

# THE SPECTATORIAL

— VOLUME XII —

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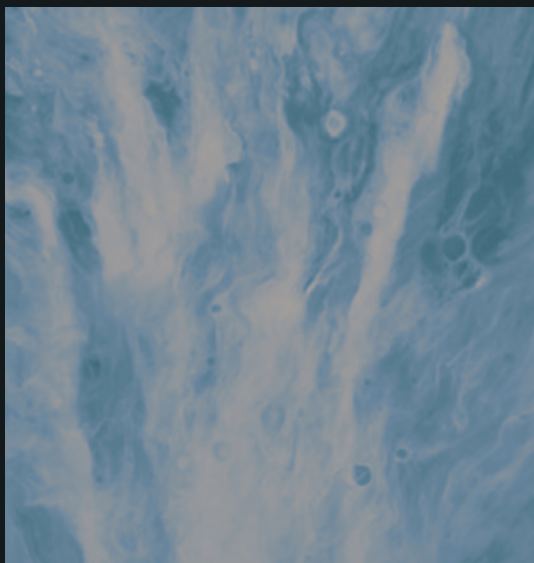


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# THE SPECTATORIAL



— VOLUME XII —

# Masthead & Contributors

## EXECUTIVE

Jacky Yu	Editor-in-Chief
.....	
Luna Chen	Managing Editor
.....	
Diana Radenko	Creative Director

## EDITORIAL

Senior Editors	
Katarina Kojic, Mei Linh Cheng, Miran Tsay	
.....	
Junior Editors	
Alyssa Donnelly, Claire Ramcharan, Xarnah Stewart	
.....	
Adaora Olisa	First Year Editor
.....	
Evan Bulloch	Social Media Manager
.....	
Any Carter	Graduate Advisor

## ARTISTS

Branwynn Friesen, Ella Chen, Evan Bulloch, Maiya Schmidt	
.....	
Cover Design & Layout by Diana Radenko	



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

To our adventurous, visionary, erudite readers,

The pendulum swings, ending a year with the *Spectatorial* and beginning another. We could not have finished this volume without your continued support, and we sincerely thank each and every one of you who make our journal possible.

Our opening issue last year was released amidst the falling leaves of Autumn dyeing the ground crimson, and our central theme was the bittersweet goodbyes of summer nostalgia. As summer approaches again, this issue reflects upon the past and future with a different outlook. Rather than conveying a yearning for a bygone era, this volume questions whether the past was ever free of the problems that plague the present or if the future will ever escape them. This tome compiles stories mixing classic fairytale and mythological settings with contemporary anxieties and societal issues. Perhaps you'll be captivated by the unsettling depictions of desire and obsession in *Adsiltia* and *The Geomor Flower* or appreciate the reimagining of iconic works by Le Guin and Aeschylus from alternate perspectives. The volume also examines the violent history of colonial exploitation in YA fiction and reduces a fantastical creature to its biological components in a grounded academic report. You may instead be more drawn to our grim depictions of the future in tales of technological horror. No matter which speculative world you retreat to, the fears and tragedies of reality seep within the setting to bloom forth a dark and beautiful tale with an uncomfortable yet genuine look of the present. This volume may not have the warmth and reassurance of our previous installments, but there is immense value in showing these stories all the same.

Speculative fiction is often dismissed as mere escapism, a form of entertainment that helps us forget our mundane world. However, this volume of the *Spectatorial* aims to challenge that perception. We believe that speculative fiction can be a powerful tool to creatively highlight and display societal problems that are otherwise challenging to discuss and engage with. Just like the mirror in *Snow White*, which may be impossibly magical, but functions to show its viewers ugly truths, the *Spectatorial* presents readers with far different worlds that contain unpleasant aspects of reality that we should not bear to overlook. We invite you to gaze at this magic mirror, see its imperfect reflection, and learn to reconcile with it.

This year's journey, mirrored in our latest issue, is a testament to the dedication and hard work of our contributors. Overcoming all our challenges to produce Volume XII demonstrates our unwavering commitment to storytelling. This issue is the culmination of the commitment, patience, and ambition of our writers, editors, illustrators, and staff. We are deeply grateful for their contributions and hope that you, our readers, will enjoy reading this volume and continue to follow the *Spectatorial*.

Jacky Yu

Editor in Chief



# LETTER FROM THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR

To our readers and stalwart supporters,

And thus, the year has flown by—disappeared suddenly in a whorl of time, leaving us with the warmth of spring, winter's wind a fading memory. It is this image of the thaw that we wish to bring to you, the collapse of the deep ice and a slow awakening.

The pieces within this volume are reflective of a plurality of themes, not the least of which is natural human connection and empathy. Familial relationships, friendships, the other side—loneliness—appear within the pages in the same mixed form we ourselves experience these aspects of existence within our own lives. In this way, speculative fiction gives us another avenue to explore the ups and downs that are integral to memory, identity, and being.

With this mind, the visual identity of this volume is rooted in the idea of presenting a clean layout to give our chosen pieces room to breathe. The varied approaches of our authors don't conform to a single container, so I aimed to create one that was inherently many-sided, to highlight the ingenuity of each respective work.

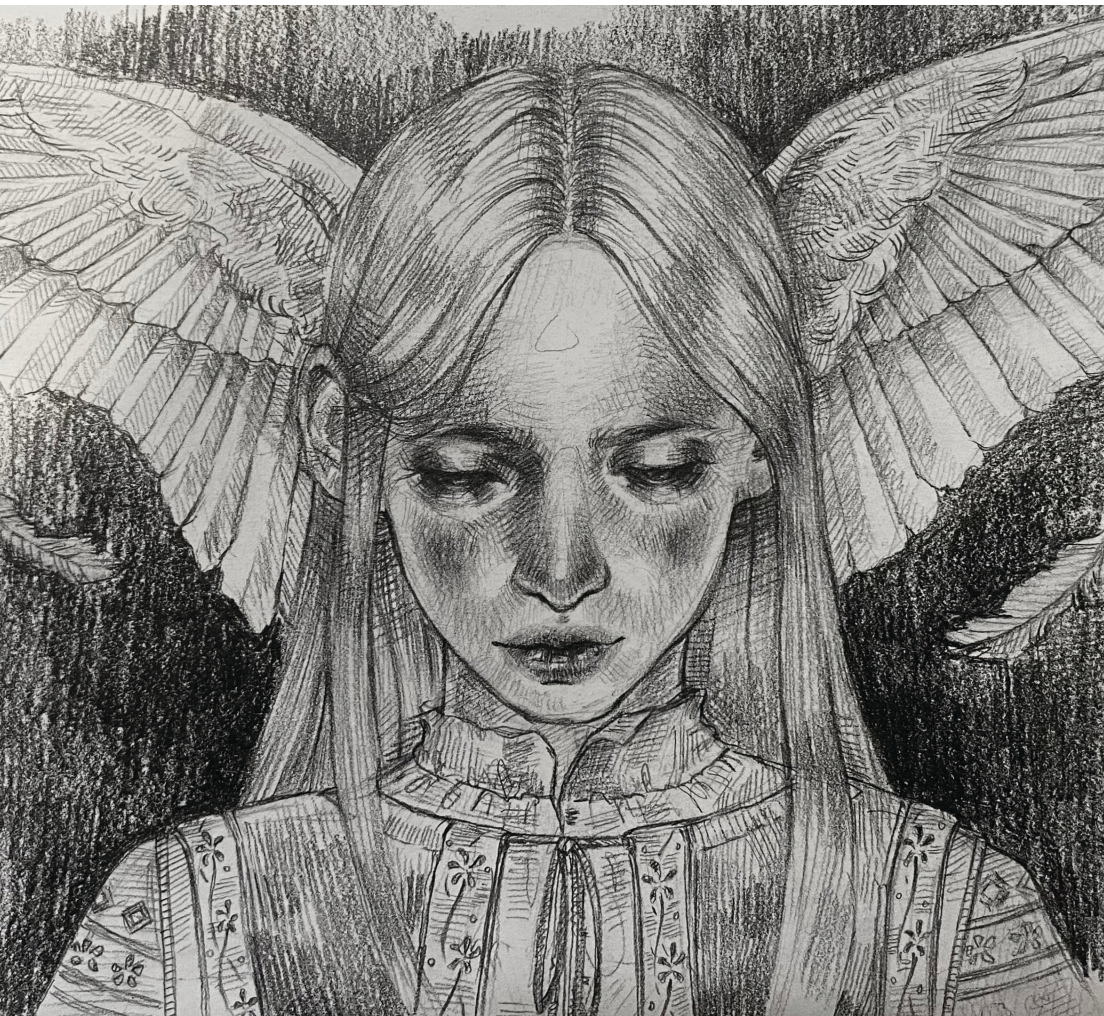
Where our previous release was a symposium of nostalgic musings, grounded by deep purple and held together by a hint of the unreal, this full issue is aligned with the shifting current, creating unique shapes and spaces for fresh ideas to swell. In other words, it evokes dreams and new imaginings, a sense of wonder, and it is this that I hope our readers can take away.

When you read this volume of the *Spectatorial*, take heed of the authors' voices, of the illustrators' apt representations of the works, and appreciate the time that went into the creation of this journal. If your friends are on the editorial or the contributing team, congratulate them—they did a fantastic job.

Till next time! And may your imagination steer you ever forward.

Diana Radenko

Creative Director



# ADSILTIA

BY MARCOS ARAUJO

EDITED BY LUNA CHEN & ILLUSTRATED BY BRANWYNN FRIESEN

There was a dead look to the king. Sacks formed beneath his eyes, his cheeks sagging, his belly resting on his lap. He reeked so horribly, one would prefer to dunk their head into a rotten pumpkin, filled with rotten milk and week-old eggs. Even the slaves themselves, without the luxury of a bath, would helplessly hold their breath when they came near him. Calisto had no choice but to get used to it, as the king would keep her tied to his throne with a coarse rope that circled her neck. She would dine with the mice on the spoils that fell to the king's side. Every so often, the king would tug her rope and whistle her onto his lap. She wore scarcely any garments. A filthy cloth to hide her intimate parts. Then, the king would ask her to sing. That was why he chose her, after all. Her rib cage was clear through her skin, her lips tattered, and her throat drier than the cold-stone floor. Regardless, she would lift her voice to not disappoint her master.

A hoarse croak emerged from her. A pitiful, tuneless caw that gave the king no satisfaction. Black tears began to stream down her cheeks as she craned towards his ear, yearning to deliver her song.

The king hurled her to the ground. "Off me you useless slave! One who once had a voice as proud as a falcon's, now is left with the squeaks of a bat. Guards! Throw her out! I have no use for her anymore."

Calisto groaned and moaned unintelligibly for the king to forgive her. In a moment, the guards seized her by the legs and dragged



her towards the hall doors. She sobbed desperately while tossing and turning in a futile attempt to free herself. Soon, her echoes faded into silence. She would not return. The king reposed on one elbow and drummed his fingers on the arm-rest. A sigh, then a groan.

"Ortho..." he called without effort. "Ortho!" he repeated louder.

From behind his throne emerged a pale man with bulging black eyes and a bent nose. "Yes, your highness? You've called on me, master? What pleasure it is to hear you say my name! —Ow!" a slap on the cheek.

"Quiet. Ortho," he slurred. "Ortho, I need you to find me another girl. Calisto lost her worth. Go down the dell to Hallstatt and find for me the most lovely, plump woman you can find; not another bony woman like Calisto was..."

"Calisto was meaty, she was. I remember that. Not as of late, but she had meat once."

"Then find me another woman who is meaty like she was, and with a voice more resonant than the avalanches that roll down Töirnách Mountain."

"Such a request will take me time, master. It will be hard to procure such a unique and special creature out of all the slaves..."

"Then don't look among the slaves!" he snapped. "For me, anyone should be honored to become one with my halls, to live at my side all life long."

"You mean, seek among the commonfolk too?"

"Any freeman would gladly give their freedom to me, wouldn't you think, Ortho?"

"Right away, then. I will find you the finest girl that's ever risen to Coromon!"

Glistening leaves rustled with the spring-wind that swayed the branches high. Tweets and whistles entwined into a chorus that sang over a hush, blowing down the mountain side and pushing through every bush and branch. Lying in a grove, Adsiltia, acorn eyes and hair of corn, gazed up at a canary with a golden voice, as gold as its feathers. Adsiltia attuned her voice to the bird's, and with each lyric, essayed to replicate the canary's enchanting pitch. She even

believed it was her own mimicry that attracted the canary onto the lowest branch. A thousand clouds passed as she harmonized with her canary friend, whom she had once called Flaegan, a boy's name; that of a prince, she thought, locked in the figure of a regal bird with an ethereal voice.

"Flaegan, thank you for practicing with me. Any day now, my Pappa will notice how good my song's become, and let me sing to him like my mother did. Until then, we'll just have to keep it between us."

Morn became noon which became eve, and the two remained in perfect synchrony, until—

"Adsiltia!" a desperate cry. "Adsiltia, come out! I can't find you!"

She sat up in haste. It was her father, Floyd, but that only put her less at ease.

"What could worry him? What do you think, Flaegan?"

The grove succumbed to the shadow of the mountain, and soon the glimmering green blackened into blue. Once the singing stopped, all the forest was dispelled by an ominous hush descending from the steep cliff. A gluttonous wind swallowing the valley.

Then, a piercing screech tore the silence. A black-eyed owl dove at the canary, snapping its nail-like claws, but it pierced only air. The canary fell on top of Adsiltia's chest and fluttered frantically.

The girl cradled Flaegan, then rose to her feet. She turned her head every which way, then saw the owl—perched on a branch with its gaze fixed on her—as it lifted its wings in preparation to dive again.

It shot towards Adsiltia. But then, a glistening blade whizzed in front of her and cut the owl down. The huntress plopped to the ground in two pieces.

The girl shut her eyes, and held Flaegan firmly against her heart. She heard footsteps about the owl's corpse, then felt herself be lifted and carried away.

"Singing again, Adsiltia?" asked her father; his carpenter ax clearing their way home. "Why won't you listen to me? I never want to repeat the stories, Adsiltia, of the girls taken for their voice. But you leave me little choice. You won't learn. What can I do for you to

learn?"

"Just let me sing to you, and then you won't hear me sing ever again!"

"No, I won't let you! I will never let you!"

They arrived at the shack that Adsiltia and her father had moved into after they left Brythonia, borrowed from owners lost to time.

He set her down on a wheelless wagon. She was pouting, red faced with tears rolling down her cheeks.

He watched with a torn expression, then let out a long sigh. He took her into his arms and let her stanch her tears on his shoulder. He caressed her head.

"I'm sorry, Addie. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. I believe you can sing beautifully. You are your mother's daughter. But I'm so scared. Scared I'll lose you too."

"Why?" she sniffled. "Did the evil king take her?"

"No, the mountain did. But in a way, the king is part of the mountain, and the mountain is hungry. Always hungry."

She sniffled again.

"That is why I'm asking you to end it, please. Keep quiet so no one will ever break us apart, understand?"

"Alright."

He kissed her on the cheek, then sat her back down.

"Now, keep your eyes closed for me." He knelt down, and with a soggy rag, he began to cleanse the blood from the owl that had sprayed onto her skin and clothing. When he did all he could, he lifted the yellow tunic through her arms and set it next to her.

"I'll see what I can do about these. Now, go inside and boil some water. We're having stew again tonight." With his left hand, he picked up the carcass by its feet.

Owl stew.

Regardless of her father's warnings, Adsiltia kept singing into her age of maturity, and the peril of her being found only increased as her father's woodwork became renowned throughout Hallstatt. To keep his customers, Floyd would soon have to relocate his workshop to somewhere less secluded.



The chief of Hallstatt came to him one late winter, clad in bear fur, and adorned with silver beads that hung from his head and beard. He gave Floyd an offer of a much finer home and a sophisticated workshop, containing the finest tools of the trade. The workshop, however, was located near the commercial district, and his new stead would sit by the wall of the mountain, where it would be impossible for Adsiltia to sing without being heard.

Before agreeing to the chief, who awaited his answer with the company of mead, Floyd made the request of having one entire log of oak, five pounds of linen, two pounds of velvet, and six pounds of elk skin delivered to his new workshop. With it, he would construct a room impenetrable by sound, so that his daughter could continue her passion. He told the chief none of this. The chief, filled with spirits, in turn requested that Floyd and his daughter join him for Yule, and reside in his hall for ten days before spring. Floyd felt wary, but a greater honor he had never received. They shook forearms. The chief kissed the maiden's hand, then set off; followed days after by his esteemed guests who had never seen the flourishing city of Hallstatt for themselves.

Laughter resounded in the oaken hall, adorned with stuffed beasts that ruled the cold dells between the dispersion of glorious emperors and the reconquest of the northern tribes. Above chief Irvin's head was a maroon-furred bear, with its mouth as widely held as the chief's himself, who trumped the room with his own guffaw that emerged from the unimaginably profound hollows of his chest.

Floyd had been pulled away a moment by Lady Hydar to speak about a new dresser she desired him to make. Excusing himself, he told Adsiltia—who kept the earl Gwrin company—to sit next to the chief: the only other person in the hall whom he trusted.

"Not like any Yule celebration you've had before, Adsiltia?" boomed the chief into her ear.

"No. It's always just me and my Pappa. I don't even think he has seen such a multitude of people since he was a boy."

"I can't imagine he's ever mingled with such a multitude at any point, with how quiet he is!" Bread crumbs sprinkled the chief's robe

as he bit into a loaf.

"It's the rumor, my liege," Adsiltia said softly. "This is the reason why we've never come to Hallstatt in person." She leaned in to whisper: "The one about the king seeking a girl who can sing."

The chief paused. The voices in the room dissipated with his, though uncertain why. Then he burst into an outrageous laugh that threatened to erupt the roof off the hall. A round of laughter ensued; thunder compared to the previous, rattling every beam of the long-house.

Chief Irvin laid his hand on her shoulder. "You've been afraid of a myth all this time?" He wheezed; his face turning red. "The king is not interested in any single maiden with a golden voice! He's already got a multitude of slaves in his castle to give him all the joy he could desire. Do not be afraid of anyone looking to kidnap you, tender one. In fact, it saddens me to imagine you've been hiding your talents all these years due to some wife's tale. It would be my greatest pleasure to hear you sing for my guests. It's Yule! Yule in the house of Irvin Ramsson! The best time and place for expression, and the liberation of worry!"

The earl Gwrin, whom she had earlier on conversed with freely, but withheld her passion for song from their discussion, overheard the news and spoke aloud to her, saying: "I would also love to hear you sing. I'll sing with you, if you like."

Her heart fluttered with excitement. She instinctively began to wet her lips, and puff her chest like Flaegan taught her. But she stopped when she realized her father was not aware of what she was doing. She looked across the hall, and saw him corralled within a crowd that had become enthralled by his peculiar nature. As he made wide gestures that indicated the measurements he had in mind for Lady Hydar's dresser, it seemed to Adsiltia that the wrinkles on his face from prior years had gone away, and his worries of their peril had drifted away.

A chair to her left then scraped the floor. Her gaze fell on Gwrin ascending; his golden mane bobbing as he rose to his feet. They locked eyes. He walked over, and standing over her, stretched out his hand, wrapped in a yellow glove. A helpless smile on both their

lips. She slowly placed her hand in his. It felt as soft as feathers. She giggled as he lifted her onto her feet.

Clapping and cheering resounded from the surrounding tables. "Sing!" they shouted. "The future chief and his bride to be!" some yelled in jest.

"What shall we sing?" she asked shyly.

"A harmony. Just you and me."

The earl began his song. Like a heavenly trumpet, he lifted the hall. All men fell silent; all women gazed in wonder. The earl's song made them think of a longship approaching from the vast silver sea, sailing steadily upstream until it finally landed on home's warm beach.

When Floyd realized what was happening, and saw Adsiltia standing alone before the chief and his entire hall, he relived that day so long ago: his hands carrying silverloads, and on the steps of his home, his wife, encumbered in snow.

Gwrin looked at Adsiltia, emitting a smile dedicated only to her, whilst maintaining his perfect chord. She filled her chest with air, then halted, glimpsing at Floyd one last time. As he struggled to pass through the crowd, he met her gaze. For a moment. Then, she closed her eyes.

What followed was a perfect harmony. The etherealness of her voice made the hall vanish entirely, causing every guest to float in their place. It was as if the earth was far beneath them, and they could watch as the earl's longship had taken flight, over familiar shores, beyond the white peaks, and up towards heaven; where love and dance and song rejoiced over Earth's creation.

All hands came together in her name. A glorious and exuberant ovation that shook Irvin's hall to its foundations. In the ensuing peace, Floyd himself couldn't help but weep at the splendor of his daughter. Never had he let himself hear her. She was more than her mother's daughter; so much more. And at last, she was free to show it. If only he had let her sooner.

In his bliss, he turned his gaze to the chief, whose mouth was agape with marvel. Then, amidst the blur of sights and sounds, he saw his jaw contrive a mute whisper: "She's the one."

The song was broken when Gwrin stopped to stare at the unlit back of the longhouse, opposite to them.

Adsiltia slowly peered at Floyd, red faced. “Pappa...” she began to cry. “I just wanted you to hear me sing.”

All at once, joy was undone forever, for when he followed the gaze of the young earl, Floyd saw across the room, stepping out from the shadows of a pillar, a pale man with bulging black eyes and a bent nose, who smirked as he gazed at Adsiltia.

It took one finger, nine chipped nails, one purple hand and all the days of Yule for Floyd to finish the room. It was stunning to behold—a statement of mastery over his craft. A quaint, brilliantly colored chamber with soft velvet walls of scarlet, evergreen, and royal blue. The fabric had been adhered to a layer of linen and elk skin, tightly pressed against a wall of black oak that was then raised against the exterior wall of stone. Here he would mourn each night and morning, isolating himself from the echo of his daughter’s voice, carried over Tøirnách Mountain by a gluttonous wind from Coromon.

# THE GEOMOR FLOWER

BY DEAN LOCKE

EDITED BY CLAIRE RAMCHARAN & ILLUSTRATED BY EVAN BULLOCH

I come to you, reader, as a soothsayer. That is, I have a premonition. My premonition is not based on foresight—I am not blessed with magical abilities, nor have I ever been. In fact, it is not really a premonition at all. It is just a warning, based on past experience. I'm an old woman now, and as I'm sure your elders have always bragged to you, with age comes the wisdom of a thousand mistakes.

Before I begin, I ask you to keep your mind open. You may be young and headstrong, full of the excitement and the promise of many years to come, but you are not invincible. Not even our most legendary so-called heroes, who roam the lands slaying dragons and whatnot with their swords and spells, are invincible. So, don't dismiss my errors as those of someone beneath yourself.

Years ago I was a botanist in a town called Spike Hill. I ran the finest magical flower store on that side of the Great River. I sold petals that healed you, stems with the strength of steel, that sort of thing. I was twenty-five when the warrior with the battleaxe walked in and asked about the Geomor.

Every botanist knew of the Geomor flower, but none had ever seen it. You have to understand, it was more of an idea than a real thing. It was a concept for scholars to theorize about. A campfire story. And as the story went, it was a flower that could give you anything you wanted but demanded more than anyone could afford to give. If that sounds too cryptic to you, I would tend to agree. People love to get excited about their stories and complicate things with

mysterious descriptions and riddles. The truth is, no one understood anything about the Geomor because there were no specimens to study. Most botanists, myself included, thought that it was a myth.

You can imagine my confusion when the warrior placed a Geomor seed on the counter.

She wanted me to grow it for her, and said she would return in one month to collect it. It was unlike any seed I had ever seen, about the size of a grape and coloured black with an odd reflective quality, but I was not convinced that it was the Geomor. Nonetheless, the woman offered to pay a sum of ten gold (about thirty gold today) if I could grow it, so I agreed. As she left she told me something strange: be careful with it.

It is a general rule of business that the customer is always right. So I used the utmost care to bury that seed in one of my greenhouse's planters. And I used my finest soil: magic-infused earth from the River Region, which had cost a handsome amount. I watered it and went to bed in my house above the store. As I waited for sleep to take me, I wanted to tell someone about the situation. I wanted to confide in someone. But I couldn't think of anyone to speak to.

The next day I checked the planter and there was nothing growing. I reminded myself to stay optimistic. But a week went by and still nothing happened. See, this magic soil was supposed to work fast. My other seeds, planted in the same soil, sprouted and bloomed over the course of just that week. After eleven or twelve days had gone by, there was no doubt in my mind that the seed was a fake, some sort of fool's gold. How I wished that the seed had been real! I grabbed my trowel from a shelf, and as soon as I returned to the planter there was a sprout there, about as tall as a nail. I dropped the trowel and stumbled backwards. Had the sprout been there before? It couldn't have been possible that it had sprouted and grown to such a length in a couple of seconds. Could it?

I considered digging up the sprout and throwing it away, being done with the whole situation. But once my heart calmed down and I stopped sweating so much, I thought of the ten gold I stood to make. Not a small sum at all. And, truth be told, I was curious about the flower. For it to accomplish such an instant growth was a good

sign that it was something different, something extraordinary.

That day, as I tended my shop and maintained the rest of my flowers, I couldn't stop thinking about the Geomor sprout. Customers came in and spoke to me, asked questions about petals and seeds, and I replied with shallow answers, since the depths of my mind were focused on the Geomor.

A day passed, then another, and the sprout grew a little more. As I watered it one morning, I wondered if I had been too hasty in my excitement. All it could show me was a single sprout, and now that I studied it again, it wasn't all that impressive. It was just a plant. Like every other.

I tended the shop and held onto the wish that the flower was something more. Something new. A break from the steel stems and healing petals, the soothing thorns and poison seeds. Something really special, for once. I begged for a surprise, just for me alone. On my lunch break I stepped into my greenhouse to check on the sprout. Sure enough, there was a leaf near the end of the sprout. A leaf! It stuck out from the sprout like an outstretched hand. I touched it, held it between my forefinger and thumb. It was smooth on the surface but rippled on its edge. It was a flag sitting atop a pole, like one that you see on castle battlements. There was something about that leaf, I'm telling you. The rest of the flowers in the greenhouse failed to capture my attention or admiration. They couldn't surprise me like the Geomor could.

A few customers grew frustrated with my behaviour manning the store, and some even stormed out before purchasing whatever they had planned to buy. I could barely concentrate on what these people were saying. The Geomor had captured my full attention.

That night I went to the greenhouse again, and gasped as I saw the second leaf on the sprout. The plant seemed to know exactly what I wanted to see. I stood there for a while, admiring the leaves, letting the time go by. After a while, I yawned and felt an inkling to leave for my bed, and just then another leaf appeared. I opened my eyes wide and leaned in close. How incredible this plant was!

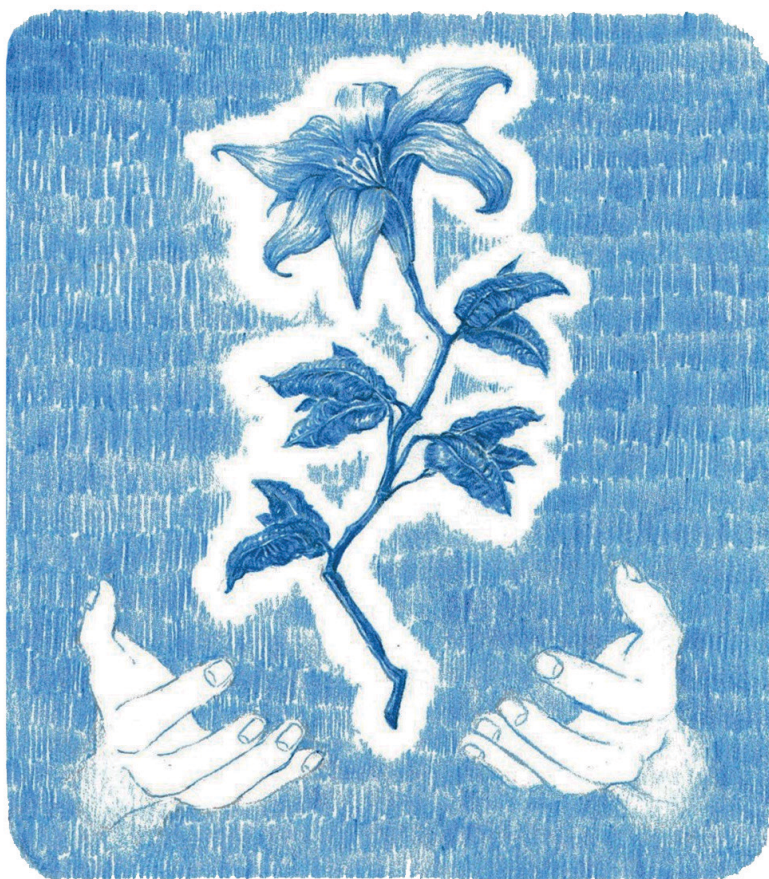
More leaves appeared each time I blinked. I lost track of time for a while, just standing there staring at it. It was relaxing, really. Like



slowly sinking deeper and deeper into a warm pool of water. But after a few hours, I remembered that the sun would come up soon enough. So I left the greenhouse and lay down in my bed. Though I was tired, I barely slept at all.

The next morning, I went to the greenhouse and the Geomor was no longer just a sprout and some leaves. There was a blue flower in full bloom rising up from the soil. How tall it stood! How its petals glowed!

I tried to leave, but I couldn't bear to be separated from the flower. So I carried the planter with me into the shop and sat behind my counter, admiring it. I ignored the customers who came into the shop





that day, but I didn't feel like I had any other choice. The flower was growing taller in front of my eyes, leaves were sprouting from little green limbs, and the petals were even changing colour. In the morning, sky blue. In the afternoon it was deep green, and in the evening it was brilliant silver. And all the while it remained glowing.

I ate my meals while staring at the flower. I walked around while staring at the flower. It was difficult to even get dressed in the morning, because as I pulled a shirt over my head my view of the flower was obstructed!

It may be difficult for you to imagine this young woman who spent all of her time staring at a flower. But you have to consider that I had previously spent my evenings looking out my window at the tavern across the street, where people cheered and sang and played games. It was so nice to for once have something instead of nothing. Something that could distract me, that could stimulate me. The Geomor didn't have any eyes, but I knew it could see me, and I felt so happy to be seen.

Running my shop had become a forgotten memory. My other flowers in the greenhouse, ancient history. I brought the Geomor to my bedside table every night and stared at it for as long as I could before falling asleep. In the morning, I stared at it until I found the strength to stand up. I closed all the curtains in my house, to appreciate the glow even more. I avoided the greenhouse and the outside world as much as I could. What did it have to offer me that the Geomor didn't?

One afternoon I was sitting on the floor of my house, clutching the flower close to my face. It was a deep crimson, and had a fruity, sweet aroma. I heard someone knock on the shop door below me, breaking my concentration. There was a rattling as the customer tried to open the locked door, and then a smash as it was forced open. My hands trembled. How long had it been since I had seen another person?

Footsteps moved around downstairs, but not a word was spoken. Then the footsteps started for the stairs. I could tell the person coming upstairs had some considerable weight—and that's when I remembered the warrior. Had it been a month already?

Sure enough, she opened my door with a lantern in one hand and stood there for a moment in the doorway, taking in the room. She asked for the Geomor, and I told her I wouldn't give it to her. I gripped it tighter.

She set down her lantern, took the battleaxe off her back and stepped forward. I screamed and shut my eyes, and the blade whooshed past right in front of me. I opened my eyes to see her stuffing the glowing flower head in her satchel. Then she reached down and yanked the beheaded plant right from the soil, and stuffed that in her satchel too. I cried and swore. In the doorway, she looked back at me. Then she stepped over to my window and pulled back the curtains, flooding the room with horrible blinding sunlight!

I was in that room for a while, squeezing my eyes shut, but eventually I found the courage to walk outside. That day, the sun felt gentler and the breeze more refreshing than they ever had before.

I never reopened the flower store, and haven't grown another plant since. For a long time afterwards I worked as a scholar, documenting myths and legends across the world. Nowadays being a grandmother is my full-time career. I'm proud of how far I've come from that incident, but even still, I sometimes wake up and look over at my bedside table, expecting to see something there.

So, reader, my warning is this: monitor yourself. Even the things that satisfy us the most have the tendency to ruin us. If you find yourself devoted to something, your best course of action might be to cut it off!

# INTERVIEW WITH A SACRIFICIAL LAMB

WRITTEN BY PHOEBE SOZOU



PS: What do you remember?

IPHIGENIA: A white dress. A wreath of flowers. My parents, standing by. And—Achilles, golden. We were meant to be married.

PS: Is that what they told you?

IPHIGENIA: My father wrote to me from his encampment. He covered his eyes, you know, when it happened. He couldn't watch.

PS: And your mother?

IPHIGENIA: My mother screamed. The knife flashed as it came down. It was so hot that day, no wind to soothe the sun.

PS: You gave yourself over in the end. Why?

IPHIGENIA: My brother forgave what happened. My sister forgot me, I think. We used to dance in the courtyard until her braids came loose, and I'd do them again on the balcony.

PS: And you? Did you forgive Agamemnon?

IPHIGENIA: It was necessary, I'm told. He was a general.

PS: A father to you.

IPHIGENIA: I didn't want to die.



# A CHAPTER FROM THE BOOK “A HISTORY OF MARSHLAND’S HARPIES”

BY ELISA PENHA

EDITED BY KATARINA KOJIC & ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT

*The following is a chapter from his acclaimed book: A History of Marshland’s Harpies by Nikolai Vogelstein-Hapstead, Professor of Creature Biology and Magical Botany at The Marshland University for Advanced Studies in Science and Alchemy.*

## CHAPTER THREE: KASANDRA MABBET AND THE BEGIN- NINGS OF HARPY WING BIOLOGY

As discussed in the preamble, Marshland’s Mediaeval medicine relied heavily on the mutilation of harpies, prompting the First Harpy Revolution in 1203, and the mass migration of harpies towards the western mountain territories of Marshland in 1215. There exists only one pre-migration harpy source which accounts the revolution in its entirety, written in Archaic Harpy Script: an amalgamation of transcribed harpy phonetics and Ancient Greek. It was translated for the first time by the faerie linguist Corinne Rootfoot in 1929 and has since been translated over forty times. The source was found to be a collection of letters written by the harpy Kasandra Mabbet and addressed to her lover, a human witch, named Pinelopi Wyn. The response letters of Pinelopi Wyn have presumably been destroyed.



Figure 3.1. *An excerpt from The Compiled Letters of Kasandra Mabbet, translated by Mabel Mistflier, 2012*

Dearest Pinelopi,

I am not so in love with you that I will refrain from laying down my life for the cause of my people, but I care for you enough that I urge you not to go searching for my body amongst those found flayed by the fae. It would be displeasing! I do not want you to see me in such an unbecoming fashion! Should I survive, however, as I surely intend to, I will be leaving with the carriages headed westwards with my brother Nicolaos, whom you have met. I plea that you join me! Perhaps not now, for you must complete your studies and should not stop them on my account, but after this terror ends, and your degree is finished, you may ride out west, and live with Nicolaos and I in the mountains. I hope to see you once more alive before I reunite with you in the afterlife!

Yours,

Kasandra

Along with the comprehensive history of the First Harpy Revolution (which will be documented in the next chapter), Kasandra Mabbet provided what is now recognised the earliest account of harpy wing biology, as she described to Pinelopi the injuries sustained by her twin brother, Nicolaos Mabbet, in the aftermath of the Battle of Windham in 1204. Harpy wing biology may be separated into three distinct parts:

### The ψυχή

The wings of harpies are more comparable to organs than limbs. As such, the Mediaeval Marshland practice of surgically removing the wings of harpies for quilting and mattress-stuffing reigned a larger terror on the harpy population than is documented by the human and faerie historians of the time. Through the wings of harpies

run a vein called the  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  (ps-oo-keh), meaning *soul*. The  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  vein behaves similarly to a fingerprint, each harpy having one that coils uniquely, safe for the case of twins, who share a  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  pattern. In the letters of Kasandra, she tells of how Nicolaos had his  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  cut, and how the harpy-allied faerie doctor, Hamish Walsam, was able to repair it by using Kasandra's own  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  as a guide on how he should mend Nicolaos' injury. The procedure was successful, and Nicolaos survived the cutting. Later harpy doctors would, too, arrive at this conclusion, even before having access to the translated letters of Kasandra Mabbet. In his dissertation, Simon Buell, the first harpy to be admitted to the Marshland College of Medicine in 1795, wrote of the patterns found between not only the  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  of twin harpies, but of harpies within the same clan.

Figure 3.2. *An excerpt from the final dissertation of Dr. Simon Buell of the Marshland College of Medicine, 1799*

As shown above, though the  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  of the left and right figures do not align, similarities may be found in the width and circumferences of the coils. If my work is applied, even an abstract guide of two  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  patterns from a same-clanned harpy would be of immense help when performing harpy surgeries, lowering the fatality rate of improperly reconnected  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  veins.

The dissertation of Dr. Simon Buell would go unnoticed by the wider Marshland medical community for decades, only coming into relevance fifteen years after the translation of Kasandra's letters. However, upon publication, it was quickly circulated through Winged communities, with the Marshland dragonfolk in particular taking an interest in Dr. Simon Buell's research. The Marshland dragonfolk of the 1700s and 1800s are known to have used harpy wing biology on themselves and their wings, as there were no published records of dragonfolk wing biology until 1902. The biological similarities between the harpies and the dragonfolk are rather sparse, however, the harpy  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  serves a similar function to the dragonfolk *sheep chord*.

### The bone and joints

The bone and joints of harpy wings are a far more elusive part of harpy wing biology than the *ψυχή*. This is largely because harpy wing bones disintegrate completely only days after a harpy passes, leaving researchers without much time to conduct thorough studies on them. The secret to harpy wing bones, however, was once again sitting in Kasandra's letters.

Figure 3.3. *An excerpt from The Compiled Letters of Kasandra Mabbet, translated by Mabel Mistflier, 2012*

Dearest Pinelopi,

I write to you bearing morbid instruction. You have asked me how to keep the fallen bones from vanishing, and I assure you that the vanishing is not a problem! If the bones stay on the ground for too long after the bodies have died, the harpy will be wandering through purgatory for the rest of time. However, I understand your hurry and the utmost importance of your understanding the mechanism of harpy bone. Nicolaos and I have conducted an experiment and found that the bones last longer after death when bathed in saline water and the blood of newt. I have prayed to Auron and have been assured that he will guide the harpy souls away from purgatory even if their bones do not follow, so long as the proper offerings are laid out in advance: the head of a dandelion and the head of a snake on a west facing altar. Best of luck, as always, my love, with your study.

Yours,

Kasandra

The unearthing of this letter kickstarted the Harpy Wing Biology Boom of the 1930s, and the founding of the Mabbet Bone Institution by the harpies Tomas Gower and Aspasia Seff in 1934. The Mabbet Bone Institution began as a collective of scientists testing the validity of Kasandra and Nicolaos' method of bone preservation and has since evolved to the most prestigious lab in all of harpy science. It



currently operates with full funding from the Marshland University for Advanced Studies in Science and Alchemy. The offerings to the harpy death god, Auron, outlined by Kasandra in her letter, are still followed when conducting studies on posthumously preserved harpy bones to this day (further elaboration on harpy religion may be found in chapters ten and eleven).

The discoveries made by the Mabbet Bone Institution helped scientists and historians both to understand the different flight patterns of harpies dependent on region. In a study conducted in collaboration with the graduate students of the Magickal Physics Department at the University of East Marshland in 1943, the Mabbet Bone Institution determined that the "wind speeds in different counties of Marshland determine the rigidness of certain spots of harpy joint; with higher and rougher winds making for thicker marrow, conducive to flying through the tough weather, whereas harpies native to areas such as Wilt and Northsham have weaker joints, attuned to calmer weather" (Stormbeak 78).

### The feathers

The style, unique texture, and layering of harpy feathers are often seen as the most iconic feature of the harpy, and this is a reputation without fault, as harpy feathers are undeniably beautiful in their grace and largess.

The functional purpose of harpy feathers falls into three primary camps: flight, protection of the  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ , and providing warmth for high altitudes. Unlike the wings of fae or dragonfolk, the wings of harpies operate like those of birds, with more emphasis on flapping than gliding. Harpy wings are built in layers—called *cammmades*—of anywhere between seven and seventeen on each wing. Harpy feathers moult monthly between the ages of thirteen and seventy. More information on the difference in regional harpy wing *cammmades* comes in another of Kasandra's letters to Pinelopi.

Figure 3.4. *An excerpt from The Compiled Letters of Kasandra Mabbet, translated by Mabel Mistflier, 2012*

Beloved Pinelopi,

I have been inundated with misery as of late. And so, I take to imagining life once Nicolaos and I finally make it to the mountains. We are from Windham, and so we surely have the density in our wings to survive the cold. Though I have been warned by elders, that often, even fifteen or sixteen *cammades* are not enough to brave the mountain chill. I am blessed with seventeen. Nicolaos has only fourteen, as is natural for boys from Windham. I worry for those hailing from townships far from the natural chill of the Swell River. Their *cammades* do not pass ten in those villages. They will not survive the mountains. Perhaps the gods will gift them with abundant growth, though I have never seen such a thing occur. Please write back with haste! I miss hearing your voice through your ink!

Yours,

Kasandra

The growth of new *cammades* is possible—though rare—with enough years of adaptation. Interestingly, the families from these villages of which Kasandra speaks—those that lie in warmer climates farther from the water such as Fordshire and Dunhaime—now have the reputation for having the most *cammades* of all harpies, as they needed to adapt when moving from said villages towards the western mountains.

The most fascinating part of harpy feathers to most historians tends to be their purposes in religious harpy practises. Kasandra writes in a letter to her beloved that she will be leaving one of her feathers behind with a bundle of her things before her and Nicolaos leave to the mountains. Pinelopi may then sew it into her chemise: an act of marriage within harpy religious practises (for more on harpy feathers in religion, see chapter eleven, and for more on harpy marriage, see chapter twelve).

### Ending Note

Having been spearheaded by the letters of Kasandra Mabbet, harpy wing biology is a rather new and ever-growing field. It is wildly important to every kind of harpy. While beaks and talons are relegated only to full-harpies, wings are the factor which unites both full and half-harpies, and therefore something shared between the harpy community as a whole.

On Kasandra, my colleague, harpy Professor of Alchemy Violeta Starfetcher, has said, "She [Kasandra] is the reason anybody bothered to learn anything about us. She is the mother of harpy history and harpy biology, and her importance cannot be understated."

As well, my husband, Valentine Graves, the author of many books on the marginalisation of Winged peoples in Marshland, writes in his book *The Flight Cycle*, "There did not exist dragonfolk doctors until 1978. Dragonfolk were not allowed into Court-funded schools until 2009. To be dragonfolk in Marshland is to not know yourself. But thanks to the writings of Kasandra Mabbet, and the diligence of the harpies who preserved her, in all her brilliance, we were able to find where we might begin to learn."

And so, before we move to the First Harpy Revolution in detail, I will conclude with the last of Kasandra's letters.

Figure 3.5. *An excerpt from The Compiled Letters of Kasandra Mabbet, translated by Mabel Mistflier, 2012*

Beloved Pinelopi,

This is my final letter, as tomorrow, I will no longer need to write to you, for you will be with me. Nicolaos and I anxiously anticipate your arrival, though myself more, obviously, there exists no air of possible competition! I cannot wait to share with you the glory of our joint survival, and to pray together that my people will begin to live in a Marshland which loves me as deeply as you do. See you soon, my love!

Yours eternally,  
Kasandra

# A DISCOVERY





Objective:

>Report to BARRY



>Find BARRY

Oh?

Examine OBJECT!



Set | Finger Strength = 5%

Document OBJECT





Specimens!  
Must show Barry!

Name: Barry  
Species: Rotting?

Species: Unknown  
Stage: Caterpillar?  
Further evaluation needed.

Species: Green Frog  
Stage: ???  
Further evaluation needed.

Species: Oxeye Daisy

Species: Beetle  
Stage: Maggot/Parva



Barry...

When will he wake up?

I wonder...

what he will think of my research...



END.

# LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK: THE POWER OF TRUE HISTORY IN YA SPECULATIVE FICTION

WRITTEN BY SAIGE SEVERIN

EDITED BY MIRAN TSAY

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a poignant example of the power of young adult (YA) dystopic literature. Her novel steps outside of the genre's white, Western mainstream and imagines an apocalyptic future in which Indigenous youth are agents of change, resistance, and cultural resurgence. Unlike other popular YA series in recent decades, Dimaline's imagined future is set apart by the depth of its historical consciousness. Her narrative is inextricably connected to a specific place and people. She draws clear connections between historical atrocities and speculative dystopia to demonstrate that understanding and acknowledgment of Canada's settler colonial past is necessary to shape its future.

The YA genre experienced a boom in popularity in the early 2000s, with the number of yearly YA publications doubling between 2002 and 2012 (Peterson 2018). Many of the most popular series at the time fit into the genres of post-apocalypse and dystopia—namely *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Divergent* (2011), and *The Maze Runner* (2009). Each of these books features young, white protagonists fighting against corrupt government systems to free the population from tyranny. However, unlike real-world governmental corruption, the institutions within these worlds are largely divorced from any sense of history. *The Hunger Games* takes place in Panem, a fictional nation-state whose history of formation and relationship to its neighboring countries is never explored (Collins 2008). *Divergent* is set in



a dystopic version of Chicago, though the history of the city—and of America at large—is irrelevant to the plot (Roth 2011). *The Maze Runner* takes place in a sun-scorched, unnamed space with no clear governing body (Dashner 2009). All three seem unmoored from a larger reality, narratives without true place or time. Crucially, these books teach about the dangers of corruption (and the power of youth to combat corruption) without discussing or acknowledging the origins of the systemic violence they portray.

Dimaline's novel takes a different approach. Her book shows that one cannot discuss institutionalized and state-perpetuated violence without discussing settler-colonial histories. She takes power from the hands of the typical white protagonist and gives it to Frenchie, a young Métis boy struggling to survive in a world ravaged by climate change, illness, and state-sanctioned genocide. Frenchie and his found family overcome some initial conflicts, reunite with other resistance fighters, and set about dismantling the marrow-sucking School system, with a little romance along the way. In the midst of this very genre-standard structure, Dimaline makes the critical decision to foreground the history of land and the people upon that land.

The book's main dystopic element is a portrayal of Canada ravaged by the exploitation and destruction of nature. Frenchie and his friends are in danger partially because the environment around them has been destroyed by decades of corporate greed. While climate destruction is nothing new for dystopic fiction—it features prominently in *The Maze Runner*, for example—the representation of that destruction is new and powerful in Dimaline's work because she never lets the reader forget exactly *which* land is being destroyed, and *who* is destroying it. Early in the novel, an Indigenous elder named Miigwans tells the young heroes "Story" (Dimaline 22)—an oral history of their land, their people, and how the world became so broken. He explains that "Anishnaabe people, us, lived on these lands for a thousand years...we welcomed visitors, who renamed the land Canada" (Dimaline 22). With these lines, Dimaline names the specific setting of Canada while acknowledging that the term "Canada" only exists because of colonial history. Thus, the rest of Story is

irrevocably framed as a series of events linked to and tied up in the violence of first contact.

Miigwans goes on to tell an abbreviated version of early-Canadian history. He says, “we lost a lot...when we were on our knees with fever and pukes, they decided they liked us there, on our knees. And that’s when they opened the first schools” (Dimaline 23). The “schools” Miigwans refers to here are residential schools, a tool used by settlers to violently disrupt Indigenous families and force the assimilation of Indigenous children into white settler culture. Miigwans moves seamlessly from this true history of residential schools into the imagined history of the Water Wars and the Melt, environmental disasters that “put most of the northlands under water” (Dimaline 25) and displaced millions of settlers and Indigenous people alike. During the progress of this single Story, in just one chapter of the book, Miigwans traces the history of settler-colonial land exploitation through known history and straight into the novel’s speculative dystopia. The structure of this storytelling is vital. There is no separation of “history” and “future” because the two are one and the same—a centuries long story that begins with colonial arrival and continues through to the novel’s present of utter environmental devastation.

The YA dystopic trope of environmental destruction is therefore complicated within time. Books like *The Maze Runner* and *Divergent* are set in dystopic worlds that speak only of the future. The apocalypse happens, the world burns, and the story begins from there. *The Marrow Thieves* operates more fluidly. It is as much a book about the true past as a work of speculative fiction, because the horrors of Dimaline’s imagined future are merely the logical conclusion of capitalist, exploitative machinery set in place during the settler theft of Canada. We cannot view the environmental destruction of Dimaline’s world without also reflecting on the ongoing destruction of our own (stolen) land. Her speculative dystopia reflects our current one.

Just as the history of colonial exploitation is used to explain the novel’s environmental present, so to is the history of colonial violence linked to the novel’s main conflict. Frenchie and his friends are on the run from white military officers called Recruiters. In Dima-

line's dystopia, all people except Indigenous folks have "stopped dreaming. And a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline 88). In a desperate bid to save themselves from insanity, white people "turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity...and then they changed on us, like the New Agers, looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves" (Dimaline 88). This section of *Story* makes an ouroboros of history—an endless cycle of settler exploitation, Indigenous resistance, and further exploitation. In the novel's present, Recruiters hunt down Indigenous people to "siphon the dreams right out of our bones" (Dimaline 89), housing their victims in "new residential schools" (Dimaline 89) and using Indigenous bodies to make medicine for the dreamless settlers. Miigwans' narration makes clear that the Recruiters and their Schools are not a new phenomenon. They are an old one. The violence and destruction of this speculative future is a direct result of its bloody past. We, the readers of *Miigwans' Story*, are never allowed to forget that past. It haunts the characters' steps through every scene.

In this way, Dimaline twists the expectations of her readership, requiring consideration of real-world history in order for her narrative to move forward. We cannot understand Frenchie's present without acknowledging our own past. Desire for the story's resolution—for Frenchie and his family to save the lives and the culture that they are so desperately struggling to protect—is necessarily desire for reconciliation with Canada's horrific settler-colonial history. While it may be easy to support other YA protagonists like Katniss or Tris in their ahistorical struggles against oppressive regimes, Dimaline sets up her narrative such that modern readers cannot root for her protagonists without also cheering on the destruction of the settler-colonial state and the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous hands. To engage with Dimaline's work is not only to read a speculative story, but to grapple with and reflect upon real Canadian history. Her message is clear: we cannot look forward without looking back.

The effect of telling this particular story in the YA genre is powerful. Dimaline's use of time speaks to Indigenous lived experience,

appealing to young Indigenous readers who rarely see themselves and their truths represented in books (Visvis). After all, Frenchie and his friends do ultimately succeed. They find a thriving community of Indigenous people who are working to preserve their languages and heal the broken land. Dimaline's book thus offers a story of Indigenous survival and futurity in the face of overwhelming odds. It also serves, as many YA novels do, to warn young people against certain behaviors or beliefs, like the false historical narratives used as propaganda against Indigenous people by a hostile Canadian state. In a reality where many in power would rather ignore the past, Dimaline's book reminds readers that our history is vital to our present. She presents a speculative argument that environmental exploitation is deadly, and that respect for Indigenous lands, knowledges, and peoples may just save the world.

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# THE SALUKI, THE WOLF

BY OLA KIM

*EDITED BY ADAORA OLISA*

One evening, settled comfortably between day and night where the sun and moon have stopped at the very edges of the world, facing away so that no man or beast can see, a wolf stumbles into a clearing.

The wolf kneads the grass, sparse and blunt beneath its paws. It is a young wolf, young not in the sense that it is a pup needing to be raised, fed, and cared for, but young in the sense that it has never before strayed beyond this point in the woods. It has never felt the urge to. Where grass is thin, there is no prey. Where there is no prey, there is no food. And, where there is no food, wolves do not eat. The wolf will not make the mistake of lingering, not when there are pups to feed, litters to raise. It lifts its head to turn back, sniffing the air for the trail of the pack that remains behind in the woods. The scent will not have gone stale; a wolf would never be left behind.

A sound cuts through the air, harsh, shrieking—the wolf startles, whipping its head towards the noise and angling its ears. It observes the stoutness of the grass as it continues beyond, passing by a strip of flat stone, and even further beyond a structure, smooth, large, larger than anything the wolf has ever seen. Walls that climb up and over, harsh and unyielding, stones oddly cut. Walls that curl over, to make a roof. The wolf bristles. Such imposition on space is unnatural. Such cutoff of land is obtrusive. The wolf has never seen anything like it. An opening sits on the face of it, sharp, square, lined with panels uniform and pale—the noise must have come from there. The wolf

begins to move, quiet paws padding across dull grass. *Danger*, it thinks. *Think of the pups.*

The wolf sniffs again. An odd sweetness wafts through the air, warm and pungent; it tastes thick down the wolf's throat. The fur on the back of its spine lifts, an instinct.

The shriek sounds once more and the wolf pads closer to the structure, shaking its head to clear its nose of the smell. Everything in the wolf says that something is wrong. That *this* is wrong. It advances, nonetheless. The wolf edges closer to the opening and spots a pane of something clear and rigid lining its fringes. Something like this could never be made by land. The wolf creeps closer, paws quiet and form slinking, until finally, it peers in.

Immediately, warm air is blasted into its face and the wolf presses its ears back in discomfort. It scans the space, oddly dim, unnaturally large, before pinpointing the source of the noise, the shrieking, to a pair of—of—

*Humans.* The wolf blinks, observing them silently. They are smaller than whatever the wolf had believed them to be. Small, dark-haired, limbs long and furless, bodies coated in an odd, soft-looking material. Humans were not wolves' enemy by nature—bears or even foxes they stumbled across more frequently, tussled with more fiercely. Humans kept largely to their own open clearings and spaces, those that wolves had no interest in roaming.

Yet, the wolf had always been warned against humans. Wolves nor bears nor even the slyest of foxes could create the structure it found itself pressed against now as it eyed the humans within, walls smooth and cool to the touch. But these creatures, these creatures could.

The humans shriek again, a shrillness that rattles the wolf's eardrums. For a moment, it thinks of the pups, no doubt huddled together for warmth, in the clearing of the forest that belongs to them. To the pack. It feels a pang, suddenly, for the wolves far behind and out of sight. They are the wolf's, just as the wolf is theirs. The pack belongs nowhere and to nothing but the pack. Sloping its ears back towards the woods, it turns to leave, cautious of being found.

Suddenly, a flash of movement shoots past its vision. The wolf



crouches down below the opening, obscuring itself from view. An accompanying shriek, an odd scuffling sound, another shriek. *Too close*, the wolf thinks.

"I can smell you, you know," a voice sounds. The wolf freezes, ears darting up and spine tingling with the same instinct as before. Wary. Wrong.

"I won't hurt you," the voice continues. "Why don't you lift your head up?"

The wolf does not lift its head up. By nature, it only trusts the pack and this, this is no pack. Instead, it darts backwards, a growl already building in its throat, until ten, twenty paces separate it and the disembodied voice. Only then does it look up.

Standing at the edge of the opening is a face, not dissimilar to the wolf's own yet wholly unfamiliar. It traps the wolf with a glance. Slender, pale, smooth coils of fur surround the eyes that peer bemusedly downwards. The wolf stiffens, refusing to break eye contact, but it knows, just as well as the creature before it knows, that the wolf is itching to go, itching to get back.

"You're not the parents," the creature says. "Do you know when they're coming back?"

The wolf does not lower the spiked fur on its back. The creature may be unthreatening, but wolves are nothing if not wary. A wolf trusts no one and nothing but the pack.

"I won't hurt you," the creature continues. "Hello. I am—"

And the creature says something that the wolf cannot understand. He seems to sense the wolf's confusion and nods apologetically. "I do not know it either, but the sound of it has long become familiar to me. It is not my name, but it is the one they know me by."

The wolf finds its voice. "They?"

The creature blinks. "The humans, of course."

"What are you?"

"You have met other dogs, have you not? Out there, I imagine dogs are plentiful. I meet few hounds in here." If the creature is wistful, it does not show in his voice.

"I am not a dog," the wolf says slowly, but of course, the distinction is arbitrary to the both of them. Coyotes, it had met a number

of times, and jackals a fair few as well, but this one, this one was unknown.

"Of course." The creature bows his head. "My apologies."

"I am a wolf," corrects the wolf, still wary. "And you are?"

"A saluki," says the saluki.

The name thunders through the wolf's mind, and immediately, it remembers. The saluki was one infrequently mentioned yet spoken of with great admiration. Canines that hunted with pure competence of sight and speed rather than scent, like wolves did. The saluki had been noted to be similar to wolves, as similar as two creatures could be, and, looking into his face now, the wolf can see why. It glances over his silver coils, his pointed ears, his dark, pooling eyes, and—the wolf's gaze stops at the *thing* looped around the saluki's neck, flush against his throat. Its hackles raise instinctively, something lowly pooling in its stomach.

"Are you trapped?"

"Trapped?" the saluki repeats, tilting his head. "I am not trapped. This thing—this could not keep me here. I could leave any-time I wish."

"Then, why don't you?"

"Well," the saluki says. "I do not wish to."

The wolf creeps closer to the opening, peering inside yet again. The warmth mats its fur and it holds back a shudder, sensing the humans who have gone quiet. At a loss, it hesitates, then curses itself. Inaction is weakness. Weakness is weakness. A wolf must be prepared for anything.

"Are those humans?" The wolf asks, and the saluki turns back to look. One of the humans jolts, the same odd leaping sound emerging from their throat. "They are."

"What is it saying?" The wolf asks.

"Why," the saluki says, a lightness to his voice, "She is laughing."

"Laughing," the wolf echoes. *She*, it thinks.

"They laugh when they are happy. You know happiness, do you not?"

The wolf pictures fresh kill beneath its claws; the hasty, pitchy

barks of young pups crawling in crumbled snow; the slow movement of a wolf's tongue, dragging up its spine, the warmest and most familiar of groomings, and nods.

"Humans are happy, too," the saluki says. A human reaches out a pudgy limb, and he turns. "That is my cue."

The speed of the saluki is an admirable thing, the wolf thinks, as the saluki darts out of its vision as quickly as he entered. Yet, the wolf cannot help but think that this speed must be wasted on this place, on these humans, on this odd cut grass. The speed of the saluki is a revered, beautiful thing, and for just a moment, the wolf longs to run itself. To feel the dirt beneath its paws, wind pushing the fur flat on its head, to hear the howl and shout of packmates around it, beside, in front. It spares a longing glance behind, before turning its attention back to the saluki.

To the wolf's horror, the saluki arrives in front of the humans, drops to his hind legs, and spins. He spins around the room, bumping into objects and items littered across the ground, hopelessly cluttered, and spins, all to the shrieking laughter of the humans, wailing and echoing. He dashes, leaps up onto high surfaces, then drops to the ground. Occasionally, he paws at the humans, who respond in rapturous, piercing laughter.

After his routine, the saluki returns to the wolf who stands watching, dumbfounded. "You see," he announces. "Laughter."

The wolf blinks. "You do *that*, for laughter?"

The closest thing to a smile appears on the saluki's face. "I'd do anything."

"From the humans?" The wolf struggles to speak, struggles to piece its thoughts together.

"The humans? Maybe not." The saluki glances behind him, where the humans are still laughing. "But, *these* humans? Absolutely."

The wolf blinks once again. "What makes these ones so different?"

"They are children, of course," the saluki says slowly, as if trying to cradle the very words he speaks. "They are mine." At the wolf's silence, he adds, "They are pups. Wolf pups."

The wolf glances over at the humans—the *children*. Long, furless; stretching limbs where there should be paws, and in their eyes—the wolf can find nothing there. If these are pups, the wolf does not know them. “Yours?” It asks.

“Well.” There is a glimmer in the saluki's eyes. “Not mine exactly, but they belong to me all the same.” The wolf stays silent as the saluki continues.

“I watch them, and love them, and in return—” Their eyes meet, dark, determined, and within them is something the wolf knows it could never hope to know. “They laugh.”

Something is wrong. Something is so—so—*wrong*. The wolf struggles for thoughts, a feeling that is ugly and unfamiliar. Thought is instinct. Instinct is survival. To be slow of mind is to be slow of body, but all the wolf can do is stand and feel the *wrongness*, curdling deep within.

“If you desire help,” it says, quickly, quietly, “The pack can help. You are not alone.”

The saluki tilts his head to the side. “Help?”

“Friend,” the wolf says, gently. “They chain you, like prey. They keep you, in *this*.”

“The collar,” the saluki muses, following the wolf's eyes. “To separate me from others, I suppose. I don't feel it anymore.”

He glances down briefly. “It's red.”

The wolf only bristles. “We don't need *collars* to tell each other apart,” it growls darkly. “And tell me, what good is *red*, anywhere at all?”

The saluki responds with a wry smile, and something akin to a joke passes between them. “I suppose they forgot,” he says, lightly, “that we hounds don't see the color at all.”

And, color is something neither the wolf nor the saluki has ever known.

“You are one of the oldest strains of canine in existence.” The wolf speaks in a slow, careful tone, in hopes that the saluki will blink, perk up, and finally understand his role. To run, to hunt, to survive. “This is unbecoming, my friend.”

The saluki tilts his head. “Perhaps once,” he agrees, “But times

have changed. I am not unbecoming. I have never considered myself unbecoming."

"We—" The wolf struggles. "We all have a purpose. I hunt for the greater good. I fight, I protect. I serve." Even now, the words send something shooting up its spine; intent, purpose, desire. To protect one other is to protect oneself.

Without speaking, the saluki offers one of the children a long lick up her cheek. She giggles, a jerky, gulping sound, and something deep within the wolf's insides winds up tight.

The wolf, fearsome as it is, is still a pack animal.

"I see," it says softly, and with that, escapes into the night. Winter is coming, and the pack with it. There are many mouths to feed, back in their part of the woods.

# ASCENT

BY SAIGE SEVERIN

EDITED BY MEI LINH CHENG

At the corner of Bay and Wellesley, a body topples from the roof of an apartment building and strikes the street below. Air whistles by as it falls, rippling clothing and scattering hair. Bones shatter on impact. Blood spills across the pavement. Its hands grasp at nothing. Nothing ever again.

She watches from just outside a cafe across the street. One leg crossed neatly over the other. A cup of poorly brewed tea in her hands, steaming. She takes a sip as the body tips and sets the cup down to the sound of a skull hitting concrete. Her hands shake but her breath comes steady.

Again.

The body falls and she notices something new each time. A soft crease on the figure's brow, smoothed only in death. A twitch of its fingers halfway through the fall. The laces of its left boot are undone. She traces its form with eyes that once wept but now watch with the dull pain of repetition, roaming over clothes and limbs they know too well.

The sound is familiar too. The liquid crunch of bones cutting through soft flesh. Heavy limbs thudding against the earth that brings them to a startling halt. Two soft clinks of metal as scrap from the roof touches down, mere seconds after the body that knocked them loose.

Again.

She pushes the cup of tea away. Water sloshes in her stomach

and it sounds like the body's ruptured arteries. First the snap of bone and then the organs ground into the pavement, liquid and wet and warm, spilling over dark asphalt. Spreading like the steady creep of the ocean's tide.

Her half-full cup of tea is the latest in a growing pile. Mugs, cups, and bottles of all different colors form a semi-circle on the unused side of her table. Most of them are simple and white, borrowed from the coffee shop behind her. Some are from other restaurants, some from houses. A beer bottle or two stands tall among them. Another dozen litter the ground at her feet. If she stands she will hear the crunch of tiny shards of glass beneath the soles of her boots. Remnants of a good bottle of whiskey and a very bad night.

Again. A step, a plummet, and an impact. Silence, silence, thud. The blood spills slowly towards her and she wishes, not for the first time, to feel the hot splatter of it on her cheeks. To have the body's just-taken life roll down her face like tears.

The sky to her right slowly darkens. Her left shoulder glows bronze in the sun's dying light. The pooling blood is ink now. The body is a dark smudge against the glass of the building behind it. Windows catch the brilliance of the fading sun, reflecting orange and pink and gold in a wall of color across which the figure falls. Again and again and again. Like it's falling across the surface of a star.

She leaves when the sun dies and there is no more light to reflect. The windows fall dark. The body cannot be seen against its black backdrop. Toronto's streetlamps flickered on long ago but the apartments across from her are empty and still as a corpse. She hears it as she walks away, the only sound on the deserted street besides her own footfalls. The soft whistle of air and the crash of a body against the road. No matter how far she walks, she will hear it.

Cars line the sides of Bay as she makes her way southward towards the lake. The lines of her face come in and out of focus as she steps through puddles of light thrown by the streetlamps overhead. Stoplights change on schedule even though there are no cars to direct. A green-cast to her skin. Now yellow. Now red. She used to watch the colors change from the sidewalk, but now she walks beneath them without thought, down the middle of the empty pave-



ment. It feels less lonely this way.

Choosing where to sleep is not a task she enjoys. She has long since forgotten her true address. Perhaps, in days long past, that house held memories for her. If she had the desire to return, perhaps it still would. Whatever those walls wish to tell her, she does not want to hear. All she can hear is the soft sound of a body falling. The crack of breaking bones.

These days, she drifts. Settling into any one place will only lead to new memories. New walls holding new secrets, new screams as she wakes in a cold sweat from the dreams that settle in alongside her. It is better to rest where the world is unfamiliar. Better to leave before the dreams can find her.

Tonight, home is a mattress store on King Street. She has seen it before in her wanderings but never gone in. Its lights are off but its door is unlocked, the handle cool to her touch as she pulls it softly open. She turns her back to the windows and walks through the rows of mattresses, trailing her hand over each one in turn. Moonlight traces the arc of her fingers as they lift and set down again, feeling their way across rich fabrics and feathered stuffing. Her touch stirs no dust behind it. The covers are freshly washed, the pillows neatly fluffed.

She finds a firm mattress at the back with a price tag on it that would have caused her shivers years ago. It doesn't matter now. She pulls blankets from a few surrounding beds and throws them onto hers before settling herself down under the covers. Her cheek finds the cool embrace of the store's new pillow and she breathes deeply to catch the light scent of detergent that still lingers on its surface. She falls asleep to the gentle whisper of spring winds outside and the horrific, rhythmic thud of a body falling down.

Again. And again. And again.



# TIN PLANTS

BY NORA ZOLFAGHARI

EDITED BY XARNAH STEWART & ILLUSTRATED BY MAIYA SCHMIDT

We were sitting on the couch.  
“Do you ever feel like you’re not ready to grow up? Like, you might feel better about everything if you could stay like this just a little longer? Juuuuust a liiiitle looonger...”

How are you even supposed to answer something like that? *I don’t know, I guess I never really thought about it. Growing up doesn’t seem like that big of a deal to me. I mean, we do it every day, even if just a little.*

“But don’t we come to a point where we do something, like we’re sitting in *my* apartment on *my* couch, I own it, and you think to yourself...I’m growing up now.”

*I guess? I don’t know. Anyways, I’m going home for dinner, are you coming with me?*

“Yeah.”

I wonder if she knows how much I love her.

“I love you, Lulu,” the same as I always tell her.

“I know.”

We’re sort of growing up together, I suppose. We never went to school together, though, so I have no idea whether she’s smart or shy, or if she has any other friends besides me. But I do know she’ll never move away from here. Even with the Floaters she’s still here. I stayed with her, of course. Probably because we’ve gotten too good at dodging all that falling debris. It’s one of those evolutionary traits that are so specific to your environment that now you’re just kind of stuck here.

Darwin's plague.

Lulu lives alone so I come over pretty much all the time. It was the opposite when we were younger because her mom worried about her being by herself. Not so much anymore, though. We sit in front of the TV because it's the only room in her apartment that can fit both of us. It's small to begin with, but she has an incredible amount of stuff. She isn't a materialist; it wouldn't be much of a loss for her if all her stuff were to be crushed by a rogue windshield. Maybe she'd be sad about her PC. She stole it from her brother when she moved out of his house, and having previously been enslaved to a teenage boy, it had a lot of questionable games on it. I was forced to learn so I could play with her. Not that I don't enjoy it, but I guess it's not very pleasant either. The spine-chilling noise music OSTs and the sound of Lulu backseating my hopeless aiming skills are forever ingrained in my being. Sometimes the sounds come to me in my dreams, like PTSD or a revelation.

She keeps every book, magazine, newspaper, printed image, and card that she's ever received. Between that and the CDs and LPs we were forced to dig up after the outage, there's no room for anything else except a tile of space for each of us, a couch, and a beanbag chair. I usually sleep on the beanbag chair. Or I sleep at Mr. Taneda's place downstairs. We usually eat breakfast under his kotatsu, anyway. He also has the guitar for us to play. All I can really do is an odd rendition of *Cecelia* where I feebly pluck the melody. The only thing Lulu can play is *Beautiful Boy*.

"I've heard you play that song so many times it doesn't even exist to me anymore. It's like white noise. I can't even register it." Was Mr. Taneda's only remark after hearing it for the billionth time that hour.

"You know what, I'd appreciate a little cooperation here, Sam. I like this song, and I don't complain when you play your soulful country music." Was her default response after the musical chairs incident.

"I played *Islands in the Stream* ONCE. and it's Dolly Parton so I'll take no criticism. Also, I told you not to call me by my first name. It's weird...what're you, like, twelve?"



"I'm fourteen. A whole adolescent. Also, what does Dolly Parton have to do with anything? Where's all your machismo? You already look half-dead, play some real music."

"My eyebags are genetic, asshole."

"You're calling a *kid* an asshole? Really? That kinda talk puts people in jail, Sam."

"Fuck off."

That's when a metal pipe hit the window with a cathartic *bang*. This was the sign that my dad was going to work late again. Now all I had to do was wait for the phone call. Every time there's a Fall, I always scope out the situation to get a read on whether my dad will be home in time for dinner. If not, I invite Lulu—and sometimes Mr. Taneda—to eat with me, because I've been genetically conditioned to only be able to cook portion sizes for 2 people. To my surprise when I looked outside past the grimy, moldy window, there was nothing but the usual ash and some chipped paint falling from the Floaters. People used to call them UFOs, and they are, but they look more like poorly-made planes. Also it kind of perfectly describes what they do. They float. No reason for them to, no reason for them not to. They just do.

"I hope Tony's still there. That thing was a real wreck, could've fallen out of the sky at any moment."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Lulu? Because then you could finally make your trip to the God forsaken moon."

"What can I say, Sam, I'm an open book."

Through the pathetic display of Mr. Taneda trying to convince a middle-school girl that getting to the moon is impossible, I noticed one of the floaters start to rattle. I called Mr. Taneda to come and take a look.

"Shit... again? Let's go downstairs, then. And call your dad. You know NAOT doesn't give a flying fuck about their employees."

"This is not the time for puns, Sam."

"I teach kids to read all day, it's a force of habit, I physically can't stop it from happening."

There's no reception in the basement, so I stay in Mr. Taneda's apartment and wait for my dad to call. I try to make it a rule never

to call my dad first. Especially during a Fall. If something happens to him, I don't want to ask, I want to be told. This time, though, I should probably call him. Probably. I sit in the living room a bit longer, shimmying myself further under the kotatsu. You never know when it'll be your last time sitting under a kotatsu. Or under a blanket, for that matter. I lay back on the overused floor, taking deep breaths. One, after the other, after the other. One breath at a time. It doesn't smell very good. I mean, it doesn't smell good *anywhere* anymore; it's mostly gasoline and wet metal from the Floaters blocking the rain. That's what NAOT thinks causes the Falls. They rust too much and lose a wing or a door. Sometimes we get a whole Floater falling from the sky. Mr. Taneda's apartment, however, is particularly pungent. I turn my head to look into his bedroom. He used his bed frame to barricade his doors the last time he got dumped by his girlfriend, so now instead of their neat stacks tucked away under his bed, he keeps his porn mags strewn around his room. Whenever Lulu and Mr. Taneda get into arguments I lie like this and browse the spines of his magazines, trying to figure out what weird 30-something-year-olds are into. I'll probably be a weird 30-something-year-old one day so I'm going to have to be prepared. He really likes cowgirls. And lesbians. Sometimes I think America really got to him.

I tip my head backwards to look outside again. Some of the Floaters are starting to overlap, probably to shield each other from the rain. You'd think that after so long they come up with some better deterioration-prevention methods. Some oil-coloured raindrops fell through the cracks between the floaters as they moved, and I can't stop myself from thinking what would happen if I stuck my hand out the window. Would it melt off like acid? Maybe I'd be infused with some Floater metal, and I'd become a test subject for NAOT. Maybe they'd force me to investigate rattling Floaters to get to the bottom of the Falls. I'll walk inside, and the ground is unstable. I can barely keep my balance and the roof is caving in, but then I spot it. The cockpit. Steadily, I make my way inside, but just as I'm about to open the door, I hear footsteps approaching. They aren't normal footsteps, though. This guy's wearing an EMU. I've been doing this so long I can tell just by the sound. But I stand my ground because

nothing's a threat to me. All I have to do is open this damn door. The Floater starts violently swaying, and I know I'm about to fall right out the sky. But I've been trained for this, and I'm not worried. I grab the door handle, enemy still approaching from behind, and suddenly everything starts vibrating so much I can barely keep my grip. I fell asleep and my phone's ringing. It's still raining outside, or I guess it's rain-adjacent. I rub my eyes and check my phone. It's Dad.

"Hey, champ, sorry for not calling you earlier! I guess you noticed the Fall already, so I won't keep ya too long. Are you still with Lulu?"

Eventually, you get to a point in your life when you don't feel like explaining anything to anyone anymore.

*I just got here a little early. She's in the same building as me, so the details don't mean all that much.*

"Alright, good, good, good. I think one of the floaters is just about ready to drop, so, um... I might be here for a while."

Sometimes I wish I could be a Floater.

"Listen, sweetheart. I don't wanna worry you, but I also don't wanna lie to you. You know what to do if anything happens. And if you need anything from me, *please* call. I'll always pick up the phone."

I'm too young for this. I've barely been out of the womb long enough to want to start thinking.

"Okay, I'm going to go now. My intern is trying to lick a metal pane, again—IT'S TOXIC, BAILEY, TOXIC! WHAT AM I GOING TO TELL YOUR FAMILY IF YOU DIE FROM LICKING PAINT?—Listen, honey, I love you. More than anything. More than I love Nelson. And that's a lot."

Nelson had a weirdly soft tail, too.

"If you need me, for any reason at all, it can be anything, like if you need me to uuhhhhhh... I don't know... sing you a lullaby or help you figure out what you want to write for your PhD thesis in a million years, call me, and I'll come home. Immediately. I'll teleport. I *promise*. Okay I'm going for real now. I love you. Bye-bye."

I hung up the phone, but I keep my phone to my ear. Listen to the void. No one but my dad ever calls me. Lulu doesn't have a

phone, and Mr. Taneda thinks it's weird to give his number to anyone under the age of 18. I run my fingers over my phone keyboard. I slide the screen out a couple times until I come to terms with the way it's settled. Then I lie down for a little longer.

I'm thrown awake by Mr. Taneda on the other side of the door: "Shut up, Lulu, she's probably fine."

"NOOOOOOOO! I CAN'T ACCEPT THIS! PLLEEEEEEEASSEEE OPEN THE DOOOOOORRRR I JUST NEED TO KNOW YOU'RE ALRIGHT! I'M TOO YOUNG FOR TRAGEDY! AND YOU HAVE SO MANY YEARS OF WRINKLE-LESS SKIN LEFT, YOU CAN'T WASTE IT! AND I KNOW MR. TANEDA MAKES YOU WORRIED FOR YOUR FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF OUR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE BUT I PROMISE THERE'S HOPE! JUST LOOK AT JESUS! MAYBE DON'T. MAYBE JESUS IS NOT A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THE JOYS OF INNOVATION AND FREE-THINKING. BUT I STILL LOVE YOU! EVEN IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF CHRISTIANS! SO PLEASE JUST OPEN THE—"

I wanted to hear her nonsensical yelling a bit longer, but I opened the door anyway and suddenly my shoulder was damp with snot and tears from my dearest best friend. Behind her trailed my elementary school English teacher.

Sometimes I wonder how I've managed to survive as long as I have.

"I'll start making dinner then. *Unless...* someone else wants to make it instead?" Mr. Taneda said, looking down on me with pleading eyes.

What was I supposed to say? How can I leave a grown man hungry like this? This is embarrassing. Whatever, I'll just start cooking. As soon as I started to get up from the floor Mr. Taneda pumped his fist, then he and Lulu's horribly energy-consuming and highly destructive handshake ensued. This handshake involved cartwheels, 2 industrial-sized blowtorches and a precariously placed children's toy. The blowtorches were a little hard to find on short notice, especially since they only started selling the single-use ones, so they tried to save their handshake for special occasions. Usually for when Mr. Taneda had a hard day at work. This time, since Mr. Taneda can't go



to work because of the Fall, they had some torches leftover.

Making dinner is the only constant in my life. I know I'll have to do it because I'm not set on dying just yet. They don't have very much left in the grocery store, though, so I always have the same ingredients to work with. The food my mom brings, I save for lunch. Or breakfast. Lunch and breakfast can change. Dinner can't.

"Oh god. I know this smell. I can't, CAN'T eat yellow chicken and rice again. I'M A GROWING WOMAN, I NEED SUSTENANCE. If I stay below 5 feet another year my brother WILL make fun of me, and I don't think that'll help my growth either."

"Just shoot some people and deal with it. I'm hungry," Mr. Tanada said.

Lulu replied, "You're just jealous you don't have my First Person Suave."

"First of all, not funny. Second, I've been playing video games for longer than you've been *alive*, Lulu. I will win, and you will cry."

"That was gross. You sound old."

"I am old."

"Listen old man, I'm not sure this is the win you think it is."

"Fuck off."

"Here's a controller."

"Thanks."

I don't know if I'll ever escape the sound of Lulu screaming for God whenever Mr. Taneda picks up or even looks at a controller. Or Mr. Taneda being a sore loser when he doesn't follow exactly what Lulu tells him to do. But I think this is okay for now. I'm never quite sure, but I think so. And maybe that's enough.



# THE ONES WHO LET THE CITY LIVE

BY SAIGE SEVERIN

EDITED BY MIRAN TSAY & ILLUSTRATED BY EVAN BULLOCH

*Ursula K. Le Guin prefaced her 1975 version of the short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" with the parenthetical subtitle: "(Variations on a theme by William James)." I have not read the words of William James. But there are other words that haunt me. I offer you these, my ghosts, so that they may haunt your steps here in the city of Omelas, where so many years have passed and nothing has changed but the pitch of the screams.*

*"Art must reflect the world in all its brutality and beauty, not in hopes of changing it, but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lie, to not be co-opted by the television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us."*

— Ta-Nehisi Coates

Held close by the arching womb of her well-tended home, a young woman rocks her baby in her arms. Its cheeks are fat, its hair and disposition gleaming yellow-gold. Matching beams of sun tumble through a window just out of arm's reach, bathing both woman and child in a pool of summer light.

When a polite knock comes at the heavy oaken door, the child does not cry. It falls agreeably asleep as its mother moves to receive their visitor.

Outside, a messenger stands with a scroll in hand. He is be-decked in silver, gold, and green, the colours of his joyful city. He is paid fairly, treated well by all. His smile, as he hands the young woman her notice from the council, is not unkind. His offer of condolences is solemn and genuine. When the mother goes inside once more, he turns easily around and goes about his day.

The mother is no feeble-minded woman. She knows, as all denizens of Omelas are taught, the condition of her people's joy, the terms on which her city rests. She knows too the request that is contained within the pen strokes held between her hands.

Do not misunderstand me. Omelas is no city of barbarians, no kingdom of heartless men. The people know well what they have asked of this woman on this day, and their love goes out to her. Her choice is a true one. Should she refuse the city's request, its leaders will nod gently, thank her for her time, and ask the next mother in line. There will be no punishment, no sharply silent stares in the jubilant streets. She and her child will return, unmolested, to their place in the sun.

And yet. You must remember that the woman is not only a mother, but a citizen of Omelas. Surely, she must understand that the perfect joy of thousands is larger than her private grief? Does she not rejoice in her loving marriage, her tender friendships? Do not the shining buildings sing choirs in the midday sun? Is she not well-educated, well-fed, treated to the pleasures of good medicine and higher wisdom? What choice remains for her in a city where she is given all things and asked for only one?

Shall I tell you of that evening, after the messenger came? I can speak of the woman's modest meal, a stew hearty and filling but not exceptional. I can describe to you her bathing chamber of rising steam and incense, her child blinking, unbothered from its place within the heat. Or perhaps you wish to hear of her husband's return from work, his coat draped over a kitchen chair, his wiry hand on the paper of the scroll, soft lines of resignation at the corners of his eyes. Feel now the gentle puffs of the infant's breath. See now the beaten bronze of falling night. Can you picture it, that house in Omelas? Can you hear the words unspoken?

Let dawn break gently over the mountains to the north and west. Imagine the swing of her heavy oaken door, its familiar arc on gleaming, oiled hinges. Let the mother and her child take certain steps into this new day which welcomes them with rosy fingers and the scent of morning dew. Send them down the fresh-swept street. Stop them at the bakery on the corner for a dripping sweet bun delivered by the spring-fresh hands of the baker's son. Let them eat their fill before you guide them on.

Lead them towards the center of the city. Do grating voices cry down from frosted windows? Do thoughtless feet cross their solemn path? I don't think so. This pilgrimage, taken by only two, is silently felt in the hearts of all. If there must be weeping, keep it behind closed doors. Let the tears fall at their own pace, at their own time, but let them settle and dry in the time-worn grooves of guiltless faces.

Shepherd the woman and her child to a simple family home just east of the city's heart. There they will find a set of nondescript steps leading beneath the life of a neatly tended lawn. Watch the woman descend these frigid steps. Meet her at the bottom of them, among the group of assembled people offering soft smiles and words of gratitude. Look now as they insert the key into its rusted lock, decades old. Witness the door scream open.

You know this room. A closet, really. You know its dirt floor, its dark, haunted recesses. You know the smell that rises to you now, a stench of wretchedness and misery that, once known, never truly leaves the body. There is a pile of horrid mops in one corner. There is a corpse in the center of the room, emaciated, just now beginning to decay, born again in the baptismal pool of its own urine.

Do not leave the door open for long. Let one of the city's leaders step in to remove the corpse, now too large to be a child. Gesture the woman forward at a moderate pace. Allow her to place her infant in the middle of the floor's one dry patch, a few square inches of dirt that will not remain unsoiled for long. Look away, if you must, as she drops one final kiss to her child's unprotesting brow. Close the door behind her, soundless, and turn the key in the lock that will not be opened again until many years have passed. Hear

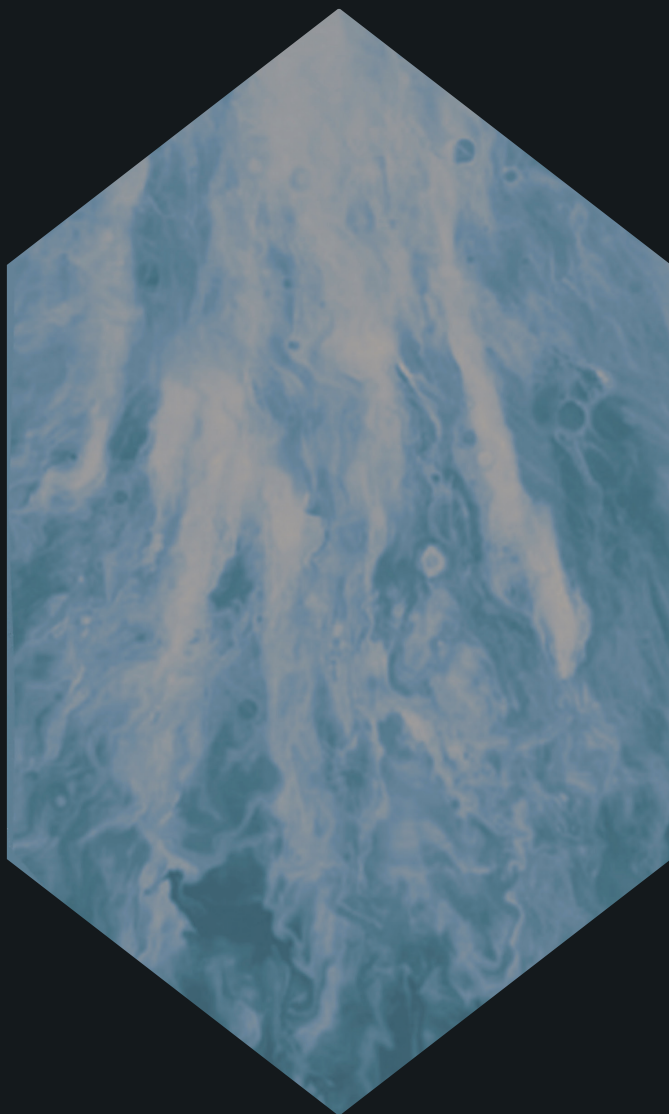
the child's cries begin.

Shall we accompany the woman home? Picture her body, lighter with every step she takes away from that vile cellar. Bathe in the warmth of her neighbours' smiles. Her choice was the right one. She can return to her cozy house on the other side of the city and mourn, as she must, the loss of her child. But soon enough joy must creep back in. Perhaps her family will come to visit. Perhaps her husband has a gift waiting for her, some poem or ring or loaf of bread lovingly crafted by his considerate hands. If you would have her dance, or sing, then let it be so. If you would have her broken tears dry slowly, then let that be as well. So long as they do dry. This is Omelas, after all.

Can you imagine it? Have you convinced yourself? No? Then let me tell you how the evening truly ended.

Beneath the shroud of this disquiet night, the perfect happiness of Omelas lies in shambles. The woman leaves her husband's side, her moral mind upended. There is no good great enough to justify this thing which she has done. They say that the heart of Omelas beats blameless as a fresh-born lamb. But there is guilt within the walls, indeed. It lives within a closet beneath the lush green of a private lawn. It drives at the woman's heels like a cowherd's whip, out the oaken door and through the barren streets. She goes on alone. South, towards the bay. She strides forth into the crashing waves, this mother who gave life to Omelas. The depths welcome their daughter home.





# THANK YOU

Another year, another volume. Thank you for reading, supporting, and sharing your work with the *Spectatorial*—we couldn't have done it without you!



