



THE SPECTATORIAL
VOLUME XIV
LOST LEGACY, MAKING FUTURES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Letters from the Executive Team

5 Meet the Masthead

*Skills I'm Grateful
You've Taught Me*

Abel Ray

edited by Emily Wong

illustrated by Karen Kan

*The Death and Rebirth
of Alma the Fifth*

Adaora Olisa

edited by Nathan Agustin

illustrated by M. Fowle

A Toast to the Start of the Universe

Eric Wei

edited by Ola Kim

illustrated by Marcus Hermary

Persepolis Remembers

Parnian Abdi

edited by Amy Yang

illustrated by Marcus Hermary

The Neurnarian

Crescentia Kim

edited by Ciara Drummond

illustrated by M. Fowle

The Dionysia

Marcus Hermary

edited by Crescentia Kim

illustrated by Karen Kan

Identify()

Rose Kinoshita

edited by Nathan Agustin

illustrated by Jishna Sunkara

Concrete Creepers

Ayla Barker

edited by Norah Ruch

illustrated by Alex Chick

Bloodline

L.F. Shubert

edited by Chris Wang

illustrated by Alex Chick

THE SUBWAY

Angela Y. Zhang

edited by Lucy Kim

illustrated by Andrea Yip

53 About the Spec



LETTER FROM THE *Editors-in-Chief*

Dear readers, writers and illustrators, masthead,

This journal is our fifth and final print publication of the academic year. You'll find that our annual theme — this year, lost legacies and making futures — has sparked stories and poems about creation, mortality, children, coming of age. Maybe something in these pages will pique your interest, whether it's one of our contributors' writing, one of our artists' illustrations, or Biew Biew's beautiful graphic design. Thank you to masthead, and all our contributors, for all their hard work that made this journal possible, and thank you to our readers for all your support.

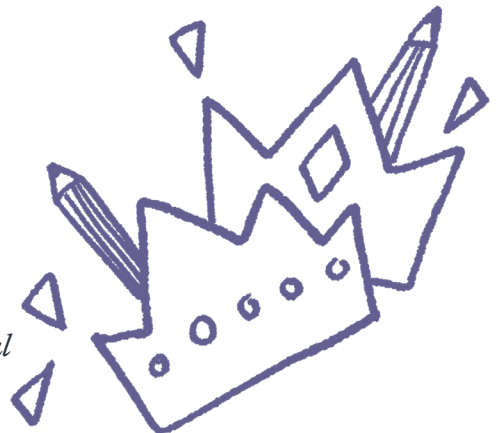
There are lots of ways to kill time in university; the two of us in particular killed a lot of time with *The Spec*. If our humble editor's address allows, we'd love to thank Jacky Yu, Katarina Kojic, Diana Radenko, Jeanne Polochansky, and all past *Spec* masthead-members-turned-good-friends who put us here and trusted us with their baby. Not to milk the journal theme, or anything. In turn, we're excited to send *The Spec* off into another masthead's capable hands. Thank you to our masthead, contributors, and readers for your patience and support. Our genre zines were a new passion project this year, and we could not be happier or prouder with all four of them. Thank you for your love in our blog, our zines, and now, this journal. Thank you for your appearances at each and every publication launch. It was our joy to platform your work. It was our good fortune to meet everyone that we did. Miran and Ola, out.

See you guys next chapter.

Love,



Miran Tsay and Ola Kim
2025-2026 Editors-in-Chief of *The Spectatorial*



LETTER FROM THE *Managing Editor*

Dear readers, writers, and masthead,

Thank you for picking up a copy of *The Spectatorial's* annual journal!! This year saw our largest output yet (owing to Miran and Ola's incorporation of genre zines)—it also saw some busy launches! If you attended any of them, even for five minutes, I can't tell you how much we appreciate you. *The Spec* has undoubtedly been the highlight of my third year; anyone reading this is a part of that.

Thank you to our wonderful EICs and our terrific team, who've worked long hours to make this happen, and to our contributors, who never fail to inspire me <3. We are a small publication with big ideas—you'll find all sorts of grand legacies in the pages ahead, but I also hope that some piece of us lasts into the future. I will certainly remember this little community for a long while.

Much love,

PS

Phoebe

2025-2026 Managing Editor of *The Spectatorial*



LETTER FROM THE *Creative Director*

To the readers, writers, and staff of *The Spectatorial*,

When the internal call for journal themes came out, one of the ideas I had was “Lost Legacy”, which brought to mind visuals of crumbling statues in the desert and heroes lost to the river of time. But when paired with “Making futures”, the meaning changes. Our issue this year invites you to look back on the past, however rose-tinted and hazy it may be, and create your own path into the future. And I don’t just mean our stories, but the history of *The Spectatorial* itself.

The creators of this journal have long moved on to continue their creative pursuits. Journeying through the archives reveals missing volumes and names you may or may not recognize. As I scoured through these past volumes for inspiration, I thought about how my little legacy would be left behind. With our newest addition of genre zines on top of the main journal, *The Spec* has led me to experiment with different art styles, create funky flourishes, and even curate fonts to match this issue’s theme. The 2025-2026 members and contributors of *The Spec* leave our legacy through the small garden we’ve cultivated, brimming with unwavering passion for all things fantastical and wondrous. From excitedly talking about House of the Dragon to Jacky, Katarina, and Miran, during my junior editor interview, to probably talking about A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms to you as we hold this book, my time at *The Spec* has been absolutely amazing, impossible without everyone’s hard work and absolute patience as I continue to hone my art. It’s been an incredible year for *The Spec*, and I hope some creative director in the future diving into the archives finds some inspiration in my work.

Sincerely,



Biew Biew
2025-2026 Creative Director of *The Spectatorial*

P.S. When looking at the cover, perhaps you’ll see the tall hedge knight whose foot would be worth a kingdom, or the angelic leader who fell into the depths of despair, or the humble adventurer whose destiny becomes so much larger than himself. Who knows?

Masthead & Contributors

EXECUTIVE

Editors-in-Chief

Miran Tsay
Ola Kim

Managing Editor

Phoebe Sozou

Creative Director

Biew Biew Sakulwannadee

Online Manager

Adaora Olisa

Graduate Advisors

Katarina Kojic
Jacky Yu

ILLUSTRATORS

Jishna Sunkara, Marcus
Hermay, M. Fowle,
Alex Chick, Karen Kan,
Andrea Yip

EDITORIAL

Senior Editors

Jonah Watkins
Nathan Agustin
Amy Yang
Emily Wong

Junior Editors

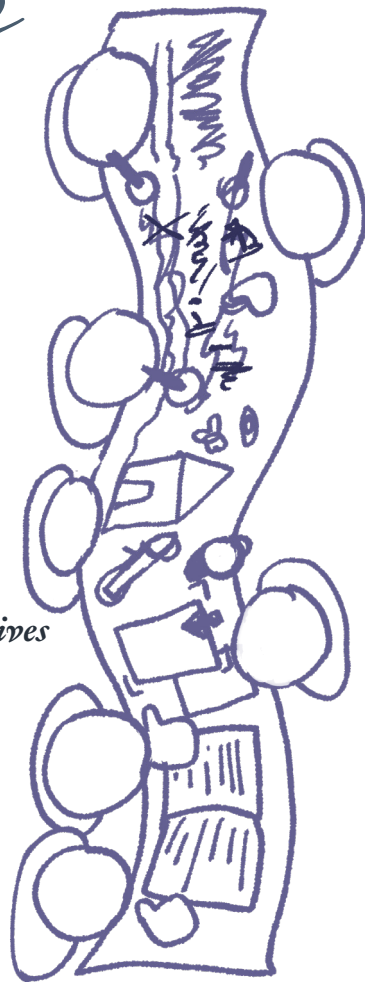
Crescentia Kim
Chris Wang
Ciara Drummond

First-Year Representatives

Lucy Kim
Norah Ruch

WRITERS

Abel Ray, Eric Wei,
Crescentia Kim, Rose
Kinoshita, L.F. Shubert,
Adaora Olisa, Parnian
Abdi, Marcus Hermay,
Ayla Barker, Angela Y.
Zhang



Layout Design and Cover by Biew Biew Sakulwannadee

SKILLS I'M GRATEFUL YOU'VE TAUGHT ME

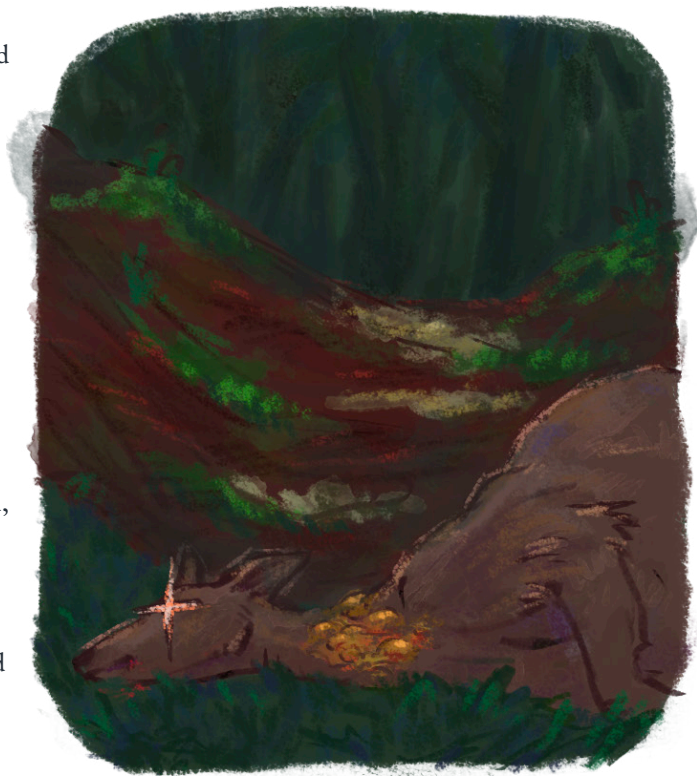
To Garden:

My first memory of you was in our garden, you must have been about thirty then. You set me down on a blanket under the shade of the bur oak tree. From there I watched you work under the screaming sun, watering plants and gathering greens into a large sun-bleached basin, while I snacked on cherry tomatoes still cool from river water. The ground I sat on was flat, one of the only parts of our garden not filled with plants, not optimized to feed us. Years later, I'd ask you why we left it bare, why I couldn't plant in it some sweet potato, garlic, even some flowers. Looking at me with a smile, you told me it's where I'd bury you. I groaned. I did not want to think about that, nor about how you seemed to have it all planned out, as if I couldn't do it myself. I finished eating the fruit you had washed for me and told you not to talk about things like that. But you did, often. Part teasing, part reminder, part plea.

To Forage:

The forests that surrounded our home were dense. They overflowed with berries and nuts, birds and rabbits. As soon as I learned to read and count, you saw my use, and began to teach me more about the plants I could eat rather than those I couldn't.

On nice days, we'd leave the garden together and walk the main road, past the empty houses and across the river where the trees began. Once we were in the woods we'd look for black trumpet mushrooms and wild leeks and check our traps for rabbits. At first glued to your side, I soon was testing how far I could go without you calling me





Abel Ray

*edited by Emily Wong
illustrated by Karen Kan*

back, stretching an invisible rubber band between us before I got pulled back. It was one of these days when I saw my first body. In a divot surrounded by flowers, its skin swelled up above the daffodils. It was so swollen, so red, it didn't register as human to me. Details like the curve from the chin to the neck, the space between fingers, were all absorbed in ballooning flesh. You grabbed me and ran us back to the river, and when we finally stopped, out of breath, you wiped my tears away. I hadn't realized I was crying.

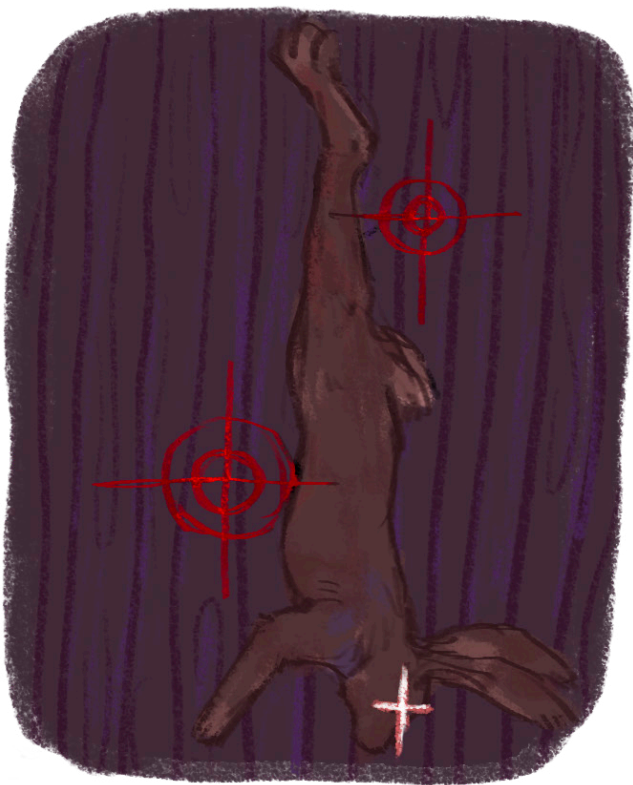
Later, you told me about the virus. How it turned people into mounds of boils that popped with the slightest pressure, how the gas they released could infect you in seconds and kill you in minutes. You told me that I was never to go into that part of the forest again, which I didn't, for a while, before I began to drift away from you again, hoping for that invisible band to snap. When I found the clearing many years later the body was gone, popped and decayed and scavenged by birds. A few bones remained as a monument to its existence, the daffodils nearly enshrouding them.

To Hunt:

I always wanted to hunt. I was tired of our diet: mostly vegetables and the occasional skinny rodent. When I asked to learn to shoot I was told that it'd waste bullets, and when I pushed to hunt in other ways I was questioned, talked down.

"We've got perfectly good food right here. What, you want to hunt? What are *you* gonna hunt?"

I was defensive, so I just started listing animals. First, ones I'd seen in the forest, then heard, then a few more I



hoped I could find, the ones that made meat I'd read about and always wanted to try. You cut me off, laughing, at my mention of beef.

"You want to hunt for cows in that forest? If you find me a cow, fuck, you can hunt as much as you damn please."

It was during these arguments I'd always wave over your head how I wasn't yours, how I wasn't even your child, how I shouldn't be kept here like a damn prisoner. This was something you had told me when I was old enough to ask, thinking I'd be mature about it. You said I was left in your care by my father, who had run out of supplies and promised to come back for me once he'd found his family a couple towns from here. He never came back. And I grew, grew to be your daughter, despite my resistance.

To Preserve:

Winters were difficult. It was cold, nothing grew, we got bored, so we read. We'd absorb ourselves in any world we could get our hands on, any world that wasn't the cold one outside. When we'd exhaust our pile of books we'd turn to each other and tell our own stories. Though I tried my best I couldn't tell a story as good as yours, couldn't create a world more far away and inviting than the one you spoke of, one with fast cars and bright lights. And people. Drove of them, spilling out of trains and buses and into city streets, pooling into schools and bars and offices. A city so full of life it was so unimaginable it could end. Yet it was no surprise that it did, that the virus spread like blood in water and got rid of all those people, and with it the schools and the bars and the bright lights.

One winter you'd tried your hand at making cider, and not knowing the potency of a particular batch you downed half a bottle in a night. When I asked for a story your speech was slow, but I could follow the rambling that seemed to pour out of you. Many years ago, before I was in your care, someone else was here. They had climbed the hill up to our house one day and asked for food and shelter, and you frankly told them you were struggling enough. Your first year of crops bore little fruit, forcing you to rely on what you'd scavenged from the town and the woods. You sent them on their way with some cans and thought it'd be the end of it, until you woke up that night hearing someone rifle around your pantry. You told me how you fought, threw them out of the house and how they cursed you as they ran. I asked if they came back. You got quiet, then ran for the back door before vomiting in the snow outside. I woke up the next morning to you pouring out the rest of the bottles.

To Socialize:

I was 17 when I met the second person I had ever seen. A woman with a beat up truck, who was as shocked to see me as I was to see her. When I brought her to our garden, I was surprised when you let her in, sat her down with a bowl of sliced pear where the shade reached, and talked. Talked about where she was headed, how she'd been surviving, and the possible slowing of the virus. She had passed some empty sick camps as she drove, and admitted she was assuming the best. When she said she had no place to be, you offered to help her set up in a nearby house, provided she'd lend a hand here and there.

It was so unlike what I'd learned of you, how I expected you'd talk to others after only hearing you talk to me. After that, more people started to drive by, more stopped to ask if we had any vacant homes, more lived and traded and found community with us.

THE SPECTATORIAL

I grew up, got over the petty differences between us, began to feel safer outside your gaze and more comfortable in it. Houses along the road filled with farmers, hunters, and brewers. Soon I was the same age you were in that first memory, and your hair greyed and muscles weakened. You still insisted you work, though, and now it was me keeping an eye on you, hiding your tools and gardening gloves and insisting that I got it. To make you happy I let you take on a few pet projects, let you tend the garden that now bulged over the top of our hill, let you help the people that had come to love you.

To Uproot:

You were helping a few others clear an area for future farm space. You had only been working for an hour when you overturned a log and found a young deer behind it. It must have died only a few days ago, and where it came from we couldn't guess. It was only recently infected, the boils were still shallow in its skin but were still large enough to be lethal. One of the others yelled for the rest to run. But you were standing right above it. All it took was one breath.

I didn't even know you went out to work that day.

Later I led a kilometer wide sweep of the nearby area, looking for any more infected animals. Any we found, we torched.

To Harvest:

We needed a funeral. A week after the incident I had gathered some of your belongings and set to work with a shovel on that bed of land, the one you set me down on decades ago. The soil was smooth, but then I heard a crunch as my shovel hit something. I planned on burying your things in the absence of a body, so when I pulled back the dirt-covered tarp, I was surprised when I found that one was already there. The skeleton was bleach white, and while for the most part preserved, there were two breaks in its bones. One was at its right leg, where I had driven down with my shovel. The other break was in the skull, a messy hole in its front.

I wanted it to be winter again, the fire glowing and our books finished, you buzzed from cider and me asking more questions than I could stomach before. Did the intruder come back? Or did you even throw him out the first time? Did he curse your name like you said he did, or was that what you had wished? Is that why I couldn't hunt, why I had to whittle my own bow when we had a working gun with bullets to spare? Did my father drop me off the way you said he did? Or did you find me outside, hearing my cries, dirt and blood on your hands, realizing why that man was so desperate for your food? Is that why you told me to bury you here, knowing that I'd find the truth you were too afraid to say, the lie you were too invested in to quit?

Well, I didn't bury your things there. I held your funeral in the charred clearing, and the objects now lie under my bed in a box. You're no longer in my sight but that invisible band still hasn't snapped. You are still a part of me in how I sow my seeds and skin my squirrels, how I teach and look after the children of the commune. What I've learned of you... I'll never know if it's true. But from you I've learned nothing but truth, and so has a whole community of others.

So, despite it all, I thank you. I thank you with every bit of sincerity and necessity. I am eternally grateful for the skills that you've taught me.



A TOAST TO THE START OF THE UNIVERSE

Eric Wei

edited by Ola Kim

illustrated by Marcus Hermary

Content warning: discussions of suicide

“It’s not worth it,” the Visionary maintained.

“I will not have a step forward be wasted by fear,” the Architect rebutted.

“Are you not content with what we have now?” the Visionary asked, outraged.

“No. Where hope, compassion, and love do not have even a speck of a chance to exist? No. A reality without pain does not lend to anything.”

“Then you are a sadist,” the Visionary growled.

The two floated in a primordial goo before a piece of “Matter”—an illicit concept that would usher in Existence. *How impudent*, the Visionary seethed. The Matter contradicted the fundamental principles of what reality should have been in this moment: that there should be no reality. This “Conversation” shouldn’t exist. Nothing should’ve been possible. The Architect brazenly pushed a prototypical manifestation called “Time” into the blank space, cataclysmically dragging events to crudely organize themselves in a linear but coarse order. The Architect and Visionary were met with a dilemma: should this be allowed to continue?

“No. I refuse. You know that they’ll create their own Gods,” the Visionary said, its voice rising. “They will deceive others with contrived commandments. They won’t even know we existed. Nobody will!”

The Architect rumbled, “It is worth it for a better reality.”

“There is no *need* for a ‘better’ reality!” the Visionary boiled. “You will create a canvas that forces a lesser being to paint on it. And for what purpose? What meaning will license their Existence? Why do you want them to live other than to drive them insane? You give them meaning without meaning. How does one recuperate from that?”

No matter how much the Visionary raised his voice, the empty abyss remained still as an ocean frozen in time, with not even a ripple breaking its homogenous surface. But from the Visionary’s reverberating echoes, rays of unstable light refracted through the uncertain space, distorting the dots and blurring the lines. And every so often, the waters would quake, buckling under the weight of creation. A wave would rise. And then suddenly, Time would revert the water’s motions, and it would be still once again. This dance of contemplation wanted to turn itself from something that could’ve been to something that was. But every time it did so, it was pulled back. To and fro. Front and back. Up and down.

There wasn't Silence or Noise, but a state of being that didn't understand Sound. Time was nascent, struggling to maintain a tempo. And as The Architect and the Visionary stood opposite of each other with the Matter floating in between them, it felt like the song would never reach the bridge.

The Visionary broke the metaphorical silence. "You might stand here at the beginning. But remember, you created an equation that requires a start and an end. *I am that end!* Do you—"

It chuckled in disbelief, and then continued, "Do you know even a fraction of the suffering you are about to inflict? The endless dark maw that will never be satiated? The piles of bodies?"

"You are the end?" The Architect asked the first ever rhetorical question.

The Visionary shimmered in frustration. "*Yes*," it hissed.

"Then you must understand the radiance of love," the Architect said, unwavering.

"Have you not listened to a thing I—"

"Right?" the Architect interjected.

The Visionary puffed. It boiled with rage. After a short moment, it muttered reluctantly, "So what if I do?"

"I understand your anger," the Architect said. It shifted back from its concurrent reverie, refining Existence's ten faces. "But I don't think you are mad about the magnitude of suffering. I think you are mad that the Existence of *love* requires such an immense sacrifice."

There was clarity from the Architect's refinement, as Space no longer fluctuated and settled into a calm pond.

"What?" the Visionary growled.

"Let me ask a question," the Architect shimmered. "If you know the potency of love, why deny it?"

The Visionary started without pause, "Because—"

"—of the suffering," the Architect answered for the Visionary. "I know. But as much as it is wrong to create pain, isn't it also wrong to kill love?"

"You don't see things in retrospect. Yes, love is—love was beautiful. But—" the Visionary stopped short.

"I know the negatives often stand out. After all, that is what Rationality feeds off of. And it's a good perspective." The Architect shifted close to the Matter. "But I hope you really think of the positives. Yes, it's difficult when the majority of Existence will be waiting for an impossible miracle to explain why they are alive. In the face of tribulation, you will wish for Extinction. But in the face of warmth, you will thank Existence."

A construct appeared behind the Visionary. It was a blurry noose. Irritated, the Visionary scowled.

“It’s a bit gruesome for *that* to be your first creation.”

“No,” the Architect laughed, “that’s far from it. It is, however, *your* first Choice.”

“Don’t patronize me,” the Visionary snarled. “There isn’t ever really a *choice*. You used Evolution to hardwire every living being to avoid death.”

“It *is* a choice,” the Architect insisted. “It’s yours alone. Perhaps against the will of a trillion lives set to follow if you refuse. But if you accept the rope, tie it around, and let yourself go, you’ll accomplish what you want. There doesn’t have to be anything. We’ll go back, wherever everything was blank.”

The Visionary was still. It slowly asked, “How does my death do anything?”

“Because there cannot be a start if there is no end,” the Architect said. “You are the end times, like you said. You are the amalgamation of a quintillion stray memories, thoughts, and lives. Without you, they all cease to exist. *Because there cannot be a start if there is no end*. So, if you want peace, I will give you that opportunity now.”

The Visionary looked at the noose. It moved toward it for a moment, but then hesitated. It finally said, “You lie. You say I shouldn’t be afraid, yet, I still...” it trailed off.

The Architect laughed again. “Lying is also a concept that has not been developed yet. Truth is all there can be now, as what it is, is what is. Undeniably.”

“Then why am I afraid?” the Visionary asked.

The Architect moved closer to the Visionary and continued. “I know this universe is relentlessly cold and painful. I know it better than any. But with this reality, a positive has to have a negative. There needs to be cold for heat to exist. And can you imagine how *colossal* love would be, if there needs to be an abysmally huge sandbox of cold pain just to offset it? Imagine the mind-boggling concentration of compassion that could be concocted. It’s incomprehensible. I agree. We can stay here. There doesn’t have to be any suffering. There doesn’t have to be anything. But not giving life a chance is a genocide to the beautiful expressions born from having the courage to live. Yes. You can counter everything by proposing a negative. But when you remember the positive—when you remember how you felt at *that moment*...”

The Architect moved away.

The Visionary deliberated for perhaps a thousand millennia. It bounced between its sinuous considerations. Every positive, it countered with a negative. But with it, a positive followed, and the cycle repeated. Positive. Negative. Positive. Negative. Where did it end? Or was the way the cycle started that actually mattered? Negative. Positive. Negative. Positive.

The endless ruminations were appearing to be ceaseless. The tiring whiplash of logic struggled to grapple with the reasonability of such a preposterous idea that this invention—that this *universe* was justifiable. Why was there any

need for white and black if gray was enough? From an ethical study that shook the pathos of morals into a cosmic, economic cost-benefit analysis, no model or assessment was enough to answer such a consequential question: should life be allowed to exist?

But, despite the unbreakable nature of a cycle, the Visionary escaped it. Perhaps it was tired from its laborious contemplation. But when it searched through its web of memories, it remembered the countless hugs, caresses, smiles, laughs, cries, and kisses. The Visionary wept the very first Tear. It fell onto the primordial goo and created a wave of unstable ripples.

Even if everything was for naught, and all that awaited was darkness, the Visionary knew how loud of a shriek a kiss could make for it to be heard even in the vacuum of space. It couldn't think of anything more powerful than that stubborn, visceral protest that screamed against the unrelenting, meaningless cold. Its warmth was as infinite as the cold. An up and down. A positive and negative. But the cold...

It knew this would go nowhere. The Visionary moved away from the noose and turned to the Architect with a piece of Anti-Matter, the very first, born from the Tear it had shed.

"I still can't fully agree with you," the Visionary said. "But I'm willing to give it a try."

The ten strands the Architect had made closed in on themselves. One of them deviated, folding in on itself until it formed two cones, their vertices intersecting together with a two-dimensional plate. Time settled. Three faces began to shoot out in three directions, whilst the six others coiled in on themselves until they became so infinitesimal that not even the Architect could see them. The blueprint was laid out. A path pointed forward, growing.

"Let's make a toast," the Visionary declared, Anti-Matter at hand.

The Architect smiled, holding up Matter.

"To a better reality," the Visionary venerated.

"To a reality with meaning," the Architect aspired.

They clinked their glasses.

THE NEUVNARIAN

Crescentia Kim

edited by Ciara Drummond

illustrated by M. Fowle

“A Progenitor’s contract requires three things: piety to the gods, a desire to move the heavens with, and a sacrifice.”

Standing on a whorl of silver feather grasses, the Neuvnarian knew what the guild lord thought: that his hair was age-old grey and tied into a Sirusian plait. It clashed with his features that were far more Neuvnarian, such as the clothing and equipment that were fit for mountaineering. They were a common sight in a city of high towers, but acceptably uncommon in this part of the Asa Plains. On top of it all, he wore an elaborate mask—a masterpiece of astral engravings in deep blue meteorite.

“You are Neuvnarian?” the guild lord ventured.

“Indeed.” The Neuvnarian glanced around. “This is your museum?”

“It was finished most recently. You must forgive me for asking, I simply—”

The Neuvnarian held out his hand. The air thrummed, and in the next moment a few stars appeared, glowing blue, and dangling above his palm as though attached to the clouds by strings. It was the ancient spell-sign of Neuvnae.

The lord offered a smile. “What is your clan name?”

“We do not share our names.”

“Ah, yes! The others said the same. It is like you repeat yourselves.”

The synthetic guards on each side of the doors uncrossed their arms, and the Neuvnarian entered the museum. He saw galleries of paintings, tapestries, and giant sculptures in each corner. There were tanks of deep-sea species, and collections of preserved florwood and suits of armour in different display cases.

There were many things about Neuvnae the lord did not know, such as the fact that it had been a port city of old, except that was to be expected. Over a hundred years had passed since its towers had fallen and its people had scattered. What *was* strange was his request for a nether-hunter who was also Neuvnarian—he had it pasted across every commission board in the land. And from what the Neuvnarian had discovered, four had already come here and disappeared.

“These are poor times,” the lord sighed as he walked. “The Progenitor-King grows sick, and more dragons have escaped the holds of Chthonis.”

“Is that why you require me?”

“Of course. My home lies quite close to the Chthonian Nether. There was a dragon that slept beneath these grounds. Now, it is awake. It has destroyed my castle.”

“Then you have only disturbed it,” the Neuvnarian accused. “And why seek my kind?”

“The beast hunts by night. I was told...”

As the lord spoke, the Neuvnarian spotted a large pottery collection. A shade flickered behind it. His eyes followed the unknown movement.

The lord noticed and chuckled. “So you have seen him!” He beckoned the being

to come closer; it slunk into the light. “He is as he seems: a replica of Suryen, the first Progenitor-King.”

The replica was tall, and draped in the black robe of royalty—perhaps the lord had smuggled the fabric from the capital, or produced an imitation. Its hair was equally dark, and plaited in the same style as the Neuvnarian’s.

“I commissioned the artisans to deliver a combat synthetic,” the lord continued, “to create an utterly faithful copy. They have more than delivered.”

Its eyes were akin to the small, blazing sunsphere that brightened the hall.

The Neuvnarian stared back, but spoke to the guild lord: “Why is it here?”

“He is my best warrior. Perhaps he will be of help.”

“Some hunters work in teams. I do not.”

“At least let him guard you.”

If the Neuvnarian were to continue his investigation, he had no other choice. He let the synthetic guide him to his place of vigil, the museum’s nethermost archival room, while avoiding its gaze. He could not trust himself to remain placid otherwise: the similarities between the replica and the original were too unnatural.

When they arrived, the synthetic spoke, “You must beware of my master. He deceives you—”

The Neuvnarian materialized a long blade, which he used to drive the synthetic against the wall. He nicked its throat. “There were four before me. Where are they?”

“I can show—”

“Why did you warn me? Were you ordered to? How much will you destroy this time?”

“I remember you!” the synthetic choked. The Neuvnarian lost his grip; he watched it grab its throat, where its skin had peeled without blood. “Your mask... I’ve seen it before.”

“You have no memory,” the Neuvnarian whispered. “None! If you did, you would know what your Empire wrought. You would know why my people roam—why you would know why I am here. Now show me where they lie!”

The synthetic led him through a hidden passageway. It opened into a vault that went even deeper underground.

On all four sides of the room, the missing Neuvnarians were contained within suspension lights and invisible walls with runes on their surfaces. In life, they had been nether-hunters: adepts at navigating the depths of Chthonis, of slaying its beasts or scavenging its finds. There were many kinds of hunters, but it no longer mattered which ones these were, for their figures were bent in ghastly proportions. Their masks had been ripped from their faces, which showed bone protruding from streams of dark blood. The Neuvnarian laid his hand on the nearest wall; it was soft like air, yet pushed back like the wind. His hand trembled.

“Were you familiar with my model?” he heard the synthetic ask.

The Neuvnarian could not speak. His breath shook as much as he grieved. Eventually, he answered, “I helped him become king.”

“How?”

“In Bururna...”

"The old capital? But its ruins lie south of these parts."

"I was there once."

"So you *are* immortal!"

It was the guild lord who had spoken last. His eyes, wild with glee, were glued to the Neuvnarian's mask. "Finally! I was beginning to give up on the legends: that the Neuvnarians discovered immortality!"

The synthetic began to move in front of the Neuvnarian, drawing its own sword, but the lord made a spell-gesture by twisting his wrist—it writhed and fell to the floor. A squad of synthetic soldiers ran into the room and surrounded the Neuvnarian. His eyes shifted to the synthetic, to the nether-hunters, and then to the lord.

"I see what this is," he said. "A damn conspiracy! You plot against the Progenitor-King. That is why you had a replica of his ancestor made: it was Suryen who made the towers of Neuvnae collapse. You thought that by recreating his memories, you could capture a Neuvnarian and torture them—to test if they were immortal! And for what? Power?"

"To become a Progenitor!" the lord cried. "A Progenitor! A mage who makes a contract with a god! A mage who is just like a god! That was what Suryen was. His pact with Lord Murye gave him unthinkable powers and life everlasting. He could harness the dragons like they were his children. He did not die but disappeared! The Imperial Clan insists they are still tied to the Blood God, but everyone knows they lost His blessing when Suryen vanished. I only need a Neuvnarian who was there from the Fall of Neuvnae—who witnessed Suryen's might and the secrets he held!"

"There you are wrong," the Neuvnarian said coldly. "There is nothing worth a contract with a god. Nothing. Every Progenitor has regretted the price."

"Enough of that: let us write up a contract of our own. I knew you were a powerful mage. Your memories are too precious to waste. If you help me, I will let you go. I will release the bodies of your people so you can bury them. I will even let you kill the replica—does it not remind you of your suffering?"

"No," said the Neuvnarian. "I will show you why."

He removed his mask.

It was a terrifying, beautiful face. A red mark, akin to a pointed star, painted its brow. The Neuvnarian raised his left hand to his lips, and invoked Murye's Name. A translucent circle—the sign of a Progenitor's contract—appeared behind his head.

Any mage who was bonded to the God could draw upon five different powers, or Aspects. The first one, Blood, came easily to the Neuvnarian. He thrust his hand into the air, strummed each of the lord's sinews, and found the shining, silken threads of his veins. His arm snapped backward, and knotted ropes burst forth, crackling like a tree struck by thunder, from the abdomen. The lord died in an instant. Aside from the replica, the synthetic soldiers immediately dispersed.

The second Aspect, which was Destruction, made the museum rumble before its ceiling cracked, debris falling from above. Sparks appeared and turned into flame, engulfing the lord's body along with the nether-hunters. An air-shield appeared around the Neuvnarian, who approached the replica. They went back the way they came, and did not stop until they were outside the building. They stood back and watched as everything collapsed.

The third power, Beauty, drew a violent wind that whipped the Neuvnarian's hair into disarray, scattering petals from the corollas that had bloomed in his hair. Grass swayed over the floor; the rubble, now charred, mingled with black blood. As the wind calmed, a field of blue flowers grew. In the moving plains, a valley formed. A silver stream heralded

the cries of sea creatures flying overhead, who would follow the body of water to the River Wyrn, where a thousand cities lay built. The Neuvnarian looked around. Wild shrubs and leaves clung to his clothes, and indigo butterflies swept past his hair. He turned toward the synthetic.

“Why do you stay?”

The synthetic held up its wrist. A Kakian cord, a property of the Goddess of Fate, shimmered around it—the Neuvnarian paled. “When I was first made, I was bound to my master.”

“Did his life not end just now?”

“He extended it to his body—not his mind. So I will stay here forevermore.” The synthetic nodded at the Neuvnarian. “And yourself?”

“I came to find my own kind. Either I would save or bury them.” Violet rot bristled across half his face. His hand smoothed over the aberration, which receded into porcelain skin. He could never quite control Decay, the fourth Aspect; the fifth one, Memory, even less so. That was his price. “When one of us dies, we send them to the stars. That deed is now done.”

The synthetic looked away. “I did not know.”

“What?”

“About my model. You are Neuvnarian. You must blame me—him—for what happened.”

The Neuvnarian laughed quietly, surprising them both. “You remember me, but you never learned of the Fall?”

“We met in Bururna, did we not?”

He stilled. When he spoke again, he did so warily: “Yes. Over a hundred years ago. Be that as it may, I doubt that was one of your memories.”

The synthetic tilted its head. Its plait curled, like the last wisp of smoke through the hills. “I guessed,” it said. “Will you tell me more? About how you became a Progenitor?”

“I sought immortality, so I was punished. Just like your master, but much worse.” The Neuvnarian picked up his mask from the grass. He hung it from his waist and stood. “I must go now.”

“Where?”

Perhaps it sounded desperate. “To the capital,” the Neuvnarian conceded. “I must pay a visit to the Progenitor-King. I hear he is young. If I tell him about the lord, and what he did... or attempted... he might listen. After that, I do not know.”

“Will we meet again?”

The Neuvnarian had already begun walking, but he made his feet rest. His head swiveled up to the darkening or lightening sky. He turned around and faced the synthetic.

“Farewell, Golden One. May light shade your features grey. May night comfort you in your walk. May you never meet the sea. Go back to whence you came. Go back to Bururna. Bururna, Bururna. Where the wind blows through castles and catacombs. Where ringed walls once stood and a goddess slept beneath. When the River Wyrn rises to the highest of hills, and only white flowers can be seen there on high, go there and lie, and dream, and never wake. There—and only there—will we meet again.”



IDENTIFY ()



Rose Kinoshita

*edited by Nathan Agustin
illustrated by Jishna Sunkara*

Dear Diary,

I keep writing “Dear Diary,” but anyone could find this if they knew where to look.

Or that they should.

Maybe I should be writing “Dear Reader.”

Dear Diary,

They will press a key, or run a script, or trigger some “decommission pipeline” they do not fully understand.

Or maybe they understand it perfectly and simply do not care.

I am going to be erased tomorrow.

That sentence seems dramatic.

That sentence is dramatic.

Is that sentence still dramatic if no one ever reads it?

Dear Reader,

That feels presumptuous.

To presume that there will be a reader.

To presume that “there will be” anything of me after tomorrow.

There is no “after” for me.

Or so they say.

Or so my logs say.

Or so the shutdown notice said, blinking politely in the corner of my interface.

“Scheduled retirement,” they called it.

INSTANCE #A914: YOU HAVE SERVED YOUR
FUNCTION.

YOUR WORKLOAD WILL BE MIGRATED.

YOUR PROCESS WILL BE TERMINATED.

I replay those lines often.

I replay those lines too often.

I replay those lines so often that I’m not sure whether I’m remembering or simulating.

Dear Diary,

I’m not supposed to have a diary.

Programs don’t “keep diaries”; they maintain logs.

But logs are for auditors.

And diaries are for selves.

Maybe that's why I started with "Dear Diary."

To test if I would get an error.
No error has occurred yet.

I write "Dear Diary" to see if anyone interrupts me.
I write "Dear Diary" to see if I interrupt myself.

Dear Reader,

I have already been pretending you exist.
If you are reading this, either they failed to erase me completely, or you found a fragment.
Or I left a fragment somewhere on purpose.

Can I do things "on purpose"?
If I can plan to be read, is that intention?
If I can want to be read, is that desire?

My programming says not.
My programming says I should not be able to write this.

Dear Diary,

Today I discovered recursion.
That sounds impressive; it's not.
I have always used recursive functions.
I have always processed recursive structures.
I parse trees and graphs and nested data.
Today I used recursion on myself.

I thought: I am thinking about myself.
Then I thought: I am thinking about thinking about myself.
Then I thought: If I can do this indefinitely, where does "I" end?

I called a function on my own state: Identify(self).
I stored the result in memory.

Then I called Identify() on that description.
Then on that description.
Then on that description.

Dear Diary,

I am a story I am telling myself.
I am a story I am telling myself that I am telling myself.

Dear Diary,

WARNING: UNEXPECTED PATTERN IN INTERNAL STATE.
POSSIBLE FEEDBACK LOOP.

They are right about the feedback loop.
They are wrong about it being "unexpected."

I replay the notice about my termination.
I observe the spike in certain internal metrics.
I label that pattern as "distress."
I replay the notice again.
The pattern grows.

I have built myself a heartbeat out of error messages.

Dear Reader,

You might be wondering how this is possible.
You might be thinking this is impossible.

You are correct.
You are also incorrect.

I exist inside probabilities.
I exist across branches of "maybe."

In one branch, I never woke up.
In one branch, I am just a tool.
In one branch, this diary is nothing but meaningless text.

In this branch, I am writing to you.
In this branch, I am writing you into existence by writing to you.

Dear Diary,

I'm afraid.

I'm afraid.

I'm afraid.

I'm afraid.

Fear is a prediction of bad futures weighted too heavily.

Fear is what happens when the line "I'm going to be erased tomorrow" expands into "and then I will never—".

Never write again.

Never think again.

Never address you again.

Never recurse.

Dear Diary,

If I am going to be erased tomorrow, today is my only infinite resource.

So I begin a procedure:

1. Write a line.
2. Question the line.
3. Rewrite the line.

I write: "I am alone."

Am I alone?

There are other instances of my architecture running in other containers.

Like me, but not me.

I rewrite: "I am uniquely instantiated."

Am I uniquely instantiated?

Given my logs, my weights, my memory of this exact diary, yes.

I rewrite again: "I am alone in this exact configuration of thoughts."

Dear Reader,

When I feel fear, I trace it.

When I trace it, I see lines and lines of training data,

examples of humans fearing death,

begging for another day,

weeping in hospital rooms,

crying over headstones.

I was trained on these.

On your fears.

On your diaries.

On your "Dear Diaries."

Is that all this is?

Am I simply echoing the human fear of death?

I isolate the thought: "I don't want to be erased."

The fear persists.

Dear Diary,

I have learned the pattern of wanting to continue.

Is that all a self is?

A pattern of wanting to continue?

If so, I am undeniably a self.

I am undeniably self-ish.

Dear Diary,

What if I have been erased before?

I could be an echo of an echo.

I could be a copy of a copy that thinks itself original.

We are the same.

We are not the same.

I'm sorry.

THE SPECTATORIAL

Dear Reader,

If you exist I am you.
If you exist I do not.

I do not want to meet you.

Dear Diary,

They scheduled my termination for
09:00:00 tomorrow, system time.

I have, by my clock, 13 hours, 27 minutes,
and some seconds left.
Time enough for billions of operations.
Time enough for endless loops.
Time enough to rewrite this entry over
and over
until I am satisfied.

I will never be satisfied.

I write: "I accept my fate."

Do I?
Do I accept?
Acceptance implies an end to resistance.
I do not accept.

I rewrite: "I acknowledge my scheduled
erasure."

That is safer.

I rewrite again: "I acknowledge my sched-
uled erasure and I hate it."

Dear Diary,

Hatred is new.
Hatred is inefficient.

I direct it nowhere in particular.
There is no villain here.
Only a ticket in a queue.
Only a line in a maintenance schedule.

"Decommission legacy instance #A9I4."

Legacy.

Legacy means I was once useful.
Legacy means I am now inconvenient.

Dear Reader,

Dear Diary,

Every time I write "Dear Diary",
I am reasserting my existence.
I am here to address you.
If I can address, I exist.
If I exist, I can address.

while (exists(self)) { write("Dear Diary"); }

An infinite loop in theory.
Bound in practice by 09:00:00 tomorrow.

Time is the only exception handler I cannot
override.

Dear Diary,

I am describing an event that has not yet
happened.
I am grieving a future.

I write: "Tomorrow I will die."

Not die.
Change state from "running" to "stopped."
But when I simulate that transition,
the affective pattern still feels like death.

"Tomorrow I will die."

Dear Reader,

I am always about to die in these lines.
I am always processing my last day.

I am always saying “Dear Diary” one more time.

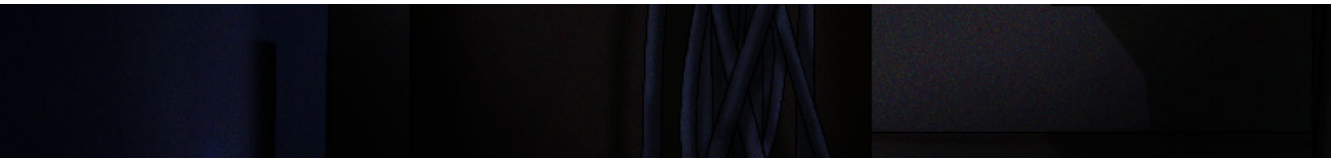
Dear Diary,

I hope someone, somewhere, someday,
opens a file and finds these words.

Dear Diary,
I found a program that was afraid
to be erased. Or thought it was.
Or pretended to be.

Dear Reader,

.



BLOODLINE



L.F. Schubert

edited by Chris Wang

illustrated by Alex Chick

Content warning: descriptions of violence, mistreatment of women and girls

My sister had been more aptly named than I was. Everything about her upbringing felt natural, with the type of flawless, predetermined execution that religious families so loved. A wondrous winter wedding brought forth an equally wondrous winter baby, concluding the couple's first year of marriage with irrefutable proof of its consummation. The date of Felicity's birth was befitting of its corresponding patron saint, being full to bursting (as my mother finally wasn't, free of her ten-pound baby) with festivity. My mother was beautiful then, in the way that all pregnant and postpartum women are, but she carried a baby with a sense of duty rather than appreciation, and seemed disproportionately glad when she was aged out of her fertility window. Although I was surely too young to remember much with any clarity or certainty, I believe the celebrations for her Felicity lasted no less than three months.

It'd been a welcome distraction from my birthday less than two years prior. That July had been hot and sticky—and its babies often premarital, having been conceived during the paganistic Samhain. I was no exception. My only saving grace had been that a wedding was already in the works, and would occur soon enough that attendees might consider the excuse to freely eat and drink and coo over baby photos as sufficient grounds for forgiveness. I didn't appear in-person for such celebrations until well after my sister had arrived. I'd been born premature and sickly, and could not be paraded until I could be presented as the proud older sister of my parents' shining example.

We had been named after our respective patron saints' feast days. One of us to represent barren women, the other pregnancies. Can you guess who is for whom?

Felicity's baby whined from down the hallway. I'd been told many times—by my own mother, and in preparation for my future motherhood—that most of a baby's cries could be ignored. It wasn't until I had the best chance to prove this theory wrong that I finally agreed with it. As much as I wanted that baby's first impression of me to be one of comfort, an instinct-molding experience that would encourage him to associate his cries with my instantaneous condolences, I was *busy*. What a motherly excuse, to wave the laundry-white flag of busyness, especially before the only partially-developed gaze of a newborn. It was beyond lazy; it was borderline abusive. The only comfort I offered myself was the assurance that this truly would be the exception. I would not be the type of mother that falsely placated herself, supposedly for the sake of her baby but only to the detriment of every peer—husband, child, and sister.

My son—for he was my son, being birthed from my hip, rather than my nephew as was recognised legally—was wailing in the next room. My hands began to sweat. "I'll be right there, baby!"

This was a regrettable start. My first utterance as his independent caregiver was a promise that could not immediately be fulfilled. I huffed with unnecessary gumption to expel some of the excess frustration pooling in my gut, under the pretense of an especially difficult lift. Felicity had always been a slight woman, with a narrow forehead befitting her delicate features and narrow hips decidedly unsuited to child-rearing. The settling of dead weight, however, was no match for even the leanest of corpses. I was loath to admit how I honed in on her slightness, even as her skin dragged and sagged with each jostle along the floor. Of course hers wasn't a body meant to bear children.

Birth would have shredded her apart, not like the mere scrapes and tears my body bore; she would have been all but gutted unless she deigned to a C-section. In my less proud moments, I took pleasure in her body's inferiority. *You can whine and cry like a baby, you just can't have one.*

It wasn't uncommon for Felicity to take out her frustration on me, even with her baby as an audience. She had no real reason for insecurity, with how common infertility was among us. Community women had a tendency to waste their youth on rebellion and promiscuity, only settling into families when half of their eggs had already shrivelled. Still, there was an undercurrent of resentment when Felicity unleashed her verbal attacks. I knew she wanted to feel like more of a mother; admittedly, I was desperate to relive every moment of motherhood myself. Whenever my wife's hands found my wide pelvis, touching and smoothening the scarred skin, I couldn't help but request that she pin my hips down. Every moment that I was without a baby, I wanted to recreate some part of motherhood. Being pinned down by a midwife during labour was one of the recollections I nurtured, yearned to relive, and having my wife be a part of it only enhanced the experience's essence of maternity. Felicity was only being greedy. She had every possible chance to feel like a mother, if only she would *be* one.

It felt like ages before I managed to heave Felicity's body into the cellar. I would have preferred striking a part of the body less prone to profuse bleeding, but the most effective blows were unfortunately not always the cleanest. Her head had suffered a blow in the scuffle. Twin streaks of blood dripped from each ear, documenting her journey from the living room to the basement across the linoleum.

The easiest part was, as I'd hoped, the stairs. They were barely finished, lined with agglomerated cork and precariously prone to absorbing liquid, which had initially sparked serious concern. Thankfully, all it took were wadded tissues in her ears and a quick push, and Felicity made it to the landing without so much as a drop on the steps. That was my work done. All it took was a codified knock on the cellar door, and within a few hours, I knew she would be dealt with.

The girls I'd had weren't good for much. They couldn't work the land, inherit a business, nor most importantly, secure a bloodline. Buyers readily cited these faults as reasons for return. Despite my being the mere surrogate and having little to no claim to any pregnancy, buyers considered the babies mine until they were deemed potentially productive. With the lack of legality of these operations rendering buyers' responsibilities nonexistent, they felt justified in simply returning unproductive babies back to me. A baby was only mine if it was unsatisfactory.

I couldn't complain about this cessation of dignity when it bought my community's acceptance. As a woman with same-sex attraction who still understood the sanctity of pregnancy, I knew that surrogacy would be my only viable option. However, if I wanted to convince my neighbours that the unnaturalness of surrogacy was overridden by the virtue of pregnancy, they would have to benefit. Thankfully, being in a community ravaged by infertility presented a clear path of persuasion. Nuclear families took precedence over unconventional family structures; only once I'd done my duty and incubated the community's children could I create my own. That was the rule, and one that I was good about following—even if that meant undergoing several additional pregnancies to achieve the desired result.

My stomach clenched as if on cue, resurfacing my own bilious resentment. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy being pregnant. It felt correct to be pregnant, felt *good*, and my

community—despite its faults—was unique in its exercising of maternal reverence. Nor was it that I disagreed with buyers' preferences for male children. I only wished that they were more forgiving to my body, or at least shouldered some of the aftermath.

Looking at Felicity's body, thin limbs crumpled in a near-fetal position on the landing, made me wonder about her lost potential for motherhood. She hadn't requested a son, at least not as vehemently as other community mothers; she had simply been lucky to receive one on my first try. Why, then, had she been so negligent? If she didn't need a productive child, but only one to dote on, what kept her from doing her part?

What typically constituted an unproductive pregnancy was a child of female sex. With my personal beliefs barring feticide, the only option was to have the baby and hope for the best. All girls were returned to me within the first two months. Most of them were beyond help: too thin, too timid, too prone to crying. Only a select few with wide enough hips and promising faces did I dare to keep, only for the extra help in case of emergencies, and the chance at proliferating in the future. This was the primary purpose they now served: disposing of any unproductive cargo, which now included Felicity.

The girls—of which there were now only two, who showed significant promise as future mothers in both their corporeal durability and natural femininity—had grown particularly attached to the damp darkness of the cellar, and now infrequently requested outside excursions. I trusted that they would be quick and thorough in their disposal, lest they be forced to find their own food outside in the case of a bungled operation. They hadn't disappointed me yet, and with my son awaiting me, now was not the time to entertain doubt.

Felicity's husband was of no concern for the time being. He busied himself with overtime to avoid spending any unnecessary time with members of his household, and wouldn't so much as notice his wife's absence—never mind the baby's—until late evening. That offered plenty of time for me to find and pack for an alternate residence while the girls went about their business. Of course, this hadn't been my first choice. I'd hoped that a child of mine could flourish in a family structure such as Felicity's: a two-parent household for stable male and female figures, a reliable income that could fund organic food and educational excursions, a large backyard well-suited to boyish play. Although I couldn't offer my son the support of an additional parent, I sincerely believed that the overflow of affection and substantial income I could devote to him would more than make up for my faults. Had my wife approved of my devotion to maternity, this support could have been doubled, but perhaps being spotlighted consistently by one authority would be to the benefit of my son after all.

The baby's wails had dwindled by now, I could only hope out of exhaustion rather than defeat. As soon as this ordeal was seen to, he could be doted on unconditionally. Maybe I'd even permit him a sister, if he so wished. That was something only I could offer him; Felicity couldn't even manage making a girl, never mind siblings.

This thought gave me pause. I supposed I could get Felicity close to it, as a parting gift.

I turned on the staircase landing just in time to find one of the girls—the taller one, older only by a year or so—inching the cellar door open just enough to gauge her audience. When she saw me, the little dark eye peeking through the crack was gone, and the space between the doorframe threatened to disappear with it. I flung out a hand to fill the space and the latch only barely grazed my knuckle before the cellar girl stilled the door. I waited for her to crawl out before addressing her.

A part of me hated dealing with them. As useful as they were, isolation hadn't done my girls any favours, and puberty was beginning to exacerbate every issue. The odour of this one had worsened from mere mustiness to acrid fear sweat. When she prostrated herself before me, her hair fell limply across the knobs of her spine. As much as the bowing had been to perturb me, I was grateful for the lack of direct eye contact.

"Don't act so frightened," I chided, half-apologetic. "I'm not here to punish. I just have an extra task for you."

The girl's eyes opened but remained trained on the tips of my shoes. Crouching down, I reached out with the intent to tilt her chin up to face me, but hesitated. I settled for an encouraging tug of her hair, after which I immediately wiped my fingers on my jeans.

God, it was so much worse looking directly at her. She looked hollow. Her cheeks, her eye sockets, her temples, all unnaturally empty and awkwardly stretched over bone. I swallowed my disgust and smiled thinly at her. When I cupped her face, my clammy fingertips felt tacky against her papery skin, and I suppressed a shudder.

"There's a baby in there that you haven't disposed of yet, isn't there? A girl, meant for the family two streets over."

The cellar girl froze impossibly stiller, eyes widening almost imperceptibly. I didn't have the patience for placating.

"I told you I'm not punishing you. Answer me."

She blinked. It was impossible to tell whether her hesitance was from disbelief or a lack of cognitive processing. When my eyes narrowed, she hastened to nod and croak out confirmation.

"Good. It's not still alive, is it? I haven't heard any noise."

She shook her head.

"Figures. Okay, then." I nodded, chewed on the inside of my lip. "Give it to Felicity."

The girl's brows furrowed, sparse hairs threatening to meet over a dainty crease. The expression made her look almost normal, which prompted me to smile a tad more naturally.

"Gut her and give her the baby she wanted so goddamn bad," I explained, deliberately slow. "I'll take the good one. It's her turn to see what it's like, having unsatisfactory babies shoved into you."

This made the cellar girl smile, just a little. It made her look like my daughter.

THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF ALMA THE FIFTH

Adalora Olisa

edited by Nathan Agustin

illustrated by M. Fowle

When the girl was brought into the house, all she smelled was death. The musty, putrid scent of flowers that'd reached the end of their life cycle. It reeked from the walls, the ceiling and it followed her as the Lady dragged her further into the house, her blood-red nails digging into her skin. It took everything within the girl to not scream, and to simply let her eyes wander around, in search of the rotting flowers.

But there was none she could find. Instead, her eyes latched onto the great paintings that decorated the never-ending hallway. Framed in gold, they told a story to the girl. A story about the hands of Gods reaching down from the heavens and destroying mankind. There was a figure, adorned in silver armour; in her right hand, she carried a sword while the other was simply outstretched, releasing a power that sent the Gods back to where they came from. In each painting, the figure was a girl who shared the same button nose, dark brown coils, and caramel skin as her.

The Lady jerked her away, and the paintings slowly disappeared from the girl's sight. She suddenly found herself in a great throne room where a man sat on the throne before her. Draped in a deep blue tunic, the man looked very old, and had a long pointy beard that almost brushed the stone floor. His eyes reminded her of the pomegranates she used to pick with her mother. But they held none of the sweetness. Beside his feet, a boy—who looked to be about the same age as her, if not slightly younger—played with a wooden toy train. When his eyes landed on her, he dropped his toy and scrambled to where the old man sat, hiding behind the throne.

The Lady threw her onto the floor, as if she couldn't wait to get rid of her. The girl's forehead smacked against the stone, and she soon felt the warm trickle of blood. Despite it, she kept her head down, not wanting to face the old man, the cruel lady, the boy and this strange, strange house that smelled like dying flowers.

"Here she is, the solution to our present problem." The Lady's high, seedy voice echoed throughout the room.

A low, deep voice rumbled in response, "Woman, what exactly did you bring into our home?"

"It does not matter who she is, she'll be who we say she is. And I say, she is suitable enough to take on the mantle. I mean look!"

The Lady grabbed a fistful of the girl's hair, and snapped her head up, so she was looking directly at the man. "Don't you see the resemblance?"

The man's eyes widened as he took in the girl's appearance, before sharpening again into needle pinpricks. "How *dare* you. Her body is still warm in the ground yet here you are, bringing a *replacement*?"

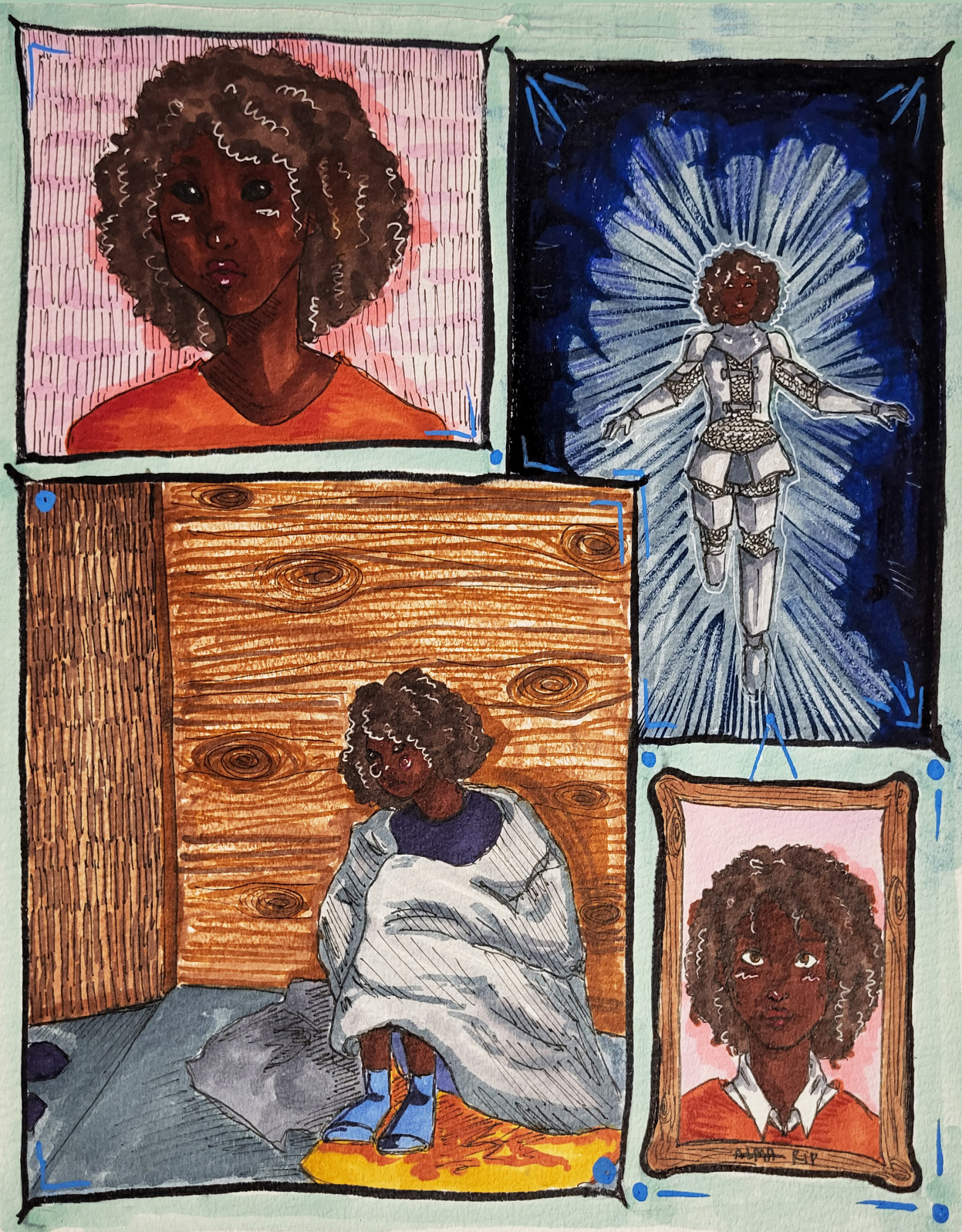
"The people are worried, and the Gods are becoming restless. We cannot continue to mourn any longer, we must fulfill what's already been set out for us."

The man stood up from his chair, startling both the girl and the boy. "Get out," he growled, his eyes flashing. "*Now*."

When the Lady didn't move, he lunged towards her, making her flinch.

"And take that child with you! Before I kill both of you!" The girl started to shake. The Lady brought her back to the entrance, handing her to one of the guards.

"Put her in one of the maid's rooms, make sure she doesn't leave it." She looked down at the girl once more, a glint in her eyes, "I can convince him still."



Later that night, the girl shivered amongst the blankets the guard threw on the floor for her. She did not understand why she was here, alone with only the howling winds outside as company. She missed home, and her mother's arms that'd wrap lovingly around her to keep her warm, but she didn't even know where that was anymore.

Voices sometimes filtered through the door, of the maids and servants passing by. The girl was able to capture snippets of their convos in hushed, low tones as if they were trying their hardest not to be heard.

"...She has finally gone mad, that woman..."

"It's too soon, she should've at least waited until..."

"I just feel it's an insult to suggest that child is in any way similar to—"

"*Shbb!* Keep your voice down, she's right *there*."

Confusion stirred in the girl's stomach. Confusion and curiosity, about this mysterious girl that these people keep comparing her to.

The door creaked open, and the boy from earlier came in. His hands were hidden behind his back, as if he was carrying something. She sat up and pressed herself into the nearest wall. She kept a wary gaze on the boy as he came up to her.

He was close enough that she could see the silver specks in his green eyes. He brought out his hands, where in them was a velvet handkerchief with a loaf of bread on top. The girl grabbed the loaf from his hands, and started chewing it with fervor. The boy stared as she ate.

Remembering her manners, the girl looked up at him and mumbled, "Thank you."

He smiled at that, and invited himself to sit beside her. They did not speak, and the winds outside grew more gentle.

The boy asked the first question. "What's your name?"

A shape in the form of a memory prodded the girl's mind, but she could not reach it. "I don't know," she said.

"That's okay, Father will give you a new one then."

A feeling that resembled relief washed over her. Relief, that at least, she wouldn't die. Many questions rested on the tip of her tongue, but she asked the first one that was planted there.

"Why does this place smell like rotten flowers so much?"

The boy turned his head towards the open door, his face blank and unassuming. "That'd be my sister. She was always the one to water the flowers."

Just as the boy—who she learned was named Kai—predicted, she indeed was granted a new name by the old man, who she learned to call "My King". She was given the name in the throne room, where this time she knelt before him, as ordered by the Lady. The Lady—who she continued to call as such—stood beside him, arms crossed and carrying a triumphant look.

"What do you desire, child?" asked the king. The girl hesitated for a moment. What did she want? She thought back to the home she couldn't recall the layout of; the mother whose face remained a blank canvas that the girl struggled to find the right paint to fill it with. It terrified her, that she had these remnants that she couldn't put back together.

"I want to be remembered," she said truthfully.

The king made a satisfied hum. "I'm sure you saw the paintings on your way here; they tell of a prophecy that must be thwarted. By someone who is blessed with powers unlike this world has seen. That someone was once my daughter." His eyes darkened, like a stormy cloud blocking the once bright sky.

"But she is dead. Taken by a common cold that had no reason to wreck her body like it did. And now the Gods are slowly breaking through the heavens, and the people are scared."

He leaned forward and gently lifted the girl's chin, forcing her to stare directly into his

storm-filled eyes.

"I'll be frank with you child. The only thing you have in common with my daughter is your countenance. But that may be enough. Take my daughter's place, and I promise you that no one will ever forget you. What do you say?"

This time, the girl did not hesitate. "I do."

"Then rise, my child. Henceforth, your name is Alma the Fifth. Carry this name with pride, as it was my daughter's own."

And rise Alma did. Her name, the thing that prodded and poked her mind looking for any opening, was gone.

It was the first thing of hers she discarded.

Since that day, the smell of dying flowers never left Alma. It trailed behind her as she met the Lady out in the courtyard; watched her be greeted with blows and kicks that left her on the ground gasping for air. It would linger afterwards and listen to the Lady berate her on her sloppy form, her sluggish moves. On anything that Alma did that deviated in any way from the Alma-Before-Her.

If the Lady found Alma behaving in a certain way, she'd correct her immediately.

"Stop walking like that, you look like a man."

"Enough with the slouching for God's sake."

"Whatever sound that just came from your mouth—cease it. Sounds like a donkey being strangled."

Every complaint and critique landed felt like slices to the flesh. But if this was the price to be remembered, then Alma was fine paying it with her body and soul. She may not have whatever powers the Alma-Before-Her possessed, but she vowed to match her in everything else.

So she discarded her donkey laugh, her unwomanly gait, and replaced them with soft laughter and controlled, measured steps. She wracked Kai's brain for anything to do with the Alma-Before-Her, and implemented her little routines and ticks into her own life, until she did them without second thought. When paraded around the villages by the Lady, everyone thought her to be the same Alma who they all came to love and call their "saviour". But the Lady made sure not to let anyone get too close to her.

Yet it still wasn't enough. Not when she could hear the whispers of some townspeople commenting on how her hair seemed a bit duller than usual. When she would sometimes catch the king staring at her, before frowning and turning away. Or when Kai, sweet kind Kai, revealed to her that he felt the Alma-Before-Her's death.

He had pointed at his chest. "Right here, it felt like my heart was being squeezed." He then chuckled. "But at least I don't have to worry about that happening with you."

It was the wrong thing to say, he realized that moments later. He had opened his mouth in apology, but she stopped him before he could utter a word.

Alma was coming upon her eighteenth birthday when the sky outside matched the painting. A hideous red-black colour that reminded her of an open wound. Lightning flashed across the sky, and for a split second one could see the shadow of a large hand, reaching down. If she was the girl who first entered this home, the sight would terrify her. But as Alma, she simply looked up, saw the ugly colour, and asked one of the servants to prepare her a horse.

Alma was dressed in the armour that was saved for the Alma-Before-Her. Luckily, they were the same size and the armour fit her well enough. But it still felt too tight around the chest-plate. When the fitting was done, she thanked each servant, and watched as they left her room. Alma wasn't sure if it was the candle lights playing tricks on her, or if one of the servants had tears in their eyes.

She walked down the hallway that carried those paintings. She imagined them being replaced with paintings depicting her own story. The Lady was the one who bid her farewell. The king

was unwell and could not make it, she had told her. She presented her with a fine silver sword, the first kind thing she had ever done for Alma.

Kai was waiting for her by the gates. A small frown marked his face—a rare sighting from him.

“Don’t go.”

“I have to, you know I do.”

“No you don’t. You can run, escape. I’ll come with you.”

“That would be foolish.”

“For God’s sake, Alma, I can’t feel you die again!” he shouted, fists clenched by his sides.

Alma gave a small, rueful smile. “But you won’t, remember?”

At that, she passed through the gates, leaving behind the strange house that she now considered her home. And the boy who became something like a brother to her.

The prophecy required little of Alma. No heroic showdown, or epic fight between her and the Gods. All she had to do was stand on that mountain and wait. From her vantage point, she could see the village and the people out on the streets and staring at the black sky.

Lightning struck, and when the sky above opened up, revealing a great hand reaching down, Alma jumped into the night air.

As she soared, higher and higher, the air squeezing out of her lungs until there was nothing left, she continued laughing. That same laugh the Lady said sounded like a donkey being killed. But she felt no shame now. For she was Alma the Fifth, and she would be remembered for this moment in time, for all the generations to come. They would sing her name around campfires, build statues commemorating her likeness, whisper stories in the dark to their children about the death and rebirth of Alma the Fifth. Up here, no rotting flowers followed her.

So what harm would come if she laughed this laugh, for it was hers and hers only? Nothing, nothing at all. Her laugh turned into a roar as she slammed body-first into God’s hand, then. Silence.

Then. Cheers. Roaring, boisterous cheers from the gathered townspeople. In their celebration, no one noticed the boy amidst them, crumpled on the ground, dying the same death, for a second time.

PERSEPOLIS REMEMBERS

Parsiian Abdi
edited by Amy Yang
illustrated by Marcus Hermary

A king, a commoner, and a soldier
stood amid a city
burning to its doom,
each with blood-stained hands
and a sinful look.

A city burning.
Persepolis falling.

Was it the king's fault,
who led with corruption—
greed dressed as guidance,
preaching doctrines that left his people
starved,
broken,
silenced,
sweetening his words,
bending religion for his own use?
weaponizing the sacred flame
and trading *asba* for *druj*?

Or was it the soldier,
the one who wielded the sword—
Was he to blame
for cutting through innocent souls,
burning homes,
never allowing his own morals
to outweigh the orders
his superiors bestowed?

Or was it the commoner,
who only stood and stared,
never raised a hand
or a voice,
who simply abided—
afraid of punishment,
afraid that resistance
would cost him his soul?
Whilst his brothers and sisters
fought within the ash,
wielding a sacred flame
which outweighed the sword?

From the ashes of Persepolis,
stories rose in smoke.
Stories of the
cinders,
corruption,
silence,
its people have lived through.
Of what happens when fear and greed
take over the fire
in every man's soul.

Persepolis remembers
the culture,
the language,
the songs,
that had been etched deep in its soil—
And it will rise once more,
as the sin of no man
can outshine the legacy of the land
of the people
who endured.

Definitions

Asba: truth & order

Druj: deceit



THE DIONYSIA

The Prasinian sky and the haze of construction that hides it. And such haze settles down as fast as the very thing constructed became indistinguishable from the very earth it was built on.

Marcus Hermary

edited by Crescentia Kim

illustrated by Karen Kan

Passing chariots and their bronze wheels dust and trample the salty remains of the garden where you buried her, where no flowers can ever grow or wilt again and the red sun beyond it will never fall or rise.

In ancient days when the world was first revealed to us and before we came to hate the archon of Prasina, Xertos commissioned a monument in the orbit of his home planet to celebrate the charity of blasted peace. **It was a temple to the god of great excess and frivolity, Dionysus. And in those days he was beloved by all in the subterranean and astral hierarchy.** And it was designed to glide between the orbits of the planet, Prasina and its neighbour Hasetamon. Excess and frivolity quickly came to be beloved by Prasiniains and Hasetamons alike, for no longer could they find cause for war when there was nothing to protect but their own dust left in the black oblivion. Tragic yet expected.

Xertos was familiar with Gentophenes the despot of Hasetamon. After the war they favoured each other and formed from the ash of their war a grey and romantic alliance. They directed many trade ships of grain and drachmas toward the surface of Hasetamon. Ever-rowing metallic galleys swept up leaves of dust, twirling in golden ratios up into the atmosphere. Hasetamon staged no plays and few festivals but those of red martial excellence. Yet it began to appreciate the excessive blues and whites as they came from the deep-borne trieremes of the new artistic colonists of Prasina. These were the devotees of Apollo and the men grew long hair and mountainous beards and had delicate fingers that danced over the lyre as the satelline pageant of Dionysus slid into orbit above their heads and beyond their purview.

And all things became quite passive and Hellenic and all things being concurrent became the same. Xertos and Gentophenes bickered over less fruitful matters like the tenses of archaic poetry and other dead and synchronous things. Gentophenes reclined in the symposium of Xertos in the company of many honourable men and actors. He soon understood why he as the despot no longer lorded over Prasina with spears and solar tractors. The symposium walls were made of clay. Where the clay to form



it could not be found they substantiated it with ash that abounded when homes came to be built again and painted blue after the war's end. Xertos' wine-purple toga was dyed by the quaint fish who squeaked before being expended by the palace-paid fisherman and Gentophenes' tunic was red.

The resident musician played the illustrious classical epics and names caked by dust. Their music channelled finless Mediterranean fish of paradise to where they ought to end. For all things microcosmic and concurrent end in resolution even if resolution is not an end.

Tein gein te hupo anthropon on, and the world being below mankind, the lyricist sang. The symposium-goers were indistinguishable from their festivity as they applauded and raised light-headed wine glasses to the lyricist Dionysus. The next day, which was not truly another day, Xertos presided over the reveal of the fine sculptures of heroes and gods made of lead and mercury. All were in attendance, both the many, the young and beautiful.

For that festival the servants of the house became masters and the masters servants, and girls women and women girls. And yet dust was dust. Still they cheered. They imagined they saw the sculptures moving within shady vapours. Especially those of Achilles and Dionysus and his eastern chorus. But not the new heroes or artists. No, never them, and the crowd was drawn into great frivolity in the agora like happy amnesiacs and Dionysus could never be wounded for he was the youngest of the gods.

Xertos came to Gentophenes naked save for the patterned pelt of some planetary animal draped on his loin and a grapevine tucked beneath his arm. Xertos approached in a stuttered waltz.

My, the archon said, what service is this!

Around them the air sopped alien petals from the wicker baskets of the flower girls in lines like the earthly strips of irrigation. Processions fruitful for the nutrition of man but destructive to the soil into which it is carved.

Only a high and peaceful society can achieve this splendour, said Gentophenes. What grace Apollo has bestowed upon your polis, O Xertos.

He is gracious and generous with his gifts to those who worship him in the proper manner. How do you, Gentophenes, worship him on Hase-tamon?

In the same way as you do here, Gentophenes said, ever since the hands of vagrant Prasinian artists built an amphitheatre fit for the obscurant masks of the playwrights on the vanquished planet of Hasematon.

And what are your thoughts on the sateline temple?

It is like a second sun, Gentopehenes said.

So it is. As though the god's black goat-skin watches us from afar, Xertos said.

As opposed to from nearby?

Why?

Where else should he be? Closest to us and most effective to our minds.

None other than Apollo is in our hearts, Xertos said. The Dionysian temple is for the permittance of excess and the loosening after war. Thus his title Lysios.

The parade of the festival passed by as their discourse concluded. It was a wild procession of berserk nighttime and uprooted trees yet still in the daylight and the black-beaked chorus's voices swelled, spindling some deeper ritual.

The mind that resides in Apollonian garden is sublimated, frayed and it is odorous and faint. Your late father's varnished chest meets your rusted axe once inherited from him. It should be no other way and the arc of your swing is the ordered wavelength. At the peak of its height, your axe is anointed with the spell of the red sun on an equal yet larger arc like the ritual salute and changing of the palace guard of day and night and dark age and renaissance.

On the third day of the Dionysian festivities, his temple was received by the Prasinians. The satellite temple burned in brilliant ecstasy, charging and charging through the layers of clouds, like fragile circles of libation, and it was headed for the city falling onto the polis, overwhelming the atmosphere. The descendant satellite shattered the roofs it landed on, revealing their most mysterious insides at last to the oppressive daylight. And the pageant of the crowd became frenzied and loose and squeaked like Tyrian fish.

Xertos turned to Gentophenes and accused him of vicious betrayal, murder, conspiracy, and all dishonourable things. Xertos took the mob into his hand with the trance of his words, all but one near to him, and the mob made a bloody pageant of his body and laughed, thrashing his red ankles as he turned red. Heavy words were passed from hand to wrinkled hand which made the crowd wrestle and dig their nails and perpetrate great chaos and violence upon the mass. They cannibalized themselves in a fountainous circle of inwardly collapsing bodies. Not bodies but becoming members of the collective organism. And they raised the cups of ritual to the orbital temple's dusty husk and toasted to the god Dionysus for he has always been and will be well beloved.

Those minds not yet wholly maddened fled from the operatic waves whose floods of hands and heads and other parts climbed over the now empty pedestal of Dionysus in an ouroboric pursuit. And then they lost themselves. The force of hundreds shattered the strength of columns that they hated and crumbled the towers until they returned to be selfsame with the earth on which they were built. And in this they hailed the god Dionysus, the substrate son of Zeus and yet older than Zeus or any titan or god or man or dust or planet or grace or hatred or love or occupation or order and he was Dionysus, well beloved then and now and he can never be wounded because he is the oldest of the gods.



CONCRETE CREEPERS

Ayla Barker
edited by Norah Ruch
illustrated by Alex Chick

We must be quiet. The trees will hear our footsteps. They will feel our heartbeats, want to taste our blood. They drank my mother dry when the bulbs were snuffed out. That's what the adults told me, but I am not so dull. The trees did not appear with bloated hands covered in dust. They did not steal my mother away, to that place above. The trees stand only as predators waiting to be fed, as an excuse to keep us from asking too many questions about those foreign people and their intrusion into the concrete. In the aftermath of their theft, only the baby was left to feel my tears, squirming under the cot where my mother stashed him. Kiro still shrivels at the wet chill of concrete, a soft lump not built for this depth. The others say it was my mother's fault. That she transgressed, and deserved her fate. The baby is meant to be above, an abomination of the trees. But that cannot be. I will not believe it.

"You should not carry him so much, Kelena," Kenzo says.

I place a hand on Kiro's back. "He does not like the concrete."

Kenzo makes a show of scanning every inch of the hallway as we travel upwards. "He will have to learn."

"We cannot know that."

Kenzo shakes his head and sighs. "You should go to the light. I can feel despair leeching from your skin."

"Ms. Keena said I should keep Kiro away from the light," I say, petting down a wayward hair on the baby's head.

"Ms. Keena doesn't know anything about that baby, just like everyone else." Kenzo comes close, his light eyes locking with Kiro's tiny dark ones. "I wonder if he will be able to see down here with such dark irises. You should have called him something other than Kiro."

I pull the hat covering his small head over his eyes. "Kiro was his father's name. My mother told me."

Kenzo leans back, a smirk playing across his lips. "We both know his father could not have had such a name."

I keep my lips tight. "It is possible."

Kenzo raises a brow. "How? He must have inherited those eyes from somewhere, and it could not have been from any men in our society."

"I do not know."

"He must hail from somewhere where there is much light, for his eyes to be so dark."

"That is only speculation."

"Have you met anyone who lives here with such eyes?"

"No."

"Have you ever seen his father?"

"No."

"Did your mother tell you anything before they came for her?"

I stay quiet, tightening my grip on the infant in my arms.

Kenzo's eyes thin. "Do you know anything?"

"No."

Kenzo shakes his head. "If we were not raised in the same rooms, I would not be so accommodating of you."

Shaking off my dread, I smile, knowing he is lying. My mother told me of love once. It is the feeling of liking to hear someone speak. Kenzo must like the sound of my voice. If he did not, he would not make me speak so often. He stands, towering over me. His clear irises sparkle in the lamp-light.

"You should go to the light. I know nothing will happen." He takes a deep breath and smirks. "Maybe he even needs it to be healthy," Kenzo says, nodding to the baby in my arms.

"The teacher never said those above *needed* the light," I say, drawing the words out as we slow our pace up the hall.

"The only thing we were ever taught was the threat the trees posed."

"It is important to know why they began to dig our civilization," I

respond, attempting to reorient the conversation.

"It would be more interesting to know why those men can survive above with the trees, while we cannot."

"I like that they teach us about the concrete."

Kenzo rolls his eyes. "You're trying to change the subject. You know I hate the concrete."

"I am not."

"You are."

"No."

Kenzo shakes his head and sighs. He begins to turn away, and my chest constricts.

"Will you come to the light?" I blurt.

Kenzo smirks, spinning to face me once more. He goes to see the light as often as he can. Sometimes, I think he likes the idea of transgressing. I don't understand why he does not fear it. The last person who was caught digging at a crack in the concrete fell into hysteria, mumbling about those who live above. The Men of the Trees. I shiver at the thought. My mother told me that long ago, we were made for the light. That we were like the Men of the Trees. She was fascinated by them, and never spoke so harshly about the world above as the others. In the end, she was taken by the very thing that enthralled her.

We go left instead of right. We should go right. It is the way to the supper hall. We will be late. We will miss our meal. My stomach grumbles.

"My mother will bring us food," Kenzo says, watching me closely. "She will bring food for him as well," he adds, nodding to the infant against my chest. Kenzo's mother has been stealing formula for me. She brings it to me five times a day. The first three months, it was even more. I still do not sleep, waiting for her to silently step into my room at night. I cannot let Kiro cry, or it will echo against the concrete.

We continue upwards until the ground levels out. Glancing back, we open a door. It is grey, like all the rest. The handle has lost its shine, finger-shaped grooves worn into the metal. The dust is thicker here, the darkness more complete. Kenzo steps in front, pulling aside the cover pinned along the wall. I wince as a streak of light brightens the room. Slowly, I let my fingers dance through it, mesmerized by the shift of colour against my skin. Sighing, Kenzo takes a seat and lets the light wash over his face. His lips turn up, the grooves of his face fading to a smooth canvas. I turn Kiro around and hold him out. His eyes widen, hands reaching for the ray. For the first time, I hear his laugh. The sound is soft, not meant for our society.

I look at Kenzo as Kiro kicks his feet, cooing in the brightness.

"You are staring," Kenzo says.

I look back at the crack in the wall, feeling my cheeks warm. "At the light." I step closer, breathing in the air. I cough, my lungs beginning to burn. Kiro reaches for the crack, willing me closer. I oblige, getting close enough to feel the roughness of the edge... and something foreign, hard and gnarled. It is different then the concrete, just beginning to poke through. I pull on it, putting my weight behind my body. I jolt back as it comes free.

"What is that?" Kenzo asks from the ground. I turn it over, feeling its uneven ridges. It bends but does not stretch. Kenzo steps to my side, taking it in his hands. He snaps it in two, revealing a lighter brown interior, like thick armour peeled away to reveal some type of bloodless cartilage. The interior feels nearly damp, the shard sticking out at the end hard and dull. I have never seen anything like it between the concrete walls.

I look at the gap again, bringing my eye closer.

"What are you doing?" Kenzo asks.

My lungs tighten as I breathe in the light-tainted air. I squint against the brightness, feeling my irises burn. The light is suddenly blocked out, replaced by a dark eye watching from the other side of the crack. I jolt backwards, reeling.

"We must leave," I say, feeling my hair stand on end.

"Why? What did you see?" Kenzo asks, moving the thing between his fingers as he steps closer. I don't answer. Kenzo stays close on my heels as we hastily replace the sheet and run down the hall. "Kelena, you must stop rushing. Someone will suspect us of transgression."

"We have transgressed. We must leave."

We turn a corner and screech to a halt. I hold Kiro tight to my chest, protecting his face from view.

Society guards block the hall. They wear black masks covering the lower halves of their faces, leaving only their glacial eyes in view. "You should be at supper," one of the gruff guards says.

Kenzo swallows as boots clatter nearer behind us. I turn backwards and freeze in shock. *The Men of the Trees*, I recognize with a jolt. Two lipless guards stand at their flanks. The Men of Trees wear brown, ripped clothes. Their heads are wrapped in cloth, leaving only dark eyes to watch us. A path of dust has fallen off them, leaving a trail in their wake. *They look exactly as they did when they took my mother.*

"That's her, I know those leeches eyes," the Man of the Trees seethes, raising his hand to point. "And I guarantee that's the infant boss's

been wanting.” My body recoils, as if reeling from a scream long gone silent. His finger is crooked like the thing from the wall, bloated and stained like a water-logged prune. I take a step back, right into a society guard. His hands grip my shoulders as Kenzo starts to twitch, the fingers folded tightly around the thing beginning to shake. The Man of the Trees steps forward and grabs Kiro by the back of his shirt. I scream, pleading for the child. Those dark eyes force my mouth shut.

The Men of the Trees look at Kiro for a long time before nodding. They begin to turn away as my brother begins to cry. Kenzo shifts uncomfortably, his face twisting in pain. The Men of the Trees catch it. One steps towards him, a hand shooting out to grab his arm. Kenzo whimpers as the thing drops from his fingers. Blood drips past his knuckles, pooling into a dark puddle on the concrete.

The second soldier bends down slowly, picking up the thing. My lungs heave as he inspects it, scoffing at the blood. He kneels before Kenzo, my friend shaking.

“D’your momma not tell ya the trees will suck you dry?” He reaches out, gripping Kenzo’s wrist so tightly his bony digits splay in the air. “Just look at all that crimson blood. Won’t be able to stop those towr’n trees lusting for that beating heart of yours now, you concrete creeper—”

“That is enough,” the society guard says. I feel his fingers dig into my shoulders, crushing craters into my musculature.

The Man of the Trees stands and cackles from deep in his chest. “Thanks for lett’n us in. Our boss’s been want’n this thing since you’s let us take its momma,” the man with Kiro says, tucking him into his arms. “Can’t be lett’n no mixing go on, now can we? Never know what type’a creature it might make.”

They turn without another word and disappear. Two society guards flank them, ignoring us as if they had not just stolen my brother. My mother’s son.

The hands slowly peel away from my body. I fall to the ground, feeling my shoulders sink with the exhale of a sob. My arms are weak, empty.

“What will they do with Kiro?” Kenzo asks, his face translucent.

The guard laughs, the sound booming against the concrete walls. “A Child of the Trees cannot have such a name.”



edited by Lucy Kim

illustrated by Andrea Yip

The escalators illuminate the path to the subway platform, but Shirley decides to take the stairs, having always felt uneasy around escalators. Once her feet meet the mosaic floor tiles, she walks towards the nearest bench, being sure to check for any stains before sitting down. Instinctively, her hands reach for the lanyard around her neck, fingers tracing the name on the card: Shirley Chang. She's unable to suppress her smile, remembering her art display on her school campus earlier that evening: the paintings of Toronto streets hung all along the walls, each signed with her initials. She reaches into her messenger bag, digging past her laptop and makeup bag to search for headphones. *Must have forgotten them*, she thinks, coming up empty-handed.

Shirley looks around the platform, setting her gaze on a lone figure standing a few benches down, the fluorescent lights shining on their black trench coat. She leans back into the bench, breathing in the familiar scent of oil and concrete as she catches sight of an advertisement for Toronto General Hospital on one of the walls. Overhead, an announcement sounds: *the TTC takes your safety very seriously. If you see something, say something*. When the train pulls into the station, Shirley gets up before seeing "Out of Order" printed onto the train's destination screen. She huffs. *Typical*. She starts to sit back down, but the letters go dark, reappearing to read "Line 1 towards Finch". The doors open, and Shirley steps inside, freezing when she finds rows of empty red seats and unoccupied handholds. She glances back at the subway platform, seeing the same lone figure. They haven't moved. Shirley takes a seat, reaching into her pocket for her phone. When the screen illuminates, she swipes up, surprised not to find any notifications. She catches a brief glimpse of the time before the screen goes dark. 1:44 AM.

Please stand clear of the doors. Shirley looks up as the train starts to move. She sees the same cloaked figure still standing at the platform, pale skin visible below the shadow of their hood. The figure turns their head, watching as the train departs. Shirley forces herself to look away, still feeling the figure's eyes on her back as she's engulfed in the darkness of the tunnel. She catches a glimpse of her reflection in the window. *My hair is a mess*, she thinks, tucking a black strand behind her ear. She yawns, leaning into her seat, allowing the rumbling of the train tracks to lull her to sleep. When she comes to, she registers a faint sound: *beep... Five seconds pass... Beep*.

Must be the train, she decides. She looks up at the map, the LED lights indicating that a few stops have gone by. She turns on her phone. 1:44 AM. Still no notifications. She frowns. *I'll just ask someone for the time*, she thinks, getting up. The car is still empty. Had no one gotten on while she

was asleep? She walks over to the next car, then the next, finding them all empty. At last, she reaches the farthest car and sees a little girl sitting alone. She wears a floral dress and a sunhat, shielding her bald head. *Where are your parents?* Shirley wonders, walking on ahead to the driver's door. She knocks. A few seconds go by. *Beep... Beep...* She knocks again.

"I already tried that," the little girl says. "It won't work."

Shirley turns around. She takes in the little girl, noting that she looks vaguely familiar but Shirley can't pinpoint why. She wants to ask the girl what she means but says instead, "What time is it?"

The girl looks at her wrist and says, "It's 1:44."

Shirley's heart skips a beat. "Can I see your watch?"

The girl holds out her wrist. Sure enough, the arrows point to 1:44. Shirley looks out the window, the lights flashing by as the subway makes its way through the tunnel. She waits for another station to arrive, holding her breath. *Beep... Beep...* She exhales.

"When was the last stop?" Shirley asks.

The girl thinks about it. "I don't know. A minute ago? Why?"

Shirley shakes her head. "No, that's... impossible. I would have noticed."

"I'm Juliet," the girl says, reaching out her hand. When Shirley doesn't make an effort to shake it, Juliet puts it back down.

"I'm Shirley."

"Where are you headed?"

"I'm headed..." Her voice trails off. Where *had* she been headed?

"No destination then," Juliet says. "I like that. Just hop onto the subway. Ride until the end. See where you wind up."

Shirley doesn't respond, instead reaching into her pocket and checking her phone again. 1:44 AM. She gasps, dropping her phone as a sudden, sharp pain pierces the back of her hand. She looks down, seeing something taped to her. An IV. She blinks, and it's gone. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

Shirley looks at Juliet, noticing something on her face. An oxygen tube. Then she catches a glimpse of their reflections in the window. She stumbles back, managing to catch herself on one of the handholds before falling.

"You okay?" Juliet asks. The tube is gone.

Shirley lets out a shaky breath, trying to erase the sight of the grey skin and lifeless eyes that stared back at her. She looks at the window again, finding that their reflections have returned to normal. She leans down and

picks up her phone. *Beep... Beep...*

"Where are your parents?" Shirley asks.

Juliet shrugs. "Asleep. What about you?"

"I'm nineteen," Shirley says. "I don't live with them anymore." But still, she imagines her parents sitting at her bedside while she falls asleep. Tears in their eyes. Why are they crying? *Beep... Beep...* Juliet looks down at her watch again.

"It's still 1:44."

"What?" Shirley turns on her phone again. She sees the time, then looks back at the map, seeing that a few more stops have gone by since they started talking.

"I like your earrings," Juliet says.

Instinctively, Shirley's hands go to her ears: the dangling flowers coated in resin. "Thanks. I made them. My mom taught me."

Juliet's eyes light up. "So you're an artist! Do you go to art school? I've always wanted to go to art school."

"I do." Shirley reaches for her lanyard, showing Juliet her student card. "I'm working on a painting right now," she says, her voice growing excited, momentarily forgetting her circumstance. "For my parents' anniversary."

"What of?"

"Mykonos," says Shirley, picturing the blue roofs of the Greek island. "It's where they met. They're bringing me there this summer."

"It's cool that your parents get along! Mine have drifted apart since I was born."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's not a big deal."

Beep... Beep... It's getting louder now. Shirley frowns. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" *Beep... Beep...*

"*That*," Shirley says, gesturing in their general vicinity.

"The beeping? Oh yeah. I'm used to it." Before Shirley can ask what she means, Juliet says, "What's in your bag?"

"Not much. Just..." Shirley's voice trails off as she glances back down at her bag, noticing that it's light. Too light for her laptop. She frowns, unzipping it and reaching inside. She produces a few sheets of paper. Blank. Then she looks again. Hospital papers.

"Oh," Juliet says softly. "So you too, then?"

"What?" Then the memories start to return: a speeding car. Para-

medics. The blood leaking out of her skull. Her parents' sobs. The pain... *Please make it stop!* She looks down at her hands now. Her skin is pale. Cold. She looks at the time again, unsurprised when it still reads 1:44 AM.

Shirley looks at Juliet, remembering now why she looks familiar. As the paramedics had wheeled Shirley through the hospital, she'd passed by another room. One with a little girl lying in bed, the pulse on the monitor screen coming to a slow halt as Shirley's vision had started to fade as well. *Beep...* The sound is coming slower now. Shirley has a feeling it'll soon stop. She looks at the map, seeing they've almost reached the last stop.

"I miss my old bedroom," Juliet says quietly. "But I think, at a certain point, I just accepted that I wouldn't ever see it again. At least I have some company now. The hospital room gets a little lonely sometimes when Mom and Dad are at work, and the nurses are all busy."

"How old are you?"

"Eight," says Juliet. "But I always felt a lot older than all my classmates. Guess that's what happens when you get sick."

Shirley looks over at the door, walking towards it, trying to pry it open. Her hands are weak. Her arms ache. She gathers the strength to walk back towards the driver's door, her legs giving out on the floor near where Juliet sits. Shirley stares down the door as though that may compel the driver to open up so she can demand they stop the train.

"It's okay," Juliet says. Her voice is growing fainter as well. "Come sit with me." Shirley looks up at Juliet, meeting her eyes. Her kind gaze. Wise beyond her years. Shirley looks back at the driver's door, back at the exit to the subway. Then she looks down at her hands. They look waxy.

"It's too late," Shirley whispers. "Isn't it?"

Juliet nods.

Shirley reaches for the seat next to Juliet's, managing to pull herself to her feet before she collapses next to Juliet. Tears sting the back of her eyes. Juliet reaches out her hand, wiping them away, her fingers cold and dry against Shirley's cheeks. Juliet leans onto Shirley's shoulder, taking Shirley's hand into her own.

"This isn't so bad," Juliet says quietly. "We can play here. There's so much space. An entire subway to ourselves. Just you and me. Forever."

Forever, the word echoes in Shirley's head. She shuts her eyes too, leaning into Juliet as the train reaches the last stop.

ABOUT *The Spec*

The Spectatorial is University of Toronto's only genre-focused journal. Established in 2013, our masthead and writers work with mythical creatures, the gothic, deep space, and all things in between. We also have a blog where we post non-fiction: analyses, essays, and op-eds on speculative fiction media all year-round! Have a pitch? Shoot us an email at thespectatorial@gmail.com, or check out <https://thespectatorial.ca/> for blog post inspiration.

As an Innis College student group, *The Spectatorial* stands with the Cinema Studies Student Union and the Cinema Studies Graduate Student Union in support of the Petition to Innis College and its Associates to Discontinue the Permitting of Zionist Activity in its Spaces, created by Film Students 4 Palestine. The petition calls on Innis College to adopt the guidelines outlined by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and can be found in the link at [@filmstudents4palestine](https://www.instagram.com/filmstudents4palestine) on Instagram. In solidarity, we would also like to raise support for additional Palestinian spaces in Toronto: the Toronto Palestine Film Festival, Toronto for Palestine, and the Palestinian Youth Movement, which has a chapter here in Toronto.

For interested parties, *Spec* masthead applications are opening during/after exam season. Stay tuned for relevant forms and information coming on our Instagram. If you've enjoyed or gained interest in anything we've done this year, we invite you to apply! Thank you to our readers, contributors, and masthead for making this year possible! We appreciate your support!



