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The Poison Swallowers by Logan Murphy

Two Little Gods were smearing cold soot onto their cheeks when the tide finally came in.

The smaller of the two was named Ogden, and he was the God of Irregularly-Shaped Fruit. Most of his divine duties involved watching for people who saw a pear that looked a bit like a Buddha, or a banana that was oddly straight, and bestowing the inspiration to photograph these miracles and share them on social media. The soot on his face circumscribed his eyes like the face of an owl, and gave him the power to see a new color that he named after his mother, whose name means the smell of rain.

Kinneret, the Goddess of Every Third Dog, being the artistic sort, had given herself a soot mask comprised of a repeating geometric mandala that hurt Ogden's eyes to look at for more than a flicker, but allowed her to sound perfectly reasonable in any argument she might choose to make for the next few minutes. This would be very important very soon, as Wren, Not Yet Goddess of Anything, was standing a few steps away, still very unsure of this whole god thing, but definitely *not* unsure of

how her family would feel if she suddenly had godly duties to perform in addition to the household chores she was already behind on.

Farther up the beach from the ceremony, a stray dog barked hysterically at a gull. Being one of the two thirds of all dogs not under Kinneret's purview, the three of them could only wait impatiently until it stopped.

Both Little Gods turned to face Wren with arms wide, as though heavily rehearsed, marching clockwise around the dead, wet ashes of the fire they'd made earlier, and intoned the opening words together: "If any of you Big Gods are watching, please be cool with this!"

They performed some kind of dance, and decided that was probably good enough as a show of reverence.

Ogden cleared his throat conspicuously and dug around in a pocket sewn into the lining of his older brother's jacket. He retrieved a mechanical pencil and a notepad spiral bound at the top. He clicked the pencil a few times and licked the lead. His face was owl-sooted and implacable.

Dense seafoam accumulated around their ankles, rising over the fire pit, sizzling heavily in the few remaining coals. Ogden asked, "So, have you decided?"

"Well—"

"Let her think a bit, Og," said Kinneret, standing in wet socks. "It's a big decision."

"She already mentioned that she wants The Things on the End of Shoelaces. That's a very respectable realm to govern." Ogden was already writing it down on his pad.

"Aglets," Wren said, correcting Ogden.

"She doesn't want *Aglets*," Kinneret said, scrunching her nose at the word. "Not with so many other options! She could do something cool like Tea Infusers Shaped Like Animals or Nonstick Frying Pans or even Flattering Camera Angles!"

And Kinneret went on like that as the tide came in, while Wren slowly backed away, keeping her toes just at its edge, watching the Little Gods argue about which realm she'd choose, watching them become torsos sticking above the choppy surface of the water. She didn't have a problem with The Things on the End of Shoelaces, not really. It's just that they seemed kind of practical, and not too much extra work after school, and people don't really even notice if they have them, so she could kind of coast on that for a while.

She cupped her hands, scooped up some seawater, and gulped it down.

Kinneret and Ogden went silent. "Did she just—"

"I think—"

"You were supposed to wait until the third part of the ceremony," Ogden said dejectedly.

"Well? At least tell us what you chose," said Kinneret.

A rush of nausea swelled from Wren's stomach as the seawater churned her gut. She pulled her hair to one side and retched. A flood of little clear plastic shoelace tips tumbled out of her mouth and fell into an impossibly neat and tiny pyramid.

Wren looked pleased with herself.

END

Logan Murphy teaches English as a foreign language to university students in China. His work has appeared in Pithead Chapel, The Masters Review, Split Lip Magazine, and others.



Replacement Parts by Michael Milne

Nancy fiddled nervously with the adjustable bed, raising and lowering her husband in it. Evan wore low-cut scrubs, and they tried to make jokes about his shaved chest, sharpie-lines grazing his ribs.

"I paid a little extra so I could watch the procedure," Nancy told Evan. Their insurance being what it was, Nancy was paying for much of this out of pocket anyway. Even if the surgery was mostly-life-saving.

"That's so macabre, babe." Evan tried to laugh, but a butterfingers orderly was making a mess of sliding an IV shunt into his hand. "Are you going to bring popcorn?"

"It's not technically 'macabre' unless you're going to die," she said, punctuating with a smirk. And then she welled up and wrung her hands. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

“Forget it,” Evan said, his eyes already droopy from whatever flowed into him. A doctor wheeled his gurney away, and Nancy trudged to the gallery.

Nancy settled into her high seat, trying to look appropriately detached from the weak form in the centre of the room below. Anonymous, turquoise-clad surgeons covered Evan head-to-toe: Nancy felt like she was watching a stranger get sliced up. There were close-up angles on the incision site, and the doctor wore a live-cam strapped across her forehead. Spire Re-Animate Ultralungs were the most trusted brand on the market, so Nancy wasn’t worried. Much. Still, after Evan was opened up, Nancy gasped aloud and gripped her chair. The doctors groped at his first blackened and cancerous organ, they severed and clipped, they moved it away. It looked forlorn in the chrome basket.

The new pair of organs seemed manufactured and alien, two childish pink ovals, quivering in embossed glass cylinders. Saline sloshed behind the corporate logo, a winking blonde little girl. Nurses popped off the cap of the first container, and one by one the doctor wedged the new pieces into Evan.

Later in the recovery room, Nancy dragged a scratchy low armchair beside the hospital bed and attempted to sleep next to her husband. The IV tube kept tangling as she tried to hold his hand through the night. His breath was ragged, and she moved to his chest to listen as he slept. Although she would never voice it aloud, she was afraid she would hear the distant, mechanical clank of metal and turning gears. (“That’s not how they make them,” Evan would have said.)

“I’m quitting smoking,” she announced as soon as he woke. He was quitting too – he had no choice. His model came with anti-nicotine features, only twenty million Won extra, and Evan’s body simply could not process cigarettes anymore.

“I’m so proud of you,” Evan croaked weakly, as he would do every morning for the next month. And when she inevitably relapsed and took her smoking underground, when she began hiding her cigarettes in the far back of the vegetable crisper, Evan smiled and pretended not to notice.

The second and third surgeries were technically necessary, Nancy guessed. Spire Ultralungs had compatibility issues in about 10 percent of the population, the consultant told them. Perfectly normal. Should be cleared up if you got the heart and kidney package. If it meant his survival, Nancy was happy to pay, she was happy to pack a little more overtime matchmaking corporate vendors to the various appendages of the telecom giant she worked for.

After recovering from the last procedure, Evan began working out. He bought new shoes and new clothes that clung to him, and he worked until the clothes stopped clinging. Nancy watched Evan gradually shrink in size, smaller each morning as he rose before the sun to go out running or swimming. The new look was appealing, Nancy certainly thought, though she didn’t understand Evan’s sudden need for change. And she felt, though Evan never said anything aloud, a growing pressure for her to start working out or drinking kale smoothies.

“He’s cheating,” Emily told Nancy plainly at lunch. The sisters had eaten together every Tuesday since being old enough to eat lunch without their parents. Nancy had never missed one.

“Why would you say that?” Nancy asked. She clenched her chopsticks in her hand.

“Who’s he trying to impress?” Emily took a sip of her drink and shrugged, gesturing at Nancy. “He’s already got you. There’s some piece on the side.”

Nancy loved Emily, even though she sometimes felt like slapping her very hard across her face, hard enough that the entire restaurant would turn at the sound. But they were sisters, and Emily was essentially her best friend, and loyalty and habit kept Nancy close to her. She changed the subject, but let the comments stew and percolate for days and weeks after.

“I just feel like getting in shape,” Evan assured her. Nancy did not bring up Emily’s crackpot theory, but still felt a need to poke around. “And it will speed up the recovery. Maybe I’ll jog home from the hospital!” They were on their way to the movies, a loud and boorish comedy they both would have once loved, though she was starting to find them immature. Nancy now watched them mostly to please Evan, though she sometimes suspected he was doing the same for her. “You should come with me some morning.”

So she woke with Evan, foregoing her own alarm and waking with his, rolling through the warmth of his side of the bed before trudging to the wardrobe. She found exactly one pair of shorts that could be used for physical activity, too tight, and she felt embarrassed as they left the house. He smiled every single lap, most especially when he passed her, always encouragingly, telling her how great she was. And Nancy felt deeply, mutely furious, resentful in her arms and her legs and her everything, she wished desperately to be back in bed, but she smiled back and didn’t let it show.

Nancy watched the second surgery, looking away when the surgeon plunged wrist-deep in Evan and wrestled his liver out of him. She told Evan later she felt like a voyeur, and she didn’t go to the viewing gallery for the next one, she never saw them toss Evan’s heart into a wastebasket or fit him with a smooth, meaty replacement. She had once nursed fantasies of going

into medicine herself, but the thought of people's lives in her hands, juggling vital organs like overripe oranges, had warded her off.

Waiting in the hospital café re-reading a battered paperback, Nancy received a text alert that the heart surgery was over. Pale and unconscious, Evan was rolled into an expensive recovery room and Nancy curled up uncomfortably at his side. She thought of all the new things inside Evan, and wondered how much of Evan they would have to trade away before he became somebody that wasn't Evan.

Nancy sometimes dreamt of herself on a cool grey operating table. A surgeon in magenta scrubs would split her open lengthwise like an avocado and Evan would be curled inside her, a soft and snoring Z-shape. The doctor would scoop him out with a kitchen knife and toss him into a container of medical waste. They would pop a fresh husband from a bulk set, handsome and roundish thirty-something men stacked like spoons in vacuum-sealed plastic. They would slide the new man into the Evan-shaped groove and suture Nancy back together before she could brown, and they would whisper and hope her body didn't reject the transplant.

Her sister Emily listened when Nancy told her about the dream, though Emily openly complained at hearing about this sort of thing.

"Replacement boyfriend, huh?" Emily laughed a little. "Give it up, Nan. The technology isn't there yet."

They were sitting at a bar on a dreary, drizzly Tuesday afternoon: the usual lunch had turned into drinks. Evan told her she didn't need to take the day off work: the full-gastro replacement surgery would be long and she could just meet him at the hospital later. She had not cried about it until she told Emily, at which point she cried a lot.

"And now he's a raw tetra-vegan, and we can't even shop at the same grocery store anymore." She sobbed into her wide-brimmed margarita, knowing she sounded obscene and petulant and not caring. "And I took the day off work anyway because I hate my job, and I only stay there to help pay for the surgeries, and if I tried to change jobs I think it would stress him out." Would it stress him out enough to leave, if she couldn't maintain the medical costs?

"Is the new diet thing for the surgery?" Emily pretended not to notice Nancy making a scene, which Nancy appreciated. "I know some of those new intestines have those weird bovine genes wired in."

"No. He said he just . . . wanted a change."

He had said more: that he felt in a rut, that he felt his feet dangling over the grave, that he hadn't bothered to improve himself until the malignant tumour wakeup call. Nancy tried not to see herself in his words, tried not to make it about her, but couldn't help it.

When Evan awoke the next morning, Nancy gingerly spooned him scoops of the flavourless, new-organ-safe hospital gruel. He winced with every swallow.

"What does all of it feel like?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Evan patted the air around his flat stomach, avoiding actually hitting himself. "I can't feel my lungs or my new guts, Nan. No more than you."

"But I mean . . . is it different?" She looked in his eyes. "Do you feel different?"

"Well." Evan was quiet for a moment. "I feel better. Better than I have in a long time. Like I'm becoming the best me." He shifted uncomfortably in his bed. "I know right now it doesn't look so attractive, but you should really consider it, Nan."

They rehashed the same old conversation: maybe Nancy could get her own set of new lungs, or a new heart or knees. Nancy told him she didn't need new anything, she liked all of her old things, and they all worked just fine. Evan looked at her appraisingly, not judgmental, but pausing occasionally as his eyes drifted past some part of her, as though mentally carving a turkey. Here they could stitch on a space-age polymer new breast, there they could glue some sleek bionic shoulders.

"I'll think about it," Nancy said, like always.

When Evan finally fell back asleep Nancy slotted her hand into his, now familiar with the zig-zag wrap around of the intravenous shunt. Would her hands fit, clasped in his, if she had them replaced? She sat watching Evan's heart monitor, counting the beats until she too fell asleep.

They drove quietly in Nancy's car, a battered and aged Camry she had driven since age eighteen. It was a twenty-minute path to the hospital, where Evan's new bioengineered eyes were waiting for him. They spoke over the histrionic sputtering of the muffler.

"We don't have to do anything special. You'll still be recovering." Nancy was taking the path of peace, as she often did.

"It's our tenth anniversary. We have to do *something*. I mean, maybe let's not go to the movies or the theatre." Evan reached up and covered both of his eyes with his hands. "But a nice dinner? Or we could go somewhere, travel. We could drive—you could drive us out to Montreal. It smells nice there." He laughed.

Nancy was taking the scenic route to the hospital on Evan's request, so that he could see the oaks and the maples and whatever meagre wildlife survived along the brim of the freeway. He wouldn't be able to see for three weeks, and had to get both ocular transplants done at once or the upgraded vision input would go wonky. "Half-a-pair of 3D glasses," Evan told her. He said he wanted a last look at the world through his old eyes.

"You'll be blind, and I'll be preparing for my surgery. We could just stay in. I'll cook something." Like their last three anniversaries, each of which Nancy had loved more than the last. They downloaded *The Princess Bride* and shared a liter of ice cream cradled in Nancy's lap, every time. Always French vanilla.

"Em's probably planning a surprise party anyway." Evan smiled. "And you won't need to prep for the surgery. Really. You have nothing to worry about."

She didn't, but she did. Her toes had always bothered her, and they seemed like a fair moot point in Evan's crusade of medical self-improvement. They were small, Nancy hated them, and they were as far away from her face as possible.

Originally Evan had talked about both of them getting their eyes done, staggering the surgeries out so they could nurse one another through their temporary impairments. It would be romantic, he said.

Their coffee table sagged under catalogues full of grotesque irises: heterochromia was all the rage, and for a little extra you could install polka dots or paisley. The back pages of each magazine contained glowing reviews from satisfied customers, their pictures featuring harrowing, cartoonish new eyes. Didn't she hate wearing glasses, and didn't she wish she had telescopic vision and could see the pained grimaces on the faces of worried airplane passengers high overhead?

Nancy had been terrified at the idea of any surgery above the neck. She imagined an overzealous surgeon and a misread medical chart. Someone would slide open the top of her skull like a can of soup, tipping her over and dumping out the contents. And then they would plop in a fresh smooth brain, free of her own cultivated neuroses. The doctors would fold in new convolutions themselves, they would massage the tissue and re-design Nancy from the top downwards. Her toes had been her bargaining chip, and she thought of them as far away, practically not even part of her.

"I'll see you soon," Evan said with a wink. They pulled up to the passenger drop off at the hospital and Evan gave Nancy a chaste kiss before hopping out. After the campaign of passive aggression last time, he had scheduled this visit for the weekend so Nancy could be nearby. Nancy drove off to park her car.

In the wide, empty parking lot Nancy climbed onto the hood of her car to sit and watch the sunset. She imagined what it might look like with a new pair of eyes, and she found herself shaken at the idea of orange never quite looking the same.

Nancy thought about marching into the hospital and slapping the scalpel from the doctor's hand, of shielding Evan's eyes and whatever else of him he hadn't thrown away. She thought of a dumpster behind the surgical wing brimming to the top with discarded eyeballs, brown and blue and hazel, still perfectly good, maybe a little worse for wear. Left to rot, together but alone, decoupled and jumbled around like they were in a bingo ball cage. As night fell, Nancy thought about getting back in the car and driving home, falling asleep in their bed without Evan, and letting him wake up on his own, calling out her name and being the one left wondering.

But Nancy didn't leave, as she knew she wouldn't. She took off her shoes and socks, letting her toes stretch into the cool night, and she rested her head on the windshield of her weathered and withering car. When the call came, she walked inside, shoes in hand, to find her husband.

END

Michael Milne is a writer and educator living in Switzerland. He's written stories in coffee shops in Canada, Korea, China, and many other places. Being from nowhere anymore really helps with making science fiction. You can find him on [Twitter](#) or his [website](#).



Tuesday by Emily Livingstone

Tuesday originally appeared on [Ellipsis Zine](#).

When I got up this morning, I left my spine in the bed. It was strange to stand up with no spine—I flopped and melted, and my head slid down my neck. I grabbed my spine, but my hand melted down it and some of my fingers came off into the sheets.

I was afraid to shower like this. I got a dress on somehow, though the sleeves clung to drooping flesh that couldn't quite be called arms, and the rest of it covered parts of me that I think used to be showing.

In the mirror, I was something like a Picasso painting. My mouth was down on my shoulder, and my hair was growing out my wrists like furry bracelets. My teeth sprouted out of my collarbone like armor.

I got toast and coffee into the mouth. I put on shoes and a coat. Matt came out of the bedroom.

“Jen, are you off already?”

I wasn't sure I could speak from my mouth where it was.

“Jen, are you all right?”

He kissed me on my face, and I thought, *well, that's not where my mouth is*, but when he kissed me there, my mouth *was* there, and I felt a sense of relief. But then it slipped back down my neck to my shoulder. I found I could say, “Yes, I'm fine. Will you get off me? I've got to get to work.”

His eyebrows went up and his eyes said, *Why? What's wrong?*

I left.

My feet came off in the subway, but I found I could move without them. I sort-of oozed forward like a blob, or a snail.

At work, while I was typing, my hands came off altogether, and I thought about leaving them, too, but really, while you could do without some things, hands seemed a pity to let go just yet, so I oozed over them and took them back into myself—one up by my right eye and the other close to the midpoint of the left arm. The fingernails fell off in the process, and were lost in the spaces between the keys on the keyboard.

A siren sounded as I was walking back home from the subway, and with the vibrations, several of my teeth fell out onto the sidewalk, rolled away, and dropped through an iron grate.

By the time I got home, I was feeling pretty grim. I glanced in the mirror and saw myself, less of a painting and more of a blank, with only one eye remaining (I'm not sure when the other one dropped out—maybe in the break room at work), the mouth somewhere in the back, a hand coming out the neck, such as it was, and no hair left on the head, having all drifted down to the ankles by now.

I poured myself a bath and mingled my molecules with the hot water, so that at least I became a clean blob. Though it seemed a little troubling to let the water out, in case I dissolved and went down the drain, I risked it, and seemed actually to emerge a little more whole, with the fingernails of the right hand restored, and my toes more or less in the right places, though the feet still seemed to be missing.

The door to the apartment opened and shut, and I waited for Matt's voice, but it didn't come. I flowed into the main room of the apartment, and Matt was sitting on the couch with his head in his hands.

“What's the matter?” I asked, and my lips found his cheek. My hand found his back.

“Everything,” he said. “I'm falling apart.”

“Me too,” I said.

He looked up at me, and he met my eyes (I had two again).

He stroked my cheek, and held me, and our molecules pressed against one another, and maybe some of them merged and separated, and some of mine became his and some of his became mine.

He said, “I lost my job today. I'm broken. Am I a man at all?”

“Yes,” I told him. “Yes, with eyes, ears, teeth, and a heart.”

“That's a relief,” he said, and it felt a little like a joke.

“And am I the woman you married?” I asked.

He studied me a moment. “You're Jen,” he said. “I'd recognize you anywhere.”

“Then I guess it will be all right,” I said.

We kissed, and the cells of our lips pressed together and created blended traces too small to see without a microscope. We went to bed and moved our strange bodies together until they felt less strange. We slept, and our fingers drifted into each other, and our closed eyes slid down our cheeks.

END

Emily Livingstone is a writer, tutor, mom, and English teacher on hiatus. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Necessary Fiction, The Molotov Cocktail, Cleaver Magazine, Fiction Southeast, and others. Pieces have been nominated for Best Small Fictions, Best of the Net, and the Pushcart Prize. She tweets [@Emi_Livingstone](#).



A Nearly Beautiful Thing by Megan Arkenberg

All summer, the nights stayed brutally hot, ninety degrees at midnight. Esther would find me in the early evenings and we'd escape to cool places, air-conditioned movie theaters and basement galleries, then a nocturnal cafe on Telegraph Street where each table had its own electric fan. Esther would fold our straw wrappers into wrinkled sea creatures and set them floating on the stream of air, animating them with a few words that—she once confided—hadn't been spoken aloud in forty-four centuries. Then she'd fill a tall glass with ice and eat the cubes one by one, crunching them between her teeth.

Back at my apartment, we lay naked on top of the blankets, soaking in the breeze from the open window. By morning we were cold, our skin goose-bumped and dry. I had no appetite, and would often wake hours before dawn to the ache of acid gnawing at my empty stomach. Esther and I were always picking up the thread of an interminable conversation, never quite beginning, never reaching the point. It was too hot, I told her, to think about the future. She said she agreed.

Then one night, after we'd spent the evening spooning and listening to a muffled argument between the men next door, she roused suddenly and demanded that I wake up, this was important. There was somewhere she needed to go.

“‘The place with no return’?” I repeated. “That doesn’t inspire confidence.”

“Rough translation,” she said—then shook her head. “No, wait, that’s a pretty solid translation. Look, Nin, I need to see someone.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“No.” She had been silent for a moment, like she needed to think about it. She raised herself on her forearm over the bedframe’s protests.

“Listen,” she said, and I could see the dampness glistening on her forehead, “I’ll need you to bring me back. You understand? It has to be you.”

“Okay.” The word fell from my mouth before I could question it. *Did* I understand? I rubbed at the half-dollar of tension that had come to rest at the base of my skull. At least in part, I thought. I knew what she needed me to feel, and knew I was the closest alive to feeling it. “Sure, of course.”

She inched closer to me, until her soft breasts pressed against mine and the smell of her rose sharp and green in my nostrils. “Thank you, lover.” Her long hair was everywhere: across her shoulders, across the pillowcase, in my mouth.

It’s pointless, asking forgiveness for this, so I don’t. I’m only trying to explain.

How does a mortal woman meet a goddess? The usual way: through mutual friends.

Someone was throwing a party at their loft in the low, swampy district east of the canal. Early in the evening I’d planted myself on the Hollywood Regency settee, a muscular production of tufted seafoam velvet. A girl I occasionally flirted with was there, her boyfriend out in New York for the weekend, and she’d sit too close and jostle my thigh and ply me with dark-papered cigarettes she rolled herself. When she got up to piss or fetch another beer, I stretched my full length on the couch and eyed the evolving ecosystem, the knots of artists, actors, freelancers, and graduate students holding their beer bottles by the neck and gesturing emphatically, shouting about Freud, or politics, or the *Tribune*’s new drama critic.

At one point I glanced across the coffee table, a slab of live-edge walnut laden with takeout Thai, and saw Esther paging through a hardback edition of Anna Atkins’s algae cyanotypes. She wore a T-shirt as blue as the photographs, and lipstick so red it was almost black.

How does a mortal woman seduce a goddess? Call it blasphemy, but truth is, it isn’t difficult. You let her catch you staring. You laugh at her jokes. You make room for her on the couch, but not too much room. When she steadies herself with an arm across the settee’s tufted back, lean into it as though it were an embrace. Tell her you like her smile.

The morning she left, we took the fire escape instead of the lobby stairs, exiting into the alley between my apartment building and a Greek diner. The dumpsters stank of lamb grease and old tomatoes. There on the dirty pavement, equidistant between the walls, was a puddle. Not brown and shallow as it ought to be, but blue like a slice of ocean.

Esther knelt and I crouched next to her, steadying myself with one hand on the concrete. The puddle went down, down, impossibly deep—miles, it seemed—and at the bottom, something gray and extinct swam in a circle. I could feel the wake the creature dragged behind it, heavy and cold, pulling on us like gravity.

Esther gave my free hand a squeeze. “Wish me luck, lover.” Then she touched the water. I thought she would sink, dive through those sharp impossible miles to the depth where the beast circled. But the change came faster: her hand lost color, then solidity, and the whole volume of her cascaded into the puddle, like gallons of water poured from nowhere.

The surface tension held. There wasn’t even a splash.

I peered down, fighting vertigo, and saw that the prehistoric beast had vanished. Now there was nothing by which to judge distance. I stayed in the alley, resting my ass against my heels, until my thigh muscles began to tremble. Half the morning I sat there, as it became embarrassingly clear that I wouldn’t be able to do the only thing she’d asked of me.

I went to work. What else could I do?

I work four days a week in the plant gazebo at a hardware yard on Cedar, watering and rearranging the plastic trays of succulents, zinnias, embryonic tomato vines. After my shifts I eat an early dinner at the bar across the street, whose main attraction is an old jukebox, a midcentury Wurlitzer, its lights the shape and color of overgrown citrus gumdrops. The song library has expanded since Esther left, Dolly Parton and Elvis Presley supplemented by names I recognize from a college course on folktales: “The Black Bull of Norway” and “East of the Sun, West of the Moon,” both by some indie pop-punk group called Psyche and the Golden Asses. Drops of water bead on the title cards. I munch my fries and drop a few quarters into the machine, punching numbers at random, and hum along, off key, when I can guess at the lyrics.

I’m not an idiot: I can see where all this is tending.

Duke, the bartender, takes the stool across from me and passes me quarters. He’s a bull of a man with the most beautiful nose I’ve ever seen—broad and uncannily symmetrical, underscored by a septum piercing. Duke is also a witch. The bar mirror is papered over with Tarot cards, The Magician plucked from fifteen or twenty different decks. I asked once how he could perform readings with a trump missing, and he glared at me as though I’d attempted to juggle his barware.

“In one version of the story,” he tells me—it’s all he tells me these days, the infinite variations of this one tedious tale —“there’s a meat hook. Inanna takes one step into the underworld and her sister strings her up like a slab of beef.”

The image flashes in my brain: Esther’s little body, so thin the ribs showed, her brown skin dusted with hair like threads of copper; the hook pushed through her shoulder, emerging from the place I so often pressed my lips. I imagine the sound of it in motion, a dry, sterile moan.

“What pisses me off,” Duke says, although he never really sounds pissed off, “is that she wouldn’t have refused you anything. Absolutely nothing, if only you’d asked.”

“I know.”

“And now what?” He spreads his massive hands. “It could be worse, Nin. You could be cleaning bloody shirts or sorting eighteen different types of grain. All you had to do was love her.”

I nod. It was the easier task. But not easy—not easy.

One evening, the third or fourth time she came over, we visited a strange storefront museum of Paleozoic fossils, ammonites and trilobites and a perfect acanthodian, a so-called spiny shark, its fins splayed like sails. In bed that night, Esther stretched out on her stomach and I rested on top of her, my cheek pillowed on her coarse hair. Her breath raised and lowered us both. She wore cologne, a heated, grassy vetiver that made me think of cornfields.

“I like your warmth,” she murmured. “You’re like a desert.” She turned and kissed my forehead, licking a bit of salt from my hairline. I couldn’t know it then, but that was the closest I came to loving her.

The next morning, we waited in line at the coffee cart outside the bus station, and she took an ammonite fossil from her purse. I couldn’t imagine how she’d slipped it out of the exhibit. She pressed the ridged spiral into my palm: “*Lover, you are the best thing in my life right now.*” She said it in the same tone she used to order her latte.

But they were fatal words. After that, there was no recovery.

Don’t misunderstand me. What I felt for her was often reverence, an admiration bordering on fear. If one could argue oneself from awe into passion, my love for her would have been cavernous, vast, Silurian. But it wasn’t. Awe is an emotion of surfaces, of mountains and lava and floods; it dries up quickly.

I explain this to the damp spots on my ceiling.

The thing is, I want her out of my life. The puddle evaporated from the alley but I find fragments of her everywhere. Straw wrappers. A whiff of vetiver. A fossil sitting on my counter, a perfect Lake Bonneville trilobite, but in striking cyanotype blue. I grab a book from my shelf—*my* book, one I read long before I met her—and there are water stains on the title page.

What does it take to banish someone you almost loved? How do you evict the dead from your life?

This strikes me as something she would know.

I find Duke on my day off, a bit earlier than usual. He's alone at the bar, muttering something to the jukebox to make the lights change color.

"I've been thinking," I tell him. "There *has* to be another way. Everywhere has a back door. I suspect you can find it."

He wrinkles his perfect nose. "You're not wrong."

I follow him into the bar's dim single-occupant restroom, a damp cave of graffiti and discarded paper products. Duke gestures for me to lock the door while he clogs the sink with paper towels. When I turn back, his pen knife rests open on the sink's edge. The stained porcelain frames a familiar sight, and in the clear shaft of water, two prehistoric beasts roll in deliberate synchrony.

"Give me your hand."

I hold it out, swallowing. Duke jabs the penknife under my thumbnail, quick and shallow, freeing flakes of potting soil and dry skin. They drift into the sink, followed by a single drop of blood.

For a moment, nothing.

Then one of the creatures breaks free of its orbit. The floor begins to shake.

"I should tell you," Duke says, raising his voice as the rumbling grows louder. "There's a catch. She's not going to remember you."

"Will I remember her?"

He must have seen the traitor spark of hope in my eyes. I feel the shove, like an animal charging, then the back of my skull colliding with the toilet seat.

When I come to, there's a spot of blood on my hairline, and someone is rapping at the restroom door. I raise my hand to the lock and notice a strange bruise beneath my thumbnail. Dark and ragged, like the shoreline of an evaporated lake.

END

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Missingness by Roberto Bommarito

“Catch fire? Well, then, at least I’ll be a spectacle to behold, don’t you think?” Nozomi’s skin looked translucent, delicate. As if a simple sneeze could be enough to hurt her. “And stop looking at me like that!”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Everybody does.” She stepped lightly across the floor, moving next to the open window. “They all look at me as if I’m some kind of soulless *thing*.” She was making an effort not to give in to anger and keep her human form.

There in the distance, the Flaminio Obelisk looked like a spear pointed at the blue sky above. Every day Nozomi watched thousands of people flocking in Piazza del Popolo, looking for something to buy or just taking a stroll down Via del Corso.

Thanks to the Alps, the Mediterranean Sea embracing her and a fair amount of luck, Italy was one of the places less affected by the consequences of the MAD Days. MAD as in Mutual Assured Destruction.

Watching people going by was all Nozomi could do. Steel bars kept her isolated from the busy capital outside.

I was paid to teach her stuff. History mainly. The history of Western civilization. She could recite by heart the whole list of Roman emperors. From Augustus to Heraclitus. That's roughly eighty names. Nozomi was smart alright.

And pretty sad, too.

She turned around and pulled up her sleeve. Coming through the sealed window, July's midday sun drowned her slim silhouette in a bath of light.

"Do you see this?" She stepped forward. Her arm had creases, two creases criss-crossing each other a few inches below her elbow.

"Nozomi!"

"I could be so many different things," she protested, an accusing look in her eyes, "but you wouldn't let me. I'm nothing but a prisoner here."

After the MAD Days were over, the Bel Paese became a safe harbour for artists and scientists, engineers and architects, all sharing the same hope: fuelling a second Italian Renaissance that could help the West back to its feet.

"You're not a prisoner," I said. "We're keeping you safe. That's all we're doing. This is for your own good." I really believed so at the time. Or at least in part.

She was fragile, that much was true. But there was more to it than that. Nozomi was the only known member of her kind. If what remained of the civilized world was to flourish once again, an anomaly such as herself needed to be studied.

"Here I'm everything but safe. I'm . . ." She took a deep breath. Anger for her meant folding into a tiger. Or sometimes a bear. But never when I was around. "Six thousand, one hundred and eighteen."

"What's that?"

Whether it was the names of Roman emperors or numbers, Nozomi was pretty damn good with details. "That's the exact number of miles separating me from home," she replied. "Six thousand, one hundred and eighteen miles."

Nozomi's mind was precise and so was the mastery of her body, every time she changed it. "She"—in official reports, the pronoun *she* would always appear in inverted commas—was retrieved by a reconnaissance unit in the midst of a rubble Tokyo. Soldiers looked at her through their gas masks with dazed disbelief, as if it was all a joke. And yet she was alive and conscious and undeniably so. After the military brought her to Rome, it took her two and a half months to utter her first words. Nothing too articulate—just "Yes" and "No" (with an early tendency to pronounce more of the latter than the former). And it took her twice as much to tell us her name: Nozomi. That's Japanese for *hope*.

She suffered from recurrent panic attacks back then. Possibly because of bad memories coming back to her, who knows? She wouldn't say.

Still, our psychiatrist believed these to be a clear symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. When she panicked, she would fold herself into something not much bigger than a shoebox, and more or less of the same shape.

When Nozomi grew up, things changed. She discovered she could fold and unfold herself of her own will.

That's also when her panic attacks stopped.

"Japan is no more," I said. "You know that. Half of Asia is just—" I could have said deadly gasses. Radioactive rubble. Darkness and civilizations gone forever. Instead I left the phrase unfinished. "This here—here in Rome—this is your home now."

She shook her head. "No."

Nozomi and I had one thing in common.

The MAD Days took everything away from me—people I loved, family, dreams—levelling London to the ground in a matter of seconds. I woke up one day, watching my old life reduced to ashes on a 46-inch TV screen. I think it was the main reason why I accepted the job. I found myself being a lonely history professor in a foreign country, left with nothing but a sense of desolation and loss, consequences of a war I didn't even fight.

“You have to accept it,” I insisted. “And you have to stop hurting yourself, understood? The more you morph, the more time it takes for the creases to disappear. We don’t know yet what implications it might be having on your health. You already seem to be growing weaker, and if the creases tear, you may even disintegrate.”

No reply. All you could hear was the indistinct chattering of passers-by coming from the street below, muffled by the rising whine of made-in-Italy cars.

When Nozomi discovered she could change shape at will, she started testing her limits. She would change into the shape of a rabbit or a beautiful white lily. The more she practised, the more complex the forms she could mimic.

It was a genuine spectacle to behold. To see her morph like that. I did once. I saw her change into a unicorn. Such beauty. It felt like a pair of eyes weren’t enough to take it all in. It took her seventy-six folds to achieve that.

“Augustus was born as Gaius Octavius Thurinus, sixty-three years before Christ,” Nozomi said, dispelling the silence engulfing us. “And died at age seventy-five.” She stepped closer. “Is this what you want? Names and dates? Do you really think knowing all these things changes the way I feel?”

“All I’m saying is there is no other choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” she replied, her hands closed into a pair of fists. “Always.”

And this was just one of our many fights, which were becoming more and more frequent as time went by.

Pictures of Nozomi morphing were often distributed to the public. People talked about her over an espresso. But she was never that important for them. She was just a *stranezza*, as they used to call her. A bizarre curiosity. Maybe Nozomi reminded them too much of a nightmarish war everybody was trying to forget. Talking instead about the new bridge being constructed between Sicily and Calabria or the Serie A *Derby d’Italia* football match between the Internazionale of Milan and Juventus of Turin felt more like moving forward.

And yet the question persisted: what was she? Maybe the result of an experiment conducted by the Japanese government? Some kind of a mistake?

Missingness: lack of data. Scientists used that word a lot around her. They studied her non-stop, day and night. With not-so-well-hidden CCTV cameras. Samples. An infinite number of questions she had to answer daily. Did you like your meals? Did you learn any useful things? Did you have any recurrent thoughts today?

The way I saw it, she was beyond logic, measurable variables and rationality. She couldn’t be understood by attaching machines to her. As unscientific as it may sound, eventually I came to think of her as the last living embodiment of a bygone civilization. The spirit of a culture trying to survive in material form.

Whatever she really was, she wouldn’t say. But she kept on repeating the same phrase: “I don’t belong here.”

218° C is the temperature at which cellulose catches fire. The sun wasn’t strong enough. Nozomi didn’t burn up. But she did fold her body sixty-two times, taking on the shape of a bird. A crane. One that could fit through bars.

The last time I saw her, the day before she attempted her escape, she smiled at me. It was the first and last time she did that. Her face looked so serene that it caught me off guard, and I forgot to smile back..

And she just said, “*Ciao*.”

There is a fine line between giving up and trying the impossible. But I believe Nozomi thought it could actually work. That she could soar up in the sky and fly east, high over the ravaged Balkan mountain range, the sterile wastelands of Russia and Asia’s radioactive valleys, and reach Tokyo.

Now everybody remembers her only as Paper Girl: a freak, an anomaly, the *stranezza* that could fold and unfold herself like an origami.

“It’s not right,” I say to our team psychiatrist, while looking at a picture on the wall of the sun playing hide and seek behind the Colosseum. “All she suffered was for nothing.”

He replies by saying what I already know: my work here is done. But the point is, I often see Nozomi in my dreams. She only appears to me in her most beautiful shapes. And every time I hope to hear her say, “I’m home at last.”

To hear her say, “I’m happy now.”

“You developed a feeling of guilt,” Dr. Russo adds, raising from the sofa and putting away his notebook. “Guilt for not paying enough attention to what she was saying to you. That’s why you keep dreaming of her every night. You feel responsible for her death.”

But the word *missingness* has another, much more direct meaning, too. One that doesn’t need any complex psychoanalytic interpretation.

It simply means absence.

END

Roberto Bommarito was born on the island of Malta in 1981. After spending his childhood in Italy, he went back to Malta where he currently resides. He has won a number of different Italian literary awards, including the Premio Robot, the Premio Short-Kipple for science fiction and the Premio Polidori for horror fiction. His first short story written in English, “Stasis,” has been published in 2015 by Daily Science Fiction. He currently collaborates with the publishing house Kipple Officina Libraria. Find him on Facebook [here](#).



Planet Sea Fog by Julie A. Hersh

The new planet had rolled out of a bottle of Advil that morning. The bottle had been opened and dropped, and a few of the Advil fell out and rolled under the dresser, and the planet,, with its fog and ocean, fell out, too, and rolled under the dresser.

The bottle had been almost empty to begin with. The planet joined the stray balls of thread and dust and long pieces of hair on the floor under the dresser. The person to whom the Advil belonged didn't want a planet and hadn't known it had been in there. It was a good thing he hadn't swallowed it; it doesn't work on pain. He had pain that a new planet could not solve. When he saw the planet, several days later, he went into despair. The planet, rolled up in black threads and long orange hairs, meant that she would never love him back. He held the planet, smoothing the threads over it like a nest, and inside the nest was sea and fog, and outside there was no love.

We sat in the sea and looked at our planet and the fog. It was more purple than blue, really. We sat in our boat or just in the water itself, bobbing, warm, looking at what we had made. The planet sat or bobbed or suspended in the water, half above, half underneath or inside, restfully. The fog didn't move, toward or away or shivering. We looked at it all.

"We shouldn't have done this," I said.

She shook her head. "We're no worse than those," she said, gesturing in the opposite direction, toward the other nine. "We're no worse than the people who did those." They were far away and we couldn't see them. We could only see ours, but we didn't go any closer.

On the seventh day he bent down to talk to us. "She will never love me because of this," he said, his face and head large as he spoke down to us, but not as large as the planet. He held it in his hand, with the sea and the fog.

"It is what it is," said Zhanna.

"That's not an answer," he said. "Why did you do this? Why here?"

"We didn't," I said. "It just happened. We were only born a few days ago. I don't know."

"Is that true?" he asked Zhanna. Her hair was black so he trusted her more. It was always like that.

"Yes. We were sea, and then we were in the sea, looking at the planet. You dropped us and we swirled around, almost lost our heads under the water, then righted and looked at each other, ourselves, the planet the same distance away, the water the same evenness."

"Don't talk like that," he said. "It doesn't belong here."

"I don't know that yet," she said.

"Why won't she love you?" I asked.

"Who would?" he asked.

"Besides that."

"It's not right. It's not clean."

"The fish will fix that," Zhanna said, thinking of maybe the dust in our waters, the animals who would eat it and turn it into sand and seaweed.

"Not that kind of clean." He had turned his ear so it was closest to us, and all we could see of his entire self were those complex bony curves. It looked like a strange kind of human, I thought, forgetting who he was. He looked like a different kind of earth, a complicated land you could get lost in, painfully. We were small and spoke quietly. When he answered, his voice came from far away, halfway across the sea, curving around with the wind to get back to us long after he had spoken.

"So what kind? We can clean. If we have to."

"The kind that kills you," was all he said, and he lifted his ear away from our planet, and the rest of him, too, and rolled us gently back under the dresser, where it was safe, but stuffy.

On the twelfth day of our lives a woman came over. She walked by the dresser on the way to the bathroom and when she came back out we had rolled into her path. We wanted to see her. We had rocked back and forth in our boats or in the water until the water began to wave, and then the planet, and the fog, until it all began to move, and we rolled a few steps before bracing ourselves, trying to hold on to the water in case it moved too far and too fast and off the planet entirely.

She bent down to look at us. She put the tip of her pinky in the ocean; it clung to her, a large drop of it, half our ocean, and she sniffed it, put it to her lips.

"What is it?" she asked him as we heard his feet approaching.

“A small world,” he said. “It just appeared.”

“How did you end up with it? Why here?” she asked again.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“That’s not quite right,” she said.

“I know.”

“So why not get rid of it?” she asked.

He didn’t answer.

Back under the dresser, we fell asleep that night with the light and dark of the other world, since ours had none of its own, had just a reflection of the lamps above us and otherwise its own smooth grey of light. I woke hours later in the dark, the lamps off and the grey darker, so that the world looked lost, the water, the fog, and the planet all the same shade and almost the same color. Zhanna was not there and I was by myself.

“Zhanna,” I said quietly. I put my foot into the water so that it felt the cold and the wet, trying to find her foot, to kick it, to kick her awake and into answering me. My foot didn’t find anyone. “Zhanna,” I said louder. I started kicking the sea around me, trying to move her, move myself, find something, but there was nothing, and the sea did not make sound, there was just deep black thousand-meter silence and dark grey. I slid into the sea, treaded water faster, feeling I might vanish into it. Zhanna, who had started at the same place as me, had gotten somewhere that I had not, and had not reached back to pull me after her. I took a breath and put my whole head under the water, into that land, and below could see the planet and some strands of seaweed, but no sand, no bottom, no legs. I stayed there, breathing the water under there, until my hair was wet all the way through, and so was my head. Underwater, heavy, I drifted toward the planet, until I clunked against it like some kind of metal against another kind. Zhanna was not there either. It was only me.

I closed my eyes and slumped all the way to the bottom of the sea, sat on the sand at the bottom, my mouth half in and half out of the water, things coming into me, dirt and water, and people, probably, smaller people in their size-of-sand worlds. I lay with my head along my knees under the water, which was good to breathe, rich like chocolate milk. Down there I could see the end of the universe, and I looked through its curvy glass to the floor below the floor. I could see the hair of Zhanna, and the rest of her, a drowned fish in the wrong room.

I lay there watching her for a long time, trying to get her attention. Calling to her, though it was hard to speak under water; the words bumped against an edge of the universe and disappeared, carried off by crabs and waves. I knocked, lightly, put my cheek to the edge, and waited.

In the morning the man walked into the hall where she lay, began to step on her, then stopped and noticed her, somehow, put his foot somewhere else. He noticed, maybe, that the speck was different colored, some black hair, the rest lighter, grey, blue. He stopped and looked at her, while I, so close, at the sea of the end of the world, watched him. He picked her up, or rather touched his finger to her so that she came up onto his skin like a piece of dust does; he looked at her, breathed gently on her, poked at her with the short nail of the other hand, then put her on the dresser and left. He came back a few minutes later with a little boat, just a tiny bent square of aluminum foil, and put her gently in the bottom, and put his finger up to the water, shaking it so the boat and she slid off and onto the water. He was surprised that he was able to; he thought that it was difficult or not possible to touch that world. The boat was too large for her, too large for the planet, so she looked like a little mouse with a whole ship.

I didn’t want to swim back up to see her. If I touched her and she was fully dead, she would never return to life. It was better to give her time to come back. The man walked away, came back dressed; peered at us to see if Zhanna had moved yet; looked again, noticing that I was gone. He thought I had fallen off, that I was dead too, though he didn’t care as much, Zhanna was his favorite. I wondered if he had stepped on Zhanna the night before, so that she had died in a soft human pillow, and he wondered that too. I knocked on the edge of the world. He couldn’t hear anything, we were too small, so I knocked harder and fell out in a rush of water and spots of algae. He didn’t notice that either, and I sat in the very small puddle on the floor, looking up at him.

I watched him going about the end of his routine, doing things too big for me to see, making sounds too big for me to hear. The whole world above me one giant color, then another color when I moved my head around. It was less interesting than it

was from my planet, where I had my own frame of vision and my size and Zhanna's size to back me up—this is the right one, this is the real size of the real world—and maybe the atmosphere disillusioned everything, the air between us making a large lens that shrank him into a larger version of us.

I did not like it down there. It does not take long to figure out something is not right for you, or at least not habitable. I fell back on, to where I had started, in that sea near the planet. The sea where I had actually been born. Swimming slowly through my mother water, I came finally to Zhanna's boat, pulled the edge toward myself so I could climb in. I fell right to the bottom and toppled almost onto Zhanna herself. I touched her; she was cold, pink. The wrong color; she must have breathed in the wrong thing for too long. I pulled the boat over our heads and we fell into our water. She fell toward the bottom, though there was no bottom and she simply fell. Holding her arm so I would not lose her in the dark, I held her mouth open so she could breathe, breathe in the dark blue and the barnacles and the grey and the small sandy creatures. She probably didn't know what death was yet; she could pretend she hadn't found out and come back. I knew everything, I'd lived for hours longer than she.

I prodded her around the neck, the lungs and mouth, trying to persuade her to breathe. She did finally, though the air or water didn't seem to be going anywhere because she wasn't breathing them right. She smiled in the bottom of the water, the air water swimming around and through her, like between her fingers but through all of her. Her chest didn't move as she breathed, but her ears and feet and hands and arms did, all swaying in and out.

"Let's see what's at the bottom," she said and wrenched her arm free of me and plummeted down feet first, like she was on a rope or was a magnet. I let her go, hearing her strange unhuman voice waft behind her in my ears; she sounded like a painting, a fish, her voice slithery, blue, and oiled on. I let her go; she was not the same species as me anymore after dying. I would miss her, though, and wonder what she found down there, how she spent her days, and whether she built a soft rocky castle to live in. I floated above, watching her dark hair spiral farther away.

I pulled myself out of the water and back into the aluminum-foil boat, which was cozy, almost, like a home, though too big. The boats we had at the beginning, the boats we were born in, were gone. Now, having grown older with what happens in life, I was bigger and needed a bigger home. I did not think of the man and of the larger earth for the next few days at all. I was thinking how I might live here. I was turning soft and watery, almost slimy, and could swim and walk quickly through the land. We had gone through one life cycle here. It was interesting once.

Outside, the man and the woman are talking loudly in the kitchen. It's been a week or two; she's forgotten about it and forgiven him. She gets up to go to the bathroom and says, "Remember when you had that strange toy in your closet? What was it, like a little marble that looked like a planet. I thought you were crazy."

He pretends to laugh. While she is washing her hands, he walks to the dresser and picks up the planet, sea and all, and swallows it, washes it down with a big sip of water. It goes into his stomach and spreads out around him. He stops standing on the world and starts standing in a sea, where there are stars, and planets around him. He looks around, wonders where the dresser has gone, and the woman. He looks for me, but I am way too far away. This is a whole universe. He's inside out, becoming cold and soft and damp, and blue and grey, like a large fish. He looks around himself and flies to another planet, and then another, like walking quickly. He's cold and tastes the dirt of each planet, feels the no air around himself. We are the same size now, only I am bigger.

END

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Yolk by Jennifer Fliss

In the kitchen, I find Clara by the sink, looking out the window. Still. Dozens of eggshells are scattered along the granite counter. Broken in halves, segments, shiny egg whites hang off jagged edges. The morning light falls across Clara's messy braid, making her hair look almost red. But she shifts, and her hair is brown again.

I want to apologize for last night, but I can't seem to shape my mouth in that big O required for Sorry. So instead I ask, "making breakfast?", but she says nothing. I move to her side and look at her face, to see what—if—she is looking and I see a drip of yolk threatening to spill off her chin. She is chewing and she chews and chews and it looks like she has raided a hen house.

She notices me, maybe, and says, "the eggs." She looks down at her hands as if meeting them for the first time. "The eggs have all gone."

"Gone?"

“Gone bad.”

It is then I notice that there are broken eggshells in her hands. At her feet. Yolk painted across her shirt like modern art. There are shards in her hair too. I can tell from the way she stands – one foot out to the side, knee bent, hip resting against the counter – that her back still aches from carrying the baby even though it's been months.

Clara woke early to make a strata. Eggs, bread, milk, a vegetable or two. Something lush for Jonathan on his first day of his new job. Last night didn't go as planned and she just wanted to make everything right again. Six months ago, she had taken maternity leave; he had lost his job. She was still on leave—unpaid—and wasn't sure how she could go back. The people in the office knew, of course, sent her a dozen roses—which seemed a weird flower to choose for death. Her out-of-office still said *“I'm having a baby! Be back in three months. If you need help, please contact Marie at . . .”* Clara sent emails to herself at least five times a day just to read the message.

When Jonathan got the new job, she assumed things would get better, things would take on a routine, and somehow that would make life bearable again. She wasn't sure why she thought this. They received the news and she bought some lingerie—a deep burgundy silk. She had to struggle to get her postpartum body into the gauzy bra and matching panties—which felt extra cruel. But Jonathan had a penchant for lacy things, so she traced the stretch marks with her fingers as she positioned herself in what might pass as sexy on the bed, and waited. She fell asleep to the sounds of the TV downstairs – some twenty-four hour news channel talking about tragedy.

Things between them were tense long before that unbreathing child slithered from her, that tiny body all blue-white in vernix and slippery with blood. Bank accounts had dwindled and Clara was nesting: white wooden crib, organic mattress, polka-dotted sheets, onesies with stripes—always and only stripes, she had decided—, and a moon-shaped night light. Jonathan grumbled and sighed when he eyeballed the credit card statements. She stood ready to defend her purchases, but he never said anything.

Now, several months later, Clara cracked an egg into a clear bowl and immediately released a sob. There, in the golden yolk, she found the curved body of a baby chick – not much more than an embryo, really. It was scrawny and flimsy, all curled into itself. Clara's breasts began to leak as she pulled away the viscous goop with a fingernail, taking care not to harm the creature. She laid a clean dish towel in a plastic storage container and then placed the little corpse in it, like a bed. Like she was tucking it in, and she thought, *yes, I could've done this. I could've done it well, see how I didn't cover its mouth. See how I placed its head down first, softly, so softly, and then followed with the rest of the body?*

She cracked another egg and found a miniscule stroller. Another, and she found a bottle – she was only going to breastfeed, she thought. Another egg, a pacifier – blue. She washed it under the faucet and closed one eye looking through it. It made everything take on an aqua hue, like she was underwater. She placed that too on the counter. *Crack, crack, crack.* The collection grew: booties – wet from the yolk, the smallest book – pages warped with moisture, jar of baby food. All the things a baby would need, some were things she had also bought for her own child.

She cracked open another egg, banging it first on the counter, then cracking it in half, discarding the shell, holding the yolk, allowing the whites to drip between her fingers. There she discovered a small diaper. It was heavy due to the wetness of the egg. She had forgotten diapers. She was going to bring her baby home and didn't even have diapers yet. *Shit*, she thought. *What kind of mother am I?*

With one swoop of her arm, she wiped all the things away, off the counter, into the sink. Flip went the garbage disposal switch – *churn churn*, the sound of metal stuck in metal. She ran the water – she heard you were supposed to do that. Help things go down better. Her hands were covered in egg whites and yolk and she felt everything was slippery. She brought her fingers to her mouth, tasted the metallic slickness of the egg white.

I put my hand on Clara's back. She stiffens, then softens. When I place my two hands on her hips, she melts into me. I wipe her hands. When I see the small box with the baby chick, I say we will bury it. I say, I'll be right back, and go upstairs.

The hallway is dark, doors closed, curtains shut tight – as they'd been for the past few months. The one open door is to the nursery and a small fractal of light issues into the darkness.

It is from the nightlight, the moon-shaped one Clara had gotten for the baby, and I allow it to guide me into the room. There I stand in a solemn darkness, seeing the outline of the crib and the mobile, turning slowly on some unseen and unfelt breeze. It is beautiful. It would've been perfect.

I open the drawer and pull out the folded collection of onesies, pocket the tiny socks. Pull the sheet from the crib and grab the plush monkey. Before I leave the room, I turn out the nightlight, pull open the curtains.

I startle when I notice that Clara has made her way upstairs. I pick a small piece of eggshell, barely noticeable, from her chin. She turns the nightlight back on, says, "we may need it to see."

END

Jennifer Fliss is a Seattle-based fiction and essay writer. Her work has appeared in PANK, Hobart, The Rumpus, Gigantic Sequins, and elsewhere. She can be found on Twitter at [@writesforlife](https://twitter.com/writesforlife) or via her website, www.jenniferflisscreative.com.



The Whist Clowns of Old Frizzle by Ivy Spadille

The Shadow Pantomimes must have drawn the ace of spades for me; that was how I ended up with the Whist Clowns of Old Frizzle pounding on my front door. I was in the shower at the time, my hair matted in suds of rosemary-mint shampoo. They jiggled the lock before the door creaked open. I peeked out of the bathroom, my hair dripping onto the cold tile as five clowns piled into my apartment.

“Time to pay your duty, dear,” they chanted as they fell to the floor cackling.

I put on my bathrobe and stepped warily into the foyer. Feigning surprise, I asked, “How'd you get in here?” I knew there was no getting away.

“We've got *all* the master keys,” said the first clown, peering into the bathroom. He fluffed his strawberry-blond afro with a pick bearing a power fist.

Like most people, I'd been primed for a Whist Clown visit and forced to read *The Rulebook* as a child. I remembered the Balloon people's warning: *There's no preparing for Old Frizzle from East Whist; unlike the other clown guilds, they follow no rules.*

"But in the Balloon people's story, Whist Clowns come for eight-year-old kids," I protested. It seemed odd when they never showed up back then, but as the years passed, I'd forgotten all about the rite.

"*They drew your card last night.*" He jabbed me with the afro pick. "No hearts, no clubs, no diamonds. *You* got spades. That's us — Old Frizzle. Under the Shadow Pantomimes' Law of Improvisation, spades pay the death tax for the other clown guilds."

"Death? I prefer the word *transformation*," said a second clown, winking at me from the kitchen. He adjusted the lime-green chef's toque perched on his head and put on a blue apron.

"Say, Snazz," he called to the clown with the strawberry-blond afro. "We *are* twenty years late. Shouldn't we see who's next on our list?"

"Non-cipher!" shouted Snazz. "Old Frizzle dwells outside of time. Eight, twenty-eight. Makes no difference. It's her Saturn return and time to collect. I need to get in here." He pushed past me carrying a pink beauty bag, swaying his hips. "It's time for me to rock my press-n-curl."

"But I have to get ready for work."

"Work, work, work," said Snazz. "Is that all you ever do?" He disappeared into the humid mist of the bathroom, slamming the door in my face.

"Some of us have bills to pay," I mumbled. "We don't have the guardians of carnival creatures to watch over us."

"She's on that *tired, old* hamster wheel," said Snazz from behind the bathroom door.

"What hamster wheel? I've done what was expected of me."

"The hamster wheel of never-ending tasks — no joy," a third clown roared. He raced for the bedroom and jumped onto my mattress as the apartment thundered with Whist Clown laughter.

The clown donning the chef's fez dumped an armload of groceries onto the counter. "Get out of the kitchen! One cook at a time," he cried. A miniature clown on top of his hat repeated his every word while beating a tiny red drum.

I moved into the living room, but a clown chuckling under the sofa grabbed my legs. I screamed and kicked to escape.

Beneath my feet, the clown's pink eyes glittered as he romped about, his purple hair molded into spikes so sharp they'd put out an eye. Something sticky congealed around my ankles; he'd smeared purple goop all over my calves. Before I could jump away, Purple Punk Rock Clown licked my ankles clean with his foot-long tongue. "It's just grape jelly, sweet thing. Want some?"

Snazz emerged from the bathroom, his afro sectioned into pink rollers. He sat me before the mirror, slapped gel onto my head, and tied my hair into a bun tight enough to slant my eyes. He finished the style with a polka-dot ribbon, then rested his head on my shoulder. "So serious," he said, as we both gazed at my reflection. "Don't you ever smile, my dear?"

Another clown rummaged through my closet. He'd managed to squeeze into my red mini-skirt and had the hairiest legs I'd ever seen. His right foot sported one of my knee-high, black vinyl boots; his other foot had cracked the left heel of my favorite navy-blue pumps.

"What are you doing in my clothes?" I yelled.

"Tsk, tsks." He waved an index finger. "Give us free rein, or this could become very unpleasant for you, sweetheart."

Fashion Clown vanished back into the closet and dug out my plaid skirt from parochial school, a hot-pink blouse, yellow tights, and two different-colored clogs. "You will wear this to work today," he commanded, batting his silver eyelashes.

"I can't wear this to work, clown. I can't even get into this skirt anymore."

"I see. You want a challenge. Should we add something even *more special*?"

"Don't make this hard on yourself," shouted Chef Clown from the kitchen amid a clamor of pots and pans.

Fashion Clown reached into his daisy-spangled garment bag and tossed me a furry scarf. I held it up and saw the sharp eyes and dewy nose of a fox. I dropped it to the floor.

"But I'm vegan!"

"That's what you get for questioning us," said Fashion Clown. "Didn't you read *The Rulebook*? It's your choice: a metaphorical death or *a real one*. Now, shall I add another accent to make this outfit really pop?"

"Nope, this is fine." He helped me dress and wrapped the dead fox-thing around my neck.

Chef Clown hailed me, waving a spatula dribbling grape jelly, then handed me a grease-stained brown paper bag. "Here's your lunch." The mini-clown echoed him from atop his hat — *tap, tap, tin, tappity-tap* — as Whist Clowns shoved me out the door.

On the subway, I kept my head up, but I felt people's eyes on me. Two teenage girls collapsed from their seats onto the train floor laughing when they saw my outfit.

Late for work, I snuck into my cubicle. Jeff, who sat at the desk beside me, commented on my furry friend. "What's with that? Aren't you vegan?"

"Yeah, this is just an off day."

"You got spades, huh? Old Frizzle showed up at my place last year around this time. I came in wearing pajama pants and red stilettos, remember?"

"That's what happened?"

"Yep. Too bad we didn't get diamonds, the clowns from North Whist. That might have brought a raise," he muttered.

To avoid attention at lunch I crept outside, behind the building, to eat. I opened the brown bag, now smeared with peanut butter. Chef Clown had forgotten the Zippy plastic bag and didn't make a proper sandwich: it was a glob of peanut butter and jelly engulfing a single piece of soggy bread. I didn't want to think about the repercussions of not eating it. At least they'd respected my dietary choices.

That evening, Snazz opened the door before I put my key in the lock, "Welcome home, beloved." He sat down at the kitchen table, removing his pink rollers. Shaking out his hair, the tight coils of his afro had transformed into shiny, bouncing ringlets.

Chef Clown had cooked five casseroles of macaroni and cheese and set them on the table. "Dinner's ready," he announced to the clowns, spooning an orange heap onto my plate. "I made this one vegan since you ate my sandwich. Had you disobeyed me, you'd be eating cheese all night long."

At bedtime, Purple Punk Rock Clown gazed at me, pink eyes glowing in the dark. He stroked my forehead and sang a lullaby, leaving grape jelly on my face. Chef Clown had placed his lime-green fez beside my bed as a makeshift nightstand. The mini-clown on top, thumped his drum along to Purple Punk Rock Clown's tune:

Dreams of the wonder-world will douse your pain,

Never walk this netherworld the same again.

I felt a cough coming on, but broke into laughter instead; with each gasp, I inhaled the grape jelly. I don't know how long I lay there oscillating between stifled giggles and outright guffaws. I rolled back and forth, grabbing my stomach. If I didn't stop laughing, I thought I might die.

I wiped the tears and grape jelly from my face, and when I finally opened my eyes, the Whist Clowns were gone. I turned on the lights and searched the apartment. Then a gentle *tap-tap-tin-tappity-tap* rumbled from underneath the sofa.

Only the mini-clown remained, an inanimate replica with a windup handle beating his tiny red drum. As I placed him on the dresser, I glanced into the mirror. There was a glint in my eyes, a rosy tinge beneath my cheeks I hadn't seen before.

Unearthing the old Rulebook from my closet, I read the Balloon people's words with new comprehension:

Whist Clowns of Old Frizzle always take something away, but leave something behind.

You never knew what kind of death it might be.

END

Ivy Spadille is originally from Virginia and currently lives in New York City. Her novelette, "The Other Side of Otto Mountain," was published in the April 2018 issue of FIYAH. Look for her on Twitter at [@ivyspadille](https://twitter.com/ivyspadille).



Home Away From Home by Fred Coppersmith

Jack carries around an empty room for almost a week before he has the nerve to do more than just peek inside.

It's in another universe, a divergent splinter of this one. That's what Charlotte says when he calls her from the road and shares the photos he's taken from outside the door.

Jack barely muddled through high school science, but his wife—no, he reminds himself, his *ex-wife*—is the real deal. She's a physicist and tenured professor who can toss around phrases like “quantum entanglement” and “space-time continuum” and sound like she hasn't wandered off the set of some bad sci-fi movie.

“I don't know, Jacky-boy,” Charlotte says, when Jack describes what he's seeing. “If I had to guess, you've caught yourself an embryonic bubble.”

That's her working theory: that he's rubbing elbows with some newborn offshoot of the multiverse. She'll have to crunch some numbers and view the room in person before reaching any kind of definitive conclusion.

In the meantime, though, there are all sorts of reasons why that bubble isn't supposed to exist—not least because it seems to violate a good dozen laws of physics, if not also the terms of Jack's Winnebago rental agreement.

"I thought you were crazy for renting it," says Charlotte. "Who knew it would start sprouting parallel universes?"

Jack parks the RV alongside the road, somewhere outside of Wichita. He flips the rear blinkers on just in case and sits outside the room at the back of the vehicle, staring at the open door.

Five days ago, that door was a wall at the back of the motorhome, nothing behind it except wiring or plumbing for the small bathroom to Jack's left. There's a curtain between the bedroom and the front of the vehicle, if what you want is quiet or privacy. But Jack doesn't want either of those things anymore, and he didn't splurge for the deluxe model, so there isn't supposed to be another room.

From outside the RV, the room still seems like it isn't there. It's large enough that the bubble should bubble *outward* several feet over the rear exhaust, and the Winnebago should look like some misshapen beast at its back, ready to tip over backwards into traffic. But it doesn't. If you're standing on the road, where Jack took some of his photos, the bubble isn't there.

Whatever it is, Jack thinks Charlotte isn't wrong that it isn't entirely part of this universe. If he stepped through that door, he doesn't think he'd be in Kansas any longer.

But he's also not convinced that Charlotte is right about the room, either. Sure, Jack wouldn't know an Einstein-Rosen bridge from a New Jersey tollbooth, and usually he'd trust Charlotte's judgement on anything remotely like this. If the divorce ten years ago taught him anything, it's that he should trust Charlotte's judgment more often.

But he can't shake the feeling that if it's a parallel universe he's seeing, shouldn't it be...well, more *parallel*? The room should be from some other universe's Winnebago, traveling along some other universe's highway. It should seem strange and otherworldly, perhaps, but Jack doesn't think it should seem quite this *familiar*. Or at least not familiar in quite this same way.

Jack carries around the empty room for almost a week before he thinks maybe he's seen it someplace else.

"Do you remember that little house we didn't buy?" he asks Charlotte. "The one we almost did, before... That place with the big yard and tree swing out back. On Peachtree...? Or Maple?"

Charlotte pauses before saying anything, and Jack thinks he can hear the weight of all the miles and years that lie between them. "Birchwood," she says at last, with a sigh. "That was a long time ago, Jack. A lot of water under that bridge."

There's another long pause, while Jack studies the room, and he thinks it's this patience he misses most about living with Charlotte, this quiet and considered understanding of hers that has let them stay friends all these years, even after he ran out.

"I know what you're thinking," she says. "But this room, Jack? It isn't in that house. It isn't back *then*."

Right, Jack thinks. Because *that* would be impossible.

But the trees through its windows look remarkably the same. And while he can't spot a tire swing from outside the room, from where he's sitting inside the RV, everything else tugs hard at Jack's memories. The thin patch of carpet. The old lamp in the corner. The periwinkle wallpaper he can still hear Charlotte laughing about, saying when they moved in it would be the first thing to go.

Jack *can* still hear her laughing, he realizes. *Through* the door. And if the room is exactly the same, maybe that means...

"I'm sure you're right," he says. "It's late. I'm being...what's the word? Wistful."

"You always are. But you'll be here tomorrow. We'll run tests, figure this out."

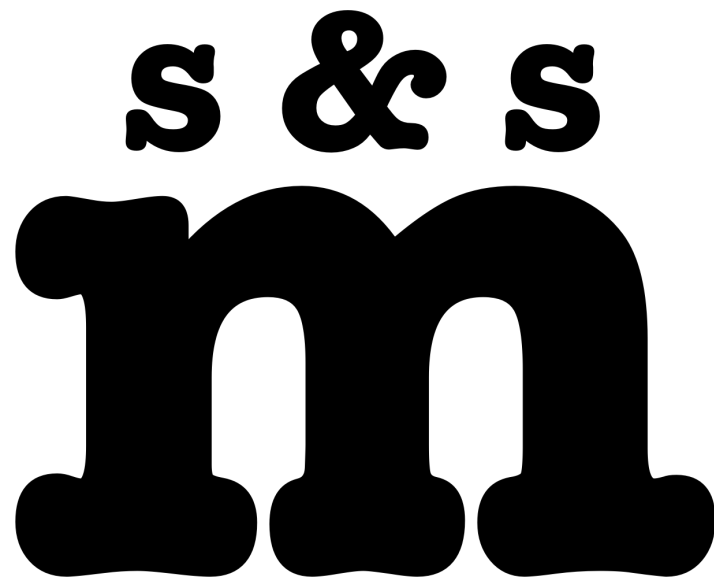
Even as he hangs up, Jack thinks he already has this figured out. It doesn't make any sense—but then, neither did the bubble theory, not really, Charlotte's space-time entanglement. Maybe that means this *is* a bad sci-fi movie, and if Jack's being honest, he always kind of preferred watching those.

He doesn't know what will happen to the Winnebago, and he feels bad about lying to Charlotte—*this* universe's Charlotte—by not showing up at her office tomorrow. But if the room is what he thinks it is, *when* he thinks it is, it's time to come in off the road.

Jack carries around the empty room for almost a week before he has the nerve to step through the door and close it behind him.

END

Fred Coppersmith is a writer and editor living in New York. His fiction has appeared in Mythic Delirium, Andromeda Spaceways, and Stupefying Stories, among others. He also edits the quarterly zine Kaleidotrope. Find him on [Twitter](#) as well.



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