and Parthenope, the carnage of Odysseus. Many more were gone in the rage of men, or the revenge of goddesses. But here was a drought upon an island, the startings of a thirst for saltwater.

A siren was to die when a mortal escaped the tendrils of her song. And so to be silenced altogether, Ala thought, was a bitter purgatory.

Night was falling. Ala pulled herself from the couch, her imprint on the cushions, and stretched, feeling her feathers along her back unfurl. She made her way to the window and began to light the candles along the sill. Outside, the colors upon the horizon were beginning to fade, but the unbearing clouds were still streaked with warmth. It was a sight so sickening Ala wished she could reach to the heavens and tear them down herself.

She spotted something, then, as she set the lighter down and turned her back on the window; it was resting against the cabinets where they kept the magazines and the postcards and the poetry, and it had a layer of dust settled like snowfall on its strings. She approached it with caution, like a wild beast, and then grabbed it quickly. The lyre felt heavy in her hands as she strode across the room and began to ease open the screen door.

"Ala?" she heard, and stopped. Licia was looking at her through the doorway of the kitchen, her expression an intricate syllable of undeciphered text. Upstairs, the humming ebbed and flowed and twisted in upon itself.

"Yes?"

"I..." *We are voiceless. We are forgotten. We are dying.* "Don't go too far."

A small nod of the head, and then Ala was beneath the judgement of the waking stars. She passed the caryatids, the grapevines, the gardens that bathed in Persephone's afterlight, until she came to the grassy haven overlooking the skeletons. They rose and fell with the waters, a somber percussion as they mingled with the rocks. She closed her eyes, and she began to play.

Ala played to the empty seas, and she played to the graves at her feet, in her home, each note drowning out the sound of her silence.



marlow's vesuvius

the man on death's edge contents himself
with a study of the sublime;
the mountain is grotesque and angry red
like a fresh wound, heaving its last sigh —
before the city, *ave caem*, he thinks
beware of the dog-shaped spaces
that will be left behind in ash,
the frescoes set to be buried like bodies
twisting torsos upon red in a bacchian rite,
or a right in the eyes of any other hungry god
(that of a sacrifice, a villa of the mysteries,
things unseen and pondered and all too clear,
alight in the last moments),
the man thinks, looking out
upon the memory he does not have,
that perhaps he will make telescopes,
he delights, after all, in things at a distance
and cannot bear the ones close enough
to hold, as the earth hold its fire, the god
his night-dark wine
perhaps, he thinks,
he will be a painter.

Ashalia the Holy Woman had been up before dawn tending to the temple, as she was every day, but when the Architect entered he noted that dust still seemed to roam the place as though thinking itself their deity. Perhaps, he mused as he stooped down to light his candle, this was the nature of reverential places — to appear always as something ancient as what they housed.

He was early; no one else had yet arrived, and the space before the Goddess where the paint was faded and the floorboards soft was yet unoccupied. The rest of the city must still be in slumber after the festival, he thought to himself. The Architect took his candle to the place the Goddess stood, shielding it with his hand, and sat down.

The statue's face was mournful, and beautiful. The Architect began to pray.

His candle's dance was just visible beneath the lids of his half-closed eyes, and grew stronger as he watched it. Soon the subtle glow had become all-consuming, and he felt it beneath his skin. His robes felt lighter, his breathing softer and less ragged.

I haven't done this in some time, he thought.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed there, only that his legs soon became stiff beneath him and he felt himself falling back to earth. There was a wetness in his eyes. His candle was out.

After wiping his face and standing quickly as his joints would let him, the Architect returned the still-warm candle and began to make his way toward the doors.

"Wait," a voice said. The Architect turned. Ashalia stood beneath the eastern wall's stained glass, and was looking at him with a peculiar expression.

"May I ask what it was you were praying for, love?" she asked.

The architect thought. "Balance," he lied. Ashalia laughed.

"Sorcerers," she said, "don't pray for balance. And certainly not ones of your kind, when it comes to you so easily."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"In watching you, I would. I beg your pardon. But it fascinates me, each person's stature in worship. Did you know no one else has been in this week?"

This came as a shock to the Architect.

"Not even the musicians? I'd have thought, with the festival—"

"Not a sound from those doors in days," she assured him, nodding to the ornate entrance behind him. "And sparse even before that. I believe She's becoming a certain obscurity, now. It's strange. She was the center of 26 life when I was a girl — everyone had their statues, and

scripture, and even the inns had her sign on their doors as a mark of safe passage. Now I host the only temple, and draw the few stray faithfuls."

"I'm sorry."

"It is the way of things." Ashalia was quiet, then, for a time, her outline glowing softly with the orange light of dawn through the stained glass.

"What is my stature when I pray?" the Architect asked at last. Ashalia blinked, looking at him, and then smiled.

"Assured," she said, "absolute. Like a lost spirit coming home."

"It feels that way. You make this place feel like a home."

They fell into silence again, warm and easy.

The Architect looked up — to the high arch of the ceiling, the mosaics in blue and gold that shifted and hypnotized the eye with each step — and felt again the creation of this place's foundations, a sensation somewhere deep beneath his skin. Places of worship took a particular sort of magic to construct, and he had slept for many days after he had laid down the temple's final floorboards, though he had been a young man at the time. It was a wonder to see the way it took its own shape over the years, molding to its caretaker and its devout visitors.

And it was heartbreak to see it fade; not a sadness that came and ended quickly, but a sort of lasting bittersweetness that he felt take hold as he admired the temple, and that he knew would not be so easily pulled from its place.

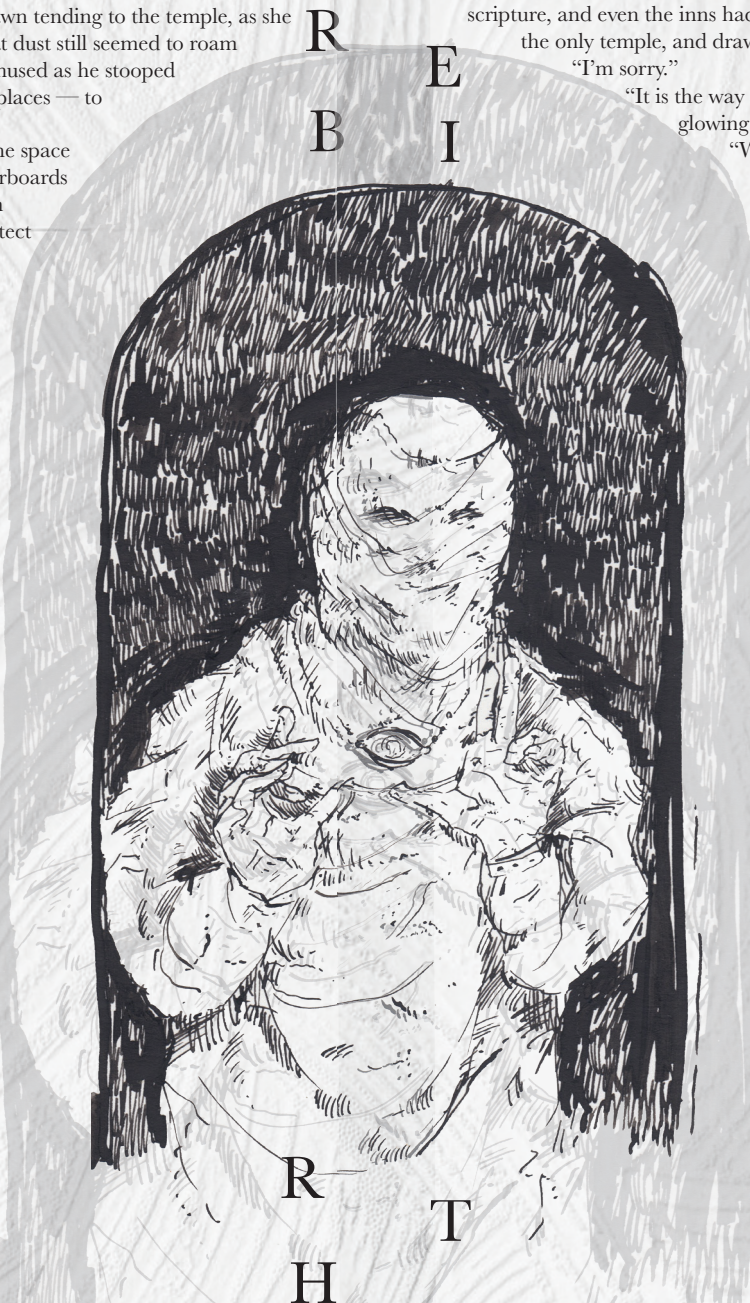
"So what are you going to do? Send missionaries? Sermons in the square?"

Ashalia laughed once more. The low and gentle sounds drifted and bounced like honeybees around the walls, then back again.

"No," she said quietly. She turned her back on him and took a candle of her own, lighting it, cradling it like something fragile and living as she approached the figure of the Goddess. In a soft, sing-song sort of way, she began to mutter phrases beneath her breath, and the Architect felt the power and the loving in each of them. He averted his eyes, and simply listened.


When the words stopped, he returned his gaze to the statue; it was no longer lit by the faint, flickering light of Ashalia's candle, and instead seemed to hover on the iridescent back of the rising smoke. Her face, now, seemed peaceful.

"She must rest now," said the Holy Woman. She returned her candle, stepped past the Architect, and pulled open the great doors, and the breeze that baptized the temple in her wake flowed like the breath of life.



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she chops the vegetables less as objects
and more as once-living things, with a particular regard
for their anatomy; the tops and bottoms

of the carrots come off cleanly and harshly,
like faces she doesn't want to see floating in the stew,
and when she splits the squashes along their

sagittal planes, she inspects what they hold
like a practiced mortician. the seeds and the pits
and the places the insects have gotten to

come away in plastic bags.
the skin is picked and peeled away, the liquid drained
until only the essence is left behind. this she tastes,

like the body of a deity, separates symmetrically. then
she seasons, prepares, awaits the watching eyes—
presents as an open casket.

preparation.

mockery of the vulture

No one has made use of the train station in quite some time. Its only occupants are the rain that sinks into the old building's pores, the wildflowers whose roots slowly overcome the wooden beams, and the man who sits outside waiting for the broken train.

The man has no eyes. In fact, much of his wolf-like face caves in on its own flesh into empty space, making his expression illegible. He wears a suit, as though he intended to go somewhere quite important once, but he must have gotten lost somewhere along the way; parts of it are now ripped and dark with dirt, or blood, or perhaps simply age. A vulture perches on his shoulder. The two of them sit politely on a bench outside the station, and are silent aside from the occasional clicking of the vulture as it pecks at a tear in the man's suit. A train arrives, and the wolf man looks up.

It slides to a stop before him, its exterior so crumpled and worn that one would not expect it to run at all, and the doors open slowly. He steps on and takes a seat, and the conductor— cloaked in black, his head a cow's skull— gives him a curt nod. The conductor waits a few moments as though allowing invisible guests entrance before closing the doors, and the train begins to move slowly, like a shuddering breath.

At first glance the train car is full of vultures, but at second it is clear that it is filled with others like the wolf man with vultures perched upon them. The people are all strange combinations of creatures and things, humans and serpents, bone and barbed wire, and they sit in a dreary almost-silence, occasionally exchanging empty small talk. Some hold ancient newspapers, the headlines so aged they are meaningless, and don't speak at all. Some seem agitated with their vultures as they peck and ruffle their wings, while others, such as the wolf man, have learned a peaceful tolerance; they take each other's presence not by choice, yet neither sees fit to protest their pairing. After some time of quietness, the wolf man hears a voice at his side.

"Feel sorry for 'em sometimes, you know? The vultures, I mean." The wolf man turns to see a young woman covered in feathers and tattoos sitting beside him, voice sounding without a movement of her elegant beak. Her

vulture is smaller than the others, not as bothersome. The man agrees with her, but says nothing.

"It's just, they're as stuck with us as we are with them. And they must be so hungry."

The wolf man says nothing.

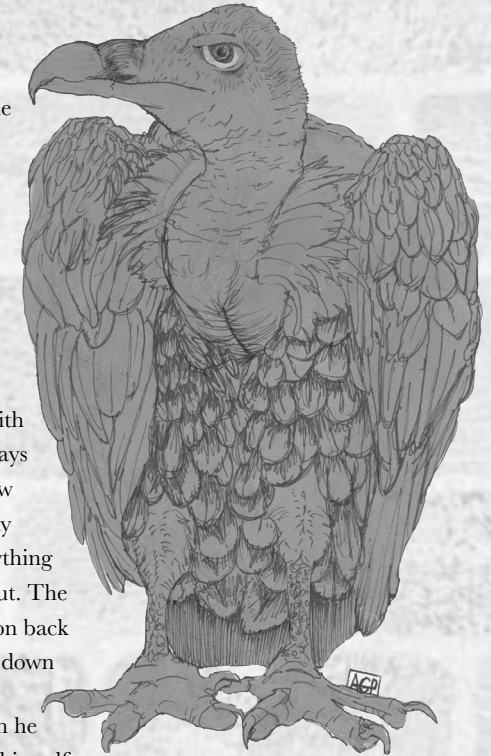
"It's true," a man with ram's horns and hollow eyes says from across the aisle after a few moments. "They're an unlucky bunch to feed on death. Everything else seems to have figured it out. The cities, and such. And the station back there." His head bobs up and down with the movement of the train, expressionless, as though he is nodding in agreement with himself.

"I don't know what's so different about us. Stubbornness, I s'pose. What's the next stop?"

The wolf man, still, does not speak. "Quiet guy, aren't you? That's alright," says the ram man. "Who knows — maybe one day, the birds will all just fly away."

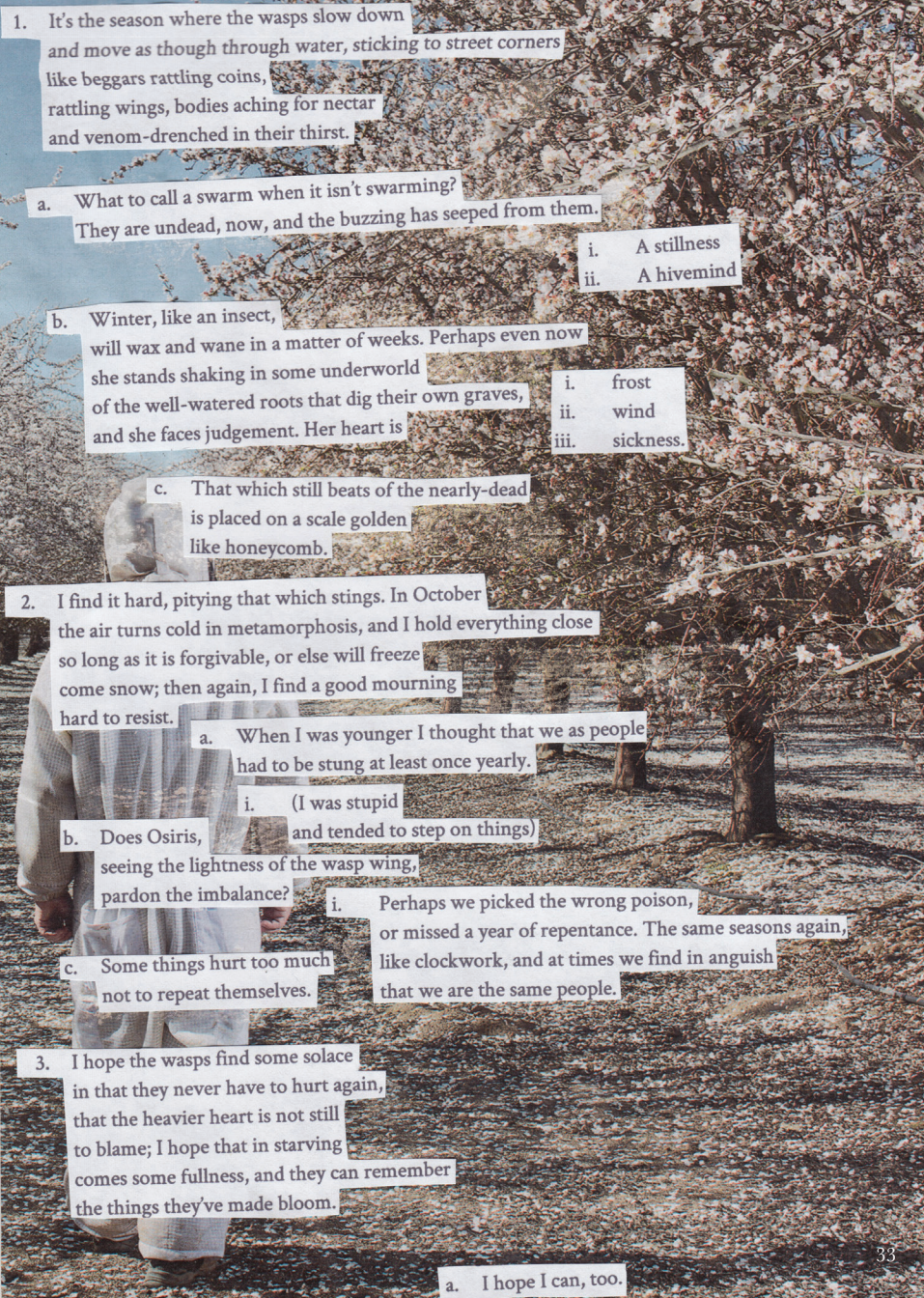
The ram man and the bird woman both laugh.

As the train comes to a halt, the wolf man stands, his vulture struggling to maintain its balance. Before he steps off, he gives a wave goodbye to the ram horned man and the bird woman, which they return. He then walks off the train and onto the same station he departed from, takes a seat on the same bench, and waits again for the broken train, the vulture pecking hopelessly.





s t i n g



1. It's the season where the wasps slow down
and move as though through water, sticking to street corners
like beggars rattling coins,
rattling wings, bodies aching for nectar
and venom-drenched in their thirst.

- a. What to call a swarm when it isn't swarming?
They are undead, now, and the buzzing has seeped from them.
 - i. A stillness
 - ii. A hivemind

- b. Winter, like an insect,
will wax and wane in a matter of weeks. Perhaps even now
she stands shaking in some underworld
of the well-watered roots that dig their own graves,
and she faces judgement. Her heart is
 - i. frost
 - ii. wind
 - iii. sickness.

- c. That which still beats of the nearly-dead
is placed on a scale golden
like honeycomb.

2. I find it hard, pitying that which stings. In October
the air turns cold in metamorphosis, and I hold everything close
so long as it is forgivable, or else will freeze
come snow; then again, I find a good mourning
hard to resist.

- a. When I was younger I thought that we as people
had to be stung at least once yearly.
 - i. (I was stupid
- b. Does Osiris,
seeing the lightness of the wasp wing,
pardon the imbalance?
 - i. Perhaps we picked the wrong poison,
or missed a year of repentance. The same seasons again,
like clockwork, and at times we find in anguish
that we are the same people.
- c. Some things hurt too much
not to repeat themselves.

3. I hope the wasps find some solace
in that they never have to hurt again,
that the heavier heart is not still
to blame; I hope that in starving
comes some fullness, and they can remember
the things they've made bloom.

- a. I hope I can, too.

EVAN'S BLOOD

Evan was antsy as his blood was slowly drained from his entire body, and he couldn't stop himself from bouncing his leg in the exact way that infuriated the Man with the Cape.

This was the name that Evan had settled on after the vampire's sixteenth refusal to give his name, and it was a title that fit, for the man's cape was (aside from his teeth), his most striking feature. It was sweeping and blood-red, with intricate designs portraying various painful deaths. The cape also had sequins, which was a factor that Evan deeply admired. This did not change the fact that Evan had several rather pressing questions about what the Man with the Cape was doing.

"What exactly is it that you're doing?" Evan asked.

The Man with the Cape grunted, not impolitely, but not quite not impolitely.

"I've already told you," the Cape Man said (Evan altered the title in his head to save his brain a couple of syllables, which he figured would add up in the long run). "I have to drain your human blood, and then fill you up with vampire blood. It is a long process. A long, long process. And it would be better for both of us if done in silence."

Evan, who was seated uncomfortably on Cape Man's Victorian reproduction settee, thought about this. It was getting slightly hard to think. Evan pictured a graph in his head with "thinking" as a product of "amount of blood in body", and determined that there was a definite correlation, but he couldn't really think well enough to figure out what it was.

"Your ad didn't say anything about this."

"Yeah, because I didn't want eBay to flag it. What did you think becoming a vampire would be like?"

"Sexier. Like becoming a werewolf."

"But you're not a werewolf."

"I tried to be. But I have really thick skin."

"I noticed." The Cape Man eyed the seven places where he had tried to stab his blood-sucking needle thing into Evan's arm before the surface finally gave.

"Yeah. It was really hot up until we realized it wouldn't work, though. Becoming a vampire was the second coolest thing I could think of."

"I'm not going to say that doesn't hurt my feelings."

"But?"

"I'm just not going to say it."

"Oh."

They drained in silence for several minutes. Evan bounced his leg. The vampire hated it. Suddenly, Evan thought of something very important.

"Hey, Cape Guy?" Evan asked. He had altered the title again to sound more casual, because he felt like they were bonding. "Is it hard never seeing your reflection?"

"Oh, that's a common misunderstanding," said Cape Guy, happy at the change of topic from vampires being not very sexy beings to drain human blood, which had been one of his deepest insecurities ever since Shambling Weekly had ranked them as #7 on the Blood Scale, below mosquitoes and only one above leeches. "We can totally see our reflections. How else would I be able to sew an elaborate self-portrait into my self-portrait cape? I need to know what my face

looks like."

"That's a shame," said Evan. "I was excited about seeing what my clothes looked like without a person in them."

"I'm sorry about that."

"I'll get over it."

"What? I didn't catch that."

"I said I'll get over it."

"Oh. You have really loud blood."

"Sorry."

They fell silent again, listening to the familiar ambiance of blood leaving a body. It might have been beautiful, had it not been not.

Soon, Evan's vision started swimming like the Michael Phelps of senses. Then it started swimming more, like Michael Phelps on a day that he's had a really good breakfast and is feeling very energized, and is also turning into a merman. Then Evan died, for a second.

"Wow," Evan said when he came to. "Being dead is crazy. I saw my grandmother."

"Has she passed away?"

"No. I was just thinking about her right before I died, so it sort of carried through into a nightmare I had that she was pulling out my teeth and replacing them with other teeth."

"That was me doing that."

"Oh, yeah," said Evan, running his tongue along his new vampire teeth. "Oh, awesome. I can't wait to get home and sell my hole-puncher and start using my teeth to hole-punch things."

Cape Guy cleared his throat.

"Right," said Evan. "Sorry." He reached deep into the pockets of his slightly bloodstained bell-bottom jeans and produced a sticky wad of cash at American dollar value \$4.37, which he handed to the vampire. Cape Guy cleared his throat again. From the other pocket, Evan produced his old Apple Watch, which he liked but didn't really use that much anymore and which would also make up for the other \$195.63 that he'd promised Cape Guy but didn't actually have. Cape Guy cleared his throat once more.

"Come on, that's my end of the deal!" cried Evan. "What more could you want?"

"Actually, I was just clearing my throat because it was feeling a little clogged, but you obviously assume the worst in people, so keep rolling with that toxic lifestyle, I guess. Anyway, we've completed the transaction, so you're free to go. Don't stay out in sunlight too long. Or make Shambling Weekly's most recent garlic and herb gnocchi salad recipe."

"Because of the garlic?"

"Because it sucks."

Evan nodded solemnly, and headed for the door. Before he could leave, though, he heard Cape Guy's voice behind him.

"Evan?"

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to say that... my name's also Evan. I was just afraid of telling you because I was worried you'd think I was copying your style, since you have such cool bell-bottom jeans and everything. I think you're a really neat guy."

"I don't know what to say," said Evan. "Thanks for the blood, Evan."

"See you, Evan," said Evan. So Evan left with vampire blood in his body and love in his heart, and also vampire blood in his heart.

And he decided, as he lurked unseen through the lurk-worthy dark of the night, that he would get himself a nice cape.



Things

Move

That

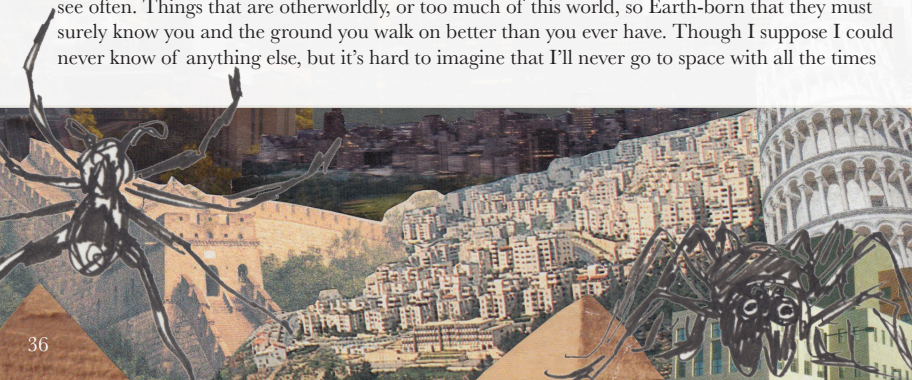


Today I saw a spider in my bathroom that I first saw a few days ago, which means it must be a very lucky spider; they are the sort of thing you only see once before they vanish. A spider can be made to disappear in three ways: one, you kill it and crumple it up in a shroud pulled from a Kleenex box, two, it slips away on its own, making the room in which you found it something akin to a haunted house that makes your skin crawl whenever you walk into it, at least for a day or so, until you forget, or three, you trap it in a jar and set it loose.

I've always tended toward the last option until recently, when I found out from a British quiz show that house spiders are paradoxical little things which have become native to the environment of a "house" and will die if subjected to the openness of nature. They don't belong to the place they come from, but they can't leave it. An awfully sad life for a spider, I'd think, but then again what they don't know can't hurt them, and if they knew, would they know to be hurt? I hope not — it would've been a wake-up call for the spiders in my living room who were watching my TV, having the facts of themselves rewritten. Though I suppose that's a moment everyone's had, once or twice or a hundred times weekly. There's nothing special about spiders.

An example of self-revising: two nights ago there was a storm, and it was a lovely one. The clouds blushed pink and scarred themselves with lightning or soft rainbows every once in a while, nothing consistent as they shifted with the sunset. There were those breaks in the clouds that must have a name, but I don't know one, the ones that pour down sun like a spotlight, and you don't quite expect to hear the voice of God when you see one but it would certainly be impolite for Him to pipe up without one being involved, were He in the mood to speak. I see them, and think I might go back to church, or get a tattoo, or change my favorite color again.

It's easier, after all, to be in your body when you see those things that your body doesn't see often. Things that are otherworldly, or too much of this world, so Earth-born that they must surely know you and the ground you walk on better than you ever have. Though I suppose I could never know of anything else, but it's hard to imagine that I'll never go to space with all the times

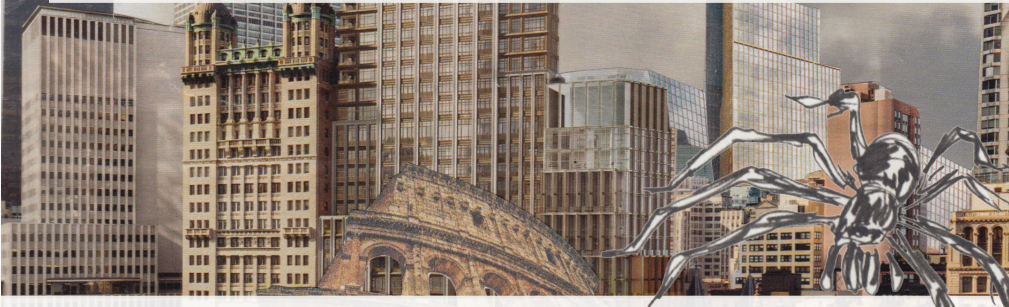


I've read and watched and heard of the things that happen to you when you go to space, all the stuff you see. I was told in elementary school not to say words like "things" and "stuff", but what I would see in that place I've never been and will never go are beyond the words I can string together with only the reference of what I know, so I believe they are eligible to linger in obscurity and the vagueness of nondescription.

I wonder, sometimes, at the strange parallels between solar movements and pestilence; I have always understood that the earth I was born to will not be the same one I leave, and that in fact I may leave it with much of my species all at once as our planet finds she can no longer bear us and turns us like soil. But I wonder at the deities, whether Nergal or Vejovis or Apollo favor one technicality over the other and, if so, whether they will fumble with light or with plague.

Or maybe they will bring both at once. Maybe the sky will turn to molten gold, like the sun in storm clouds, and wash us out in the way of the first flood until the air smells of death and petrichor.

Earlier this week, a friend was talking to me about climate change; how she's terrified of its scale but curious, also, as to whether the universe — the stuff out there — would notice based on its own bigness and infinite calm and catastrophe, if in fact there is life beyond ourselves. Not "life", though, because how can we define "life" aside from what we know of it, anyway?



Instead of "life," she said "things that move". The phrase struck me, and I wrote it down in the margin of my notebook for reference, in case I needed a band or book name later on. As it was, I had already used that very phrase in a poem over the summer, in a similar context. A *deja vu* moment — a house spider moment. I can't seem to get it off my mind.

It's too hot to think, anyway, far too hot, and I woke this morning with a fever that broke when I tried to look for it, and climate change must've had some hand in all of this, too. The dogs are panting, and the soap in the bathroom is melting. Typical that human vice would come around and bite us in the season best for a cool walk and clear thought, since it is September now, after all. I don't know what to think of September, and she feels much the same about me, so I guess we'll go on avoiding each other the way we always do.

I'm always sick at the end of summer. I think it's a reaction to the changing things around me, the body's natural resistance to letting go. I have one more year to let go of everything I've spun my web around, though, and maybe I can prove my body wrong. Maybe there will be a wellness in it. Anything away from where I've grown up, from this same place and the same people would probably prove a lot of things about me to be wrong, and I don't know if I'm ready to hear those things yet. It's hard to step outside myself and know what I'm really like. It's all things and stuff. But the seasons are changing, and the sky is clear tonight, and maybe all the spiders scuttling in places unseen will find a home yet.



WITH LOVE,

TO THE 2020 CW SENIOR CLASS

AURELIA for talking to me on walk-outs and for writing that feels like a memory I've misplaced **MUSA** for vibing and letting me hide a bouquet in your locker **LIDA** for genuine soul connections and manifesting **ALEXA** for the immense wisdom of your writing and comedy of your conversation **PIPER** for five hour talks outside kaplan's room and your dope-ass jean jacket **JULIA** for being my first real friend here, all those years ago, and for everything since **KAT** for your laugh and for yelling at people for their flash photography **MATT** for long aimless walks and heart-deep comfort **ANNICA** for being one of the funniest and most charming people I'll ever have the pleasure of knowing **JULIANA** for chicago backstage nonsense and boba runs **ANNE** for rat memes and being my other half in the comedy duo of the century **TRE** for breathtakingly beautiful poetry and third period nonsense **MAGGIE** for the enchantment of your being and the beauty of your poetry and your stupid torpedo wine chips **CAMDEN** for being the goddamn backbone of this program for seven whole years **EMILY** for your remarkable insight and intelligence and our awful shared eighth grade phase **THALIA** for matching greek muse names and being the devil to my ringmaster **CURLY** for dedicating absolutely one hundred percent to dumb bits and for belting country roads **ALL OF YOU** for for laughing with me, crying with me, falling asleep on beanbags, eating so many lofthouse cookies, night hiking, louisiana swamp touring, growing up with me, and being the best family I could've possibly found.

TO

EVERYONE

ELSE

AZAR there is no possible way for me to fit everything I want to tell you into one block of text, but I will list a small portion of the infinite. you have been a constant source of light and love since I first joined this program. you have shown me the beauty in everything and taught me how to catch it, observe it, set it loose again. above all, you have been there for me, been like a mother to me, helped each of us through hundreds of bad days and bad cases of writer's block. so much love, always. **KAPLAN** I'm not going to say I'm not mad at you for ditching our class during our last semester, or that I'm sorry for the great snowball fight incident of la foret (2019), but any retained resentment is entirely a result of just how much you have meant to me these past few years. thank you for snacks and stories and kind words and big hugs and everything you have done for us to help us grow into our (debatably) best selves. **GWEN, AVERY, OWEN, NATHAN, KIKI, AND GABE** for creating spectacular art for this book and for being spectacular humans; I'm so grateful to have known each of you, and so lucky to have been your friend. **DAPHNE** for making every day brighter, every moment more enchanting, and every song from *Cats* a song that I unfortunately know the lyrics to now. I feel so lucky to have sat by you by chance in math so that we could mutually pine over each other for months, like idiots. love you endlessly. **MY FAMILY** for supporting me in everything, and for listening to my stories since I first started spouting nonsense (a hobby I don't plan on stopping) **MAYA, FRANCEE, AND GWEN** for being delightful and letting me sort of slide into your chaotic friend group! it was so sweet getting to know y'all better this year. **ELIZABETH** for podcast recs and the road trips and magical starbucks funds **HARRY** for hot sauce bars and sitting in a cold sauna, fully clothed, at 11pm, and general peculiar nonsense **DEAN** for loaning me your wizard hat that one time and always making me smile **EDIE, AUTUMN, AND ANAMARIA** for your grace and laughter and always being your beautiful, authentic selves **TRISTENNE** for 4squared shenanigans and marine bio shenanigans and giving me rides to school and beaing a real one! love ya so much girl. **TORSEY** for being there, almost literally, since day one **OLIVER** for hectic (but wonderful) dpcc days and being an amazing friend **MR DUNN** for being a spectacular teacher, recommending some excellent books, and giving me a hug that one time when I really, really needed it. you have genuinely been an inspiration for me, tangents and all. thank you so much. **MS EASLEY** for opening my eyes what is now one of my absolute favorite subjects in the world, and helping me to see art wherever I go! your class inspired me beyond belief, and I will always hold it in my heart. I hope my meme page has functioned as sufficient payment for your enormously impactful wisdom. **APOLLO** for supporting my writing career by putting your head on my lap whenever I cried over poetry that was too emotional. you were the best dog in the world. I feel the stars are safer with you watching over them.

, WITH LOVE,



