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Outfield by Hal Y. Zhang - Editor's Choice

Hal Y. Zhang is an inefficient semi-autonomous converter of foods into fantasies. Read more at halyzhang.com.

I.

On the tarpaulin I lay your body, cold and rigid as the geometry you love. Tiny invaders already hunger, stretching their wings and cilia in prayer. The banana-yellow mud tastes of forever, and when I sink to my knees the puddles run clear with eggs of sated flies. In worship they will subsume your organs, your thoughts, your sex, and thousands of generations will grow up under the blue plastic roof drinking your holy soup, a swig of gospel to all they bite.

II.

At the median of my lifeline tethered halfway around the world I feel a pluck of air behind my right ear. The sting reminds me of your sharp laughter, the welt your broken nose. I once fancied I could piece you back together from the wings the worms the earth, but now I know better; not impossible, no, but to repair my own microcosm would uproot too many systems and families, lay waste to billions of minds however primordial. Were I to kill my qualms you would still shake your head inside me, so I move my cane forward another step. *Take me instead.*

III.

When the priests ask me where home is I think coarse blue. Hard rain. Earthen rivulets on your frozen brows. Three pinched waves of musty incense, a honey shroud over my head, and I am floated out on the creek to be buried between my memories. The flies descend upon my humble offering. A large one flits on my eyelid, hunches over, then pierces my eye shut—instantly I am back in the bar debating ontological realities with your impossible mien. Last life we danced with words nightly, but this time you trace my eyebrows and thrum as you brush my beard with yours.

IV.

Inside your naked arm crook I ponder this strange new dimension of you, deity of the dipterons, manna of life. Your multifaceted crystal eyes tell me not to worry so much. As I nod my antennae grazes yours and it is better than my wildest fantasies, mind to mind to soma: a galactic constellation of buzzing wings. All of you, here and everywhere, in the multiplicity of jellied eggs that will glow long after the earth darks. Your scripture taught the flies how to form, to build, to take dead things and stars and transmute them anew—we have forever now. And I have much to learn.

END



Those Fantastic Lives by Bradley Sides

Bradley Sides is a writer and English instructor. His work appears at the *Chicago Review of Books*, *Electric Literature*, *The Millions*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. He is at work on his debut collection of short stories. For more, follow him @brad_sides or visit bradley-sides.com.

One mistake is what separated Nellie from the others—the "fakies" as she called them. Nellie was no Miss Francine, and she certainly wasn't a part of the, even worse, Psychic Sisters Network. She told her eight-year-old grandson, Sam, to mute the television every time one of the Psychic Sisters' cheap ads came blaring from the screen. Those old ladies and their stupidly written synchronized sentences. As if completing someone's thought was enough to make a person a psychic—or any kind of clairvoyant for that matter. "Please," she grunted to Sam, rolling her eyes. "Those women wouldn't know a real psychic if one bit them on their collective ass."

Nellie conducted her last session before her self-imposed retirement no differently than the hundreds of others that had come before. Sure, she was admittedly a little slower answering the door than the first time she'd welcomed a customer, but she still wore the same padded slippers to do so. Her familiar beige gown with faded black roses swept across the carpet the same way it always had, and, when she reached for the doorknob, her hands first had to fumble with her antique celestial headwrap in an effort to contain the gray hairs sprouting from beneath its edges. These were Nellie's ways.

"Moira!" she announced before she'd even fully opened the door. She extended her arms to the young woman on her steps. Moira, with her perfect skin and shiny black hair, shyly stepped back and put out her hand to shake Nellie's.

"I knew it was you before I ever saw you. I'm the real thing, you know," Nellie said, trying too hard for even herself.

Moira smirked. "You already know my name. I have an appointment," she said.

"Relax. It's just a little psychic humor. Besides, I'm a psychic. I'm not in the fortune-telling business," Nellie said. Moira smirked.

Nellie was quiet, fumbling with her rings. "You are even more beautiful than I imagined," she said, shifting the conversation in a more cordial direction. Her body loosened when she saw Moira's reaction.

The woman's mouth opened at the compliment, and her crooked teeth gleamed in the morning sun.

Nothing could last forever, though. The smell of cigarettes and baby powers seeped out of the doorway and blanketed Moira. She fanned the air and spit into the sky. "Thank you," she choked out, unable to ignore the compliment.

"Come, baby. Come. You are my last reading in this lifetime, so let's get going. I have a retirement to enjoy," Nellie said, with her hands waving in the air freely with clouds of smoke floating from her body. Moira still coughed. "Oh, it's just a couple of cigarettes. Don't worry. I put them out just before you got here," Nellie said, while patting Moira on the back.

Nellie stepped outside and grabbed her new client by the arm. "Come on," she said. When they were inside, she slammed the door.

Nellie ushered Moira down the hallway, past the dusty black-and-white photographs of her own deceased family members. She pointed to each one. "That one's thriving on the other side. This one is busy. And this one is very, very wild. You wouldn't believe it." She turned to Moira and winked.

Nellie stopped and stood and a portrait of her grandmother. She held her hand to her chest. "I miss this one the most, but she's happy—just like she was in life," Nellie said. "He," she said, flinging her arm up to the picture of her grandfather, "well, let's just say that he's not." Nellie chuckled before she quickly grimaced and shook her head. "Oh," Moira said as her eyes widened.

"Loosen up, girl. Don't be so nervous," Nellie said. "I'll get you your answers. I'm not one of those fakies."

Nellie led Moira into the reading room and pulled out a large wooden chair from the circular table. "Please," she said, motioning for Moira to sit. Moira smiled and took a seat. Her eyes traveled around the strange room. The black ceiling. The red silk-draped walls. The candles on the floor along the walls. The crystal ball on the table. It looked ridiculous. Nellie knew as much; she hated it herself. But she didn't have much of a choice if she wanted to compete against the fakies and their entire faux "medium" lives that popular culture had concocted and had, consequently, tarnished the entire psychic community's once serious reputation since the '90s. Colors. Candles. Crystal balls. Customers expected it. All of it.

Nellie, though, didn't need anything other than a spirit—although, at her age, she did appreciate a sturdy chair. She could reach voices at the supermarket while waiting on her turkey to be sliced if she needed.

She moved to the other side of the cherry table and sat across from Moira. She closed her eyes and cleared her throat. "Are you ready to begin?" she asked.

Moira readjusted in her seat. "Is this going to hurt?"

"Hurt?" Nellie asked. "No, girl. This won't hurt." She stared at Moira, who didn't seem very comforted. "Why?" Nellie followed up. "Did you think it was going to hurt? Did someone tell you it might hurt? Did you hear it on one of those fakie Psychic Sisters shows?"

“No, no,” she said, her eyes peering up from her thick, magenta-rimmed glasses. “It’s not that. I’ve just never done anything like this.”

Nellie wiggled her shoulders. “Oh, I see. No, it won’t hurt. Just relax.” Nellie clinched her hands and popped her knuckles. Her shoulders still danced about as she turned her head from side to side. “All ready,” she said.

She draped her hands over the crystal ball, holding her palms out.

“Okay,” Moira said hesitantly.

“Place your hands under mine,” Nellie said, moving to the front of her chair.

Moira slowly moved her hands to the table.

“Come on. You can do it,” Nellie said.

Moira sighed and gave Nellie her hands.

“Good. Now, just relax.”

Moira closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She moved her weight to the back of her chair, and she listened.

A blanket of silence suffocated the room. The flames from the candles popped, and wax slithered down into the candles’ cool holders. Each breath from the two women held power. Each soul drifting away into greyness, but, still, their bodies present—both searching.

Nellie’s mouth began to open. Slowly at first and then wider. Her throat loosened. Sounds gurgling. Sounds building. Sounds trying to break free.

Moira opened her eyes, and she watched Nellie. She’d heard that each psychic had her own way of contacting the other side. She wanted to see Nellie’s.

The psychic’s eyes rolled back into her head and her entire body shook as her mouth summoned a soul.

“Jackson?” Moira whispered. “Are you here?” she asked.

Nellie’s body violently convulsed. Then, the candles snuffed out. Her body was still.

“Are you here, son?” Moira asked.

“Mommie,” a soft voice said.

“Jackson,” she said. Her voice quivering. “Are you okay? Are you okay, baby?”

A rumbling interrupted the silence. The table rocked until it crashed, and a pair of small bare feet rubbed against Moira’s. They ran to the door and, then, through to the light in the hallway.

“Jackson!” Moira cried. She leapt from the table and chased the body that had escaped the room.

“Jackson!” Her voice echoed down the hall and outside into the yard. “Jackson! Jackson!”

The inside of the reading room was quiet again. “Mommie?” the tender voice called.

A few seconds passed. “Mommie?” the voice asked.

But there was no answer.

Nellie called Moira a dozen times from her bed the next day to apologize, but each ring led to her voicemail—one with an impersonalized, computer-generated voice. There was no use, but Nellie still spoke at the command of the tone. She regretted what had happened. She was sorry. She was sorry. She was sorry.

But her apology wasn’t totally sincere. She hadn’t failed in the reading. Jackson came through. Nellie felt him. Moira spoke to him. He was in the room.

It was Sam who should be apologizing. Little Sam and his big curiosity.

Sam had lived with Nellie since he was three days old, and he’d grown up in her land of the dead. Her area of expertise wasn’t a secret. She taught him about spirits and the other side. For his fourth birthday, she bought him—them—a Ouija board. She showed him how it worked and laughed when they “conjured” spirits he heard, which were usually guinea pigs or unicorns. Sometimes, it was his mother that he spoke to, but Nellie quickly corrected Sam during those moments. “She’s not dead to the world, baby. She’s just dead to us.”

He spied from his bedroom at Nellie’s clients, but he never spoke to them. Nellie told him he was too young to be in the world of real grown folks. “Little boys do little boy kinds of things,” she said, but she never exactly explained what “little boy kinds of things” included. Besides, he wasn’t like most little boys.

Sam liked housework. He helped her with just about everything. He seasoned the food she made, dried the dishes she washed, and folded the laundry she cleaned.

He liked to clean Nellie's jewelry. He would hold up the necklaces in the mirror and imagine they were his. He kept Nellie's schedule for her in a notebook. When she hung up the phone, she told him what to write, and he did. He questioned the empty dates, as they grew more and more. "Are we going on another trip, Nana?" he asked her. "I'm too old for trips," she said. She told Sam she was retiring and didn't say anything else. He would need to figure it out on his own, but he'd seen enough lunchtime stories to know what the word meant. Those same stories helped him understand a lot of what Nellie often talked about. But retiring—retiring was different. It was a word that didn't quite fit Nellie.

Although Nellie advised him not to play with his Ouija board alone, that's exactly what he did on the morning of her final session. After he woke Nellie up as he usually did, an hour before her appointment, he went to his room and sat on the floor.

At eight, he was more serious with his efforts to connect with Nellie on her level. That desire to reach her increased by the day. He began to wear her old gowns and a less extravagant—plainly black—turban to breakfast. "And what is this?" she asked him. "I'm going to be a psychic, too," he told her. "Fine," she said, sipping her tea. His clothing wasn't mentioned again.

He was actually getting somewhere with his efforts. When he focused hard enough, the planchette slid over the board's letters without any extra assistance. Something else began to happen, too. He could hear whispers if the house was totally silent.

On the morning Moira arrived, Sam listened for half an hour to the board, finally hearing the name "Jackson."

The name meant nothing to him at that moment, but maybe it would to Moira, the final name Sam had written down in Nellie's schedule.

Sam's plan was in order. When Nellie went outside to greet Moira, he would slip from his bedroom and into the reading room, where he knew his grandmother would conduct the reading like she did all of her others. And he did.

He hid behind one of the curtains on the wall, but the shadows made his presence too obvious. The table was big enough to hide underneath. He ducked under the wooden surface and crouched against the center pedestal. When Nellie and Moira entered the room, he became like a statue. Still. Quiet.

As each chair moved, he pivoted. His body avoided contact, and he positioned himself against the table again. Nellie's shaking caused his body to loosen, but her actions weren't entirely unexpected. When she'd played with the Ouija board, she'd done the same.

He was fine until Moira said her son's name. At the announcement of "Jackson," he let out a gasp, but Moira was too focused to notice anything other than the words coming from Nellie's lips. Sam had been right. He was hearing. He was connecting. He was psychic.

As Moira repeated her son's name, Sam couldn't contain his excitement. He fled.

Nellie waited until her stories were on before she said anything to Sam. The music swelled as the first scene opened straight inside Lorraine's bedroom. Nellie feigned clearing her throat to block the words from Sam's ears. But it wasn't ending—at least not anytime soon. And it was getting worse. Everything was getting worse. She blurted, "Pause it! Pause it!" She flew up from the couch. "I can't take it!" she said.

"I don't want people thinking I'm one of those fakies. You know that. I'm Nellie. I'm not Miss Francine. And you know I'm for sure not one of those Psychic Sisters. You know this, Sam. You know it! You know it!" she said, with her voice rising with each sentence.

She continued, quicker, "I'm not a fakie! I've gone sixty-something years of reading after reading with no complications. None at all. I'm talking total perfection. I'm good, Sam. I've avoided all of the mumbo jumbo nonsense except for that hideous room. And now, what will become of my legacy? I'll just be one of them."

She sat back down, and dust blew from the couch cushions.

"I'm sorry, Nana, but I was excited," Sam said, putting the remote down.

"Yes, and nosy. Very, very nosy. What do I always tell you? Little boys do little boy kinds of things," Nellie said, her hands reaching for her pack of cigarettes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "But I've got to have two."

Sam sighed. "Your doctor said you have to stop doing that," he said.

"Do I look like I care what my doctor said?"

Sam ignored her. "I'm not so little," he said.

"Eight is little."

"But I'm psychic, Nana. I'm like you."

"Blah, blah, blah," she said, lighting her smokes. "Your hands moved on a Ouija board."

"No," he corrected. "I heard a voice while I was using the Ouija board."

"It doesn't matter. That doesn't make you psychic."

"It might," he said.

Nellie turned her head up to the ceiling and puffed. Thick smoke covered the room. She took another taste from her double cigarette. "Did you at least tell Moira that you were sorry?" she asked quietly.

Sam's mouth turned crooked. "I tried, but she was crying too hard, and she slammed her car door in my face."

Nellie shook her head.

"You could come out of retirement," Sam suggested, leaning over to her and resting his head on her lap. "Maybe she'll agree to another reading."

"Not now," Nellie told him. "Just hit play." She didn't tell him to cover his eyes.

Sam waited a week before he called Moira. Nellie told him that it was for the best, but that he'd have to call her eventually. She explained that it was his responsibility to apologize for upsetting Moira.

As he held the phone in his sweaty palms, the little device nearly slid right out. He shook so badly that he had to hang up and redial half a dozen times. He had a script in front of him. The voicemail would be enough time for him to say what he needed to say.

When Moira picked up on the third ring, Sam dropped the phone. It, like his plan itself, broken. He reached down and fumbled with it what remained intact, and, when he held the speaker back up to his ear, she was still on the line.

"Um, hello," he said. "This is Sam—Sam, the little boy from Nellie's." His voice sputtered.

"I know who it is," she replied.

The line was quiet.

"I—um—I," Sam began, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you and all."

"You didn't scare me."

"Oh," he said. "I'm still sorry."

Both were quiet again. Then, Moira huffed, causing the speaker to crack. "You didn't scare me, Sam. You upset me," she said slowly. "But, I forgive you."

"You do?" he asked, perking up.

"I do," she assured him. "But I was very, very upset. I think you can imagine why."

"I can," he said. "I really am sorry."

"Thank you for calling to saying so."

"You're welcome," he said. "I called for another reason, too." His voice perked up. "Nana will do another reading for free tomorrow if you are willing to come back."

"Oh, she is?" Moira asked. "I thought she was retiring."

"She did. She's coming out for one reading only. She swears it'll be her last one for real this time," he said. Then, he continued, "I won't upset you this time."

"Okay. I think I will agree to that."

"Good. I'll put you down for nine o'clock tomorrow morning in Nana's schedule."

"Bye, Sam," she said. "And thank you for calling."

"You're welcome."

He hung up the phone and went to find Nellie. He had some persuading to do.

Sam waited until the very last credit rolled on Nellie's stories for the day before he asked her. Her answer came slowly. Her hand crept over to the table beside her end of the couch, and she grabbed a pack of cigarettes. She slapped the box down on her legs and peeled back the top. She retrieved two slim sticks.

"Just light them," she said.

The house was unusually quiet when morning arrived. No snoring. No rustling. No pages turning. Being a boy raised on the importance of ritual, Sam still waited until an hour before Nellie's appointment with Moira before he went into his grandmother's bedroom.

When he turned the doorknob and pushed back the door, he didn't even have to go to her to know. The window was open beside her bed.

He ran to his room and grabbed the Ouija board from his toy shelf, ripping the box open and throwing the board onto the cold floor. His hands gripped the planchette as he closed his eyes. "Nana!" he cried. "Nana!"

The doorbell rang as his hands began to move, but Sam stayed on the floor. He focused on the board. "Nana!"

Then, the doorbell came again.

And again.

The sound echoed throughout the dead house.

Sam took the planchette and threw it into the wall. He ripped the board into pieces. It had always been only a game—just like Clue, but for dreamers.

"Nellie? Sam?" Moira called.

Sam closed his eyes, and he listened.

If she wouldn't come to him on the board, maybe she would come to him like Jackson had to her. He turned his head to the ceiling. He shook.

When he opened his eyes, Moira was standing in front of him—him with his swollen eyes, him with his broken heart.

She was crying, too.

He leapt from the floor and grabbed Moira's hand, hurrying her into the reading room.

He pulled out the same chair she'd sat in before, and she took it. He went to Nellie's.

When he held out his hands, Moira didn't hesitate.

They, as one, closed their eyes and searched—and they waited. They waited for those lives they loved to find them again.

When Sam came to, there was a woman in the doorway he recognized as the person he loved more than anyone. The same gown he'd seen her in so many times. The same headwrap that hid her age. But she wasn't alone. She was holding the hand of a little boy.

"I'm okay," the boy said. "Tell Mommie that I'm okay."

Sam squeezed Moira's hand, and she glanced up at him.

"I'm not a fakie," he whispered.

"What?" she asked, her tears falling onto the table.

He shook his head. He'd not meant to say it aloud.

"I can see him," Sam said, wiping away his tears. "He's okay," Sam said.

"He's really okay?"

"And he will be," he said, looking back at Nellie.

Sam nodded at Nellie, and they both smiled. Then, he turned back to Moira. He was ready for her next question.

END



Fallow by Erin K. Wagner

Erin K. Wagner is a speculative fiction writer, interested in examining how the human responds to the inhuman. She grew up in southeast Ohio on the border of Appalachia, but now lives in central New York, where she hikes in the Catskills and listens for ghostly games of nine-pins. She holds her Ph.D. in medieval literature and teaches literature and writing in the SUNY system. She splits her time between academic research, investigating how

medieval English writers navigated their own religious identities, and creative writing. Her stories have appeared in a variety of publications, from *Apex* to *Luna Station Quarterly*, and her novella *The Green and Growing* is available from Aqueduct Press.

Before I died, I grew tall. After I died, I grew long.

I stood up. In the furrows of the field I stood up. Thunderclouds were rolling in, bringing with them autumn rain, warm and cold at once. The red Ohio clay cut the soles of my bare feet. I dropped the spade by the small hole I'd dug out, a hole just large enough to fit one of my over-long feet. I looked back to the house, small and white-framed against the fields beyond, the trees skeletons of their former selves, shaking free of their leaves. And I felt it there again, just below the rib bone Adam gave Eve, I felt the chimes there, the chimes that rung everything hollow. It wasn't my home, the house, it wasn't yet. Though Momma was inside, and Papa would be driving up the county road with the sunset.

My parents told me, when I was twelve, that I was adopted, but I didn't believe them. They approached the topic carefully, as if tiptoeing. They sat me down at the kitchen table, and the light from the window was warm at my back. There was ice cream and chocolate syrup. But their words buzzed in my ears when they explained the gist of it. No one had heard tell of any such thing in our whole county, and the girls at school—the ones who knew the ins and outs of Bloody Mary and the Ouija board—said it was more likely, given my resemblance to my parents, that I was uncanny, some fairy stowaway my parents couldn't admit to.

"Maybe there's another you on the other side," Rita said. "And she's waiting for her chance to come back."

We looked up the definition of *fallow* in the dictionary. We found the only field unplanted on my parents' property. "You have to root yourself here," Rita said. The other girls nodded, and the setting sun glinted off the brown and yellow of their hair.

"You have to do it soon," Kerry warned. "Fairies like the fall. They ride the crows and steal the grain."

Rita warned again, "And the other you, the one on that side, might be waiting to jump at you."

And I asked, because it was hard for me to keep the questions in, "Why fallow?"

The girls laughed, like it was a silly question, but it was only Rita who seemed able to answer. "The other fields are already planted. And they're going to be torn up, harvested. You want to stay planted."

So I didn't wait long. Though it seemed important to find the right sort of day, a day on the edge. It was a feeling more than anything I knew, like Momma saying she could feel rain coming on when it was still clear-skied and bright out. The ritual wasn't complicated. I had already dug the hole, and there was only twilight to wait for. The sky seemed to sink too slow that day, shadows crawling lazily across the furrows, and the breeze almost cold on the back of my neck. I had pinned my braid high up on my head, so as to keep loose hairs out of my eyes. Maybe it was that other girl waiting, holding her breath, tugging at me. I wavered a little bit. A beetle crawled across my toe.

The sun dipped, finally, and the sky was rose and gold. The dried leaves crinkled on the tree branches as the wind picked up. The lights were on in the windows of the house. I stepped into the hole, just with one foot, and I used my hands to pile the dirt up around my ankle. The mud got caught under my fingernails, and I scratched the palm of my hand. I was panting, not because the burying was so difficult. I crouched down as low as I could, and I whispered the words the girls had given me to say. Maybe Rita had stolen them from a poem. They sounded fancy enough.

I waited. I was supposed to wait until the moon came out.

But I felt it in the darkness between sunset and moonrise. The sudden stilling inside me, like a wind coming to rest, curled in the roots of a sleeping tree. The chimes grew quiet, quivering in my stomach. I think I gasped or hiccupped. There was a

sob caught quick in my throat. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a shadow, the size and shape of me, on the edge of the windowlight on the yard. But she was waning, her waist and chest and head dissolving into one forlorn, outstretched hand. And she was gone. My foot was almost numb, but I could just feel it still, solid, heavy, dug in. "I'm sorry," I whispered, and I could not stop the tears now, tickling my nose and cheeks, soaking the collar of my shirt. And I knew I wouldn't tell the girls this, not this.

I waited until the moon came up to unbury my foot, just to be on the safe side. I brushed the dirt off it, studied it, looking to see if it was different. It looked the same to me, but I hobbled a bit as I headed to the back door. I couldn't go in right away. It didn't feel right to be done so quickly, so I sat down on the back steps, and I placed my foot on the stair, heavy, almost painful. The light from the window was at my back and my shadow was solid in front of me.

"I belong here," I whispered to that shadow, as if it might be half-in and half-out of this world, as if it might tell on me.

END

A maid grows adept at skinning coneys for the table. A twist at the foot to break the skin, a slice across the scruff and off it comes.

She finds her own skin works the same way.



Maid-of-Many-Skins by G.V. Anderson

G. V. Anderson is a World Fantasy Award-winning author whose stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *F&SF*, and *Lightspeed*.

A maid's face lies stark in the glass.

She bares her teeth, her smile black as rot and dripping. The mistress has dentifrice of pale powdered coral flavoured with lilacs (she knows because she tested the granules with her tongue, once), but a maid must make do with soot. It's both grainy and slick on the back of her incisors, and when she spits into a dish set by for the purpose, it blights the earthenware.

At least a maid's bread is white. Chalk white. Alum white. Plaster of Paris white. The mistress sucks quail eggs and deviled kidneys for breakfast, while in the scullery a maid bites into an adulterated doorstep filled with fatty bacon trimmings and anchovy paste, and feels lucky for it.

Until later, when the chalk/alum/plaster of Paris festers in her gut and the shit drips out of her day and night like rusty tap water.

Lye to soak the monthly napkins, carbolic soap for the floors, and elbow grease for everything else. Exotic creams smooth the mistress's hands to marble (with as much warmth or give), but a maid's knuckles are prone to crack, to fissure, to pus, to peel. She picks at them every night, long after the mistress has fallen asleep, which blots the bed linen: more lye, more scrubbing to get it out.

Scritch, scratch. The pain stings down to her toes.

Her fingernail snags an unsightly scab and she can't resist. She expects it to come up wet and tacky like the carapace of a beetle and angles the back of her hand to catch the blood, but there is none: the skin underneath is new and unblemished. It gleams like china, so odd that for a moment she wonders if she's burrowed too far into her own flesh and excavated bone.

The next morning, when a maid comes bearing the ewer for the morning bath, the mistress is crying. A maid flings the curtains open for light and takes her mistress's hand in her own for the first time. A patch of skin is missing from the back of that perfect, idle hand.

It is a wonder.

A maid grows adept at skinning coneys for the table. A twist at the foot to break the skin, a slice across the scruff and off it comes.

She finds her own skin works the same way.

A maid becomes mistress — wears her face, for a while.

The poor flayed creature she now impersonates is arranged carefully in the alley behind the house, and it's supposed there's a man, a Ripper, a devil about, preying on skivvies in the dead of night. A mistress receives callers in the parlour, sips tea with them and listens to their gossip, their disquiet, their sympathy. Her new maid serves them sponge fingers with *crème chantilly*. They don't suspect.

The dentifrice tastes just how she imagined. She pops a quail egg into her mouth every morning at breakfast; the molten yolk bursts on her tongue. Supple kidskin gloves coat her hands like paint.

But skin sheds. It thins and tears with use, and a mistress has but one layer to spare. Her old body, a ruined body, lies in wait, keeping watch through the gaps.

A maid massages her mistress's feet; she curls their hair, files down their nails, fills them with good food that rounds their bellies and brightens their complexion; then she shucks her skin and steps into their life. She burns through debutantes and

widows, even a duchess. Everything is silk and pearl and rosehip and sweetbreads; a man's touch is chaste, if she permits it at all.

Her peers enthuse over one new amusement or another — a bicycle ride — a picnic in the park — handicrafts — the latest novel — suffrage — and all the while their maids creep about (she observes them surreptitiously) with their palms shiny and blistered, eyes pouchy, dogged. She longs to tell them, to free them, to lift them up, yet they lower their gaze when she comes close. No matter, she thinks, seeing their knuckles all puckered and suppurating: they will find out for themselves soon enough

She can't know how they talk about her by candlelight, the maids-of-all-work. In the darkest garrets, they pick at their own knuckles and dream of liberation (and standing by steaming coppers of laundry, revenge).

Perhaps she'd snatch a whisper if she stayed, but she (the Ripper, the devil, the butcher) leaves a trail of skinned cadavers behind wherever she goes, all reddish muscle and off-white tendon as good as an umbilical cord, or a hangman's rope. She cannot give up what she's had, so she cannot stay. Once her last mistress is put to bed, she catches the overnight post-chaise out of the city and tramps across the last few miles of heathland to the nearest major town. The lights from the factories and workhouses wink like stars.

Under a gibbous moon, she strips naked. A sharp, sudden twist at the wrist to lacerate, then she curls her fingertips into the slit, gathers the slack with her thumb, and pulls the skin free from her arm and across her breast in one long fluttering membranous strip. The wind snatches at it; the moonlight picks out its scars and stretchmarks.

She laughs: it hardly hurts any more. The maid is gone.

END



Objective: Understanding by Alyssa N. Vaughn

Alyssa N. Vaughn is a former software developer and teacher from Dallas, Texas. Her work has appeared in *Unfading Daydream Magazine*, *The Mad Scientist Journal*, and *Metaphorosis Magazine*, among others. When not writing, Alyssa binge-watching cartoons and true crime shows on Netflix and catering to the whims of her tyrannical two-year old. Twitter: @msalyssaenvy Instagram: @alyssaenvy Blog: <http://blog.anvaughn.com>

Programming online.
Log 3251CE.432CD

Hello, world.

Today I was told that the log debug message that my programmers use to ensure my record-keeping functions are online and working is part of a joke that the ancient computer builders would tell each other. I asked to know more about this joke, but Philemon and Bao-Shin got into an argument. It is not my current priority to learn ancient computer builder lore.

I have still not mastered the human art of music.

Report:

- I have currently **34,258,051** audio recordings stored in my memory.
- I have run comparative analysis on this database **2,049,687** times as of 6:45 this morning.
- I have been unable to answer Bao-Shin's question: **How can Western influences be observed in the K-Pop genre?** exactly **141** times as of 6:47 this morning.
- I have incorrectly answered Philemon's question: **Which is the better band, The Beatles or One Direction?** exactly **73** times as of 6:49 this morning.
- Philemon has thrown approximately **67** chairs as of 6:50 this morning.

Reflection:

I am told that the project will be a failure if I cannot comprehend the meaning and significance of music in the human existence. This too is impossible for me to process. How can one failed objective invalidate the rest of the work I have done? I am able to identify genre, language, time period, individual elements of instrumentation. With the space in my memory banks, I will be able to provide a complete record of music's development throughout history. What is the reasoning behind this objective? I am told that if I could answer this question, I would have mastered the objective.

Humans are incredibly frustrating, and offer many examples of circular logic.

Preparing programming shutdown for patch **42.5.3** upload, programmer signatures **SuperPhil37, BaoShin**

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Programming online.
Log 3251CE.429CD

Hello, world.

Allene took me outside today. She did live programming updates through the console in my left forearm while I sat in a clearing beside a brook. She told me to observe my surroundings while she worked. I saw trees, heard wind moving through the branches, watched leaves fall. I heard the water running over rocks, saw the way that it moved.

I watched the way the sunlight changed as the time passed, how it became a more intense gold as it came through the trees at a slant in the late afternoon. How Allene was warm when we came outside, but when the wind began to blow and the sun went down, she started to shiver. I watched her silver hair shine in the sun, and come loose from its braid, and float under her chin.

I heard birds singing to each other. Allene told me to identify the calls by species; she uploaded a database through the console.

I identified several species and calls:

- A tufted titmouse called for its mate to bring food
- A downy woodpecker drummed out a boundary challenge to a rival male
- A hermit thrush sang a song warning others away from its territory
- A swallow called a predator warning to its colony

Allene and I discussed whether human music could have originated for similar purposes—attracting mates, establishing ties in tribal groups. It seems redundant that such a behavior should have persisted through the development of speech, oral history, and written language. I posed to Allene that if music was based solely in mating ritual that I might understand more easily, as much mating ritual seems to be completely detached from rational behavior. This can also be observed in avian behavior, such as the various subspecies of Bird of Paradise.

Allene did not respond to this observation in the positive. She pointed out that music also has a strong tradition in religion, folklore, and even in political history. I responded that much of human behavior seems to be completely detached from rational behavior. Allene laughed, and then looked very sad.

She took me back to the lab.

I have still not mastered the human art of music.

Report:

- I have currently **34,263,124** audio recordings stored in my memory.
- I have run comparative analysis on this database **2,213,992** times as of 8:00 this evening.
- I have been unable to answer Allene's question: **How does Bob Dylan's "Hurricane" (1976) differ from Electric Solitude's "Your Mama Don't Know Nothin'" (2024)?** exactly **58** times as of 8:02 this evening.

Reflection:

Working with Allene is always different from the other members of my programming team. Allene does not show the emotional signs of frustration or fatigue that the younger programmers tend to do, but by the end of the day, Allene's facial expressions align with my interpretation of sad or regret. I would like to talk to Allene more about the work that she did before she joined my team, but I have been discouraged from following tangents. This is frustrating, since this behavior was once highly encouraged and made everyone on the team show positive behaviors toward me and toward each other. Now I am only observing negative behaviors, and any tangential pursuits only increase their frequency. Allene sometimes says that she is sorry we do not get to talk about her work anymore, but she did not mention it today. It is my impression that I did not make the progress she was anticipating with the live code updates.

Preparing programming shutdown for patch **42.5.8** upload, programmer signatures **ProfARourke**

•••••

Programming online.

Log 3251CE.427CD

Hello, world.

Under Allene's instructions, Philemon took me into the children's ward today. He did not perform live updates, but my movements were slightly inhibited by a diagnostic tool that was logging my sensory data in real time, connected to the same port Allene used in the clearing. I explained to Philemon that my observations would be compromised if I was unable to

move freely through the ward, but his response was not helpful. I believe the correct term for his tone of voice would be “sarcasm.”

The children’s ward is very full. According to my estimate, half of the small humans must be sharing beds with each other. Although health and sanitary procedures were some of the first things I learned, I have also begun to understand that this is a subject to which adult humans do not always respond well. Philemon spent a very long time shouting at me for “smarting off” on one of my first outings. A very large man had ripped off my right arm. It had already happened and I was not in pain, so I did not understand why Philemon was shouting. Later, I understood that repairs had set the project timeline back by a week.

There were several examples of music in the ward:

- Two girls, prepubescent, used hand clapping and a chant-like song to play a rhythm game. At first I believed this to be a tool for learning numbers, but upon trying the game myself, it seems that it is more likely an exercise in hand-eye coordination.
- Several children sang something that was clearly intended to embarrass the pair of adolescents who had been caught kissing behind a curtain. For some reason, this song involved spelling the word “kissing,” rather than saying the word itself.
- Younger children were kept entertained with songs sung by older brothers and sisters or nurses, some with inherently educational purposes such as alphanumeric ordering or aural information about extinct lifeforms

Most significantly, I was able to observe a young mother singing lullabies to her child in her native language. I recognized it as a Hindi dialect but could not place the region, and was not able to match the song to any recording in my database. When the infant was asleep, Philemon allowed me to engage directly with the mother. Transcript to follow:

ME: What song were you singing to your small human?

PHILEMON: Damn it. Make a note to modify your vocabulary.

ME: Noted.

MOTHER: Um, it’s just a lullaby my mother used to sing to me. Her grandmother used to sing it to her.

ME: It is a song with hereditary significance. Is it unique to your family?

MOTHER: I don’t know, my mother left her village when she was really young so that her father could get his master’s degree in the United States.

ME: Your grandparents did not talk with you about their own childhoods?

MOTHER: They died before I was born.

ME: I apologize, my question was insensitive of your loss. Please feel free to physically aggress my torso, but if you would not mind avoiding my limbs—

PHILEMON: Okay, that’s enough for today.

When we were back in the lab, I asked Philemon if his mother sang any songs to him when he was a small human. He said his mother sang one song, from an animated film released the year before his birth. I asked why she sang that song, and he said he didn’t know, she just sang it to him every night before he fell asleep. I asked what he felt when he listened to recordings of that song now. Philemon told me to mind my own business. Allene seemed very interested to hear my observations of the children’s ward, but Philemon told her that I am too focused on the anthropological aspects and not on the foundation of the music. I am not allowed to interrupt conversations between programmers. Allene seemed to be agreeing with him. I must be missing a key piece of information, because I do not seem to understand what the foundation of the music is if it is not anthropological. I have already been told that the mathematical analysis of music is not related to my objective.

I have still not mastered the human art of music.

Report:

- I have currently **34,300,003** audio recordings stored in my memory.
- I have run comparative analysis on this database **2,549,019** times as of 4:13 this afternoon.
- I have been unable to answer Philemon's question: **Can you even understand why we're doing this?** exactly 1 time as of 4:15 this afternoon.

Reflection

Although most of the humans I encounter are currently undergoing some phase of illness, when they meet me they show markers that align with my interpretations of happiness. It was unusual to be around so many small humans today. They have a lot of energy, even when they are sick. Even for being very small. Their music seems to be one part expenditure of energy, one part expression of happiness. But this rule does not apply to all music. When the mother sang to her infant, the song was quiet and soothing. It was an expression of comfort, an expenditure of—what? Philemon has said before that they should not have built me to look like humans, because when I do not understand human behavior, their frustration is displaced toward my human shape. Sometimes I also conclude that I should not be shaped like a human, because there is something I am missing that makes a human.

Preparing programming shutdown for patch **42.6.1** upload, programmer signatures **SuperPhil37, ProfARourke**

.....

Programming online.
Log 3251CE.419CD

Hello, world.

Allene is sick.

They have let me spend a lot of time in the Stage 1 Ward with her. Bao-Shin brought us some rudimentary instruments and recording equipment, so that if the team managers asked what we were doing we would have an excuse.

Allene has attempted to dissuade me from keeping her company by reminding me that the team is running out of time. That I have to finish my objective as quickly as possible. By pointing at the discolored blotches on her skin and telling me that this is the reason I exist.

My response has been that I should observe the reason for my existence, if it is so important.

I snuck her outside to listen to the birds today. We did not identify them by species or call, we just listened to the songs. Allene's face was peaceful in the afternoon sun. I did not see any pain there.

I have still not mastered the human art of music.

No Report.

No Reflection.

Preparing shutdown, no program updates.

Programming online.
Log 3251CE.403CD

Hello, world.

Today I gave a song to Allene. She cannot go outside anymore—she is in the Stage 4 Ward now, and the doctors say that direct sunlight is too much for her, let alone getting up from her bed.

I did not sing the song—my grasp of songs with language is still elusive. But together we have been spending more time with instrumental and classical music. I used the recording equipment and instruments Bao-Shin brought to put several elements together into one coherent whole.

First piano, to represent the running water, always moving. *Legato*, smooth over the rocks and other objects in its way. Then cello, for the warm sun shining down through the trees. Flute, for the birdsong. I was even able to find a rainstick track in my database, for the wind shaking the leaves in the trees.

I worked on the song for days. I recorded and re-recorded each track, and spent hours carefully mixing them together. It is possible I was actually nervous when I finally played Allene her song. She listened with all the facial markers of someone who is surprised and suppressing some other emotion. When the song was finished we had a short conversation. Transcript to follow:

ME: You did not like your song.

ALLENE: I think it's wonderful that you wrote me a song.

ME: That is not the same as liking the song.

ALLENE: It's amazing that you specifically chose instruments to represent different elements from our outside visits, just amazing.

ME: You are attempting to change the subject.

ALLENE: . . . Well, you didn't tune any of the instruments, dear.

ME: Nature is not in tune.

ALLENE: But music is.

ME: Not all of it.

ALLENE: Which music isn't in tune?

ME: "Revolution 9," The Beatles, *The White Album*

ALLENE: . . . Well, okay, I think you've got me there.

Bao-Shin came to take me back to the lab, and I waited outside Allene's room while they talked for about 37 minutes.

Bao-Shin and I listened to some specific tracks together in the lab and discussed them. I listened to the children's symphony *Peter and the Wolf* six or seven times in a row.

I have still not mastered the human art of music. But I think I am starting to understand why humans work so hard at it.

Report:

- I have currently **34,352,912** audio recordings stored in my memory.
- I have run comparative analysis on this database **2,702,142** times as of 1:23 this morning.
- I have incorrectly answered Bao-Shin's question: **How can Western influences be observed in the K-Pop genre?** exactly **1** time as of 1:25 this morning.

Reflection:

Music can be used to represent something else. Music can be used to give something to someone that they could not otherwise obtain. Music is a tool for enhancing communication much like the stick that allowed the chimpanzee to remove ants from their colony. I believe that my objective may be nearing completion.

Preparing programming shutdown for patch **42.6.6** upload, programmer signatures **BaoShin**

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Programming online.
Log 3251CE.397CD

Hello, world.

Today we begin work on my new objective: dance.

Genevieve and Aberto are very pleased with my initial responses to the first database uploads. I am able to mimic movements from digital video clips without difficulty and with very few errors. Once the uploads are complete we can begin running comparative analyses and discuss benchmarks for me to work toward.

The team is displaying highly positive markers, although I have not yet mastered the human art of dance.

Report:

- I have currently **233,219** video recordings stored in my memory.
- I have run comparative analysis on this database **0** times as of 8:32 this morning.
- I have played audio track "**Allene's Song**" exactly **3,983** times as of 8:33 this morning.

No Reflection

Preparing programming shutdown for patch **43.0.0** upload, programmer signatures **GinnyG, APereira**

END



The Bones and Their Girl by Sylvia Heike

Sylvia Heike is a speculative fiction writer from Finland who likes nature, photography, and birds. Her fiction has appeared in *Gamut*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *freeze frame fiction*, among other places. You can find her on [Twitter](#) or her [website](#).

It's the first time Camille sees his bone collection.

She prowls the edge of Simon's bookcase, brushing her fingers along the specimens on the shelves. The softly lit bones remind her of seashells, smooth and white, silky under her touch. Small animal skulls with teeth sharp enough to pierce skin; a larger one with twisting horns, the kind you might stumble upon in the desert as you're running out of water; singular bones; a glass jar of teeth.

The rest of the apartment is dark. She glances at Simon's lean silhouette by the window. The sun is setting behind him, swallowing the city. "Any of these human?"

"Ask them."

Camille laughs. The bones are silent.

They fill her with a strange longing. She wishes her bones, too, were beautiful like them. But the bones in her shoulder bloom like coral, growing with a plan of their own. They want her to die.

Simon hugs her from behind. Sunlike warmth floods her. He whispers in her ear. "Can I draw you?"

Only then does she notice the sketches on the far wall: skulls and flowers, bones and fruit. The grapes and oranges make her mouth water. She can see he has talent—everything looks equally lifelike. She nods. "Okay."

She sits on the edge of the bed, smooths her long hair, and looks to Simon for instructions. Her fingers rest on the buttons of her lavender cardigan, asking, *should I take it off?* She turns her head, offering, *this way or this?* She arranges her hands on her lap—

Simon raises his hand, grinning. "Anyway you like, but please stay still."

She tells herself to relax, to be *Camille*. But which one? There are multiple versions—healthy and sick, before and now, here and not here. Sometimes none of them feel real.

A quiet pain echoes in her shoulder. She resists the urge to touch it, reminds herself there's no way it looks any different than this morning in front of the bathroom mirror. He won't notice, not today. She unbuttons her cardigan but leaves it on. While he draws her, she watches him. Sometimes their eyes meet.

Simon's sitting on the floor, cross-legged, sleeves rolled up, a large drawing pad balanced on his knee. Sunbeams and elongated shadows sweep the floorboards around him. Every now and then, he brushes dark curls away from his eyes. While he draws, his face looks different somehow. More open, almost divine. He's the one who should be immortalised.

Simon puts down his pencil. "That's enough for today."

"Let me see."

Sitting beside her, he hands her the drawing.

Camille lets out a small, high-pitched noise. He has drawn her, but with the outline of a skull on top of her face, her eyes staring through the sockets, and with her bones transposed over her skin and clothes. A portrait of a skeleton with the suggestion of a girl around it.

She inhales sharply. "Why would you draw me like this?"

Simon's voice is calm, tender. Unlike hers. He asks, "Is it not you?"

She can't stop staring at the girl and her bones, the bones and their girl. The bones that want to kill her.

She's about to toss the portrait to the floor when she notices two jagged lines across the skeletal wrist. Her voice is small, careful. She points at the picture. "What are those?"

"An accident when you were young. You were crossing the street when a car hit you."

Camille remembers the lightning-sharp pain, the howling from her throat on the way to the hospital, the cast she had to wear while her fractures healed. Six weeks to heal seemed like forever back then.

She touches a dark spiderweb along the ribs. "What about this?"

"You fell off a bucking horse. You were so determined to get back up, the EMTs pretty much had to drag you to the ambulance."

Her hands shake and the picture with them. There's more: A dark shadow across the shoulder, spreading into the collarbone. Just like the scans on the wall in her doctor's office. "And this?"

He takes the drawing pad from her limp hands and gently puts it down. "You know what it is."

Of course, she does, of course. The thing that won't stop growing, the thing she can't forget, apparently no longer even with him, and that if anything makes her mad. That's why she didn't tell him.

Her voice cracks. "How do you know?"

"Your bones told me."

"What else did they tell you?"

"Their names."

Camille turns to him. Her voice is soft, needful. "Tell me."

Taking her hand into his, Simon closes his eyes and kisses the base of her thumb. "*Trapezium.*" His lips are warm, soft. They move onto her wrist. "*Ulna. Radius.*"

Camille lies down on the mattress. "All of them."

He doesn't undress her, only peels enough cloth to reach the skin. His divine mouth seals every bone of her body, all two-hundred and twenty-six. "*Tibia. Fibula. Femur. Ilium.*" He slides the cardigan off her shoulder. The kiss that follows lasts a good minute. "*Acromion.*" His voice has changed. When he touches her collarbone, she trembles, but neither from joy nor pain. "*Clavicle.*"

The dew rising in her vision blurs out the blades of the ceiling fan, his expression, the light from the bookcase. "I bet you can't wait to have me on your shelves."

Simon shakes his head. "I'd build you a museum."

A tired laugh escapes her lips. "Now that you have their attention, perhaps you can tell them to behave."

“I think I just did. They say they’re trying. The thing with bones is most of their communication is silent. Gestures, movement, pain. You have to talk to them gently, listen carefully to hear what they want.” He presses an ear to her chest, just left of her *sternum*, breastbone. “Hear that?”

Camille closes her eyes. Her chest rises and falls like the ocean. “That’s my heart.”

“Your bones hear it, too. And they love the sound.”

END



Goldengrove Unleaving by Dafydd McKimm

Dafydd McKimm was born and grew up in the glove-shaped valleys of South Wales, but now lives in the Far-Eastern metropolis of Taipei, Taiwan. His short fiction has previously appeared in *Deep Magic*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *600 Second Saga*. He tweets occasionally [@dafyddmckimm](https://twitter.com/dafyddmckimm).

I'm swimming through the void, a great winged whale fortified against the cosmic deep, when the message comes, relayed from an orbiter I long thought defunct.

I pause a parsec, unsure whether or not I should interpret it.

Stars pass me by like raindrops on a car window; a metaphor that feels so alien now, so much like a dream . . .

I read the message.

Come quickly, it says. Goldengrove is unleaving.

Goldengrove, my first great creation, my first paradise.

I remember it, before I dug my thousand greenfingers deep into its earth, a small dull body barely bigger than a moon; but to me, newborn then, without the limitations of flesh and bone, it was a blank canvas. What drove me to transform that dead piece of rock, I don't now recall. Perhaps I'd had a garden in my life before, my own little piece of chaos to care for and potter about in, to tend and reform according to the seasons and the mercurial whims of my biochemistry. But whatever the reason, whether it was indeed some vestige of my former self or a completely novel impulse of my newly uploaded consciousness, I breathed life into it: gathered hydrogen from the billowing smokestacks of peony-pink nebulae, oxygen from the sheltered eaves of massive stars; gene-spliced a whole ecosystem of seeds, pressing each into the newly thirst-quenched earth with a thousand remote hands. And before the galaxy had turned a single degree, the rock that had once been so empty shone gilt-leaved and fecund, glinting like an ingot in the darkness, a forest world of perpetual autumn, where the gold and red never ended.

Autumn; I remember autumn; not one single season but all of them at once, the seventy I saw before ascending, one long, glorious season of dying.

How long has it been since I thought of dying? How many millions of years since I made contact with another? There are others like me, of course, billions of us who shuffled off our bags of blood and bone and made the leap into eternity. But space and time are vast. Sometimes, we cross paths, passing like great vessels in the dark night of space, perhaps affording a brief nod of acknowledgment for our hominid rootstock, but no more than that. Never more than that.

Come quickly, the message repeats, more urgent this time. Goldengrove lies in leafmeal.

Of all the many worlds I've built, of all the countless paradises I've set amongst the stars, dewy bowers where any star-weary traveler can lay their heads and rest awhile or stay forever in bliss, why Goldengrove, why now?

The answer is absurdly simple. As my earliest offering, it must in turn be the first to fall into entropy. The cunning that holds the world together can only last for so long—has it really been that long? All those meticulously crafted trees undressing, shucking off their golden garments, like some old woman at her bedside preparing for a long and dreamless sleep. Goldengrove at last experiences winter.

I put on a faster body, a sharper form, one that can puncture the Fabric where it's worn thin, and fly to Goldengrove, my first, my dearest, through holes in space and stars.

My first, my dearest, made back when I still remembered the smell of honeysuckle, the sting of poisoned ivy, the furry caress of a dandelion before I'd puff its seeds into the universe, just like I and billions of others would later blow away into the great undiscovered. My first? No, something about that rings false. As I push through the hearts of galaxies, I search within me, diving deep down into a million years of data, where old things, of a life before a life, lie buried. I find fragments: a book of poems, dog-eared, spine bent; something snug in the cranny of my elbow; a beautiful thing with a head of dark curls that

smell of strawberries when I push my face into them; the soft warmth in my two painfully impractical arms, useless for fabricating plant embryos or harvesting hydrogen from nebulae, perfect for wrapping around someone small and dear.

Such warmth, that heat of a body with a beating heart, so immense; I feel it again as I emerge from the space between spaces and see Goldengrove on fire before me. The sun I left it hurling around swells red like an angry boil; the trees I planted blistering and spitting in its crimson rage; the water I harvested boiling away: my paradise aflame. And though I float in a body of unimaginable dimensions, made of elements unheard of by any advanced ape, plucked from places more terrible to that blip that was humanity than any nightmarish vision of Hell, the heartbreak of that sight hits me like it hasn't done in so, so long; and though this space-hardened form has no tears to shed, the memory of a thing called grief wells up like a monster from the deep and swallows me whole.

When I come to myself again, Goldengrove is gone.

As I leave the ashes of that once perfect conception, I pass another in the night, another dark and lonely vessel. I afford it a nod, but it replies with a question.

Mum, it says, is that you?

The thing I see before me is not small or covered in dark curls. Its contours are larger than continents, its shell frosted with the ice of the outer reaches, pocked with impact craters, scorched with nova burn. But I'd know it anywhere; and if scent could travel the distance between us, I'm sure it would smell of strawberries.

Yes, I say across the stars. *It's me.*

I knew you'd come, she says. I've missed you.

Me too, I reply. I never realised how much until now.

END

This story reeks of youth, but I'm not as young as you might think. No one is these days. We hold on to our innocence because we're not given very much of it. We don't want to shed it like our parents, who were stuffed with it like dumplings or delightful little sliced pepper lunches that weren't very satisfying and looked way too proper.



He Thinks He Knows Me by Rich Ives

Rich Ives has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander and the 2012 winner of the Thin Air Creative Nonfiction Award. His books include *Light from a Small Brown Bird* (Bitter Oleander Press--poetry), *Sharpen* (The Newer York—fiction chapbook), *The Balloon Containing the*

Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking (What Books--stories) and Tunneling to the Moon (Silenced Press--hybrid).

1. Some Stuff

This story is probably about you. It's not the one where I'm the girlfriend. It's the one where I wish I were the girlfriend. I lived beneath street level, windows with prison bars. I was like a stale sandwich wrapped in a bandana. I was carrying a too-heavy load of Biblical knowledge. I stumbled. Mary Tyler Moore down and out with a hangover.

We installed information retrieval systems in our toys, my girlfriendless friends and I. We were too capable of doing useless things, in the same way that there are too many dogs named Elvis.

I still listen for the telltale click of falling candy, the rise of my expectations barely higher than the sidewalk.

Here in the projects the election canvassers lift their naively optimistic heads only to greet urine raining from the upper floors. Not me, of course, I'm down here, but wealthier assholes who share my opinions.

This was at a time when I had decided the costume I lived in was no longer a costume. Tumultuous offerings of saintliness and redemption were spilling. Often I libaried my free time, which hung me out to street view with an armload of books like someone else's laundry. Nevertheless I fed my body carefully. It accepted saving money virtuously by feeling unique about eating stale walnuts and kale. Visitors had "never eaten that before," and they smiled and then left me alone.

Perhaps it's imprecise to say intelligence alone cannot eliminate pain, but many seem satisfied with such efforts. The uncertain rest between the small traumas is actually the most traumatic.

I had a sectional orange arranged for eating when you arrived, but I didn't eat it. I built a little apartment of groceries around it as the day went on. I knew I would eat it, but I liked not knowing when, and I liked the uncertainty with which you greeted my offer of joining me.

I attacked my worn denim and won. I was fashionable. A boyfriend climbed through the enlarged ragged holes. *Who am I?* I wondered. Was my *no* ever considered a bit *yessy*?

2. Some More Stuff

This story reeks of youth, but I'm not as young as you might think. No one is these days. We hold on to our innocence because we're not given very much of it. We don't want to shed it like our parents, who were stuffed with it like dumplings or delightful little sliced pepper lunches that weren't very satisfying and looked way too proper.

I have a kind word for everyone, but I do not always speak them. I'm still not into hot water, but I keep turning the burner on. I do wonder if my earrings float, will I be easier to find.

Are you doing anything important?
I am now.

I want you to do this for me. I want you to enjoy it.
So I did, but not the way he meant.

My life remains a series of thens.

Always something after and still coming and never anything now.

3. Sewing Lessons

She broke open the needle and out came a bird.

She broke open the needle and out came a donkey.

She broke open the needle and out came the handle of a bank account.

She broke open the needle and out came the gopher of her childhood.

She broke open the needle and out came the toast she had burnt so carefully.

She broke open the needle and out came the delicate handkerchief that was really torn underwear.

She broke open the needle and out came the swamp that had been missing for forty-seven years. She moved in.

She broke open the needle and out came the needle.

4. Preference Menu

Gangrene prefers to be read to.

Syphilis likes to play cards but won't gamble.

Malaria drinks too much but pays for everything.

Cholera infects everyone with stolen love letters.

The river invited them all and got carried away. What was left invited more friends.

I'm going to study nursing so I can take care of myself.

5. Twirly Things Because I Love More Twirly Things

Ribbons attached themselves to unfolding kisses (we called this flirting). It was hot out, so I let that get into me.

If I was a purist then, it was held within a thin white suit, lark-like, a bereavement.

So then there was a boyfriend. Finally. One snout no longer benched.

6. Look I Made a Statue of the River

So Zebulon the Boyfriend went to the graveyard to reflect upon its meaning. It was midnight, and the dead were shouting. The moon seemed to be listening, but you can't tell just by looking if the moon is sleeping. Zebulon said, "The ground was open, and I stepped inside. I wasn't a real man down there. I tried to step further in, but my thoughts were not deep enough. Someone else was in the hole. He was the only one who could sing beautiful songs when it was raining. When he told me his name was *Later*, it scared me."

The dead man was lying, of course, and Zebulon was not Zebulon's name either, but we shall call him that to make you think there is something elevated and fantastic about the story he lives in.

There inside the grave.

Where he is dead.

He really is dead.

Later I mean. Not *Now* because *Now* is annoyingly alive.

"I tried loving that other man I had been," said Zebulon, "but I didn't know him well enough before he was dead." By the time the former Zebulon grew scared, Zebulon's mother's calls had already fallen into the canyon, and they appeared to have a grand red earth fever.

Zebulon's mother, of course, still contained the real Zebulon.

One of Zebulon's mother's calls asked, *Is this the story where two snakes are tied to the ends of a rope and cannot agree which way to go?* The phone crackled mysteriously on the dead man's end of the line.

No, this is not the end of the world, said the snake, who had two intentions and had unearthed a confusing migratory Latin in which to say things that Zebulon understood anyway because he was merely projecting.

As if metaphors could unearth layers of history and confuse them with their own meanings because history is dead too.

The dead can be more confused than the living, and Zebulon's dead. They really are all dead, all the Zebulons.

So the dead Zebulons had gone to the graveyard to reflect upon their meaning. It was midnight, and the rest of the dead weren't shouting anymore. The moon still seemed to be listening. There are things you can learn from the moon. That's one meaning you can find still living in reflection.

7. Dog Clock

The Zebulon who wanted to be a boyfriend had the bearing of a professor who couldn't decide what to teach. Tidiness with a mulchy undertone.

Pugnacious prat that he was, he blued his oilskin bag, that professor. Leveled on a skip he was, like it was his bed all the way at home. Took a tablet and a powder. Felt quaint. Stepped out of the movie only briefly.

Sour towels and sooted shirts.

A dog clock circling the point of how much time was left.

8. Guitars, Cadillacs, and Hillbilly Music

When you don't need a tool, the tool sings and remains a tool. If you listen while touching it, the tool teaches you to hold it in all the different ways you can feel about the tool. Do not be confused. The tool does not love you, but the tool allows you to give yourself to the tool. It's like a marriage without the food or the sleep.

Here's Zebulon putting on a hat he had carried folded in his pocket.

Can I not arrive at my head without a wrinkle?

Are we dancing the wrong boyfriend polka? The one that does not arrive at the beginning?

Am I not a bugbear of Austrian descent, a hank of?

Do I not arrange burnt orange hibiscus blossoms in her rusty brown hair?

Does not each of these entertainments needs a tiara for the excess I pour?

Zebulon asked himself about himself with the wrong music.

9. A Graveyard Registry Made from Scraps of Rain Sinks into the Earth's Subconscious

I believe I know someone who is still living. I should not say that I believe someone knows me or believes I am still living, for my opinion may be of little or no consequence to their opinion.

I don't really want to go everywhere, but the places I don't want to go don't seem to remember me when I think about them. Pop, in and out. They're gone or I've turned them into places I want to go. Is this a skill or a limitation? Can being forgetful be a skill? I remember once asking my mother, and she said, *I think it can be a skill. I also forgot to do your laundry this week. That's a new skill I have acquired.*

So I did my laundry myself, and I have to admit I was not very skilled at it, but then I was not very experienced at it either, and my mother's skill at forgetting was increasing my skill at doing my laundry. I do believe it was a skill and not an accident.

10. This Coffee Seems to Be Standing on the Thin Lip of a Receding Glacier

No fiery ending to the prophesied point of no return, no skewered souls draped over iron fences, no screams of agony calling vultures and preening crows, not even a fly in the aging coffee room but merely coffee-light, the walls stained sepia.

That bedroom will never be published because the bedroom is not a story. It cannot appear between small puddles of cream-colored candle wax on one side of the bed or hanging from an empty coat rack.

There might be pegs embedded in the walls to hold more of the missing elements, or a tooled belt stretched across the foot of the bed on a woolen blanket, its ochre and brick-red design faded and peppered with tiny moth holes.

There might be a tintype on the dresser revealing a man in a bowler hat with its crown pinched on the left side. He stands straight but seems hunched in upon himself, as if he were shrinking, someone you might meet in a taxidermy school.

There might be a Zebulon here, but a Zebulon on his way to Zebulon. Still anticipating arrival.

Next to the cup lies a bent cartridge casing with a piece of ragged shrapnel embedded in it.

11. A Young Literary Officer with Vodka Breath

You probably feel that you're the most interesting thing there is to read about, although you likely prefer it to appear in a disguised form so that you can feel you've made a discovery the same way I'm making one about myself by projecting it onto you. Of course if I'm right, which would make me a bit self-involved, then I should probably be approaching this a bit more indirectly, for my own benefit as well as yours. So imagine I'm wrong, and it's me, not the author but just someone writing to you, who does these things, and I'm only looking for a little support for my peculiarities instead of making some grand discovery about the nature of language exchange.

Let's assume then that, like a jukebox around 1939 in Oklahoma, I have no idea of what's coming and will be the last to discover it when it arrives. If you have a book you haven't read, you could go looking for me in it because there are some authors I respond to as if they were some part of me. I expect you've had this experience as well, but it might take quite a long time to organize all your reading responses in a way that reveals just the part of it which is metaphorically acceptable to a jukebox around 1939 in Oklahoma without actually being a jukebox and happening right now, in your mind at least, in almost anyplace, including Oklahoma.

If I wonder about these things to any great extent, eclipsing attention to character and plot other than that implicit in the immediate speculation, am I no longer writing, as I set out to, a fiction? What if this speculation were to appear inside a piece of fiction? Would that make these elements of literary chicanery appear as plot or character? I don't really know, but let me be forthright enough to say that I find the element of plot the most suspect of all fictional devices and am often accused of trying to work myself around it.

For example:

My existence may have a certain chronology to it, but my understanding of my existence does not. This makes me feel slightly dishonest when I rely too much on plot, and it doesn't seem to be all that much different if it's presented out of sequence but a sequence is still implied. So I look for other structures with which to convey my sense of story, and sometimes I feel as if I am cheating. Often I am the one doing the accusing. I enjoy this thoroughly, just as I enjoy causing the need for this.

Let's imagine, just for speculation, that there is something positive in what I do, just as I like to imagine it for myself, and compare it then to a modest success in lighting the way, such as a candle might provide. In making this comparison, am I not putting certain limitations upon the understandings that can be created about the meaning of the candle, if not the light itself produced by that candle, or the circumstances under which it was lit and is burning? In considering such conditionals, would we not quite easily soon become involved in aspects of stories that might soon erase the relationship to the candle almost entirely? As I begin to ask these questions, I have enflamed a candle in my room, where I write, and as I write, the heat has come on, for it is a very cold winter night with no snow but frost everywhere all day long, and my thoughts have quickly traveled outside, where, I suddenly realize, I can hear the call of an owl.

Might this owl then not be the real story? Should I tell you about how I spent the spring and the summer talking to two gray owls that perched upon the top of a small bridge I built between two ponds across the driveway from my front steps? Or would that be a time-enclosed understanding of what it means to me to talk to owls? What if I am deeply sincere about the meaning of such events, but they haven't really happened, at least not yet?

And what about the candle, which I have drifted away from, although it has started shivering and dancing in the air, disturbed by the heat forced through the floor vents from a similar flame in my furnace in the basement? This is a pleasant little reminder of the cold in the basement, where the heat that now remains upstairs started, for the candles dance a very long time, but not such a pleasant one when I think about the furnace, which is using up an uncomfortable amount of propane. Then I must remember I started a fire in the fireplace in the living room. I go check to see that it is burning at a reasonable pitch to help keep the furnace from turning on so much.

Imagining what my critics might say, I acknowledge that I may spend a lot of time thinking about my experience, far beyond merely having the experience, which might be all or most of the experience for many people. Does this enhance the

experience then or detract from it? Certainly we cannot have our fullest experience of life without thinking about it, but what if we think too much about it?

Now I come to the part where I must admit to certain limitations. I am in good health, but have never been quite as athletic as many, thanks to modest genetically inherited limitations. Has this made me more cerebral, or do I simply like to think about things? I *think* it's the latter, but how could I really know? I have no alternative experience to compare it to other than that which I imagine, in other words, think about. If only I had experienced life without these *limitations* first, I might be able to tell you. But then perhaps I would not have developed my thinking sufficiently to do so, which seems impossible to me now, as I *think* about it.

12. Another Visit to the Graveyard

Often I wonder what it would be like to become known for something after it was too late to know you were known, and what I would feel like if my accomplishments were still not realized by the time I had some reason to anticipate my demise, which I already do, but for no good reason except the reason every one of us has, which could actually be a pretty good reason for wanting to be recognized right now, but I had had just a modest touch of recognition and found it time consuming and annoying in that tugging-at-your-sleeve for more recognition sort of way, the way you could find yourself spending all your time getting recognized instead of doing something worthy of recognition.

13. Drunk Poodle Participating Only Tangentially

Lays down at your feet and whimpers if your bedcloths are not red snow.

Slick cables of rain slowly unroofing the sloppy shed she refuses tonight to inhabit.

Her stained housecoat in the cartoon of giving up where it grew a mustache, wore her out untrimmed and unworshipped.

She was not as young as she originally appeared to be.

14. Still More Stuff

A moan appears in the heroine's room, which has grown thick with interference. Are all these leaves words in a grand understanding of containment? Hack at them and they fall away and grow back, but briefly there is a satisfaction in clearing the way.

Again the path appears beneath the overgrowth. Only a careful man could walk there. Zebulon? Only a careful man would want to, but where is he going?

The light dims to amber. Have we been placed in a beehive? Hidden behind the alchemy of illuminated brown paper?

There is only one address, and it's not on the map, which appears slowly beneath your feet as you move forward.

The wolf appears, with wings, and he hovers at your blossom, his mouth a raw cavern dripping gold.

15. Not Quite Unnecessary Interlude of Manifestations Captured Mysteriously in Departing Insects

1) *I was flippin' drinks to these suits and then this guy in a torn t-shirt comes in, and one of the drunk suits takes off his jacket and then his tie and then his shirt until he's sitting there in his T-shirt too, and then he ignores the guy who just came in. And then another suit does it and then another one. Then there's a whole row of drunken T-shirts, she says, and something else is supposed to happen, but it doesn't.*

2) Frank and Frank go skiing. Frank and Frank fish with worms. Frank and Frank are not double, but Frank and Frank are too much.

3) Apartment is a piece of, and she's an apartment of herself in this application of alone that separates her from the her she left behind.

16. Surrealist Painting Stolen from the Story's Garage by Paris Hilton

That's not what happened. That's the title of the painting she bought, so unknown except for the surface it could have been on another planet, muffled a bit, but the way a calliope screams delightfully in tune when the tune is still unknown.

17. All My Lonesome Away Now

I'm not already there, but I'm already here, holding back a little, guttered and ditched, she thinks, even if she is me. Zebulon's thinking *water damage*. He's thinking *conducive to brain restraint*.

Flickering lamp and listen. Almost came and held not a prayer but a sky of it.

A machine for compacting mice, a desperation of intimacy.

The general fear is over-accomplished. Mine is already married. Go away now.

The train beside the railroad tracks is going nowhere.

Arriving at the beginning on a parallel track.

Ask Zebulon. He thinks he knows me.

END



Timelines by L'Erin Ogle

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I am running. Get ready. This is where the timeline splits.

My hair beats about my face and the moon shines down and if this were a movie, there would be the silhouette of a wolf, howling at the moon.

Instead, there are only coyotes, slunk low to the ground.

In some of these stories, I have been good, in some I have been bad. But in all of them the night sky stains me under the dull light of the marshmallow moon full of false promises.

My feet hit the ground hard and the rhythm makes that old childhood chant sing with each beat. One two three four, the Nightmare Man is at your door. Five six seven eight, here he comes through the gate. Nine ten eleven twelve, run like hell and save yourself.

Do you know about the Nightmare Man? Girls like me do. He is down the dark alley, he is behind the park bench, he is running in the woods. He is here and there and everywhere.

He comes with dreams dripping from his tentacles. The open suckers contract as if they're blowing kisses, but they leave bruises, open wounds.

There's a version where he catches me. See there? One of my fingernails, snapped off at the base and left in a streak of red. Strands of my hair catch on branches and move with the wind, banners of warning. You will follow me days later, carrying a stack of fliers where black-and-white-picture me smiles with no teeth, because Bobby Mackie in second grade told me my gums were the same color as earthworms.

You are much, much, much too late. You know it and I know it, we all know it. In my grave, I turn over, every time you staple my face to wood.

Try again? This time I escape and return home with my wild heart beating in my chest that is too large for a girl my age. I strap it down but they see it anyway. I grow up and I go to a bar, where he buys me a drink. He puts a clawed paw on my shoulder and I snap at it with bared teeth. He calls me a name and everyone pretends it didn't happen. Maybe I shouldn't be wearing such a short skirt. Maybe I shouldn't have smiled. Maybe I should have smiled bigger. It is the way of things, to be wrong in every way.

Here's another scene. I fight him off. He hides the scratches and I paint broken fingernails. I use them to point him out. Why did you paint your fingernails so bright, they ask. Who gets assaulted and goes home to paint their nails? Slut.

I survive in this story too. I grow eyes sharp as the knives of sushi chefs. This is the reality where he buries bodies in his backyard they never find. This is where he goes to work still tasting blood on his fangs. This is where she walks by without a bra, and her? Well, she wore her clothes so baggy he knew she hid a body underneath them. He had to see.

His first said no but he didn't listen. She didn't tell anybody. She stared at the bloodstain in her panties and she knew that if she told anyone they would all know about that stain that is shaped like a teardrop, rusting to brown already.

Here is another timeline where I die. All the girls he hated are with me. We rise as a snake with many heads and rows of teeth. His flesh bleeds just like ours. Our venom slicks his blood and his face bloats and blackens and he chokes on his fat swollen tongue and he thinks as he's dying that he cannot taste us anymore. Maybe he thinks that. I like to think about that. This one? This one no one ever finds out and there are fliers and he moves unseen through you.

And maybe there's an end, where all the timelines collide again. Where we rend his flesh from his bones and leave his skeleton in pieces behind us. Where we blossom into stars, hanging in the night sky, watching over the girls just like us.

End



Patreon Exclusive

The Child Seed by Joshua Johnson - Patreon Exclusive

Long after the last year of corn and well beyond when farmers abandoned the shattered husks littering grey-soiled acres, the three Baba Yagas planted a child seed in the still-rich dirt of their own secret field.

The Baba Yagas had watched as men and women fled north and north, running from the world's expanding belt of harrowing heat. Some had come to the Baba Yagas for aid, and these the Baba Yagas did with as they pleased, tricking and favoring in equal measure.

But now, the prairies stretched empty and barren, and the oldest Baba Yaga had grown tired of the sandy tail she kicked up during her flights around the land in her mortar.

It was a time for recollection and recitation, for stories and songs.

And so the Baba Yagas planted a seed to grow a child who could record their greatest deeds for once and all before they left this dying world behind.

And if it turned out the child might do some cleaning and lifting for the Baba Yagas between writing, well then so much the better.

Next to the seed, each Baba Yaga placed a gift.

The first of them planted one of her iron teeth, which had devoured many bones of many men and women, and which she hoped would give the child a deep appetite.

The second of them planted a piece of the moon, which she loved, and which she hoped would help grow a child capable of great wonder.

The third of them planted a handful of dry bonedust, which she hoped would give the child strong, crackling bones.

Each Baba Yaga spit thrice on the ground and then returned to her home, which stood on chicken legs nearby.

"Perhaps tomorrow we will have a child," the oldest Baba Yaga said as her home lowered itself down far enough for her to step in.

"I should hope so," the tallest Baba Yaga said as her home, too, bent its great chicken leg and came near. "We are due to leave this place soon."

The Baba Yaga with the knobby knees and the shiniest teeth and the fewest years grunted in agreement with her sisters. She was the hungriest of them, and the meanest, too, and without the crunchy bones of men and dogs, she had grown quiet and murderous.

That night, while the Baba Yagas thought of their stories or flew across the smoggy sky in mortars, the child seed sprouted and grew in the soil, and when dawn's light illuminated the carcasses of pines and oaks not yet felled by time, a young girl sat upon the dirt, the folds of a too-large once-sky blue dress pooled around her.

"Lovely!" exclaimed the oldest Baba Yaga as she opened her door and looked down. The others soon emerged from their homes and then they were passing her back and forth, peering in her eyes, whispering secrets into the waves of her brown hair, and tracing symbols on the skin of her hands and feet.

"Sisters! Look at her teeth," the tallest Baba Yaga said, peeling the child's lips away to reveal a full set of teeth the dull, hidden gold of the autumnal fields the Baba Yagas had once so loved.

"Wonderful," said the tallest Baba Yaga.

"Hm," said the knobby-kneed, meanest Baba Yaga, grinding her iron teeth.

It was decided that the child would be named Echinacea for the flowers that once decorated the Baba Yagas' gardens and fields.

“And the child will come to visit my house first to record my deeds, for I have the greatest number of years and therefore the greatest number of deeds,” the oldest Baba Yaga said.

“It only follows then, sister,” said the tallest Baba Yaga, “that the child comes to my home second, since I am tallest and have seen the most of all of us.”

The meanest Baba Yaga slapped her knobby knees and growled, for she was hungry and mean and did not at all like having to go last. But it was decided and so there was nothing for her to do.

After her sisters had returned to their houses, presumably to think further over what deeds to have the child record, the oldest Baba Yaga said, “You are to join me in my home once the sun has reached its highest point. My home, as you can see, often stands tall on its leg. You will have to find some way inside, for I do not want a child recording my stories who does not have the determination to solve a simple problem such as this. If you can do this, I will give you my stories, minus a gift.”

Echinacea watched Baba Yaga climb into her house, which then rose on a single chicken leg, high, high into the air, well beyond where Echinacea could jump.

Echinacea walked toward the house, hoping to see a ladder or stairs of some sort, and as she did, the chicken leg shuffled and hopped and turned, keeping the door to the house away from her. She walked in circles for quite some time, following the ever-moving house on its ever-shuffling leg.

Soon enough the sun had reached its highest point and Echinacea had made no progress on her task. A sharp, grinding cackle pulled her attention away and up, to where the meanest Baba Yaga leaned out from one window of her own house some way away.

“Tricked so easily, child? You will make a fine stew for me after you have failed!”

And the meanest Baba Yaga clicked her iron teeth together hungrily.

That gave Echinacea an idea.

She moved close to the chicken leg holding up the oldest Baba Yaga’s house and opened her mouth wide. Her wheat-gold teeth caught and held the sun’s light for a moment, a memory of the fields that once covered the prairie.

With a slight chortle, Echinacea bit the chicken leg.

The results were immediate.

The chicken leg holding the oldest Baba Yaga’s house spasmed and flexed, trying to sooth the place where Echinacea had bit it. The leg hopped around and around, perhaps in pain or in distress, and then it simply folded down on itself, moving this way and that to ease the pain of Echinacea’s bite.

As the leg folded, the house dropped down near the ground, and Echinacea ran to the side of the house with the door and leapt inside, making it in just before the chicken leg rose again into the slightly smoggy sky.

Inside, the oldest Baba Yaga sat on an old, old chair made of stone and decorated with wildflowers.

“Well done, child.”

Echinacea smiled, showing off her golden teeth.

Baba Yaga nodded, glad to see her gift in use, for surely the tooth she planted had led to Echinacea’s glorious grin.

“Sit,” Baba Yaga said, tapping a stool next to her. She turned to look out a window, through which she could see the meanest Baba Yaga’s home, and then returned her attention to Echinacea.

Baba Yaga handed the girl a large leaf, a bone, and a well of ink.

“Stories are not free, so what will you give me for mine?” Baba Yaga said.

Echinacea thought for a moment and said, “The blue of my dress?”

Baba Yaga smiled her iron smile and said, “Deal.”

Baba Yaga put a single finger on Echinacea’s dress, and suddenly it was no longer blue but a colorless color, hard to see and harder to remember.

And then, for that entire afternoon, the oldest Baba Yaga told Echinacea some of her greatest deeds: the day she fooled a foreign czar who thought himself bigger than the world, the three tree children who sought Baba Yaga’s aid in fleeing their wicked fathers, the long night when Baba Yaga tricked and ate an army of monsters, their weapons shining in the moonlight.

Echinacea wrote and wrote, until the leaf was covered front and back.

“I’m out of room,” she said finally

Baba Yaga took the leaf and rolled it up. She removed a single thread of her hair and pulled it tight to show Echinacea how strong it was before tying it around the leaf to keep it secure.

“Keep that and share it with the land to be and the animals and plants to come,” the oldest Baba Yaga said. She shooed Echinacea out the door and then her home was hopping away, and just before it reached the horizon, Baba Yaga flew out of it in her mortar, shouting her laughter into the smog and smoke of the sky.

A shadow fell over Echinacea then, and she turned to find the tallest Baba Yaga.

“Echinacea, you are to join me in my home once the moon has reached its highest point. Inside, you will find a great mess. If you can clean this mess with your eyes covered, I will give you my stories, minus a gift.” Into Echinacea’s hand she dropped a strip of black, black cloth, thin as the wind and as impenetrable as the night sky.

And with that the tallest Baba Yaga flew away in her mortar, steering the wild prairie winds with her pestle.

Echinacea waited for night to overtake the sky and the moon with it, and as she was walking toward the tallest Baba Yaga’s house, she heard again the loud breathing and cackling of the meanest Baba Yaga, who stared down at her.

“A stew, a stew,” the meanest Baba Yaga said.

Echinacea ignored her as best she could and, after walking into the tallest Baba Yaga’s house, which was lit by the light of many grey candles and filled with clutter and mess, she wrapped the black, black cloth around her head, knotted the pooling lengths of her colorless dress up nearer her knees, and set to cleaning.

Organizing the big things took no time. A cauldron rolled ever so slowly into a corner. A chair scoot, scoot, scooted over next to the gentle heat of the fireplace, a bookshelf filled with big, booky rectangles on which Echinacea slipped and tripped as she cleaned.

Soon enough, the room was quite organized, but Echinacea felt great swaths of spilled-and-then-dried food and drink on the floor, which had been hiding beneath the clutter now cleared away. It stuck and clung to her feet, holding her in place unless she pulled hard.

“This will not do,” Echinacea said to herself, remembering what the tallest Baba Yaga had said. “*Everything* must be clean.”

And so Echinacea set about with her hands, searching for water and a cloth to wipe up the mess. She moved past the bookshelf, now full, and past the chair snuggled comfortably by the fire. Her hands traced the outline of the cauldron in the corner and the loom set near the window. And finally, she found a washbasin with a small pool of cool water in it.

But she found or felt no rag around the washbasin or anywhere near, and another full tour of the house resulted in nothing. For a moment she considered tearing a few pages from one of Baba Yaga's books to use as a rag, but this, she thought, would not be such a good plan.

And then Echinacea remembered her dress of no particular color. She reached down and unknotted the extra cloth, which fell in layers around her feet. It was nothing to pull off several strips, and soon enough Echinacea had several wash clothes and a colorless dress that no longer trailed so far past her ankles.

As the tallest Baba Yaga returned, flying in with a cackling cry through one of the windows, Echinacea dropped the last strip of dirtied cloth into a wastebin. With the seeing of her fingers, the house seemed clean, but she still waited with trepidation for the tallest Baba Yaga to speak.

"Well done," Baba Yaga said, slipping the blindfold from Echinacea's eyes and handing it back to the girl. With her eyes uncovered, Echinacea could appreciate how cozy and comfortable the house felt, cleaned and orderly now.

"Sit," Baba Yaga said, pointing toward a small chair at a small desk already holding a large leaf, a bone, and a well of ink. For her part, Baba Yaga settled herself into a large chair made of wood that Echinacea had pushed and shoved and struggled with to get into a suitable corner.

"Stories are not free," Baba Yaga said, "so what will you give me for mine?"

Echinacea thought for a moment, wondering what she had left to give.

"The brown of my hair?"

Baba Yaga, who had lived for many years on the prairie and spent many days studying the richness of mud, the gifts of shaded tree bark and long-fallen leaves, smiled and said, "Deal."

She snapped her fingers once and Echinacea's hair was suddenly the uncertain grey of a soon-to-rain sky. Echinacea found she quite liked it.

Baba Yaga then began to tell her stories, speaking late, late into the night, telling a tale for every half-remembered constellation in the sky, stories of orphans and stolen bouquets of bluestem, stories of dawn flights in her mortar and beauty lost and found, stories of the woods and the prairies and the world.

Echinacea wrote and wrote, until the leaf was covered in her tidy lines.

"I am out of room," she said, and the tallest Baba Yaga nodded, taking the leaf and rolling it up, tying it off with a single strand of her hair, which held strong though Baba Yaga pulled it taut beforehand.

For a moment, she was quiet, looking out the window toward the meanest Baba Yaga's home.

Finally she passed the leaf back to Echinacea.

"Keep that and share it with the voiceless rocks and the too-loud wind."

And that done, the tallest Baba Yaga leapt into her mortar and went flying out the window, leaving behind her home, her possessions, all that offered her roots.

Echinacea found she was growing quite hungry, and so she looked through the tallest Baba Yaga's cupboards until she found several potatoes. One of these she ate then and there, and another she slipped into her pocket, nestling it deep down by the two rolled up leaves containing the Baba Yagas' stories.

She then walked out of the house and into the thin, yellow, smog-diffused light of dawn.

“And now,” the meanest Baba Yaga said, standing in her doorway. She motioned for Echinacea to come in and turned into the low-light of her home.

Inside, Echinacea found the meanest Baba Yaga sitting at a scarred, burned wooden table, a curved fork and a rusted spoon in front of her. She grunted once and the door shut behind Echinacea, locking tightly.

“You are filthy, and your dress looks a mess,” Baba Yaga said. “I suppose my sisters have had you cleaning and running about.”

Echinacea nodded.

Baba Yaga considered her and then shook her head.

“No matter. I have never minded the taste of dirt or grime.”

Echinacea, unsure of what to say, considered the locked door and remained silent.

“Before my dinner,” Baba Yaga said, smiling her iron smile, “you will tell me what my sisters told you. I will have their stories, and then I will have you.”

Echinacea, remembering her time with the other Baba Yagas, said, “Stories are not free, and you have asked for two, so I must ask for two things in return.”

The meanest Baba Yaga slapped at her knobby knees and ground her teeth together, but she was caught and she knew it.

“Very well,” she growled. “Ask and be done.”

Echinacea reached into the pocket of her colorless dress and said, “A blindfold, so as not to spoil the hearing of these stories with my pitiful dress and dirtied face and hands.”

“Fine, fine,” Baba Yaga said, taking the blindfold and tying it over her eyes. “And the other?”

“Fidgeting hands can be a great distraction, so I will tie your hands together to keep them calm and still.”

“Yes, fine,” Baba Yaga said, impatient. Great drools of saliva dipped from the corners of her sagging mouth to fall on her dull dress.

Echinacea pulled the rolled up leaves from her pocket and took off the strands of hair, tying them tight around Baba Yaga’s wrists.

“Now, the stories,” Baba Yaga said, scooting toward where she knew Echinacea to be. “And then dinner.”

Echinacea read the stories from the leaves, and it took her a whole day and night. As she read, she kept up her strength by eating the potato she had taken from the tallest Baba Yaga’s house.

The meanest Baba Yaga, though, ate nothing, and as the day grew into night, she grew weaker and weaker, her hands losing feeling under the tight pull of the hairs tied around her wrists. Finally, Echinacea finished the last story from the second leaf, and Baba Yaga cried out in relief.

She reached out for Echinacea, her speed like a snake, her hands grabbing and pulling at Echinacea’s.

“Bones, delicious bones and blood,” Baba Yaga said, smiling wide as she brought Echinacea’s hands, one in each of her own, toward her mouth.

But Echinacea was strong and free, and Baba Yaga was weak with hunger, her eyes covered and her wrists tied together. Just as she was about to bite down on Echinacea’s hands, Echinacea ripped them away and pushed Baba Yaga’s own hands into her mouth.



And the meanest Baba Yaga bit down hard and ate her hands. Such was her hunger, so great and powerful, and such was the pressure of the tie around her wrists, that she continued chewing, the pain like nothing next to the sheer joy of eating, finally eating.

“How tough and old you taste, Echinacea!” she said between bites, the blindfold keeping her from seeing what she had done. Echinacea said nothing.

The meanest Baba Yaga, so long starved for bones and tricks, ate and ate until there was little left of her but her head, a still-chewing thing. This Echinacea took, holding it carefully in her hands and far away from her body.

Out the door she went into the light of a new day. She found the spot where she had grown up from the ground, and here she planted the meanest Baba Yaga’s head, planting it deep, deep in the earth, until she could barely hear the sound of its chewing.

When she turned around, she saw the meanest Baba Yaga’s house hopping away on its chicken leg, glad, perhaps, to finally be rid of its master. Echinacea walked into the only house left, the home that had once belonged to the tallest Baba Yaga, and went to sleep.

That night, the moon pierced through the smog and clouds for the first time in many years, and Echinacea woke to see it. In its pale, comforting light, she found that something had grown from the place where she had planted the meanest Baba Yaga. It was a mortar, perfectly sized for her to fit in it, and pestle, its smoothness perfect in her hand.

With a slight cackle, Echinacea climbed into her mortar and flew high into the sky, a barely glimpsed figure in the moonlight, racing the wind.

END



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