



the
pec
other
worlds

The Spectatorial
Summer Zine
2026

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EDITORS' ADDRESS

Dear Readers,

Welcome to our first publication of the 2026-27 season! We hope it finds you soaking in the last rays of summer. Here at the *Spec*, we've been hard at work writing, editing, and illustrating our summer zine—we're super excited to share it with you!

Unlike our other zines, the summer zine is produced entirely by our incredible masthead. This year, the genre is FANTASY and the theme is *other worlds*. It acts as a worldbuilding repository, imagining realities beyond our own. Inside these pages you'll find unfamiliar traditions, folktales, magicks, and voyages...

We'd like to thank our masthead for all the work they've put into this zine—your efforts shine through in every piece. Thank you especially to our Creative Director, Chris, who designed the finished product you're holding right now.

And thank *you* for reading. We hope to see you at one of our events, or in the pages of our future publications!

Phoebe, Adaora, and Crescentia

Editors-in-Chief and Managing Editor

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MEET THE MASTHEAD

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OBSERVATIONS MADE IN THE COURSE OF ORDINARY EMPLOYMENT

by Anya Malhotra

On the Fourth Day of the Harvest, 1209 | Journal of Runa Hrothgar,
Beast Slayer

Today's job was nailed to the door of the Yrgrend Inn.

BEAST SLAYER NEEDED. A HUGE DRAGON has been burning the HOLY FIELDS of the Viggurat commune. 100 Keping.

I thought Aelriel and I would take a break after our last job on the First. She could have finished some reading. I could have addressed my stiff left shoulder. Bronwyn could have rested in a proper stable.

So I nearly left the contract there. Ael said another would come. They always do. Someone would have taken this one eventually.

But I took the job the next morning. Three days of rest proved, to my irritation, that I was terrible at inertia.

The contractor was a priest of the Land God Viggurat, notoriously devoted and pious. I have yet to find something worth believing in with such conviction. Gods demand devotion. Something I do not find myself having much time for. My weaknesses include my wife and perhaps a chilled mug of mead. That is devotion enough.

The job seemed routine. I assumed the creature to be a wyvern. Perhaps a griffin glimpsed poorly at dusk. The priest insisted it was a dragon.

I scoffed in his face. Ael gave me her *please be nice he is paying us* look.

Dragons do not bother themselves with human society. They are solitary. Ancient. Rational. They do not concern themselves with sheep. If I had to pray to anything, it would be a dragon.

We rode north toward Mount Æthel, cutting through the commune's fields in search of tracks. Ael sat side-saddle before me, back against my chest, silk skirts draped over Bronwyn's shoulder. Her black hair sluiced down her back and caught in the buckles of my breastplate. Beside her pointed ears and impossible green eyes, I must look barbarous: all pale braids, broad shoulders, and battered steel.

Viggurat's priests pride themselves on fertile land. Their communes are recognizable for miles, through lush fields, orchards, and shrine-stones beneath offerings of grain.

Here, however, the wheat had burned. Too neatly.

Fire from a hungry beast wanders. It catches dry grass, leaps hedges, takes whatever the wind offers. This fire stopped where a row of six half-buried onyx pillars began. Ael dismounted and brushed soot from the largest one, tracing the lettering.

"Draconic."

"Meaning?"

"You've been in this profession for two decades, Runa. Take a guess."

I sighed. "Dragon."

"There she is."

I did not want to believe it. Nobody doubts Aelriel once she is sure.

The runes brightened beneath Ael's fingers.. She translated,

"A boundary of mourning. No plough, blade, or altar is to pass beyond it."

The priest had neglected to mention his fields had, indeed, passed beyond it.

Ael looked at me. I looked at the fields.

"He built through the boundary."

"Looks that way."

"And now he wants us to kill the thing protecting it."

I sighed. "Of course he does."

The boundary led us north, toward Æthel's summit. We found the dragon a few hours later.

She lay enormous and bronze-scaled beneath an outcropping of stone, one vast wing concealing something beneath her. Female, judging by her talons and absence of horns. One amber eye opened as we approached. Bronwyn reared, ready to run. I stopped her and drew my

sword. Ael was already dismounting.

The dragon did not move.

Had she wanted us dead, we would have been incinerated the moment we reached the summit.

I kept my guard up still. Ael knelt, whispering something low and sweet in Common Draconic and reached out a hand. The dragon slowly lifted her wing, then. Beneath it lay bones. Onyx-black, iridescent and ancient, arranged carefully within a circle of carved stones. The largest bore the same High Draconic runes.

“Arys,” she read softly. “Esteemed Lord of the Skies. Mate of Synninta the Bronze.” Synninta lowered her wing over him again. I thought of the priest calling her a beast. I wondered what, then, he might call a widow. I sheathed my sword.

That evening I informed the priest there had been no dragon. Merely an adolescent wyvern, thoroughly scolded by my mage.

He protested. I reminded him that only one of us was a licensed beast slayer, and my mage was more than capable of turning him into a frog. He swiftly paid me the one hundred Forest Keping.

Today’s observation: I remain convinced devotion is a weakness. I have merely discovered that some weaknesses are worth having.

THE REPOSSESSION OF A SPIRIT

by Lucy Kim



If floating in a dark body of tempestuous water had taught her anything, it was that the resentment of one girl, Alebren or not, meant nothing to the elements. Sehlím had never seen such murky currents, with scarcely enough visibility to glimpse things floating directly beneath her chin. She was unprotected in this dark abyss, utterly vulnerable in a way she had never been before. She now thought of every monster her people had ever written about, all attempting to reach the same place. Her hands were growing purple, arms aching with the struggle of grasping at the log keeping her afloat. One thing alone kept Sehlím above the water: the knowledge that she hadn't smoked a thing in over a day, almost two.

“Not before I get my hands on a fucking pipe.”

She kicked and kicked, flailing like a mad thing in her desperation for even a slip of land. The drowsy sky grew darker and darker until she could no longer see her own outstretched hand. With no idea where she was going, having left her compass on the ship, possibly lying on the bottom of the ocean along with her crewmates, Sehlím had no choice but to brave through the currents, unknowing. Kick, Sehlím, kick. Just twenty more kicks, now fifteen, just ten, just ten! She kicked and kicked until it was nearly impossible to differentiate the movement of her body from the swaying of the waves and parse out the significance a kick or two even made. Maybe she had not moved at all from the place where her ship had capsized.

Helplessness settled over her like a monsoon, rapid and all at once, in a violent pour. There was, after all, a reason that no one in the ancient and noble history of her people had ever managed to reach Taili. She had been too hasty, as her father had said when she proposed

her mission to the “Sacred Lands”, and now it was too late. With the last vestige of strength in her searing body, she threw her leg over the side of the log and pulled herself atop it. Her hands were iron-clad on the wood as if welded together; she could not pry them off if she tried. Slowly, she lowered her cold cheek to the sopping lumber and closed her eyes. That elusive prize: glory, seemed farther than ever. Her parents would be disappointed, and so would the Alebren who believed in her father's legendary legacy of high general and, by extension, her capabilities as his daughter. For the first time in her young life, Sehlim thought of death as a possibility and did not fight it.

However, life, like dreams or imaginings, often goes by contrary, and she did not die. The cards dealt are a curious thing, and Sehlim couldn't decide whether it was prayers or sheer dumb luck. Sharp twinges of light prompted crusted eyes to stumble open. Sehlim attempted to lift an arm, to rub a dry and itchy eye, but the pain that shot up her arm was so severe that a surprised cry leapt from her parched throat.

“Don't move.” A girl's voice.

“Who—?” Instantly alert and frightened, Sehlim blinked rapidly. A ray of bright, clear sunlight penetrated through a square opening in the ceiling. It took several seconds of erratic blinking to see where the hell she was, and who had just spoken. Instead of seeing one form, however, three took shape, growing darker with the new moisture accumulating beneath her lids. They looked young, younger than her and darker. Their eyes were layered, ringed like sandstone, each a different colour. Before she could say anything else, the boy on the left spoke.

“Don't worry. You're safe. My name is Ilias. This is Chalki, and that is Rame. You're in our boat. We found you yesterday drifting atop a piece of wood, far west to where we are now.”

“Water,” was all she had the strength to murmur.

The second boy, whose name she'd already forgotten, rose and fetched her a water pouch. Lifting the skin to her cracked lips obediently, he said, “We are from the Sacred Lands, and we seek to bring you home with us.”

Sehlim's eyes widened, and she stopped drinking. The Sacred Lands? God's in his heaven, she thought.

A FRIENDLY GAME

by Adaora Olisa

Lamis knew who set that bomb at the national museum. The threat of termination for defying orders couldn't drown out the sickening drum in her heart, that *ra ta ta* telling her that she may be right.

So instead of being tucked in bed, enjoying a cup of tea, the sole of her boots met the loud crunch of shattered debris as she searched the abandoned gallery space. In the past week, the place had been filled with the police and investigators. Now, only broken pieces of the remaining statues kept her company.

Hurried footsteps, not her own. Lamis followed the sound around a sharp corner where a statue that, amazingly, did not suffer the same fate as its brothers and sisters stood. Sudden movement shifted behind it. Lamis whipped out her Primary Apparati: a pair of scissors that hummed with the pulse of her energy.

"Step away from the statue. *Slowly.*" As the person stepped out, the *ra ta ta* in her heart slowed to a stop.

She was met with soft brown eyes that did not match the hardened, angular face it belonged to. But they were unmistakable. Lamis wondered if Rosa was making a similar calculation—did they recognize her? She did not dwell on it for too long. She had gotten her answer: Rosa Baron was alive, and they were a traitor.

A damn shame.

From her pocket, Lamis brought out a thick roll of tape—her Second Apparati—and in a flurry of movements, strips of tape floated beside her like tentacle arms.

"Wait." Rosa croaked out. Lamis paused, her confusion only deepening when Rosa kicked something towards her feet. Then another, and another.

Three items. A cellphone, an empty box of matches, and a water bottle. Three completely unrelated items. She looked up and saw that Rosa also had three items before them as well.

"Let's play."

And before she knew it, they were kids again. Like it was another day after school, and they didn't feel like going home just yet. Rosa would pull out whatever random stuff was in their bag and ask in that raspy voice of theirs if Lamis wanted to play.

Of course she did. When it was Rosa asking, she always did. Because with Rosa, the impossible became possible. Whatever rules their Conduit Arts teacher would spout at them became mere suggestions.

1. Your Energy can be channeled through none other than your Primary Apparati, and Objects that are Direct Tethers.

One of their items was a sheet of paper. A Direct Tether to her scissors. She had used plenty of those in the past, and the connection was strong enough for her to channel about 90% of her energy through them. But the items she had were useless for trading. Rosa knew that already, it's why they didn't bother asking.

Leaving the other option. Fight for it.

2. A Direct Tether is determined based on what can be Observed by the Eyes.

Lamis moved first. She made several slicing motions, as if she already had the paper and was cutting it. She cut a circle shape into the air and sent it Rosa's way. But they easily sidestepped each and everyone of them, chuckling as they did. Showoff.

The other two items—a rubber ducky and some shoe laces—hung onto their slender hands.

"Two words in them. Rubber-ducky shoe-laces. I can work with that."

"Won't do shit." Lamis gruffed out, but there was no real menace behind it. Only a desire for them to prove her wrong.

They tied the ducky to the shoe laces. Gave it a spin, once, twice. Lamis watched as it turned into a weapon, one that came down at her terrifying speed. One hit to the chest, yet the pain was doubled.

3. The Conduit Arts is not for Amusement.

The game's over. She was flat on her back, a thick wetness expanding beneath her head. Yet all Lamis could was laugh. She was dying, yes, but it was fun. How long has it been since she experienced something like that? From her viewpoint, she saw Rosa standing over her. She noticed the downward turn of their mouth and, were those tears? Must've been her imagination. If she died, that was that.

But why did she stop playing with them all those years ago? Lamis thought hard about it, but the answer eluded her, she could only watch it leave with Rosa before succumbing to the darkness.

THE FOREST

by Ciara Drummond

On a small planet hidden in a sea of stars, there was a Forest.

If you asked the Elders, they would say that the Forest inhabited the space above Deimos, floating above the large pit where it used to reside before the planet's magical core pushed the Forest from itself. A rejection, if you asked Anya. Below it, Deimos laid dying, withered and grey, its remaining magic sacrificed to keep the horrors of the Forest at bay. A curse the gods placed on the Forest people for daring to meddle with magic they didn't understand.

There are things that live in the dark. And you should be afraid. That was the first lesson you learned living within the Forest. Generations ago, the old Elders had sacrificed themselves, as offerings, to create the protection core around Anya's village, a barrier that stopped the Forest's horrors from getting in. But if you were to leave, you were at the mercy of the Forest. And, it was not kind.

The Forest was a monster, as was everything that lived in it.

The magic of Deimos had been isolated within the Forest for decades, becoming more concentrated as the planet flowed its magic into the Forest. It contaminated the soil and corrupted the Forest itself. Trees were the most deadly, and the first thing children were taught to fear. Their roots were too close to raw magic, and when disturbed, the trees lashed out.

When Anya was twelve, a little girl wandered too far from the protection core, and was dragged into the Forest. It took four men to hold the girl's mother back from the barrier as the village watched the girl be dragged away. The council debated for hours whether she was worth sending the hunters after her. She wasn't. Everything had a cost. And the little girl's life wasn't worth the possible price.

The lives of the hunters, the people responsible for transporting resources between villages, were more important. Before entering the

Forest, hunters were marked with the blood of Offerings, people born with unusually powerful magic, until the Forest recognized the magic in their blood and mistook the hunters for part of itself. But they aren't invulnerable.

Even with hunters, people didn't come back from the Forest.

Yet Anton had come back. Anya's brother had conquered the Forest and returned without a hunter's protection. He returned as a corpse, mind you, but Anton returned. Cause of death: magic deprivation sickness. He had likely wandered into an isolated zone where the Forest had exhausted the magic around it. Starved, it began drawing magic from the living things nearby.

Anya never imagined she would be jealous of the dead. But she was. He died lost, confused, but consumed by an euphoric high, as everyone who died of magic deprivation sickness did. Perhaps in his delusion, Anton imagined a world away from the Forest. A safe, and comfortable world. The elders told Anya he died quickly with no suffering. Only a few steps from the barrier. It was a miracle the hunters had taken his body back to the village before the trees consumed his body. Anya didn't know if it mattered.

Anya was going to die. Soon. She felt it. She was chosen, the offering like the old elders, to ensure the protection core barrier stayed healthy. The girl who usually sat beside Anya during dinner rattled on how lucky she was. Anya didn't feel lucky.

Everything had a cost. Her life was the cost.

And looking at Anton, who died wastefully, she was devastated. When Anton foolishly got his magic stolen, he became useless to the village, unable to be offered to the protection core. If he had to die, why couldn't he have been sacrificed to protect the village? She hated him. She could have lived. She didn't have to die.

He was weak. He had insufficient magic. He angered the elders constantly. And he spent his final days cursing Anya. Calling her a Forest child. And acting like a heretic. And, he died for nothing when he could have died for her.

She hated him.

She sat with his corpse for days. The elders force fed her when she refused to eat. And, in moments of weakness, she cried. Whether for herself or Anton, she didn't know.

And then, she had to die.

THE ALL-CHANGER, THE FUTURE KING, AND THE MAGES OF DARKNESS

by Crescentia Kim

On the grey morning of the festival for Ras, Son of Light, they both slumped on the table. Although Witch Rozenn saw that Wizard Elouan had plopped his feet—which were shaped like a crow’s—amongst her books and spell-jars, she let him be. She herself pulled her silver hair apart.

Elouan spoke first. “Forget the patronage: the school will never be.”

Rozenn said nothing. The banquet yesterday evening had been a failure. They had taken Mage Filimor to the castle in the Valley of White. They had introduced them to the nobility who were in attendance, yet what did Filimor do? The mage had revealed not only that they were an All-Changer and could cast any spell under any sky in the realm, but that they were the servant of both Ras the Sky Dragon, and Oss the Angel of Darkness. Then Filimor had laughed before disappearing in the twilight: the hour that everyone had thought could vanquish all magic.

“You couldn’t have named them Gatekeeper instead of Headmaster?” Elouan accused.

“We need them for the prophecy.”

“To teach the Future King? Then let them! But the All-Changer can’t be Headmaster or the school won’t exist. They’ll be hunted down by every order in the realm, and so will we if we shelter them.”

“Both gods have spoken,” Rozenn said sharply. “Oss’ messenger, the Lady of the Lake, and the Knight-Saintess of Ras are all in agreement. For the war to end, the Future King must be born and raised until the age of majority, and only in the valley will he be safe. Even more so with an All-Changer by his side.”

Elouan yawned and looked at her. His legs were human again. “Then is the school even necessary?”

“The King needs allies as well as peers: his own company to follow him wherever he goes.”

“Fine, then—I’ll help you find Filimor today.”

She started. “How?”

“By the grace of Oss, I change shape; you see the matter of things. You’ll spot them, I’ll fetch them.”

“It’s the day of Ras, this night will be the shortest all year.” As she and Elouan were servants of Oss, Angel of Darkness, they could only

effective? We'll try tomorrow—”

“Ah, ah, ah, you forget: Filimor’s an All-Changer. We can’t find them with the usual spells. Even if we know where they are at night, they’ll be gone by day—or worse, dawn. Actually, d’you know why spells—*most* spells—don’t work when it’s twilight?”

It had been years since Rozenn had been an apprentice studying her first primer; now, she was a master at her craft. “If there is both light and dark in the sky, they’ll collide. The same goes for light and dark magic.”

“Almost, but not quite. I’ve figured it out: at dawn and dusk, the two elements—light and dark—are equal. Equal in amount, and equal in power. The truth is, the sky’s both light and dark at any time—*all* the time—*that’s* how an All-Changer works.”

“Show me.”

“See—outside.” He went to the nearest window. “It’s light, grey—”

“It’s dawn.”

“Clouds,” he said. “Clouds everywhere. Mist. Fog. Rain.”

“Yes.”

“In the day! Day as dark as night! Then when it’s night—”

“Stars,” she realized. “Moon.”

“Reflection. Water.”

“Fireflies. Fire. Lightning?”

“Has to be natural.”

“But do you think they can manipulate—”

“Even if they can, it doesn’t matter: it’s the Day of Ras. And when Ras flies out from his cave an hour from now, he’ll breathe his fire—”

“And drench the realm in awful sunlight,” she recited. “So much sunlight.”

“So much so, there won’t be a speck of dark or shadow in the day—*this* day.”

“If you’re right,” she continued, “Filimor can’t cast anything, but neither can we: we can’t use magic on any day. What’s the use of our search if both of us are disadvantaged?”

“The answer’s in the songs: ‘The Sky Dragon’s shadow shall cast cities in rays of darkness.’ This night will be the darkest it’s ever been all year—at least until the winter solstice. There’s our advantage over Filimor.”

“You seem awfully familiar with Ras.”

“Did you forget where I’m from? My name’s the most common one there: it means *light*, as every name there does, and since you work with essences you’ll have noticed that I was named after—”

His voice grew muffled as she headed upstairs.

For now, they will rest, and she will serve herself breakfast.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

by Jubran Mansour

Rain, black as the night, quivering as lightning flashes overhead, falling in fat drops. Rain, sick, remorseless, thoughtless rain, pooling in my clothes, into my skin, soaking me to the bone. The homes in this town at the foot of the jungle have no roofs. Just clay bowls dotting the muck, built with small grooves in their floors to direct all the water off into a designated pool area: a stagnant, residue filled bath choking with deep green algae.

My love looks beautiful, though. He's lounging on a stone slate—the beds these people use—his chin pointed to the sky, the gills on his back drawing deep, satiated breaths, water running down his scaly limbs. Lightning flashes and he glitters.

He looks up at me and smiles. Harsh, guttural, beautiful notes leave his mouth. I have to pause. He is asking if I am enjoying myself.

I take a sharp breath, a lying breath. "It's pretty incredible."

He gives me a grin. "Your language is improving."

He gets up, walks over to me in jerking bursts, then stretches to his full height. He knows I like that. He brushes my shoulder. His hand, so soft, runs down my arm and I direct him slowly, subtly, away from the invisible stitches that hold it together. I kiss him.

How long, how long, can I keep this up I think, as he grabs my hand, bends over to kiss my neck. A big, bright, unbroken flash hits the sky and I remember how much it took to get here. Working in the white light of my lab, ripping, plastering, measuring. I blink. I am here now.

He moves me so my back is put up against the tree in the center of his home. Bloated, ugly fruits hang all around me, branches sagging under their weight, swaying in the sharp wind.

He really loves me.

Behind me, over the wall, lightning falls in a grey blue arc, reaches down, and a tree, for a moment, grows elastic, shoots up as if it were this whole time pent up like a coil, bending gracefully as it stretches, stretches, to take a bit of that fire. This is all it has, in the light of this world's dim, dead sun. Years, it has spent years waiting to be picked, and it does not miss its chance.

As he runs his cat-rough, forked tongue down my body, the dead nerve shield I built all around me transmitting sensations to my real nerves, my real, pink, pudgy nerves. The storm builds, and more trees follow, snapping up, making, for instantaneous moments, perfect roads into heaven. They never compete. They're too evolved. They know when it's their moment. Again and again, the lucky ones take it, twisting themselves beyond reason, unmaking themselves to become what they need to be.

THEIR FOOLISH RUSE

by Emon Hossain

Father, though not mine
Always said, "Past nine,
The ocean waves align
And they come through"

The town locked each night
Ensuring no sight
Of the unknown fright
That we just "knew"

Hiding was a norm
Before we were born
"Just hide till the morn"
And so we do

But time after time
Those not on the dime
Were caught in the grime
So warnings grew

Those lost were not found
No organs around
Save a puddle drowned
In blush pink hue

Every trace we'd see
Broke our alchemy
A stained mystery
None could construe

Warnings I heeded
Laid back when needed
But luck retreated
And soon, I knew

Felicia was lost
And I feared the cost
To have her life tossed
For "them" to strew

I went to find her
And flee from danger
Though night fell quicker
And "they" came through

I hid by a farm
Mouth clutched by my arm
As to not alarm
What no one knew

But soon I would learn
As my body turned
And my stomach churned
For limbs slid through

A tendril in pink
Then more in a link
'Round the bend to sink
Into my shoe

I was dragged closer
And soon it took over
It drew me lower
And showed the truth

The mass had no claw
Or talon I saw
But countless eyes raw
All human, too

Tendrilled eyelashes
Mixed with red rashes
A bulb of gashes
In grotesque bloom

Though I was enwrapped
My bones had not snapped
It sought me entrapped
And not consumed

Chance was beyond me
Death was destiny
As "they" leaned over me
Tendrils all loose

But death never came
Nor was life the same
For "their" twisted game
Changed all I knew

Though my body ripped
And my soul had split
I lived right through it
And with joy too

The pain was delight
As bliss filled my sight
And drained all my might
I craved this brew

Tendrils came to shrink
And I soon could blink
But I loathed to think
"Must I have to?"

I wished to be hurt
For this creature's burn
So slighting return
I chose the noose

They all spoke in fear
Yet now, held so near,
I see all too clear
Their foolish ruse

SHADOWS

by Norah Ruch

The first thing the children of Knightwich Hollow were taught was to never leave a candle burning on the night of the Winter Solstice. Before they could even read, they could recite the legend of the Night Lands, and before they learned to be afraid of the dark, they knew to fear the beings that lurked within it. Liora was no different. She could vividly recall the day their father had sat her and Siyana down for what the village children called “The Talk.”

“Girls,” he’d begun, grave resignation draining the warmth from his eyes. “Tell me what you know about the other world.”

“Just the rhyme, papa,” Siyana had managed. At only seven years old, she’d understood the severity of what he was about to tell them in a way that Liora never had. “The one the kids at school always sing.”

Liora, five years old and in her first year at the schoolhouse, had already known it by heart:

*In the darkest hour of darkest night
When shadows fall across the light
The worlds meet at world’s end
And to the Night Lands your soul is condemned.*

There was a hand-clapping game and everything.

Their father had nodded. “You’re both old enough to have heard the stories, now. Which means you’re old enough to learn how to keep yourselves safe.”

Liora dug her fingernails into her palms. *Safe*. A lot of good that had done them. Even after her father’s death, she and Siyana had followed his instructions, year in and year out—but it hadn’t stopped those monsters from taking her sister.

“First things first,” Liora’s father had said, “make sure all the doors and windows are shut tight on the night of the Solstice. You don’t want to

let any light in—”

“Because light creates shadows,” both girls had finished in perfect, practiced unison.

Now, Liora tossed the curtains back. There wasn’t a speck of light beyond the glass panes, no moon in the sky nor a single star to be seen—still, she undid the latch on each window before unlocking the door.

“Second rule: you never light a candle on the night of the Solstice. No lamps, no matches, nothing. Got it?”

Liora almost smiled to herself as she struck a match on the stone mantle of the fireplace. The wooden logs blazed to life. She gathered up the candles she’d been saving, letting them catch in the flames of the hearth, before arranging them in a circle around the room.

A shrill wind blew through the cabin, sending candle flames dancing and shivers coursing down Liora’s spine. The air around her darkened, the shadows flickering on the walls appearing to thicken and draw near. Then the whispers started, soft, unintelligible, emanating from the darkness all around. Their voices grew in number and volume until Liora longed to cover her ears and cower. She resisted, instead straining to hear what they said. They spoke no language she had ever heard. It was dark, it was wrong, it was dead leaves growing from rotted tree trunks and fatal secrets unleashed on final breaths. When the noise bordered on too much to bear, the shadows began to coalesce, until nightmarish figures emerged from the darkness one by one.

“Umbrei,” Liora breathed in shock. Even after everything, part of her had refused to believe it.

“One last rule: if you ever come face to face with one of those things, you turn tail and run. Never, under any circumstances, look them in the eye. You understand?”

The village elders claimed that the eyes of the Umbrei were pools of pure darkness. If you gazed directly into them, they said, you would collapse dead from fear. At five years old, Liora hadn’t been afraid of the dark—Siyana had always been there to protect her. At sixteen, the one fear she did have had already come true: Siyana was gone. Liora looked the closest creature dead in the eye.

“I want my sister back.”

The thing grinned. When the chorus of murmurs began to sing again, she swore she could almost make out their words. The shadows crept closer, dancing in the wind, until Liora was engulfed in a swirl of darkness and flame.

“I know this is scary, girls. But the two of you have each other. I want you to promise me that you’ll always look out for one another, okay?”

“I promised,” Liora whispered, and disappeared into the dark.

THE SEA'S OFFERINGS

by Chris Wang



The sea's offerings started small.

Many moons ago, young women foraging in the coasts returned with shiny, flat coins the colour of the molten sun. With every expedition, the women brought back more and more washed-up treasure: shimmering jewels as big as a sand dollar, tridents twice the size of one's arm. It was said that our village's women could conjure the moon itself, summoning submerged gold from the seabed below. Those who could not become craftswomen, imbuing our work with the moon's powers.

Treasure foragers became renowned, with dozens of girls competing each moon cycle for a chance to venture out in search of adventure, magic, and wealth. In preparation, girls would train on the beach near my family's hut: racing, climbing, dunking each other's heads in the sea. Their raw athleticism, so different from my own aching body, entranced me and distracted me from my carving lessons.

I remember the ambitious glint in Asa's eyes as she emerged from the water drenched, grinning towards my window with all her teeth. She always knew when I was watching, and I stopped pretending like I wasn't once I realized she knew.

Memories of the flood hardened Asa's heart. Her sharp canines, wild hair, and aggressive demeanour made her resemble a barracuda, causing her to be shunned and feared by elders and youth alike. Sheltered all my life, I argued with my father to allow me to converse with her. I was her only friend.

Still, Asa's tough qualities made her the perfect candidate for treasure foraging, with many of the older fisherwomen praising her strength well before the competition. Though other families tried to make the contest seem less one-sided, there was a clear winner from the start. My father, by my urgings, carried me on his shoulders so I could attend the contest. Asa was jubilant when she won.

Asa was quickly brought into the foragers' fold. She pinned her hair back with a pointed whalebone spine, into which I had carved sigil after sigil of protection. The other girls grumbled about Asa's unfair ruthlessness in the competition, but their complaints were eclipsed by the riches Asa soon brought to our village in the form of metal ornaments and intricately painted stoneware, which were traded with other villages on the continent.

Asa never cared about others' opinions, nor about the wealth that treasure foraging granted her. When I asked her why she trained so hard, Asa said she was looking for *signs*. Signs of her family, who were washed away by the ocean. Signs of what her life could have been, had it not disappeared below the crashing waves.

It seems ironic, then, that she, too, disappeared. The sea took her away.

There was a vigil on the beach after her disappearance. I could not attend. My legs, unstable and prone to collapse since birth, shook from shock and heartbreak, and could not carry me there.

Bedbound, I cried myself to sleep.

In my dream, there was blue—the sky, the sea. The salty air stung my eyes. I was standing on the shore. A rising tidal wave was forming on the horizon. Rising, rising, rising, while my feet were stuck in place. I closed my eyes—

And felt the warm water wrap itself around me in an embrace, the rush of sound in my ears as coarse and harsh as a gruff laugh.

I could not open my eyes, in fear of what I'd see. Was I afraid to see Asa in her teenage years, bold, free? Or Asa as a woman, with callused hands and the faintest crow's feet? We had become so busy that I had not seen her for a moon cycle. I could only imagine what she looked like when she disappeared.

Asa pulled away, but continued to hold onto my arms, my hands. I felt an object, small and sharp, being pushed into my palm. Then, she disappeared.

When I awoke, my hand was clutched around a hairpin. My sigils glowed opalescent, and my palm leaf bedding was soaked in saltwater. Maybe Asa could not find her signs, but the sea has offered me mine.

nautilus

by Phoebe Sozou



The ship swung between the waves like a pendulum fastened to the waning storm above. Florian pressed his forehead to the cool brass rim of a porthole, breathing through his nose. Wedged between crates of rum and gold and gods knew what else, he sat with his knees pulled flush against his chest, listlessly watching a barrel roll from wall to wall with every pitch and surge of the sea. He focused his eyes, then unfocused them. In the cargo hold there was only splintered wood and the occasional flash of blue through the portholes; if he let out his thoughts very carefully, they clung to details like gouges in the walls and patches on the ceiling, deftly evading any memory of glinting blades in the shadows of his room.

Every now and then he made a flailing grasp at lucidity, then again—less successfully—at the highborn dignity he was certain he had possessed just a day ago. He was half convinced they would sail on forever. He had broken into a crate of rations hours ago, but the first taste of bile had ruled that out as an option. If he vomited, he knew the stench would give him away.

Twice, a beastly, one-eyed woman had come down to check on the cargo, and he'd flattened himself behind the crates, fist pressed against his mouth in case he gagged. Both times, she had passed his hiding spot unknowing.

Dawn broke. His empty stomach spasmed, his temples throbbed. He found, dragging himself back to the porthole, that he could unmoor his mind from his twitching limbs and desiccated throat by watching the waves, a hypnotic and unrelenting indigo that swallowed all physical sensation. The porthole was set low enough into the hull, and the waves were climbing high enough into the sky, that he filled the hours with piecemeal glimpses of an underwater world—ringed octopi, one-eyed krill the size of his thumbnail, rays gliding through the gloom.

Once he thought he saw the end of a scaly tail vanish into the deep, but by then the midday heat was beating its fist against the porthole, and it was several hours before he stopped sweating and shaking sufficiently to focus his eyes again.

They sailed by the first island that afternoon, so close to shore that Florian spied the fishermages casting great glittering nets into the waves. One of them, a four-armed fellow with hands like dinnerplates, was prying barnacles off the side of their raft with a glowing knife. The island beyond them was more a haphazard collection of stones than a landmass, jagged grey terrain broken only by roving clusters of goats.

They docked at the second island a few minutes shy of nightfall, and Florian listened for the crew's boots as they disembarked and drifted further across the docks. He had never seen anything like it, having been shuttled all his life between stony rooms and gilt carriages. For a moment, he thought there were angels in the harbour, but realized quickly that they were only people bearing birds on their shoulders. They had hair like fire, looped and twisted into elaborate shapes that fell forward and across their robes. The plumage of their birds ranged from brilliant emerald to radiant sapphire. They gleamed in the encroaching dusk.

Florian ached to cast off the mildewed shadows of the hold and join them. He thought, *I'm meant to be beautiful like you.*

Later that night, the beastly woman re-materialized at the ladder. Crouched again behind his crate, Florian had the childish urge to close his eyes. As a boy barely tall enough to reach the seat of his mother's throne, he used to think that blotting out his own vision would save him. Last night, listening from below his bed as armoured men tore the room apart, he had done the same.

The woman shuffled about the hold as she always did. There was a dull thud, then the sound of her footsteps retreating.

She had left behind a sack. Eyeing the trapdoor in case of another intrusion, Florian heaved it toward himself and pulled open the drawstrings. Inside were three fruits unfamiliar to him, spiny and sweet-smelling, and a root he recognized from the palace gardens, which the cook had once fed him to cure an upset stomach. Below them was a flask of water.

THE OTHER SIDE

by Amy Yang



They flashed like cracks of lightning in the darkness.
Bright spots flaring behind my eyelids,
Blazing across my field of vision, circling in and around, again and
again
With eyes of their own,
Gleaming white,
Vicious mouths gaping open,
Tearing high-pitched, whistling screams into the abyss
With such ferocity that I could feel the wind rush through my body.
They circled closer with their blinding light and
White-hot heat pressed against my head,
My skull about to implode from the light and the heat and the
noise—

I awoke with a gasp and jerked upright in my cot. The thin sheets were damp with sweat, a combination of the summer heat and the nightmares that were visiting me with alarmingly increasing frequency.

My head was pounding like a real motherfucker. I reached into the nightstand for my pain medication, but my hand came back with nothing. The Sisters must have taken it again.

A shard of silver moonlight infiltrated the room. It was a small single room, tucked into a corner of the monastery, as far from the Sisters' quarters as I could get.

The stone floor was cool beneath the soles of my feet. I changed from my nightgown into my training robes and grabbed the *jian* leaning against the bedframe.

The hallway was pitch black, the sconces on the walls snuffed when the Sisters went to bed. All that remained was the hearth in the atrium that a priestess tended to throughout the night. Electricity was banned at the monastery. It made the voices louder—the electric signals in the human brain were already too fragile; the Spirits didn't need another medium to infiltrate through. Though, at this point, I knew the layout of the monastery like the back of my hand.

The hilltop was cooler than the rest of the grounds. An unobstructed breeze swept by, carrying soft whispers on its lips. I planted my bare feet into the ground, took a deep breath, and pulled the *jian* from its black leather sheath. The steel glinted in the night.

Inhale...

I swept the blade in a flowing arc around my head.

Exhale...

I stepped into a lunge.

Inhale...

And repeated the movements like a mantra.

It was dawn, the sun barely tipping over the horizon, when one of the priestesses found me.

"Diana. Were you not cold out here?"

I turned around and lowered the *jian*. "I was practicing my meditations."

Lola was dressed in the flowing white robes they all wore. An ivory sash wrapped around her waist, binding the fabric together. She was smiling at me softly, but I couldn't shake the uneasiness I felt every time I looked into their eyes—the pupils blown wide open, a milky white.

"It's important that you get enough rest," she sighed. "Will you come sing?" Lola extended her pale hand towards me. A bell chimed melodically in the distance.

"Of course." I grabbed her hand. Her fingers were thin and brittle to the touch.

Her smile grew a little wider. It was an uncanny sight with her unchanging eyes and placid demeanor. We walked back to the monastery in silence.

The High Priestess sat before a bone drum in the center of the prayer room. She began drumming a slow, steady beat, and we sang. It

started with a low hum, pushed from our stomachs out of our throats. The sounds reverberated around the stone walls and through the stone beneath our feet. The Sisters closed their eyes and lost themselves in the chant, one breath after the other. The rhythm washed over me, residuals of the nightmare fading away—

A sharp pain suddenly burst against the side of my head.
Blinding white spots filled my vision.
The voices swarmed me, *screaming*
Those wretched, whistling screams, with
More malice, more ire,
Than before,
Beating relentlessly against my skull as
Pinpricks of heat spiked throughout my body—

I stumbled backwards as the pain disappeared, as abruptly as it came, receding once more to a distant thrum. The High Priestess bore her bleached eyes into me as if she knew exactly what was wrong with me. I felt a sudden surge of anger—like a beast had opened its maws inside my head and swallowed everything with one gulp. I couldn't be like them. Vacant, devoid of thought and feeling. Frail, pallid bodies cold to the touch.

There must be another way to do it, to come through on the other end, without becoming like *this*.

I GUIDE THE HEAVY BEACON

by Marcus Hermary

Beyond me is the vapour and the silver sea. Before me it was like static, equally motioned and motionless. I am standing from the peak of our lattice tower, holding with one mittened hand the metalworks and with the other the rear of one piece of machinery. Tonight, like those previous, I guide the heavy beacon. Together, me hanging onto my great metal home and the beacon's face a blinding egg white, we are the bark-black shades amidst the silverscape.

Tonight I return home on the great cargo freighter, street blocks in length. Our rig here, built on floating columns from the silver sea, is hardly a quarter of its size. Windy bulwarks with tubing, faint yet a warm yellow, have been my home, and sudden waves have swashed, but never crippled them. Every few minutes the sound of steam released from a valve weakly resists the crashing of the sea, tempestuous but too wide to contest a flatness. Before long, I'll climb back down from the lattice tower and conclude my three-year contract.

So I stare into the silver sea and its pale mist, made paler still as distance grows from the observer. Who was not ferried to the rig riding on the legends of those who had been this way before? Who, in their life before setting out, had not followed the yarns of the gallant crews? They drowned seaside towns with stories upon their return from this archipelago of mist with a heavy trident in one hand and the hide of a feared sea demon in the other, master of them both—or sang of those same sea demons feeding on the driftwood and sail scraps that once made the great freighters of ambitious sailors? The vast waters are tempestuous still with promises of epic battles—perhaps with the beasts who make it their habitation or with the thundering waves themselves. All, however, seem small from the tall, windy bulwarks. Where once many a humble roughneck was ferried to this empty wilderness like the maker of flowering legacies, the mist has made them ever smaller and bark-black.

Here I am heavy, but likewise light and nimble. I hang solemnly from the tower like the thundering noonday bell but climb its ladder with a chest of helium, hastening toward singularity: one point of infinite density and energy like my friend the beacon.

All too soon comes the rumbling of a distant foghorn. How many times did I direct the light as it docked, only to silently leave again? How many times did the blinding egg white beacon's glare hide me from the prying eyes of those sailors, three dozen feet below? The beacon punches through the silver mist, impressing itself upon the invisible surface as one warm dot in the sea. It says:

"I am here."

Closer and closer I see an otherworldly shade of red steam near with deft sparks of light above it. Yes, yes!—I can make out its form: the ochre hull and white bow. No, no longer a shade! It is the great cargo freighter, street blocks in length! Aboard are oarsmen of a hundred classes, each wearing the trophies of a thousand seaborne adventures. I see, but cannot hear, their many paddles crash into the depths only to come out again. And aboard are not only supplies for the next crew, but the last I shall see of the windy bulwarks and the blinding egg white beacon.

In one mittened hand I cling to the metalworks and in the other the rear of that piece of machinery. I stand as an instrument, the highest among all who trace this vast pocket of the world. Street blocks in length, like a kitten the cargo freighter follows that oppressive point of light.

Clenching my left fist, I swing the heavy beacon's face to mine and let it illuminate me. My eyes shut by instinct but by a shock of volition open again, and remain awake to witness. The foghorn bellows again, my fiery form its only light, as I let loose of the tower and shoot my fingers up to the same silver sky. I shout,

"I am here!"

ABOUT *THE SPEC*

The Spectatorial is the University of Toronto's only genre-focused journal. Started in 2013, our masthead and writers work with mythical creatures, the gothic, outer 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.

During the Fall semester, we're running two additional zines (just like this one) to platform flash fiction. Each zine will centre on a different genre, which we'll announce before submissions open! In the Winter semester, we'll open submissions for our journal, which will accept pieces of all genres but adhere to a specific theme. If you'd like to get involved, please follow our Instagram @*thespectatorial* to stay up-to-date!

