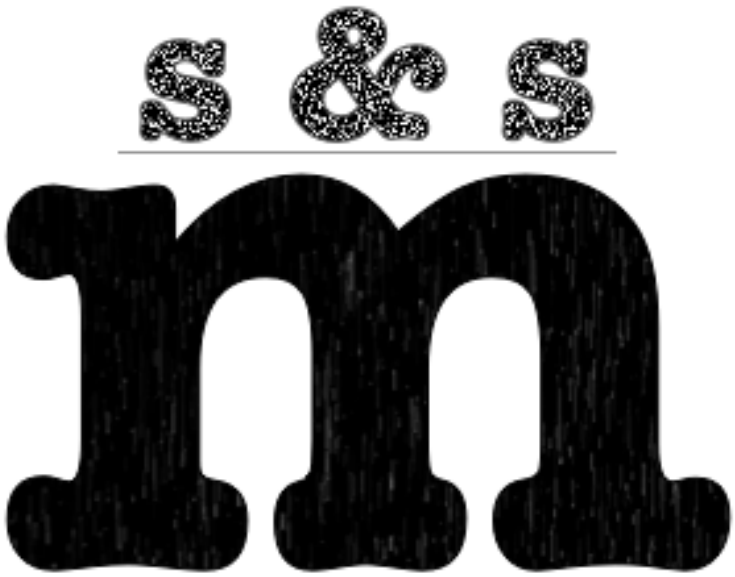

ISSUE 2018:01
SYNTAX & SALT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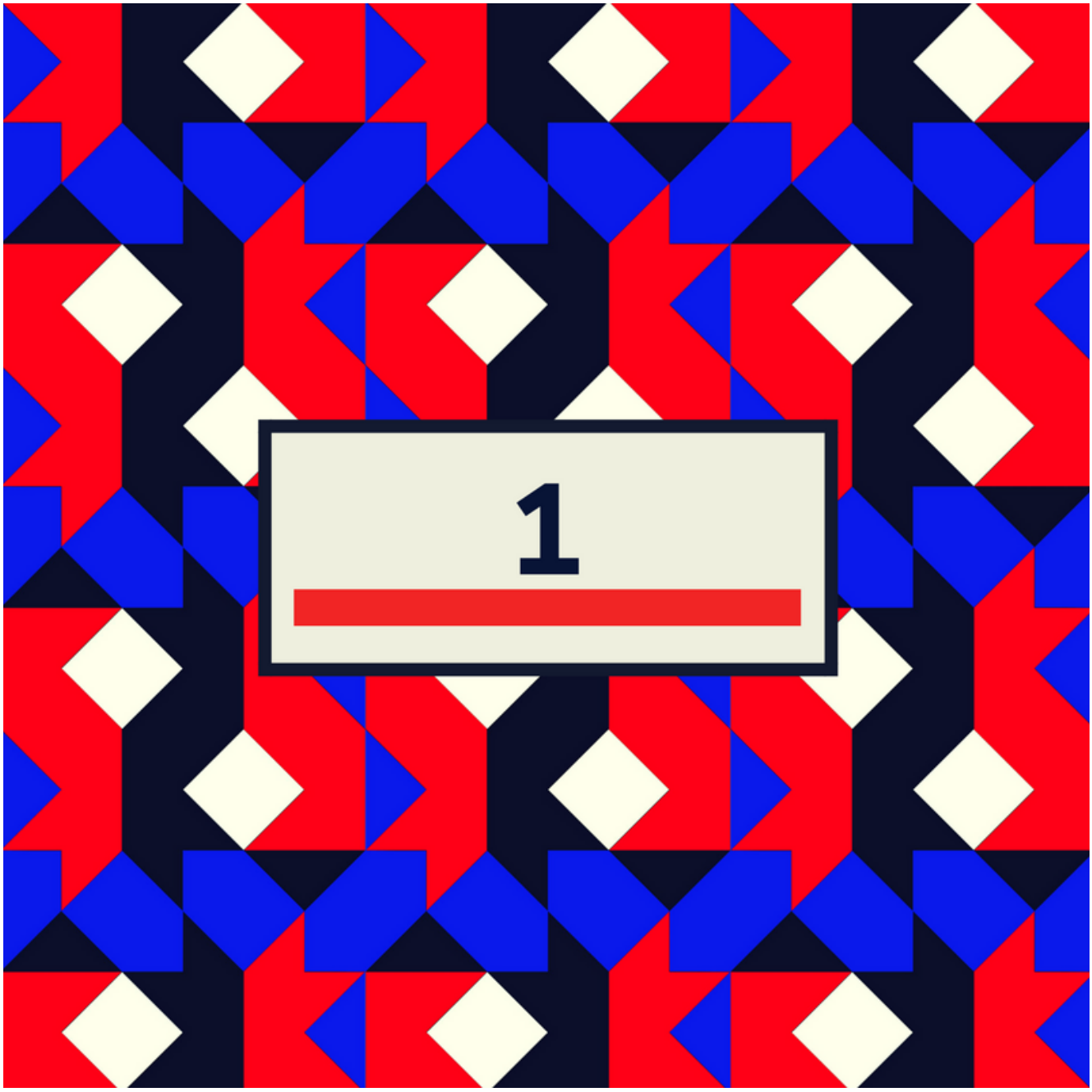

Mirror Images by Eleanor Pearson

Eleanor Pearson is a writer living in St. Paul, Minnesota. She draws inspiration from her many past and present jobs, which have included working as a nanny, a truck-unloader, a research tech, and a barista.

MY AUNT KEPT every mirror she ever broke.

She kept many things: used toothbrushes, twist-ties with the wires sticking out, and those little white squares of plastic that close bags of bread. They lay jumbled at the bottom of old yogurt containers until she pulled them out to clean with or fasten things with. The mirrors, she had no immediate use for. They sat in small, jagged piles in the basement, glass shards heaped on top of silver backings, waiting for a purpose.

If a mirror wasn't broken enough to be consigned to the basement, my aunt would fit it back together with sealing caulk. She ground the caulk flat with an emery board that she wrapped and re-wrapped in sandpaper.

My aunt and uncle's friends thought the fixed mirrors could be art installations and my aunt an artist. Her methods had given them an appearance that was just odd enough to seem intentional. The friends collected damaged mirrors from garage sales and estate sales, second-hand stores and roadsides, which they brought over for her. The mirrors waited in ever-growing stacks in the basement for when my aunt had enough time to get to them.

There was never enough time before my uncle got sick. It was a form of cancer – something quick, something that sprang from his middle full-formed and with claws. My memories are vague. I was still young enough at the time for my parents to hide the details, but old enough that friends and sports took precedence anyway.

My aunt was very strong through it all, said the rest of the family, by which they meant that my aunt didn't burden them more than she had to. She didn't even cry during the funeral.

I do remember my mother complaining about the mess. She had visited my aunt on a Tuesday near the end, with a pan of hotdish and a bundle of hydrangeas. The place had become a dump, she said – a shame for my uncle, who had to spend his last days surrounded by takeout containers. My mother had thrown out what she could, but my aunt had banned her from going through any of the cupboards. She wasn't even allowed to touch the broken mirrors in the basement, which had become blanketed in dust.

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Eight years after my uncle's death, I received a phone call: it had become apparent that strong might not be enough. No one had really seen my aunt lately, except for very short visits. She was reluctant to let anyone into her house. She rarely went outside.

Someone needed to stay with my aunt for a while, to see how she was doing. Visiting could only give so much information, especially when my aunt refused to talk to her guests.

Every other member of the family had brought up health concerns, marital concerns, childcare obligations. I had no such excuses. I was relatively young and relatively healthy, had been single for longer than I cared to admit, and had spent more than I had on a degree that never became a diploma. Staying with my aunt would help me get back on my feet, they said, as if life were a sidewalk that I had tripped on and skinned my knee.

They wanted to know if my aunt was "alright". They never specified what that meant, so I assumed they meant however she had been before her behavior began to draw attention. I had been too young to really know what my aunt had been like when my uncle was well, but I said I would do my best.

I was expecting something terrible when I entered my aunt's house. The images in my head were drawn from family gossip and shored up with reality television: piles of debris, unclassifiable refuse.

My aunt didn't open the front door when I knocked, but she nodded at me from the sofa when I walked in. She appeared healthy, if tired.

Her house was nicer than I had imagined. In fact, it was much nicer than any place I had lived since I was in school. There were spiderwebs in the corners and the furniture was worn, that was all. I took the guest bedroom.

Over her years alone, my aunt had begun to fix the mirrors in her basement, the ones that had previously been too broken to bother with or that her well-intentioned friends had brought so long ago. She had set up a gluing table down there, around which were scattered silvery frames and baskets of shards of glass. She spent most of the day working, and often slept on an old couch kitty-corner from the table. I brought food when I thought she might be hungry. My aunt acknowledged the meals with the same nod she had greeted me with when I arrived.

I tried to speak with my aunt at the beginning, but my attempts soon began to seem like intrusions. I told the rest of the family that she was "alright." She seemed to be content. She often hummed while she worked.

I planted a small garden in the backyard for lack of anything better to do. I dusted the furniture. At night, I paged through old books and class notes, thinking I might give college another try when I moved out.

Living in my aunt's house was like living in a bubble outside time. My friends changed into different people each time I talked to them, gaining jobs and families and interests; it wasn't long before they changed into acquaintances, and it wasn't long after that we stopped talking entirely.

What my aunt was doing with the mirrors had long since ceased to be repair-work. The shards were now arranged in patterns, whorls and spirals as intricate as a Van Gogh. They were truly impressive. I suggested once that she consider selling them, but she only stared in response, looking at and through me at the same time.

Every so often, my aunt would stop and gaze into one of the fixed mirrors intently, like she was searching for something in her own face. I would find her like this in the basement, or the living room, or in her abandoned bedroom upstairs.

One afternoon in late July, about three months after I had moved in, I thought I saw my aunt watching through the kitchen window as I weeded. When I came back inside, she was again enthralled by the reflection in one of her creations. Even when I showed off the first vegetables of the garden, a bright bundle of tiny radishes, she spared them no more than a glance.

There was a fine layer of glass everywhere in the house, like frost. I took to wearing shoes inside the house. The food I bought for my aunt was all packaged: microwavable meals, vegetables in cans. I turned all the chinaware upside-down and stocked the pantry with cases of water bottles. I often thought I could feel it, waking up in the guest bedroom, scratching in the corners of my eyes.

***

I first saw my uncle on a day when I was trapped inside by autumn sleet. He was reflected in one of the mirrors in the upstairs guest room; in one of the glued fragments, that is. He was rifling through one of the drawers in the cabinet behind me. Then he turned both of his pants pockets inside-out. He threw up his hands, exasperated, and walked out of the room – and out of the mirror – with his pockets hanging off his hips like dogs' ears.

The second time I saw him, he was playing the piano in one of the living room mirror shards. I could almost hear the music as his fingers bounced out a swing tune with the seeming effortlessness of a true virtuoso. He grimaced cartoonishly whenever the arrangement got tricky, but never missed a beat. When I finally turned away, the house seemed that much quieter and more empty.

I began to search for my uncle like my aunt did, checking all the rooms when I came in from the garden, looking up every few minutes from evening studies that had grown increasingly half-hearted. There was no knowing when you might see him, or what he might be doing. He would sometimes cross the room in a hurry, sometimes sit and read for hours.

My memories of my uncle had been a child's memories: a large figure who was often kind, often frightening; a hand reaching down with an Easter egg; a shoulder lifting me to the height of apples in an orchard. Now I began to feel that I knew him better than almost anyone. He was often clumsy, but never self-consciously so. When a fried tomato once again escaped down his shirt, he laughed – and I laughed out loud along with him.

The noise brought my aunt, who sat beside me on the floor, hugging her knees. We three joined in laughter until my uncle walked out of the mirror. Then we were two, and we were silent.

The reflected rooms looked slightly different. The upholstery was fuller, the pictures on the walls more vibrant. Things that had become cracked were whole.

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I saw myself on a night when snow battered the windows like moths. I was a child in the mirror; I crept along the wall, conspicuously sneaky, inspecting several cabinets before choosing one to climb into. I remembered that afternoon. We had been playing a hide-and-seek game my cousins had invented, with rules that seemed to change whenever my eldest cousin started to lose.

Once child-me was discovered, she climbed out of the cabinet scowling, but with a light in her eyes that had long since dimmed. Seeing that light, I almost felt that I could reach through the glass and grab it for myself: the certainty of a girl that she could grow up, that she could get a degree, that she could be anything she wanted.

My days and nights were increasingly spent prowling from room to room in search of movement. Anything else that caught my eye – birds, snowflakes – was a source of bitter disappointment. I stuffed my school books and notes under the doors to keep out the wind. I drew the curtains. Later, I found that my aunt had fastened them together more tightly with metal binder clips.

I watched for my aunt nearly as much as I watched the mirrors. I think she watched me too. We were beacons, drawing each other to where my uncle had appeared. We never talked; there was nothing we might say that was as important as what we might see.

During the middle of a dinner party held by my newly-married aunt and uncle, I heard a far-off knock at the front door. I waited until all the guests had left before answering. When I opened the door, I found several plastic bags of food laying on the steps. I didn't question them. I set them on the kitchen table, where they lay even after their contents were gone.

I watched my uncle at the piano a second time, a third time, too many times to count.

I watched my cousins and I bicker over Christmas presents around a wobbly, overstuffed tree.

I watched my uncle perform a clumsy Fred Astaire dance with a yardstick as a cane.

I watched my aunt chase my uncle up the stairs, playfully threatening violence with a frying pan.

I watched joy. I watched anger. I watched love. I watched life.

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One day, I came upon my aunt sitting in the living room, staring into her latest creation. It was easily four feet tall, with a pattern like a galactic spiral that burst out from somewhere

left of center. It was her latest, but not made recently. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen her downstairs working. It was around the last time that I had visited the garden, whenever that was. A while ago.

I came up behind her to see what she saw. She sat as still as a piece of furniture.

It took me some time to find the fragment she was looking into. It was one of the smallest ones, hardly thicker than a matchstick.

In it, she and my uncle were dancing. He spun her around and around, laughing. They were both laughing. Her pleated skirt flared outward like the petals of a flower.

My aunt in the mirror was young, with long hair. Her cheeks were full and rosy. My aunt beside me was shrunken, hunched in front of the shard. The lines of her face could have been carved from wood. The only thing alive about her was her eyes; when she turned to look at me they swam with emotion, reflecting me back at myself.

I saw for the first time how young my uncle in the mirrors was. Compared to my aunt beside me, he could have been her child. She was older than I remembered.

"Isn't it beautiful?" my aunt asked. Her mouth had been still for so long that her lips cracked when she spoke. A small drop of blood formed in the center of her lower lip.

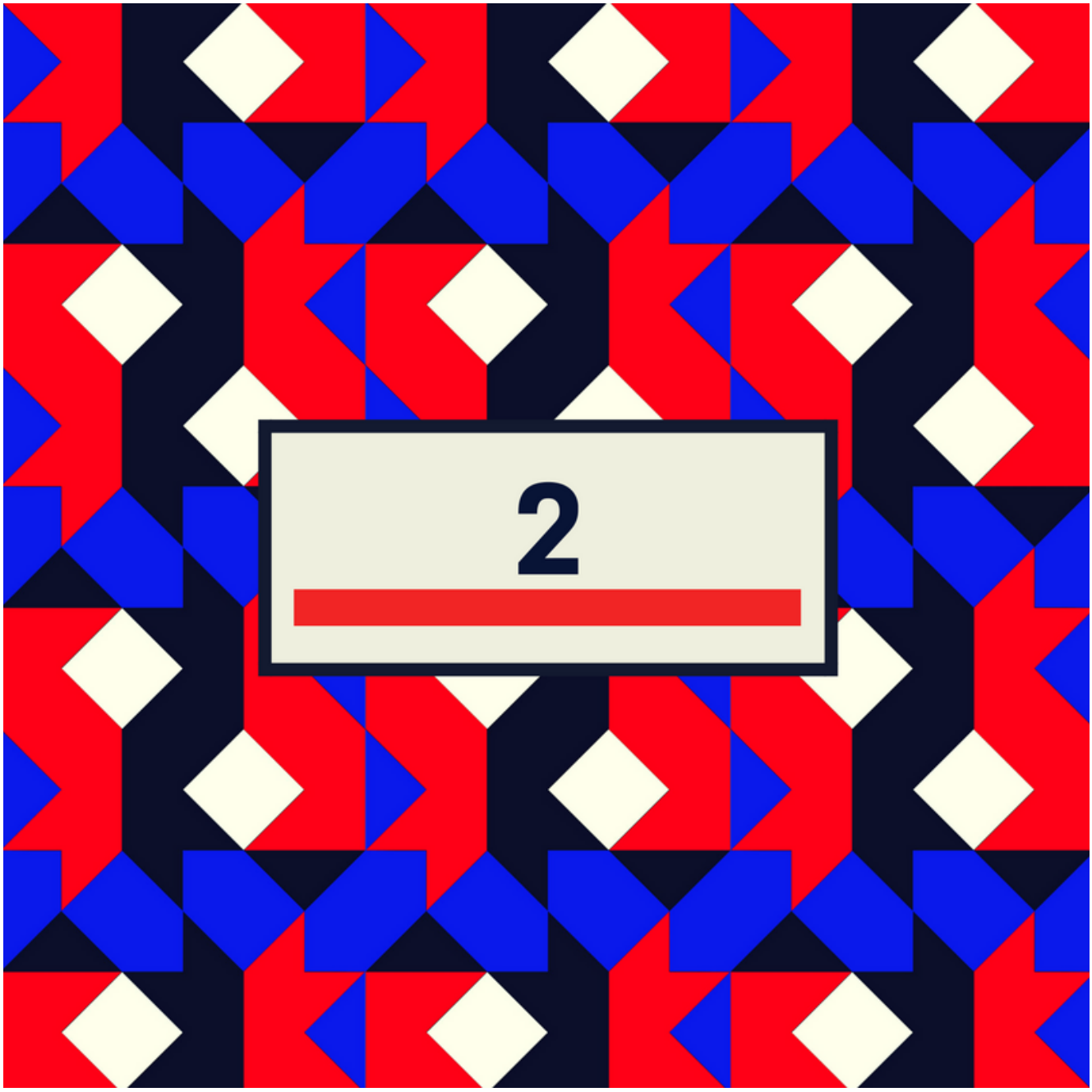
"Yes," I said.

I went out the back door, into the garden, which had become overgrown with vetch. It had just rained and the air smelled like wet earth.

I saw my reflection in a puddle at my feet, surprised not to see the face of the mirror-child staring up at me. Like my aunt, I was older than I remembered.

But I wasn't old yet.

On the other side of the fence, the neighbors had installed a large trampoline. Three children were bouncing on it. All around, lilies were pushing their way up through dead leaves, ready to bloom. It was spring.



Fixer Upper by A.M. Call

A.M. lives in Salem, Massachusetts, land of thrift store witches and the voice of the rising sea. Look for more work in the April edition of Unnerving Magazine *and in the near future on* Daily Science Fiction.

TOO MANY MOONS, for one thing. Where did all of these extra moons come from? That one up there, the oblong one, I remember that orbiting the fourth planet last time we visited. You must have towed it here somehow. Why in… Never mind. I don't really want to know. I don't want to know why you did *any* of it. We deal with the present, not the past. Moving forward!

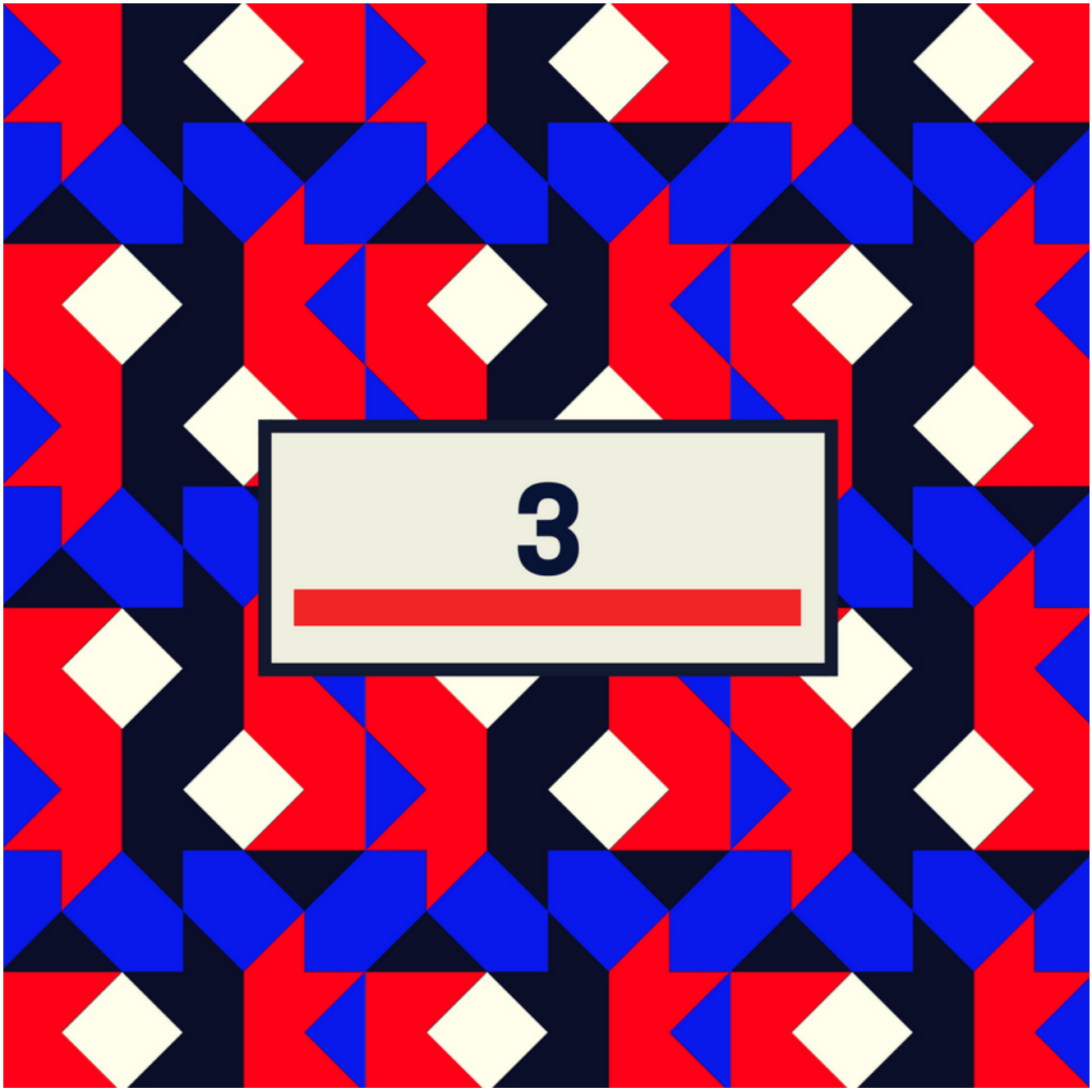
That said, the moons really are going to have to go. First episode, we tow them out into the great black void. Maybe we'll fling them into the sun. Goodbye, trash! Out with the old! I'll ask my producer and see how it tests. If you sign, of course.

Dumping the extra moons ought to fix your tide situation immediately, then we can start working with what's left. I'll be honest with you right now: it's not going back to the way it was before. We can make it *look*similar. But it won't *feel* the same. Your atmosphere, for example. Do you know how expensive it is to synthesize new air? Plus, I gather you're all used to the status quo now, right? And anything living on the surface that can't handle it is dead at this point. So, OK, good! We make lemonade. Sub in argon for the missing oxygen and at least get atmospheric pressure back up to where birds can fly in it. The editing guy has a *huge* boner for flying birds. He wants the final scene to show one of your magnificent avians taking wing and triumphantly sailing into the rising sun. Part of the "after" segment. You know, "before" and "after." We show the audience the difference between your planet pre-makeover and post-makeover. Oh, you were asking about the birds? We'll take some of ours and genetically engineer them, since you don't have any of your own left.

Now, keep in mind that we considered ten thousand planets for this season. Earth was by far the most messed up, and we think we could get some really great ratings out of it, but let's be honest, the place needs more than a new lawn. If your oceans turn out to be more than

20% carbonic acid by volume, then every viewscreen in the cosmos plus our profits for the last hundred thousand years could not pull us out of the money hole that your planet would become. Your surface waters test out at 19.75% on your beaches, right? OK, good, that's good, but remember, we still can't get down to test your deep seas because of those crazy tides. Who knows what it's like down there? So if you sign, *when* you sign, you'll be agreeing that if the place turns out to be a total shipwreck, it's your problem. Good news, though: in that case, the station will perform a complimentary gutting. (Guttings are *great* ratings. We do 'em nuclear style.) That way, the station recoups its loss and you get a nice barren world to start all over on. Win-win!

But we'll probably fix your planet. Like sixty percent of the planets we find with the show, we fix. The look on our contestants' faces when they see the new sky, the new dirt, the new birds. So happy. And if it doesn't work out, well. There are only a few thousand of you. I'm sure you could all fit on one of your moons.



A Storm Kissed by Blackbirds by Eva Papasoulioti

Eva Papasoulioti is a writer of speculative fiction and poetry. She lives in Athens, Greece, and translates words for a living. You can find her on Twitter and on her blog plothopes.com.

EVERYTHING STARTED IN this room sixty-five years ago and everything will end here as well.
A birth then, a death now.

It was here where I met him, his fingers clasped around a rasp, chipping the stone, shaping it. He didn't do faces. He loved to create art for people where they could see themselves in every piece.

"It could be you; it could be me," he said, while he paid attention to the folds of the dress around the chest of what was clearly a woman's body.

"But you're creating a woman."

"Why?"

"The breasts." I believe that back then I had blushed but now…well, now and after all these years of fighting as a single mother with a daughter fighting back at me, I think of myself as blunter. Braver.

"It's the face that captures one's soul. Not the body."

"But what about our actions? Touching, not touching, isn't it all a part of our soul?"

He had smiled of course, meeting my eyes, checking my body up and down. In that moment that smelled like basil and dust and rain, I had surely blushed.

My mother was a sculptor and he had been her intern. I saw him every day that summer. I was waiting for university classes to start and the island was peaceful and quite rainy, which meant I had nothing to do. So I loitered. I asked questions and he answered them. I would put music on and he didn't mind. I brought him homemade cakes and pies and he ate them, always with a good word to say.

We slept together, right where my daughter currently stands, three weeks before the end of his internship. He left and never came back. I grew and grew and never thought to call him.

***

I named her Nephele. It made sense with all the clouds and the decision to keep her instead of giving her away, and she stood up to her name, stormy whenever she met refusal, lightning whenever she was wronged. But whenever the sun peeked out from behind those clouds, she wore her prettiest smile and made all the water in my sorrows evaporate.

Those moments were the moments I held onto when her wrath brought down the windows and made the walls shatter. She would smile and hold my hand, "Your hands are cold, ma."

I never used to have cold hands but, after the birth, the skin of my lips and on my knuckles would break open and bleed with the first drop in temperature. Even summer's humidity would make them crack. As if my body was rejecting rain altogether.

I would touch her cheek. "Just my hands, sweetheart." And I would lean in and give her a peck on her cheek.

***

She loved to create things with her hands from a very young age. She learned how to paint and quickly grew bored of it. She moved on to knitting but she was unsatisfied, always muttering something about the lack of breath. The day I introduced her to clay, when she was twelve, was the day I knew the blackbirds had kissed her fingers.

It took her two weeks to give shape to her first form: a bird, standing tall in its small height, with its long wings spread and its feathers sloppily curved with her nails. She gave me her star smile.

"Look, ma! It's breathing!"

The figure in her hand moved once. I blinked and looked better and it never moved again. Of course. *Of course, Elli, it's only clay,* I muttered to myself.

"It's wonderful," I said and kissed her cheek. She had taken after her father, or maybe her grandmother. It didn't matter, as long as the clay didn't breathe.

***

On her twenty-second birthday, she started carving our cat out of clay.

"Why the cat?"

Said cat was currently sitting at the yard, enjoying the sun. She was the same age as Nephele, inseparable from the moment they met, meowing at each other playfully, all day. Nephele had never shown any interest in making a sculpture of her.

“So that she will be remembered,” she said, deep in concentration. Her fingertips pulled a hooked blade on the clay’s surface, shaping our cat’s whiskers.

“A photograph isn’t enough?”

“A photograph is only about faces. This isn’t about the face. It’s about existing.” She smiled at me. “Whatever remains in our memories lives forever, ma. Sometimes though, we have to give it a hand.”

We lost our cat the next day.

***

“Look grandma, look!” Anthi came running to me holding a pot of her mother’s favorite chrysanthemums. The dirt in the pot should have spilled the way she was running, but not a grain had fallen on the tiles. The blossoms were moving joyously under June’s breeze, as if Anthi’s happiness was contagious. She was eleven and more energetic than ever.

“Beautiful flowers, my cookie.”

“Aha! Tell me, grandma, when people die, do they become clay and live again?”

The flowers now stopped moving. They sat there, strong like clay. The dirt, too, was wonderfully detailed work from my daughter's fingers. But Anthi was smelling them, and where Nephele's smile was the sun, Anthi's smile was zephyr; gentle, calm, a touch of love in your hair. My sweet Anthi was never afraid to smell and hold and show with pride a creation of clay as a living thing.

I was raised to believe people return to dirt when they die. They only live on in our hearts. My daughter breathes with her fingers into the empty space left by death. She's not afraid either. Maybe…maybe when the blackbirds kissed her it was meant to be a gift after all.

***

Yesterday morning, the sun rose late and so did I.

The blackbirds' song was louder than usual as I walked outside to water the plants. It's a tedious job that I've been doing with much less gusto than I used to. My back now hurts and every two minutes I have to rest my legs. Getting old is a troublesome situation, one that you never register while it happens but only after.

Eighty-one years is a long life.

Still, I managed to water the roses, the begonias, and I had just started with the bougainvilleas when I heard steps behind me.

"Good morning, ma."

Nephele was standing at the metallic door of our yard, with a small suitcase and a smile on her face but it was not the sun. It was shooting star, a sunset. She hugged me tightly and I hugged her back. I felt my back creak under the weight of all those days behind me.

“My child.” I smiled. I hadn’t seen her since Christmas and it was now late May. She was now living in Athens for work. “What brings you here? How is Anthi?”

“Memories.” Her voice broke and she hugged me again. “Anthi is well.”

I took her hand and lead her in the house. “Come on, let’s go inside, I’ll make coffee and you can tell me your news. I made strawberry spoon sweet yesterday.”

“Your hands are cold,” she said, bringing my hand to her lips and kissing my rough knuckles.

Later, she fell asleep in my bed.

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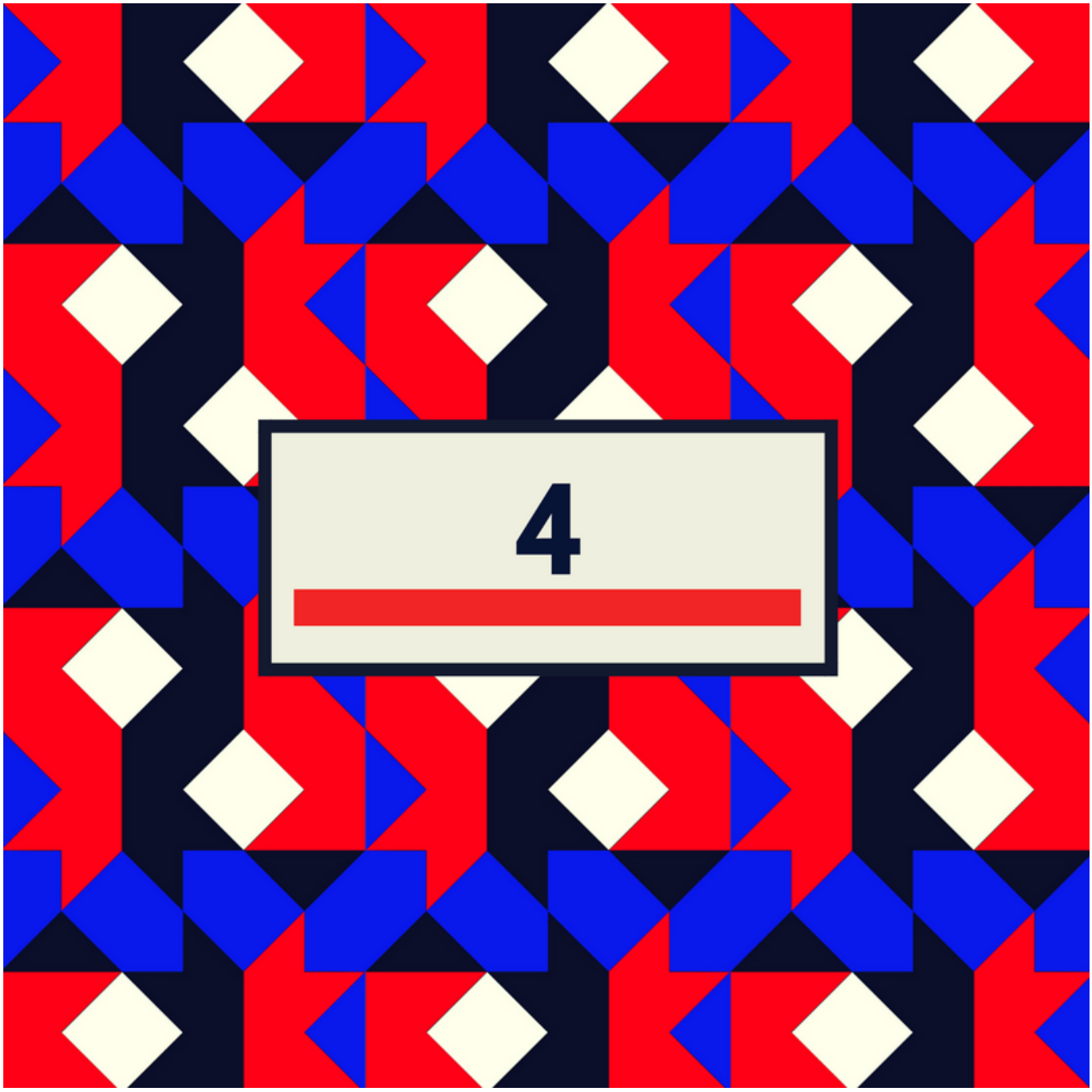
Today, I finish watering and I go into the workshop where her father worked once, where she worked for the first years of her passion, where she stands now chiseling away details on the clay that looks like me. I sit on the chair next to the window, and I meet the sun.

Nephele comes to me and places a hand on my shoulder and one on my lap, caressing my fingers. Her eyes are the clear sky over turbulent sea. Like his. I wish I could say I’m not afraid.

“Now ma, you will never be cold again. You will be earth breathing, always alive in this world, just like in my heart.” I touch her heart that is always beating a little too hard and take my last breath as the blackbirds fly on our window ledge, their wings shaking the leaves. All that remains is a room filled with the scent of basil and souls suspended for eternity in white.



You Will Never Lose Me by Tim Jeffreys

Tim Jeffreys is the author of five collections of short stories, the most recent being 'The Real Rachel Winterbourne and Other Stories'. His science fiction novella, 'Voids', co-written with Martin Greaves was published by Omnium Gatherum Media in early 2016. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in various anthologies and magazines including Not One of Us, Turn to Ash, *and* Nightscript. *In his own work he incorporates elements of horror, fantasy,*

absurdist humour, science-fiction and anything else he wants to toss into the pot to create his own brand of weird fiction. Find him here, as well.

I'M REMEMBERING AGAIN. Remembering — if that's the word for it. The memories swamp me as I settle down to sleep. A ratty blanket with clumps of soil stuck to it was all I could find to wrap myself in. After discovering naught but ruins for miles, I was glad to come across something which still had four walls. But this shack can't keep out the cold. It seeps up through the floor slats, and whistles through knotholes in the wall. My bones ache with it. I shiver as the images flood my mind. This time, I let them come. Let them swim over me. Swim, that's it. Swim. Swimming.

Swimming in the ocean. The sun hangs overhead, a dazzle of light. I can feel the warmth of it on my face. Cold currents snake through the warm water, moving against and around my naked body. There's a feeling of well-being, of pleasure, tinged with fear as I'm rocked by waves. All of it, I savour. I duck below and push for the floor, keeping my eyes open, seeing through a greenish haze the quavering patches of sunlight on the many coloured stones.

Sitting on a park bench. Blue sky overhead. Low sunlight, pale and hazy. The grass heavy with dew. A child beside me, laughing every time I switch my head around and say in mock-seriousness: *Whadda ya want?* We're alone in the park. All this blue sky and all this green grass, it's ours. For the moment it's ours. *Whadda ya want?* I say, and the child laughs. Head thrown back, laughing. Laughing.

I sit alone at a table. Before me there's a basket of some soft brown-black fruit. I take one and peel it before placing it, whole, into my mouth. The sweetness seems to fill my whole being.

These memories don't belong to me. They're his. The old man's. He had a gift. Something unnatural. He unloaded his memories into me as he sank to his knees, his blood muddying the dust between his feet. His wavering hands reached out when I stepped away to clean

my blade and cemented themselves onto each side of my head. I tried to pull away but couldn't; the old fool locked onto me so tightly. I could see the grime embedded in the lines of his face. The grease in his beard. His eyes were wild, but there was something deep in them, something determined. That's when he did it. That's when he put these memories in me. They were the only weapons he had. Knives of recollection. Blades of joy. Stabbing them into my head. Right before he died.

I'd been heading east. I don't know why. But in the morning, escaping that shack, I decide to head south instead. I let the compass show the way. The compass was his too. I patted him down after his eyes went dull and discovered it amongst his rags. The gold is tarnished, and the hoop where it might once have hung on a chain or a string around the neck is broken, but it still works. There are words engraved on the back. They gave me a weird chill the first time I read them.

Why south? Maybe it's that memory of his, the one where he's swimming in the ocean. It's put something in me, some kind of a yearning. I want to taste the salt water on my lips. I want to feel those cold currents. I don't just want to remember it, I want to feel it, really feel it. Feel something other than this numbing cold and the grit in my mouth.

There's a road just discernible under a thin blanket of ash. In one of the old man's memories he's walking through a field of freshly fallen snow, and that's what this reminds me of. Only, where the snow gave him a feeling of vitality and newness, this ash only makes me feel heavy and soiled. I soon start to detest the way it sticks to my boots, forming clumps along the sole, so that I have to keep stopping to knock it free.

The road is lined with the scorched skeletons of trees. The sky looks like dirt smeared on a windowpane. None of this seemed strange to me before. It's all I've ever known. That is, until the old man filled my head with sunshine and laughter and the blue of the sea.

I carry his memories like splinters beneath the skin.

I wonder if that world he remembers is still out there somewhere. There's nothing else for it. I suppose I'll just keep walking.

It's not blue like he remembers it. It's grey, turning towards black, though there are rainbows in the oily film on its surface. Hunks of brownish foam slosh about in the shallows. There are dead things in the shallows and in the debris strewn across the entirety of the beach.

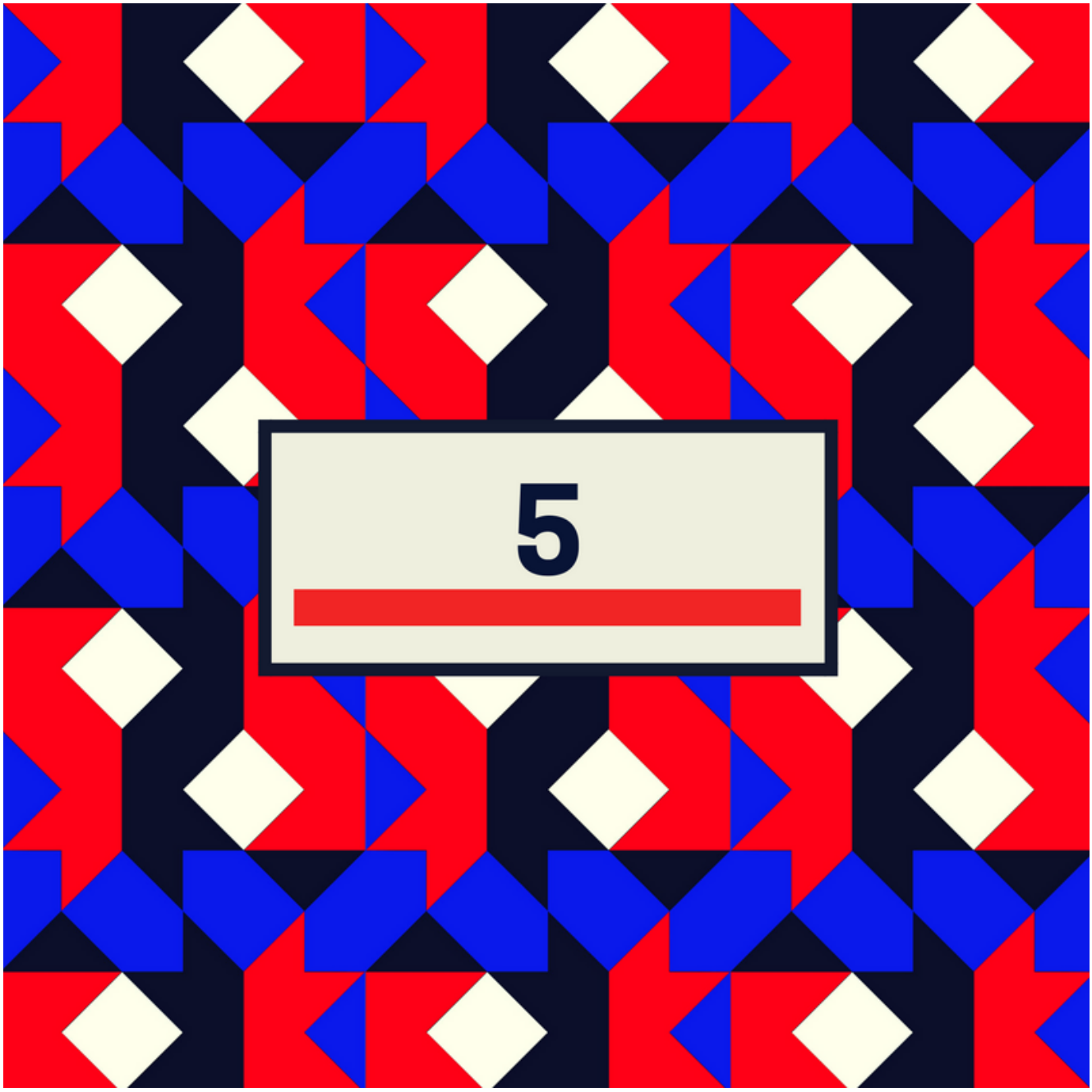
After all the miles, after all the days, after all the scratching around for food and shelter and warmth, seeing this actually makes me weep. I thought I'd cried myself dry as a kid, but no. I can't help but laugh, remembering how much I'd wanted to taste salt water, really taste it, and here it is spilling down my cheeks. Then I shake my head, and cry some more.

I have to put my back to the ocean. Where now?

Some nights, huddled against the wind, I study that inscription on the back of the compass, tracing the outline of the letters with my finger before I let his memories in.

And I realise what an evil thing it was he did to me.

And how perfect his revenge.



Sabbaths by L.S. Johnson

L.S. Johnson lives in Northern California, where she feeds her cats by writing book indexes. She is the author of the gothic novellas Harkworth Hall *and upcoming sequel* Leviathan. *Her first collection,* Vacui Magia, *was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Her novel remains vexedly in progress. Find her here as well.*

SHE HAD ALREADY hauled kindling the day before, trundling the wheelbarrow back and forth under the cool dawn sky, before anyone would be on the road to see her. Now she gathered their things: a half-dozen charms and rings, bound hair shorn rough at the end, pieces of lace and embroidered handkerchiefs, the locket and the reticule. She put them all in the big market basket with the candle stub and the match-box, wedged the grimoire over them and piled apples on top of that, and with the wineskin slung over her shoulder she started walking.

It was twilight. The dirt road was a grey ribbon between the cornfields; a few last crows cawed their farewells. Over the rise until their little cottage was out of sight; forty paces further was the indent marked with the striped rock. There she stepped off the road and into the cornfield and its ghosts.

Striped rocks were lucky, that was one of the first things they had taught her. Only they had never specified what kind of luck, good or bad.

In the cornfields, all was memory. Memory guided her steps, though she could not see the way; memory turned her rustling passage into the soft laughter of past nights, the voices caught by the breeze as they too marched through the corn, following their own markings. Memory transmuted the rasp of the leaves on her bare arm into the slide of Ellie's fingernails as she caught at her, giggling breathless: *slow down, you know I cannot keep up!*

She slowed down. She would always slow down.

A wind came out of nowhere, bowing the stalks before her, and in the deepening gloaming she saw not swaying corn but the gentle swinging of the bodies beneath the gallows, and the basket handle in her hand was the feel of the rope as she sawed away at it.

From her left came Hannah's deep voice: *they won't ever come for us. They wouldn't dare.*

From her right came Margery, laughing as usual: *too worried we'll hex their cocks off!* All the field laughing then, laughing and singing:

A little love may prove a pleasure

Too great a passion is a pain

And even Ellie too, though she always sang quieter, because she was embarrassed to be singing about such things.

That hint of embarrassment – once it would have set her burning with desire. Now she only felt a coldness in the pit of her stomach at the memory, a hard clenching and the first hint of tears, and she stopped completely in the corn, the basket sliding to her feet. *Ellie*, she whispered aloud, and the corn rustled with approval. *Ellie. Ellie*. The name a charm in her mouth, she kept saying it over and over, until it was just sounds, and then took up her basket once more.

Closer to the edge the corn began to thin and now she glimpsed the clearing, right between corn and forest, where the world of men and the world of the wild rubbed uneasily against each other. As she reached to push aside the last stalk she felt, as always, that she became two people, herself now and herself then, the first time she had come. Young and straining in a body that had become a prison, all blooming curves and at every turn restriction, restriction, skirts suddenly twice their length and so hot she had fainted, stomach bound until there was no room for food, her house a cell she could not exit without permission. Until she had seen the distant glow of the bonfire from her window and snuck out into the corn, searching by sound and smell in the darkness, and when she had pushed the corn apart that circle of smiles had turned to her, their bodies wonderfully naked and lips stained with wine, and they had, to a one, opened their arms and said: *welcome sister*.

She pushed aside the corn now and there was nothing but the clearing, a circle of trampled earth with a blackened center upon which she had carefully arranged the firewood. *The navel of this world*, Ellie had explained, sitting shyly beside her, *and the fire is like the cord, you see? So we come here to nourish our souls*. And she had on impulse taken Ellie's hand in her own and nothing had ever felt so right . . .

Slowly she dropped into a crouch at the edge of the circle, letting the basket and wineskin slide from her body, letting it all slide into the welcoming earth.

Each month it took longer. Longer to rest after the long walk through the corn, longer to arrange the objects in their places. There could be no fire before readiness, so she stumbled around the circle with the flickering candle stub, her world reduced to that small pool of light and beyond it the darkness and the ghosts. Hannah, Margery, Agatha, Janet, the two Roses, Norah and Gladys, Sarah and Alice. Her own Ellie. With herself they had been twelve, a good, strong number. She fancied she could feel Ellie's small hand in hers, helping her along, fiddling with her arrangements, so that the ring she had placed where Norah sat was suddenly propped up on a pebble and Alice's fichu was neatly folded.

She fancied she saw them all out of the corner of her eye, crowded deep in the shadows of the trees, but when she turned completely there were only the trees and the corn.

She fancied that Ellie forgave her.

And then she touched the candle to the kindling and set the world alight, as bright as day. The navel of the world, the cord of light rising to the heavens, and she longed to somehow seize it and draw it down, down, to the earth and its horrors and put her face to it and demand, why have you done these things to us?

But she knew that wasn't how it worked; that had never been how it worked.

She stripped off her worn dress with ease, slipping feet out of shoes and wadding her stockings and bloomers into the basket. The night air set her skin alight with gooseflesh. She took care with the grimoire, keeping all the notes and letters in their places; there was something in its annotations, something that made it greater than the sum of its words. As they had been greater together. Her voice was thin as she read the opening prayer, but in her ears it became doubled with Hannah's booming recital, the consonants made drum beats, the slide of the vowels tugging their bodies into movement.

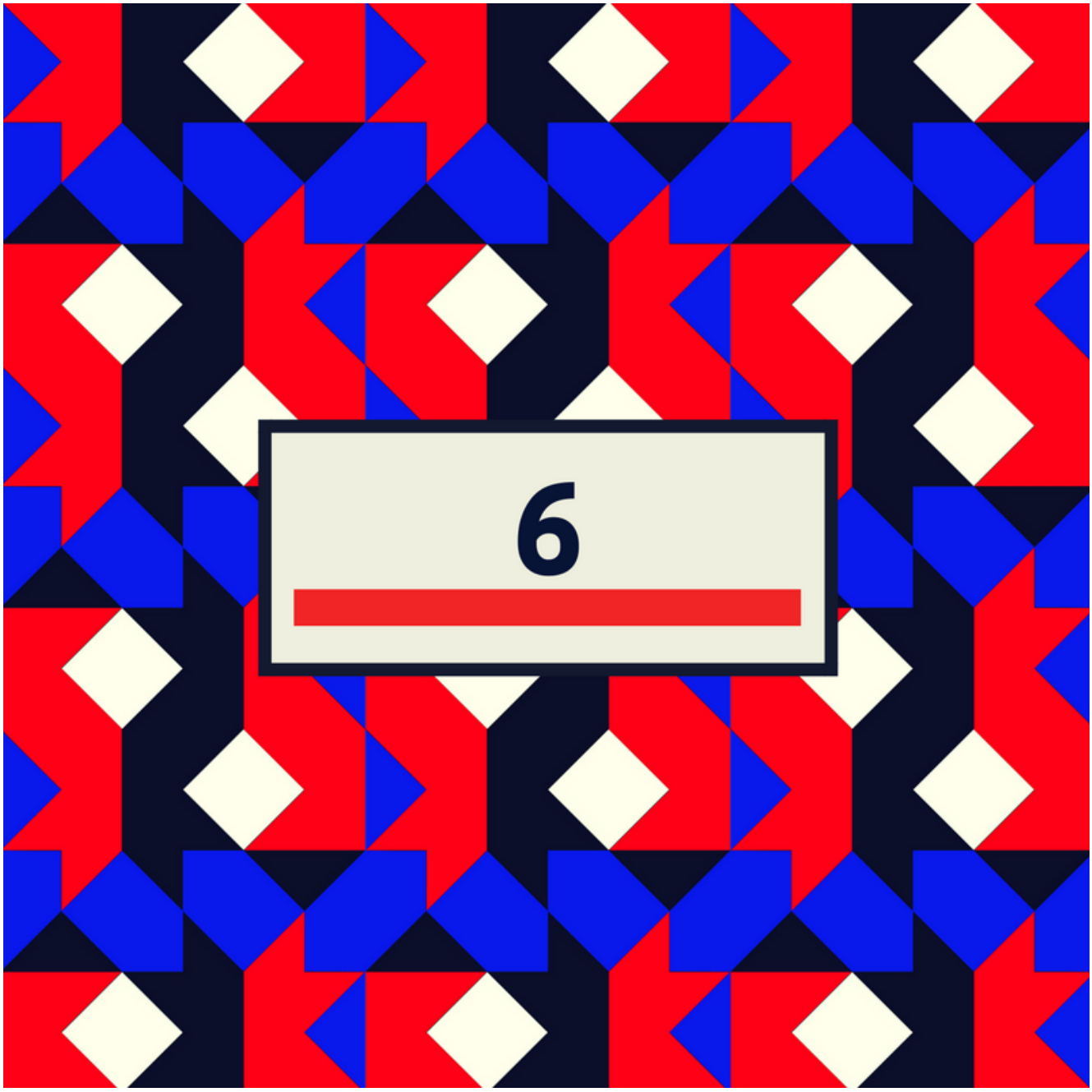
She read the prayer, and she danced and sang and danced more. Sometimes she stumbled, but she kept her mouth open and her body moving. In her mind's eye she saw the flames and her voice and the tremors of her movements all rising into the night, twining and drifting, and how others might go to the window as she had once done and feel the pull of that strange glow, restless girls and women heavy with exhaustion and care, they too feeling as if their bodies, their very lives were calcifying around them like a cocoon of stone.

She saw all this, and she saw too the men who might see the great cord rising, and how it might be they who came through the corn as they had that night, so that when the circle turned smiling with open arms it had been to a mob with pistols and how the fire had sputtered just at that moment, tumbling back to the earth as if neatly snipped in two. Bare-teethed rage, Hannah and Norah seized while they fled, Ellie panting frantic beside her as they ran naked through the corn, the leaves cutting their bodies and the earth drinking their blood. For months after, in the whole of the county, there had been bodies upon bodies, bodies accused and denounced, bodies tried and condemned, bodies cut down from gallows and dragged sodden from lakes, scraped up as bone and ash and prised rotting from gutters with a handkerchief over her mouth. The relentless fear and horror, day after day, month after month, season after season, until her nerves jangled at every sound and she lay awake every night wide with terror. Until she had felt worn to the point where she was simply fear, nothing more.

Had she gone mad from it? She thought so now, for how else to explain how she came to be standing on a strange man's doorstep one dawn, saying: *not us, not Ellie and I*, and he had looked her over with visible disgust and agreed: *not you*. The names tripping over her tongue as if fighting to get out. Rose and Rose, Janet, Gladys, Agatha, Sarah and Alice, Margery. Shivering on his threshold for he would not let her through the door, as if her very being was a curse.

When they had come for Ellie she had risen to join her and the men had said: *not you*, and had left her too stunned to weep.

Not you, not you. She sang the phrase like the curse that it was and she drank heavily of the wine and she danced. Twelve had been a good number, a strong number. Above her the heavens alight with the glow and she felt her body become more limber, her voice stronger in her throat until it was like the baying of an animal, freed for one more night, *oh Ellie my Ellie not you not you*, and she waited to see what would come out of the corn.



The Mansion of Endless Rooms by L Chan

L CHAN hails from Singapore, where he alternates being walked by his dog and writing speculative fiction after work. His work has appeared in places like Liminal Stories, Arsenika, Podcastle *and* The Dark. *He tweets occasionally @lchanwrites.*

YOU CARRY YOUR father to the Mansion of Endless Rooms. It is the duty of the oldest to do this; not all children are called and fewer still answer. You feel his weight on your spine, the tightness of obligation around your neck, the responsibility grinding your knees.

You asked your family which room your father had in the Mansion. The Mansion, they replied, was somewhere for afterwards; each room was a day in the life of a man, and one could traverse the happiest days of their lives as easily as moving from hearth to bedroom. It would be heaven.

What if a person lingered on regrets, you asked and your family was silent. It seemed that the Mansion was less heaven and more like its antipode. You still shouldered the weight of your father and left.

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Something sudden would have been more merciful. Sickness had been a tide, always encroaching and receding, keeping a family guessing when a patriarch's head might finally disappear beneath the waves. Still you walk until you trade your gaping boots at a cobbler for a pair of worn shoes; saving the coin for food instead.

You imagine conversations with the body lashed to your back, some craft or spell postponing decay. His features were passed down to all his children, although the grime and infrequent meals have made yours the more corpse-like of the two. This is what you can do; your penance for not leaving heirs with the family name. This is what you can do; let his memories live forever.

There is no map to the Mansion; the routes are multifarious and different for each supplicant. You ask at inns, the worn down sort where they mix beer with water. You ask at markets, where peddlers and farmers congregate across the plains. You never get the same answer twice.

A fellow traveller at a well offers you water, it is icy and tastes of stardew and roots, tooth-numbingly cold. She does not remark on your posture, bent nearly double under your unrelenting companion. Unbidden, for everyone has one piece of advice they will offer without prompting, she tells you there is a mountain range, where there are monks or ascetics or hermits that know the location of the Mansion.

The Mansion, she says, was once a place of learning, where masters and mystics studied the flow of time and magic. This is not news to you, has there not been a similar spell holding the body behind you static in the flow of time? Whether by design or by accident, time itself fractured around the Mansion, and not the Mansion alone but all who stepped in; a lifetime shattered into shards, each of the endless rooms a piece from a life broken, to be savoured like a segment of fruit. A reflection on your father's life suggests that eternity in a cracked mosaic would be fitting and you shoulder your burden again.

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How far can a person crawl, how low can they be brought by a lifetime's obligations? No limit to either, as long as life persists. And so you find the mountains the traveller spoke off, and follow the paths until they are sheer cliff and staked rope. You follow the ropes until they vanish into a cave, so deep that up and down cease to have meaning. The walls press close, like the guts of some giant beast squeezing the breath from you. The ceiling nears to the floor, and you're on your hands and knees, wondering how much further you can crawl. Always a little bit further, as long as life remains.

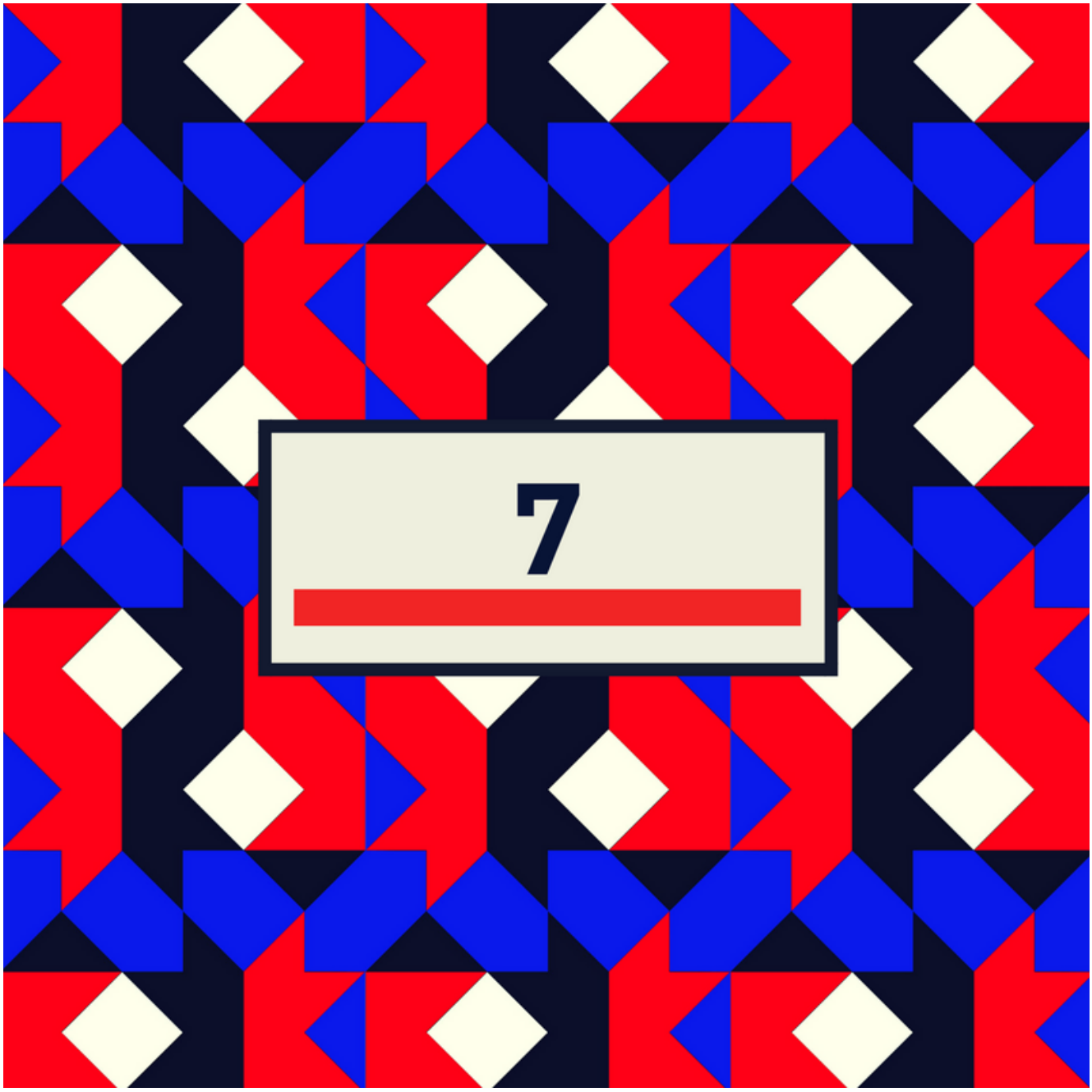
It is when hope is lost and you are so far into the darkness that your mind cannot encompass an egress, that strong hands pull you into an open space. The monks, if that is what they are, have smooth faces. You study them while your racing heart slows, but they do not blink or breathe for minutes at a time.

Few, they say, are those that find their way to the antechamber of the Mansion, and fewer still are those that return. You ask of one (truly you cannot tell them apart and have given up trying to discern their number, given their pacing and motion) what the Mansion is. They laugh, and the sound bounces off the walls and fills the world.

The gods created the world, the things that are and are not. Through the world runs time, a raging river, ever forward. But even rivers have pools and eddies, like the Mansion, where time does not flow forward, but in wild loops and one whose time is added to the Mansion's turbulence could live forever, circulating in times past, insofar as that counted as living.

At this, you can only laugh with the monks, adding your own guffaws to the cacophony. Heaven, hell, experiment, mistake, a place outside of time. All for a chance to live everything again. All for a sack of memories, encased in bone and bound in skin, as though once wasn't enough.

It's the first time you've laughed in a while, and the sound surprises you. Your back is straighter, straighter than it's been in months; the load melting away. The closer your father's memories got to the Mansion, the heavier they became. And perhaps you know now, as he does, that neither of you need the Mansion for memories to go on. The weight of memory, he might have told you, was only ever defined by the person carrying it. They feel lighter than they've ever been as you turn your back on the Mansion, followed by the smiles of the monks.



What We Remember by Amal Singh

Amal is writer from Mumbai, India. While his day job is writing comedy sketches for YouTube, he moonlights as a writer of Science Fiction and Fantasy. In his spare time he can be found sipping a good stout. His fiction has appeared in Mithila Review *and* Juggernaut Books. *Find him on Twitter as well.*

ONE HOT SUMMER when cricket had become irrelevant, and the cracked earth outside was a barren, lifeless desert, Suleikha left us. A horrible wetness had started to cling to the ceiling, with moss creeping all over the place, and the house had become a playground for rats and lizards.

The ceiling remembers that summer and that time, mumbling as only it can, reaching out to us walls for help. We are happy with our graffiti, a glorious mini Sistine Chapel-esque formation on our surface, which Suleikha painted laboriously and with great care. But now the new people have covered us with horrid green, the beautiful artwork scratched off coat by careless coat. It hurts, this green paint of hatred, and all we can do is remember.

-I hate the new ones.

-Hate is a strong word, dear sister.

Outside, a squirrel scurries along the railing, the same squirrel which Suleikha fed with grains of dalmoth, and stale parle-g biscuits. Squirrels don't complain. They take what they're given and keep coming back. If I was able to glance sideways, I would have. If I had hands, I'd have caressed the squirrel's soft fur, and whispered into its ear that Suleikha was gone now. Hush, little squirrel. Go away, and find another home.

-Those were the days.

-Yes, those were the days. Remember when Wahida scratched her fingers up and down your body, and Suleikha got mad?

-I have those scars. Beautiful scars.

-Yes, beautiful scars.

-Remember the rains?

-Oh, the rains.

It was the same summer, and the approaching monsoon almost made our paint fall with anxiety. We wished Suleikha would whisper something to us, telling us everything would be all right. That the water wouldn't seep inside us, that capillary action was a thing of the past, that our fears had no basis. But that wasn't the reality. Water did come. How does that poem go, now? Water, water, everywhere. . .

So the water did come and the ceiling did cry and the fans didn't run and our paint fell off like honey oozing from honeycomb. In front of her, Wahida held Suleikha as she wept in her hands. Wahida told her everything would be all right.

Wahida was fond of music. Her fingers danced over the fretboard like they had a life of their own, plucking and strumming, strumming and plucking, her eyes half closed and her voice a rich, soothing baritone. We helped there. Just a tad. Not to the extent our oak sisters would have done, but we played our part. That was a time we were glad we had ears. The music leapt off her fingers, danced around the room, struck us silently, moving along our surface and we sent it back.

-Do we have noses?

-We do. Remember that day when. . .

That day when Wahida decided to be smart and cooked a meal for Suleikha who was too stressed out to do anything because of work. Wahida made a Chicken Patiala, the smell wafting from the kitchen like a thing alive, reaching us, making us hungry for a thing we weren't supposed to have.

-The oak sisters tell tall tales of a beautiful, red liquid. . .

Sometimes we get jealous of our oak sisters. They house a thing of beauty which has caused many a drop of ink to dry over pages, and brought many a life together. A red liquid, sometimes in white, it tastes of grapes. Only our oak sisters have the ability to smell that elixir, something which we have wanted to, all our life. We had to make do with the Chicken Patiala.

-How do you know about the chicken?

-I listened.

-That isn't polite.

-Politeness is a virtue for humans, not walls.

-What about when they made love?

-I made a decision of my own then.

Wahida loved Suleikha. Suleikha loved Wahida. They loved this place they called home. I saw when they loved, fought, made up, fought again, patched up again, fingers entwined, sitting, laughing, singing, watching "Sholay," and "Pyasa," and "The Apartment," and listening to Rafi, to Bowie, to Mercury and to Manna Dey. And now they're gone, and this room feels hollow, like a piston pulled back suddenly, leaving only vacuum, like the onset of autumn.

-Oak sisters talk about a silver lining.

-Oak sisters lie.

And then, they came, the ones with orange flags, the chest-thumpers, the self proclaimed guardians of everything pious, the ones who rule this land and made its laws. We heard their hate-filled chants from across the streets, but what could we do? We saw. We listened.

It escapes us walls what they saw in the union of Wahida and Suleikha that was so incendiary. We believe, it would escape humans, too. But what do we know about humans, really, fickle things that they are.

So, they came inside the home, demanding that Wahida be presented before them. But Wahida, smart that she was, had already left. Suleikha told them that she lived alone, not revealing the name and the identity of her lover. They left, those people, but not before screaming out a hollow warning about Suleikha's failure to adhere to their imaginary values. We saw how Suleikha shivered in silence when they left.

-Was it Wahida's name the people had a problem with?

-Her name. Her faith. Her being.

-But why?

-Because humans are not walls. I am a green wall, you're blue. I still love you. Some humans don't think like that.

Eventually, Suleikha moved out. In the end, fear trumped love. Wahida sat there, right in the front, staring at me, staring at you, my sister. Her hands tapped on the fabric of the sofa, her fingers quivering, as if expecting to find Suleikha's. Her eyes on the edge of tears, and her mouth on the verge of breaking out into a song. I almost expected her to do that; to shriek, to yell, to make music, to sing. But that only happened in movies they watched. Wahida just sat there, biting her lips until blood welled out, tearing the sofa silently, one thread at a time. When she got tired of sitting, she smoked. When she got tired of smoking, she drank. When she got tired of drinking, she slept a soundless sleep on the floor.

At one point, Wahida decided to blemish us, to remove traces of anything which reminded her of Suleikha. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she sold us.

-I wish she hadn't done that.

-I wish so too.

-I miss both of them.

-I miss them, too, little sister.

-Is there hope, yet?

-Maybe.

The new ones aren't terrible. They're just not quite there, yet. The new ones want shiny things, and cling to temporary joys. Their crash to the ground is also more severe and their sorrows, well, they can't deal with sorrows.

There's Nishant, not unlike Wahida entirely, but infinitely more passive. There isn't a shine to his eyes, and there is no music, his voice a broken record. There is Radha, not unlike Suleikha entirely, but infinitely wittier, and strangely, less charming. They have a daughter, Ishita, whose cries wake up the neighborhood, and make us wish we didn't have ears.

-Ishita is cute.

-That she is.

-Makes me think of them more.

Time is a jagged thing for us. It doesn't move in a straight line, nor is it a circle. It's to us as sandpaper is to an ant; crusty and rough, a terrain hard to cross. It clings to us, as we cling to it. Wahida and Suleikha's absence, now permanent, is hard to swallow. We remember the times when they'd go out on long vacations, locking this home, leaving us to the mercy of the sun, the wind, and lizards. Lizards are funny creatures. Predatory instincts, but really lazy.

Suleikha once yanked a lizard by its tail and threw it out the balcony, at which Wahida cringed like a little girl. Suleikha wasn't afraid of reptiles, but Wahida was terrified of them.

-This little green one is bothering me.

-Eat it, then.

Their temporary absences felt like milk left too long to boil. You wait and wait and wait for the foam to rise. You steal glances at the kitchen, the utensil, to get a hint of it. But the milk is clever. It never calls you. Then you flip open a book and get lost in its pages, and after a while you smell a smokey, pungent thing and can't quite place what it is, and then realize, of course, curse you, it's the milk. You run but it's too late.

Waiting for Wahida and Suleikha to come back was sort of like waiting for the milk. Too long, and it felt like we were closing in together, falling apart, or burning. They'd go without preamble, and arrive suddenly, bringing gifts of happiness and memories. This absence, this permanent absence, reminds us of their temporary ones.

-Where'd you reckon they are, sister?

-Their separate ways.

-Suleikha would've got the scholarship.

-And Wahida would've flown to UK.

Conjectures. Speculations. This is what walls do. This is what we exist for. We listen. We talk. And we try to predict the future. A future which is now in the hands of three other people, with little in common between them. There's no intimacy, there's no art, there's no music. There's no love. This house, which someone called home once, is a hollow thing now. I wish we had mouths to scream.

-Look, the little one. Here she comes.

-She's coming in your direction.

-Paint's still wet. Where are her parents?

Our muted cries don't affect the kid. Of course, why would they? It's not like they can hear us. No one hears us but the wind. And maybe the lizards.

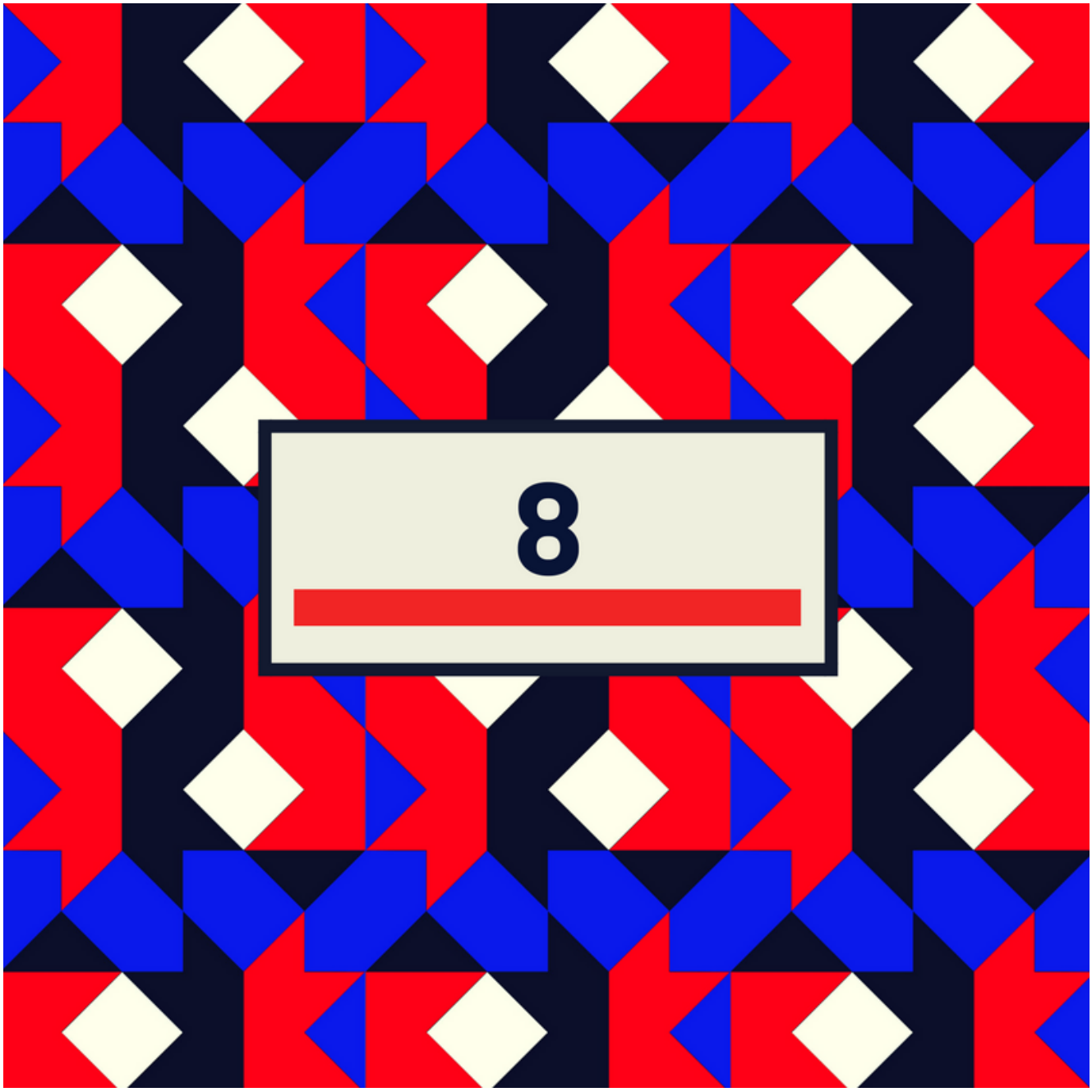
-Look, sister.

The kid is making shapes. A circle, a dot, a line; she makes a painting. Look, little sister, the kid's making a painting. Look, here she draws a face on you, there a hand, and there a leg.

-Maybe, there's hope. This silver lining.

-Maybe, the new ones aren't terrible after all.

We see the future now. Memories the new ones will create. This Nishant, a new Wahida, but not quite. This Radha, a new Suleikha, but not quite. But this wondrous thing of beauty now making strange shapes on the walls which tell you this story, this kid will bring them together. Their love will give us our own Wahida and Suleikha, and this time, I hope, they will live happily ever after.



Flare by Kathryn McMahon

Kathryn McMahon's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in such places as The Cincinnati Review, Necessary Fiction, *and here in* Syntax & Salt, *as well as in the food and horror anthology* Sharp & Sugar Tooth: Women Up to No Good (Upper Rubber Boot, 2019). *Recently, she has received nominations for Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart, and she was a finalist in the 2017 Wyvern Lit flash fiction contest. On Twitter, she is @katoscope. Find more of her writing at darkandsparklystories.com.*

Flare was originally published in *Ellipsis* on October 24th, 2017.

ON A DARK November morning, the senior sun gods discover Ann-Margaret. They linger at her locker with glowing lips and voices like arrogant roosters. Apollo hooks the edge of her hood and yanks it from her face. She slaps his hand, but too late, everyone has seen her chin lit up like a buttercup.Helios whistles.

Her neck pinks and she tugs the hood back.

Ann-Margaret wears a black hoodie to hide the sun roaring out of her chest. It arrived before the curve of her hips, before her period. It started as a dim glow when she was just ten-and-a-half, and grew, and when she was fourteen she lined her pullovers with reflective material to keep in the light. She walks chin down, hood up, arms crossed over the brightest point of her sternum. When her family mocks her, this is the gesture they choose.

She keeps the hood up all day, every day, but then Thursday in P.E. Ms. Klein says to put on their swimsuits. Ann-Margaret lingers in the girls' locker room to call her mother and ask to be picked up early. But her mother interrupts.

"Honey, can you buy more sunscreen on your way home? I don't want any more sunburns at the breakfast table."

Ann-Margaret stays in the locker room until her next class.

She walks in the door and whirring comes from her bedroom. Her mother is drilling hooks into the ceiling above Ann-Margaret's bed. Why? To dry grapes and tomatoes. She screams and her mother asks, again, what she has to be stuck-up about.

Ann-Margaret runs out into the street and roosters crow all the way to Charlotte's house.

The girls sit and watch TV. Charlotte coaxes her into letting her braid her hair. Hood down, the living room fills with daylight. Ann-Margaret doesn't want to talk about her family or the sun gods, but Charlotte has heard the chain of roosters.

She strokes Ann-Margaret's forehead. "Somewhere, there is a town without poultry."

But what does Charlotte know? She's never even left the county.

On the walk home, Ann-Margaret welcomes the freezing wind. She can zip herself up without overheating or being stared at. That night, under the bright perfume of drying fruit, she dreams of empty cities and vacant farmyards.

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Ann-Margaret goes for a check-up. When she pulls back the changing curtain, the pediatric gynecologist puts on sunglasses as well as gloves. She doesn't like that she can't see what he's thinking.

Her mother does the talking. "This isn't normal, is it? She must get it from her father's side. Her grandmother had constellations all over her ribs. You should've seen the way she flashed them around."

The doctor peels off his gloves. "It's nothing to worry about, Annie. Just keep making your friends jealous."

"No one calls me 'Annie.'"

No, at school the hallways teem with rumors. *Ann-Margaret is a methhead. She does porn for her Russian pimp. She has a boyfriend who pays her to hit him.*

"Where do they come up with these things?" asks Charlotte. "You know, it's okay to yell back." She chucks her water bottle at Theresa, and gets suspended.

Ann-Margaret brings over consolatory chocolates and wasabi popcorn. When Charlotte falls asleep to the TV, Ann-Margaret kneels in front of the full-length mirror. She peels off her hoodie and, even through her t-shirt, the room brightens. She covers her chest and her hand marbles with red veins. Auroras streak her clavicles. Green. Gold. She could light up a mountain.

A commercial blares and Charlotte lifts her head from the pillow. She reaches for Ann-Margaret's hair and, humming, braids it away from her face. Ann-Margaret leans her cheek into Charlotte's palm, as deep as a lake.

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In the morning, no longer night-brave, Ann-Margaret tugs the braid free and draws her hood closed.

The sun gods find her walking home. Flames shoot up the sides of their convertible.

"Hot damn," says Helios.

"Come on, baby, jump in my chariot of fire," says Apollo, revving the engine.

Ann-Margaret ignores them, but clouds build over her chest.

The sun gods crow, "Take it off!" And follow her until she loses them in the park. As she jogs home, her breath is angry with rainbows.

In her bathroom, she dabs makeup over the sun, but it bakes into cracks. She tapes up her chest, but the adhesive cooks away and leaves her sticky with sunspots. She presses ice to extinguish the sun, but the ice melts. She wipes away the wet. Maybe she should just take off her hoodie. Then she could blind them. Give them melanoma.

Solar flares writhe over her fingers. The tissue in her fist catches fire. She drops it into the sink and her hand fades.

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Ann-Margaret walks to school with her hood tight around her face. Pre-dawn street lights buzz anxiously. Across from the high school, the sun gods pull up whooping and gesturing rudely with magnifying glasses.

She wishes she had a car, a horse, a magic carpet. *Charlotte*. She wants to punch out their teeth. She wants to curl up. She wants to run to the motorcycle dealership and hotwire a Kawasaki, flinging her hoodie behind her as she peels west.

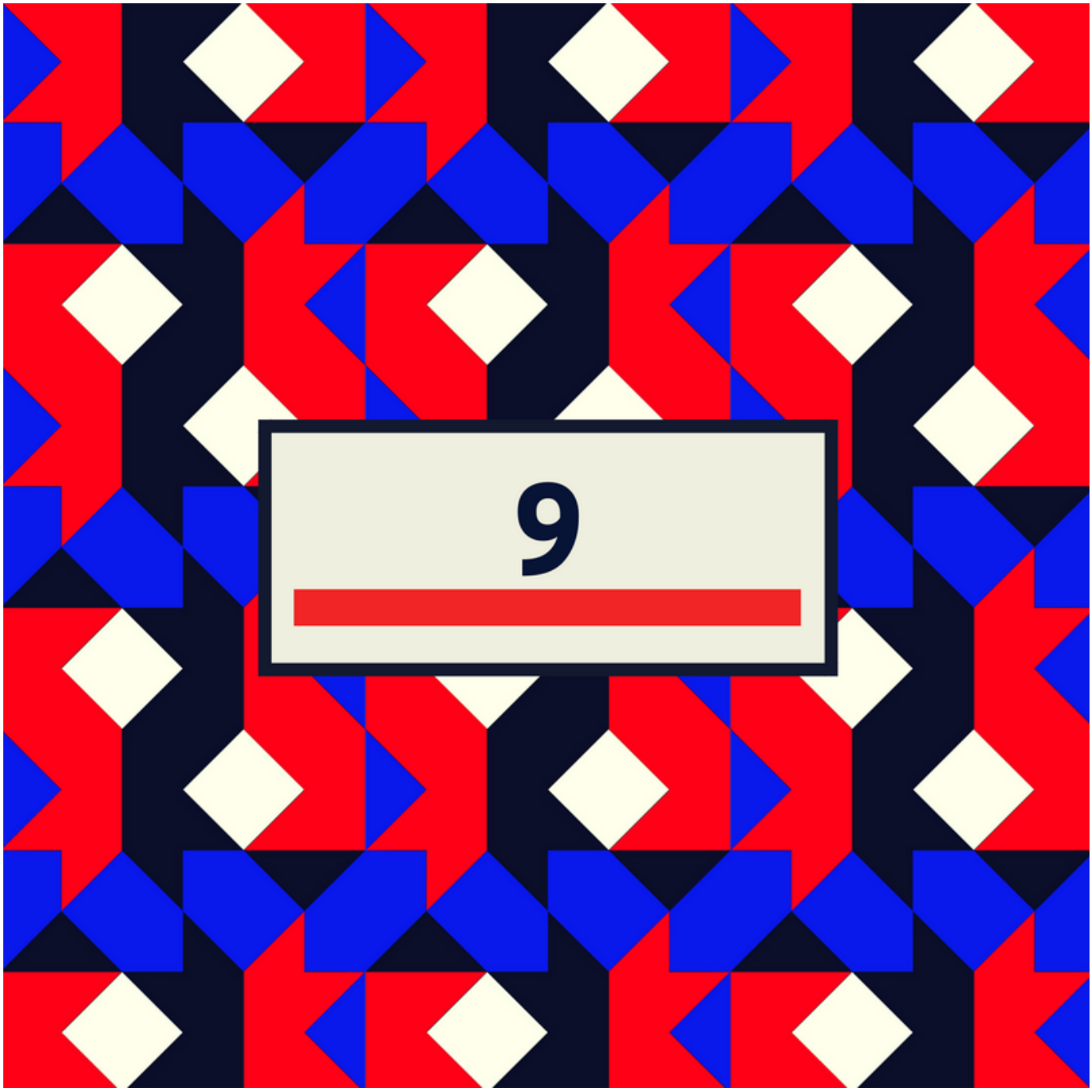
Apollo drives onto the curb ahead of her and she nearly falls into Helios' lap. He reaches out and strikes a match across her chest. It spits with life.

Ann-Margaret's stomach fizz-pops as they laugh and ask her to ignite their wicks. Her neck prickles. Her hands burn rose and violet. She reaches into her hood and draws out a solar flare the size of a javelin; sharp, orange, and fragrant with dried persimmons.

The sun gods stop laughing.

She throws the flare and it crackles across their scalps.

They screech off with flames chasing after them. Ann-Margaret wants to catch them. Kick them. Fry them with her thoughts. But the first bell rings and somewhere through there is the mountain she will light up.



The Old Queen by Rachel D. Welton

Rachel Welton is a writer and seamstress born in Western New York. She lives in north Florida, where she spends her time yelling about stories and narrowly avoiding abduction by the Good Neighbors. Find her on Twitter and Patreon.

These young girls, they come in from the cornfields of Kansas, or arrive covered in ash from sleeping on their stepmother's hearth, or appear all tattered from their hundred years in a vine-covered tower, and they always need new clothes. You can't be married in blue gingham or patched flannel or silk gone cobweb-thin with age. So they take what we make, and they never question where it comes from. Every garment, from garters to gloves, will fit perfectly.

As though it's magic.

And it is. Of course it is. But magic doesn't work the way you think. Magic didn't harpoon the whales whose bones your maid draws tight around your ribs. Magic didn't shear the sheep or dye the wool or weave the thread or felt the cloth so you could have a winter cloak, red as blood, warm as blood, the cloak that lets you travel through the wolf-woods without fear. Magic didn't force mulberry leaves into the endless grinding maws of silkworms so you could wear their death shrouds on your wedding day.

That's not how magic works at all.

When a new maiden comes to the crystalline city or the high castle with turrets like a bundle of spears or the kingdom by the sea, we will hail her as our new queen, young, lithe, lovely.

A silent servant will lead her over floors of white marble that reflect back their smudged shapes: ghostly figures moving ever-into the heart of the palace. They will pose her in front of a wardrobe and fling wide the doors. Out will shine gowns of ruby, gowns of flame, gowns as glowing-green as grass and lilac-leaves, green as the deepest parts of the sea the sun can never touch. No one has ever looped a measure around the maiden's neck, her waist, her back, but each gown will fit perfectly. Even heroines have slightly crooked shoulders, one hip-bone that juts out further, small quirks of figure that no one has ever judged worth noticing-- no one except us.

Perhaps she will take a moment to look at the tiny stitches laid into the hem. Perhaps she will lift up the lining and see the basting, the catch stitching, the hours of careful, back-aching work that went into every seam. One time out of a hundred, she might notice the sturdy cotton tape that reinforces the seams, or the hand-worked buttonholes, or the interlining behind the heavy beaded silk, and she will recognize that it was human hands, not magic, that put it all together. She knows how long it took, in her old life, to sew a single patch onto her one cinder-stained frock. She left her ash-choked hearthside just yesterday, but this wardrobe, full of rich good things fit for a princess, is the work of years.

Few of the girls dared question the finery. Some took double handfuls of fabric and clenched them tight, afraid it would vanish like sea-foam. Some turned their heads up as they wept in joy so their tears would not spot the fine silks. One grasped my twisted old hand hard and murmured her thanks in a prayer. It was thanks to the entirely wrong people, of course, but I still smiled.

Only one of them ever went further. Only one of them ever asked what happened to the old queen.

That particular pauper-princess was trouble from the start. I met her when I went to help her dress, that first night after her victory. She was standing in front of her wardrobe, still wearing drab wool and looking so deep into the mirror that her brow touched the silvered glass. They're always soft of hair and bright of eye, always lovely, but this one had a twist in her mouth and a glance that took in too much.

"She can't have *always* been the old queen," she said to her reflection. "She can't have *always* been ugly and jealous."

She pulled back, but she wasn't looking at the vibrant row of silks and satins glowing in the wardrobe. Her eyes flicked down. I tensed as she dropped to her knees and picked a single black feather off the floor. It dangled, limp and broken, from her fingers.

"Where have I seen these before?" she asked herself, and her eyes went distant for a moment as she questioned her memories. I didn't have to try. Like magic, like memory, the old queen's cloak was under my hands, and I was stitching down those black feathers. We picked them because we saw, years before it came to pass, that she would fight her last battle on the crags in the wind and the rain.

We saw her fall.

Perhaps my sisters merely appreciated how the black feathers would set off the striking scene, their fronds boiling and curling in the wind as she fell into the mist. Some secret, rebellious part of me that wanted them for a different reason. I wanted one of our girls-turned-crones, just one, to win. As I stitched each feather down, I begged that one would find a way, like the dark birds, to fly.

Perhaps that one feather worked its way free from the old queen's cloak because I had been careless, wishing and hoping for impossible things when I should have been attending to my work. Perhaps it fell for another reason.

"My lady," I whispered. My shadow fell over the young girl's form as I stepped closer. I reached down with both hands, wanting to clap my hands over the loose feather the way you might stamp out a spark before it sets the dead grass on fire. "It's nothing. It's a mistake. Let me take it."

She rose and curled her hands in towards her breast, hiding the feather from me. Her eyes were cold and hard as winter sky.

"These rooms," she demanded. "How many have lived here before me?"

I was silent.

"Well?" Her voice was smooth as ice, hard as marble.

"I was trying," I replied, "to count them all. There have been--"

"There have been *too many*!" she exclaimed. "There has always been a young girl coming to this castle as the new queen. There has always been an old queen, always a coup. And then what happens: one becomes the other?" Her laugh was jagged. "Oh, she was here just hours ago. She was sleeping in that bed last night."

"It's the way things go round," I said. "It's the only way we make things work."

She turned her back to me to face the wardrobe. She stood with one hand on either door, breathing hard for a moment. The tempo calmed as she opened the door and stroked her wedding gown. Her roughened fingers caught on the fine rows of gathered stitches that had taken three full weeks to lay down. She breathed deep, exhaled.

Then she went mad.

She tore down a ballgown of sea-green dupioni. It ripped free of its hanger, and tiny turquoise beads pattered free onto the marble floor. She tossed it behind her, but the stiff silk stayed half-standing for a moment before the fabric crumpled and collapsed. She wrenched out linen nightgowns, white as snow, light as meringue, and they fluttered through the air behind her like ghosts. She crushed the little pointed dancing slippers she found nestled in cedar boxes, and she knit her fingers into embroidered shawls and tore until the fine yarn popped like sinews under wildcat fangs.

"Stop!" I screeched, rushing forward. "Stop, stop!"

She whirled to scratch at me, too. Her sharp nails traced lines across my neck. She screamed and struggled, but I caught her hands and held them there.

I drew a breath and screamed back.

"You stupid, stupid girl! That was years of work! That was worth more than the entire coal-scuttle you call a hometown, you ungrateful, wretched creature!"

Her braid had come loose, and her hair writhed between us like willow-boughs thrashing in the wind. She watched me from behind it with bright wet eyes. She looked wilder than she had after she threw the sorceress down from the crags. She had watched a woman fall to her death with calm, with relief, but she could not face the clothing we had set out for her.

"What would you rather do?" I hissed. She fought against the grip I had on her wrists, but I could see that she was listening. "You can go home and sweep the hearth and eat burnt crusts until you die, or you can stay and rule. Those are your choices. There is no other."

With a wild effort, she tore free of me and lunged across the room to the bed. She flung herself onto its surface, crying and choking, clutching at the tufted quilt.

I have heard tell of soothsayers who can read the future in the entrails of chickens. I felt, as I looked at the wreckage of the dresses on the floor, that I ought to be able to do the same, but I could read no answer there.

"Don't worry," I told her, though I knew she couldn't hear me over her sobs. "You have nothing to worry about. You'll never have to worry about anything again."

And it wasn't a lie. We had arranged it all. We had finished her wedding dress the year she turned eight. We had seen her, grown and lovely, when she was still a tiny child. Before her father died, before she had a wicked stepmother, we knew that she would come to us someday. We had the lace dressing gown she would wear to birth her son wrapped up in tissue-paper upstairs, waiting his conception. And on that night before her wedding, after she ruined what, for any other seamstress, would have been a lifetime's labor, I went back to the workroom and laid the final stitches into the last gown she would ever wear. It was a harsh cut, an old-woman cut, fit for a creature thin of shoulder and sharp of bone. She

wouldn't need it for decades yet, but someday, she would pull it on gladly. It had a high collar, a clinging skirt, and a cloak as black as shadow, lined with silk the color of bruised flesh. And, because I am cruel, because I am kind, I opened a tiny drawer in a dusty chest and drew out the last handful of feathers, dark as soot. I dressed the mannequin in that final gown and with tiny, careful stitches, I again tacked feathers from a raven onto the cloak's shoulders: just a few, just enough to remind her.

She would not always be young and beautiful. The knowing would build in her heart, turning her bitter and cold, as it had all the others. One day a new girl would appear, fresh-faced and lovely, and she would take the old queen's place. This is how the kingdoms turn. This is the cycle, sure as summer turns to fall.

We know when they're coming. The prince always swears he would have rescued her sooner if he had known to seek her, that he would have moved mountains to spare his one true love a single hour of misery. I cannot answer for the princes. I can't say who sews *their* doublets or tacks down their futures. The princes, for all that they profess love for those bright-as-sunlight girls, never ask us when she'll appear. Perhaps they don't know how to find us. Perhaps they'd rather not know. But we are here.

In a sunny, seldom-visited loft in every castle, every crystal city, every kingdom-by-the-sea, there are three women working with needle and thread. We cut the cloth and drape the folds and stitch layers together, and as we work, we spare the occasional glance for the mirrors that brighten the room, or the fog swirling outside the windows, or the reflections off the tea kettle. We scry the future out of the corners of our eyes.

We take our time. We do good work. There's never any rush.

That princess wore her wedding dress the next day. It was hastily mended, though only we knew about the long, hurried stitches holding together its seams, and the hollows under her eyes were dark with shadows, but she was still so beautiful that songbirds followed her

down the aisle. She birthed babies, all pink cheeks and golden hair as fine as silk floss, and she did not weep when, one by one, they grew up and went off to seek their own kingdoms.

She was young and beautiful, until, one day, she wasn't.

The day her husband died, she called me into her chambers with the white marble floors. I have never been a beauty, but my hands were strong and sure as I held up the last gown that she would wear. She did not move to take it from me.

"Have you seen the next girl?" she asked.

I hesitated, but it was no use.

"Six years ago."

She took the dress out of my hands. She wore her dressing gown, the one she had worn at the birth of each her children. It was old. It had been blue when we made it, but now it was just the color of the sky on a hazy-hot day.

Outside, the wind keened over the crags. Far off, a girl trekked to the site of her first battle.

"You three always did such lovely work," the old queen said. "And it *was* a better life than sweeping the hearth."

I saw it in the set of her shoulders. I saw it in the twist of her mouth. She grabbed the neckline of the final dress and tore.

The fabric gave way under her hands. Stitches popped, and threads burst. The fabric purred as she ripped it all the way to the hem. The black feathers burst loose and swirled about her feet. She let the two halves dropped to the floor and stepped over them.

"I'll go to meet her," she said. She threw her shoulders back and looked down at me. "But I'm not going to meet her in black."

Because she was the cleverest of all her kind, I practically saw her thinking as she walked out of the castle and down to the crags. The clouds were already gathering. I saw her fingers twitch, and I was ready when she turned back to me.

"I'm old," she called. The wind yanked at the lace on her dressing-gown. "I'm weak. And you always did such good, strong stitching."

I bowed my head and said nothing. Under her long gaze, I said nothing of how silk must be washed carefully, without caustic soap, lest its threads weaken. I said nothing of how fine fabric must be kept wrapped away so it cannot be eaten by the harsh light of the sun. I said nothing about thread spun too loosely, or stitches placed too far apart. I spoke only once she had turned her back and walked away. Spoke only to myself.

"I do perfect work. You know that. You knew."

The next princess was fair of face and bright of eye, and she never asked who the old queen had been. I'm not sure if I'm sorry about that, either. Understanding how the magic works just means that you can know, and dread, what is to come. That clever one, the one with the wry smile and the leftover raven feathers, went to her death smiling. She knew that her fate had been stitched down long before we met. Sometimes we try to be kind, sometimes we try to twist it, but the threads snare and knot and twine together again, no matter what we will.

I went back into the castle, into all of the castles, and readied myself for the next girl to become the old queen.

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Ani King, EIC

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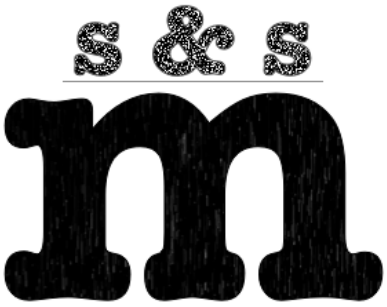

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