

ELEGANT LITERATURE

TALKING IN TONGUES



#037

Elegant Literature Issue #037
Talking In Tongues

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ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

CONTENT WARNING

Work published in *Elegant Literature* varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

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THANK YOU TO
OUR PARTNERS

SUBTXT
SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
CORMALLEN JEWELLERY
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH

ISSUE PROMPT

TALKING IN TONGUES

Write a story involving Talking in Tongues, and a thorn.

Talk, talk, talk. The noise is everywhere, all around you. But one voice whispers clearly in your ear, speaks through your mouth. You shouldn't understand, but you do, and you're not sure how you feel about what it has to say...

Mystics speak in languages they never learned. Children snarl guttural sounds as they sleep while priests chant divine verse. Whispers, wails, and warnings—listen close to the utterance of the universe. The shaman communes with spirits through voice and dance. The programmer dictates with key and code. Our machines hallucinate in zeros and ones. If we find a cosmic cipher among the stars, do we answer it or ignore the call? Grimoires, glyphs, and gibberish dictionaries. Drums beat a rhythm understandable across cultures, and the painter creates a dialogue between brush and canvas louder than a thousand words. But beware, lest your own voice betray you and your dreams fill with lies. The translator chooses what to interpret or conceal. Communication is a blessing, but tread lightly—the power of understanding can be a heavy burden to bear.

This contest invites you to explore Talking in Tongues, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

HEAD JUDGE
A.R. FREDERIKSEN

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

LYNDSEY CROAL
TAO WONG
JORDAN KURELLA
CAITLIN MARCEAU
HANNAH YANG
ANDY PELOQUIN
CHRISTOPHER FIELDEN
SOMTO IHEZUE
CHRISTI NOGLE
LINDZ MCLEOD
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HAYLEY MILLIMAN
JORDAN KANTEY
NATHAN BAUGH
JIM HULL
DJANGO WEXLER
NICKY SHEARSBY
MAX GLADSTONE
CREAG MUNROE

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE
HONORABLE MENTIONS

PRESENTED IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

A Parent's Job Is Never Done	N. M. Locke
Birth, Death, and Industrial-Strength Cat Mess Cleaner	Erin Wilk
Bluebells	Annie Marie Morgan
Colonel Kong	Steve Lance
Cursed	Katharine Kapodistria
Echoes of Eon	Kelly McSherry
Ghost in the Machine	Ellie Kay
Home to Mexico	Galen Gower
Julia in the Attic with a Confection	Melanie Mulrooney
Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide	Will Kelly
My Apple	Peaches
Opal & Ember	Lola Richard
Our Mother	Jeff Taylor
Over At My Place	Lily Séjor
Reclamation	Ryan Smith
Regrowth	Kirsty Nottage
Speak the Tongue and Become	Michael Chirichella
Speechless	George Alexandru Dragoi
Talking Heads	Lisa Robertson
The Devil's Advocate	Frederik Coussement
The Fallen are Falling	Sunny Olds
The Language of Tea	K. Espinola
The Paths of Language	Paul RR Webster
The Power of Understanding	Jack Gorzynski
The Return	Steven Huff

ANGELS BEYOND WORDS

CJ LARSEN

MY AUNT JAZZ ONCE TOLD me language is what makes us human. “I thought it was tool use,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

Jazz looked at me over a half-empty bottle of Tequila. She pointed her finger at me with the passion of a person who had had one shot too many. “Crows use tools. A crow can’t write a book about how to fashion the perfect twig. Tools are nothing without language. Humanity never would have advanced from fire to steam engine without language!”

Jazz drove the point home. “If you had to give one up, which would it be? Your ability to talk, or your thumbs?”

I had to concede. We could get by without thumbs, but we’d be lost without language.

She poured me another shot. “You’ve got to follow your dreams, Lizzy.”

I was staying at her place over the summer after my freshman year in college. My mom wanted me to major in something practical, but I wanted to major in literature. Jazz had my back.

Mom used to say Jazz was a bad influence, but I always thought she was the coolest aunt. I think she enjoyed mentoring me, even though maternal wasn’t exactly in her DNA. She’d been married three times but never had kids of her own. I filled that void in some way.

“I’ll finance your first book,” she promised. She meant it too. Jazz had made a small fortune working at start-ups and loved to fund artists. With Jazz’s support, I majored in literature and never looked back.

That’s why I was so surprised when she came to me with her crazy plan a decade later. She had just returned from a retreat with some new aged guru who ran a monastery of sorts in the Colorado mountains where she’d taken a vow of silence for three months. She claimed she’d had a vision while there. If she got a surgeon to shut down the part of her brain that processes language, the angels would speak to her.

“I want to hear the angels,” she said. “They’re out there, singing in their angel voices and we can’t hear them over ourselves.”

I kept a neutral face and sipped my mocha. “How do you know angels even exist?” I asked.

“I don’t have to know,” she said. “I just have to believe. You can’t find angels without faith.”

She had never been particularly religious. I wondered if she was having a psychotic break. I tried another approach. “What about us?” I asked. “How are we going to be friends if you can’t talk anymore? Are we just going to sit around drinking coffee and stare at each other?”

She wouldn’t be deterred. “I’m making a sacrifice. You can’t find angels without sacrifice.”

“You won’t even be able to tell anyone about it if you hear them,” I pointed out.

She just shrugged. “If the angels want me to share, they’ll show me how.”

I gave up arguing with her. She’d come to her senses eventually. Besides, it’s not like she’d actually be able to find a doctor willing to give her a lobotomy. I was wrong. Turns out money trumps ethics.

Jazz didn’t tell me ahead of time. I think she knew I would have ratted her out to the rest of the family. When I arrived at her condo to meet for our regular coffee date, she opened the door, smiling innocently, and handed me a packet. It contained a pamphlet about Wernicke’s aphasia—a disorder that prevented sufferers from understanding language, spoken and written.

There was a letter explaining what she had done. *I know you don’t understand. I hope you’ll forgive me and I hope you’ll have faith too.* The last page asked me to move in with her and be her ears and mouth. She’d filled out a power of attorney, a healthcare directive, and turned over all her savings accounts to me to compensate for my time and to cover her expenses. *You can work on that novel.*

I was in shock. But what could I do? In the end, I resigned myself to the fate she’d saddled me with. I had no choice. I couldn’t leave her helpless. But that didn’t stop me from resenting her at first. I hadn’t asked for this burden.

My mom found out what she’d done soon after me. Jazz sent her a

letter too. Mom wasn't happy, but we came up with a story to tell the world. Jazz had a stroke and I moved in to be her caretaker.

In some ways, life didn't change that much. The surgeon did a good job. He actually did only destroy her language processing center. She couldn't understand a word I said. Anytime she tried to speak, it came out gibberish. She couldn't read or write. But the rest of her intellect was intact. She didn't need a babysitter, she just needed someone to interact with the rest of the world. We figured out how to communicate with each other. If she wanted Thai, she'd bring me the take out menu. If she needed shampoo, she'd hand me an empty bottle. We found our way.

Still, I was angry at first. She'd set up an office for me so I could spend my days writing. I refused to quit my day job. I claimed I wanted to stay independent, but really, looking back, I think it was out of spite. I didn't want to be bribed into forgiving her. She'd been my confidante and she had thrown it all away over some fantasy about angels.

After a while, the anger faded. I stopped expecting her to understand when I prattled on about my day. I'd groan and complain about my job or about bad dates. She'd listen, steeping in the emotions, even if she couldn't understand the words. She'd pat my knee and give me a cup of tea. It felt a bit like having a therapist, who nods and urges you to keep sharing.

Jazz spent her day sitting on the balcony, listening for her angels. I'd come home from work and find her smiling peacefully. Sometimes I'd sit beside her and listen myself. I wondered if I would make the same choice if I could hear their song.

Even without language, Jazz still expressed herself. She began painting. She'd cover canvases with a cacophony of color. She'd show them to me, watching me intently, hoping I'd understand the message. The images were like shapes in a cloud. If I focused, I might see a thorn hedge climbing a wall of ice, but if I shifted my perspective, I'd see a wave crashing over coral. Maybe it was both. Some of the paintings were beautiful. Some were discomfoting. All were provocative. I'd give her my opinion in words she couldn't understand

and she seemed happy enough.

We took our first trip two years after the operation. Jazz brought me a brochure and pointed at a picture of Notre Dame. Off to Paris we went. She must have found angels there, standing under the arches, gazing upwards with rapt expression. I could almost hear them too. They hummed in that resonating silence particular to old stone cathedrals, their melody marked by the echoing steps of tourists and parishioners.

After that, we'd travel once a year, sometimes twice. I'd study the visitors' guides and learn about the history. Jazz would listen to her angels. We visited places ripe with faith, Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, and Angkor Wat. The angels lived in nature too—the Grand Canyon, the Carlsbad Caverns, Victoria Falls. They sang in places full of human energy, cities like New Orleans. I even saw her smile as she heard them in the Frankfurt airport during a layover.

Our visit to the Mayan ruins deep in a Belize jungle didn't go as well. Everything seemed fine as we climbed to the top of the pyramid. But when we reached the altar, Jazz panicked and began pulling at my arm, dragging me away from the sign describing human sacrifice. She cried that night in the hotel room. I held her in my arms, a bulwark against whatever she'd heard.

I'm not sure when I forgave her. I did though. I accepted the sacrifice had been worth it to her. I began writing. Jazz would sit on the sofa in my office while I typed. I knew she'd never be able to read what I'd created but maybe the angels translated the story in the staccato rhythm of the tapping keys.

Jazz didn't tell me when she first started feeling ill, but she couldn't hide her lack of appetite or exhaustion from me forever. I'd spent years reading her emotions. I dragged her to the doctor. By then the cancer had taken root. There was no way to tell her what the report said. No way to ask her whether she wanted the aggressive treatment that likely wouldn't work. Somehow, she understood. When I looked at her in the doctor's office, holding back my tears, she smiled and shook her head.

For six months, I sat with her and watched for any grimace that

would let me know she needed the pain medication increased. Even though she'd put her life in my hands all those years ago, Jazz didn't like me seeing her so weak. She'd glare when I tried to adjust her pillow and push me away. I hired a hospice nurse to stay with her when I couldn't. Jazz was docile in his hands. He turned out to be a living angel, a relief to us both.

He called me at work one Wednesday afternoon. "I think you should come home now." I was by Jazz's side within half an hour. She opened her eyes, lucid for the first time in days despite the haze of pain medication. She smiled at me and mouthed a single word, the first word she'd been able to say since the operation.

Love.

She closed her eyes again and her ragged breathing slowed. One last gasp and Jazz was gone.

Jazz left everything to me. It took several months before I could find the strength to go through her closet. I set aside a few pieces of clothing and jewelry, but most of it I put in a bag for a woman's shelter. I piled up all the books she'd bought in her life before the surgery, thinking maybe I'd find her in them if I read them closely enough. The shoe boxes full of souvenirs from our trips were too painful to open. I thumbed through the stacks of paintings, wondering if I could find room to hang them all.

Deep in the closet, I found a package in wrapping paper, tied with a neat bow. She'd taped my business card on it as a label. She must have hidden it before she was bedridden—a present waiting for me to find after she'd left. I opened it and found seven canvases inside. I had never seen them before. They were portraits, less abstract than her usual work. Some were just of me. Others were of us together. They were each painted in a different style, but in all of them, she had placed a halo about my head. She didn't need words to explain what she wanted me to know. She had placed her faith in me and she had found her angel.

I never asked her whether the angels bothered to listen to us. I hope they do. I hope they hear *our* song in the space between words.

I hope Jazz listened to me that day, as I sat on the floor of her closet

and cried, as I told her I had placed my faith in her too and I had found my angel. I hope she smiled while I listened to her sing.

CJ LARSEN

CJ Larsen lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, daughters, two dogs and a cat. Someday she hopes to finish that novel, even if she doesn't have a rich aunt to finance her dreams.

A LASHING OF TONGUES

HEATHER LS

THE BLOND MAN SITS IN the station. He is smartly dressed, clean-shaven, dark blue eyes and straight, thin lips. He is of no particular build or height. If ten different FBI portrait artists were to draw him, there would be ten alternate results. His clients send him to gather information, no questions asked. His sole possessions are a small, gun-metal grey suitcase on wheels, and a long, narrow leather case on his lap. Pulling out his documents, he checks the name; he is to be Jamie Duff, for the time being, en route from Brussels to Edinburgh.

He does not speak, but smiles benignly at the station staff as he passes through security and boards the train. No one pays him any attention, a lone, faceless entity, his presence slipping through their memories like holding water in cupped hands.

Many hours and several changes later, Jamie steps into the Scottish cold with purpose, and the cab driver's scrutiny is brief as they drive to a hotel on the outskirts of the city. Here, he redresses in a designer polo shirt and chinos, and combs gel through his fine hair. He places the black case onto a writer's desk under a tall sash window. One might mistake it for containing a musical instrument. Indeed, as Jamie unlatches the first layer, dismantled pieces of a clarinet are revealed, enough of the casings and metalwork to fool even a trained security officer's eye. He flips a second set of clasps, lifts the velvet inner lid to reveal a row of eight capsules, warm to the touch, thrumming with energy from a small solar battery. He runs a finger over each capsule as though selecting a chocolate from a box until it rests on the one third from the right, then he slides open the capsule. Inside is a wet, pink, human tongue, twitching gently, as if asleep. Jamie plucks it from its housing using the metal fixtures at its base and opens his jaw wide. He clips the still quivering tongue into the void in his mouth, and into matching metal fastenings where his wisdom teeth once were. He does not gag. He cured himself of that long ago.

The afternoon condenses as Jamie leaves, heavy banks of cloud dimming a faint white sun. The mind convinces itself that the best of the day is over, and all that is left to do is order a well-earned dram. Jamie knows this, and has a taxi drop him at the golf club of

his intended target, Jim Mullawny. The client wants dirt, any dirt, for leverage, blackmail, Jamie does not know or care. This particular case will be worth thousands to him, and like everyone else, he has bills to pay.

Jamie's tongue lays obediently under his palette, occasionally running along the insides of his molars, pulsing back and forth as he swallows. He selected it for its Celtic flavour, an Irish specimen. Not Scottish, but close enough, he hopes, to garner the trust of this Mullawny. The tongue salivates at the smell of roast beef filling the hallways of the clubhouse. Jamie passes straight through to the lounge bar, and tests out the tongue by ordering a Strathearn single malt. The accent and the charm are delicious. The whisky tastes of oak and spiced honey. He does not look about the room, or go to the target. He waits.

Mullawny stands almost as soon as the drink is ordered, and limps over to the bar. Early sixties, one heart attack and a TIA deep, and increasingly nonchalant about mortality for it. His round belly meets the bar first, and he catches the unblinking eyes of Duff with his own bloodshot ones. Jamie raises his glass in greeting and takes a healthy, expensive mouthful. Mullawny smiles.

'You have my attention, Mr...'

'Gamble,' Jamie says, 'Adrian Gamble. But perhaps you mistake me for someone else?' Jamie sets his heavy crystal glass down and swivels on his stool to face Mullawny.

'No one comes into my club and orders my drink unless they want my attention, Mr Gamble.'

'Perhaps I'm an outlier, sir, as I've not the foggiest idea who you are. It's a very nice bar, though. I'm passing through on my way up to St. Andrew's.'

Mullawny orders himself another whisky and settles himself beside Jamie. They are sitting close enough to the log burner that the fine alcohol mixes with heat, and a false sense of security blooms in the older man's veins. They talk of politics, the state of the NHS, and business. Jamie spins a yarn about his own troubles, the constant travel, the breakdown of his marriage and the son he never sees. He

balances candour with the dry wit of the Irish and expects returns for his investment.

Jim sweats at the temples and taps his empty glass on the counter.

‘My troubles are not so dire, but I do have one problem I cannae shake, my own fault, of course, but...’

‘But what?’ Jamie presses, and something in the tone, the lilt, sparks a thread of suspicion in the target, who smiles, shakes his head and accepts the refill Jamie orders.

‘Nah, it’s too late for my ramblings. Go on now, we’d best be closing for the night.’

Jamie knows when to stop flogging the fly-ridden horse and departs, cursing the failure of his tongue. He must do better.

Later, Jamie pulls himself upstairs, using the bannister as support, limbs weighed down with barrel-aged spirit and defeat. On entering his room, he wipes his sleeve across his brow and checks his case. He cleans his teeth and the tongue before storing it back in its capsule.

Jamie uses an English tongue to consume a full Scottish breakfast. He hires an SUV from a local dealership, drives through waves of sunshine, gusting rain, sun again. He travels north where the roads narrow into single-track lanes, and properties become infrequent, ramshackle.

At noon, he pulls onto a wide gravel drive, and two collies come out to greet him. Jamie circles round to the boot to fetch his long case. The dogs sniffle at his knees.

‘Who is it, boys? Do I need to give the kill command?’ A joking voice with a broad highlands accent projects across the drive. It is warm, honest, a voice to confide in, to be lulled to sleep by, to believe in. It is followed by the owner, a stout, middle-aged woman, bristly grey hair clipped up into a bun. Jamie slams the boot shut and faces the woman. He does not speak. Her face slackens as she takes him in. The tea towel in her plump fist falls to the ground, immediately snatched up by one of the dogs.

‘Robert?’ she whispers.

‘Good afternoon, Mother.’

Without waiting for an invitation, he strides into the house, to the kitchen. Robert's mother scampers after him until they are face to face across the kitchen island.

'I'm surprised you recognise me,' Robert says, planting the case on the top.

'They sent me pictures,' she gasps, eyes drawn with magnetic dread to the black leather.

'Ah, pictures of your deformed child, how lovely,' Robert sneers.

'I loved you, even if I couldn't keep you. I had to know you were safe,' the woman pleads. Robert resists the earnestness of the voice.

'Yes, I was safe with my father's people. Safe with their fists and their belts,' he explains, unlatching the first layer, then the second.

'If you'd only told me...'

'No! That's not why I'm here. I am missing something. Growing up in England, I never acquired my mother-tongue. I was hoping you could help with that.' Robert draws a slender filleting blade.

'Gaelic?' she says, just as she sees the knife.

'Not quite,' Robert smiles. 'This isn't about vengeance, dear Mother, this is business.' He detaches and pulls out his current tongue. His mother blanches, stifles a retch as Robert's wriggling tongue is stored back in its capsule.

'No!' she howls, before blundering for the door, followed by the dogs. 'Stop him!' she commands, but the two confused collies are quite taken by the smell of the tongues, and bark, rather than attack.

Robert chases his mother into the conservatory, which is stacked with exotic plants, fruits and fungi, bathing in a humid mist. She heads for the back door, but the way is cluttered, and she is slow. Robert closes his fist around hers as she struggles with the handle. He makes conciliatory noises, placating moans.

'No, please, I'm sorry I gave you away, please!' she begs.

They tussle, momentum swinging them into pots, clattering into rakes, chairs. They fall against a workbench as he pins her down. Her legs no longer reach the floor. She reaches desperately for a weapon. Her jaw is in the vice of his grip, knife raised, looking for the opportunity. She swipes, he feels a scratch. He looks down to see

a thick vine's thorns protruding from the skin of his forearm, sunk deep, drawing blood. She lunges forwards and they fall to the floor, Robert on top, pinching her nose closed until she draws breath. The silver blade finds its target, a single slice, and it is done. She does not scream but gargles, mouth full of blood that pours onto the terracotta tiling as she rolls over, shock and blood loss stripping away her coordination.

He retreats with his prize, cleaning off the raw edges and fitting it with a housing. Robert does not linger, but repacks his case and pats the dogs on the head as he leaves.

During the mid-afternoon corporate lull, Robert takes his chance. He drives to Mullawny's office and accepts a visitor's pass from the blushing male secretary. He waits.

'Gamble! What are you doing here, old boy?'

'We didn't finish our conversation last night, Jim. You had something on your mind, something weighing on you. I may not know you well, but sometimes the best ear is an unfamiliar one.' Robert's new voice is mesmeric, haunting in its allure. A tongue that persuaded an entire family that she was not to blame for giving up her tongueless child, that he would be better off without her, and she should be absolved entirely.

Jim, at some wonderment to himself, tells Robert everything, confesses every sin he has ever committed, and is relieved, forgiven. Robert listens with the gentle smile of a lover, and feels the zeroes in his bank balance multiplying.

The information is with his client by five o'clock, and Robert buys a Pot Noodle and sports drink to celebrate. He feels nauseous, feverish—salt and sugar are well known as cure-alls. At the hotel, he takes off the shirt clinging to his clammy skin, and sees the puncture wounds made by the barbed thorns. They are oozing a thick yellow pus, surrounded by raised, blistered flesh. Robert does not panic, but takes out his first-aid kit and swallows antibiotics. He tries to eat the noodles, but tastes bitter, acrid mush. He consults the bathroom

mirror, and sees that the tongue has gone black, necrotic. His curses slur and he rips out the prized, once-in-a-lifetime tongue, flushes it down the toilet.

These infernal British Isles! Robert books tickets to Taiwan, confident they will have dealt with this type of infection before. By the time he gets there, his replacement tongue has died inside his mouth, and must be discarded. Doctors prescribe more antibiotics, anti-fungals, anti-rejection drugs, blood transfusions, but one by one, his tongues shrivel into rotten lumps, and he is left with a case housing half a dozen limp grey blobs.

He leans over the capsules as a mother might lean over her newborn babe, and weeps. His curses are silent, his remonstrations voiceless. He burns the dead tongues one by one. He will wait, as long as he has to, for his body to recover, and then he will begin again.

HEATHER LS

Heather is a writer and optometrist from Lancashire, England. She enjoys writing anything with a fantastical twist, and annoying the neighbours by loudly playing the piano. She has works available on Amazon Kindle and recently published on The Berlin Literary Review.

MURMURS

BEN DAGGERS

EVERY FRIDAY, LIKE A CLOCK works, so they say, the Colonel and his cronies come here to the *Yongfu Colonial Club* to smoke. They used to be a party of four, but the one they called General stopped coming months ago. Taken by dengue fever, if the rumours are true. Even now as a trio, the opium-tinged air is no less ill-tempered.

“Dirty Rat, light my pipe.” The Colonel spits peanut shells onto the tabletop, addressing me without looking.

My name is Laoshu, or Rat in the King’s English. Not the name I would have chosen, but no use crying after milk is spilled, so they say. Besides, my namesake is a noble animal: nimble, clever, quiet. Not even the mighty whale, ferocious bear, or regal lion grace our zodiac. But just like the soaring dragon, one year in every twelve belongs to me.

When my mother calls me Laoshu—for it was she who gave me the name—it is sweet honey to my ears. Even from a kindly *laowai* like old Mr. Tillman—though I suspect it was the only Chinese word he knew—it was always steeped in affection. But spat from the forked tongues of foreign oppressors such as the Colonel, it is nettle and thorns, stinging and scratching all the way through me.

“Fetch me another whiskey while you’re at it, Rat.”

“Yes, sir.” I bow.

As one of the young waitresses passes by the table, the youngest of the officers, a man with straw-coloured hair and eyes that can’t agree on where to look, reaches out and grabs the back of her silken *qipao*.

“How much extra will you cost me?” he asks. Her eyes prickle with fear as she looks to me for help. I send her to the kitchen in our native Chinese.

The Colonel’s sharp features contort upon hearing our exchange. “What did you say, Rat? This is meant to be a *civilized* place. We’re not here to listen to you speak in tongues!”

Like a man with a shilling gloating over a man with a shilling and a pound, somehow in this fool’s mind, his knowledge of one language makes him superior to me for my mastery of two.

“Nothing, sir,” I reply.

“And where in God’s name is my whiskey?” As the Colonel slams his hand down onto the table, the golden stars on his stone-coloured jacket shimmer under the candlelight. Medals for pointing a stick at a map and signing the death warrants of my brothers-in-arms, their blood seeping into the red of our flag.

“I’ll fetch it right away, sir.” I bow my head. I lower my already stooped shoulders. I bide my time. Like a real rat, I know how to live in the shadows, on the doorstep of the enemy.

As I walk away, his drunken words waft through the smoke into my ears: “*suppress... uprising... no mercy...*”

My nose twitches at the cloying smell. It was those innocent-looking poppies that enslaved my nation. Sent my grandfather to war. Brought him back in a box. Drove my father to an early grave. And now, in this private club for the white man, moustached politicians and self-serving pencil-pushers spend their days carving up Shanghai like their Sunday roast, and their nights using this same opium to smoke away their guilt.

But some smoke doesn’t clear so easily.

Please don’t hold the wrong end of the stick; I am not against a whole people. There have been some diamonds in the dirt, so they say. Mr. Tillman was one of the diamonds. From his first visit he took a liking to me, smiling as I struggled to balance plates and pots, cups and ashtrays on my arms, as though I were an act from one of the circus troupes that so enchant the *laowai*.

It was Tillman who taught me my King’s English, such as it is. His *Shanghai Daily Post*, warped and wet from the humid air, became my textbook. Headlines of humiliation, injustice, prejudice—these were my nursery rhymes and bedtime stories. Tillman would always search for something which could give me hope. Some days he would leaf all the way to the final page and just sigh. Others there would be linings of silver inside the clouds. Even after all these years, there is still one headline etched into my mind: *Murmurs of Rebellion in Outskirts of City*.

“What is *murmur*, Mr. Tillman?”

“It’s like a whisper.”

“Why they not just say whisper, then?”

“They could. But a murmur is even harder to hear. If you want to survive in this world, Laoshu, you’ll need to learn to murmur.”

Tillman died last winter, but his lessons remain with me: the knowledge that diamonds exist; the correct use of the King’s English; the importance of murmurs.

Tonight there are no diamonds in the *Yongfu Colonial Club*. There is only dirt.

The silver-haired Colonel snaps his fingers. His eyes, also silver in their cold glare, look both at me and through me. I approach the table.

“Fill my pipe again, Dirty Rat.”

I take the ash-filled bowl through the curtains towards the kitchen. For patrons, the walls are lined with silk floral prints and gold-leafed murals. On this side of the establishment, out of the view of foreign eyes, our decorations are grime, tattered mosquito nets and peeling paint.

As I fill the bowl with fresh powder, I can still see the three of them through a gap in the curtain. Their eyes will soon become heavy, as the fragrant drug takes hold. Usually, their mouths curl up into sickly smiles, as the scourge which sent my nation to hell takes them to a slumbering paradise. Usually, they all awake in the small hours, stumbling groggily into the balmy half-light of the city.

Tonight, however, the Colonel will not be smiling. He will not taste paradise. He will not feel the gentle Shanghai breeze on his face. All he will feel is sweat on his brow, fever in his bones and then death. His compatriots will look on in horror. They will search for answers. Rumours of dengue fever will reverberate through the ranks. A little *Laoshu*, nimble, clever and quiet, will be the last thing on anyone’s minds.

I look down at the white powder which coats my fingers. I discarded the bottle long ago, but I still remember the words printed on the label: *Rid your home of vermin*.

“I will,” I murmur.

BEN DAGGERS

Ben Daggers is a short story writer who loves to explore the dark edges of fiction, before slowly backing away before things get a bit too dark. His works have been featured in Black Hare Press, as well as WestWord's Winners Anthology in both flash and microfiction.

When not writing, procrastinating, or feeling guilty for procrastinating instead of writing, Ben spends his time doting over an emotionally-needy Italian greyhound.

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THE UR TEXT
PT MACKIM

BLANK STARES. IT HAPPENED AGAIN. How long have I been talking this time? What did I say?

Did I confuse them, offend them, upset them? I can't read those expressions. My colleagues might as well be strangers. No, I'm the stranger here. A raving lunatic.

Dean Dormin clears her throat and says something, but I can barely hear her over the pounding in my ears and what I can hear gets all mixed up with the babble racing through my head, which even I cannot understand.

"I'm sorry, I—" I begin, but clamp my mouth shut before the words start pouring out of me all over again. I stand up too fast and the swivel chair spins away behind me and thuds into the wall. I hurry out of the dean's conference room, my cheeks hot, my chest tight.

Out in the quad I light a cigarette and ignore the looks of shock and disgust from students walking by, clutching their books and laptops closer as if I'm some drug-addled derelict who might rob them. I don't think young people were always this moralistic and fearful, but who knows what the craggy old professors thought of my generation way back when.

Devi finds me outside and waves the smoke away from her nose with her slender brown hand.

"I thought you quit."

I shrug, holding the smoke in. It keeps me from talking so I ignore the burn in my lungs.

"Dean Dormin is putting you on administrative leave, she wants you to get some help."

I exhale and it turns into a ragged cough. "No, I have to keep working on the project," I manage to say but thankfully the hacking and gasping disrupts the flow of words that always threatens to burst forth from me.

"Noah, you need a break. That was weird, what you did in there."

I shake my head, trying to catch my breath. She doesn't understand, none of them do.

"Look, I'm on your side. The students these days have the attention span of fruit flies, so when they said you were droning on incoher-

ently I assumed they were just complaining like they do whenever we ask them to do anything remotely challenging. But there were five classicists and three linguists in that meeting just now and not one of us could make head nor tail of what you were on about.”

“Devi, I can explain...” I start, but I’m almost grateful when she cuts me off.

“No, you can’t. You just tried to and it was like one of those nineteenth century texts where they just drop into other languages with no explanation or translation, only worse because you didn’t limit yourself to Latin or Greek. I couldn’t even recognize half the words you were saying. By the way, when did you learn Prakrit? I know you had a little Sanskrit, but you spoke like a paragraph in fluent Prakrit.”

I shrug. She has no idea how many words are boiling up from within me, and if I try to explain they’ll all just come pouring out again. Too fast, too jumbled, it always feels like it will make sense when I start but then it gets all tangled up. I take another drag as soon as I stop coughing and for a moment the smoke clears my head.

“Higgins recognized some of what you said as Akkadian and he wants to know how you came up with the pronunciations you used... but he says you won’t share your notes on the new script.”

“Screw Higgins. He’s been a thorn in my side since I got here. At least I still have enough sense to keep that lying fraud off my project... us lu lul—e us lu zi—de—ke an—ta na—mu—un—du...”

“Noah, stop.” She takes me by the shoulders and shakes me hard enough to snap me out of it. “Listen, you have to go home. Dormin thinks you’re having a manic episode and she’s going to have security escort you off campus.”

“No, I need to get back to work.” I break away from her and head toward the building across the quad that houses my cramped office. Higgins made sure I got the worst one, after his effort to block my tenure advancement failed. I slow my pace as a pair of security guards stationed in front of the department catch sight of me and start to approach, spreading out to flank me as if I’m some kind of rabid animal.

I turn back to Devi, and she’s got this sad and worried look on her

face that says more about how far I've fallen than words could tell. She's always been there for me, and it seemed like something might happen between us before I went on that dig, before these ancient words came flowing into me.

I look back at the guards. They're not going to let me in. I have this impulse to try and get past them, but I've never been much of an athlete and weeks of sleep deprivation haven't helped.

"Devi, can you help me? I need the rubbing from my office, and my notes. Would you get them for me and bring them to my place?"

She sighs. "Noah, you should let it go..." but she knows I won't be able to. "Fine. I'll help you, but only if you promise to call my brother-in-law. He's a psychiatrist, maybe he can recommend someone good for you to see about all this." She's trying to hand me a business card. I want to tell her I'm not crazy but I've got sense enough left to know that would only make me sound more crazy. I take the card without looking at it and shove it in my pocket.

The guards step to either side of me. "Professor Shiner," one of them says, "we've been asked to escort you off campus." They're not touching me, not yet.

"I'm coming," I say. I won't give Higgins or any of my other rivals the pleasure of seeing me dragged off like some kind of criminal. The guards get startled when I reach into my pocket, but they let me hand Devi my keys.

On the way out of the gates, I think of all the times earlier in my career when I imagined being cast out of the ivory tower after some failure or unforgivable offense. It never looked like this, and I don't even care anymore. I just need to understand that text. If I can make sense of it, the words flooding through me might be tamed and turned to the purpose of higher knowledge. I don't care about my academic standing, publication, anything but making sense of these words.

I pace back and forth in my apartment like a junkie waiting for the man until Devi brings the original rubbing and my notes from my office. I promise her I'll call her brother-in-law the psychiatrist and then something in me twinges at the worried look in her eyes and the words start pouring out of my mouth again. I can't stop them, so I

close the door on her and babble to myself while I spread my notes out on the floor of my apartment. I need to see them all at once.

My notes are a scribbled mess in a dozen languages, most of them dead. Latin, Avestan, Old Aramaic, Akkadian, Ancient Syriac, Cuneiform, Sanskrit. I've spent my academic career studying things most people will never understand, but this new script dances just beyond the edge of understanding. I run my finger along the rubbing I took from the stele, hoping to feel something like I did when I touched that wall with my bare hand. A moment of archaeological indiscretion to be sure, but I could not resist. That night in my dreams I heard the whispering syllables that have come to dominate my mind. I needed to go back, to touch it again, to make the words louder and clearer. The pull of it was strong enough that I tried to get past the security forces who were rushing us to evacuate. One of them manhandled me and threw me into the jeep, yelling at me that the rebels were less than an hour away and he wasn't going to let a stupid professor get killed or taken hostage on his watch.

Now they tell me the side our country was backing in the war bombed the ruins into oblivion because the rebels were using them as a staging ground for their operations. Could that one wall have survived? These words are driving me crazy enough I'd risk being beheaded to touch that stele again. It might even be a relief.

My voice goes hoarse but the words won't stop. I try writing, maybe if I get it out of my head onto paper it will make more sense. I fill every scrap of paper in the apartment and I'm writing on old envelopes and even on the table and walls, but it's just going and going. Connections dancing just out of reach.

I don't know how long it's been when Devi comes back to my place. I must look like a mess. My whole apartment is filled with scribbled notes and I haven't slept or eaten for who knows how long.

"I'll call him," I say before she opens her mouth. I can see her worry, feel that twinge of shame at looking like this in front of someone I once thought might even like me. I clamp my mouth shut after that, the words are bubbling up again, only this time I'm delirious enough to think they're coming as much from her as from me.

She doesn't say anything, just takes my hand and leads me to the couch. She sits me down like a child who has gone delirious from too much stimulation and too little sleep. I let her guide me, and I take a breath. Ideas and words are still swimming through me, but I've given up trying to make sense of them.

She makes me a cup of ramen and I feel like we're students again, pulling an all nighter on an impossible assignment.

She's looking over my notes and wrinkling her brow. I let her work. I've given up. The words rushing all around me have become a kind of resonant hum. I'm not trying to understand them anymore.

"It's like the ur-text," she mutters. Then she looks at me, "That's what you're looking for with all this, Noah? The proto-language of human communication? It's not going to be in any written language, and I don't think it really exists... but some of what you're doing here almost makes sense."

I nod, but I can't explain. Too many ideas, too many words, too many thoughts. I've been missing something this whole time. She's here now, here with me, and the hum of the language is shifting, undulating between us.

I listen to it, feel it. I don't need to understand it, it can't be contained. All this time I've been trying to force this ocean of meaning through the tiny straw of my rational mind.

"Noah? Are you alright?" She comes over to sit next to me, lays a hand on my shoulder. The hum of endless words and sounds shifts again. I feel her worry now, not as a separate thing, but in myself, her kindness and presence weaving a thread between us.

I don't try to speak, I just take her hand and listen.

PT MACKIM

PT MacKim has been writing science fiction and fantasy for many years, mostly in self-imposed obscurity near the shores of the San Francisco Bay. He does not write dystopian stories even though he is living through days of smoke and fire when the sun doesn't rise, devastating global pandemics, and political instability driven by vast conspiracies of reality-bending misinformation. He prefers fiction.

THROUGH SILENT DARKNESS

CUYLER MEADE

THE DISAPPEARANCES STARTED SLOWLY. A few crew members having never existed could easily go unnoticed on a colossus of a ship like this one.

If I ever saw someone swallowed by the Eraser's gaping mouth, I have forgotten. I do remember the creeping horror of something dreadfully amiss without any idea as to what it was—like hearing the first notes of a tune, the next notes of which you can't quite conjure. Like the prick of a tiny thorn in the sole of your foot that you can't ever find to dig out.

I can't recall if I first noticed more work than usual at my station, or if it was the curiosity of empty bunks in my quarters. But I remember the sinking unease that I was slowly losing hold of a precious thing I couldn't name. I was forgetting my own language, but it was as if I had never spoken it. Like oxygen slowly leaking through an invisible crack, the crew of this once-proud vessel, Morning Glory, was erased. All but me.

What I can't forget, but wish desperately I could, is the voice. It was spoken through the ship's android, but they weren't his words.

"You are not welcome here. You are in sovereign space. Depart immediately. Do not return."

No comfort overwhelms the aching chill I felt when he spoke. It was in the voice of the android, MQ4, and by his tongue, but I knew in my tendons it wasn't him. We tread on the domain of another.

I remember the certainty I felt when we ignored the warning. Nothing stops a Federation Flyer. It was that confidence. That's how we were trained. It's how we were made to be.

It's what ended us.

There's little cause to write this. I doubt anything will remain after I'm gone, slurped into the gulping creature that lurks in the void, its infinite maw dripping with vengeance. (Or so I imagine. As I have said, I cannot picture it, having surely seen it, but without an image to recall in my increasingly demented mind.) But creating a record—even if it's destroyed when I exit existence—makes my inevitable erasure more palatable.

If death would exempt me from this fate, I'd already be dead. But

the creature I've come to call Eraser subsumes even the dead, greedily sucking all into its eternal hole. That's the dark retribution we earned by coming here.

Once, more were with me. I don't know who they were, and I don't know when they disappeared. But I know they used to be here. The Morning Glory, this creaking old war vessel, is too vast to have been built for me and MQ4 alone.

The others are gone now—not just from the empty posts, desolate passageways, and vacated bunks, but also from the crew photos that adorn the mess hall. Instead, thick, glossy thirteen-by-eighteen pages of empty mementos line the cavernous walls, mirroring the gaps littered across my own memory.

I remember people from home. Family, friends, fellow Flyers from previous missions. But none from the crew. Not one. Where memory was, only a hollow, acrid taste replaces it. Words to describe those who once were no longer exist. The only cause I have to believe that they ever existed is the conspicuous absence of evidence.

We must have been happy once. While there are no characters in the stories I can recall, there are stories, and the stories have all the hallmarks of a convivial crew of intrepid explorers of deep space.

I remember being sent here—nobody chooses to go, because nobody would—and I remember defiant pride. Smirking salutes to Earth-side commanding officers I despised that must have been joined by others with similar distaste; daring battles and bold maneuvers to find our way this far, all surely accomplished by more than just me and MQ4; and sorrowful funerals for those who must have died of some ailment or injury on the journey. The grim participants of each exist now only in shadows of a past that no longer includes them.

What I do recall, with crystal clarity, is how it started. All pride and fanfare, we reached this uncharted quadrant of deep space, the first Earth mission ever to venture into the nebula. I don't know who was taken first, and I don't know who was taken last. But I believe the first erasings came after the warning.

MQ4 was first to notice something was wrong—appropriate for an

android with a neural network tied to the ship's sensors. That's part of why he's here. Command says they man these missions with human Flyers because of our instinct and wisdom, but we all know it's because we're cheaper per head than the MQs.

4's default mode is serene. They've programmed these AI units with simulated personalities for our sake—typically agreeable but businesslike. But that day he was, if this is possible, distracted. Touched. Something was slowing down even his advanced CPU. Some kind of bug, I supposed. Or—we supposed. I assume I wasn't the only one.

Crewmembers must have labored with him, because in time, he was rebooted. He came back even stranger. It wasn't MQ4; it was something else speaking through him. He'd become but a cypher for an unseen eldritch other. The voice was dark, calm. Sincere as death.

“Depart immediately.”

If only we'd listened.

Now, I wander empty corridors, waiting to become a blank space in the minds of those back home. The lights flicker with suggestion. Nobody is left to maintain them. Sometimes I extinguish them and drift through silent darkness, wondering when it will come for me. I tried turning around, to return home, where my family still remembers me. Loves me. But it didn't work. I don't have clearance for course changes. Instead, MQ4 is my lone conversant, and he offers little reassurance. In our solitude, he's gotten contemplative—a personality trait I didn't know was available to him.

“I wonder,” he said yesterday, “when it takes you, will I remain? I am not a lifeform. Will I be erased? Or will I continue alone until I run out of power? That will be quite some time. My power source is manufactured for long-distance travel. Years.”

I considered offering to help him avoid that misery by powering him down—MQ units aren't programmed to do it themselves. But then I'd be alone. Perhaps that was selfish. Maybe, when my wife and children forget I was ever in their home, that choice will be my only legacy.

Fortunately, if so, MQ4 won't remember my cruelty—no more than he'll remember my screams.

CUYLER MEADE

Cuyler Meade is a husband of one and father of six. He's a former journalist who now works for a school district in rural northwest Colorado. He writes stories about people.

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**WORDS OF WINTER,
WRITTEN IN SUMMER**

BEN DETIVEAUX

CONTEST WINNER

ON THE FIRST DAY OF the summer's third month, sunlight baked the townhouse of Count Cedric von Yvies. Twice today a maid had fainted while cleaning the parlor, the high windows of which had made it a much hated room during this particular season. Out of concern for the heat, the butler had ordered all fireplaces left unlit, and the kitchen had agreed that what the count most needed were cool meals untouched by the stove.

The young count himself combated the rise in temperature by lounging in his study largely in undergarments. Considering his usual eccentricities (admittedly typically in the addition, rather than the subtraction, of clothes of bright colors) the household found this quite humorous. They did, however, ask that the count's man take charge of visits to the study.

So it was his faithful valet who brought up a tray of coffee and cold buttered bread. And it was the valet who asked if his employer would be wearing the blue or red coat tonight (the blue) and informed him that a letter had arrived. This was truly an exceptional valet, particularly because he kept up the fiction that he had not immediately read who the letter was from and informed the rest of the household.

Count Cedric thanked his man and waited for the door to close before he snatched the letter off the tray and tore the seal. Typically, a pen knife would have been more suitable but as the Ministry had already opened it and their resealing was notoriously shoddy the letter snapped open with little effort. The paper smelled of Dante's favorite blended tobacco and of the damp ministry office it had passed through for inspection.

Dante had covered every inch of the page in his fierce scrawl. Within the lines of tightly packed letters he sent his greetings, his well wishes, and all the appropriate introductions of a gentleman. A bit of gossip on the local parish choir. His sister's courting of a banker. How a new play, *Temperance's Journey*, had replaced *A Fool's Ruin* after a dismal showing.

Cedric forced himself to break away and sit down at his desk before continuing.

"Do you remember," Dante wrote, "our diplomatic trip a year or so

ago?” How they’d been so politely received by the court and Prince Mother Orianje. How embarrassing it was that Dante had gotten so deep in his cups he’d stumbled to her door, declaring his love for her.

Only, Cedric smiled, the Prince Mother had returned to her private palace that night. It was not her door that Dante knocked on, tearfully, saying that he would damn the consequences but—

Well, it wasn’t her at any rate.

There was more to the letter, and Cedric forced himself to sit with each statement. To sift through the words like a miner through the rough. Dirt and dirt and dirt, but underneath it all glimmered the promise of all the riches of the world. If you ignored the damp smell that had come with it.

When finished, Cedric reread the letter before he began to pen his reply. Unlike Dante, when Cedric wrote he did so in smooth, confident strokes. His letters rose high and filled the page, his words stretched wide so they could be admired, and his sentences demanded others make room for their glorious turns of phrases. No doubt the Ministry rolled their eyes at the soft O’s and the heavy slants in the Ts and whispered ‘dandy’ when they read.

He started with all the typical pleasantries and thank yous and expected gossips and then paused. He found he was no longer in the study with his forehead streaked with sweat. No longer in the capital with its dying horde of plays that was once the envy of the world (most had been placed on indefinite hiatus since the Ministry’s formation by the 18th Act of Parliament). No longer in the home that he loved.

A coldness had crept into his bones. The sky outside was dark and grey. Everything was frozen. He thought of the foggy county where his family had long maintained their country estate.

“A winter came upon the hinterlands,” he wrote. “You have seen the gardens of my family’s villa there, so attended to by our beloved household.” How the coral colored yarrows clustered about and the marigolds seemed to drip honey onto the dark green leaves of the alpenrose, which itself flowered into the bright pink Dante once whispered had given him a headache.

A pause. A dip for his pen.

“It is curious what happens when the fiercest of seasons come upon the world. Those vibrant colors, the envy of eight counties, have all faded. The hinterlands have always been tough, but the warm light of the sun is nowhere to be found. There is little joy in the gardens of my home now.”

Outside, a preacher was crying that the heat was judgement from the Ever. That they would all burn.

“And yet,” Cedric wrote in those leisurely strokes of his pen, “we can find beauty in the most horrid of worlds.” He dabbed his brow with a handkerchief.

The pride of his gardens was the banded beau. A brightly colored shrub that would explode in color even in the fiercest of winters. Passerbys would be dazzled as it glimmered in blue and red (the exact shade depended upon the season) and anyone who had it in their gardens was the talk of the county. It would draw crowds to even the grouchiest man’s garden.

But the banded beau was the most curious thing. Certainly, everyone adored it, but was Dante aware that under the surface it struggled?

The masses applauded politely when they saw the flowers in spite of the winter. They were ignorant. For the banded beau’s roots had difficulty growing even in the most prepared soil. They were so weak that, when its tops flowered the plant threatened to uproot itself entirely.

Cedric sipped at the coffee and wished he had something cool.

“Killed, despite flowering,” Cedric wrote, “is that not the most tragic thing?” Despite all the attention lavished upon it the poor thing could not find a way to survive in the world. Every crowd loved how it lit up their dreary winters, but spared not a word once it died by its own roots. The gardeners would burn it with little fanfare.

“I assumed this death was destiny.” Until, just before the harsh winter, a wayward plant seemed to have snuck its way into his garden. Some troublesome seed, no doubt, that took root. It was all thorns and sharp edges and had sprung up quite close to the banded beau.

When Cedric first examined it he found himself cut.

“Imagine!” Here he smiled. “Like meeting someone at a ball and having them snap at you for the most innocent of compliments.” He had not bothered uprooting the interloper despite its nearness to the beau.

“After all, what harm could come to one already destined for death?”

Cedric found his easy writing had drifted into a fearsome scribble. He stopped, composed himself, and returned to the smooth loops that had so infuriated his school teachers (“There is no serious!” they yelled, smacking his hand.)

But it lived.

Even as summer progressed into the harsh winter, that winter that oppressed and hung heavy in the air, the beau showed no signs of its impending doom. In fact, it was more vibrant and powerful than ever. Like it was fated to survive.

“But you know me,” he continued, “I am not such a believer in fate. Particularly in this garden and in this winter.”

It was the interloping plant, he had realized upon reflection. The uninvited guest, “that had barged so rudely into my life.” Above ground the thorns and jagged leaves sprouted in a small armory of sharp edges, but underneath the earth its roots had grown deep in a short span of time. Their tendrils had wrapped tightly round its weak, failing neighbor. The beau was held fast.

“Do you see,” Cedric asked, “what I mean?” That this thorny, sharp thing, who had arrived in passing, had secured the light of his family home. Held it tight to this world.

The garden and its banded beau centerpiece would continue to dazzle visitors to his villa. It would be the pride of the gardener and the topic of dinner time conversation even as the winter dragged on and all memory of summer faded. And all the fools would fail to acknowledge how its existence was because of that sharp plant right next to it, which would pass their notice.

“You can see, can’t you Dante, how a life was saved?” How the true beauty in the garden was reserved not for this colorful, much vaunted

flower but for this sudden, subdued thing which had all the strength in the world?

“During the harshest of the winter, that lays so heavy upon me, I will admire it every day. For without it there would be no color left in the world.” Cedric paused, thought for a moment, and continued writing. “I pray for the winter to break quickly and for the sun to shine a bit brighter, but in harsh seasons I can only be thankful for survival.”

“I dream of a day where the summer sun shines again and the colors of my garden glow.”

Cedric signed the letter and sealed it with his signet ring. The wax bled and he imagined the bored ministry official cutting it open. One man crammed among a hundred compatriots and every one of them reading a thousand pieces of correspondence. A metronome keeping time at the far end of the vaulted office. The clockwork stamping of ‘VERIFIED BY THE MINISTRY FOR THE DISSOLUTION OF POLLUTIVE VALUES’ on correspondence (the old families were excused from the stamping to help maintain the illusion of separation). Passive faces as they read the most private thoughts of both the cobbler and the count. Letters resealed, logged in vast ledgers, and reposted. Hatred bureaucrifed.

The valet was rung for to post the letter and then Cedric dressed for his outing. There were still plays to be seen in town, even if the selection had much wilted, and it would be odd if he disappeared from society entirely. One of the ministry board members was waiting for him for dinner at The Royale and visiting dignitaries were expecting him for drinks. All quite exhausting for most individuals, to run from one engagement to another, but he was not concerned.

His roots were quite secure.

BEN DETIVEAUX

Ben lives in a place that is far too hot where he writes anything that will hold his interest. You can follow him on instagram where he'll start posting about books and cocktails. Any day now.

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TANNÉ
FIONA SELDEN

EVE DREADED THE MORNING THAT she would wake with a dull pain in her jaw, but it came all the same. Around her seventeenth birthday, her wisdom teeth figured it a ripe time to burrow into the tender pink flesh of her gums. Eve did not want this wisdom, but it would come all the same.

It was tradition to have them removed by the local surgeon, then leave them out for the little mice, the little mice who scurried and hid in crooks and crannies and watched and waited and knew everything there was to know, in exchange for dreams. It was quite the painful process, Eve had heard, not only to have the teeth extracted, but to carry around the knowledge that the mice gave for the rest of your life.

One woman, Eve had heard, learned that her husband had been unfaithful. He had taken a harpy into their bed. The woman hunted the creature down, cooked it, and set it out for dinner, unbeknownst to her husband, who gobbled it up with relish. Now he could no longer speak in lies, only in ungodly squawks and screeches. Another townspeople, a farmer, learned that his crops would earn him no money. In a panic, he sold all of his land for a small sum and received nothing when the crops yielded a bountiful harvest the following season.

Some townspeople would do anything to avoid having the wisdom removed from their heads. You could tell who they were just by observing their smiles which would reveal mouths crowded with teeth like sardines packed in a tin can. Some of these townspeople could hardly eat or speak. Others were driven to madness, pulling out any of the remaining teeth in their heads to achieve even just the resemblance of a dream-state. And when they had run out of teeth to offer the mice, they would gather in broken houses and smoke hallucinogenic herbs, the fumes rising from their pipes like smoke from a chimney. Eve did not want to be either of these.

So, Eve ran to the surgeon and begged him to give her something that would stop the teeth from growing in her head. He said that no such thing was possible, that the wisdom would have to come out of her eventually. She cried and cried, saying that he must be able to

stop them somehow. He could do so many other incredible things. He could stitch together broken hearts, leech bad blood from between neighbors, steel one's stomach against their worst fears. Still, he maintained that stunting the wisdom's growth was beyond his skills. Sadly, Eve resigned.

The surgeon gave her an anesthetic to settle her tangled nerves and set her down in a cold, metal dentist's chair. The gas made the world all blurry at the edges and created a sort of twilight space; its sensory subjugation she was helpless to fight, an insect caught in a Venus flytrap. Then the surgeon carefully took her chin in his hand, opened her mouth, took a small but sharp instrument, and expertly split her aching gums. Once he found the wisdoms nestled in her jaw, he took a pair of forceps and extracted them. Silent tears rolled down Eve's cheeks as she felt them being pulled from her head, but the relief she felt once they were absent was immense. The surgeon placed the wisdoms in her hand and folded her fingers protectively over top of them.

Eve took her wisdoms home and laid them under her pillow. She could hear the pitter-patter of tiny feet in the walls and across the floor. Then she fell into a deep and dream-filled sleep. And in that deep sleep, there were those things she feared, nightmares of broken glass and blood and thorns. Her dream's avatar screamed at her mother and her father and although it possessed her to do so, she meant every word that spilled from her lips, and the words her parents slung back at it, and by extension herself, stung like deadly poison. It fed once-treasures from scorned lovers, now tarnished with betrayal, to flames that licked them up with voracious hunger. It looked out into the dark of winter that left the earth a starving husk.

But between the horrors, she heard songbirds beckoning the sun to rise and surrendered helplessly to the joy of witnessing the flowers bloom in spring. Her avatar held the hand of a friend and leaned on their shoulder when the weight of the world was too much to bear alone. And it danced with wild love to music.

Eve awoke to see beady little eyes full of knowledge staring down at her before the little mice they belonged to turned tail and scab-

bled back to their hidey-holes. And although the mice had taken her teeth, as evidenced by their absence when she lifted her pillow to mourn their loss, they left her with a heart fuller than before.

FIONA SELDEN

Fiona Selden is a writer from Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. They write whatever they feel possessed to, be it a short story, novel, personal essay, manifesto, or poetry, but whatever genre, it will always dabble in the magical.



OUR VOICE

CHRISTINE STAMATE

I WAS SITTING ON A barstool, exposing both my cleavage and my loneliness, the first time it happened. The arm I lifted to summon the bartender lowered. It lurched—at first in the halting movements of bad stop motion, but then more fluidly—towards my glass of water. My mouth, which had been about to order a double shot of whiskey, opened to swallow. I watched my arm with sick fascination as it brought the glass down. I shuddered. I had been in a daze ever since my mom had died, but this was a new low. I definitely needed whiskey.

I opened my mouth, pleased with its cooperation, but the voice that sounded was not my own. I didn't even recognize the language I was speaking, much less the words I was saying. The sounds were fluid; they moved swiftly from vowel to vowel, skirting over soft fricatives, but it was foreign to me.

“You've had enough,” the bartender said in response to my gibberish and the wild perplexity in my eyes. I fled, panicked and embarrassed.

The second time it happened, I was half-naked on a table. The needle began to hum; my body jerked spastically.

“You ok, hun?” asked the tattooer.

I couldn't answer. My tongue was thick. But then I felt it move. It danced off the roof of my mouth in an unfamiliar rhythm of consonants and vowels. I rolled off the table and faced the tattooer, unleashing a torrent of words. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I was swearing, and I was certain I was telling him not to touch me. I sprinted out the door.

I plastered on a temporary tattoo instead, trying not to think about the strange experience. I had gotten into the habit of trying not to think. I focused instead on the attractive guy I had met at the bar. He said tattoos were sexy, so I hoped that the skull surrounded by thorns that I pressed onto my lower back would seem sultry and dangerous.

It was unclear if he would have been impressed, though: he'd only gotten as far as unhooking my bra after our first date when my body rebelled. Instead of whispering his name, I began shrieking. Yet again, my tongue was intractable, my words strange. I could pick out

what sounded like “nu,” but the rest was a stream of resistance and refusal.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” my date asked.

I didn’t know the answer, but my voice answered for me, increasingly angry and discordant.

“Romanian bitch,” the man swore, pushing out of my bed and my room.

Alone, my body returned to me. My breathing calmed, my heart rate slowed. I played back the encounter in my mind, trying to understand what had happened. I thought of what he had called me; had I ever told him I was half-Romanian? I didn’t think so. Our conversation had been the banal chatter that presages a hookup. Maybe I looked Romanian? I didn’t know. All I knew was that I was confused, tired, and unable to ignore what was happening to me.

It was time to ask for help. My sister, gallivanting across the country yet again, was no help, so I had to find others to consult.

“It’s like I’m a puppet inside my own body,” I told the neurologist who said I was physically flawless.

“It’s like I have no free will,” I told the psychiatrist, who jotted notes frenetically before sliding me a useless prescription.

“It’s like I can’t do anything remotely risky,” I told my mom, as I hacked away at the weeds encroaching on her tombstone. She didn’t answer, but I continued anyway.

“I just want to feel again,” I mumbled. “You know, get drunk, sleep with someone new. I want to feel like I didn’t die when you did.”

I was crying, my body trembling, when it happened again. My lungs were still panting with sobs, but my arms stopped shaking. They were warm and strong as they wrapped across my chest, holding me tightly.

The palm of my right hand patted my shoulder rhythmically. My mouth opened, and this time the sounds that emerged were caressing and familiar. I was speaking slower, and I could pick out individual sounds. I heard, “Nani, Nani,” but I didn’t know what it meant. I listened as I repeated the sounds again: “Nani, Nani, puiul mamei.” My hand continued to rub comforting circles against my shoulder and

back; the touch had the familiarity of a distant dream.

I wanted to talk and ask the question that burned on my tongue, but I kept repeating the same words—words, I suddenly realized, that were from a childhood lullaby. Doubt vanished.

I exhaled into my arms, into her arms.

I didn't care that my voice wasn't my own. She could have it. My mother could have whatever she wanted from my life as long as she didn't leave me again.

At least that's what I thought back then. The reality grew increasingly complicated. It was understandable that my mother wanted to protect me from mistakes. It was maternal, almost endearing.

It was less endearing when she started micromanaging my life. She wouldn't even let me sleep with dishes in the sink. I opened my mouth to yawn, and she chided me, propelling me back to the kitchen. I began to wonder where this might end. My mother was with me, thank God, but would I ever be free to make my own decisions again? Was this my fate, to hear my mother's voice coming out of my throat whenever I displeased her?

I started studying Romanian in my spare time. Maybe she was trying to tell me something specific. Maybe I could find a way to please her, to appease her.

She seemed to approve of my attempts to learn her language. For weeks, she was silent, and, for the first time since she died, life flowed smoothly. I felt close to my mom and less alone.

Soon I had even more company. My wandering sister returned from her latest quest of self-discovery and plunked down on my couch. I hadn't seen her since the funeral. She had left as soon as Mom was in the ground, abandoning me to well-meaning guests and a pyramid of calla lilies.

"You made it back," I stated dispassionately, removing her dirty backpack from the couch. I was trying to be calm, but my pulse was thrumming. Surely mom would speak now. Surely she had some choice words for my sister.

"Yeah," my sister said laconically, "thought I'd crash here for a few

nights.”

She opened a pack of cigarettes, tapping one out.

Yes! I thought. Mom hated smoking. Our grandfather had died of lung cancer. I stretched my mouth, waiting for the storm of words. I hoped my Romanian was adequate to translate my mother’s anger.

Kayla held her lighter to the tip of her cigarette, but my tongue sat idly in my mouth. I couldn’t believe it. Mom wouldn’t let me leave dishes in the sink, but Kayla could smoke a cigarette in my house?

“Get out,” I told her tightly, “no smoking inside. No smoking at all! How could you be so stupid? Grandpa had lung cancer!”

“Fine, whatever,” my ever-eloquent sister said. “God, you sound just like—” she didn’t finish the sentence. Even Kayla had some sense of restraint.

That night, alone in bed, I thought about Kayla. She was a mess. If mom wouldn’t help her, I would. I took out the Romanian dictionary, rolling words across my tongue until they felt like my own. If Kayla wanted to waste her life, she would hear what our mother would say about it.

It didn’t take long. Over dinner the next night, Kayla announced that she quit her job. She had been on leave and now wouldn’t go back. The free life suited her.

I took a breath, and sent a prayer to my mother for guidance.

It was halting at first, but I stuck to the same phrase, repeating it until it grew in clarity and conviction.

My sister’s eyes were wide with shock at the sound of my voice, at the sight of my feigned blank stare.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she cried.

I didn’t respond. Didn’t blink. I repeated the injunction three times before collapsing dramatically on the table.

Kayla ran to me. She put her shaking hands on my hair, my head. It was the first time we had touched in years. It felt good, and my tears were unfeigned. I sat back up.

“Is it you?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

Relieved, Kayla pulled my head into her chest.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“You were—something else. Your words. It wasn’t—”

I nodded.

“I should have told you sooner,” I confessed. “I’ve been having—episodes. I start speaking Romanian, even though I never learned it. The words just—come out. I know it’s crazy, but I think it’s Mom. I know it is, actually.”

I proceeded to tell my stunned sister of my encounter at the cemetery. I was just trying to convince her, but soon I realized I was trying to make her understand what it had felt like to hear that lullaby, to feel Mom.

“Makes sense, I guess,” my sister admitted. “You always were her favorite. What was she saying to me?”

I hesitated, as if struggling to translate.

“I think she was saying—‘stai cu sora ta—stay with your sister.

“She wants,” I paused, “for us to stay together. Help each other, be close, since we don’t have Mom anymore.”

Kayla thought for a moment.

“This is so weird,” she said. “Mom is talking through you? Is she watching me? What does she know?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I guess we will have to figure it out.”

And so Kayla stayed and Mom was quiet, not that Kayla knew it. As far as Kayla knew, Mom had a lot of thoughts on her work ethic, her hygiene, and her partners. I studied Romanian religiously, eager to be ready to prophesize as necessary, but I was careful to keep the books hidden from Kayla. For the first time in my life, my sister was listening to me. I was helping her. I was ensuring Mom would be proud of us.

My plan worked perfectly until Kayla found the Romanian dictionary in my purse.

“What do you need this for?” she asked. “You don’t speak Romanian. Only mom does.”

I fumbled for a response.

“Sometimes I need to look up one of her words,” I lied.

“You told me that the translation just comes to you,” Kayla accused.

She narrowed her eyes.

“There is no mom, is there?” she asked. “Just you, being controlling as always. This was never about mom, was it?”

“Kayla, no, I swear.” My words came fast, desperate. I couldn’t lose my sister, too. “Mom takes over my voice. It really happened. She keeps me from doing what I want to do!”

“I don’t believe you,” Kayla said. “Besides, when have you ever wanted anything Mom didn’t? You are exactly like her.”

Kayla stood up.

“I’m leaving,” she announced. “It’s always been the two of you. I don’t know why I stayed so long.”

My chest was tight. I thought I was going to be sick.

“Kayla, wait! That’s not what she wants!” I said. That’s when I felt it again. My mom. The words flew out of me, too fast for me to fully translate. I cried through the words, through the pleas and admonitions that filled my mouth.

Kayla backed away from the door.

“Fine,” she said, persuaded by my terror, “I’ll stay. At least until we can figure out what Mom wants.”

I felt it then, the smile that curved my lips. Were those lips hers or mine? Did it even matter anymore? We had gotten what we wanted.

CHRISTINE STAMATE

Christine is a mother and teacher living in Scottsdale, AZ. She spends her free time playing with her daughters, reading, and combating existential angst.

BRAMBLES

MATHEW MONACO

April 6th, Day 2

I hate this. I hate living here. I'm only here because Penny wanted to move for her teaching career and she didn't want to do the long-distance thing. I'm doing all of this for her. I even opened this stupid journal and wrote my thoughts out because she prodded me to.

All of my friends back home write me stupid messages. "Oh, you're so lucky, Jackson." "I wish I could live in Kyoto." I'm not even sure how to respond. I'd probably start with reminding them that I don't even live in Kyoto. Penny explained it but I don't exactly understand. We are in Kyoto prefecture but not Kyoto city.

Wherever I go, the people here all feel so alien. They look at me like a tourist. Can't they see I didn't come to gawk and geek out about their culture? Even the children stop and stare like I have three heads. Worst of all, when one of these foreigners do speak English, I can't understand their accent. Nobody's rushing to translate for me.

I'm an outsider here. Every street sign and brochure reminds me that I don't belong. It's a struggle just to run to the store and play charades with the cashier, counting out their money, unsure if I'm getting scammed or overcharged. I don't know how I'm supposed to survive in this country, let alone thrive.

This doesn't feel like home at all. I hate this.

April 17th, day 13

Penny and I had a fight today. She just left me here alone and I'm so... I'm so disgusted. I'm pissed. Why does nobody understand? Why am I even with her if she refuses to accept my perspective? I don't deserve to feel this invalidated! She called me racist for Christ sake! How is that okay?

I'm losing my cool. Let me focus and start from the beginning.

Things got a little heated. She's started speaking Japanese around me. She thinks she can "acclimate" me to it. Stops our entire conversation just to teach me words I honestly can't remember. Now she's mad at me for "not trying"? I tried by moving halfway across the world! I'm trying so damn hard just to make this relationship work! The amount of sacrifice I've made that's being brushed under the rug,

I just get pissed as hell all over again thinking about it! If I'm "racist" why am I even here? IF I'M TOXIC THAT'S YOUR FAULT FOR LETTING ME COME LIVE HERE!

...I'm not racist. It's not my fault I can't pick up languages like she can. English is hard enough for me. Her calling me that was a low blow. It's not like I planned to flip out, I didn't want that screaming match either. Wouldn't anyone be pissed? Am I just not good enough for her? I'm here aren't I? Why is that not good enough?

Look, I will admit that I took it too far. There's a broken plate all over the kitchen floor I need to sweep up before she returns.

April 18th, day 14

We talked it out. I owed it to Penny to update the journal. Maybe she won't ever read it, but if someone did, I wouldn't want them to think our relationship was anything like what I described yesterday.

Agree to disagree. That's all she said when I tried to apologize. How one disagrees with another person's feelings I can't fathom. I'm here. What does she expect? I shouldn't have to wear a kimono and take my shoes off every time I enter a house just to prove my commitment.

Either way, things returned to normal. Well, as normal as normal can be. She's stopped trying to teach me Japanese words. I guess that's fair.

As far as my living situation, Penny said she has a friend from work who can give me a cleaning job at a warehouse. It isn't much, but I think I can swab a mop where I'm pointed. I might feel better, she probably thinks, if I have something to do with myself. Maybe she's right. This will keep me from stewing in my thoughts at least.

April 25th, day 21

I went inside a McDonalds today. I've seen them around, but this was the first time I had a chance to just go in and treat myself to a meal.

Took the wrong bus home from work. Damn this city and its maps. I looked one up that had English annotations, but the streets are as confusing as the people. I had to ask five different times for direc-

tions before I could understand a word I was being told. Charades is a fun game, but being forced to play it just to find your way home gets old really fast.

The cashier spoke decent English, thank God. Gave me intelligible directions back, too. Guess I should tell Penny I got some McDirections free of charge. Heh. Bad joke.

Picked up a McChicken and large fries. The portion size was smaller, but that doesn't matter. Best damn meal I've eaten since I arrived here. Hell, the whole atmosphere almost felt like I was back home. Everyone sounded like they were speaking in tongues, but you could tell they were at ease. Nobody paid me any mind.

It actually isn't far from where I live. I might start going there more often.

May 11th 2023, day 37

On my way to work, I walk across this bridge that passes over a gorge of sorts. I never really checked out what exactly was below it before. Today I found out. It's thorn bushes. Nasty and painful, but they'll break your fall at least.

I don't tend to pay attention to the locals when I make my morning commute, either. Today, though... I don't know. Not sure what I could have done. He was more than likely set to jump. Some foreigner insisting "it will all be okay" at random would have solved nothing.

Either way, I don't know. I heard him jump behind me a few seconds after I passed. It was such a soft sound, more a disturbance in the air than anything I can put into words. It made me turn, though. Penny told me that this is a common occurrence in Japan. Guess their lifestyle leads to a lot of social pressure that gets to their heads sometimes. It's not like it was very different in America. Still sucks.

So here I am at seven in the morning, wading through this field of brambles and getting scratched by thorns left and right. Even thought to myself about the fact that I was getting cut up just to retrieve a corpse. I just wanted to get the guy out of there.

He was alive. Not in great shape, but he was still conscious. I dialed 119 for an ambulance. Penny taught me that. They understood the

name of the bridge even with the language barrier. I got lucky.

I actually recognized the guy. He visited the McDonalds around the same time I did the past week. I noticed him because he was like me, sitting by himself. Waiting there with him at the edge of the pit of brambles, looking at the scratches all over our bodies... both of us bled red. We both ate McDonalds. We were both ready to give up on something when we shouldn't.

I tried to talk to him about it. I couldn't understand a word the guy was saying. Whatever he was on about, it meant a lot to him. He started crying and everything. He kept repeating a word, "hitoribotchi" I think. I should ask Penny what it means.

Again, that parallel I saw in the brambles. Again, I felt like he and I were not so dissimilar in some way. If I was in his position, wouldn't Penny rush to save me from that fate, digging brambles into her body, sitting there with me and trying to get through to me even if it sounded like nonsense?

Eventually, I made my way to work and even managed to navigate the bus on my own. I had a lot of time to think about everything... I want to ask Penny to keep teaching me Japanese. She's digging through the brambles trying to save me and I've just been... I could be a better partner to her. Do some work to save myself.

I am terrible at foreign languages, but maybe one day I could get to a point where the gibberish all around me stops being gibberish.

MATHEW MONACO

Mathew Monaco is a starving artist forced to work a regular job to make ends meet. He has been writing since he was a child, including several completed works self-published on Amazon. It is incredibly likely he will continue writing until the end of his days.

AN EVENING WITH THE GODS

JAIME GILL

Masks

“It’s going to be a busy one,” Maia says, walking briskly into the rehearsal space. “Mostly newcomers, so let’s make them regulars. What do we do?”

“Make them love us!”

It’s half mantra, half joke, and all the dancers shout it back.

“Not bothered, Joe?” Maia says.

I realise I didn’t say the stupid words. And then I feel the implication, that I don’t care.

“Sorry Joe, have I embarrassed you?”

Is she calling me out publicly?

“No,” I say, hoping my skin doesn’t betray the lie.

“Then are you angry?”

“Yes actually, I am getting a bit pissed off now.”

“Good. Be angry. Maybe we’ll have a passionate Apollo tonight.”

Before I can think of anything clever to say she’s turned and started running through last minute changes. When she’s finished, we performers file out through the corridors taking us to our starting points.

I climb a metal ladder and crawl to the trapdoor I’ll drop from. In the dark I try to clear my mind. “Luckiest dancers alive,” I tell myself. Another show mantra which has curdled, but it’s true. I’ve been a paid performer for 12 years and nothing compares to this.

For most productions you dance in a square of contained space, the lights reducing the audience’s faces to smudges. Bows are collective, applause shared. In this interactive theatre show there are no stages and the audience is everywhere. When they are with you, they are with *you*. We move together through sixty rooms which become—for three strange hours sealed in a shimmering bubble—a separate universe. No night is ever the same. Our routes may be mapped out, but the audience changes everything. The way they respond, the love we see from behind the masks they wear, every night is reshaped.

But, yes, I’ve been struggling. Maia may be a thorn in my side, and increasingly a bitch—but she’s a bitch with a point. Is it the slowing ticket sales, the rumours the show might close? Maybe it’s doing the same role for a year. Perhaps I should ask for a different part, one of

the mortal characters in our recreation of the Trojan War. But who'd voluntarily be demoted from godhood?

Below me I hear the fake whistling of arrows. My cue. I slide the trapdoor and drop as lightly as I can into a shadowy square. So much depends on this entrance.

Gasps. Good. There are maybe twelve masked audience members crowded around. Some have been waiting, they know this show well enough to know my routine. Others jerk away, startled. Newcomers. I feel their eyes on me but turn my own gaze on the other character here, Cassandra. She regards me with awe—oh, Susie is good—then runs.

I pursue down a corridor, past the little shops of Troy. Masks stare from windows, startled by the explosion of movement.

A mask accidentally blocks the corridor between me and Cassandra. Only a newcomer would make the mistake of getting between characters. We are forbidden from talking in the performances, but there are other ways to communicate. I bark in his ear and he jerks away, eyes wide at this startling, beautiful, unrepeatable moment.

But only unrepeatable for him. I've barked that same way forty times now. The first was one of those inspired improvisations where I truly felt like a savage god was in me. It made a woman gasp. And so I did it again. And again. And now it's not Apollo doing it, it's just me. Jumped-up Joe the dancer from Macclesfield. A dog with old tricks.

I resume the pursuit and catch Cassandra in the bar, one of the set's largest spaces. Dozens of masks crowd around. We begin our dance, a cruel pursuit where I am cat and she is mouse. But that feeling of artificiality creeps in again. One little crack in conviction and doubt drip drip drips through.

I glance at the crowd as I whirl. There's usually someone so enthralled, eyes so wide behind their masks, that I can draw power from them. But tonight I can't find that connection. And it's me. It's not them. It's me, Joe.

I let Cassandra go, knowing I will pursue a few moments later. I crouch and assume the shape of a tiger, eyeing the audience. I want

them to feel they are all potential prey. One flinches from my gaze. Oh, that's good.

Then I see a mask at the back, dressed in black. He's watching and I can't see his mouth behind the mask, but I feel like he's smiling. Not a kind smile. A mocking smile. I look into his eyes, but something makes me glance away. He unnerves me. Why is he so far away? He should be drawn to me, edging closer. Paranoia flutters. Has Maia sent someone to spy on me, to judge me?

The music changes in the next room, my cue. I try to forget the smiling man as I continue my pursuit of Cassandra. We whirl through corridors and recreated hotels and department stores and town squares and this beautiful fake world becomes a carousel, masked faces peering from walls and windows, feet thumping as they join our chase. The joy of motion is back. When I catch Cassandra, I seize her and clasp her head to mine and sinister strings swell from the ground, the walls tremble. A dazzle of lights surrounds us as I, Apollo, give Cassandra my gift and her curse.

And then it happens. A sudden itch in my throat, and I cough. An unmistakably human cough.

Susie—Cassandra—smothers her smirk, but someone doesn't try to hide his amusement. That man. The smiling man. I don't look but I hear him. I know it's him. He's laughing. At me.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I race through the next scenes but I've given up on a good performance, I just want to make sure I'm in the right places at the right time. I almost hope the crowd disappears but no, I hear the clump clump of following feet.

I reach the dark slum square with its secret door where I perform my one-to-one. The one-to-ones are the hidden beating hearts of the show, magical moments where we choose one lucky audience member to take inside a locked room where we reveal secrets that unlock new mysteries and wonders. These are the moments nobody forgets, that bring them back like addicts. These moments have made this show—the whole theatre company—world-famous.

I eye the room. I see a handful of regulars, twitching for my atten-

tion. They know what's coming. There are a few newcomers, uncertain and wide-eyed. And that man, at the back. Watching. Smiling. Well, I'm not choosing that fucker.

I reach out to a young woman and her eyes widen, but then...

My arm moves past her without will, like a compass point dragged north. I open my hand. The smiling man takes it, even as my brain roars at me *no, no, no*. I draw him inside the darkness.

As I slide the noisy bolts that lock the door behind us, I try to understand what just happened. Some spasm of the mind? An instinct gone wrong? I didn't want him. I didn't choose him. Yet I did. What's happening?

By the time I turn I have reasserted self-control. If he's Maia's spy, then I need to make this moment perfect. I hate him but I'll seduce him. I'll sit him in the chair and reveal a secret that will make his head spin. And I will do it as a god.

I reach out to take his mask. Here, the chosen audience member sometimes flinches—losing the mask can feel like nakedness. The smiling man stays perfectly still, as if there was no movement in him, not even breath.

I slip the mask off and the electric candlelight in the room falters and fizzes as if made of wax and wick, then flares.

His face is severe and beautiful and he isn't smiling after all and perhaps never was. His eyes are made of gold. A trick of the candlelight, but...

No tricks.

He didn't say that. His mouth didn't move. Yet I heard his voice, cold and smooth as marble. Accentless. No—languageless. That was thought alone.

I try to remember what happens next. I'm meant to...

Sit, Joseph Macy.

I sit. Or rather my body sits. I didn't want to. I want to snap those bolts back and throw this man out, then lock the doors and hide.

Say my name.

"I don't know your name." That small voice is little bullied Joe from Macclesfield, hoping that being quiet will make the other boys

leave him alone.

I stare into golden eyes and the electric light brightens, bathing the whole room in warm orange until it isn't a room at all, it's a boat, and green-blue waves lap around and I am prostrating myself and adoring the setting sun as it spreads its arms across the horizon and I am saying his name again and again and...

"Apollo."

At last we meet.

Someone tries to open the door, rattles it, and we're back in this cramped little room. The light is dim again.

I have been watching you.

I want to speak, but my throat is dry as baked clay. This body is such a brittle, broken, clumsy thing. I want to tell him He can't be real.

What do you think reality is, Joseph? It is an agreement. That's all. When enough people believe something is real, it becomes so. I have been real before, in a hot land of islands and mountains, where many believed in me. This show, imperfect though it is, has made people believe in me for brief enraptured moments every night. And their belief made me real again. You believe in me, too. Don't you?

I want to tell him he's a madman but can't speak and I know the madman must be me.

I have watched you every night, child. There have been moments where you were good. Even better than you thought. You move beautifully, like the finest boys at those first games. You were almost me.

And now a smile does finally flicker across his lips.

But you weren't me.

He leans forward, gold eyes inches from mine.

Though you can be.

No more words are said, no thoughts expressed. His eyes become two suns scorching me, searing me, obliterating me. My soul cries *help, please help me*, and at the same time cries *yes, please, transform me, make me more beautiful than I have ever been, let me ascend above all those who doubt me*. And then I have no soul to cry out any more and He is gone and I am gone and there is something

new here in this body which looks like Joseph Macy's.

This body breathes and is surprised at the feel of air in its chest. Thicker than it had thought. This body stands and regards the empty space where a masked man once stood. Nothing of him is left. Not a rag. He was never there.

This body opens the door. The bolts slide away noiselessly, surrendering to this body with ease.

There are masks outside, waiting. They look at this body. They move away, some ancient instinct making them draw back. This body turns and strides back towards the heart of Troy. Gravity is frightened of this body, it shrinks from it, and lets it move weightlessly.

Masks across this small fake city abandon whatever they are doing to come see. They will come back, all of them, on other nights. They will bring others to see this body which moves like a god. The show will last for as long as this body wants it to. They will come and they will worship.

Behind this body, the sound of footsteps. They follow. They will always follow.

JAIME GILL

Jaime Gill is a queer, British-born writer happily exiled in Cambodia, where he works for non-profits. He reads, writes, boxes, travels, and occasionally socialises. His stories have appeared in publications including Litro, Exposition Review, BULL, Good Life Review, and Underscore, and won awards including the 2024 Honeybee Literature Prize and a Bridport Prize. He's currently a Pushcart Prize nominee and working on a novel, script, and far too many short story ideas. Find out more and read some free stories at www.jaimegill.com.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

A.R. FREDERIKSEN

SO MANY THINGS DREW ME in about this piece, one by one, continually adding to each other, so let's take them all in the succession that they occurred to me.

The narration and prose caught my attention first. The story starts off with a recognizable and fitting voice for anything written within the historical sphere—and in a voice that knows itself well, at that—but we very quickly get the sense of a contrasting, cheeky undertone that sets the story apart from what we'd normally expect, thus elevating it. Even the title itself hints that we'll be treated to a story of contrasts, which is very exciting.

As the story progresses, so does the suspense and mystery that we feel. We get the sense that everything isn't fine and dandy based on cues both from the past and the present that Count Cedric delivers to the reader in that delightfully cheeky, yet also morose and ominous, undertone. Suspense and mystery are difficult to do well because it often means balancing tension and foreshadowing on a knife's edge, and it becomes even more difficult to do this well when you then choose to add a contrasting tongue-in-cheek undertone to the mix.

Next, allow me to wax poetic about the general subtlety of this piece. The story is intriguing because the prose itself isn't minimalistic at all, but the storytelling is exactly that. So much is said without ever actually being said, wrapped up in clever metaphors and imagery and plot parallels and whatnot. We have a single man who sits and writes a letter, but that's not where the story actually lies. The story lies in what he writes, and specifically how he writes it while the world turns around him, rather than the act of the writing itself. We're put directly into the eye of the storm where nothing moves at all, and yet everything moves all at once when you angle your head just right.

We can easily say that the narrator is talking in tongues here. Not only to the recipient of the letter, though, but also to the readers of the story. And perhaps even a little bit to himself. This makes for a fascinating interpretation of the theme for this competition. It's an interpretation that works well on several levels and is executed with the precision of someone who knows their own voice well enough to

play around with reader expectations.

Overall, this is a quiet story that speaks volumes if you sit down, close your mouth, and listen.

I'm happy to select *Words of Winter, Written in Summer* as the winner of the competition.

A.R. FREDERIKSEN

As a child, A. R. Frederiksen wanted to be either a hairdresser, a florist, a horse, or an author.

Hair, flowers, and horses sadly haven't played much part in her road to authoring, but that road has been interspersed with many other vocations such as kitchen worker, university admissions caseworker, B2B copywriter and copyeditor of scientific content, freelance creative writing teacher at undergraduate level, and much more.

Authoring won out when she was introduced to English as a pre-teen and instantly fell in love with a language much riper and vaster than her own.

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