



GLYPH.

The literary magazine for the casual writer



THE
FOLKLORE
ISSUE



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Issue 1: Folklore

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FOREWORD

I wish I could say there was a more compelling reason why *Folklore* is the theme for our first (official) issue, but truthfully it was the result of going down a Wikipedia rabbit hole whilst researching Scottish folklore and not being able to climb back out of it. The knowledge that these myths, passed down simply by word of mouth and illustrations, have stood the test of time is as fascinating as it is bewildering (evidence of the Loch Ness Monster legend quite incredibly dates back to drawings created by the Picts in the Early Middle Ages). And though rich in folklore, Scotland's kelpies, selkies and banshees only cover the most minute fraction of folk tales that exist across the world. Clearly, as humans, we have always possessed an innate ability to be storytellers.

When we launched our pilot edition of *Glyph*, we were overwhelmed by how many of you were out there, wanting to share and pass down your stories to others. *Folklore* therefore seemed like a perfectly fitting way to invite others into our little writing community. We wanted to bring writers together across borders and languages and culture, to pick up their pens and share the tales that have followed them from shadowed corners of the globe, or the brand new myths they've created themselves.

The following anthology of stories stretches from the most fantastical to the eerily plausible. In 'Wild Man' and 'Incense', we revisit the repressed tales from childhood that will forever find a way to haunt you. Though vastly different in setting and culture, they both masterfully capture that universal feeling of unease. And sometimes we cannot help but be equally curious about that thing

that terrifies us the most, as Rebecca King portrays in ‘The Door’. Towards the more divine end of our folklore spectrum, ‘Achilles’ Choice’ and ‘Artemis’s Blasphemy’ take us to Ancient Greek territory that feels refreshingly modern, exploring the forever relevant conflict between love and duty.

Despite the majority of the stories in this collection taking place in universes that are not quite our own, the characters within them are experiencing issues we are all too familiar with—ones that are being passed down through generations in the same manner that folktales themselves are. Both Tess in ‘Dirty Laundry’ and Alasdair in ‘What You Are’ find themselves suffering because those that are more powerful are the ones who get to decide what is right and wrong. The two stories cover totally dissimilar themes, with Tess embodying female resilience and Alasdair grappling with his true self—but, in the end, it is the unjust that will perish in the hands of vengeful entities.

‘She Who Sold The Fish Scales’ also finds a character seeking assistance from a mythical being, but do not be fooled by its fairytale-like title and rhythm, the short piece is wonderfully unsettling. Our narrator in ‘The Hibernating Dead’, however, takes matters into her own hands, as Lia Mulcahy expertly weaves a tale that is dark and haunting, but ends with a sliver of hopefulness, of a new start. A similar notion is echoed in ‘Learning To Walk In The Dark’, a piece inspired by the *haminja* luck spirits of Norse mythology. And for those seeking folklore of the lighter, more comical kind, ‘The Godfather of Garden End’ offers a quick-witted fairytale that follows two particularly crafty pixies—who I hope we get to hear more from in the future.

This is a special anthology—I’m aware that we’re completely biased—but we really feel that it showcases the work of some incredibly talented writers, and although they work together cohesively and thematically, all eleven stories are brilliantly unique.

Enjoy all at once, or savour slowly. Just remember to pass them down.

Eleanor

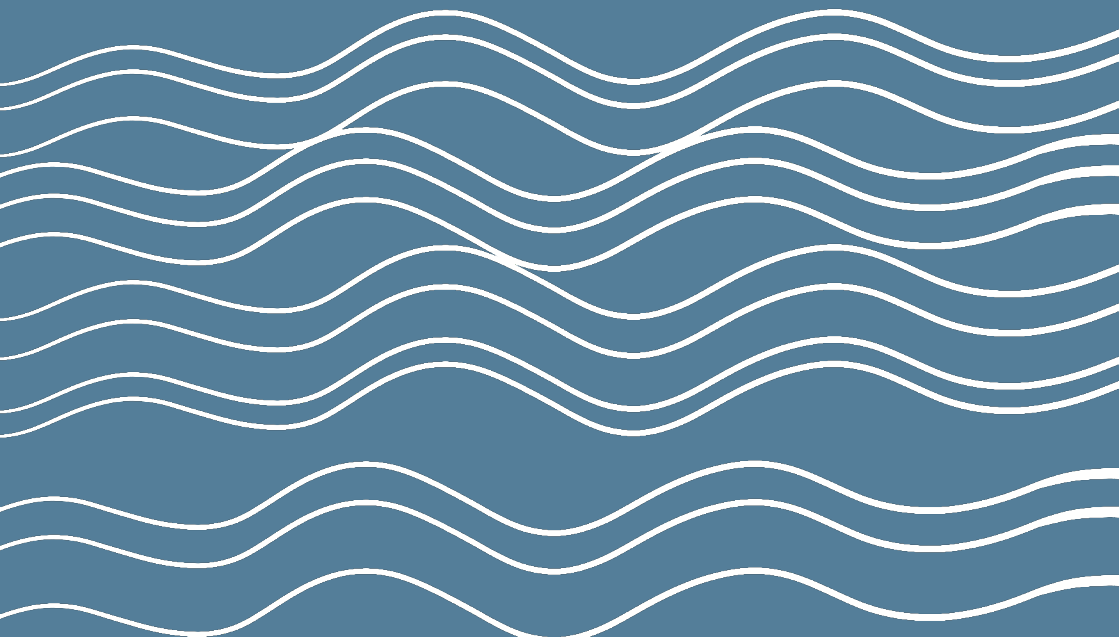
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SHE WHO SOLD THE FISH SCALES

KAT ANSTICE



Men guarded the beaches day and night during the first week of winter, when they were said to arrive. Yet the ones who sold the fish scales slipped past the guards each year, stole in amongst the hills and trees and pale homes that sat along the coast like wind rolling from a wave.

Here they began to sell their wares.

‘A silver scale caught off a Sea Snake’s first shed,’ the Seller hissed, her smile full of sharp little teeth under her long dripping hair. ‘Place it under your pillow and you will dream of your true love. Or perhaps a Blue Sacien’s scale, my dear. Place it in your left shoe and it will walk you to wealth.’

The silver cost the flush from their cheeks for the year that came, the blue cost the warmth of their breath. A soft pink scale of a Dakrine Eel would make all who saw you remember only your best features; A dark red scale from the Valk Snake would make them forget that they had seen you at all. The former cost a vial of blood, the latter a pinch of skin.

*

The Woman approached the Seller at the edge of the water, a tight-knit shawl of dark grey swirls wrapped firmly around her as the wind picked up; a cap was drawn low over her face. Men roamed the beaches, but the cove the Seller had chosen was shadowed by the cliff, safe from their hunt for a time.

‘You are the Seller?’ the Woman asked.

The Seller tilted her head, slit eyes glinting in the torchlight, pale-yellow and bulging from her translucent grey skin. She hummed vaguely, thin fingers drawing aside her cloak to show the scales stitched inside the lining.

‘My husband does not love me; he finds fault in all I do. I am clumsy, and not good at cooking. What can I do to please him?’ the Woman asked, her voice quiet but unshaking.

‘Do you wish for him to be pleased?’

‘I wish to do my duty, as a wife.’

Swaying lazily with the flow of the waves behind her, the Seller pondered, her features shallow in the moon’s pale light. She was standing half-submerged in the water, the tide lapping at skin barely covered by a sea-weed green cloak. It was as though the waves were beckoning her, pulling

at her to return before the church's bells could strike twelve times.

'Very well,' she reached her hand, her skin thin enough to reveal the scales that lay underneath, into a pocket, and produced a handful of glinting black scales. 'Place one in his tea each full moon. He will never see a mistake that you make, nor remember a wrong that you commit.'

'What does it cost?'

'A long lock of hair from your head.'

'Thank you,' the Woman said, wading into the waves and lowering her head so the Seller could snip away the hair with a small, curved blade, before hurrying back into the night.

The Seller watched her go for a time, until finally she pushed her elongating limbs back into the sea as her tail reformed, her year's trade complete.

*

True to the Seller's word, the Husband never saw the mistakes the Woman made. She burnt his meals, he tasted nothing; she dropped the crockery, he heard nothing; she stumbled at the market, he saw nothing.

But still he was cruel to her, for she was not quick enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough. Not good enough for him.

*

'Hello again,' the Seller said as the Woman approached the following winter. 'What is your wish?'

The Woman said nothing for a moment, steeling her nerves; the Seller was more human in appearance now, for she had only come to shore the previous evening. She had made her way across the beach and through the town, and waited, hidden where the Woman had found her, in a copse of oak trees between the hills.

'My Husband finds no flaws in what I do,' she said slowly, sitting on the grass beside the Seller, 'but many in who I am. How do I make him happy?'

'Are you happy?'

The Woman considered. 'I no longer feel afraid of his anger, I can move as I like and cook as I like without fear. But he is still not happy. Please, can you help me?'

'This,' the Seller said, fishing a light blue scale from inside her cloak, 'is the shell of a Dock Rester. It will blind those around you to all they consider to be your imperfections. You must wear it against your heart each day and night. But it will cost you your voice, my dear, for whenever I might be in need of it.'

The Woman nodded her consent, took the shell, and sat with the Seller for some time, before finally returning home.

*

The shell sat against her heart, sewn into small pockets inside of her dresses, from that day on. For a time, her Husband was happy, and his happiness made him kind. He could find no fault in her lateness, hear no issue with her speech.

During this time the Woman found freedom to do as she pleased, as she had in her youth. She visited her friends, her family, sang as she worked, and danced with the crowds in the town.

But soon his temper grew. She spent too much time away, did not dote on him as she should, and he forbade her to leave their home again.

*

But.

As the first week of winter arrived, the Woman stole away from her house in the early morning and found the Seller as soon as she had walked in from the Sea.

'Please. Will he ever be happy, will I ever be enough?'

The Seller frowned. 'What will make you happy? What will make your life enough, for you and only you.'

'I just want to be free. To be free of him.'

'Free as I am?' the Seller asked.

She Who Sold The Fish Scales

‘What will it cost?’

‘A heart, my dear,’ she smiled as the Woman paled, ‘but do not fret. You are not the one who must pay. For now, I need only your name.’

The Woman stared; the Seller stared back.

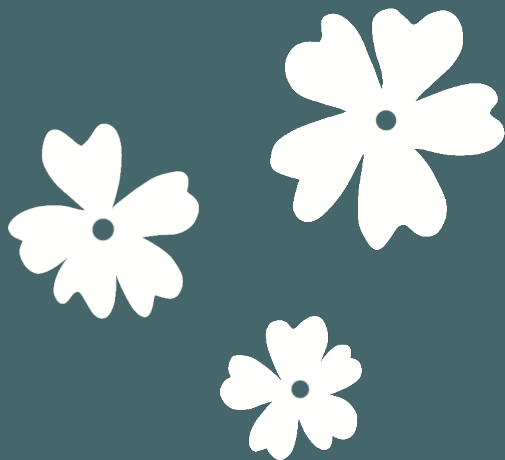
‘My name is—,’ A rush of wind snatched the voice from her mouth, cold and quick as a slap, and the Woman gasped silently.

The seller nodded and took out of her pockets a lock of hair, a vial of blood, and a pinch of skin.

‘That will do quite nicely,’ the Seller said, in the Woman’s voice. She walked back to the Woman’s home and smiled at the Husband with the Woman’s face. She stayed that way for but a day, and when she returned to the sea, the Woman walked at her side, a heart still beating in her fist and scales forming underneath her skin. ■

INCENSE

ANUSMITA RAY



It's been a few years since I made peace with the unknown stranger behind my shoulder, the shadow I find myself avoiding even in broad daylight, the silence that I drown out by playing whatever music brings some semblance of stability to my anxiety-ridden pulse. I find most Bengalis of a certain age do believe in the existence of the Other, on some level. They will attribute it to either religion or astrology or the great unknown, but it all does seem to stem from a genuine belief that the supernatural exists and resides alongside our unremarkable lives.

You can smell the change of season in the air in Calcutta. Spring (*bawsbonto*) comes with the smell of the tuberose. You'll know it's summer (*grishyo*) when you can notice ripe mangoes and jackfruit in the air. The monsoon (*borsha*) comes with petrichor and the aroma of piping-hot *khichuri* (the humble rice-and-lentils dish that inspired the British kedgeree) in every kitchen (the rather superstitious belief goes that *khichuri* stops incessant downpour). Winters (*sheet*, with a soft t) smell of deep-fried *telebhaja* and freshly baked fruit cakes. And autumn (*bemonto*) smells of intoxicating *shiuli* (night-flowering jasmine) and *dhoop-dhuno*, the incense that reminds Bengalis of *pujo*. The knowledge of these smells are pervasive in our community. It binds us together. However, the thing about recognisable scents is that they lend a sense of discomfort when misplaced. I'm not meant to smell night-flowering jasmine inflorescence in January.

I first smelled the *shiuli* out of season when I was returning from school. It had been a rather long day, full of singed sleeves from laboratory experiments. I remember rubbing at the edge of the sleeve, whilst running through a plethora of explanations I could provide to my mother that wouldn't involve 'I was pretending to be an evil alchemist with a test tube full of sulphuric acid and a bunsen burner'. I suddenly had the distinct sensation that I was being watched, so I stopped and looked around. The short walk from the bus stop where I disembarked to my house was mostly quiet and deserted, marked by the high walls of the Royal Calcutta Golf Club on one side and the empty road on the other. The houses across the street seemed rather forlorn in their silence as well. I took a step forward when the fragrance of *shiuli* flooded my senses. I was about to stop and look up to the trees to see what was happening when I heard the voice.

'Don't look up.'

I've never been particularly rebellious in my life. At that moment, too, I chose to heed the soft voice and instead asked, 'What's happening? Who are you?'

‘Can you bring me some incense?’

‘What?’

‘Can you bring me some incense?’

I couldn't. It was late afternoon, the local shop (*dawshokormo bhandar*, literally translated to ‘the shop with ten functions’) was closed and wouldn't open until after the sunset. I was smelling *shiuli* out of season, standing in the middle of an abandoned street and listening to the whims of a disembodied voice. I closed my eyes and counted to five. Then, realising how utterly absurd this situation was, I opened my eyes again.

‘No. I can't.’

I looked up to the trees. It was a Siamese rough bush, a *shaora* tree. The thick foliage covered my view of what seemed to be a shadow hiding between the leaves. The smell of *shiuli* seemed to intensify immediately, as though I had left the mild January afternoon and been transported to my late grandmother's flowering garden in early October. As I tried to squint at the shadowy figure, a hand reached out from the leaves. It was soft and feminine, adorned with the *shakha-pola* that is staple for married Bengali women.

‘Can you bring me some incense?’ the voice repeated, monotone and without any inflection.

It was at this point my instincts told me I should've left ages ago. Something was evidently wrong but a sixteen year old in school uniform wasn't going to fix it, no matter what young adult fiction told me. And so I started to walk away, while keeping my eyes up at the tree. As I took a step forward, the hand shot back up into the shadows, as though burnt. The shadow folded back in between the leaves. When I had walked a few steps ahead, the smell of *shiuli* died out.

Then I ran as fast as I could.

‘You were rather late today. And out of breath, like you ran all the way from school. Where were you?’

I don't think my mother was trying to be accusatory, but my teenage self was not the best judge of tone and I snapped at her and told her something along the lines of having my independence infringed upon. She wasn't best pleased with my response and held her tongue, perhaps to preserve her own dignity.

I laid in bed that evening, wondering about the strange encounter. I was not a believer in

the supernatural, having planted my feet firmly in the world of reason and predictable outcomes fairly early in life. Santa wasn't real, religion was a moral framework a large collective subscribes to, and ghosts were a mere reflection of human fears.

Since then, I've kept an ear out for any legends in the area that speak of a beckoning stranger in late afternoons. I've found none. Some spoke of young men haunting the *shaora* trees to prey upon any lost myrmidons of law as revenge for the atrocities committed during the Naxalite revolution, but no one ever mentioned a lady asking a school girl to do some shopping.

I have moved out of the city since, to an older, larger one with winding alleys, Victorian façades, and coffee store chains. The gentrification has truly erased the supernatural from these alleys in the afternoons. I spend my weekend afternoons walking up and down the streets, keeping an eye for familiar trees and unfamiliar smells. I even wander into graveyards, now that I have some distance (both spatial and temporal) from my past brush with—well, whatever it was. Perhaps it was the account of a rather hyperactive imagination; I was quite the storyteller even as a child. I'd consider myself completely past the experience if it weren't for a recent piece of local news my mother told me last weekend.

'Things are getting unsafe these days. What is even happening in the neighbourhood?' she said, over the slightly dodgy internet connection.

'What are you talking about?' I'm always half-listening to her elaborate descriptions of the world as she sees it. My mother can be as dramatic as I can.

'A young girl went missing. She was walking from school—same road that you used to walk on. You never had any problems.'

That caught my interest.

'Where did she go missing then? Do we know?'

'Their family lives close to the Golf Club. Apparently she got off the bus and was walking by the club. That's where the last eyewitnesses can locate her. She seems to have just vanished into thin air, nothing but dried leaves, cigarette butts, and a muddy pack of incense lying around the area. I can't believe what society has come to...' ■

WHAT YOU ARE

EMILY A. CRAWFORD



If he had been given a choice in the matter, regret would have already set in.

The forest held no allure, no sense of adventure. The thicket, scraping through his breeches, held no promise of glory or triumph as it did for the others. He was not riding the winds nor bounding over debris in joyous pursuit of his hunt, instead the winds were a harbinger of dread and the litter underfoot amplified the weight of his reluctance.

No matter what they decided, he was no hunter. He longed to be a part of this world, not to mutilate it. But this was where a man was meant to be—he didn't, nor did he ever want to understand why *this* was where a man belonged.

He took another step, fingers trembling on the bowstring as eyes darted between the trees. It didn't need to be anything big; a bird would do, or perhaps a rabbit if he was fast enough.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy, illuminating the forest floor in a verdant spectrum. Shadows danced and flickered, casting their silhouettes in every direction. Distant birdsong echoed; a melodic cacophony that gave this untamed world life. Alasdair could hear each one for what it truly was. Hatchlings crying out with their first breaths. A young suitor enchanting a potential mate. A far-off mother calling to the nest and the father returning his song. It was a cycle no different to the one lived in the village, but this was a cycle that was expected to end too soon.

There, beyond the bush and bramble, grazing peacefully in a sun-dappled glade, stood a doe, its rear still speckled white and auburn. It stood alone, occasionally shaking dust from its coat, oblivious to his presence.

The splinters of the shaft were rough between his fingers as he drew the string taut. He knew to slow his breath, but, feeling the barbs of the feather against his cheek, Alasdair held his breath. His heart stopped. It should have been pounding, sounding like a drum to startle the beast. He tried to take a step, hoping to send it running from his sights, but he stood. Frozen. Reality paralysed him—how he longed to be elsewhere.

His body betrayed him.

With the sound of his heart and the warmth of his breath, the arrow flew.

The doe bolted, but it took a moment for Alasdair to do the same. His faculties were slow to return, and when they did, there was no sign of the deer. Even his arrow had abandoned him.

A knot formed in his stomach, and his gaze dropped to the forest floor, where a scattered

trail of crimson vanished deeper into the forest. The arrow struck true. The beast was dying. He couldn't defect now. His hold tightened around the bow's grip, the sensation of the twine burrowing into his palm burning. Every fibre of his being was taut; the ache travelling from the tips of his toes to the nape of his neck, leaving him dazed.

Navigating a wavering world, he followed the trail. A seasoned hunter would have crept through the underbrush, premeditating each and every step, but Alasdair stumbled forth on uneasy feet, balancing himself whenever he could against the trunks of trees. It was then, battering his shoulder against another tree, he happened upon the wounded deer, hearing its breath become shallow gasps and witnessing another standing over his victim.

Hunched over, comforting the dying beast, was a ghostly apparition—a mess of flowing fabric that draped over the ground like seafoam tides brushing the shores. He could see nothing of its features, but as he tried, fabric turned to fur and the apparition was nothing more than a wolf, pure as snow, with crimson staining its maw.

Hands trembling, Alasdair nocked another arrow and raised the bow, pulling the string and stretching the limbs as he lined a crooked shot. This time his breath faltered and drew the predator's gaze.

It was large, much larger than a wolf ought to be, but its body was thin. He thought perhaps it was taking advantage of already wounded prey, but when it turned to face him, he saw the deer was dead with no other cause than the puncture from the arrow he shot. The wolf's muzzle was bloodied, but not from the kill. Between its teeth was his arrow which it dropped and split beneath a paw as it began to approach. Its eyes, burning red, met his, and from its chest he heard a low growl.

Alasdair's breaths strained as he struggled to maintain his control of the bow. The strings shook, ready and willing to fire with or without his command.

The wolf edged closer, the fire in its eyes dulling to warm coals—flecks of amber still illuminating them in the fading light. His weapon was aimed towards it, but it showed no fear or hostility. It strode forward, one foot after another, with graceful curiosity, stretching out its head to catch his scent.

In a moment it was as if this creature knew more of his heart than he ever could. There was a tenderness, a sense of understanding that broke his walls and penetrated a lonely core.

He faltered. The arrow broke free from his grip. It sliced through the air with deadly precision, but instead of finding its mark, it buried itself deep into the gnarled roots of a nearby tree. The wolf recoiled, its eyes darting between him and the arrow. There was something new bubbling in its expression, something he couldn't place but that tugged at the strings of his heart.

It made him sick.

Alasdair fled, his footsteps pounding against the forest floor as he raced from his folly.

*

Emerging from the depths and into the glade, Alasdair stumbled over his feet. He struggled to regain his breath, wavering as he inched closer to the camp.

The others were already sat by a roaring fire roasting a spit. Deep in conversation, they hadn't noticed his arrival and that suited him just fine. He readied his announcement, preparing himself for the inevitable mockery that would follow. But then he heard it. Laughter that cut through the night air like a knife.

'You know you shoulda left him back with the wimmin, he ain't fit tae be a hunter.'

'A coward, through n' through.'

'Aye, but natheless he's still a man, even if he'd have been better aff if he were born as one of the wimmin.'

He could ignore the others, but as always Bairn's words stung. His older brother had little fondness for him, even before their dad passed, but no matter how many times it happened and no matter what was said, it cut deeper than any blade ever could.

Alasdair swallowed whatever greeting he readied, returning to the shadows of the forest as they continued their conversation.

'Speakin' of the wimmin, shouldnae he be back already?' One pondered loud enough to prick his ears.

'Maybe, but would it really be sae bad if he just didnae come back?'

'Shut it, Fin.'

'Sorry Bairn, didnae mean a' thing by it.'

There was a sharpness in Bairn's voice, an unfamiliar venom in it that made it feel like, for Bairn, this was all in jest. Alasdair's heart sank when he heard the laughter resume, Bairn louder than the rest.

'Regairdless was gid we got this rabbit. If we hadnae, we'd be dead by the time he'd have made a kill big enough to feed us aw!'

'You said it, Bairn!'

They unknowingly toasted his departure as Alasdair made from the glade and walked into the dark. He let his memory guide him, following trails he had trodden a hundred times over. A way off, he arrived in his secluded sanctuary—an outcropping that overlooked the forest where he could watch the world fade away and where he could hide from judgement.

Alasdair sat and plucked a blade of grass. He ran it over his knuckles and knotted it around each finger; it left a dew on his skin that allowed the cold to cling to him. He sighed and sniffed, and let it go free, watching it flutter for a moment before disappearing into the detritus that covered the ground.

'Why do you cry?'

'What?'

Behind him stood a maiden dressed in soft seafoam. Through the glistening film that covered his eyes, she sparkled in the nightlight; cold rays dancing along ashen strands and illuminating a porcelain complexion. Hands clasped to her front weighed down the fabric of her dress, but the long train and delicate hem caught in the breeze.

With another sniff, he put a palm to his temple and felt the tears as he massaged it. They soiled his hand and quickly, he tried to wipe them away on his breeches. He wasn't meant to express such things in front of a lady such as this.

But another hand gently stopped him.

She found a place beside him, the fabric of her dress gathering behind her like a shimmering pool. He sat dumbfounded as she took his hand and inspected the smeared tears that stained it.

'Why do you cry?' She asked again, with the same lilt as before.

'I ain't,' he objected, feeling the flutter in his chest subside as he wrenched his hand from her grip.

She leant forward and instinctively he leant back. Her face was so close to his. So close he could see the amber in her eyes burn like embers clinging to coals. So close that he should have felt her breath upon his skin.

Softly a single finger brushed his cheek, running from the edge of his duct to the top of his cheekbone. There was little chance she failed to feel the heat rising in him.

She held her hand against his face for a moment, her eyes piercing him. ‘Not now, but then. Why?’

Alasdair’s arms bent awkwardly behind him; they strained to hold him up. Whether they stretched for relief or faltered even slightly, it would have brought them too close for comfort. *This* was already too close for comfort, and yet, there was a comfort in it. There was something about her, something that stirred a sense of familiarity—a warmth, a kindness, which made him feel as though he had known her all his life.

‘I...’ he began, his voice faltering as he struggled to find the words to express a lifetime.

She sat back, cocking her head, waiting with patient curiosity for his composure to settle. Alasdair sat up too, bringing his knees up, folding his arms over them, and resting his head on top. He took a breath, staring out over the horizon.

‘I just cannae dae what they expect me tae dae. I ain’t like them, n’ I didnae want tae be. I know it means ah’m odd, that I ain’t gonna have anyone but I didnae mind that. I didnae want trophies—beist or utherways. I just...’

With each word, a lump grew in the back of his throat and silenced his admittance to anything else.

‘You want to be new, not what they make you—not what you are.’

Her interruption was welcome, but her words were less so. He didn’t want to be a hunter, he didn’t want to be a killer, but he wanted to be himself. What he was was all he wanted to be, he just wished everyone else would let him. He looked at her, ready to refute, but when he saw the glimmer, the sadness, his heart sank. She knew him more than he knew himself.

But before he could speak, a chorus of howls, mournful and haunting, called out and sent a shiver down his spine.

Her eyes widened, flickering towards the trees with a fearful sense of urgency. Before he had

the chance to draw another breath, she jumped to her feet and ran to the forest. Her form blended seamlessly into the shadows, and even when he rose to his feet, his eyes searching the darkness for any sign of her presence, he could only admit defeat. All that remained were rustling leaves and shifting shadows; the maiden gone like a wisp on the wind.

*

Alasdair returned to a jeering audience, but heard none of it, sitting by himself on the other side of the firepit. His mind was listlessly elsewhere, still sat on the hill with a soft hand against his cheek. He could envision her so clearly and couldn't help but fixate on what might have happened had he been swift enough to stop her fleeing into the night.

Once they realised he wasn't willing to indulge them, the others ceased their taunts and resumed their merriment, feasting on the spoils of their own hunt, filling their bellies with booze, and perversely mooning over the women from the village. It was static overlaid with the crackling fire and continued for far longer than he would have liked, but then it stopped.

In the silence, the leaves rustled and the trees shook. Something was coming, and the hunters were ready.

Bairn took up his blade and gestured for Alasdair to do the same. He was never great with a blade, but, in that moment, he could have fooled anyone into thinking he was just as incompetent with a bow. Failing to pull an arrow from the quiver, he clumsily scattered the ammunition on the ground.

'Just stay back n' stay ootta sight,' Bairn snapped.

Obedient and wide eyed, Alasdair watched the others stalk the treeline, waiting for the right moment to strike. But the element of surprise works both ways.

A group of young women, one for each of them, emerged from the forest. Weapons lowered, but caution remained. That was until the women spoke of losing their way. Their voices were sweet, their appearances even more so, and a silent congratulations passed among the others when they asked for refuge for the night.

Alasdair didn't have to guess where their minds drifted. Revelry would lead to

companionship, and then the gallant gentlemen would be all too willing to share their beds and their warmth for the night. But his mind refused to delight in the forms of the other women, for his mysterious maiden stood among them.

The three men coupled perfectly with their newfound companions. Bairn already had his perched on his lap, while his comrades shared a drink and a dance with theirs. Alasdair and his, however, after he sheepishly gathered his arrows, sat a few feet apart on a log, unsure of what to say.

The night wore on, the fire stoked twice over, and yet, they sat in silence while the others partook in debaucherous revelry. He wanted to know what was going through her head, what she was thinking and if it was what he was thinking. Awkwardly, he shuffled along the log to be closer to her and drew breath, finally finding something to say.

‘I—’

Screams unlike anything he had ever heard before—they stole his voice and abruptly ended the merriment.

In the light of the fire, the pairs danced the *Danse Macabre*, with the women taking lead. Their beautiful features twisted into something foul; broken limbs and cracked jaws, with elongated claws that sliced through their partners’ bodies with bloody ferocity. His brother, bent in two, still had his on his knee as her teeth ripped open his throat. Gargled cries of pain mingled with the sounds of tearing flesh and splintering bone. Alasdair struggled to force the bile back down his throat.

A hand grabbed his arm and added his screams to the chorus.

With a finger pressed against his lips, the maiden hushed him. ‘We must flee before their feed ends.’

Without another word, without another thought, Alasdair took her hand and bolted from the camp in a wild frenzy. He pulled her through the brush, darting between the trees until the cacophony faded into the dark.

When he stopped, he struggled to reclaim his breath. His thoughts were racing, his heart pounding. The maiden was no worse for wear; when he turned to face her, she was as perfect as a portrait.

His voice broke as he gasped. ‘What were those things?’

‘They were Sith, and Sith is me.’

‘Yer a faerie? A devil’s sprite?’

He backed away, tripping over his own feet and falling to the ground. He sat slumped against a tree, her ghostly presence looming over him and yet, she, herself, radiated no such dread. She looked upon him with kindness, with sadness, but faerie were not to be trusted. Whatever this was, it was no more than the deceitful allure of a Baobhan Sith.

‘Why did you come tae us, tae me?’ He asked, averting his eyes as best he could while still keeping her in his sights.

‘We came of longing.’

‘I didnae—’

She shook her head. ‘Longing brought us forth, but I came for you, not them.’

‘Will you dae tae me what yer sisters did tae them, tae mi brother?’

He braced himself for no answer. He braced himself for death.

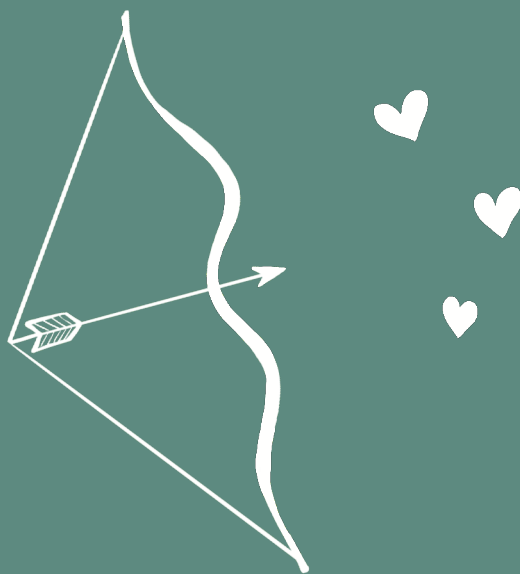
But she knelt before him and gently raised his head, so his eyes met hers. They were warm, sparking with a fire that seemed to burn only for him.

‘You are not what you are nor what they make you.’ She finally smiled. ‘You are you and I wish to stay to see what you are.’

Deep down another fire burned in his chest. But as the first light of dawn split the trees, her form shifted; a trick of the eye that left him face to face with a wolf, pure as snow, that stood waiting for an answer. With a tentative smile, he ran a hand along her muzzle and settled it behind her ear. Whatever this was, it was something he was going to indulge. ■

ARTEMIS'S BLASPHEMY

SOPHIE HANNAM



I sank deeper against the creaky mattress, nestled below her covers; slowly warmed by the ritualistic exhales that fluttered from her nose.

Her body rose and fell against me, each breath assuring her humanity. I could smell the faint remains of her all too floral perfume infused with the sweetly stale hint of sweat produced as a consequence of our shared body heat. If such a smell could be captured within a candle I would never sleep without it beside me, burning the memories of mornings such as these into the wallpaper and furniture it sat between.

Gradually I shuffled myself closer, pressing further and further towards her until it became unsure as to where I ended and she began.

She looked so pure when she slept.

I think it was mornings like this that I loved her the most.

Gentle and full of my raging desire I locked our lips together, consuming her presence into my body.

A stifled moan slipped from her perfect mouth, her mind still encased within a labyrinth of slumber despite her body beginning to wake.

I knew this was wrong, I couldn't love her like this.

It was forbidden.

I was forbidden.

*

It was largely a family issue—a saying that could be used to describe every tribulation I had faced in my lengthy existence. Nothing could be set in motion without their interference. We had set roles, set expectations...to venture from that would be abhorrent.

If my brothers were to discover our love she would be ripped limb from limb.

Her essence would be defiled before the temple of the Gods in an almighty sacrifice against my betrayal.

How could I be so selfish? Did I crave the sweetness of humanity so much that I was willing to forego my love's security in this realm for mere moments of such bliss?

Artemis's Blasphemy

I thought of Apollo, the closest of my brothers. What would he say if he were to discover us?

For I am the Goddess of the hunt, the Goddess of nature's wild creations and the Goddess of Chastity. I was borne with my purity sealed, intended to live my existence as singular. By definition I was not made for this, I was not made for her. My consent, my heart, and my love were not mine to bestow, no matter what I desired.

*

I blamed my father for my isolation, so confused by my adamant dismissal of men that he sealed my maidenhood for all eternity. I, as my truest self, would never be accepted in the realm of Olympus. If I could not bear future Gods and Goddesses for my father to prey upon and torment, what use was I to the Gods?

Is that all a woman is worth?

Her ability to be gazed upon by the eyes of hungry men and to break her body and soul in order to bring forth life into such a wicked world?

What about me? Did I have no say in my destiny? My purpose?

*

'*Morning Art*,' she whispered, her voice hoarse from the deep sleep that hadn't fully subsided. Instantly my insecurities melted. All seemed inconsequential in her presence, even the wrath of the Gods presented as a mere gust in the tempest of our devotion.

Yet everything I felt was grounded in her being. She was the embodiment of my theism, and therefore the reason for my apostasy. ■

WILD

MAN

TODD JORDAN



The bar's buzzing with the pre-dinner crowd. Scott swallows. Wipes his mouth on a denim sleeve—the same jacket he's worn for, what? Thirty years? It'd be embarrassing if it wasn't so sad.

'I should be grateful?' One greying eyebrow rises.

'Yeah,' I say, and I never use that word anymore. 'You should be grateful, for everything you have.' Scott just snorts, then drains the glass to foaming dregs.

'I'm drowning, man. Not like you, with your, with your, your briefcase to keep you afloat.' It's a laptop bag, not a *briefcase*, but this isn't the time to point that out. I signal for another round.

'You've got your own place in a nice town. That's why you stayed, right? Hell, if I wanted to move back now, there's no way I could afford it.' I pause, realising I should finish my first beer before the next arrives. There's a rhythm to this sort of thing. There are rules. I gulp it down and grimace. Thin, cheap, too sweet. 'You know,' I continue, 'if you did want to leave, you'd make a bundle.'

He's barely listening. Wherever he's gone, I'm not with him. He's stuck in that cold hole that won't let him grow.

A group of young women take the table next to ours. One of them wears a sequinned hat and speaks in an accent I can't place. She's finishing a joke and all her friends are laughing.

After the noise dies down, Scott says:

'I can't.'

I shake my head. Bite my lip.

'You can. It's not that hard. If it's the paperwork you're worried about, I can help with that.'

'I said I *can't*. So drop it.' He glances sideways at the women. Runs his fingers through his greasy hair; and God, his nails are filthy. We shift in our seats until the new beers arrive. He grips his fresh glass as if it were a rope ladder. Then he leans forward, voice low:

'Remember Wild Man?'

My cheeks burn.

'We promised not to talk about that anymore.' He laughs, an unkind sound like a set of rusty keys.

'Anymore? *Anymore?* We never talked about it at all.'

'Look,' I mutter. 'Wild Man happened, sure. I was there and you were there. And then we went our separate ways.'

Scott shrugs.

‘Sure we did. You got the briefcase. And I got what I got. Forgive me if I’m not as grateful as you’d like.’

It was a mistake for me to come.

‘Think I’ll head home after this one,’ I sigh. ‘Can’t be leaving Gemma with the kids all night.’ The next time Scott says anything, there’s no more aggression in his voice. Shaken off like water from a shaggy dog’s fur.

‘How old are they now?’ This is something new. Normally, he only cares about... Well. I can’t think of a single thing, besides whatever weirdness he’s into online.

‘Twelve and nine,’ I smile. ‘The older one, Alice, she likes to be alone. But Henry, he still needs lots of attention.’

‘You said he’s getting bullied, right?’ I did say that, yes, but I’m surprised he remembers.

‘Breaks my heart, he’s such a sweet kid. We’re thinking of moving him to a different school. But he’s got these two little mates he’s really close to. Doesn’t want to give them up. Just wants the bullies to leave him alone.’

‘It’s that age,’ Scott says, swallowing half his beer in one. ‘Same as we were; you, me, Christian. But like you said. We don’t talk about *that* anymore.’

The chambers of my heart turn like tumblers in a lock.

‘Jesus, Christian Perkins. What happened to his Dad in the end?’ I whisper the question the way we whisper secrets.

‘He died.’ Scott tips his glass, spins it, makes a little whirlpool.

‘In prison?’

‘Sure. Can’t remember when. Couple years back?’

‘Wow. He really hung on.’ Scott’s beer keeps swirling faster. We’re both looking at the glass, not at each other.

‘That he did. Kept trying for appeal. Writing to the paper. Kept on keeping on.’

‘And what do you think?’ I shouldn’t ask, but I have to know. Scott looks up at me as if I just stepped on his foot.

‘What do I think about what?’ I down the rest of my drink, struggling to catch up.

'I mean do you think he did it?'

Scott cocks his head. For a moment, he almost looks like the handsome Peter Pan that he pretends to be.

'Come on, man. You know the answer to that.'

New beers are purchased and emptied. I message Gemma to say I won't be much longer, just finishing up this round. My phone throbs against my leg. I don't check it.

Where are we going?

At some point Scott disappears to pee and returns with two shots of something strong and clear. The only drinks he's paid for all night, and they're vile. I thank him anyway, as if he's done me some huge favour. It's been a long time since I misbehaved.

'Listen,' I say, stretching out the N into infinity. 'I didn't mean to harp on. You're the most free man I know. You do what you want, when you want. So why not come to the city with me tonight? Stay for the weekend? We've got a spare room; you've never even *met* Gemma.' Scott licks alcohol from his lips.

'No can do brother. Ain't so free as you think.' On a whim, I hammer my empty shot glass against the table; *clack-clack-clack*.

'Bullshit! Come on, you're the guy that doesn't play by the rules! Jack it in, whatever job or thing it is you've got to do. Your presence is required elsewhere.'

He grins. I grin. We grin. Two more shots appear by my elbow. Did I order them? Doesn't matter. I drink. He drinks.

'Wild Man,' says Scott.

'Yeah, man. It's wild, man.' I'm dizzy. Can't remember when my last train leaves.

'How about you come to my place?' He's excited. 'It's not far from here. Let me open a bottle of wine. I've got some great stuff at home, just gathers cobwebs otherwise.'

I think of Gemma. By the time I get back, she'll be asleep. Hair stuck to the side of her face. Crust in her crow's feet.

'Sure,' I say. 'Why not.'

Christian Perkins' parents made up a game called Wild Man. We only played it twice.

The name of the game was from our local legend; the Hanggar Wild Man. They said he lived inside a cave. Ate rabbits and foxes. Stole babies from careless mothers and swallowed them whole. Even as a child, I understood enough to know the story was only ever meant to keep us out of the caves.

The game was simple. They took all the local kids out into the woods. Mr. Perkins would play the part of the Wild Man. That meant he hid out among the trees with no shirt on. We'd go running through the forest, and it was his job to catch us. If he snuck up on you, he'd jab his fingers in your side and dangle you by the ankles while your friends ran screaming and laughing because the Wild Man *got* you. Then he'd tell you where to find Mrs. Perkins with the birthday cake. Last one standing got a prize; I can't remember what.

The first time we played, Christian won. Of course he did; his parents rigged the game. Thinking back, I suppose it was a way to give him a regular birthday present and make it seem more special. They weren't wealthy, the Perkins'. But for us kids, Wild Man was the most exciting thing that ever happened—at least until we figured out the odds were stacked against us.

I remember telling my family how scary Mr. Perkins was. It felt like anything could happen if he caught you. There was nothing you could say or do; when you got *got*, you got *got*. Then afterwards, you had cake.

We were kids.

Next year we played the game again. I didn't care about trying to win. Only the thrill of creeping among the bushes. Or perhaps hearing a heavy crunch behind me, and then knowing that it was too late; that the Wild Man had me.

On the other hand, Scott—my best friend since birth, whose backyard shared a fence with mine—was determined to make it to the end. He was a wild man too. Didn't care about rules. He convinced me we should form a team with Christian. That if all three of us stayed together, they'd have to split the prize between us. It doesn't make much sense now, but it did to us back then.

We were kids.

Christian comes back in those fleeting moments when I forget how old I am. Mostly when

I'm drunk, which is why I don't do it anymore. Those moments when I'm nine for a heartbeat, like he'll be forever.

Where are we going?

All I have now are a few broken images. A shoe-print in the mud. Dappled light like leopard spots on our skin. Christian swaddled in his blue hoody. He didn't have a lot to say, just kept asking where we were going. I didn't know. I don't think Scott did either, but he said '*this way*,' and so that was the way we went.

Where are we going?

It was pure dumb luck that brought us to the cave. The turn of a card. We could have gone anywhere. But the cave was where we went.

*

Scott's giving a cab driver an address; a part of town I don't know very well. He's laughing as we're driven, laughing at nothing in particular and I'm laughing too. Street lights streak by the window in reverse. My forehead rests against cold glass. I'm in a taxi and I'm middle aged. I'm a boy in a cave that I never left.

Scott said it was a good place to hide from the Wild Man. Christian wanted to get back to the game, but Scott said this was the game. We wriggled through a little fissure in the rock. There was dripping water. None of us had been in there before. We used to explore the woods a lot in those days before our parents decided it wasn't safe. The trees and rocks were our whole summer, but we'd never gone that deep before.

Now I'm clambering awkwardly out of the car. My beer gut is a boulder that I'm rolling uphill. I have to pee. I'm hoping Scott's bathroom is cleaner than his fingernails.

The building is dark, bigger than I expected. My vision's blurry, I'm going to be sick. Scott pats me on the back and his touch feels like home. That's where Christian wanted to go.

The cave was warm and smelled of mushrooms. He was missing his party, but Scott wanted to go deeper. So deeper we went, bringing Christian with us.

I had a flashlight on my keychain. The bulb was feeble, but I'm a proud torch-bearer. Scott

was always the brave one, but at least I had the light. Christian was so scared, Scott asked if he'd pissed his pants, and Christian said that he was sorry.

Then there was a crunch.

Now I'm older again. Scott's front door closes behind me. The outside looked bad, but the inside is worse. The room is a stone-henge of beer cans, faded by sun-damage. An empty fish tank with a shattered front. Take out boxes full of blue fur. Nowhere to sit. A ghostly twist of yellow sheet gropes its way across the carpet. Crumpled tissues in the corner, and an adolescent smell. I honestly need to pee so bad.

'I can't stay long.'

'No worries,' he says. 'Wait till you try this Côtes du Rhône.' The thought of wine on top of all we've had feels like a death sentence. But I never do this anymore, and he's my oldest friend.

'I can't believe you're a wine guy now.' I know I'm slurring, but our wavelengths are attuned. Vibrating like crystals in a digital watch. I still need to pee, but I have to wait for a break in the conversation. There's a rhythm, there are rules.

Scott grins again.

'Plenty about me you don't know.'

Beneath cloudy alkaline water, the small boy says:

Where are we going?

Then a crunch.

Christian's parents were the wrecks you'd expect. The police asked me to remember again and again, but I couldn't do it. Didn't have it in me. My head's been shot through with holes ever since I left that cave. Riddled through with fissures that I'd grown too big to clamber through.

Everyone in the neighbourhood joined the search. I don't know why they never found the fissure in the rock. I do recall asking my parents why Mr. Perkins had to go away. They just said the police found out he'd done something against the rules, and asked if he ever took me into his basement. I said no, because he never did. They asked if I ever saw him do anything to Christian, and I told them I couldn't remember.

Now Scott wants me to remember. I say what and he says you know. I say I have to pee, and he says the toilet's broken. I ask how he's living with a broken toilet but he ignores the question. Tells

me again that I need to remember, says he can't do it for us both, not anymore.

There's that crunch again, only this time it's *now*, not *then*. I've stepped on an empty beer can as I back away, but we both know what the crunch sounds like. He can see it on my face. The mask is slipping. What the hell was in those shots?

I pull back the dusty blind. The taxi's gone. I reach for my phone to call another, but the phone must be in my laptop bag because it isn't in my pocket. Did I let Gemma know where I was going?

Scott's on the floor, legs crossed, drinking wine. His eyes and smile tell me to do the same and so that's what I'm doing. He's the leader. He thrusts a glass into my hand and I drink, grateful when the wine tips up and back and I can't see anything but the disc of liquid coming at me.

'It's weird I don't have chairs, right?' he asks. 'I only just thought of that. Most people probably have chairs.'

My hips hurt, I'm too old to sit like this. I look around the room and it's a cave he's living in. Where he's been all these years.

'Not that weird,' I shrug, trying to be polite. 'Spartan style. Minimal.' Scott nods, drinking deep.

'Because I don't play by the rules...'

'That's right, that's right... You don't...'

I must have nodded off, because next thing I know the room's dark. I jolt awake as a sound disturbs me from another room. Not quite a crunch. A pair of shoes dropping from a bed? Something dry and hollow.

I wish I had my torch, but I've lost it. No, wait, it's my phone I've lost. I haven't had my torch since I was a boy. Scott turns back over his shoulder towards the door that hides the sound. Then he turns back to me with that grin, the one that pins me.

'Do you have a room-mate?' I ask. My trousers are wet. I'm shaking. Scott shakes his head, real slow. His mouth is a crack in mossy rock. I move to stand, but my legs lock up, unsteady.

'I should head out. Gemma. The kids.' The door with the noise is open now. A slice of jaundice light leaks out.

'Not yet.' He's pulling me up off the carpet and it hurts so bad. My joints pop and burn.

His hands guide my waist. My lungs refuse to work in unison, running out of phase so I'm breathing in and out with the same breath.

'Where are we going?' Scott leads me to the door; not the front door, but the one at the back. The one with the dropped-shoe sound and the slice of light that makes me want to gag.

When a body ages like mine, it swells. Parts that once were hard turn soft. Flexible joints bloat into rusted hinges. By contrast, I can see that Christian Perkin's body has aged into perfection. He'll never be soft like me. He's hard as stone, the same size he always was. The bones of his cheeks are pristine crescent moons, glistening under empty sockets, and the old blue hoody fits like a glove.

'You went back for him?' It's my voice but it's far away. I'm in a hole.

Scott shakes his head and clamps his hand onto my shoulder. I almost fall, almost strike my head with a crunch, like Christian.

'No. He followed me home.'

There's a scrap of papery skin atop the skull, a treasure map dipped in coffee. That's all that remains of the scalp, but it's the hair that does me in. The strands are long since shed. Fallen away like October leaves; but I can see that Scott has saved them. Every single hair, gathered up and arranged on the pillow with care.

'All this time?'

'Mmm-hmm. I sleep in the living room. Best to leave him to it. Sometimes he gets restless.'

I cover my eyes just in time as that dropped-shoe thud comes again. That, and a scratchy exhalation.

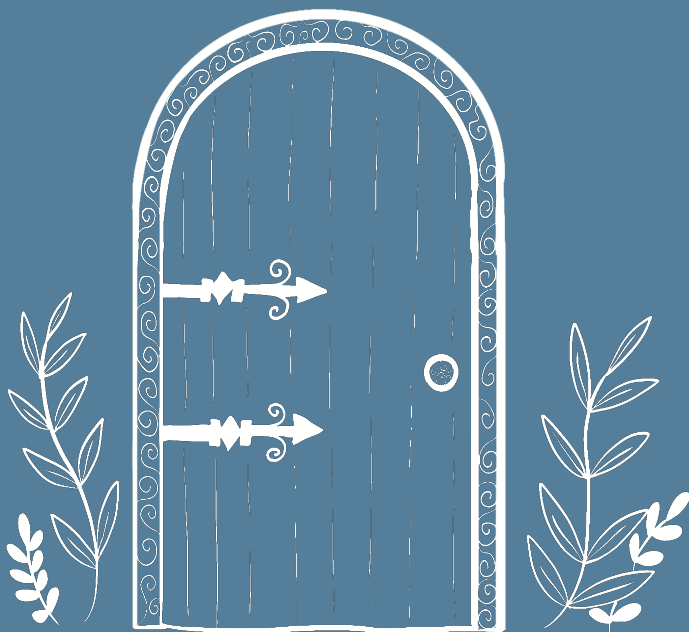
'It's hard, going it alone,' Scott whispers. 'He needs a lot of attention. I'm grateful you're here.'

And I'm grateful too. Grateful I don't have to see—can only listen while the corpse-bed shifts, and Christian rises.

'Where are we going?' asks a voice that's stuffed with dust, and I know we're going nowhere. ■

THE DOOR

REBECCA KING



The simplicity of the situation overshadowed any curiosity that resided in her mind. If she went through the door, she might not be able to return. Not that she knew that for a fact; but ever since the door arrived in her garden, she knew that it was out of her control.

Arianne did not know how long the door had been there. A couple of Sundays ago, she had decided to sit in her conservatory overlooking the small square of space that lived behind her house. It was a beautiful, shining day, the white tint of the sun lighting the entire space. Her house was the culmination of her hard work, and it was the first time in her life that she felt truly comfortable where she lived. The conservatory was a picturesque room that Arianne felt as though she neglected, the sun spotlighting the thin layer of dust that lived on every surface. The only time she came in was to water the many house plants that she had collected over the years, an activity that, she was able to admit to herself, was only few and far between. Living alone had its troubles. She organised her things, and carried a watering can, a book, and a cup of diffusing peppermint tea on a tray into the conservatory, and placed it on the coffee table beside the armchair that was tucked in the corner. The décor was modern; Arianne preferred a minimalistic approach to her house, sticking to neutral tones with splashes of green dotted around. Settling herself down on the chair, she smiled at the way that her entire weight folded into the heavy cushions, but her eyes fell upon the watering can that she left sitting on the table in front of her. She sighed. If she didn't do it now, then she knew that she wouldn't. She heaved herself back out of the chair and picked up the metallic tin, and tipped it over into the nearest plant. She was on her fifth plant when a glint of gold caught her eye amongst the sea of emerald.

Her first thought was surprise at not noticing it before. It was beautifully obnoxious in the way that it hid only slightly behind the leafy arms of a couple of trees. Her garden was fully enclosed, Arianne the only one with a key. No-one could get in. Arianne stared. Was she awake? Yes, of course she was. She was a thirty-two-year-old doctor; she could tell when she was awake.

Perched comfortably in her garden was a door. Not a huge door, but what it lacked in size, it made up for in grandeur. The perimeter of the door featured golden metallic swirls, intertwining intricately with one another, happily catching the rays of sunlight that bounced off of them. Inside the swirly border, there was red wood that had the depth of fire, seeming to flicker every which way in one glance. The doorknob was as gold as the swirls, reaching towards Arianne, tempting her. The red and

gold screamed at her beside all of the green that she was so used to being surrounded by in her home. There was no door frame, no hinges, no way at all that she could see to suggest that the door was being held up. Presumably—logically—there was support on the side that was out of view.

Arianne looked around her in the open conservatory, suddenly not trusting her own vision. What else could appear? Everything was just as it was and just as it was supposed to be. She squeezed her eyelids shut until the black space behind her eyelids turned white, opening her eyes, hoping to see an empty garden. Still, the door persisted.

A deep buzzing drew her eyes away from the golden haze; she had been staring at the door so hard that everything started to blur together. The door buzzer went off sharply three short times, her mother's signature. Arianne was conflicted; how could she do something so normal and answer the door? What would her mother say when she saw the door—or worse, what would Arianne say if she didn't? She stood. The doorbell rang three times more. Arianne's feet found their way through the house, after being sure to firmly close the conservatory's double doors, and unlocked the front door to her beaming mother, Gloria.

'What a lovely day!' she began, kissing her daughter on the cheek. 'How are you darling?'

'Oh, I'm fine,' she said, with a calmness to her voice that surprised her. 'Come on in.'

'Sorry for just popping by, but I was just sitting in that big house all by myself.'

'It's nice to see you, Mum.'

Arianne led her mother through to the kitchen; a room at the front of the house, away from the conservatory. Gloria sat her bag on the kitchen island, hopping delicately onto one of the bar stools that resided beside it. Her kind eyes were squinting at Arianne, the sun shining down above her.

'So tell me,' she said. 'How's work?'

'It's been good. Stressful.'

Gloria looked worriedly at her. Arianne knew what she was thinking. She was thinking that the eye bags under her topaz eyes were a little too deep, looking out of place besides the otherwise perfect features. Arianne's long red hair was tied up casually in a chic knot on the top of her head, and she was dressed in ripped blue jeans and a white blouse. She looked organised; efficient yet aloof.

'As long as you're still coping,' Gloria said with a smile, reaching for the mug that Arianne placed in front of her. 'Shall we sit in the conservatory?'

Panic. Just a hint of it, like someone was reaching down her throat and skimming pebbles off of her stomach one after the other. Little pangs of unease. 'No, let's just stay in here, will we? I've been sitting through there all morning.'

Three hours later, Arianne closed the door behind her mother. The sun had just begun to set, the clouds turning pink in the baby blue sky. Rays of red and purple subtly made their way along the wispy clouds, all of the colours braiding together beautifully. She leaned her back against the coolness of the front door. She looked out at the hallway; it all looked so normal, so innocent. It occurred to her that she could have hallucinated the door in the garden, the logical part of her brain skipping a beat. She had been tempted to see if Gloria saw the door as well, but she didn't particularly want the confirmation of potential insanity. And then on the other hand, if her mother did manage to lay her eyes on the golden wonder, she would have to accept the fact that there was a magical door in the garden of her house. Neither option sounded particularly enticing. So she chose to ignore it. Without even turning off all the lights downstairs, she turned to lock the door, then climbed the stairs to her bedroom, focused only on the feeling of the carpet on her bare feet.

*

The next morning, a mild Monday, Arianne stood in her kitchen holding a warm cup of coffee in her hands, working up the courage to look out the conservatory windows. She stood there for ten minutes, listening to the tick, tick, ticking of the clock, the seconds bleeding into minutes before it was annoying enough to her for her to slowly creep from room to room until she stood at the doors of the conservatory, her eyes glued to the floor. She gripped the freezing handle and pushed downwards, opening the glass door. She slowly raised her eyes, hoping to see no gold amongst the green. But there it stood. She turned back around to the normality of her life, pretending that the door did not exist, and went to work. That was her morning routine for the next thirteen days.

Every day, the dread decreased, but the temptation and curiosity elevated. Two weeks after discovering the door, she lay in her bed long after she normally crawled out. She had been working every single day until today, desperate for any distraction, and happily picking up extra shifts that the hospital offered her. She enjoyed her work, but normally took the weekends off. On this particular

Sunday, she had no choice but to stay at home due to no available shift, under the watchful eye of the allurements that still resided in her back garden. She had not been further than the conservatory doors, not once having stepped foot out of the door to the garden. It was decided that morning, however, that she would. She would let her toes curl into the damp grass of a bright morning in April and touch the door. Two weeks of agonising if she was losing her mind was long enough.

Swinging her legs out of bed, Arianne showered and dressed for the day. Like any other Sunday, she dressed comfortably, draping her tall body in a white top and blue denim dungarees. Taking a deep breath that felt as though it reached her toes, she left the safety of her bedroom and went downstairs. It was as if everything had an edge; she was eerily aware that things could change at any moment, that anything could arrive. The dread that had dissipated returned, with a bucket of nerves that was just sitting beside her, ready to be tipped over her. She stood at the conservatory doors, her eyes stuck to the floor as usual. The door handle was cold to the touch, not yet grabbed by the shining sun that came in through the many windows. She let her feet carry her without too much thought, curiosity's hands pushing her back, leading her gently forward. Her bare toes felt the soft harshness of the grass in between them. She saw the golden glow before her eyes lifted, which didn't stop the gasp of adrenaline as she looked up. The door stood only a few short feet away from her, lighting Arianne's small face with its beauty. But still, she felt the prickle of fear gently poke at her entire body. She focused on the door knob, which was just as tempting as it had been every day for the past fortnight, whispering her name, bringing her forward. It was the size of a fist and was embellished with very thin, sage vines. The brilliant red wood of the door screamed at her, overwhelming her with the need to run her fingers over it. The gold border was just as magnificent up close. Arianne wasn't nervous any more: she was horrified. She was a normal person, she thought. She had done well in her life. She had always worked hard and loved fully. How dare this door disturb her? But still—she wanted to know what would happen when she opened the door. The abhorrence of not being able to return to her life was the only thing giving her the courage to do so. No matter how much she had tried to distract herself, she knew that this moment was inevitable, no matter how long she delayed.

'I need to.' She said to herself quietly. She would never stop living on edge otherwise.

The tip of her fingers grazed the door knob, retracting quickly at the heat of it. A sharp intake of breath washed through Arianne at the burning sensation that she felt. Bracing herself, she

touched it again, to feel the contradictory coolness of it. Shaking her confusion, she felt every muscle in her body tighten, her breath stopping to a halt, as she twisted the golden knob and pushed it forwards. ■

DIRTY LAUNDRY

SAMANTHA NIMMO



(TW: IMPLIED SA)

I heard her. Last night. Her voice floated on the wind like dead leaves, carried up from the river. Her words were in the old tongue, the one that feels clunky in my mouth, my teeth too big for the sounds to fit through. They sounded urgent, somehow soft and frantic all at once: lilting, throaty sounds and looping, cursive cries. I'm sure my grandparents would be able to understand her song. But I don't. The knowledge makes my head hurt.

I know very little in the language of my ancestors, the language of my land. My grandmother tried to teach me with the stories she used to whisper about the things that roamed the highlands. *Bean nighe*, she'd sigh over the gentle spark of the fire.

The words curled around her tongue like petals, blossoming from her lips in a way that I could never replicate. The flowers didn't grow for me. Perhaps it's because I didn't water them enough, left them too long between feedings, forgot where I planted the seeds altogether.

Washerwoman. The bringer of death.

Why does she kill people, seanmhair? It's not kind to hurt people.

She is dead, too, mo leanabh. The mnathan-nighe died bringing life into the world and must wash their bloody rags in the river until the day their life would have ended had childbirth not killed them. Since they couldnae deliver life, they must deliver death.

I frowned, then, staring into the bright flames as they devoured the logs, the light breaking up the thick weight of the night around us. The heat rippled through the air, and sweat beaded at my hairline. I tried to understand.

They're sad?

They're angry. Dinnae get near them, Tess, d' ye hear me? You hear her singing, you turn around. To look a bean nighe in the face is to see death, mo leanabh. Nothing can cure their sadness now.

It's been years since my grandmother told me her stories. But I understand them now. I have no plans to bear a child, but I have felt the soul-deep urge to *kill*. I have felt a man's life end under my hand.

I am angry, too.

I stare out at the copse which separates our village from the river. The trees are ancient and wise, curling their branches together, swapping leaves like secrets. Their roots stretch wide, resurfacing to turn over the earth in patches, tripping me when my feet drag me towards them. I reach out to the

trunks, place my hand against the rough bark, expect to feel some sort of connection. Perhaps the trees will talk to me in the same language as the Washerwoman. Perhaps they will tell me why she has been cursed to suffer more grief instead of being given peace. Perhaps they can explain how to find her.

The sun is setting, but there's no singing. Her voice disappeared with the sunrise this morning. There's an ache in my throat that's sure I know the words if I could just remember them.

I don't.

But I need her. I have no other plan. I have tangled myself in a web of blood and betrayal and the village certainly won't help me after what I've done.

He was a man. A hunter. A hero.

I'm only human. Only a girl.

Only a selfish heart wrapped in fragile flesh. Only a mouth and tits and an empty space between my legs. Only warmth and wetness and quiet.

The bruises on my hips pang as I scrape my side against a thick trunk. There are a few stubborn strands of bright orange sunlight stretching through the ceiling of branches as I press myself further into the tight tangle of trees. Leaves and sticks crunch under my feet, the sound like snapping bones. I shiver, the wind cutting through my shawl and scratching along my skin.

Voices reach my ears. Male shouts and jeering. I catch a half formed sentence about *showing that girl exactly who she's fucked with*. Goosebumps rise along my arms. The rough skin of the tree digs through my clothes, spindly fingers reaching for my flesh. I don't move. Being swallowed by the woods is a kinder fate than being found by those men.

They're hunters. Guards. Protectors.

Such good men. So brave. So honourable. Don't you know they deserve a nice place to rest? A nice woman to rest with. Something to take the edge off. They've seen a lot out on those hills, don't you know? Seen a lot out there.

They never tell me what they see. Nobody seems to be able to tell me anything. The village is a good mile away now, and I'm almost impressed they've followed me this far this late. I didn't think they would.

I wonder if they can smell their brother's blood on me like hounds. Just in case, I scoop up a handful of earth and scrub at the streaks of scarlet on my palms, using the dirt like soap until I can't

see red anymore.

I wonder if there are wolves in these woods. I've never seen a wolf up close. The men hunted them all, or so they bragged. Their pelts hung like trophies from the clothes maker's cottage. Once, I got close enough to watch her skin a fresh one. The blade separated pelt from gristle with ease, like the fat and muscle were nothing but butter, leaving behind a pink, half-formed shell of a thing. Even the wolf's teeth were pulled from its poor skull, made into pendants to hang around their murderers' necks. I would know. I have one in my pocket. The string it's threaded on has snapped, pulled taut by my desperate hands. I rub my thumb against the still sharp tooth the way a child might stroke a doll's woollen hair. I shouldn't have taken it from him, but I couldn't leave it. He didn't deserve it. Not in life and certainly not in death.

The wolves deserve better.

The brave strands of light disappear as the men's voices draw closer. I stay stock still, breathing shallowly in hopes they won't find me. One man was easy enough to overpower in such a compromising position, but three, armed with knives and anger, is another thing altogether. Really, I'm not that strong at all. Quick, perhaps. Canny. My grandmother once told me, when I crawled into her bed after a nightmare, that she wondered if I wasn't a changeling. Some wild, feral thing wrapped in the guise of a girl. My father yelled at her for it in the morning when I told him in excited gasps how *Seanmhair thinks I might be fae, Da! Not from here at all! D'ya think I have wings?*

Fae cannae lie, Tèss.

I dinnae lie, neither, Da.

A low voice bounces off the trees, too close, too close—Gods that's too close. My heartbeat thumps loud in my ears, and for the first time since I scrambled over the wall that marks the boundary of the village, the oily slick of panic fills me. Before now, I'd been all anger, a burning body of rage. Now, I'm starting to feel the cold.

There's three of them, three low murmuring voices, three sets of feet pressing carefully against the undergrowth. The night grows, wind whipping the unsettled dirt into the air, and an animal chitters in the distance. I can't tell what kind. Something small. Something safe.

I hope the men don't kill it.

'Surrender, lass, and we won't hurt ye,' one of the men calls. He's a terrible liar. I can

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practically taste it in the air—the sour tang of rage, masked by false sweetness.

My teeth try to chatter even as I clamp my jaw shut tight. I desperately want to wrap my shawl tighter around me and burrow down to hide from the chill. But I don't move. The blood on my skin itches. Inside my torn shoes, my toes ache. I wriggle them furiously, trying to keep my body awake and aware. These shoes are years old and well worn, and if I'd known any of this was going to happen, I'd have made sure to put my boots on this morning instead.

But I was only going to the market. Only taking my basket of vegetables to swap for honey and meat. It's a four minute walk from the cottage. The garden is slowing down now that we're coming into winter but there's still a decent enough harvest. Parsnips and swede and some fat, misshapen carrots. They're my favourite, eaten raw.

The memory of the food spilled along the road makes anger flick to life in my gut again, warming me. What a waste. What a waste, indeed.

I was only going to the market.

'Branches have been snapped over this way!'

I recognise this voice. I think this one's name is Ruaridh. I remember him as a little boy, with strawberry hair and beetroot cheeks.

But we're in our twenties now. All grown up. Know our rights from wrongs. Right.

I did nothing wrong. If only my grandmother could see me now. I can't decide if she'd be horrified or proud. Maybe both.

My father would just be ashamed. Such a good girl. What happened, Tess. What happened.

Someone grabs my shoulder. My body moves automatically, scrambling away, shedding my shawl and their hand with it. I run without looking, pulse so loud in my ears I almost don't hear it.

She's singing.

Blindly, I charge towards her voice, though every muscle in my body begs me to turn around and run away. The men or the spirit. There's only one option.

Behind me, the woods shake with the pounding of their footsteps. I push and push and push until I'm flying out of the tree line and the babbling water of the burn is in view. Moonlight shines off the river, bright and beautiful, and the comforting scent of wet earth fills my nose. The singing is louder now, shouted out like a desperate prayer, and my heart aches like it's being drowned

in the same waters the woman on the bank is washing her laundry in.

She's hunched over, the vertebrae on her spine sticking out of her thin tunic. Long, limp white hair hangs like rats' tails around her gaunt face, though I can't see her features, only the sharp points of cheekbones and thin, papery skin. The tunic is dirty and torn and her feet are bare. She crouches at the river's edge, her hands plunged into the water, a bloody scrap of cloth being scrubbed clean with her knuckles.

A dizzying mixture of fear and relief sweep through me as the *bean nighe* sings and washes her bloodstained laundry. My body moves before I think about what I'm doing. I dart behind a bush, only realising that it's holly when the leaves prod at my skin. I hear the men break from the tree line, their bodies moving hard and fast.

I can't help myself. I part the branches with my hands, ignoring the prickles of pain on my palms, and through the thin twigs, I can make out the figures at the edge of the water. They stride forward as one, steps sure and strong.

The Washerwoman's head lifts.

She stops singing.

In the silence, my breaths seem so loud.

'Oi, *cailleach!*' Ruaridh shouts, his voice so much *harsher* now that he's a man.

I don't know what took their boyhood from them. But I know it gives them no right to take my girlhood from me.

My thighs still burn from his brother's bruising grip. My throat is raw from screaming at him to stop. My muddy, bloody hands tighten around the serrated edges of the leaves.

I wish I'd taken the knife with me when I fled. I wish I hadn't left it buried in his neck. I wish I'd worn better shoes.

'What are you doing out here so late?'

I've forgotten this one's name, but his voice is deeper than the first's. 'Get back to your village. It's not safe out on these hills for old women by themselves.'

The first scoffs, interrupting before the last has even finished the final word. 'Have you seen a girl running around here? She's a *murderer*, ye know. You're in danger.'

The rage returns to drown out any lingering panic. I have to bite my tongue to resist the

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urge to scream at them. To tell them their good for nothing brother deserved everything he got. That I only wish I'd made his death hurt more.

The taste of my own blood trickles down my throat. The indent that my teeth leave in my tongue throbs.

The Washerwoman stands, her back hunched, that scrap of wet, bloody cloth still gripped tight in her bony hand. River water streams in a pink, thin trail from her wrist to the grass. The men go white.

'What the fu—' Ruaridh shouts, stumbling backwards desperately.

He's not fast enough.

I close my eyes just as she turns.

To look upon the *bean nighe's* face is to see death itself. Is to be *taken* by death itself.

And I will not die tonight.

One of them screams. It's high pitched and pained, like a child who's fallen and scraped the skin off their knee. There is no mother here to kiss it better. Another, the one with the deepest voice, begins to plead for his life, begging through sobs.

'Please, please, *shit*, no, NO!'

The squelching, desperate sound of hands and feet slipping in the wet ground of the riverbank is cut off by someone shrieking so loud it bounces off the trees.

That, too, cuts off in the span of seconds.

Something limp drops to the floor, followed by two more *thumps*. The air is still and silent.

I don't move.

I don't know how long I stay there, pressed into the holly bush, only that at some point my hands press tight over my mouth and hot, fat tears wet my cheeks. There is a cavern inside of me, and I have no idea how to traverse it. I want to feel happy, because I am sure that the men are breathless and empty on the ground behind me, but all I feel is hollow.

Four men have died because of me today. And I didn't *want* to kill any of them.

I just wanted to be left alone. I wanted to trade vegetables for honey and meat. I wanted him to get off me.

I think of the basket of vegetables spilled all over the road. What a waste.

The singing starts again, but it's fainter this time and growing quieter by the second. There's no sound of footsteps, but as the keening, sad song moves further and further away from me, I find the strength to move. The skin of my cheeks feels tight with the drying salt tracks but I do not shake as I stand.

The pale, white shape of the *bean nighe* recedes down the hill, following the winding path of the stream. Her feet leave no marks in the soil, and the wilderness is utterly quiet except for her music.

There are no bodies in the grass, but in her hands hangs three bloody wolf skin capes.

I stand there until life returns to the woods. I have nowhere to go. I can't return to the village. There is nothing there for me now except blood and judgement. I think I should feel scared.

I grip the stolen tooth in my pocket. The memory of ripping it from my assaulter's neck as he laboured over me races through me as blood and mud flake from my palm.

In the distance, the howl of a wolf splits the night. ■

ACHILLES' CHOICE

MOIR McCALLUM



King Achilles stirred, rousing from a deep and troubled slumber. For a moment he was elsewhere: another man, another time, another life. Glory-dreams of war and death were common for the king; but this was different. This one had been tangible, more like a memory than a dream—or a reflection, witnessed from afar. Familiarity lingered in his waking mind: golden walls that scraped the sky; a scarlet river, swelled to flood the sands; a flaming horse, the steed that carried victory.

It didn't matter, he supposed. A vivid work of Morpheus and nothing more. He forgot it all as his wife shifted by his side.

Queen Deidamia was a wonder to behold. Achilles watched her waking, just as he had every morning since their marriage. It was his sunrise, his daybreak, the signal that the night had passed and his world could resume. Apollo could but hope to rival such radiance. Her warmth and beauty were the equal of the sun, but in one regard, they differed. Where mortal men could stand to gaze upon Apollo's face for but an instant, it was all the king could do to tear his eyes from Deidamia's burning beauty. She was more alike to sunlight than she knew, Achilles thought. His eyes needed to behold her, as surely as the world required the sun, for without it, the sky would be a bleak and empty void.

'Good morning, my love,' she whispered, before her eyes had even opened. Deidamia shuffled closer to him, her slender arm draping across Achilles' bare chest. As she moved, the smooth silk beneath which they slept slithered gently down his torso, caressing him as softly as did she. 'You're awake early.'

'Couldn't wait to see you,' answered Achilles, squeezing her tighter to him.

The queen laughed. 'Such a charmer,' she murmured, nestling into her husband's neck. For a moment, it seemed she had returned to sleep; but Achilles would not follow.

He revelled in her every detail as she snoozed. His forefinger traced the line of her exquisite nose, rising slightly over the little bump at the bridge he so adored. His lips pressed gently to the freckle on her right ear, one tiny fragment of the masterpiece of her. He inhaled deeply, slowly filling his lungs with the sweet, woody scent of her auburn hair. By the gods, she was a marvel. Achilles thought that had he been Prometheus, the gift of fire his to bestow, he would have given it all to her and her alone.

The door to their bedchamber creaked as it opened, just a fraction. Achilles sat sharply, startling the queen as he rose. His kingdom of Thessaly had known peace for near a decade, since

Agamemnon had led the proud Greeks to their doom; yet still, Achilles' fighting instincts had endured. He crept soft-footed to the door, pulse quickened, muscles tensing. His anxious fingers gripped the handle, the other hand balling into a tight fist. With the swiftness of a swooping hawk, he yanked the door open, ready for whomever stood beyond.

'Good morning, father,' said the figure in the doorway.

Achilles exhaled heavily, relief replacing tension. Before him stood a flame-haired child, a girl of eight years old: his daughter, Princess Pyrrha. Freckle-faced and sharp, she was the picture of her mother—thank Olympus, thought the king. From him, she had inherited two things: those dark eyes, black as Nyx, as deep and drowning as the river Styx; and a fearlessness that often caused her trouble. Achilles loved her with an almost painful fervour. He remembered the day of her birth, how her little hand had grasped his finger with the strength of hardened soldiers. The very sight of her disarmed him.

'What have I told you about knocking, little lady?' he scolded, suppressing a smile.

The princess shrugged. 'I forgot,' she answered innocently, flashing him that doe-eyed look she knew had such authority. 'Is mother awake?'

'She is now,' called the queen, a hint of humour in her gentle tone. 'Come on, then,' she continued. 'In you get. I'm not going to cuddle myself, you know.'

Pyrrha darted past her father, slipping underneath his arm like a fox evading the hound. The soft padding of her feet, rushing on the rugs that carpeted the floor, brought a twitching grin to the corner of Achilles' mouth. He turned and watched her crawl into the broad bed, saw her mother envelope her with a smothering hug: his two girls, his two great loves.

He made to close the door again, but a panicked call halted him abruptly.

A young soldier—royal guard, in robes of red—bolted down the long hallway to Achilles' chambers, sandalled feet slapping the polished stone. 'My lord,' he cried, 'my lord!'

The guardsman stopped short before his king, swallowing sharply and saluting as he caught his breath. Achilles dismissed the gesture with a wave, setting him at ease.

'Report, man,' he ordered. The distress the soldier wore upon his furrowed brow was not lost on the king: it ignited in him a low but potent flame, a flicker of fear that threatened to swell to an inferno.

‘Thracians, lord,’ said the guardsman. ‘A force of several hundred. They’ve landed on the coast. Lord Patroclus delays them, but he cannot hold for long.’

Thracians—Hector’s cursed lapdogs, thought Achilles. The Trojan Empire crept further west each summer since the war, like a plague that spread from strife. Thrace had been the first to bend the knee; then the many isles of the Aegean; soon, even Athens had been annexed. The natural fortress of the Thessalian valley had delayed King Hector’s ambition—but Achilles had always known that he would come.

He caught the guardsman’s eye. There he saw reflected the same fear that burned inside himself. But soldiers and kings bore different burdens. The young man looked to him for guidance, for the wisdom time had granted. Achilles knew there was but one decision.

‘Gather the Myrmidons,’ he commanded, steadying his voice to convey fabricated confidence. ‘We ride as soon as they are ready.’

*

Half a day it took the king and his warriors, the journey from the palace to the coast. It should have taken half as long again, but Achilles drove them onwards, riding as if fleeing from the vengeance of the Furies. The sun beamed upon the hills and grasslands of the northern kingdom, luring sweat from the pores of the Myrmidons to drip between flesh and armour, cool beads snaking down their spines. It was a striking sight: a hundred fearsome soldiers, riding hard to battle through a land renowned for peace and for prosperity. Long had they been stagnant, forgotten and disused in times of harmony; but the call to arms refreshed them all, a wave of duty that had rinsed them of their lethargy, rejuvenating their purpose. The finest fighters in the world—and Achilles, first among them.

In truth, he did not want to fight. There was a time, in a youth long since spent, when war had seemed his calling; but those days were distant memories, his former self unrecognisable, like an old acquaintance spotted from across a crowded hall. He had denied the summons of Agamemnon, all those years ago. The siege had lasted but three seasons, before Hector had cast the proud Greeks back into the sea. All that gold spent, all those lives lost: and what had Agamemnon to show for his endeavour? The fury of the Greeks at his abysmal leadership had been terrible and swift. The King of

Kings never made it back to Greece—though nor did half the Greek fleet, when a storm had caught them halfway home. No, Achilles had never regretted his decision. He had a family and a kingdom to keep him occupied. Now though, as he rode to battle, a seed of doubt sprouted, blossoming into the dread of inevitability. He may not have gone to war, but now, it seemed, the war had come to him.

They arrived as great Apollo's daily duty ended, and were met with utter carnage. The shoreline was littered with discarded dead, too many and too far away to distinguish their allegiance. It seemed a skirmish had been fought inland; there, the sand was scarlet in the dying light of day. As Achilles and his Myrmidons crested the final hill before the land gave way to beach, he saw that Patroclus had organised a fighting retreat to defend a rocky ridge above the shore. Beneath it lay some twenty Thracians, arrows protruding from their twisted bodies, arranged in a morbid procession where each soldier had ventured farther than the man before. *A wise strategy*, thought the king. But it had only postponed fate.

Now, the Thracians' appetite for slaughter would be satisfied. They had formed a tight unit—two hundred or so fighters, shields locked, spears levelled. With patience and discipline, they advanced upon Patroclus's remaining warriors like a wave of death, fixed to sweep the Thessalians away as easily as specks of sand. Achilles saw futile arrows glance off the Thracian wall, as harmless as sea-spray spattering a ship's hull. They would be on the defenders in moments, as certain as the coming of the tides.

His blood rose, sending warmth and courage to his heart. He hefted his own spear, revelling in its familiarity, and set his eyes upon the fast-approaching invaders.

'Myrmidons!' he bellowed, voice carrying upon the ocean air. 'With me!'

Taking up a fearsome cry, the hundred mounted Myrmidons hurtled towards the Thracians with a speed to rival lightning, as if they had been cast from the very hand of Zeus. They would break upon the shield-wall like water on a cliff-face if it held. Achilles' eyes darted along the front line as he charged, searching for any sign of weakness. *Please*, he prayed internally, *please—just a sliver in which to bury my spear*.

There.

He split the Thracian wall with a perfect thrust, lancing through the cheek of one neglectful warrior. As one weak link can ruin a chain, so did the invading unit shatter, falling out of line as the

Myrmidons barrelled into them.

Achilles leapt from his horse, drawing his short sword as he landed lithely on the sand. Immediately a Thracian launched himself at the king, spear aimed at his chest; Achilles swatted it aside with ease, sending a lethal counter-cut to the attacker's throat.

Next came a savage sword-slice, coupled with a cry of fury. Achilles ducked under it, sinking his own blade deep into the swordsman's stomach. He wrenched it clear, and the Thracian tumbled, his armour clattering about him as he fell.

Another fighter charged at him, spear tucked firmly in his elbow. Achilles feinted left, sensing the change in his assailant's stride; then, he surged to the right, bringing down a brutal blow upon the Thracian's helm. It split beneath the force, and spilled the man's lifeblood upon the shore.

A pause for breath. The king felt the thrill of battle coursing through his veins, empowering as the *ichor* that flowed within the gods themselves. In ten years, he had lost none of his lethality.

The Thracians had parted around his men, and the fighting had slowed enough for Patroclus to descend from his position. He forced a bloody path towards Achilles, beaming brazenly as he neared his dearest friend.

'Better late than never, eh?' he grinned, clapping Achilles on the shoulder. 'Was starting to think you'd never come.'

'And miss a chance to outdo you?' joked Achilles, embracing the man he loved as his own brother.

Patroclus laughed—a carefree, joyous sound. In his presence, the king almost forgot that they were at battle, that war would follow, that the future balanced on the edge of a keen sword.

So assuaged was he that he failed to see the arrow sailing straight for his heart—but Patroclus did not.

Bronze bit deep: a fatal strike. Achilles' eyes widened, his jaw falling at the impact. Patroclus had pushed him just in time for the arrow to miss the king and bury itself deep inside his own chest instead. Achilles caught him as he fell, lowering him gently to the ground. He watched in horror as the mortal light fled from his friend's eyes, leaving only darkness.

The goddess Thetis yanked her son from the vision, tugging him back into reality.

'You see?' she said, desperation shaking her soft voice. 'You see what you stand to lose, Achilles?'

Achilles shook his head, dislodging the illusion. For a moment, he was still King Achilles of Thessaly, a husband and a father; but when he saw his reflection in his mother's sacred pool, he remembered.

Troy was yet to happen. He was at home, in Phthia, twenty summers to his name. The ship would sail tomorrow—and tonight, he must decide.

'Patroclus...' he began, his own voice strange to his ears.

'Forget him,' hissed Thetis, seizing him roughly. 'Think of your wife, your unborn child. They will never happen if you sail tomorrow. You will never come home.'

Achilles knew the prophecy. But if he did not bring death to Troy, then Troy would deliver it to Greece—this, he had seen. And his beloved Patroclus would pay the price.

'I am decided, mother,' he said, raising his chin in defiance. 'I will go to Troy.'

He mourned in silence for his wife and child, never to be known. He would fight, the Greeks would win, and—though he himself must die—Patroclus would live. Yes, he would live. That was enough.

How cruel the Fates could be. ■

THE
HIBERNATING
DEAD



LIA MULCAHY

Her kin came from the old country for the funeral. They stroked and clasped her limp hands, clicked their tongues at her paleness, the dark coal-smears beneath her eyes. *Grief suits you, my little sun*, said her mother approvingly, and pinched her white cheek. *You lose weight, see? Easy to find another husband.*

They laid him on the dining room table like they were carving him for dinner, his feet facing the saints on the wall, his great head laid close to the fire. The flames leaped and danced like girls too deep in their cups, and the golden light caught on the dead eyes of her husband's hunting trophies; boar, stag, hare. Her husband's eyes were shut. They had all been very careful not to use the word *dead*—indeed, it looked like he was only sleeping.

The mourners flung the doors open and trickled in and out of her house, spilling into the garden like black wine overflowing from a carafe. She sat still and watched the body. Her mother praised her vigil and kissed her hair, twining braids through her fingers with proprietary love. Her breath smelled like bitter grapes. *What a fine daughter I have, she sighed, so devout, so faithful.*

Her father pulled her mother away when she swayed from the spirits, steadying her with a thick hand on her back. Pulling her close. It was very like something that her husband would have done.

*

Her grandmother settled at her side with a hissing of black skirts, an old crow nesting for the night. He was buried now. It was done. Tomorrow she would go to lay fresh flowers, and the day after, and the day after that. The women would pity her, in her crisp young widowhood. The men would look at her with longing, now that they could do so without fear of reprisal.

He was a determined man, said her grandmother. *A man with strong passions.*

The Hibernating Dead

And this was true, so she said nothing—but a low dread dripped into her stomach, thick and sticky like tar.

He will return to you, she continued. The dead sometimes do.

Once before, her grandmother had told the story of her own mother's death. She had been a hard woman, the kind often produced by scant food and harsh winters, but she had loved with fierceness. The fine details of how death came for her were never described; that wasn't the important part of the tale. The part that her grandmother told was that after she was laid to rest in the dark earth, she came back.

I walked home from school and a falcon followed me the whole way, her grandmother had recounted, her eyes half-closed in memory. When the boys called, she called back and she was louder. When they came close, she flew at them with her talons and her cruel sharp beak. She pecked out a young man's eye when it fell on me, and it left ribbons, red ribbons in the snow. I knew then that she had truly loved me.

In this precious, weary moment, her grandmother did not tell her the story again, though they were both thinking of it. Instead, a lined hand withdrew from the sleeve of her grandmother's black mourning gown. It rested very gently over her own.

Be ready, was all she said.

*

The sun was slipping down the sky like a woman easing into a steaming bath—slowly at first, then all at once. She sat in the garden, wrapped in her big fur coat, watching the shadows of the trees shift and play in the dying daylight. The mourners had gone. She was alone.

The only warning she had was the faint rustle of the undergrowth.

It came from the woods, mammoth and lumbering, dislodging itself from the shadows with a deceptive swiftness. The smell of it was almost as startling; rank and hot as sin, as lust, stuffing her nose and her mouth like wet cotton. It reminded her of nights spent in the tight cage of her husband's arms, her face turned into the sweaty crook of his neck, waiting for him to tire of his panting labours and fall to dreaming. A bestial musk, but one she knew well.

The bear did not roar—but then her husband had rarely raised his voice at her. He hadn't needed to. It chuffed instead, like it was amused at her audacity, sitting all by herself in the encroaching dark. When it loped towards her, it reared up on thick hind legs, blocking out the falling sun. It drew back a broad paw to strike.

This, too, was familiar.

Her husband's hunting rifle was warm to the touch, kept half-concealed by the fall of her coat. It did not quite fit in her hands, but she had prepared for that; how many times had she grasped it as her husband slumbered, and thought about how easy it would be to pull the trigger? A woman could not kill her husband, but she could defend herself from a rabid beast—and only she knew that the two were one and the same...

She fired.

The blowback nearly knocked her flat, but she heard the bear shriek, a sound of agonised fear that made her stomach twist with instinctive pity, because she recognised that fear intimately. It was an old companion that she had spent too many years with.

There was something damp tracing a snail-trail down her face, and she did not know if it was tears or gore. She fired again, and once more, and this time there was no scream, just the heavy

The Hibernating Dead

thud of flesh and muscle and fur hitting the ground. The air smelled metallic, of bullets and blood. Her coat was stained, but she found that she did not care in the slightest. There would be new fur now, for new coats, even if she had to clean the viscera off first.

And then the world was quiet again, but for the croaking of the crows. They sounded proud; they sounded hungry. She breathed in deep and steady, exhaled. The bear's eyes were glassy with death.

The bravest crow hopped towards it and tore out one eye with his sharp little beak. She watched as he flapped his wings and went up, up and away, flying free into the new and peaceful night.



THE GODFATHER OF GARDEN END

NICOLA WIGGINS



Hank took a long drag of his pondweed cigar and shifted in his moleskin chair. His wings were bunching up behind his back and giving him awful gyp.

‘It’s time, Vinnie.’

‘Boss?’

‘To expand. I’ve had a proposal to extend our territory beyond Garden End cleared by the rest of the Pixie Elders.’

‘Where to?’ Vinnie’s stubby wings pricked up.

‘The House.’

‘But, Boss—what about the Fairies? The agreement?’ Vinnie frowned at Hank and cracked his knuckles, ‘After that business with the Old Shed, the Elders said any more talk of expanding territory and we’d be exiled to the Compost Heap. I got kids to feed. I can’t afford to lose my pension—’

Hank held up his hands, ‘Calm down, Vinnie. The House Fairies have been having some trouble lately with an...infestation.’

‘Infestation?’

‘The Mice, Vinnie. We’re not the only ones with ambition. Those dirty rats have been increasing their ranks behind the Fairies’ backs. The rumour is they’re planning to mobilise,’ Hank puffed out cigar smoke in concentric rings, rubbing a hand over his large, green belly.

‘I’m going to make them an offer they can’t refuse, Vinnie. We help them out with their little problem and in return we get the Ground Floor. It’s a straightforward business transaction.’

‘Gee Boss, that sounds great,’ gushed his aide.

‘I need you to get this letter to the Fairy Elders,’ Hank held out a rolled-up parchment. ‘And include a case of the 200-year-old buttercup rum as a gesture of goodwill.’

*

Hank was not in a good mood. The response from the House Fairies had been a swift and cursory ‘no’, along with some suggestions as to where he could deposit his cigars.

‘Goddammit!’ He bellowed, sliding a hand across his desk. An antique glow-worm lamp

crashed to the floor.

He was sick of Garden End. Sick of the weeds and the ivy. Sick of the constant flow of immigrant worker bees from Next Door trying to settle in the Big Tree. He'd had enough. Those flaky Fairies weren't going to stand in his way, with their elongated wings and whispering voices and feathery clothes. He would show them who was in charge. He'd have them begging for his help in no time.

'Everything alright, Boss?' Vinnie's paunch burst into view a second before his face did. He saw the jumble on the floor and realised he didn't need an answer.

Hank remained silent as he gazed through his office window at the dandelions swaying like inverted pendulums in the breeze.

Eventually, he murmured, 'We need the Fairies to know we mean business.'

'What are you thinking, Boss?'

Hank brought his henchman in close and told him what he needed him to do.

*

The sun beamed down on Garden End the following morning, its warmth pervading every meeting place and dwelling.

Hank leaned back in his chair and rested his hands behind his bald head.

Today will be the day, he thought to himself. He imagined the look of horror on the Fairy Elders' faces when they woke in their beds to discover the heads of their beloved horseflies as companions. He congratulated himself on his ingenuity. How splendidly clever he was.

A knock sounded at the door and Vinnie entered, cracking his knuckles, 'So, ah...'

Hank's smile fell like frogspawn from a spoon as he realised what was coming.

Vinnie forced the words out, 'They said no again, Boss.'

Hank slammed his fists on the table and jumped to his feet. His belly bounced up after a second delay and nearly knocked the desk over.

How could this *be*? Had he underestimated them? He refused to believe it.

Vinnie watched his employer's face morph from green to murky brown. When it reached

purple, he decided to leave. Being a Pixie was challenging enough at times, but right now, he was glad he wasn't a Fairy.

*

The House loomed, dark and forbidding, above the silvery, moonlit branches of the sycamore tree. A summer breeze roused a ditty from aluminium chimes hanging on a hook near the patio door, causing a sudden commotion in the peaceful garden.

Hank held up a hand and the legion of Pixie soldiers behind him came to a halt.

His anger had taken a full week to abate, by which time it had been replaced by a stoic determination. He had formulated a new plan, and this time he was confident he would succeed. After his last two failed attempts to persuade the Fairies to concede territory, his reputation was now at stake. Usually, he would have used a little Pixie magic to help his mission along, but it didn't always work so well against other magical creatures and should a battle of spells break out, there was every chance the whole thing could get out of hand and attract the attention of the Humankind—and that didn't bear thinking about.

No. This called for a good, old-fashioned invasion. Those lousy Fairies wouldn't know their borage from their brassicas by the time he had finished with them.

Crooked arms of rhododendron and hydrangea reached out their fragrant fingers towards the cobbled garden path, beckoning Hank onward, but he knew he had to be careful. He could hear the music of the crickets beating out a heady rhythm into the night. The echo of the nearby motorway sounded ocean-like in the darkness, the rush of the human-mobiles like falling waves crashing to shore.

Pressing a finger to his lips, Hank dropped to a crouching position and ran his thumb under the strap of his horse chestnut helmet. He wiped the sweat collected on his spindly thigh and peered through the doorway to the House scullery. He didn't usually participate in active missions but he couldn't resist the opportunity to see the Fairy Elders surrender first hand. Behind him waited a militia of the strongest and most skilled Pixies from across Garden End, armed with hedgehog spines and horse chestnut flails.

Ahead, moonlight painted a milky arc across the smooth, terracotta-tiled floor of the scullery. The room was still, except for the breeze that ruffled the tendrils of the mop propped upside down against the far wall.

Hank had expected to see some sign of Fairy activity by now, perhaps suds dripping from some half-washed dishes or some reparative needlework in progress, but it was eerily silent.

Again, he lifted an arm, this time urging his men forward.

The miniature green soldiers tiptoed across the tiles and crouched behind a battered, wooden shoe rack. Hank sniffed the air. He knew that smell; honeysuckle-sweet with an undertone of cherry blossom.

'Fairy dust,' he hissed. 'Follow me.'

This is it, he thought. We'll crush their foolish little heads like seed pods. The Fairies are no match for the Pixie infantry, whether on foot or in the air. They were fast, that much was true, but they had neither the strength nor the organisational capabilities to form an effective defence against their tactically proficient, green-skinned neighbours.

Hank grinned; it was a done deal.

He rounded the corner of the shoe rack, followed by his men. Fairy dust was thick in the air now and filled their nostrils with its sickly aroma. A murmur of soft whispering voices grew louder and Hank looked up to see the four Fairy Elders sitting cross-legged on the edge of the porcelain butler sink.

They stopped talking and stared at Hank as he moved closer.

'It's over,' he called. 'Even a dozen of your kind are no match against a Pixie. We don't want any unpleasantness, but if you give us no choice, we won't hesitate.' He pointed a finger at the ceiling, 'The terms are as I already proposed: you can keep the Upstairs, but the Ground Floor is now Pixie territory.'

The Fairy Elders said nothing, their stares penetrating and ineluctable.

'Hey, Fairy!' Hank shouted, defying the knot in his stomach, 'You listening to me?'

A deafening moment of silence preceded a low rumble that echoed around the scullery. Row upon row of broad, four-legged, furry bodies emerged from under the cupboards below the sink, marching in perfect synchronicity towards Hank and his men.

Cries rose up from the Pixie ranks.

‘It’s the Mice!’

‘They’re all in cahoots!’

‘We’re done for!’

The mice halted, but their leader continued to saunter forward to stand directly in front of Hank, rising up onto its haunches. It peered down at him with mean, beady eyes, hands on hips, tail curled like a question mark.

It snarled, ‘Who are you calling a Fairy?’

Hank was trying to think of a response when the world condensed into a white speck and he blacked out cold.

*

Hank woke to find himself back in his office, flat out on the floor, Vinnie mopping his brow with a damp dock leaf.

‘I’m too old for this, Vinnie,’ Hank manoeuvred himself into a sitting position, swatting away Vinnie’s moist palm.

‘Nah Boss, you just rest up a little while.’

Hank’s left wing trembled as he tried to sit straight and a sigh escaped him. Maybe he *was* getting too old. Maybe it was time to hang up his helmet and hand the reins of his operations to the younger generation, even if they were more interested in rolling in the daisies with Pixie females than rolling cigars.

Hank rubbed his head and touched his chin, feeling the impression his helmet strap had left. Maybe it had been a mistake to try and gain territory via the House. Maybe he should have aimed for somewhere more familiar, closer to their existing boundaries.

Vinnie passed Hank a small box with its lid open, ‘Have a pondweed cigar, Boss. Your favourite.’

Hank’s eyes gleamed, thoughts of retirement expelled from his mind like the seeds of a dandelion clock on a blustery day.

The Godfather of Garden End

'Vinnie, that's it!' he exclaimed, struggling to his feet. 'That's it!'

'What's that, Boss?'

'The Pond, of course!' Hank rubbed his hands together, 'Those Water Nymphs know a good deal when they see one.'

'That's a great idea, Boss,' Vinnie held in a sigh. 'I'll fetch the buttercup rum.' ■

LEARNING TO
WALK IN THE
DARK



CHARLOTTE MARTEN

Three sisters lived in a house beloved by God, save for the absence of luck. This was long ago, in a town that would have been picturesque if its inhabitants had anywhere else to compare it to. There were small, sod-roofed houses, a few shops off the main square, and a new church built of blackened wood. Once, there had been a wall around the town, and in some places it still stood as tall as two men, but over the years the stones had one by one been taken for better use, and in other places a child could skip over it without a second thought. Still, most of the houses stayed within the wall's boundary, like sheep kept close from fear of wolves. But if you walked out the old north gate on the path up the mountain which rose behind the town, you would see a house backed against a copse of evergreens.

This was the house where Inge and Asta and Lilli lived. It was dark and smelled always of drying herbs and candle smoke. They had been born in the house and grown there, and when their father and mother had died they had simply continued to live there, for what else was there to do? The sisters had meant to marry, but it had always seemed of less immediate importance than tending the garden. 'And who wants such an unlucky wife?' Inge said to Lilli once, just before knocking the milk pail over for the second time that day. Lilli was the most unfortunate of the three, the one forever slipping on wet stones or swatting gnats out of her eyes.

The sisters were content with their lives at the edge of the forest. They were free to wander in the fields with their sheep, and to spend warm summer afternoons next to the waterfall upriver from the town. But with every passing season, luck dripped away from their house like melted wax. One spring, the best lamb was torn apart by wolves. The next, half of Inge's vegetables rotted in the ground before harvest. Each winter was leaner than the last. They did not speak of the fear that gripped them as the first frosts bit the ground, but all three sisters knew: like a candle burned down to the wick, there would be a year when their luck guttered out.

Inge slept in the north room, in the largest wooden bed their grandfather had built, and Asta slept in the loft, on the softest of three child-size cots, and Lilli slept curled on the floor next to the fireplace, where it was the warmest. Neither Inge nor Asta woke one autumn night when Lilli's knees knocked against the table in the main room, or when her hand caught in the door as it swung shut.

It was three weeks past the first snows. The townsfolk, the animals, even the mountain

seemed to know that this was not the darkest night; no, there was yet descent before the slow climb to spring. Lilli scrambled through the ice and mud churned by the cows' hooves. She passed the border of the western field, where the old stones stood beneath the spines of a spruce. There were warnings in the town to never enter the spruce's shadow, for that was where the Devil played, running his clawed fingers over the runes and stamping his cloven feet on the grass.

But it was night, and the moon was new, and the spruce cast no shadow at all—or else its shadow obscured the entire world. Lilli paused at the edge of the stones and wrapped her cloak closer about herself. The darkness around her was a true dark, the kind that whispers promises no one wants fulfilled.

Lilli had sat in the new church with her sisters and listened to the new priest proclaim the Word: for those who love God, all paths are cleared. And after the sermon, when they passed the old north gate, she heard the whispers of the townsfolk. Their house was outside the wall, far from God's light.

But Lilli remembered her Father's stories: there were Words spoken in the night so powerful they shaped the day. Father had never been to the new church. Lilli drew the thin fish knife he had given her from her sleeve and stepped into the ring of stones.

She knelt, scraped away the ice until it darkened with dirt below. Carved the first Word her father had taught her into the ground. Her hands had long gone numb, so she barely felt the second Word cut into her palms. She pressed her hand into the soil. Blood dripped into the earth.

'Three words for three sisters,' Father told her once. He traced the sigils on Lilli's arm, then held out his hand for practice. 'We don't need any wall to keep us safe, as long as we remember the words.'

Lilli closed her eyes and said the third Word. She expected a wild wind to whip through the trees and stir her hair. She expected to be blinded by a light, or deafened by a roar. She knew what miracles were supposed to look like: bombast and brightness, immediate certainty that what you had seen was divine. Instead, she felt the cuts in her palm beginning to ache through the cold.

Lilli set off back across the fields to the house amid the gathering dawn. She did not look back towards the stones, so she did not see the first sign of the luck. Cornflowers pushed out of the snow in each footprints.

As she crossed the jamb of the house, two drops of blood rolled from her fists, and this was the second sign of the luck. They dropped onto the stones next to the stoop, where they clanked with the golden weight of new-minted coins. But Lilli did not hear this second sign, as she had fallen onto her pallet and into a dream.

The hours rolled towards morning, and the final gust of night-wind limned the window panes with ice, and the sisters dreamed as one. They stood at the edge of the stones, facing a bear. Its paws tamped the half-melted snow under the spruce into a flattened slurry of mud and ice. The sisters kept their toes firmly outside the shadow of the spruce's branches.

'I don't believe it,' Lilli said. 'Is this our luck?'

She tried to step forward, but Asta pulled her arm. Inge turned to Lilli. 'What have you done?'

The bear roared. In the house, six eyes opened.

Inge rose first to take the animals to pasture, so she was the first to notice the candles. Their flames usually burned so close to the herbs Asta hung from the ceiling the kitchen filled with smoke, but now they were flickering exactly high enough to light the room, and no farther.

Asta rose next to sweep the snow from their stoop and melt it for water. She could never tie her boots without tangling her fingers in the twine, but now she found that once she slipped her feet into the leather, the laces latched without so much as a snarl.

Lilli rose last. She'd grasped at sleep and come up empty-handed. 'I'm going to walk to the waterfall,' she told her sisters. 'There may be some useful bits growing there yet.' Their feet always stumbled across the path. Branches always scraped their faces. Last season, Lilli had asked for a new pair of boots or a better knife.

'Purchased with the money you lost on your way to the smithy?' Asta would say.

'Purchased with the only coins we have left to tithe?' Inge would respond.

Lilli would roll her shoulders down to her boots and slouch behind them all the way back to the house.

But today, the path was already cleared. Swallows flitted through the trees from their perches in the scree above. Inge looked down—and there was a single, unbroken egg sitting in the snow alongside the path. She picked it up and set it gently in her pouch. When she got to the waterfall,

its paper-thin shell was still whole. She waded along the gleaming stones at the edge of the toiling water and did not slip. At the top of the waterfall, she found bunches of winter-fern.

Lilli did not notice her luck. This is how humans can be: unable to taste the good fortune until it turns sour, unwilling to see the fade of the bad. She hurried home with a full bag of ferns. It was Sunday.

The new church was more full than usual. The sisters sat down in their pew at the back, first Asta, then Inge, then Lilli. Veda, the fletcher's daughter, leaned over and whispered, 'Have you heard? We all dreamed of animals last night. Father Einarsson thinks it's a demon, or some manifestation sent by a witch.'

'What else is there to dream of around here?' said Sigmund, Veda's brother. 'A fox, a goose, a bear—it doesn't matter. There's less meaning there than in the soles of my shoes.' But he was in church, Lilli noted, which was more than could usually be said. She was the only one who noticed his trembling knees.

After the sermon, Sigmund and Veda followed the sisters out beyond the wall and up the path through their uncle's fields. Storm clouds marshalled over the eastern pass.

'A blizzard's coming,' said Veda grimly. 'We'll be bringing our goat inside tonight.'

Sigmund groaned and muttered something about the stench, and he and Veda turned away from the path to the sisters' house.

If they had just kept on that path, followed it towards the forest, they would have looked back to see the cold blue skies of early winter clearing as soon as they crossed the property line.

Lilli had just sat down to the table for the midday meal when there came a knock at the door. Asta put down the cards—already cleaned, though shearing was months away—and opened the door.

A tall woman with brown goose-down hair braided down her back for travel stood under the lintel. She wore a large, thick mantle of fur clasped at the throat with a bear tooth.

'May I enter?' she asked.

Asta stepped aside. 'May you enter in peace, stranger. What brings you to our town and to ourcroft?'

The woman entered the room and sat on a stool without prompting, facing the window.

Lilli tried to decipher her long braid.

‘I have been separated from my aellir for years,’ she said. ‘It is only now that I may return.’ Her voice was soft and feathered like a dove’s wing. ‘Tell me, children, have you ever seen a goddess before?’ She turned and Lilli realised her eyes were the same deep brown as the bear’s.

Asta closed the door with a slam. ‘We don’t believe in gods and goddesses anymore,’ she said. ‘Not since the church was built.’

The woman glanced out the kitchen window at the town. The church’s spire split the sky. ‘Tell me, then. Who protects your fortunes? Who ensures that your cattle are fertile, that your harvests are plentiful, that your small lives are filled with pleasure and luck?’

Lilli looked around the house. There, the chair leg half-broken from careless knocks. The ladder, singed by an accidental fire. Their worn clothes. Their luck was thin, like paint worn over old wood.

Asta began to lay each of the boned and salted herring out on a board for lunch. ‘We have been blessed by God,’ she said, the line polished by repetition. ‘We no longer need idols.’

Inge grasped the cards as if they were knives. ‘I’m afraid you won’t find many who believe in the old ways in this town,’ she said.

‘Ah, but we aren’t in the town, are we?’ said the woman. ‘If we were, I’d hardly have been able to cross that wall. And I wouldn’t have come if I hadn’t been summoned by her.’ She pointed at Lilli. ‘And it’s about time someone had the sense to summon a deity with a smaller field of view. More focus.’ She laughed, and the sound tumbled the cloaks to the floor. She twitched a finger, and they flapped their edges until they rose to their hooks by the door.

‘I think you should leave,’ Asta said. ‘We have repented and serve the Lord. We seek only His grace. His gifts.’

The woman’s nostrils flared. ‘This is not a gift. I am not a god of grace, but one of debts paid and owed.’ She stood abruptly. ‘I’ll give you seven times seven hours to repay me.’ With that, she spun on her heel and folded in on herself, furling her cloak and releasing four wild geese from under its folds. They honked and winged their way around the room, scattering the fish and knocking over the candles. By the time Inge had smothered the flames, both the geese and the woman were gone, save for a gust of wind that carried with it the sickly smell of overripe apples.

Asta and Inge looked at their sister. Lilli spent her childhood afternoons searching for redcaps among the trees. Lilli raced with the dogs through the snow. Lilli had been the last to come to the new church. Lilli was the wildest of them all, and the most unfortunate.

‘I called upon the only force that could favour our house,’ said Lilli.

Inge turned and climbed into the loft without speaking. She carried with her the cards, which amid the chaos had filled themselves with fresh wool.

The sisters did not speak that day, but the house brimmed with luck. Lilli milked the goats. They each gave bottles and buckets of milk, so much cream that every container in the house was filled, but no more. The hens each lay two eggs.

The second morning she walked into the village with Asta to sell the milk and eggs. Halvor the smith was sitting outside his shop, head in his hands. ‘My chickens each lay two eggs this morning,’ he said. ‘But both of them were rotten.’ Veda bought a gallon of milk. Her uncle’s cows had all gone dry. Everyone they met had no luck.

They returned home with a heavy purse of coins. ‘Enough to tithe this year and for new boots,’ Lilli said.

‘May our good fortune spread to those around us,’ Asta said.

The table in the cabin was covered in wool. ‘The more I dig from our basket, the more I find,’ Inge said. She passed Asta and Lilli some cards.

Asta grabbed a hank of wool and tore at it viciously. ‘The deadline is coming. You must banish her,’ she said to Lilli. ‘Don’t you see? This luck will tear our village apart.’

Lilli yanked on a stubborn burr. ‘Of course I see. I see the clear skies over our fields, even when fog has all but covered the town. I see the sheen of our horse’s mane and the gleam in the hounds’ eyes.’ The wool ripped, the burr taking half the fibre with it. Lilli slammed down the cards and stalked away from the table.

‘Going to dance in the Devil’s tracks?’ Asta said.

Lilli didn’t answer, just fled out the door and down the path towards the waterfall. The snow was frozen into hard cups of ice, but Lilli didn’t slip or stumble. She pressed forward until the arms of the forest reached out and pulled her in.

Among the trees, the disapproving daylight refracted into complex shadows.

‘Help!’ The call came from a clearing just up the mountainside. Sigmund knelt over Veda, who lay twitching and half-conscious.

‘She collapsed in a fit. We were gathering berries. She must have eaten some bad ones.’ Sigmund bent his head and sobbed. ‘She was always so certain of their kind.’

Veda’s face was ashen, nearly as pale as the snow. ‘It must have been bad luck,’ Lilli whispered.

Lilli knew now what miracles looked like. No lightning strikes, no thunder: they were like clouds, drifting slowly to shadow a life. She pulled her knife from her bag. She carved the first word in the snow. The second she cut into Veda’s cloak. Then she reopened the cuts in her palm.

At the edge of the clearing, a fluttering of wings. The rush of a cloak against ice. The smell of spring lavender on the mountain, and the salt spray of the sea, and the cedar of the church’s walls.

‘Save her,’ Veda pleaded. ‘She didn’t deserve this.’

‘Balance is the only guarantee,’ said the woman. ‘Good luck for bad. Your favour for others.’ That was the deal you made.’

‘Then I need a new one,’ said Lilli.

‘I’ll take your words,’ said the woman. ‘I will return her to health, but your family cannot call on me again. You must give up your sigils and your conversations with me in the darkness. You will only have the daytime gods, their indirectness and their indifference. Their luck, good or bad.’

When the villagers would tell this story years hence, they imagined a blast of icy wind lifting the woman’s cape, or a bear’s roar piercing the air. But there was only a single tooth left on the ground at the edge of the trees. There was only a girl bleeding into the snow, and her friend waking on the ground. There was only a brother weeping into his sister’s dress. There was only the slow walk to the town’s wall.

Asta and Inge stood at the door to the house. Lilli held out the bear tooth. ‘We will make our own luck,’ she said. ‘We have done it all our lives.’ That promise was no debt, no guarantee. But in the dark nights, it was all they had. ■

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THE GLYPH. TEAM

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SOFIA ARTOLA DIAZ (EDITOR & WEB EDITOR): Sofia is a Spanish writer who finds being bilingual means struggling both in Spanish and English. Obsessed with commas and emotionally unavailable characters, she finds inspiration for her writing in her daily battles against energy companies, spiders, and heights.

NICOLA ROSE (EDITOR): Nicola lives and writes in rural South Lanarkshire. She likes unusual stories about bodies and transformation and what it means to be alive at the same time as other humans. Her writing has appeared in *Gutter 27* and *New Writing Scotland 42*.

GIOVANNI SEBASTIAN CARDILLO (EDITOR): Giovanni is a German-Italian writer who abandoned both of his native languages to write in what's left of the King's English. His prose and poetry are influenced by the shockingly mundane experiences and encounters he made while meandering across the globe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A selection of books recommended by our Folklore writers and the GLYPH. team

NEVERWHERE, NEIL GAIMAN

'A beautifully written, whimsical reimagination of what's below London. I found it to be a fast-paced and humorous read.'

- LIA MULCAHY

A THOUSAND SHIPS, NATALIE HAYNES

'A brilliant collection of female perspectives based on Homer's Iliad, which upon its release played a big part in the continuing shift from male-dominated ancient retellings towards (equally valuable) female-focused themes. Anyone who has ever met a woman should read this book.'

- MOIR MCCALLUM

THE RUIN OF ALL WITCHES, MALCOLM GASKILL

'For anyone with an interest in folklore, I highly recommend this non-fiction account describing the fallout from one instance where somebody was accused of witchcraft in colonial New England. Harrowing, human and strange in equal measure. Fun stuff.'

- TODD JORDAN

BREASTS AND EGGS, MIEKO KAWAKAMI

'It gave me a totally new outlook on what it means to be a woman in a modern society as well as the morality behind being a mother in such a world—it seriously blew my mind!'

- SOPHIE HANNAM

THE FIRST PROMISE (PROTHOM PROTISRUTI), ASHAPURNA DEBI

'The first part of a feminist trilogy written about three generations of women in a family, the changes in society as time progressed and how these women responded to them and dealt with prejudice and injustice. The first piece of feminist literature I read, after my mother bought it for me at a book fair, telling me how she'd read it as a teenager as well.'

- ANUSMITA RAY

REBECCA, DAPHNE DU MAURIER

'This is the closest to perfection a book can get; ghost story, love story, thriller.'

- REBECCA KING

FOLK, ZOE GILBERT

'Almost a collection of short stories, linking together an intriguing group of characters. It weaves in folklore, magic, and is written in such stunningly beautiful language, I'm in awe.'

- NICOLA WIGGINS

STORYLAND: A NEW MYTHOLOGY OF BRITAIN, AMY JEFF

'A collection of reimagined folktales based on the mythical founding of Britain. It's a super fun read and fascinating to see the different origins of various legends and how other, earlier civilisations played a part in shaping them.'

-KAT ANSTICE

A PSALM OF STORMS AND SILENCE, ROSEANNE A. BROWN

'A perfect introduction to an adaption of African folklore and magic. Bear with the rise and fall of the first book because the pay-off in this sequel is more than worth it!'

- EMILY A. CRAWFORD

THE INVISIBLE GUARDIAN, DOLORES REDONDO

'The first installment of a thriller trilogy inspired by the mythology of Northern Spain. An unputdownable read with a broody female detective investigating a dark crime in an area of Spain often overlooked despite its beauty and rich culture.'

- SOFIA (EDITOR)

BIG SWISS, JEN BEAGIN

'If you love wonderfully weird women doing wonderfully weird things, you'll love this bizarre little book. A surprisingly heartfelt hot mess (in a good way).'

- NICOLA (EDITOR)

BEASTLY BEAUTY, JENNIFER DONNELLY

'A wonderful gender bent take on the classic Beauty and the Beast to remind everyone that true beauty is in the strength we find in ourselves.'

- RACH (EDITOR)



GLYPH.

The literary magazine for the casual writer.

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