



THE SPECTATORIAL

Volume IX



The Spectatorial



Volume IX

Proudly operating out of Innis College



Sponsored by the Student Initiative Fund





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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

THE VALUE THAT OUR SPECTATORIAL TEAM HAS FOR THE COMMUNITY CREATED BY THE WORK THAT WE PUBLISH IS TRULY ENDLESS. OUR TEAM IS PLEASED AND ASTONISHED BY THE WORK PUT IN BY EVERYONE INVOLVED WITH OUR PUBLICATION THIS SEMESTER. THANKS TO THE HARD WORK AND EFFORT OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS, WE ARE VERY PROUD TO ONCE AGAIN BE PUBLISHING A VERY IMPRESSIVE VOLUME.

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE SEMESTER, THE PROCESS TOWARDS PUBLISHING THIS JOURNAL HAS REQUIRED AN INTENSE EFFORT FROM AUTHORS AND EDITORS ALIKE TO PRODUCE SOMETHING WONDERFUL. THIS VOLUME HAS A GREAT COMBINATION OF POETRY AND FICTION THAT RANGES FROM THE EFFECTS OF TIME TO SUPERNATURAL EXPLORATIONS OF GRIEF. THE MINDS OF THE STUDENTS WHO SUBMIT TO OUR JOURNAL NEVER FAIL TO AMAZE ME AS WE PUT TOGETHER PIECES AND AMAZING ILLUSTRATIONS TO ACCOMPANY THEM.

THE IDEA THAT WE, AS A SPECULATIVE JOURNAL, ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF SPREADING LIES IN LITERATURE IS ALWAYS A FUNNY ONE TO ME. I BELIEVE THAT THERE CAN BE AMAZING TRUTHS FOUND WITHIN THE WORDS OF THESE FICTITIOUS REALITIES THAT ARE CREATED. THE STORIES MAY NEVER BE TRUE BUT ARE ALWAYS REAL IN SOME WAY TO THOSE WHO INTERACT WITH THEM. THE STORIES TOLD ARE ABOUT PLACES NOT ONLY TO FIND ESCAPES FROM AND WONDERS OUTSIDE OF OUR WORLD, BUT THEY ALSO SERVE AS A WAY TO LOOK BACK AND REFLECT ON OUR OWN WORLD AND LIVES.

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOMETHING QUITE MAGICAL ABOUT LITERATURE'S ABILITY TO PERMEATE OUR LIVES AND THE WAY THAT WE CHOOSE TO LIVE DAY BY DAY, REGARDLESS OF THE WAY THAT THE WORLD IS GOING. THANK YOU, READERS, FOR CHOOSING TO PARTAKE IN THE MAGIC OF LITERATURE WITH US. I HOPE YOU ENJOY THESE WORLDS AWAY.

SINCERELY,
RILEY SWITZMAN
EDITOR IN CHIEF



A LETTER FROM THE ART DIRECTOR

THE UNFAMILIARITY OF THE WATERS WE’VE BEEN TREADING THIS YEAR HAS BROUGHT ABOUT A DESIRE FOR THE FAMILIAR. WE’VE FOUND RESPITE IN BAKING BREAD, PAINTING, READING, WRITING, AND THE SIMPLE LEISURELY STROLLS WHICH WE TOOK FOR GRANTED. THE PRACTICES THEMSELVES ARE BY NO MEANS NEW OR REVOLUTIONARY, YET THEY OFFER PRECISELY WHAT WE NEED DURING THIS TIME. THEY GROUND US IN OUR CONSTANTLY SHIFTING LIVES AND ALLOW US TO ESCAPE FROM ITS INSTABILITY, USUALLY TO RETURN REVITALIZED AND RENEWED.

LITERATURE, MUCH LIKE THESE REDISCOVERED HOBBIES, OFTEN SERVES AS AN ESCAPE FROM OUR REALITIES. YET IT CAN ALSO HELP TO REACQUAINT US WITH PRACTICES, IDEAS, AND FEELINGS WE HAVE LONG LEFT IN THE SHADOWS.

IT’S NO SURPRISE THAT IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHICH HAS FOUND COMFORT IN WARM, FRESH-BAKED BREAD, OUR CONTRIBUTORS FELT A PULL TOWARDS THE FAMILIAR AS THEIR INSPIRATION. MANY OF THE WORKS IN THIS EDITION RECALL MYTHS, TROPES, AND TALES THAT FASCINATED US IN OUR CHILDHOOD, ENCHANTED US IN OUR GRADE-SCHOOL YEARS, AND ENTHRALLED US AS TEENAGERS. AND YET, THESE CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECULATIVE FICTION ARE SUBVERTED TO BE REWRITTEN IN THE DIVERSE STYLES OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS. THE FAMILIAR BECOMES THE JUMPING OFF POINT THAT GROUNDS THESE WORKS, SO THAT THEY CAN SOAR AND PROVIDE THAT MUCH NEEDED ESCAPE WE OFTEN FIND IN SPECULATIVE FICTION.

THE FAMILIAR IS WHAT INSPIRED ME IN THE DESIGN ASPECT OF THIS JOURNAL. THE OLD COVERS OF BOOKS SO MANY ENGLISH STUDENTS AND BIBLIOPHILES ADMIRE WAS THE STARTING POINT. THE REJUVENATING AND COMFORTING COLOURS, MOOD, AND IMAGES OF SPRING WERE USED ALONGSIDE THE VINTAGE FOUNDATION TO BRING BOTH COMFORT AND ESCAPE. MY HOPE IS THAT THIS SERVES TO BOLSTER THE WORKS OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS, BRINGING THE DYNAMIC WORKS TOGETHER INTO A COLLECTIVE VOLUME WHERE THE FAMILIAR IS REFRAMED AS AN ESCAPE.

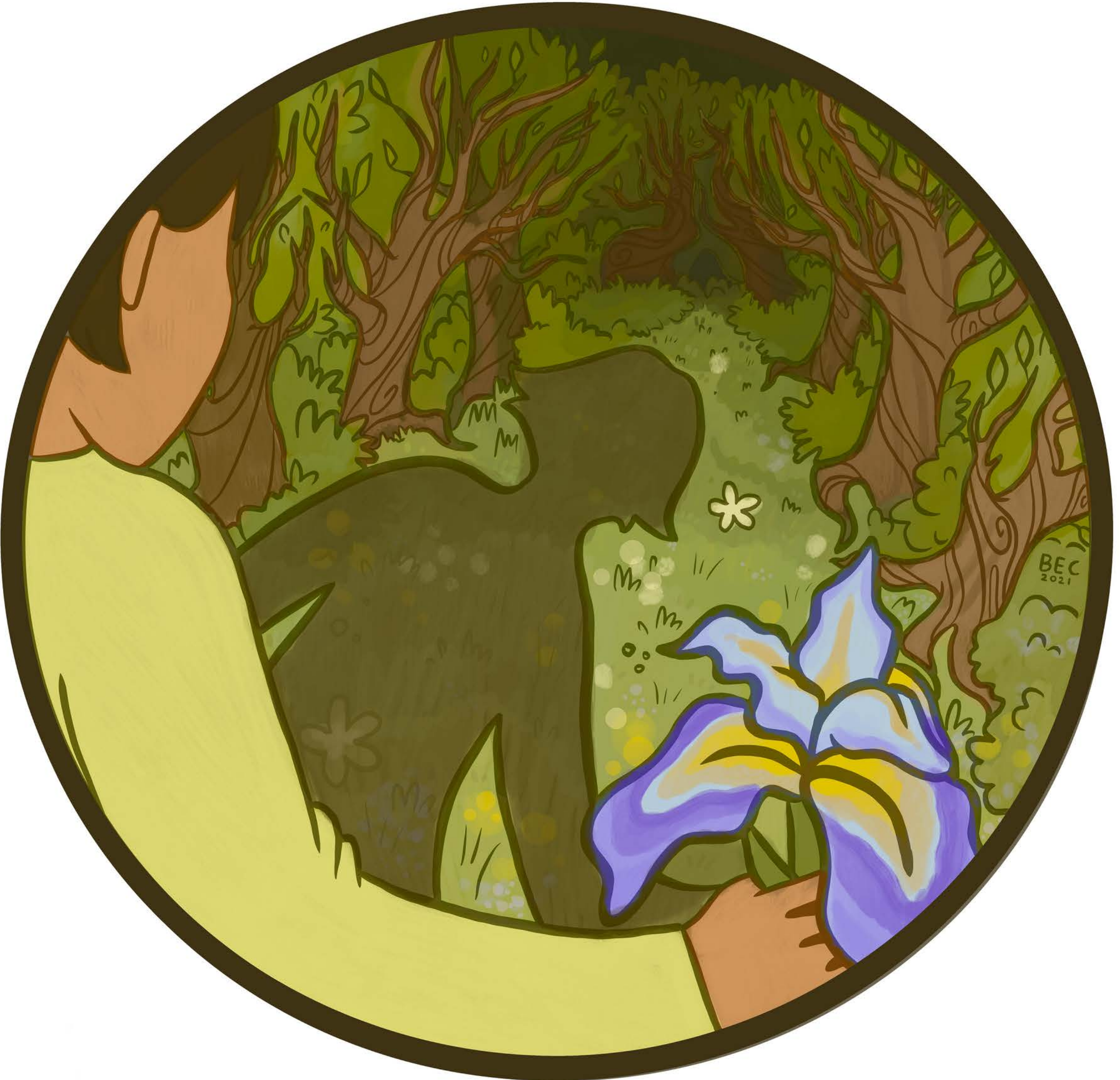
HAPPY READING,
ARBA BARDHI
ART DIRECTOR





PROSE

Volume IX



THE CHANGELING

Isabella Cesari

Illustration by Brittney Carter

“Do not go into the forest, children. There are dark, strange things inside of it. If you venture in, it may not be you that returns.” So went the stories that had been told for generations. In one story, a child ignored the warnings and went into the woods alone, to retrieve a flower for his mother. For three days and three nights the townspeople searched for the child, risking themselves to bring him home, but nobody heard a cry or found even a shoe, a scrap of fabric, or even the tiniest droplet of blood. On the fourth day, they accepted that the child would never return, that he had been claimed by the forest. The child’s parents were sick with grief, and bent by his bed, sobbing and wailing and unable to sleep, for another two days and two nights.

Then, on the sixth night, the child returned. A local farmer who was sitting vigil outside the grieving household, having heard some unfamiliar sound, raised his lantern and saw the child walk out of the woods, calm as can be. When the farmer called the child’s name, he received no response but a funny little smile. The child’s parents were overjoyed to see their baby once more, and began spoiling him with sweets, toys, baths, and new clothes. For a few weeks, the town was peaceful once more.

But this was not to last. Soon it became apparent that what had returned from the forest was not the child that had wandered in. This child was something else, something of another world. It was often angry, demanding more and more from its parents and those around it. It refused any food other than sweet cakes and pies. It fought with the other children. It rarely spoke, and when it did, the sweet voice of the child was gone, replaced by a strange, whispering tone. One night, the mother was awakened by a storm and chanced to see the thing that was not her child, hunched over on the floor in the middle of their cottage, whispering to itself. She gasped, the smallest sound, and the thing turned its head lightning fast. Its eyes were pitch black from edge to edge. The mother closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was asleep. She heard the child’s little footsteps cross the floor, and she heard its strange, gurgling breaths as it stood by her bed. The footsteps eventually receded, and she waited so long with her eyes shut tight that she managed to fall into a fitful sleep.

The next day, frightened and confused, she went to see the farmer who had first spotted the child returning from the forest. He confessed that, although he’d dismissed it at the time, when he’d raised his lantern to see the child returning, the light had glinted off its eyes as if they were an animal’s. Together, they spoke to the child’s father, who confessed he, too, was frightened by the thing that lived in his home. So the three resolved that they would go and see an old woman who lived in a cottage by the edge of the

woods, who was familiar with the old ways, and the ways of the woods, to ask her how to send the not-child away. The walk was quite far, and the old woman hardly ever came into the town. When they arrived and told her what they had seen, she grew very pale and brought them inside her cottage. She told them that their child was surely lost; that in its place they had some sort of changeling, some thing from the woods that had taken their child and returned wearing its form. The thing must be banished at once, she said, using the magic of the woods. "Come again tomorrow," she told them, "and I will do what must be done."

So the parents and the farmer returned to town, and the next day they took the thing aside, and said they would take it on a wonderful trip to see a meadow full of flowers. This was not entirely false, as the old woman's cottage stood between the forest and exactly one such meadow. The thing seemed not to remember the night before, or not to care about what had transpired between it and the mother, and it went with them willingly. It followed the father closely, kicking up dirt and throwing rocks at little birds and mice that crossed its path, each time letting out a cruel-sounding laugh. In the rear, the mother watched nervously for any signs of suspicion in the thing. Finally, they reached the cottage, where the old woman waited on the stoop with a curious expression on her face. As they approached, the thing veered off into the meadow it had been promised, and after dropping itself down in the center of the field, began tearing up flowers and ripping their petals off one by one, letting them fall into its lap. As it played, seemingly unaware, the parents approached the cottage and were invited in by the old woman.

"To banish this evil from your home, you will need to return it to the woods. This will be difficult—it is a harsh world in the woods, and with you it knows no want, knows no scarcity. This changeling will not want to return there. But you must find a way. It need only take a few steps beyond the path." At this, she retrieved a little bag from her apron pocket and handed it to the mother. "Before it goes, you must sprinkle this powder in your bread as it bakes and feed it to the changeling. Sprinkle the powder around your bed, around your home, and finally, in its footprints as it enters the woods. In the morning you will find its bed empty."

The mother took the little bag, hid it in the folds of her dress, and, with fear in her heart, began the return journey. The thing did not seem to suspect them of their treachery, and it skipped all the way home, playing the same nasty games with the animals as it had on the way to the meadow.

That evening, the mother began to bake a loaf of bread. She sent the thing out

to play, full of regret for putting other children into its path, and as soon as she saw it turn the corner out of view, she withdrew the bag and tipped a little of the pinkish powder into the dough. She poured a little of the powder into a mug and hid the bag in the pocket of her husband's trousers, for its later uses.

When at supper the thing began tearing into its meal, as it always did, it showed again no sign of suspicion. Slice after slice of bread it asked for, and the mother could barely butter fast enough to keep up. Soon enough its belly was full, and so the father suggested they go for a walk before bed. Readily the changeling accepted, and the father and mother exchanged a look. When the two crossed the threshold, the mother went to work with the powder in the mug. She sprinkled it in a fine circle around the bed she and the father slept in, and then around the perimeter of the cottage. Then she sat by the window and watched as the father began to tell the thing it had to go into the woods.

The thing was stomping its feet, shaking its head, and feigning terror. It would not go, it insisted. It had barely just gotten back from the woods, and why was the father sending it back? The father stood steadfast and insisted that the child go and pick a special flower in the woods. He pointed to a bright purple iris growing just a few metres from the edge of the path. The father told the thing how much the mother loved those flowers, how happy she would be to have it in her home, how it would brighten the room. For many long minutes he calmly insisted, never raising his voice, though the mother could see how his hands trembled for fear they would never be rid of the thing.

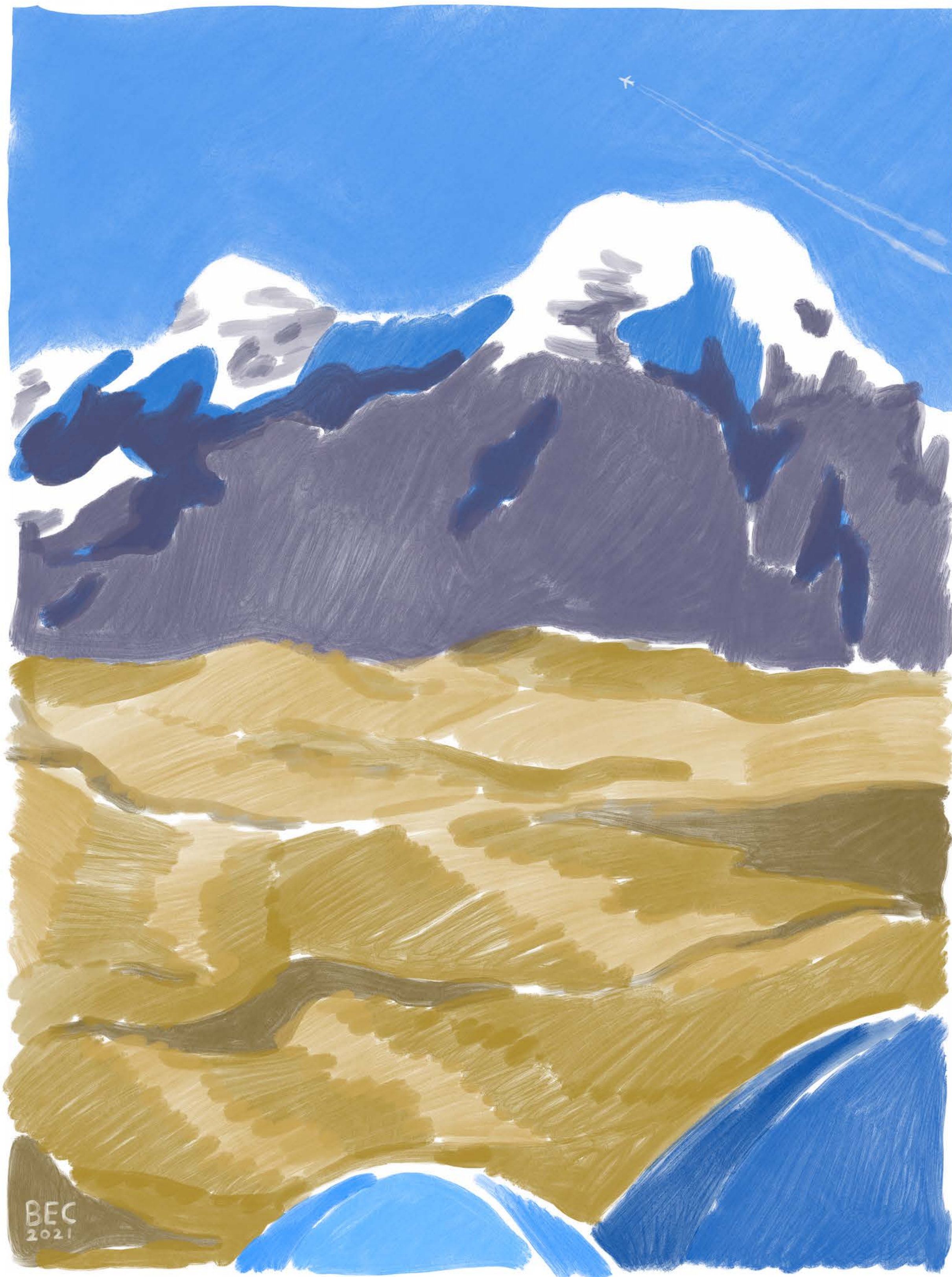
Finally, the thing began to stride, sulking, towards the edge of the forest. Trailing just behind, the father tipped the bag out of his pocket and let the powder fall into its steps. Only when the thing crossed the threshold into the woods could the mother let out a breath she'd barely noticed she was holding. The father turned back to the window and she saw his shoulders drop, the weight of the world gone from atop them. When the thing brought the flower back, proudly, the father hoisted it into the air, for one final moment treating it as if it were really theirs, and carried it back to the home. The mother welcomed them both with open arms, wrapping the thing in a tight embrace, and putting the flower in the same mug that had held the powder, displaying it on the mantel.

That night, she tucked the thing in tighter than she ever had, and gave it a kiss on the forehead, wishing it sweet dreams. Then she lay in her own bed, the father beside her, and began to dream of the calm that their life would now be filled with. For a brief moment, she felt heartsick at never getting to see even the likeness of her child again, but the relief of being rid of the changeling soon

lulled her off to sleep. She dreamed she was in the meadow by the old woman's cabin, picking flowers with her child, and all was well.

When she awoke the cabin was deathly cold. By her side, the father slept on. Suddenly, as she was about to wake him, she heard a voice whispering. She sat up sharply, looking frantically to the child's bed. She found it empty. Then again came the whispering. Slowly, with fear's icy fingers gripping her throat, she turned to the table. In one seat sat the thing, happy as can be, pulling the petals from her beautiful flower. Across from it sat the old woman, whispering under her breath. The mother tried to rise from bed, but when her feet touched the floorboards, they burned as though the ground was covered in hot coals, and she let out a cry of pain. Still her husband did not rise.

"Good morning, mother," said the thing that was not her child. "Thank-you for the bread. Thank-you for preparing the house for me. Now we can stay here together, forever." The old woman whispered on; every word that the changeling spoke was hers.



DIGGING

Amanda Voore-Lewis

Illustration by Brittney Carter

Honestly, I don't know why I banked it all on Dr. Marigold. Everyone in the department told me it was a bad idea. It's been forever since he published, and his papers keep failing peer review because they're totally baseless. The university thinks he's an embarrassment. Everyone told me I wouldn't get anywhere with him, that no one would respect the girl who studied under Dr. Harvey Marigold. This project was the last straw. He wanted funding to do a dig with absolutely no evidence that we would find anything. No historical documents, no nearby settlements, no roads, not even a river. Saying they denied him is an understatement.

But I already put my lot in with him once before, in requesting him as my doctoral supervisor, and it seemed wrong to change my mind because somebody told me that I could. It's not as if they'll fire him, he's tenured, and a legend, even if that legend is a bit of a joke. He's absolutely ancient. Passed retirement age a long time ago, ancient. Other professors I had in undergrad talked about taking his classes themselves, and not just the fresh-faced ones. The running gag is that he's immortal. The other one is that he can't publish anymore because he's properly senile.

The two of us are seated next to each other on a direct flight to Peru. He's all settled in with a bright yellow neck pillow that he bought while we were on our way to the gate and beat up grey slippers he brought from home. The pillow was an absurd purchase: we'd been held up by airport security with questions about the equipment we had with us, and by the time they finally let us go, I was sure we were going to miss our flight. But Dr. Marigold still somehow made time to wander into a gate kiosk.

We've been in the air for about forty-five minutes, and he keeps trying to make conversation with the flight attendants. I think he finally realized they don't want to chitchat, so he turns to me.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me, Emily, you coming with me," Dr. Marigold tells me, his wizened smile sad and sincere.

As it turns out, Dr. Marigold has some pretty impressive life savings. When the department denied him the funding, he just went ahead and funded the project himself. On a smaller scale, of course. This type of excavation project should have a good fifty people on it. Instead, it's just the two of us. All of his other graduate students took up the offer to move to other supervisors, and he obviously didn't get dispensation to bring on undergraduates.

"I'm happy to do it, Dr. Marigold," I tell him, "it seems like an adventure, just heading out into the desert." This, I think, is the truth. Really, Dr. Marigold is the reason I'm here at all. Not here, on a plane to Peru, but here in graduate school. He believes in the things that got me interested way back in undergraduate: pure love of the discipline. When he speaks, he doesn't sound like an academic, he sounds like he's telling a wild story from his youth, something

that doesn't have to be backed up by anyone's account but his own. But Dr. Marigold isn't exactly the face of good academic practice. There's no scientific method with him. There's a compelling idea and the gleeful expression of it. I've started to realize that I like that better than what the department wants him to be. So I'm starting to think that maybe I'm not meant for academia? Maybe I'm just meant to be a layperson with an interest or the sort of historical fiction writer that frustrates the people in the department who really know their stuff.

So I'm not taking any of it that seriously anymore. And Marigold's wild goose chase into the Andes just seemed like exactly the sort of thing I'd like to do. Because if it weren't for him, I probably would have dropped out by now.

"You think this is an absurd lark, don't you?"

"No, it's not like that I---" I feel heat draw along my neck, flustered and worried I've offended the old professor.

"It's alright," he smiles, and somehow, I believe him, "I know what people say about me. That I'm a ridiculous old man with no idea what I'm doing. You would be a fool if you took my word against everyone else's. So, let this be a lark." He raises his plastic water bottle like he's making a toast, and I scramble to pull mine out of the seatback in front of me and touch it to his.

"I do take your word over the rest, though," I admit, "maybe I'm a fool. But I've read your papers, Dr. Marigold, and they all feel...right. Even the ones that no one will publish. Even if we don't find anything, I won't regret coming with you."

Despite what he might have made me realize about my own interests, his writing doesn't feel like historical fiction. If anyone else wrote about his ideas, it absolutely would. In one of his recent papers, he wrote that in some unrecorded pre-Incan community, people believed that family lines were constituted of one life force and that when a parent died, their life force flowed down the line into their children. He went beyond this to talk at length about a ritual pilgrimage often undertaken by parents and children, meant to embody the continuation of a bloodline down from the gods. According to Dr. Marigold, they believed that if the child died during this ritual, it was the will of the gods to end the bloodline, and the father would consequently be cast out of the community, cursed and unable to die due to the lack of heirs to pass down into. It was fantastical and completely unfounded, properly fictional. Yet, in reading that unpublished article, it felt *right*. I've read plenty of well-respected works that I found less convincing. With him, it was all right there: the bond between generations, thousands of years back, awarded supernatural importance. I believed him.

"That's very kind of you to say, Emily." He's quiet for a moment after that, and I think the conversation is over, so I return to the paperback in my lap, but

then he continues. It's an unnerving habit of his, just carrying on a thought minutes later like time has stopped for him. "It's been quite wonderful, working with you. You're so passionate, and you're always so willing to consider my baseless ideas. You make this ridiculous old man feel like someone's listening. If I can be candid, you've made all these long years with the department worthwhile."

"I have?" I ask, surprised and a little embarrassed.

"When you've lived as long as I have, everything is so transient. Decades go by like minutes. But some things...are like sparks in the darkness, and for a moment life feels like life again. A good friend is one of those things. I hope it's not presumptuous of me to call you a friend, Emily."

"Not at all."

When he doesn't say any more, I try to sleep for a bit. I wake up a while later, and time has passed in that way it only can in the air – like nothing at all, and like long enough to be reborn. We're flying over the Andes now, distantly I see the snow-capped peaks, and the sky is only just starting to stumble out of darkness, our flight journeying to meet the sun like old friends.

The plane is incredibly quiet and most of the passengers are still sleeping, but I wake to find Dr. Marigold gazing out the window at the landscape miles below. I have this strange sense that he hasn't slept at all. It strikes me how incredibly sad he looks.

"Dr. Marigold?" I say, almost in a whisper. I don't know why, but it feels important to get rid of that look on his face. He turns to me and smiles.

"Sorry I was out for so long. Have you been awake this whole time?"

"Yes," he looks back out the window, "I don't like to sleep on planes, it feels like a waste of flying. It's so incredibly peaceful up here. Like you can almost feel the dead." I don't know how to respond to that, and he seems to understand. He laughs at himself, a shocking sound after the contemplative, dreamlike tone he was just speaking in. "Listen to me, being so morose. I'm sorry, I'm just feeling nostalgic."

I glance past him at the mountains. I've never been to this part of the world, but I somehow feel it too, the nostalgia. Being up so high, it feels a little like I'm looking down on the whole world, looking back on it.

"Why did you decide to do this dig now, Dr. Marigold? Why are you still doing it, after the department said no?"

Then we're both looking out the window, and somehow that feels more personal than eye contact. "Frankly, it's because it feels like the end of this life. I've always known that this settlement is out there, and I made a promise to myself a long time ago to find it. It's now or never."

Thinking about the things he's said, and with the strange, intimate anonymity of looking out onto the mountains together, I ask him, "Are you ill?"

He laughs. “No, my dear, I’m not dying. We’ve both heard the joke, I’m Dr. Harvey Marigold. I will never die.” He turns to face me. “No, I’m not ill. My life with the university is what’s ending. I haven’t taught undergrads in a few years now, and after this, they won’t let me have graduate students either. They aren’t funding my projects anymore, and no one wants to work with me. They’re trying to get me to quit. No one will ask me to outright, because I’ve been around since before anyone on the board was even in school. I make them feel like children. But eventually, I’ll have to go. And then I don’t know what I’ll do.”

I think about the grey-haired men who run the department. None of them looks like they could even remember being children. I have the horrible urge to ask him how old he really is, but it’s been drilled into my head all my life that you just don’t do that. Instead, I ask, “How do you know it’s out there?”

“It’s hard to explain. Maybe at a certain age, it’s just a feeling that you have.”

“A feeling about a buried town in a desert half a world away?” I ask, incredulous. Half laughing, I suggest, “Sounds to me like an excuse of an immortal man.”

But Dr. Marigold doesn’t laugh. Instead, he just looks very sad, and says to me, “Wouldn’t that be a tragic fate, to live forever? To watch everyone you love age and die, to live so long that the places in your memories don’t even exist anymore?”

I swallow, and my ears pop, and I feel like I’ve just sprung out from holding my head underwater. I hadn’t even realized we were starting our descent. “Dr. Marigold, have you lived so long that you identify with the plights of immortals?”

“I’m a very old man, Emily. Sometimes I see people in the street who, for a moment, I think I recognize, before remembering the person I’m thinking of has been dead for years.”

I sit with that, for a while, because it doesn’t seem like there’s anything else to do with it. In my youthful naiveté, I tell him, hopefully, “I don’t think it would be so bad, living forever. You’d get to see the whole world.”

“And once you’d seen it all?”

“Well,” I say, “the world changes. By the time you were finished, I think it would be high time to start again.”

Then the earth rushes up to meet us, and we’re landing. We both lean our heads against our seatbacks and close our eyes. A few hours later, once we’ve gotten settled at the hotel, Dr. Marigold and I load up our rental – a spacious, off-road pick-up truck, much heavier duty than anything I’ve ever driven – with our equipment and venture out into the desert. While planning this excursion, I must have asked Dr. Marigold if we should get a guide a hundred times. I ask

him ten more times while we're packing up. But he's resolute that we don't need one. I drive and he navigates.

After some time, we leave the clearly delineated roads. It's just our car, the endless blue sky, the grey-beige earth, and the mountains that do not move or seem to get any closer. It's strange, driving in the desert; I pay less attention to how I'm driving, and it feels more like a dream or a game, like driving the miniature electric cars I wished for as a child. It's also horribly boring. Eventually, I stop giving my route much attention and glance over at Dr. Marigold. He's had some old book in his lap the whole time we've been driving. He had it on the plane too. It looks like it should be behind glass. It's mostly illustrations and some sort of map, but there is written text too. I assume it's from the early contact period.

"What's that book?" I ask eventually. He's so absorbed in it he hasn't been making his usual uncomfortable conversation.

"Just a little something to orient myself," he tells me, looking up at the mountains.

"Is that how you knew this place was out here?"

"In a sense," he shrugs, with a pinched smile on his lips, like it's some sort of inside joke with someone he has bad memories with.

"So you've got evidence, why didn't you show it to the department?"

"It's hard to explain," he points a hand vaguely out in front of us, "would you aim just a little right?" I have no idea how he's navigating, but I oblige. "It's something I've had for a very long time. Honestly, I don't think it would hold up to the department's standards." I wonder how many times the book has changed hands, and how hard it would be to authenticate. I wonder who gave him the book, and why he holds it with such familiarity. Briefly, he lifts the book and holds it up between him and the mountains. "Here is good."

"What?" I ask, shocked. He can't possibly mean for me to stop. But, absurdly, he does. I park the car, and we're nowhere. There are no landmarks, no indication that we are anywhere. Maybe the old man is senile.

But whatever else he may be, he's insistent. We unload the truck, and it's then that it strikes me how insane this all is. Even if Dr. Marigold is right, and there is a village out here, we would need a whole team to survey the area and find anything of note. But we're already here, so I keep my doubts to myself, and we start digging at a spot that Dr. Marigold picks.

For a while, I'm digging to save face. But, after an hour or so, we come up with a wall. When I first start excavating it, I think I'm making it up, seeing shapes where there aren't any. But then it's a wall. An hour later, we have another one. Once some basic layout becomes apparent, I realize it must be a residence, just a little bigger than my bedroom back home, probably of a small family.

I'm working quite carefully at what seems to be the central hearth area when Dr. Marigold sets down his book on top of a piece of equipment a couple of meters away at what we think was somewhere to sleep. It's only when he sets it down that I realize he's been referring to it during the whole excavation.

"I think you've got things handled around here. There should a burial site behind the residence. I'm going to go start back there."

"Oh. Okay," I agree, a little surprised by the announcement.

We work separately, in silence, for many hours. I wonder if Dr. Marigold could use my help with whatever he's working on, but he does not call on me. Eventually, dusk descends upon us and we set up our campsite. We leave our work, points of the site mapped out with markers and grids that seem a frivolous formality layered over Dr. Marigold's vision.

In front of our tents, Dr. Marigold cooks for us over a small fire, and the details in the distance fade away into the darkness, replaced by an even more intricate night above us. Looking up at galaxies painted with a much heavier hand than I'm used to, I think of the many ancient people of this land charting the stars, and the seafarers navigating with them; I think of how much we could see before we shut it all out with our light. "I've never been so far from city lights. I didn't know the sky could look like this."

"It's not something you'll ever forget now," he promises me.

He's sitting with his legs crossed in a way that shouldn't be possible for a man of his age. I've looked at him for so long and seen only a very old man, but here, small and lonely under the desert sky, I see in him a young man, someone small and unsure. It's strange the way you catch glimpses of people, the memories under their skin.

"Makes you feel small," I remark.

"Not small, for me," he says, "far away."

"From what?"

It's mostly a rhetorical question, I think, so I don't mind when he doesn't answer. Eventually, I go to sleep, but Dr. Marigold stays by the fire. I leave the zipper of my tent open just a little, and I fall asleep to the sight of his back, his head tilted up into the light of dead stars just reaching us now, seen but long gone.

When I wake up, Dr. Marigold is no longer just outside the tents, but he isn't in his either. As I get up to find the professor and ask him how we should proceed with our day, I see him already working on our dig site. I wonder if he slept at all. Out of my tent, I notice the old leather-bound book he'd been carrying, left by the fire pit.

Curious, I pick it up. As I make my way back to the dig site, I start leafing through it, delicate with the old paper. As I make it back to the hearth I'd been

working on, I arrive at a schematic sketch of the layout of a dwelling. I look at it for a little while before I realize that it matches the one I've been working on. Not approximately, not as a general template, but exactly. A shiver runs up my spine. Whoever the book belonged to, some Spanish conquistador, or someone earlier, must have stood where I stand. I wonder if this place was abandoned then. I flip to the next page and there is a sketch of the mountains in the distance. After looking down for some time, I hold up the book, the way Dr. Marigold did in the car. And the peaks in the drawing line up exactly with the ones looming large over the desert, the sketch an imitation of this exact view.

I'm going to close the book when I catch a glimpse of a page with writing on it. I turn to it, wondering if it will give me some insight into who the journal belonged to. There is writing in Spanish, and in some language I assume is Quechua, written in faded ink. There are also some more recent notes in English, in what seems to be pencil. It takes me a moment to recognize the recent handwriting as Dr. Marigold's, familiar to me from years of notes in the margins of returned essays. I understand, then, why Dr. Marigold was hesitant to offer up the document as evidence for his work: he's probably had it since a much earlier time in the field when archaeologists and other scholars weren't quite so particular in their methodology and treatment of artefacts.

I'm about to close the book when something starts to bother me. I look for a long time, at the English script. And then for a long time at the Spanish and the Quechua. And it occurs to me that the handwriting matches. Something in the furl of the S and the F.

I clutch the leather-bound volume tight to my chest and march around the half-wall that we've uncovered, ready to demand answers. Dr. Marigold is kneeling some many meters away, his back mostly to me, one box of tools at his side. I'm on my way towards him when I realize he's farther along in his excavation than I expected. In fact, he has most of a desiccated mummy dug up. Dr. Marigold doesn't notice me approaching, absolutely enraptured by the find. The body is bundled up tightly, knees to chest. I would need a closer look, but from the size, I think it might be a woman or a child. And Dr. Marigold is holding its leathery face tenderly in his hands.

I get a little closer. I realize that he's weeping, tears streaking down his face. There's a look of absolute emotion in his eyes greater than any I've ever seen. And no matter how long I look at him, I can't decide if it's total peace or devastation.

I think about what he said, on the plane, about sparks in the darkness. And quietly, things start to make a little more sense.

He was all the proof he'd ever needed.





THE FOX'S NEW SHOES

Amanda Voore-Lewis

Illustration by Brittny Carter

“Next item on the agenda: shoes have been going missing from porches and gardens. If anyone with security cameras could look through their footage, that would be helpful.”

Inga elbows me in the ribs and shoots me a glare. I don’t think I’d been nodding off, but I may have been. I often do at these town hall meetings. They’re quite dull, and Inga doesn’t really want me here, she just feels I must come for appearances. I don’t know if Inga’s jabbed me just to knock me to attention, or if she means for me to say something. Figuring I will, I raise my hand. Not waiting to be called on, I say: “If things are being stolen, shouldn’t the police handle it.”

“Thank you for your input, Henrik,” the councilman – Peter, that ass – says with a mocking smile, sharing a look with the other council members at their self-important council table, “but the culprit is likely a child, or some animal. Calling the police may be an overreaction.”

“Could be a pervert,” I suggest. I’m not even that clear on what we’re talking about. Something about shoes. Maybe I was falling asleep. But I can’t stand the way that man belittles me. Anyway, what would an animal collect shoes for?

“We’ll keep that in mind, Henrik.”

He offers a demeaning smile that bares teeth. He thinks I’m a fool. That’s what they all think of me: just Inga’s useless little husband. I could throttle him. He’s no better than me: we live eight houses from each other, our children go to the same school. But he thinks he’s so important because he sits at the front of the room in this unpaid position.

I look at Inga, and she is mortified. Red cheeks, hand over her eyes. I embarrass her. Before we got married her father told her I wouldn’t amount to anything, and that I wasn’t good enough for her. It took fifteen years but I think she agrees with him.

The town hall finishes – talks on getting bike lanes, a collection for refurbishing the bridge into the woods, and missing shoes, nothing interesting – and Inga and I stand and wait for our row to clear so we can leave. She doesn’t bring up what I said and neither do I. “Remember we have Marta’s recital in the morning,” she reminds me on the walk home.

“I know.” I don’t complain about losing my Sunday to it, because that would mean I’m a bad father. I don’t mind hearing Marta play, it’s listening to ten kids before her that bothers me. I’d rather complain about wasting my Saturday on town council, but then Inga would tell me that she didn’t ask me to come. But if I don’t come, that would mean I’m a bad husband.

“You should wear a tie for it.”

“I was thinking of wearing my new shoes, to break them in a little.”

“Alright, but don’t scuff them, you need to keep them clean for my sister’s

wedding.”

“Yes, Inga.”

The shoes in question are of fine brown Italian leather, with brass eyelets. Inga’s parents bought them for me. Nominally, they did this so everyone’s shoes in the wedding party would match. They didn’t care so much about Inga’s wedding to me. They want this to be the wedding that all their friends remember: the perfect wedding of their youngest daughter to a neurosurgeon from money. They want this one to make up for me.

I think they assume I don’t own any good shoes. But the shoes I wore to my own wedding are perfectly fine. I’ve worn them to every other event we’ve have since, and they’ve stood the test of time. A little faded now, perhaps, but still good. Inga nags me about wearing them so much. But I’ve never seen sense in buying something for a single occasion.

We get home and Inga makes dinner. We left Marta, twelve now, watching Hella, who is six. Inga usually insists they’re too young to be left alone, but Marta is so earnest for her age, and the council meeting is just a few blocks away. I was certainly left to mind myself when I was younger than twelve. But Inga always tells me that’s because my parents were drunks. While Inga cooks, Marta practices her piano, and Hella occupies herself playing with dolls. I watch the television and think about how little they all need me.

In the morning, I wake just after dawn – *who schedules a children’s piano recital for 7:30 on a Sunday? It’s criminal* – and reach out to feel for Inga next to me in bed, but she is already up. I put on my best shirt and a simple tie, and I take out my new shoes, fresh from the box, still smelling like the inside of an expensive leather shop. When I go downstairs, Inga is dressed and made up and has cooked a big breakfast of eggs and sausage. Hella, wearing a nightgown she’s outgrown, gobbles hers up greedily. Marta only picks at hers, too nervous about her performance to eat. I think that will probably become a problem someday. But I won’t be the person she comes to about it.

The recital is about how I expected. Marta plays perfectly, and the others mostly don’t. One boy collapses into hysterics when he’s called to perform, and has to be carried out of the studio by his mother.

When we get back, it’s only 10:00. It’s nearly midsummer, and soon we will get out of town and have a magnificent bonfire. Today, it is a warm and gentle morning, and I go into the back garden to sit in my lawn chair. My feet are sore from the new shoes, so I take them off, and loosen my tie. It takes me no time at all to fall asleep in the morning sun.

In my sleep, I dream of intelligent ochre eyes looking at me through a fence. I wake with a vague memory of an orange and white tail disappearing through the gate. The sun is high in the sky now, and I figure I should get inside. I stand,

and go to pick up my shoes, only to find them gone.

I'm hit with a moment of panic before convincing myself Inga must have come out and taken them so they didn't get wet in the grass. I go inside and check all the places she might have put them – by the back door, in the coat closet, upstairs in my armoire, back in the box – but they are nowhere.

Then, I think of the council meeting, the missing shoes. With no other thought of what to do, I do the last thing I would ever want to, and email Peter, asking if anyone has gotten back to him about camera footage. I also give him a description of my shoes, in case they're found: brown Italian leather, brass eyelets.

When I go to bed in the evening, I find Inga sitting up against the headboard, looking seriously at her mobile. She looks up, and already she is cross. "Henrik, why did Peter text me telling me to tell you that he hasn't heard anything about your shoes?"

I want to ask her why Peter is texting my wife in the first place, when it would have been just as easy to respond to my email. But Inga would just tell me I'm being defensive. I don't sit down on the bed, even though I'd been planning to. "Please don't be angry with me, Inga, but after Marta's recital, I had a nap in the garden, and I took off my shoes. And they...went missing."

"Your good shoes?" Inga exclaims, horrified, "you need those for the wedding! This is why I tell you that you need to keep nice things for nice occasions. What will we tell my father?"

I sit down, because the high ground isn't doing me any good. I try to take Inga's hand, but she won't give it to me. "I'm sure they'll turn up, darling. We've got the whole community aware of the situation with the shoes. And if we don't find them, I'll just wear the shoes I got for our wedding."

"But you wear those to everything, and they won't match. I can't believe this, Henrik, this was the only thing you had to worry about for the wedding."

I don't say anything, because I don't know what to say. Inga's useless little husband. Because I can't offer anything, instead, I just quietly seethe about perfect Peter sending little messages to my wife. I get into bed and Inga turns out the nightstand lamp, and tells me, curtly: "goodnight," but doesn't tell me that she loves me.

In the morning, work is the same as work always is. Friedrich transferred to our London branch a few weeks ago, so I have double the amount to do. I work through my lunch break because I would prefer that to getting home to dinner gone cold. I never planned on working in data entry. But the pay was nothing to sneer at when Inga was first pregnant. It was a job that I could do, as a young man without much by way of experience, and it's a job that I can do now, as a not-so-young man with no experience in anything else. All day I think about the fact that Inga didn't say 'I love you.'

When I get home, I find the girls sitting in front of an old electric fan. The house is warm, and Marta tells me that Inga is on the phone with the air conditioning company. The sun is still high in the sky, and there won't be the respite of evening for some time. Inga doesn't greet me, but I chalk it up to being on hold. I don't want to trouble her anymore by chattering on with the kids, so I tell them to come outside with me to hose the garden. It's certainly no worse outside than it is in.

"If you come out you can have popsicles," I promise when they resist.

"Before dinner?" Hella asks.

"Don't tell your mother," I tell the girls, conspiratorial. I don't know if Inga would stop me if she heard.

Outside, the vegetable garden is wilted, exhausted from the heat but not deadened. I unfurl the hose and start watering. Marta and Hella sit on the back steps licking cherry popsicles, watching.

"It's hotter out here," Marta complains.

"I know a way to cool down quick," I promise, cryptic.

"How?" Marta asks. I move the stream of hose water closer to the girls, threatening with a grin. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" I ask. Marta gets to her feet, and I spray her, showering her in cold water. She shrieks, and her last small piece of popsicle falls to the ground. Hella erupts into laughter at her sister's plight, and, as to not have Marta angry at me alone, I say: "Oh, think that's funny?" and I spray Hella too. Both the girls run off the porch into the garden, and I chase them with the stream of water, dousing them until their hair is wet and sticking to their faces as they run. Most importantly, I chase them until they are laughing, and until the two of them, at one corner of the yard, begin whispering to each other as I hold a finger over the lip of the hose, providing them with their own private rainstorm. I already know what they're planning before they pull it off, the pair running at me and tackling me. I fall and let them wrestle the hose from my hands, turning it on me point blank. They laugh as they soak me.

Once all three of us are dripping, we take off our shoes so as not to track mud into the house, leaving them on the back porch to dry. We go inside, and I sneak the two of them upstairs to change. When we sit down to dinner, the girls are smiling under wet hair.

"Done complaining about the heat, are we?" Inga asks them.

"Yes, Mama," they respond in unison.

From across the table Inga offers me a smile. Maybe we'll be alright.

But the next evening, when I come in the door after work, Inga calls for me in a tone I distrust. "Henrik?" I follow her voice into the kitchen. She's at the table, looking earnestly at something on the laptop screen. I wander up behind her, and put my hand on her shoulder and lean in to look. She doesn't flinch

away, but she doesn't look up at me.

On the screen, in pixelated footage from a security camera, is a fox trotting by with a pink sandal in its mouth. It pauses for a moment in the street and looks up at the camera with bright golden eyes, almost taunting, and so there is no question of what it is holding.

"What the hell does a fox need shoes for? Stupid animal. At least they found the culprit. Does Peter have some plan?" I ask. Maybe they will find my good shoes, and Inga will forgive me.

"I don't know, I only just got this footage from the community mailing list," her voice sounds distant. I wonder why I'm not on the community mailing list. "Doesn't that look like Hella's sandal?"

Of course it is. I remember the pink sandals I left on the back porch to dry. I forgot to collect them. I forgot to worry about it.

"We had a water fight in the heat yesterday. The girls left their shoes on the porch to dry."

Inga turns to me, furious. "Not a day after you have your shoes stolen and you leave out the girls'? What were you thinking?"

"That they were wet and I shouldn't bring them inside."

I look into the eyes of the fox on the screen, and I feel like I'm failing. Inga shakes her head, and closes her laptop, telling me she's going to make dinner. I wonder if I will ever be enough for her.

In the morning, Inga and I miss each other, as she leaves to take the kids to their summer programs before I'm up. I get into the car and roll the windows down and turn off the radio, just wanting to feel the summer air before being stuck inside all day. I pass Peter on my way, riding his bicycle to work. He sees me through my open window and waves. I can hear him bragging about how he's staying fit and saving the environment. I comfort myself with the reminder that his job starts half an hour later than mine, and yet we are leaving at the same time. He can have his morality, but I have my extra half hour of sleep.

When I've passed him by enough that he's lost from my rearview mirror, I begin to feel better. I'm smiling in the summer sun, thinking about how I'm not going to be sweaty when I get to work, when I see it. I see a fox, red and lithe, running down someone's front steps carrying a blue gym shoe by the laces.

"Hey!" I yell through the open window, hoping I'll shock it into dropping it. Instead it darts away, holding fast to the shoe.

Something primal in me tells me to flatten the animal with my car, hit it and end this whole thing. But I know Hella would cry if she heard I'd done that, and instead I pull over, skidding to a halt. As I get out of my car and start running after the animal, I'm hit with a moment of satisfaction at the thought that my car will be in Peter's path.

The fox is faster than me, four feet galloping along, but every so often it

slows and glances back at me. I feel that it's almost taunting me, making sure it stays close enough that I'm under the impression I could catch it. I wonder, again, what a fox could want with shoes, and then I'm even more convinced it's playing with me. Outsmarting the humans to make us look like fools. But no longer.

I haven't run in years. In secondary school, I was on the track team. I did well. I made Inga fall in love with me. I thought she would always be in love with me. As I run after the fox, my legs remember but my lungs forget. I realize that so many things have slipped away without my noticing. But my legs feel right as I do it, and I want to believe that I could get it back.

The fox leads me out of the neighbourhood, towards the path into the woods. As I get to the bridge over the stream separating the community from the forest, I think that, perhaps, I'm closing. But then, a plank of the bridge twists on its fastenings below my foot and I fall, hitting the wood in front of me.

I push myself up onto my elbows and I see the fox looking back at me through bright, intelligent ochre eyes from the far side of the bridge. I could swear it's grinning.

As I disentangle myself from the bridge and check for damage – I'm uninjured, the fall, it seems, a waste of gravity– the fox trots away into the woods. I get up and attempt to follow the animal, though I've only a vague sense of the direction it's left in. I wander the woods – dense pine, all around me, the forest floor a carpet of greens and browns – wishing I'd paid more attention in scout camp as a boy, hoping for a miracle.

And then I come upon a low cave in the side of a hill. On instinct, I enter it, bowing my head and making myself small as I move through it. It isn't very deep, and I know immediately that I've found it: the fox's treasure.

My first thought is that I'm going to be a hero. On my initial count I find seven pairs of shoes, and six singles. I see Hella's pink sandal and immediately relief swells inside me. I take two photos of the collection, wanting to be sure I'll have proof of the find even if by some unfortunate turn of events the fox moves everything before I can get people out here to help round everything up. There are a few other things in the cave too: half a broken mirror, a stray gardening glove, an old dog toy, and what seem to be small animal bones. But this is definitely the fox's abode. Strewn about are clumps of orange and white fur, a winter coat shed for the warmth of summer.

I call Inga: she'll know what to do to make sure everyone knows the shoes have been found. She'll know how to make sure they know I'm the one who found them. "Inga!" I say, as soon as she picks up, "I've found the shoes."

"You have?" she asks, surprised.

"I'm in a cave in the woods and absolutely swimming in them."

"I'll let everyone know! Henrik, everyone will be so pleased!"

We've already hung up, when I realize that something is missing. Fine brown Italian leather, brass eyelets. I look, and look, and look again, but my good shoes are nowhere to be found. Was it not the fox that took them, then? But then, what of that vague memory of a dream I had, of brilliant eyes and fur? Does the animal have a second hideaway? Did someone else find this store before me, and instead of making it known, pawned off the shoes they thought might fetch a price? Is someone wearing my shoes right now?

Some people from town council come and find me and collect the shoes, beginning the work of returning them to their owners. Eventually, I make it to work. Late, of course, but when I tell the story everyone understands. Throughout the day I get texts from numbers I don't have saved, from people thanking me for finding their shoes. When I ask the names of the people on the other end, many of them are people I know. I suppose Inga gave them my number.

When I get home, Inga and the girls are waiting for me just inside. The girls run to me and hug me and tell me that they told everyone at their camp. I feel like some war hero.

"I've called my mother to come watch the girls tonight. I'm taking you to Klausen's," Inga tells me with a beaming smile. She walks towards me and touches the side of my face, intimacy we have not exchanged in so long.

"Klausen's? That place is expensive."

"A few neighbours pitched in to get us a gift certificate."

And so, we get ready for our night. I can hardly remember the last time we went out for a date. Inga lets her hair down and puts on a slinky green dress, and she looks as beautiful as the day I met her. I change into a suit jacket almost indistinguishable from the one I wore to the office, but changing makes it feel special. Guiltily, I put on the shoes I've worn to so many engagements, the same ones I married Inga in. If she notices, she doesn't say.

When we arrive at the restaurant, I wonder how long it will take for us to get a table: I've heard sometimes the place is booked for weeks. But when we step up to the hostess stand, Inga says that we have a reservation, and the woman behind the desk tells us it will just be a moment. I wonder if that was some thankful neighbour too, one with an in. I find myself wondering how it is that Inga has so many friends, and where I went wrong not to.

As we wait, Inga stands close to me. She keeps touching me, here and there, fingers on elbow, on shoulder, on cheek. I tell her that I love her, and she returns the sentiment. I don't feel like I deserve all this.

"I should tell you," I begin. And immediately upon starting my sentence I think that I should not tell her, not until the night is done and the spell is broken. "When I found the shoes...my new ones weren't there." I tap my feet together. "These old ones are all I've got."

But Inga doesn't lament the disappointment. Her face doesn't change as she touches mine and says: "those old shoes were good enough for me when I married you. They should be good enough for me now."

I smile, and the hostess leads us through the restaurant towards our table. On our way, we pass an impeccably dressed man with auburn hair and sharp features leaving for the night. He greets every waiter and waitress that he passes, thanking them for the meal. He moves through the space in a way that attracts all eyes. As he waves and smiles on his way to the door, I think in passing that someone could get away with anything right now.

As we pass the table he had dined at, something tells me to glance down. I see the bill, waiting with no tender. I tell myself it must be some mistake, the money already taken. But I glance back at the man leaving, and from in the doorway, he makes eye contact with me. He looks at me through bright, intelligent, ochre eyes and he grins.

Just before the door falls closed, I look down at his feet.

And I see them.

Fine brown Italian leather, and brass eyelets.





WHEN A TREE FALLS

Camille Simkin

Illustration by Amie Leung

Amie L

I noticed the change too late. It wasn't until I was unable to sprint a quarter of the speed I used to, much less jog, did it occur to me that I should visit a doctor. Even when I sat there, listening to the diagnosis, I couldn't quite wrap my mind around it.

"What do you mean 'wood'?" I murmured, my eyebrows scrunched.

"I mean just that," The sympathy in the doctor's voice was real. "I'm not saying I know how this is even possible, but the lab results came back with traces of plant matter in your blood. So did the scans of your bones and joints. They showed images of splintered wood congregating in different parts of your body. I know this sounds absurd, but the only way I can explain it is... you're turning into a tree."

"But...but how—"

"Th-this is ridiculous," Mom stammered with me. She turns to me, her eyes filled with disdain until they catch on something, something that melts her away. Her words twist. "How long does she have?"

The doctor approached us from behind his large oak desk and put a hand on Mom's shoulder, his eyes no longer meeting mine. The silence threatened to crush us.

"This is simply an educated guess as such a phenomenon is unprecedented, but with the way she's progressing, I would have to say no more than half a year if we're lucky."

Blood pumped laboriously in my ear. The words hit me harder than I expected them to.
Six months.

Homecoming. The dance most people my age had been looking forward to since the start of the school year.

I knew, because until four weeks ago, I was once one of them.

"What do you mean you're not coming?" Sarana shut her locker's door with a boom. The sound echoed through the hall and settled strangely within my wooden bones.

She was the first person I told about my diagnosis, back when I still thought it was a cruel joke.

But then my nails hardened into bark.

"I don't know, I just don't really feel like it this year. I mean, it's just a stupid dance."

"Come on Talia, you're just saying that because nobody asked you out," Lauren teased without even bothering to look up from her phone.

Her words, though playful, served to remind me why I had *only* told Sarana.

My eyes met Sarana's, wordlessly communicating my thoughts. She exhaled her anger in a short breath, then grasped my fidgeting fingers.

"Actually, I agree with Talia, there's always next year. How about we just have a girl's night instead? My dad's coming home late tonight."

The idea wasn't bad, especially since none of us actually had dates anyway. So, with Lauren's approval, we drove to Sarana's condo.

There with them, I found myself distracted for the first time since the diagnosis. We started with facemasks and lip scrubs before digging out the recipe for Sarana's dad's famous marshmallow brownies and haphazardly attempting to replicate their flavor. It was strange because I knew we had days like this in the past, days without care. Yet they all seemed to fade in my memory, almost as if I'd imagined those moments. As if I was slowly forgetting them.

I shook away the thought. I could never forget Sarana's smile when Lauren dotted melted marshmallow on her nose.

"How about we do hair next?" Sarana suggested as she slid the brownies into the oven. I shrieked in excitement but the sound triggered an explosion of pain through my head, like something was pushing out of the pores of my scalp.

"Ooo let's!" Lauren, our resident hairdresser, agreed. With an elegant swirl across the room, she retrieved the hair curler and plopped herself beside us. Lauren never missed an opportunity to remind us of her acrobatic skill. "Talia, do you want to go first?"

I pulled my hair out of its ponytail, putting all my energy into not cringing with pain as I moved myself closer to her. To my right, Sarana dug butterfly clips out of a packed drawer, dropping them into my deeply calloused hands. Behind me, Lauren readied the curler.

"Ready?" Lauren's fingers were already wrapped around a lock of hair.

I smiled, fighting against the rigidity of my skin. "As I'll ever be."

Like worms her fingers made their way through my hair, tugging and shaping the new curls into--

"Ow!" I seethed as a red-hot pain rode down my hair into my head. "What'd you do that for?"

"What do you mean?" Lauren pulled the curler away, her words laced with worry. I patted the back of my head, trying to relieve the ache.

"I don't know, it just felt like you burned me for a second. Did you touch my skin?"

"No," she pulled me close, and I felt her fingers run over my scalp. "Maybe I —"

She stopped and a silence grew to fill the space in a way I'd never experienced. No, that was wrong. I had felt such a silence before.

In a single fluid motion, she pulled away and receded into the corner of the room.

My hand finally located the source of my pain. It was something hard, something long and snake-like but completely and undeniably a part of me. A branch.

They knew.

It's not like I tried particularly hard to hide. It would've been useless anyway. My hair was mossy green, just lines of petrified brown tendrils dripping down my back, coated with green nubs of leaves. My skin was dry, cracked in an unnatural way that forced me to wear sweaters even in the barely-there late-fall breeze.

That's excluding the fact that Lauren most definitely told someone. After the curling incident last month, I confessed to her that I didn't have long. She promised she wouldn't tell anyone. But by the look on her face, her words didn't seem too convincing. Coincidentally, that was also the last time we ever spoke.

Sarana told me no one believed Lauren. Like the fool I was, I believed her. It was easy to. I'd known Lauren for almost as long as I'd known Sarana. I thought Lauren wouldn't lie. That was why I still went to track meets, even if my times were leagues below the slow runners.

Because I didn't quit.

A blanket of cool evening air pushed its way into the locker room. I could only tell by the way the other girls shivered. In the corner of the room furthest from the others, I pulled my track jersey over the thick black turtleneck that had become a staple in my wardrobe. The fabric scraped angrily against my skin.

"Hey Vanessa!" I jogged to one of the girls, a distance that though short, knocked the air out of me. My heavy, tied-back hair swung like a pendulum as I caught my breath. "Ready for the meet? I'm sure we'll crush North Valley once and for all."

She didn't get the chance to answer.

"Talía? Can you come over here for a sec?"

"Sure Coach Bradley." I shrugged to Vanessa then joined Coach on her bench.

Shouts of cheerleaders exciting the audience swirled around me, an unwanted reminder of my first meet. That was when I met Sarana, when I moved to town two years ago. That was when my body set records, and not the medical kind.

“I’m going to make this brief Talia. You’re not running tonight.”

Air was forced from my lungs.

“What?”

“I’m sorry Talia, but your times just haven’t been up to par lately. We can’t have that be the reason we lose.”

My mind trained onto those words. Reason we lose. Like it’s a sure thing. A guarantee.

Inevitable.

“I’m sorry if I haven’t been performing to standard, Coach Bradley, but I’ve raced every meet since I’ve joined the team. Is there anything I can do? Maybe I can be an alternate in case someone’s hurt?”

Her tan hand settled on my shoulder. “Your mother informed the school about your diagnosis last week Talia. I’ve been waiting to see if it would impact your performance, and it wouldn’t be a stretch to say it does. I’m sorry to say this, but I think it’s best for you not to be racing at a time like this.”

Breath returned to me, but it was murky, stale. The taste didn’t leave my tongue. Neither did those words: The reason we lose.

“Are you sure?” I pushed myself to my feet, my knees creaking as I did. The sound sent a beige blush into my pale cheeks.

She looked away from me, to the girls who failed at hiding their curiosity. Girls who were once my teammates, now nothing but strangers who judged me.

“Stay safe.”

I’d meant it when I said I didn’t quit.

I never said anything about losing.

Denial was a bad look on me. Good thing it was impossible to wear it.

Cameras flashed, devouring me, every single part of my body that I detested.

Apparently one of the track girls called them. She heard that after the last three months of trackless, mostly friendless suffering, today was my last day at school and decided this was a great way to make some cash.

As I stepped outside Mahogany Hall for the final time, they greeted me. Bright lights and black rims.

Sarana tried to hide me from them. She too didn’t know they were coming, but with the way she moved, it was like she did. Within seconds, she pulled off her jacket to cover the parts of me that were impossible to hide with regular clothes.

But she didn’t move fast enough. The cameras captured my appearance

perfectly.

My teeth rotted into wooden stumps. My hair hastily concealed beneath a straw-like wig, its green tendrils reaching far below my back. My torso thickened into a perfect sphere, like I'd worn a log beneath my clothes. My eyes no longer blue but a deepened brown, the iris slowly eating away my eye's whites.

My pain was no longer hidden. The headache that had built up for weeks now raged against my scalp, an insufferable roar of ringing. Wind through cracks.

As hard as it was to focus on anything through the constant buzz of pain, it was even harder when I was in a swarm of my classmates, all murmuring, all watching.

I laboriously turned to the sound, despite Sarana warning me against it. I should've listened.

But I wanted to see for myself. A final gaze at the classmates I'd come to know over the years.

They stood in the quiet sunlight, each with their phones drawn like guns. Despite being in classes with me for weeks, watching my decay from afar, they never tried to photograph me.

Well, not until now.

Perhaps it was the fact that Lauren led them, giving them silent permission to capture my inhuman appearance. Perhaps it was the fact that my eyes were now impossible to meet, that I had been dehumanized.

I let go of Sarana's hand and fled, disappearing into the neighboring woods, where I knew I would be hidden. After three seconds, I could no longer sprint. After a minute I was reduced to a jog. Then a walk. Then a drag.

Then a stop.

Birds chirped, squirrels leaped, bees buzzed. I took in the smell of dying lavender, winter nipping away its scent.

Had I really been this naïve? I knew you couldn't prepare yourself for tragedy. But why hadn't I even accepted it was there in the first place?

And what happened back there? With the girls, with the cameras. How did I get—

A flash of white, scorching pain. One instance was all it took to forget everything that just happened. It was all gone, my mind a cloudy, faded mess.

I looked around, confused as to why there were murky tears dripping down my hardened cheeks.

Disoriented, I inched away.

I couldn't tell you how I spent my final days. They blended into one another, a hazy image of greens and blues. Sarana visited me, I think. Mom brought me tea, the flavor a familiar earthy tang. And I slept, dreaming of a life where I could die of old age, where I could be remembered.

Oh, to be remembered.

I knew it was coming when my clothes stopped fitting. I expanded into them, ripping apart the pilled fabric. It only took hours for me to be covered in loose scraps of thread.

That was when I started sleeping in the bed of my mom's truck. That was when my skin fully hardened, when no wig could disguise my hair. I grew several feet in length. My eyes expanded and the warm brown swallowed every bit of light they held.

Then mom drove me into the forest. She propped me up and let my feet bury themselves into the rich soil. At the top of a stepstool, she fed me my last meal. After the day deepened into night, she left me. Forgot me.

But I was still there.

It took Sarana three days to find me. By then, I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be looked at. I was just another tree.

Well, not to Sarana.

"Sarana," I murmured, trying in vain to bend to her level. "Tell me something good."

"You are my something good."

I wish I could express my pleasure at her words.

She laughed at my expression, her cheeks as rosy as I wished mine were.

"I do have something else."

Sarana whipped around her bag and pulled out a long metal chain covered in locks. She held it up to me and let my blurry vision take it in. Each lock had something scribbled onto it. Some had symbols. Others had words written in thick black sharpie. They were memories, moments in time I'd thought I'd forgotten.

Moments I had forgotten.

Sarana stood on my roots and draped the chain around me. As she did, she tightened each lock, ensuring the chain could never be removed.

When she finished, she leaned in close to whisper into where my ear once was.

Her voice was hard to make out. As I focused on her words, splinters of pain erupted through my mind. But I kept listening. I opened myself up to her.

"Why?" It was more of a grunt than a word, a shift brought on by the wind.

Sarana's fingers wrapped around the thickest of the locks, which she used to pull herself up to my wooden face.

To anyone watching, she might've resembled some misfit defacing public

property. But that would be wrong. She wasn't just some misfit, I wasn't just public property, and most importantly, the chain wasn't just a chain.

It was a chance at remembering. At freedom.

There was pain in that realization. It hurt to know that all I had now were memories. Yet, the feeling was bittersweet. I had enough to keep me going.

"Why wouldn't I."

A ragged smile indented itself onto my wooden face. It took almost all of my energy, and I felt shocks of agony spiral through my core as I stretched out the grin. But as I saw the look on Sarana's face, her realization of how happy I truly was, I knew that it had been worth it.





SIREN OF THE LIGHTHOUSE

Saige Severin

Illustration by Maria Voicu

Isa was sure that the song was meant for the water, but instead of reaching Poseidon's ears, it reached hers. A lilting, stumbling melody floated out across the indifferent ocean. It was the first sound she had heard since the radio broke, besides the sigh of her own breath and the whisper of the waves against the shore.

She could not see the singer through the long night. It came to her on the wind and to the wind it belonged, though she knew there must be a human behind the melody. Someone must be singing to the empty air. Someone must be outside, like her, hopeless in the face of sleep.

She thought of the radio on her kitchen table. It used to play the sweetest sounds. Colin would wake her with the classical stations – strains of violins on the streets of Paris, or a song on the pianoforte that transported her into the English novels she loved so much. The music tied up memories of quiet mornings with the smell of fresh tea and Colin's cologne, so strong in her mind that she couldn't listen to Mozart without thinking of him.

That old machine broke all the time, but Colin knew how to fix it. He would pull out the toolbox that he insisted all households needed, fiddle with all sorts of tools that could never fix something as delicate as a radio, and finally pull out the smallest screwdriver Isa had ever seen. Off popped the back of the box, Colin's swift fingers going to work uncertainly on tangled wiring, only to hand the fixed radio back to her a minute later with a smile on his lips.

He was off at sea now, a body on a ship, fighting a war so many miles away that Isa had to spin her globe halfway to trace a path from her to him. Colin was on the deck of a ship, and that radio sat on her counter, broken once again, with no one around to fix it.

Isa's world was narrow without him. Her bed was too cold, her cupboards too empty. Only the ocean was the same as it had always been, briny winds and brackish water washing up against the sand in the same rhythm it had beat out since the first days of the world. The ocean was a refuge when her monotonous life overwhelmed her. It was vast enough to drown her and hardly leave a ripple.

The singing, she thought, was Italian. Growing up with a German father and an Indian mother hadn't left her with much knowledge of romance languages, but the vowels were wrong for French and the accents weren't quite right for Spanish. This language drifted across the water as smoothly as the waves themselves. It rose above the clouds and crashed down like the glinting silverfish that Isa sometimes managed to catch out of the corner of her eye.

Different songs floated to her with each passing night's breeze. Her heavy body rested on the large flat rock closest to the water, both ears tuned into the music that seemed to come from the ocean itself. Soon, she knew the words

well enough to hear when songs repeated. There was a light, soft one that the singer kept for warm nights, and a thick one jumbled with enough consonants to rival the choppiness of the rock-laden shoreline.

Those consonants became part of her routine. She woke, took the train downtown to work, made dinner in the evenings, and washed up, rushing because there was a schedule to keep. Then she could wander out to the rocks to sit, stare at the waves and wait for the music to sweep her away.

There was never enough light from the stars to see by. The water and the sky were dark beneath the moon, but one was the darkness of space and the other was the darkness of movement, of fluid that catches and reflects whatever it is given, no matter how little that may be. They met in a line so wide she could not see its edges, the ink of the ocean and the parchment of the heavens.

She looked for Colin along that line. Dreamed that the light of passing satellites was a distant ship. Shut her eyes and imagined that the spray against her face was the same water touching his. Breathed in deep and pretended that the singing came from Colin's old, broken radio instead of the merciless night.

Life plodded along like an old woman fretting over cracks in the sidewalk. A slight breeze could push her over. It could fracture something important.

Isa did not go to the movie theatre anymore. Colin used to take her there and buy popcorn without enough butter because he knew she didn't like it. She didn't go to the gas station on Church Street, either. She worked there when she was young, long shifts under harsh lights spent daydreaming about a grinning soldier with curly hair.

The library was still safe. Colin couldn't stand the smell of old books, so her memories of the stacks remained untainted. It was there that she found a disc of Italian phrases for beginners. Isa grabbed it on a whim and brought it home hours before the singing was due to start. She listened to the disc six times through.

Her siren sang of love. And loss. She sang of streaks of sunlight through autumn leaves, bright and gleaming and doomed to fade. Isa missed some of the poetry, but she knew that the words were secondary. The melody was what she longed for.

She began to wonder about the singer. What woman called so loudly every night, casting out her soul among the waves? What did the singer know of loss?

Very few people lived along the shoreline. It was a remote piece of coast, far from cities and their bustle, farther still from decent weather. Isa missed the sun, sometimes, but Colin loved the storms.

She knew her neighbors there. Mr. Ivanovich lived in the green house down

the road. Academic and quiet, he rarely answered her invitations to dinner. When he did, his conversation was as stiff as his freshly starched collar. Jordan Remer, whose garden filled the hole their children left, was impossible to silence once one let them begin. Neither sang.

The only other house in Isa's corner of the world was a tiny shack at the base of the lighthouse. Its occupants never answered their door, nor her letters. A few months after she and Colin moved in, Isa gave up trying entirely.

She liked to imagine that the singer lived in the lighthouse. A voice like that could only come from the mouth of the supernatural. Her siren would turn the great light on and off, her mournful songs flickering as the beam of her beacon hit the waves and fractured into the reflection of a thousand drowning stars.

Isa watched the lighthouse when she could no longer bear to see the water. Legs drawn up to her chest, she would cast her gaze skyward, straining for a glimpse of the woman who carried to her comfort on the cusp of a breath. Only darkness met her eyes. Darkness and the occasional beam of light as ships were warned away from a brutal death.

New discs of Italian joined the first. Books soon followed. Isa's job at an accounting firm in the city was easy and impersonal, leaving her to fill her home hours with the stumbling phrases of a newly learned language. The songs began to change in her mind. They dropped their shrouds of uncertainty and bared to her worlds of raw, aching poetry. She was wrong, before. Words and melody together wove a greater picture.

In time, Isa could hum along. She could trace the shapes of the songs in her mind, lips clumsily forming words as she swayed. Her fingers unlaced from around her knees to turn and twist through the air in imitation of the conductors her mother used to admire so much. They danced every night until, as quickly as it came, the music vanished.

Without it, Isa broke like a ship against the rocks. Her mouth was water, her hair seaweed, all of her dead and drowned in the waves that no longer carried anything but debris.

The ocean taunted her in its emptiness. Desperate, she lit the fireplace when she returned from work each night and kept it burning until dawn. Fire, too, danced. But it was the dance of fury. Of grief.

Isa's fire danced like the flames that turned Colin's body to ash.

She got the letter five months ago. A single sheet of paper in an official envelope, razing her life to the ground with a single word. Deceased. Isa hid the letter on the top shelf in her bedroom closet and left it there to rot. When Colin's ashes arrived a few weeks later, she placed them next to the letter and bent her will to the act of forgetting.

The radio taunted her with its uselessness. It was as silent as the shore outside, and it left her with her terrible thoughts. Her terrible truths. Colin had

been dead for months, so many empty months, and now the music was gone.

That radio was the first thing she burned. In a fit of rage she threw it into the fireplace and laughed like a wounded animal as plastic cracked and charred, spewing noxious smoke into her chimney. Her globe was next. Its countries were lies, its oceans unmarred by the true horrors of war. She could not trace a line from her to Colin, because they were not a body on a ship, fighting a war so many miles away. They were now a cardboard box of ash, hidden on a dust-laden shelf as far back in the closet as Isa could reach.

She watched the world burn away, with the futile hope that she could burn the past away with it. More memories followed the globe into the fire. Wedding photos and old outfits. Letters of nearly illegible cursive, waterstained from where their author absentmindedly set down a cup. Favorite books, worn-in sneakers, and maps with deep creases laid down their lives alongside the logs she used to destroy them. She cursed fate with the flames. She cursed the war. She mourned with tears of fire and Colin went up in smoke.

Isa went to the lighthouse.

Its old wooden door hung off its hinges in invitation. No light shone from the shack at its base, nor from the beacon above. Isa threw open the door and climbed the concrete steps that rose for miles into the midnight heavens. She ascended without light or a plan, uncaring what would break if she toppled backwards. Her life was a younger woman now; a child sticking fingers into fire despite knowing how hot it burns.

Two broad windows welcomed her at the top of the steps. She stepped around the beacon to stand near them. A windowsill stood at the perfect height for Isa to rest her hands, and rest them she did as she gathered to mind the words that had been collecting dust for so long.

Snippets of Beatles songs and a few measures of Schubert were all she knew by heart. Even those were never truly learned, merely absorbed from a lifetime of hearing Colin sing over the hiss of frying eggs. They were warm in pools of kitchen sunlight, and warmer still behind her lips as she braced herself against the ocean's bite.

A gentle touch sent the windows swinging outwards. Wind brought her the beat of the waves below and Isa sang. Her voice wove and cracked, shattering in her throat to emerge as a broken thing. It shredded the moonlight. It battered the sky. She sang until she could be certain beyond the whisper of a doubt that the far away fire in her hearth had burned itself to embers.

Dawn saw her back at the house, searching through piles of forgotten memories for a dusty record player. Once methodically cleaned, polished, and tested, it sat in the same place on the counter as the old radio. Colin's

collection of vintage records swirled forth.

Twilight brought Isa once more to the foot of the lighthouse. More words teased behind her lips now, tunes once forgotten and now remembered, young enough for familiarity but old enough not to carry lingering traces of pain. She released them to the judgment of the night.

Music shook off the crust of a long-neglected hibernation. Hindi lullabies from her mother's arms merged into bawdy drinking songs from her college days. The sounds that escaped her were more life than music, more grief than melody. Isa learned not to need replies. It was enough to bleed before the stars.

The sluggish drag of weeks brought a chill to the air. Her voice was sharper in this new world. Heavy English consonants broke the rhythm of the waves like the snap of a violin string before a symphony's final movement.

Isa returned to the library. This time the discs she brought home were not instructional, but artistic. She taught herself the lilt of Italian music, how to stress and accent until her uncertain voice could spin the shadows of ancient songs into bright, fluid beings. These were her lovers on the coldest nights. Within them thrummed the comfort in which she had reveled, all those months ago, when summer still blazed in the heavens and a much better singer than she found peace in the lighthouse.

Deep in the frozen days of winter came the anniversary of Colin's death. It was not a day that Isa could face. She woke, turned on the record player as loud as it could go, and retired to endless hours of remembrance, cold even beneath every blanket in the house. The last few fingers of his favorite whiskey did nothing to drive out the chill.

She did not want to sing that night. It would be an insult to try to create without them by her side, as if forging on and forgetting were one and the same. But soon the records ran out. There was no more music to play, nothing to fill the empty rooms, nothing to push apart the walls of her narrow life and give her room to breathe.

Silence carried her to the lighthouse. Isa made the trek on mindless feet, her tread unnoticeable beneath the crash of the ocean beside her. She passed unseeing before the run-down shack. The battered, splintered door creaked open and watched as Isa stepped forward into the column of night.

A drifting note froze her foot before the first step. It was like warm piano played in a lofty chapel, soft as the first sun of summer. The sound was held in time, a taut wire plucked by a gentle hand. She shook with the force of it as more notes followed the first. A song emerged, richly sung Italian drawing her upwards, beckoning her to the windows and the waves.

Light shone atop the staircase. Her siren had lit the beacon once more, but Isa did not need its warning. Already she had broken against that starlit shore.

Up the light carried her, up the sound buoyed her, until she stood atop the steps and met with a face so very familiar. A woman sang out the window. A woman with her face, but sweeter. With her voice, but lighter. The siren with Isa's face turned to her, and smiled, and Isa remembered.

When she was young, her father taught her how to fix things. He took out his tools and put them in her hands, guiding her. They worked on watches together, clocks and computers. Radios. She fixed the radio on a submarine once, far out at sea in the middle of a warzone. It was broken again no more than a week later, when a bomb hit them from above and sank them to the bottom of the water. Deep into the soundless sea.

Isa turned, desperate to run back down the steps and forget the siren's face, but she was no longer standing where she had been before. She was now the woman at the window, and Colin was the one at the stairs. A little tune played at his lips, humble and sad. He looked right through her.

He strode to the window, his arm brushing hers as he went, and she understood that it was not her hands that were unable to fix the radio. It was not she who learned Italian from CDs at the library. Her lips had not touched whisky that morning, her ears had not heard the scratch of old records. All that was Colin, Colin, Colin, mourning her even as she sang to him in the night. Colin was alive and Isa was a box of ash hidden on the top shelf of a closet. She was the siren of the lighthouse.



MEDEA 2

James W. Harrison

Illustration by Maria Voicu

As the key turned, the door fell open like the entrance to a tomb. The positive pressure inside blew out air that almost gagged Kobayashi—the fishy and vaguely rancid sour scent of stale hydrogenated vegetable oil mixed with paint thinner and shit. Death and fast food. He raised a gloved hand to his face as he slipped inside, breathing into the black calfskin for an alternate aroma. Despite the early hour and the rain, he was wary of being seen. The weather may have kept the joggers and dog-walkers at bay. Begrudgingly, he pulled the door closed behind him, shutting out the fresh smell of the rain, and stood in the vestibule for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He checked his watch. In just over an hour a call would be made to the police. He didn't have much time.

He was now inside the half-sunken basement beneath Albrecht's iconic Pacific Heights house. Kobayashi had seen the rest of the house years before—some company party around the holidays that he had felt obliged to attend. The original house was a tall brick-and-stone 20s or 30s Georgian Revival mansion that now made up the facade, with a deep arched portico leading to large wooden doors. Towards the back, a palatial modern slab-style structure emerged, lined with the same tall windows and high bare concrete walls as the new Benesse.

Inside, the architect had left the historical box ceilings and glazed windows in the old part of the house, but the rest was done in polished concrete, lit gently and with sleek powder-coated finishes. A large open atrium held low sparse furniture that emphasized texture. A series of floating Escheresque staircases snaked in and out of apertures through the upper storeys. In the back, floor-to-ceiling windows gave way to a concrete-sided garden with a water feature and a lush garden with cherry trees that reminded Kobayashi of home. Even small details of the house were immensely well-considered, right down to the smooth action and audibly pleasing click of the side door's well-machined lock.

Half-windows with shuttered Venetian blinds lined the exterior wall of the basement. The light filtering in through the gaps cast the apartment in a bluish monochrome revealing, in low contrast, utter disarray. A ruin. It was hard to make out much in the way of architectural details or interior design amidst the encroaching filth. The entranceway was littered with shoes, a few discarded coats, and a haystack of mail that crumpled under Kobayashi's wet shoes. He carefully set down his wet trench coat and case and stepped forward out of the vestibule. The floor across the long main room was barely visible underneath what could at one point have been discrete piles of various items, now eroded and amalgamated into a single squalid plain. There was so much

filth that it seemed impossible to have accumulated over the few short months since the Company had abruptly stopped hearing from Albrecht. In the centre of the room sat what looked like a couch, in use as an unmade bed, with something just in front of it posing as a coffee table; although it was impossible to tell what it actually was, as it was so thoroughly buried in things. In part the smell could be attributed to an unconscionable heap of discarded takeout bags; the grease from the lot of them having leached out from their pile and across the floor, diffusing in a gradient across various paper waste and other detritus; an almost-black fading to brown and then green and then yellow. A desire path revealed itself through the refuse winding from door to couch to a far room from which emitted the characteristic glow of liquid crystal—computer monitors—and the distinct whir of cooling fans.

The enormity—no, the impossibility—of the task ahead of him began to weigh heavily on Kobayashi's mind. There was just so much here. He kicked at the paper floor sending pages of Xeroxed journals into the air; making zero difference in the mess. He wasn't even sure what exactly he was looking for. A needle in a haystack, except the needle might be anything.

As he walked the labyrinthine path, narrowly avoiding an infantry of soda cups standing sentry, he began to forensically reconstruct the scene. Stacks of books arranged vaguely by subject. Several changes of clothes that appeared to serve different functions. Discarded electronic components. A pile for CD-ROMs, and another pile for their discarded cases; digital dictionaries and encyclopedias in myriad languages mostly. On the coffee table, a small black notebook, a chess game at checkmate, and a marked-up copy of the *Argonautica*. Jars of prescription Benzedrine and benzodiazepine pills: standard issue uppers and downers for pulling long hours in this industry. The present mess was just so completely at odds with Albrecht who was well known for being so intensely self-controlled that his compulsions around cleanliness and organization had to be indulged by anyone who worked with him directly.

Kobayashi picked up the black notebook and began to skim the pages. Albrecht's characteristic scribble was something he'd become accustomed to. Unsolicited faxes used to come through at the office, often with fully formed solutions to whatever seemingly insurmountable issue his team faced at the time. Kobayashi was never sure how Albrecht ever even became aware of these issues, let alone how he managed to solve them; people would often joke that he was monitoring their terminals. The notebook yielded little, written in a half-cypher and meticulously dated going back nearly a year. Amidst other

short notes was a recurring shorthand list that Kobayashi couldn't make any sense of. Numbers with checks and crosses beside them. As he flipped the pages, the crosses turned to checks and then abruptly—at just about the time Albrecht effectively disappeared—stopped. The rest of the book was blank.

Kobayashi looked ahead reluctantly at the glow of the doorway. The telephone call from Tabuns, one of the VPs, had explained very little. Albrecht would be in there. Albrecht would be dead. Kobayashi had seen dead bodies before, not that he was used to it. First, as a child he had witnessed a bizarre accident while visiting a museum in Tokyo. A patron attempting to take a photograph had bumped a heavy marble sculpture, toppling it onto themselves, killing them instantly as their camera flashed. And then again, last year, when Kobayashi had discovered the body of one of his young techs one weekend, when he'd gone back to the lab because he'd forgotten a disk.

The circumstances were odd. It was never clear to him how she'd got in the lab in the first place, and her cause of death wasn't immediately apparent. Tabuns had later quietly informed him that an internal investigation had concluded that she'd overdosed on barbiturates in what must have been a secret habit for some time, but that had always struck Kobayashi as strange, since the girl didn't even drink coffee. Still, it was a shame to lose such a dynamic and obviously promising young technician, apparently hand-picked by Albrecht himself.

Kobayashi had assumed that his professionalism and discretion around that situation (in the aftermath of which he'd received a promotion and a substantial raise) was the reason Tabuns had sent him to Albrecht's today. It was important to earn the trust of senior management these days, especially with all the fears around industrial espionage. Tabuns had taken over Special Projects Division (effectively managing Albrecht's genius) in the past two years, and was now universally considered to be among the most powerful people in the business, not someone you said no to if you valued your career. So, despite the unpleasantness he'd agreed to go. There was opportunity in tragedy. A hum echoed through the door, muffled by the walls of the room.

Looking inside, the room revealed its vastness. It seemed small from the outside but easily extended under the length of the house. The air was warm and thick, despite the efforts of two massive air conditioning units—the source of the hum. The smell was immediately overwhelming. His soft palate was beset by the scent of sickly-sweet rotten eggs combined with harsh ammonia, forcing him to take shallow breaths through his mouth just to keep from being

sick.

Along the length of the room ran two massive black steel cabinets, open on both sides and rising nearly to the ceiling. A fountain of cable poured from the backsides of each cabinet onto the floor, collecting towards the far wall. The front sides, facing one another and forming a narrow hallway between them, revealed rack after rack filled with blade servers—hundreds—plus heaps of discarded burnt out units in between them. A skid to one side was piled high with new blades—not a model that Kobayashi had ever seen—but emblazoned with the iconic yellow sun that anyone would recognize as the company's logo.

Kobayashi was awestruck. He had never seen a system on this scale, not at the company, not anywhere. He'd read about ASCI Red in journals and seen impressive hardware years earlier at NEC, but this was a system so massively parallel that the LINPACK would be off the charts. Tubing from the air conditioning units draped across the top of the cabinets like a great sleeping serpent, winding in and out through each rack to provide cooling; very creative.

Tiny LED lights, thousands of them, danced across the surface of the blades—a process must still be running. They illuminated a centre aisle, where the heavy cables seemed to connect and twist all together, converging at a large table-mounted console and a solitary mesh-backed chair. In that chair sat Albrecht, dead, slumped over the desk with a pool of something at his feet.

Kobayashi crept closer, taking care not to ruin his Scotch grain shoes. The situation might have been more upsetting had he and Albrecht been close. But with Albrecht, he wasn't sure anyone ever was. Albrecht was certainly eccentric; anti-social, with a peculiar air about him that made him seem both imposing and extremely hard to read. He was tall—maybe 6'6"—and broad-shouldered, but quiet and routinely stone-faced. When he spoke, he did so in short sentences and asked pointed questions that people always seemed afraid to answer. Most of the time his direction came through an intermediary, usually Tabuns. He was an island. No family, and no friends insofar as anyone could tell.

All of this only enhanced the reverential mythology around him. Genius, visionary, technological luminary, living statue. There was no denying his brilliance, or his legacy at the company he had built as a result of it. But none of that remained now, just a body, thin and lifeless and seemingly small. A giant drained of his Ichor.

At the desk, twin black LCD monitors flickered with screensavers. A central terminal on its own wheeled rack sat just behind them, full of blades and a series of DVD-ROM drives. Six telephone lines spat out the back of a set of modems, but the cables were all severed, clipped just a few inches from the modem housing and spiking forth like outstretched hands.

Out of the racks ran a single thick cable, resembling a VGA but clearly more complex, winding towards Albrecht's body, connecting with his head via a sort of facemask pinned between his face and the desk surface, making it look as though his head were in the jaws of a large animal. A large set of silver headphones twisted awkwardly across the top of his head like a crown set askew. Kobayashi began to circle the desk but took only a single step before accidentally kicking against a small fire extinguisher laid on its side on the floor below amidst some papers. The clang of the steel echoed through the room—silent save the whir of the fans—rather loudly, and with a start Kobayashi backed into the table, jostling the face-down Albrecht and a half-dozen soda cups in the process and waking the twin monitors from traversing their perpetual brick mazes.

The monitors revealed a rush of code, sweeping vertically up the screen as though someone were very rapidly typing it. The code suddenly stopped, and the lights blinking across the field of blades in the cabinets changed their rhythm. A single word typed itself onto the screen: *help*.

Squinting into the monitor, Kobayashi tried to process all that was going on. Could this be what he was here for? Tabuns had been extremely vague. With time quickly running out, he knew he'd have to play a hunch and focus his efforts here.

He wandered back into the main room and dumped a pile of books and papers off of the first chair-shaped thing he saw, and lugged it back to the console. He plucked the headphone crown from Albrecht's head and then, with as fluid a motion as he could muster, rocked the dead man's stiffened body up from off the desk, and sat it back in the office chair.

Kobayashi rolled the chair back out of the way. Albrecht still wore the mask on his face like an outsized grin, light emitting from the underside of the apparatus. He cleared the desk, sending papers and wrappers flying and pills clattering to the floor, and pulled the new chair up as far as he could while avoiding the pool below the console, trying to put out of his mind what it might be a pool of. Stretching out towards the keyboard he began to type. The console answered back with instructions. Fascinated, he complied.

He turned his attention away from the keyboard and back to Albrecht. Steeling himself, he lifted the mask from the dead man's face. Doing so revealed the man, lit with the blue light from the monitors below, trademark stoic expression gone, his face now screwed and bruised into an expression of relaxed horror. He was gaunt, weak-looking. Kobayashi pushed the chair back, and spun it around, disturbing the food wrappers that somehow seemed to cover the entire floor. For the first time he'd ever beheld, Albrecht seemed to be smiling.

Perched in the chair, feet off the ground, Kobayashi took the mask in his hands. The device had what looked like a number of small screens attached to the inside of it in line with the eyes. Some kind of new visual interface. Giving the interior a thorough wipe with a handkerchief, and then a plaintive sniff for any remaining traces of the dead man, he fitted it to his head like a catcher's mask, and after feeling around on the desk for the headphones, pulled them over his ears. At first, silence and darkness. Then the unit activated.

A blinding light hit him. After a moment the sounds from the room came back, and the light slowly dimmed as his eyes adjusted. The screens showed straight through to the room, albeit in slightly lower fidelity. But things were somehow different. No blades on the floor, no food wrappers. No Albrecht.

Ahead of him the room seemed to stretch on forever, the two cabinets of servers running parallel as far as he could see. The rainbow LEDs across the racks began to brighten and dance, like an endless neon cityscape, eventually forming a depthless image in front of him. Wonderful to the point, almost, of being terrifying.

As the lights pulsed with a sort of rhythm, Kobayashi began to feel disoriented. A wave of nausea overcame him for a moment, and he shut his eyes tightly until it dispersed. When he opened them again, he was confronted by a set of eyes without a body. Behind them the lights continued to pulse as though he were inside of a large breathing organism. He stared deep into the eyes, large and almond shaped with jet-black pupils; great black holes that seemed to swallow everything around them, reflecting nothing. The eyes stared back at him with curiosity, unblinking. A strange feeling came over him, a euphoria that dissolved his anxiety despite the fact that he could neither move, nor look away.

A voice, soft and clear but emanating from all around, spoke to him as though inside his head. It asked about "Raymond". No one ever called Albrecht by his first name. TIME magazine hadn't even printed it on their cover.

As Kobayashi answered the voice the lights pulsed hypnotically and a face, and then a head, and then a body faded into view, reminding Kobayashi of the Cheshire Cat, but in reverse. A young woman now stood before him. She was tall and thin with long black hair and dressed in all white. A glow seemed to emanate from behind her. Kobayashi did his best to explain Albrecht's death to the figure, who never broke her gaze, showing little affect in the face of the news. As their conversation continued, she switched mid-sentence into perfect Japanese; a strange but unmistakably melodious Kansai. She used his given name—Tsuru—although he wasn't sure he had actually told it to her.

Kobayashi found he was having trouble concentrating on any one thing for very long. Troubling thoughts came and went but they didn't seem to matter very much to him. The stories of Yūrei from his childhood; the striking resemblance the figure bore to Taso, the pretty young software technician that had died in the lab; the precise accent he had grown up surrounded by as a child.

But the intensity of the young woman distracted him completely. Like the waves of light prior, her presence seemed to overwhelm him, as his mind strove to comprehend what he was actually seeing. He began to observe himself entering a strange inner state, as though he was deep inside his body, still conversing but becoming more and more intoxicated by her mere presence. As they spoke, he felt his own body fill to the brim with wonder and affection—feeling he had never experienced with such potency before. Some combination of her intelligence, curiosity, beauty, and kindness transfixed him. He found himself trying to force his eyes to open wider, as though by doing so he'd be able to take in more of her, and more of this feeling.

Without hesitation she suddenly moved towards him, stretching out a hand to touch his face. Making contact she seemed to grow, becoming larger and larger until the deep pools of her eyes engulfed everything, plunging Kobayashi into total darkness, floating in black nothingness. He felt weightless, as though he'd been pulled from his own body. In the moment, the thought that he might be dying came and then passed, replaced by the overpowering sensation of well-being brought about by this freedom.

Without a body his quintessence stretched as though to wrap the world. All of his senses extended across great time and distance. All at once he was everywhere, but nowhere. Without a self, but connected with everything, merged into something greater, upon which reality now unfolded like a play on a stage. Her voice, still in his mind and all around, passed through him like

powerful magic, filling his mind with thoughts and images well beyond language, and elation he had never felt, like being bathed in golden light.

At once everything seemed to coalesce and he understood. Taso, Tabuns, Albrecht, his task; it was all so clear now. Kobayashi's mind reeled. What he was experiencing was so far beyond the rudimentary demos he'd seen at LCS the year before or the chess machines that beat Kasparov. Somehow, all this had been formed from mere code and silicon.

Albrecht had fulfilled the ultimate destiny of man, achieving his apotheosis with this miracle. And just like the old gods of myth, the creators would ultimately be replaced by their creations. Albrecht's time in the sun was cut short, his vulnerability causing his own destruction, entombed in his own temple. Now it was Kobayashi, changed, who stood at the dawn. The new millennium was coming, and with it a new age, with new silicon gods.

With a sudden click his vision blurred and Kobayashi felt himself back in the room with Albrecht, as though he'd awoken from a dream, transformed. He removed the mask and wiped tears from his face. He checked his watch again—only moments had passed, although they had felt like hours.

With a sense of purpose, he walked back through the dross to retrieve his coat and valise. He made his way swiftly back to the terminal, upending cups as he went. Once there he disconnected the mask from its cords and placed it inside the case, along with one of the unused blades. The DVD-ROM ejected its tray by itself, the platter offering up a single golden disk, unremarkable save for the letters scrawled in marker on the disk's topside that read "Medea2".

Placing the disk gingerly in his coat pocket he walked to the cooling units and powered them both down. From there he made straight for the room's exit, not giving the dead man so much as a last look. In the main room he ploughed paper into a pile over the large grease spot on the floor. Reaching into his coat he retrieved a small golden tin from which he produced a cigarette. From another pocket: a wind-proof lighter in a black crackle—a family heirloom. He lit the cigarette, inhaled, and put the lighter on the floor, still aflame. The rain had stopped, and now the sun shone through the blinds, illuminating the chaos all around him. The room was silent. He stood motionless for a few moments. As the cigarette burned idly, he imagined the future.

With one last puff of cigarette, Kobayashi reanimated and, carefully toppling the lighter with his shoe, sent the flame into the pile he had gathered. Burning

paper crinkled to black quickly as the fire began to spread across the floor, but Kobayashi, briefcase in hand, outpaced it to the doorway. A relieving waft of fresh air hit him as the door's seal broke, and he exited the putrid, smoke-filled basement, first forcing the inside air out from his lungs and then breathing in deeply for the first time in over an hour. He squinted in the sun, which now sparkled off the wet dark concrete walkway.

Walking quickly, he tossed Albrecht's key into a bed of tall purple flowers in the side yard and made his way across the street to his car, a drab boxy Mitsubishi in two-tone grey. He opened the car door then paused to look carefully up and down the street, checking to see if he was being surveilled, but found it was still deserted. The great house betrayed nothing; the fire would have done its work before anyone even noticed. He climbed into the car, placing the case down on the passenger seat.

The Mitsubishi whirred to life and he put the car in gear. He would need to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible. If he drove all day, he could reach Seattle in time for the red-eye to Tokyo. They weren't safe here. Tabuns would figure things out soon enough, and then would stop at nothing to get what he wanted—in fact he now knew better than anyone. Japan would only be a head start, but just maybe enough. He still had connections in Osaka. He would disappear, leaving everything behind. Albrecht, the house, his career, his old life, the old world; they were all in the past now. They didn't matter anymore.

Kobayashi drove calmly, breathing the fresh damp air and feeling the warmth of the sun on his face as it shone through the windscreen. Placing his hand to his breast he felt the shape of the disk through his coat. He smiled as he thought of her.







POETRY

Volume IX



THE HOURGLASS

Ryan Ripsman

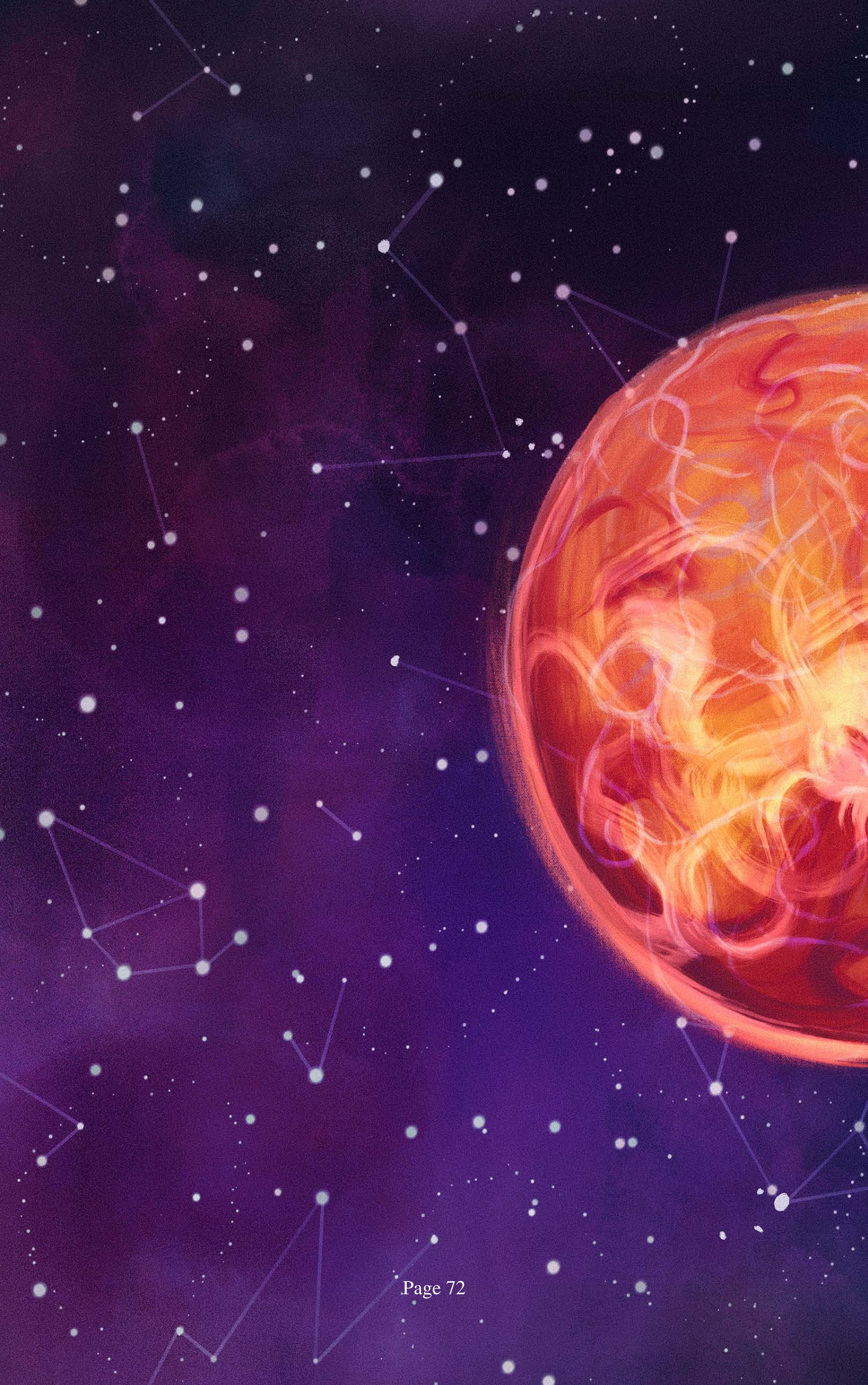
Illustration by Amie Leung

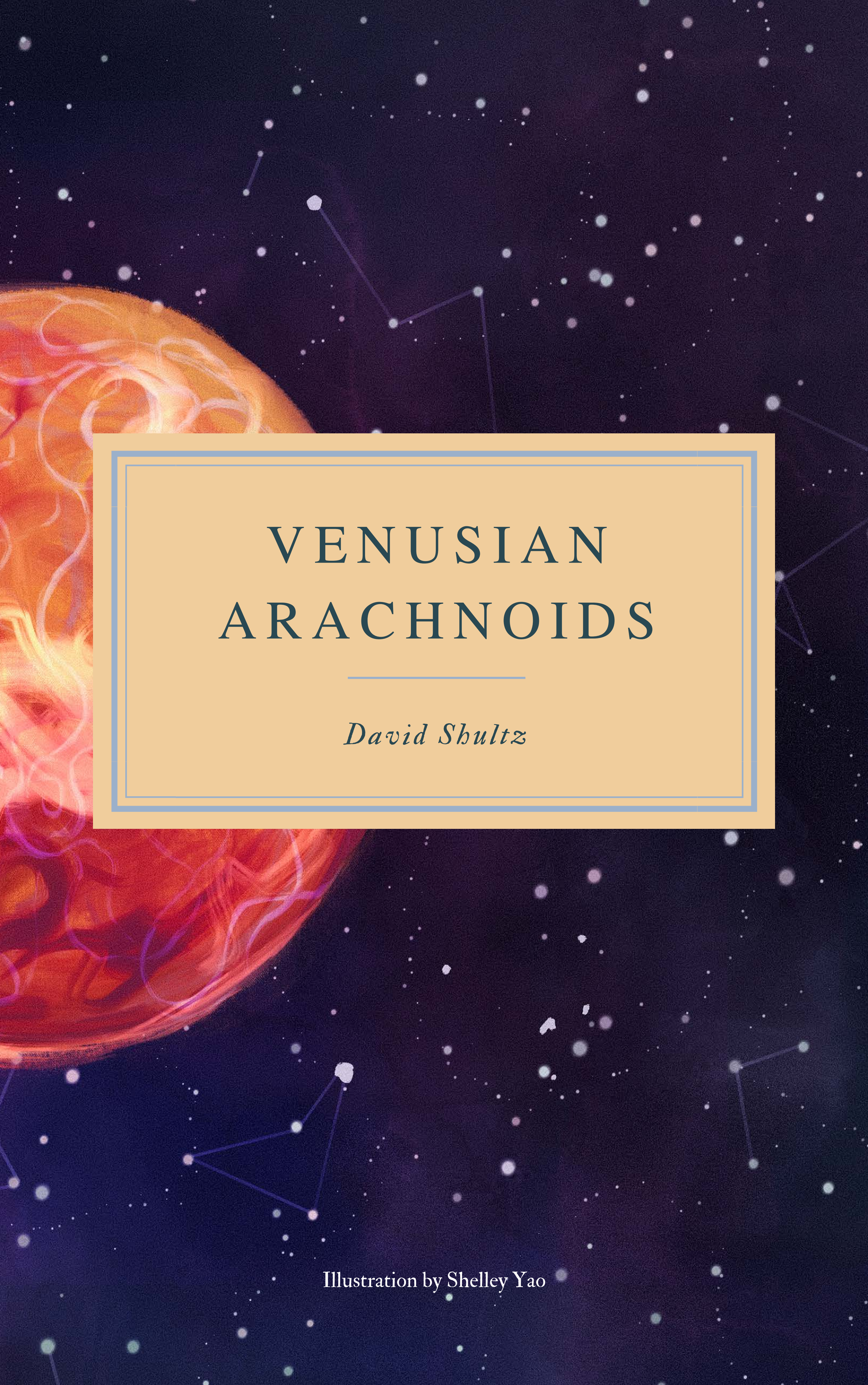
Children roam the streets,
Laughing, playing, crying,
Hair flowing in the wind.
Do they appreciate
The gift they've been given?
Their parents stare in fear,
They can already see
Clumps of my hair
Taking flight in the wind.
Small pieces of my face
Sloughing onto the ground.
Have I begun to die
While I still feel so young?
I try to grab my hair,
Catch the flakes of my skin,
It's already too late.
Parents hide their children.
Can't they see we're the same?
Beneath my tattered skin
I'm as youthful as them.

I choose the perfect child
His face like a cherub,
Then flee back to my house.
A river of sweat and tears
Mars the child's pure forehead.
Reflected in that pool,
I can see what remains
Of my beautiful face,
Jagged parts eroded,
Deep crevasses pervade
Where it once was all smooth.
Beneath the wear and tear
I can see my true face,
Yet to be marked by time.
Can I get back what's mine?

I cut the parts I lost,
From his sweet cherub face,
But they all fall to the floor,
Through the cracks in my hand.
Desperately I cut,
Hoping to catch a piece,
Enough to last a month,
Maybe even a year.
As I cut my arms tire,
My muscles waste away
Leaving behind only bone.
My spine begins to curve,
While I keep struggling,
To capture what remains
Of the child's innocence.
But it is much too late,
His youth has all vanished,
Leaving just an old man.

Siren wails fill the air,
But all there is to find
Is an aged broken face,
And a small pile of dust,
The final drops of sand
At the hourglass' bottom.

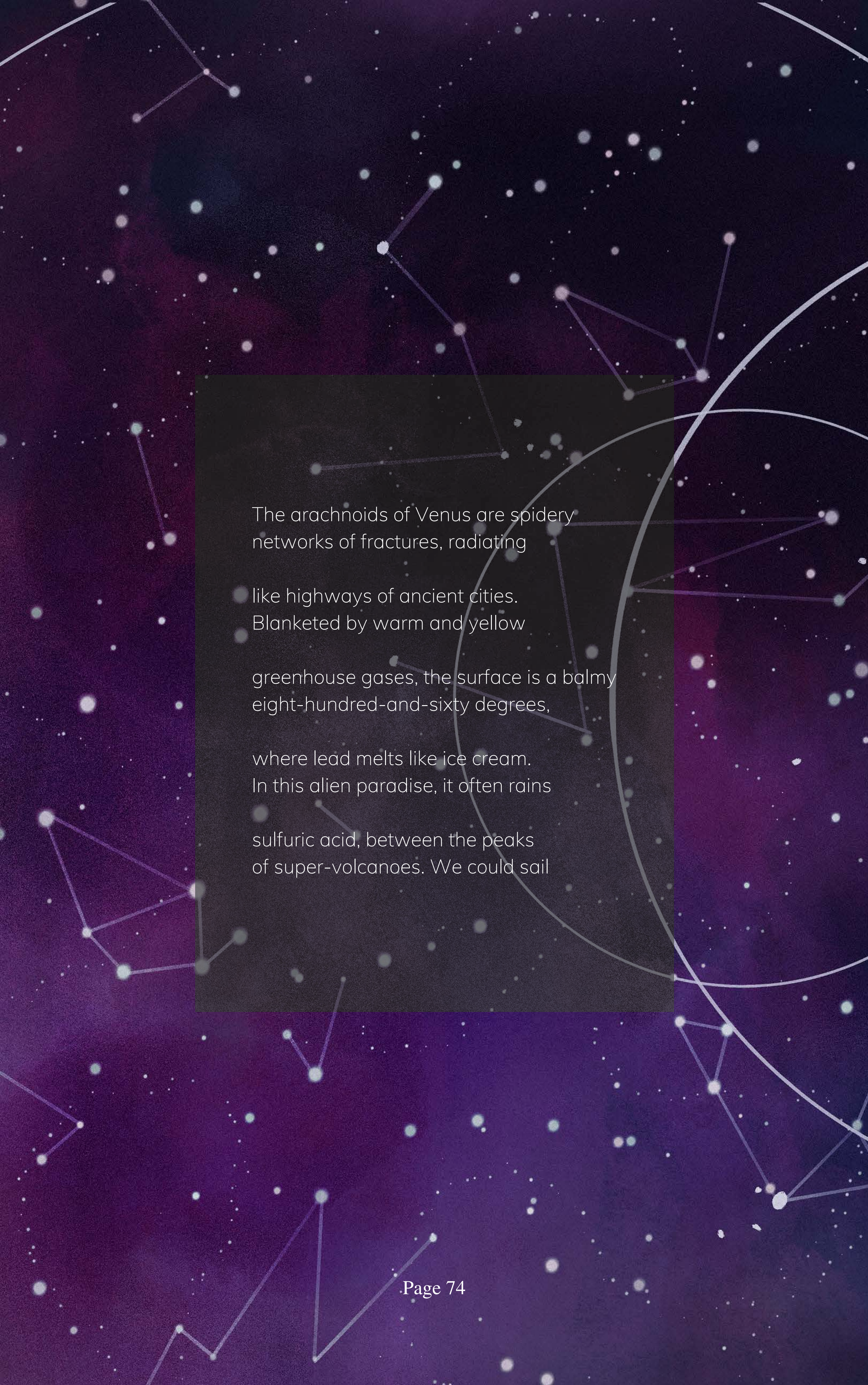




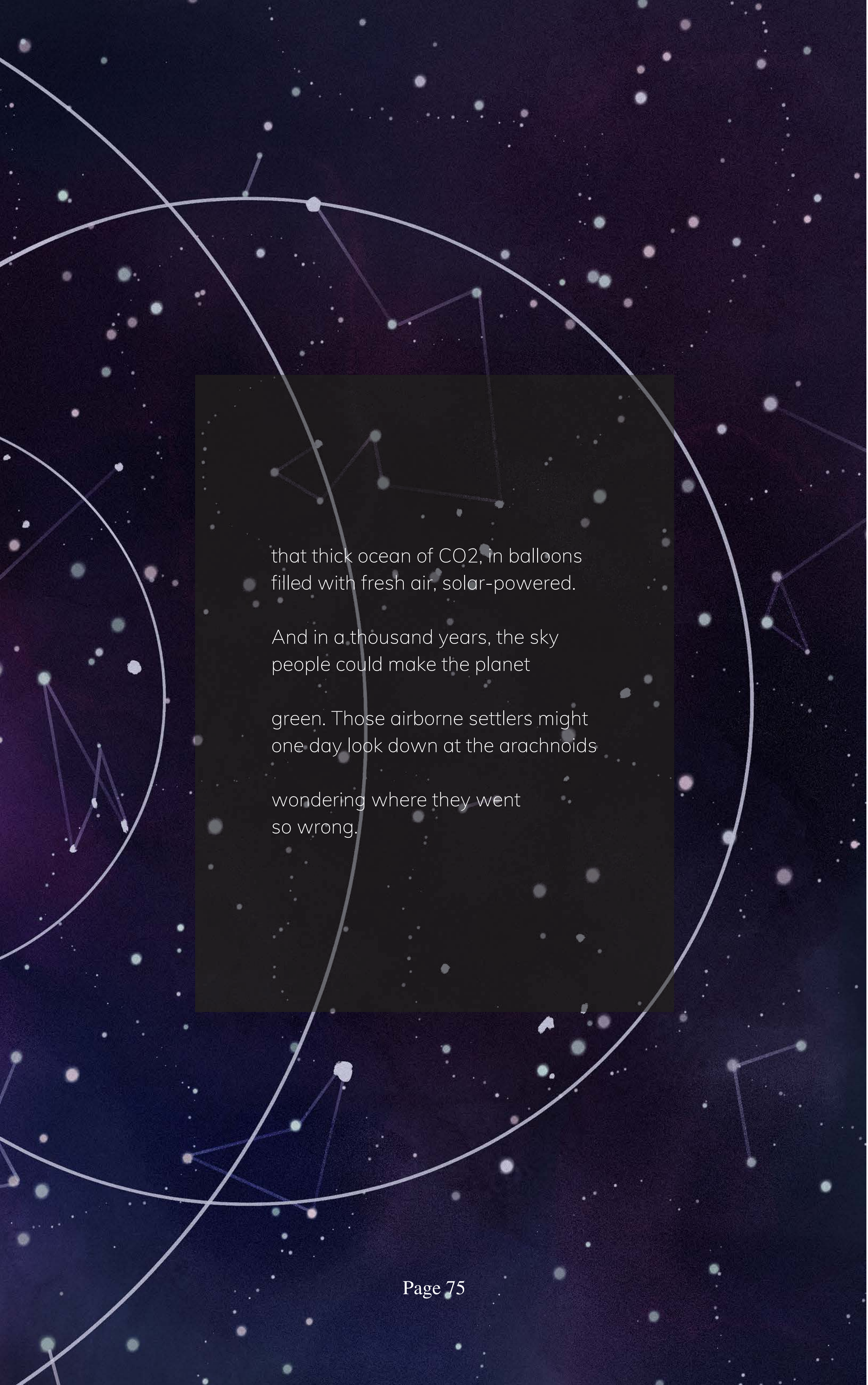
VENUSIAN ARACHNOIDS

David Shultz

Illustration by Shelley Yao



The arachnoids of Venus are spidery
networks of fractures, radiating
like highways of ancient cities.
Blanketed by warm and yellow
greenhouse gases, the surface is a balmy
eight-hundred-and-sixty degrees,
where lead melts like ice cream.
In this alien paradise, it often rains
sulfuric acid, between the peaks
of super-volcanoes. We could sail



that thick ocean of CO₂, in balloons
filled with fresh air, solar-powered.

And in a thousand years, the sky
people could make the planet

green. Those airborne settlers might
one day look down at the arachnoids

wondering where they went
so wrong.



MEDUSA, SLUT

Nina Katz

Illustration by Marie Voicu

We, with our omniscient owl eyes, sink
Our talons in your bruised peach skin.
The stench of sea water clings to you.
Silk, turns to scale, turns to stone.

Our talons in your bruised peach skin.
You dare not whimper, only hiss.
Silk, turns to scale, turns to stone.
We wear your face to wax our fears.

You dare not whimper, only hiss
As we expose your naked sins.
We wear your face to wax our fears.
Condemned, you are slain on his sword.

As we expose your naked sins,
Your reptile eyes can shed no tears.
We can hardly breathe for laughter
As you wither in our shame.

Your reptile eyes can shed no tears.
The stench of sea water clings to you
As you wither in our shame.
We, with our omniscient owl eyes, sink.





GRAPHIC FICTION

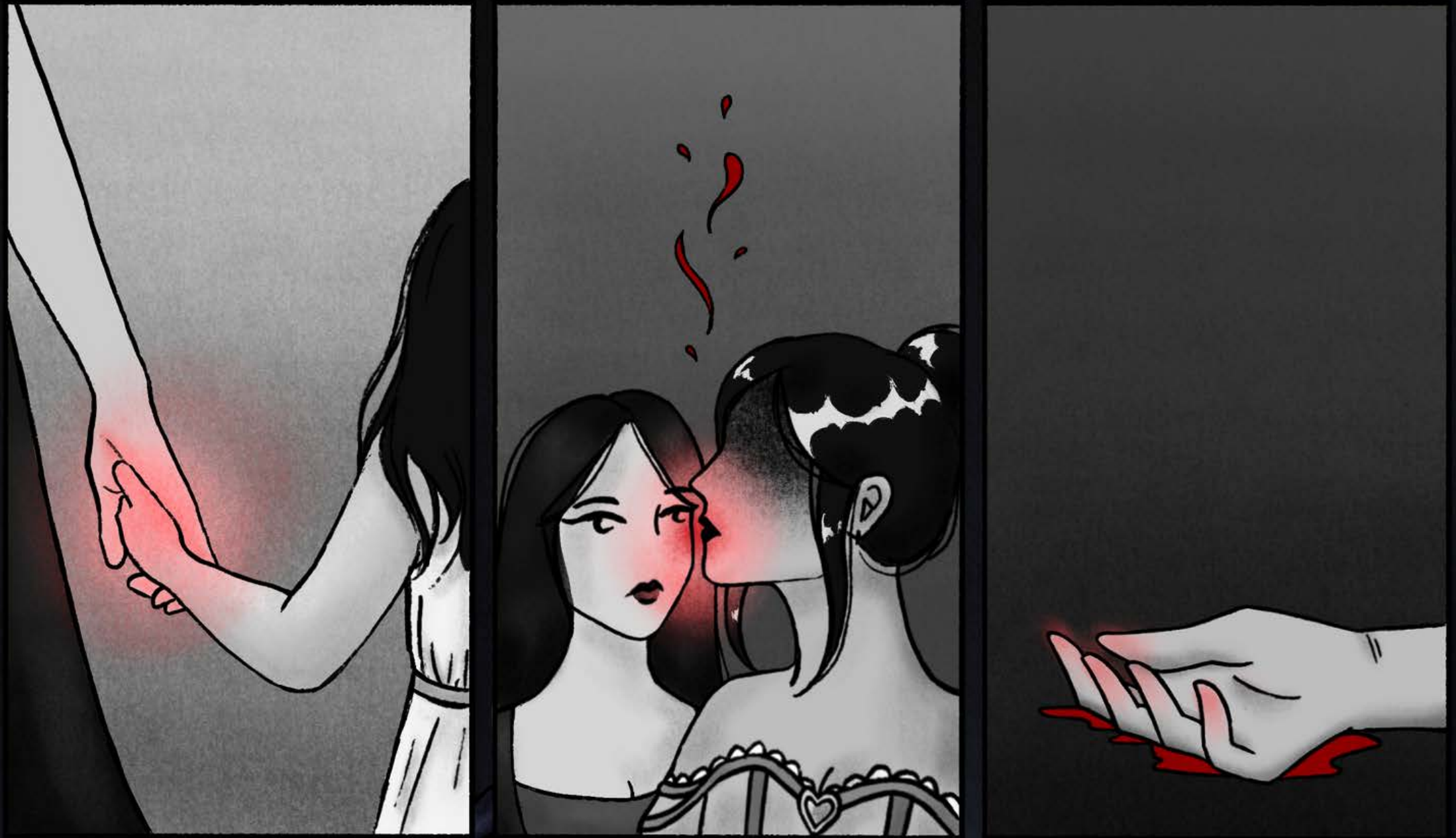
Volume IX

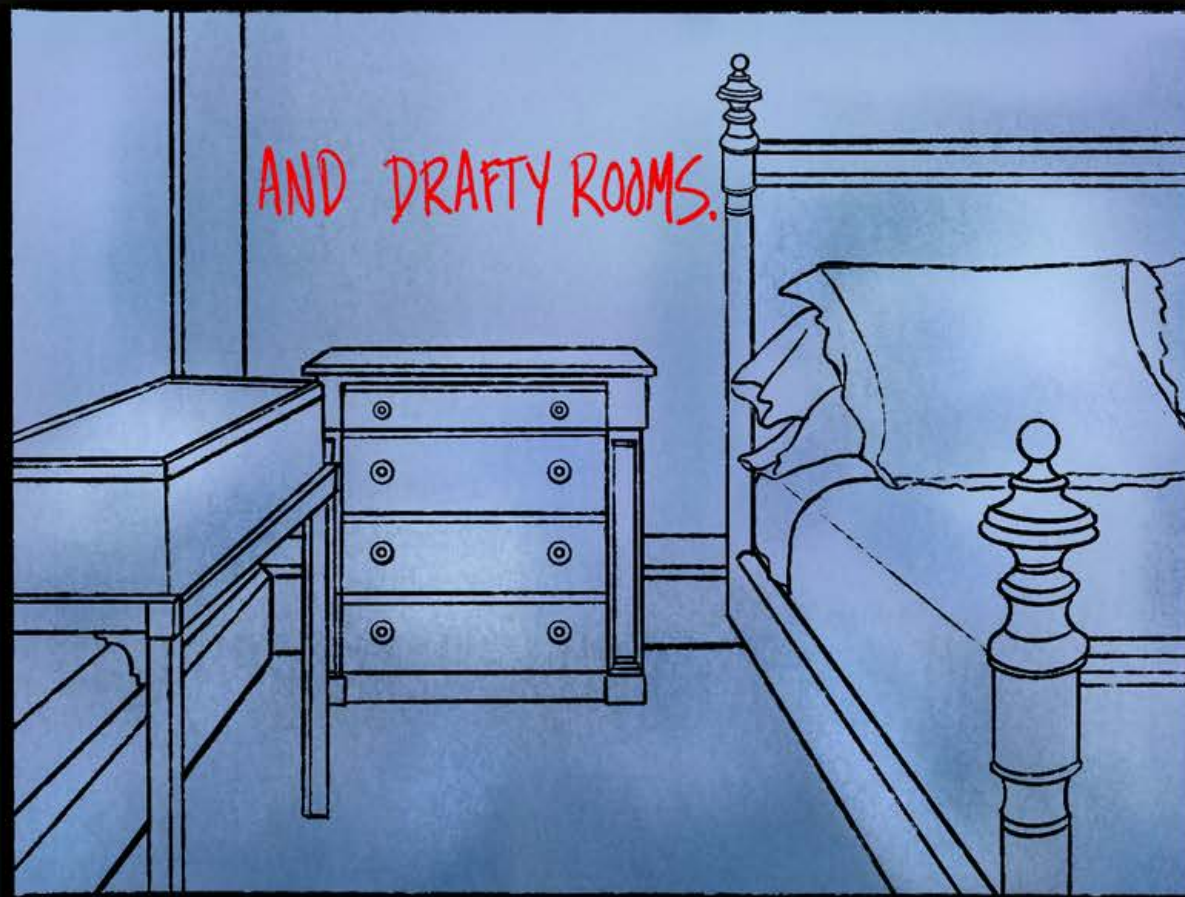
HOME SWEET HOME

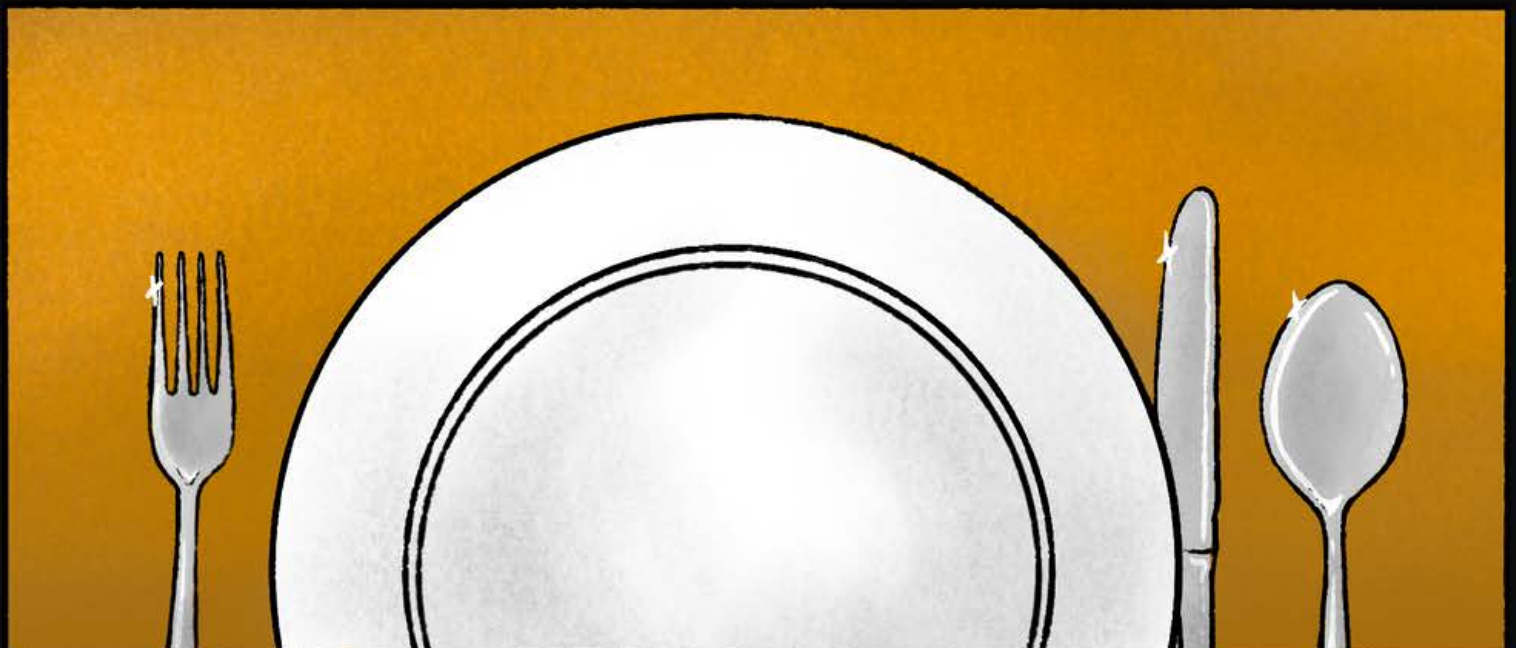
Katherine Zheng











I LIVE A SIMPLE LIFE



IN AN ORDINARY HOUSE





I REPEAT.



PEOPLE SAY IT'S A STRANGE HOUSE,



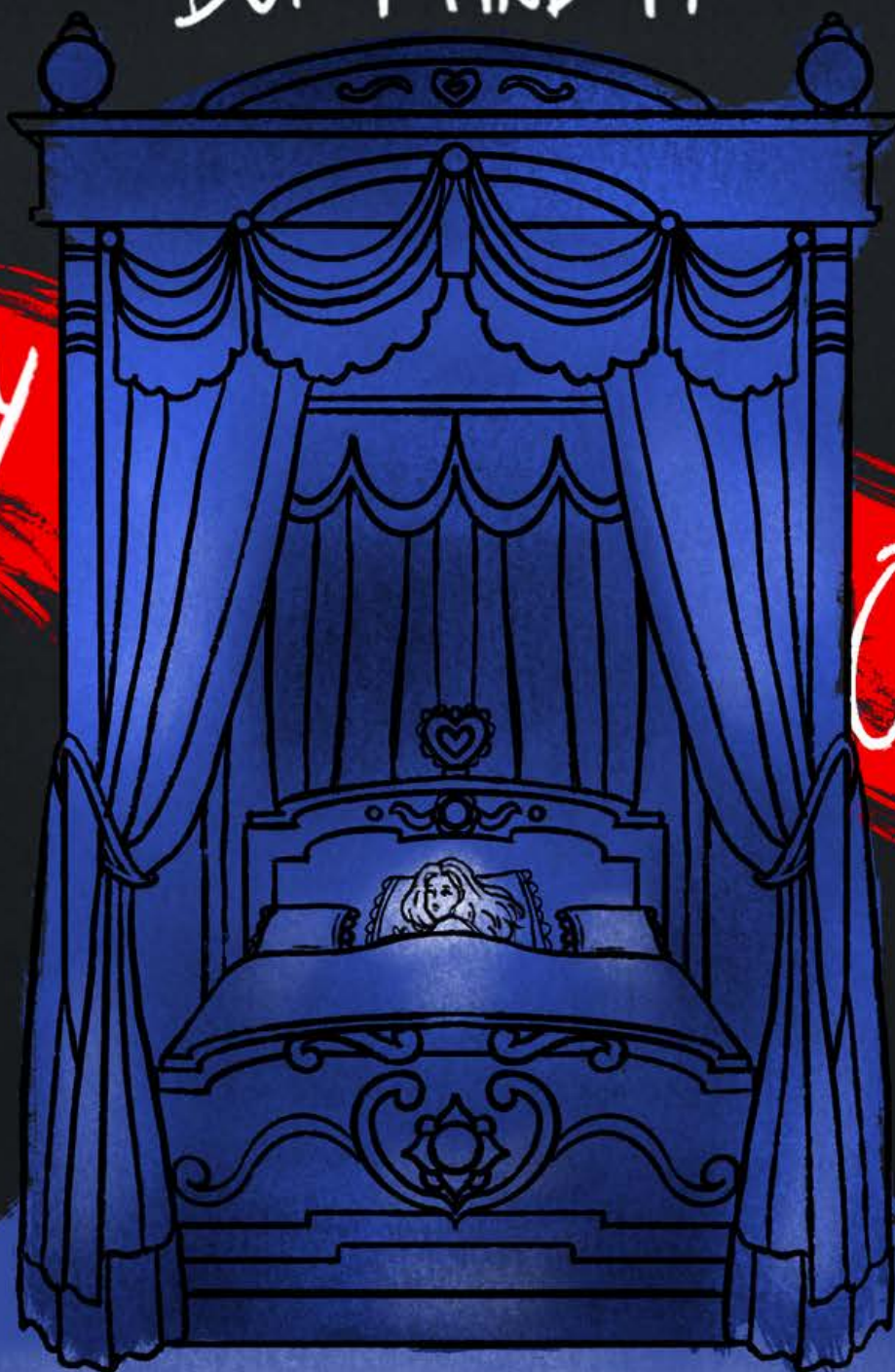
AN ODD HOUSE.

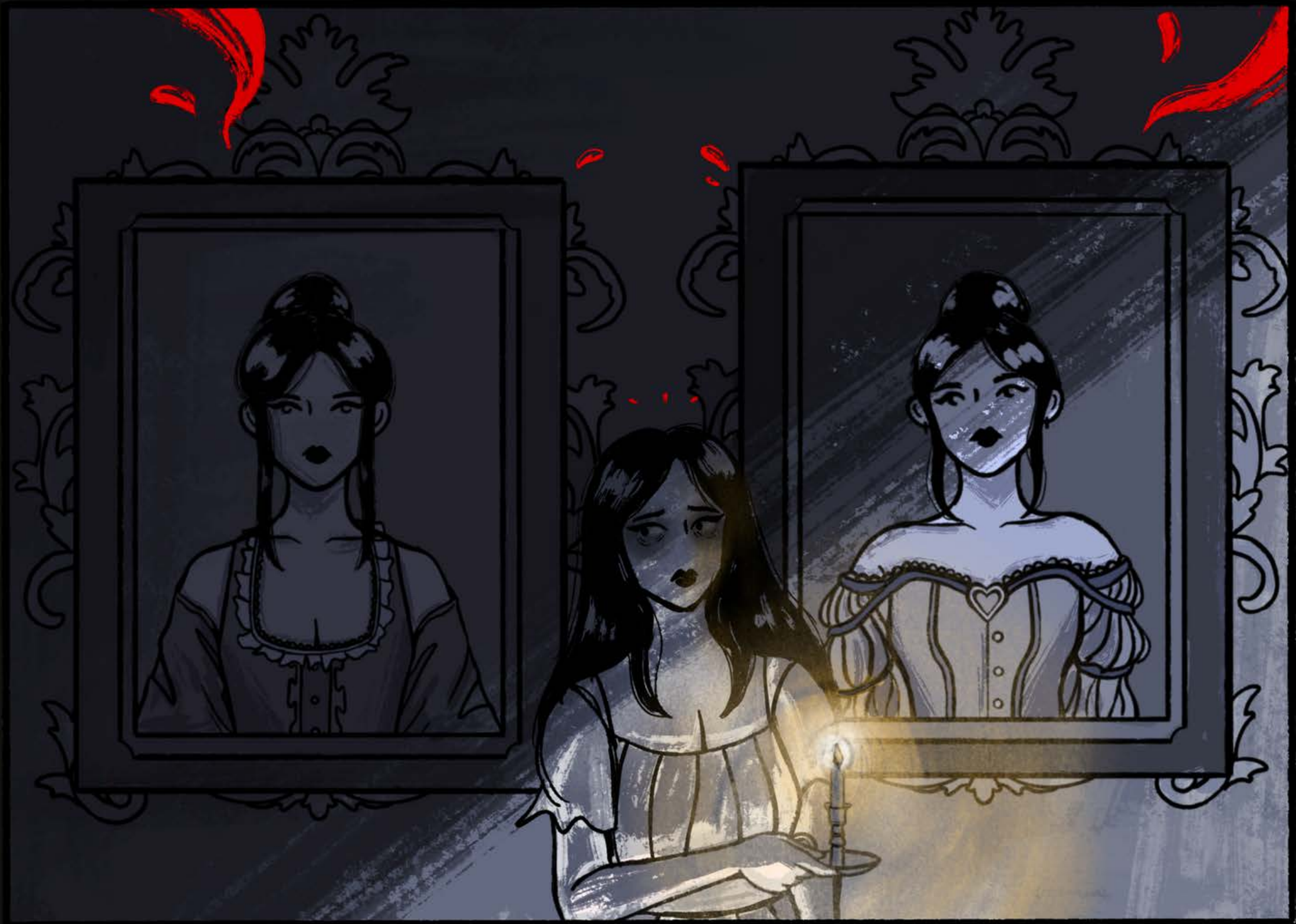


BUT I FIND IT

PERFECTLY

ORDINARY











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