New Gothic Review

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Catherine Wilson - Melissa Elborn - Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick Jenna Dietzer - Rhys Owain Williams - Charlotte Heather



stories that rot from the inside out

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Masthead

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THICKER THAN WATER by Catherine Wilson	5
THE COLOUR OF PAIN by Melissa Elborn	12
MY HUSBAND'S GARDEN by Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick	22
THE LOVEBUGS by Jenna Dietzer	28
PASSENGERS by Rhys Owain Williams	41
A HAUNTING TOO CLOSE TO THE HEART by Charlotte Heather	50
Contributors	56
Supporters	59



THICKER THAN WATER

Catherine Wilson

Illustration by Pollyanna Johnson

The last bus of the year drags me towards the empty rental cottage. I double check that my shopping bags are still next to me, crisp plastic handles still standing upright despite the shuddering of the bus. The road suddenly dips and my stomach leaps into my mouth.

I'm dreading the next few days. The house has no internet and no television. The walk into town without the bus would take me over six hours, and even then, the only open supermarket will have already switched off its stinging fluorescents for the day. When clicking through rental options, I was excited to unplug and shut myself off with a stack of paperback novels between Christmas and New Year. I couldn't bear the idea of company. So many hands had reached out to me. Desperate and clutching, they became indistinguishable. All of them ended in black sleeves and good intentions I was not interested in.

I arrived a few days ago by ferry. The crossing was so rough the captain's voice crackled over the tannoy telling us we had to get out of our chairs and lie down on the floor. As my head met the stale carpet, all I could hear was bottles of tonic water falling from the bar shelves and smashing on the ground. A woman lying next to me stuck out her hand, gesturing for me to give her some kind of anchor. I rolled away slowly enough to see her blush. The ferry shook and I shut my eyes, terrified we would be swallowed by the sea.

I step off the bus, reassuring myself with the feeling of solid ground beneath my feet. I breathe in, but I'm filled with the smell of washed-up fish and brine. I try to cough it out and swallow fresh air, but the sea forces its way in again. I run to the door of the cottage and open it as quickly as I can.

I make a cup of cocoa on the stove. I remember the exact way my mum used to hit the pan with the spoon three times to shake off the droplets of milk. I try and fail to direct the memory towards her face.

A few hours later, I wake to the sound of a wet smack against the bedroom window. Unable to see anything in the dark, I sleep fitfully.

Once it's light enough, I investigate in my dressing gown. Under the bedroom window is a snapped tree branch and, hidden in the splintered wood, a bird's nest pulled towards the ground by the wind and rain. The small eggs are crushed, blood and yolk leak across the grass.

I turn my back on the scene, deciding to draw a hot bath; it's a more effective way to kill time than showering. Whilst the water heats, I spread two thick slices of white bread with peanut butter and inspect the fridge. Tomatoes. Spinach. Milk. Butter. Three eggs. Thick squirms of red mince in a plastic tray. I find that taking an inventory calms me down so I move on to the cupboards: A packet of biscuits. Pasta. Rice. Stock cubes.

I hear a gush and realise the bath has overrun.

That night I stare at the ceiling for what feels like hours, unable to drift off. Every time I get close to sleep the wind whips up the window and it vibrates off the seal around the glazing to produce a horrible, rumbling scream. It sounds so familiar, I start thinking it's coming from my own mouth. I feel myself being dragged backwards to the last time I heard that scream. I force myself up.

I spread two slices of toast with peanut butter and wait for dawn. The sun rises at some point, but the clouds are too thick to see through.

I take another bath. Holding myself under the water for longer and longer periods of time. I push myself for a full minute until the panic overwhelms me and I resurface.

I spend the day chasing down plots of easily readable books. I bought them in the last large supermarket before the ferry terminal. I didn't stop to read the blurbs, just grabbed an armful based on how bright the covers were. I wanted something that didn't require a lot of thinking.

I shove all my clothes in the washing machine, desperate to rid them of the sea stench they've acquired. I add a liberal pour of sickly floral detergent and set the machine to spin as fast as possible. The water churns and slaps the window like a wet hand.

Around noon I head out into the garden: the rental has a huge patch of land with wild, untamed grass. There are no trees because the sea wind whips up and down the land too harshly for them to grow. As I start pegging up my clothes on the line, my nostrils fill with that fetid smell of decay. Of fish being broken down by the waves and eaten by other fish. I force my clothes back in the laundry basket and take them back inside.

I take extra care before going to bed that night. I slowly switch the lights off in the house one by one. I burn a lavender candle. I drop Olbas oil on my pillow, something that reminds me of being young and sweet and sleepy. I try to relax by starting a new book but the author introduces too many characters at once and I get confused and frustrated. I throw the duvet off and search the house, finding a radio in one of the other bedrooms. I turn it on, determined to let the chatter lull me.

When I drift off, I am trapped between sleep and waking. I can feel the cold pillow beneath my arm but I cannot move it. I become convinced there is someone in the room.

'Mum? Is that you?'

My head snaps up. I see my damp clothes hung around the room. My dress is suspended on a hanger like a ghost. The shipping forecast has begun on the radio, the low voice rumbling 'Viking...North Utsire, South Utsire, Forties...' It's a rough night. Ferry crossings have been canceled. I turn the radio off and lie back down, imagining churning water spanning the distance between me and my mother's house.

The buses are back on so I take one into town for a change of scenery. The town still seems to be recovering from New Year's festivities; paper streamers, crisp packets and crushed cans spot the pavements. Places are leisurely reopening, not dictated by the strict schedules of my usual city chains.

I duck into a tea room and order a strong black coffee. On the wall is a framed souvenir poster of the mainland ferry. It's fairly unremarkable save the warped rainbow logo painted on the ship's side.

'It calls to you. Doesn't it?'

I look up to see a bearded older man placing a mug in front of me. It occurs to me I haven't spoken to another human in nearly three days.

'What?'

'The sea. It calls to you.' he pushes on, gesturing at the poster.

'Oh...No. Sorry...I was just looking.' I look down into the swirling steam. The mug is chipped.

'It's okay. It appeals to many of us. That's why we live so close to it.'

'Oh, I don't live here.'

'Why else would you visit an island if you weren't called?' He gives me a wry smile as if we are bound together by some hidden secret and walks back behind the counter. He reminds me of a kind uncle with laugh lines around his eyes. I know if he stays he'll try to talk more and ask why I came here and if he finds out, his head will do that sympathetic tilt that has followed me up and down hospital corridors and church aisles. It was all a performance of choreographed movements, I couldn't bear it. I drink the coffee as fast as I can, scalding my tongue, and drop a five-pound note on the counter and walk out, not waiting for the change.

The next day I walk. I'm not sure how long for, but hours feel like minutes under my feet. Eventually I hit the coastline and scramble down the rocks to a hidden stretch of sand. I slip on a rock covered in slimy green seaweed and land on my hand. The pain makes me yell. There isn't anyone around to hear me.

I keep walking along the sand to try and find a safer exit. I think of the game I used to play as a child: I would run right up to the sea, my toes a pink temptation to the cold water. When the next wave came in, at the last second, I would dash away from the surge. Occasionally a wave would surprise me and I'd feel the sting of foam and have to rub my raw feet with a sandy towel before getting back in the car.

I turn my gaze away from the sea and see a shape further down the sand. I'm too far away to make out any specific details but I see a humped curve, almost like a speed bump. It's moving. I edge closer and see it's a porpoise or dolphin. It has its back to me but as I edge around I see it's clearly dead and has been for some time. Bits of its fleshy fin have disconnected and are being carried off by the incoming tide.

'Hey!' A voice rings out across the sand and I whip my head around to see a boy who can't be older than eight or nine. I try to move on.

'Hey!' He shouts again, running towards me. 'You have to help!'

'With what?' I say, looking around me for his parents.

'With the porpoise, we've got to get her back in.' He shoulders past me and puts two hands on the porpoise and tries to push it.

'Back where?'

'The sea.'

'It's dead.' I say, looking between the boy and the porpoise.

'We can't give up, you have to help!' he screams, and he strains against the dark body stuck in the sand.

I look closer at the heap of flesh. I think I see a patch of tangled hair, a hand, but I blink and it's gone again.

'Where are your parents?' I ask tentatively, trying to reach out a hand to gently move him away.

'HELP ME!' He screams. Something takes over my body and I turn and run. I can still hear his screams all the way down the beach.

When I get back to the cottage my heels and soles are scraped bloody and blistering.

I sit in the bath. I'm so tired I struggle to lift my arms and soap myself down. I take my time scrubbing and washing until I am scraped pink and feel half asleep from the motion of the bathwater. I have nothing to change into, white spots of mildew have bloomed on my drying clothes. I find an unwashed t-shirt and leggings in the laundry basket and crawl into bed.

I wake up in the night when my whole body starts to shake. It takes a few moments to come around and realise I am not the one shaking, the house is. The wind races across the walls and roof, rushes down the chimney, and makes the windows scream and rattle. The damp clothes hanging around my room rattle on their hangers, spreading their smell of thick dampness.

I put my coat and boots on straight over my makeshift pyjamas. When I open the front door, the wind pulls it away, slamming it into the wall. The glass shatters and blows back at me. Small pieces of glass embed themselves in my hands and arms. I wrestle the door closed and start to walk to the sea.

I try to focus on counting my footsteps, but my head fills with the memory of the weight of a body in the water. Look at it one way, and it floats, but as soon as you blink the arms and legs seem heavy, dragging themselves through the spray.

Eventually, I hit the coast. The waves froth as they hit the sand, building into a seam of foam that lingers like dirty snow. I face the sea head on and walk towards the water. It's so cold I feel a hollow burn when it hits my skin. The trick is to wade in so it's above your heart, then your blood cools and it doesn't hurt as much.

I push my head under. There is a moment of calm where, with ultimate focus, I can see the tangle of hair and the open hand, its palm passively facing up towards the sky. I remember realising she would never hold anything ever again. It doesn't scare me. Doctors and therapists and friends and family were so ready to chalk this up as a state of shock, but I don't know if I was shocked. It felt like my whole life, my whole mother's life, was leading to the sea and her hand and her hair.

I imagine she was calm too, when she gathered the stones to take with her. She tested each one in her hand, to feel its size and shape before putting them in her pockets, her shoes, or tied them around her waist with kitchen string. When I was a child, I'd catch her assessing stones in her hands. I thought she was skimming them—throwing them away from her body instead of keeping them close.

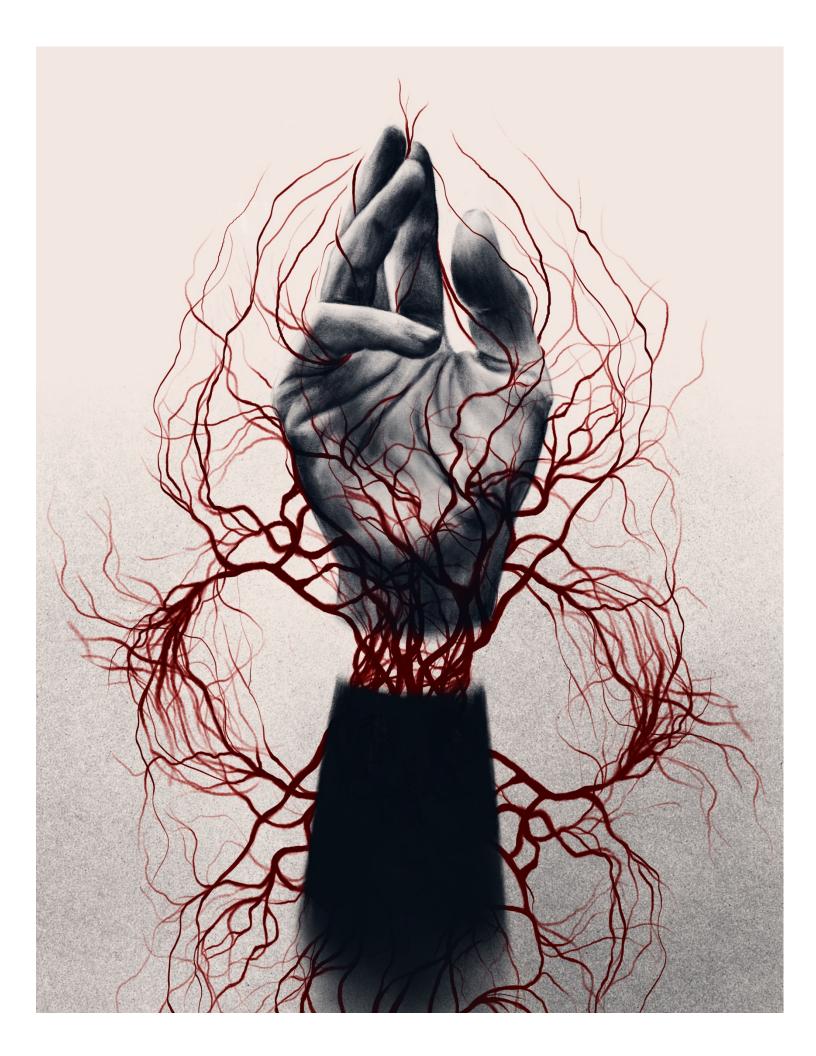
I remember, days after it happened, taking a cup of coffee to drink in the morning sun and finding the small holes across the garden that she'd left behind from her methodical digging. We hadn't noticed them whilst she was alive, she must have kept going back, kept gathering and collecting stones whilst still making sure there was dinner on the table. I wanted to be small enough to climb into those holes and sleep and wake up in a world where she was still here.

I remember pulling her out of the waves. I felt her back against my body and was breathless from the sheer weight of her. I staggered to the land, still holding her even though I already knew she was dead. She hadn't been in there long, but her face was beginning to bloat.

When they propped up a photograph next to her coffin with her hair done, full face of make-up and best dress, I wanted to show them how I would always remember her. I wanted them to see her skin turning blue, her hand at an impossible angle, her face stretching with the sea salt and gas.

My head rockets up through the water. I am not like her, not able to hold myself under with any sort of conviction.

The only response is the crash of waves hitting rocks, a process that over time will smooth them out before wearing them down into nothing.



THE COLOUR OF PAIN

Melissa Elborn

Illustration by Deena So Oteh

Content warning: Self-harm imagery

Tuesdays are always blue, no exceptions. Never a blood orange like today. And definitely not an orange that tastes of mud, dregs of coffee granules and wet ash. My dream comes back in snatches—hands rotten and black, stumps at the end of my arms, ragged stitches attaching new hands, bigger with bruised skin. My hands are the same, but different. So hideous. Why had I never noticed before? It's hands that brush teeth, put clothes on, feed. Hard to ignore, impossible to avoid. They control everything.

It takes me some time to get dressed, hands not behaving as they should. Ben is ready before me.

"You need to hurry up. You're going to be late. Again."

Ben is never late for anything, but time has always slipped away from me. I can't keep a grip on it. It's easy for him though. He can shower and put on his mechanic overalls in five minutes. Colours are only something he sees if he pays attention to them. He doesn't wake up with their taste clogging his mouth.

I don't say that. Instead, I say: "My hands. Do they look any different to you?"

Ben smiles, bending forward and kissing my fingertips. "No, Sarah," he says. "You know, you said this before, after the—"

"I know. I'm fine, it's nothing." It's not nothing though. Deep in my sour gut, I know with complete certainty that these things at the ends of my arms are not mine.

It hasn't felt this bad in the car since the accident. The 9 a.m. heat sucks my black uniform dress into a second skin. Inside my leather gloves, these things sweat and itch to be free. It is better though. Covered up, it's easier to pretend they are still my hands. They change the gear, press an indicator, turn the wheel.

The cars thin out on the A-road and I give in and do what I long for—my foot hits the accelerator all the way down. The familiar thrill of electric blue prickles in my gut and I taste chocolate, my favourite colour in the world—the colour of pleasure. Even now after everything. A bit faster, a little more, and there it is. Outside the car, everything else blurs and there are no thoughts. Sweat drips down my wrists and face, even though the aircon is on full blast. The tingle of electric blue is changing to a churning green. They are doing it. Those horrible fingers are making me hot and sick. I watch them on the wheel. They look further away, stretched out from the rest of me. The rush of a van on the other side of the road makes my car wobble. Further ahead, a lorry is going faster than it should. The back of it sways a little. Why not give in and let the hands do what they want? Maybe it is better this way. The hands drop off the steering wheel, and the car veers, drifting well over the central white line. A loud horn blasts, and at the last second I grab the steering wheel, swerving back a few seconds before the lorry rushes past. The driver sounds his horn long after he passes.

Waves of green pound my stomach as I walk into the hair salon. But it doesn't matter. I have cut and coloured hair a thousand times. Muscle memory, it's called. It's no big deal that I'm not feeling quite right. It's the heatwave, hottest July on record, everyone is moaning about it.

Flies buzz around the backroom as I shove my bag onto the floor that looks dirty even after it's been mopped. For a minute, I imagine what it would be like in one of those salons I trained in. All shiny white tiles, air conditioning and ambient lighting. Every year, I said I would get a new job.

Swapping the leather gloves for a pair of latex ones, I put my face shield on. That is an upside of all this COVID shit. I can just say I'm being careful if anyone asks about the gloves. These latex ones are not so good, though. The disgusting skin shows

through. And you can't cut someone's hair without looking at your hands, even when you've been a hairdresser for twenty years. All morning there is no escape from them. Hands that aren't mine but remain attached to my arms. The last appointment before lunch is a men's wet cut, Luke. He is never much of a talker and today I am glad for it. Short hair close to skin needs concentration.

Holding the scissors tight, I snip the hair against his neck. His pulse pushes the skin in and out, and I try not to imagine what would happen if the scissors slipped. I grip the metal harder and keep cutting. But the hands are happy about that. They don't want the scissors to casually slip and only scratch skin. I stare as they turn the point of the scissors towards the man's neck. One hard and fast jab is all that's needed. Straight into the vein. The blood will be warm.

At break, in the toilet, I put the hands in the sink. Letting the cold water run over them until they go numb. Pain is always red. Colours aren't just something you see; they taste of something too. There was a fancy name for it and some famous people have it. But it's not helping me pay off my debts any quicker. It is just something that's there. Like the sky is blue.

There is no colour for how I feel now, though. When the pain is inside you, when it's everywhere but nowhere, what colour is that pain? I switch the tap to hot and let it fill up the sink. The steam rises and I plunge the hands into the water—and there it is finally—red splotches in front of my eyes. Angry blood red that tastes of bitter chocolate and chillies.

Whatever this is might have started in these hands, but it is seeping through me. Infecting my blood and burying into my bones. Settling there. And now I don't fit in my body the same way. Incomplete. Stretched too thin. No amount of therapy will make a difference. Because changing on the inside isn't enough now. There are creases worn into my skin around my wrists. That's where my body now ends. Ugly palms and fingers sticking out will become silky-smooth, rounded bumps. And I will be whole. No colours. No pain.

When I walk into the flat that evening, Ben is sitting in his boxers on the balcony big enough for one chair with the only fan aimed at him, earbuds in. A coffin inching towards its final inferno could not be hotter than in here. It doesn't seem to bother him though. Probably because he grew up in one of these tower blocks. His whole life has passed by in concrete walls, balconies and lifts that stink of piss. I wedge the front door open and shove the window back. It's the same in the other flats. Windows and doors screaming open for help, no one is afraid of being robbed.

The fridge is not even cold. I stick my head in there to check. It stinks and the milk is curdling. I pull out some fruit and reach for the knife and chopping board. My stomach is still too green to contemplate eating anything. And seeing as our bed is a few steps away from the microwave and hot plate, the heat will keep the smell of anything we cook alive all night.

I turn the tap to rinse the fruit, but nothing comes out. Just a few drops.

"Ben," I shout. After a moment, he sticks his head around the door.

"Hey. What's up?"

"There's no water."

"Yeah. There's a problem. Pipe burst, something to do with the heat."

I want to smack my head against the wall, but I've had enough red today. All I want is blue and sleep.

"Do you wanna go buy some water then?"

"Tried. Shop's sold out. Got some coke and lemonade." He brushes past me, his skin hot and ingrained with the smell of ten hours of working on cars. I watch his hands pick up the can and flick it open. His hands are tanned and calloused. Hardworking and honest hands. Ben glugs down the rest of the warm coke and goes back onto the balcony. There was a time when he was so fascinated with me. Never-ending questions about colours and me describing every shade and taste. I'm no longer interesting. Instead, his earbuds are always in, taking him somewhere that I can't reach.

The bin is only a couple of steps away, but he's left the empty can on the counter. Lifting the lid reveals that the rubbish is moving. Tiny white worms wriggle and little white dots coat the underside of the lid. Shit. The whole bin needs bleaching. Can I kill them though? These maggots will change and get wings. They will fly right out of this place. Each one of these wriggling things has more chance of escape than me.

I take the sharpest knife and start to cut into a melon. It is soothing, feeling the tough skin and soft flesh underneath give way. Quick. Sharp. Clean. The juice makes my grip on the knife slip. This could be a way. If I can stem the bleeding quickly or

get to the hospital fast. And it would only be one hand. There was no way I could do both at once. But still, one hand gone. I let the blade rest against my wrist. Cold and smooth. My wrists are tiny with little flesh and unyielding bone. It might not work. But what about a little test, instead. Yeah, that will do. Moving the knife from my wrist to the crease at the bottom of my little finger, I take a deep breath. Quick. Sharp. Clean.

The finger now an inch away from the rest of the hand. I shove it down the sink plug hole. The stump where the finger was doesn't know the finger is gone yet. It's dry and pale. As I stare, the red comes to the surface and spills out onto the chopping board.

"Christ, Sarah," Ben shouts, grabbing the knife from me.

Later, much later, after the hospital, we lie on our backs in bed staring up at the black heat.

"You know it's not your fault, right?" he says.

"I know that you've said this before."

"Yeah, but do you listen? Do you believe me or anyone?"

"A girl is dead. It was these hands driving the car. No one else's."

"It's also your hands that cut people's hair better than any other hairdresser in this town. Your hands that carry Mrs. Patel's shopping up ten flights of stairs when the lift's out. Your hands that painted the murals downstairs for the kids. Things aren't black and white, Sarah."

And I want to laugh or cry or scream but nothing comes out. Of course, life is not black and white. There are so many colours. So many that he will never feel.

Wednesday morning is yellow, which is a good start. Wednesdays are always yellow and my day off. I pretend to sleep when Ben leaves for work. Shortly afterwards, I make my way to the pharmacy and buy all their bandages.

My finger stump is covered up with a dressing, and that has given me an idea. Curling up my remaining three fingers and thumb into a ball, the other hand wraps layers of gauze over them to create a bump. Now I can feel what it would be like to have no hand. After a little while, the pins and needles stop, and the hand goes numb. Electric blue pings in my chest, trickling through me. If only there was a painless way with no blood. It would be easy then. Where does the blood go when you die? I remember reading somewhere that it pools at the bottom of your body. I never looked

at her body after the accident. Only at her face. The half-opened eyes. The slack jaw. Nothing like the movies.

Walking around like this feels good. A bump suits me. It looks right, natural. It's a shame that I can't bandage the other hand, but that's impossible without help. What about the simple things—eating, washing, and wiping myself? Would Ben stay with me? He's a boyfriend, not a nurse. And I already know he won't stick around. Even if it was an accident. Even though he says that the other accident wasn't my fault. Not after growing up looking after his pisshead mum. He works night and day because he's convinced that we'll escape this life. Living in a concrete box, ten floors up, working twelve hours a day—at some point, we broke without either of us realising. The wear and tear of everyday life.

Sweating all day is becoming normal. Hot air and breath merge into one. Water, when it works, is warm to drink, hot to wash in. I have forgotten what snow feels like, jumping into freezing lakes, icy rain showers. Cold—that is what I need. Numbing ice with no colours at all. I cut the bandages off the hand. There is research to do.

They look like ordinary ice cubes and there isn't long before they melt. I touch one and the hand jerks back instinctively like you would if you touched fire. Pills and vodka. That will help. Fifteen minutes should do it.

There are enough ice cubes to fill a bucket. Warnings in red capitals shout at me to handle with gloves, but I don't. All I need to do now is shove my hands in the bucket and keep them there. A quarter to three. The long handle ticks each second by, no longer and no shorter than any other second before it.

Five minutes in and the pain is changing. My tears are drying on my cheeks and no longer taste of sand. It's funny how something really hot and something really cold can feel the same. The skin doesn't understand. It burns when it is too hot, and it burns when it is too cold.

The longer my hands are in this bucket, the more colours I feel. The usual crimson red is gone. Red has never been one colour, but I move through every shade from light to dark, and then shift into every shade of brown, beige, yellow, green. Trapped in some nightmare colour carousel where sometimes the colours shift so quickly I retch, and other times I want to claw at my skin until the colour shifts. Every colour I have

ever felt passes through me and colours that I have never felt take their turns to show themselves.

That's the thing with pain. It's a living thing. Growing and receding, starting as one shape and when you are used to it, contorting into something new. The pain in these hands is pulling out all these colours, unearthing them from memories I have forgotten. And deep down inside me, there are more colours. Colours I've never seen. Colours that maybe no one has ever seen.

Ten minutes in and I know for sure that I have never felt this much pain before. The ice is melting into smoke, leaving my hands dry and cold. The smoke reminds me of nightclubs, dancing under UV lights and drinking cocktails where colours collide. The hands are red now, and the skin is bubbling. There are no more colours. Not black, exactly. But it's not nothing. It's turning into white instead. Blinding me, making me wince. Rising in my throat and behind my eyelids. And I remember that without white light, there is no colour, nothing else can be seen. I thought there was no colour for the pain inside of me, but it was there all along. In every colour I've ever felt. That's all I can see now. All that I am from head to toe. The colour of pain.

Fifteen minutes later and I pull my hands out of the bucket. There is nothing to feel in the deadened hands, but I want to be sure. What if frostbite is not enough? I slam them against the wall and watch them hit the brick. Then with the hands drooping from my wrists, and crawling on elbows and knees, I drag myself into bed and close my eyes.

Thursdays are turquoise but not today. I awake to a rainbow of colours and the sheet wrapped around me is drenched.

- "Are you ill?" Ben says. "You're burning up."
- "There's a heatwave," I mumble into the pillow.
- "You're hotter than me. Hotter than you usually are."

I say nothing, keeping my eyes closed and my hands under the sheet. He goes around doing his morning routine, earbuds in. He doesn't say goodbye when he leaves. As soon as the door clicks shut, I examine my hands. This is better. They are starting to look how they should. People saw pretty hands, slender fingers, painted nails. Now

the skin is red turning to dark purple, fingers swollen. The bubbles on the skin look like they could pop if I took a needle to them.

Just a bit longer. Then there will be no other option.

Sage green is the colour of sickness. A few years ago I had gastric flu, and the days of aches and pains in bed, the headaches, the vomiting, it was all sage green. The body must know when it's sick. The body wants to live, even when it's worn out, it tries to carry on. Right now, it's talking to me in seaweed green, a green so dark it is almost black, slimy and tasting of sour fish and rusty metal. But I'm not listening. A little more time.

Screaming wakes me. Cold hands on my skin, but not that cold, now that I know what real cold feels like. Hands shaking me. Shouting.

"Sarah. Fuck. What have you done? Your hands. Your fucking hands."

There are other voices now. A shiny hard bed that moves quickly. People speak to me, but I don't feel much like saying anything back. There is no hiding my hands. Everyone can see what I see. No delusions or pretty skin. The hands don't look like hands anymore. Swollen to twice their size. Skin stretched and snapping. And fingers turning black.

When I open my eyes again, it feels like days have passed. Electric blue buzzes until I look down and see hands. There should be bandaged stumps at the end of my arms. But there are the same hands. Bloated, the skin darker, Frankenstein stitches around bloodied wrists.

"We might be able to save them," the nurse says, walking towards me.

I try to move the hands that I can't feel yet. Those ugly stitches. My teeth will be sharp enough to rip them out.

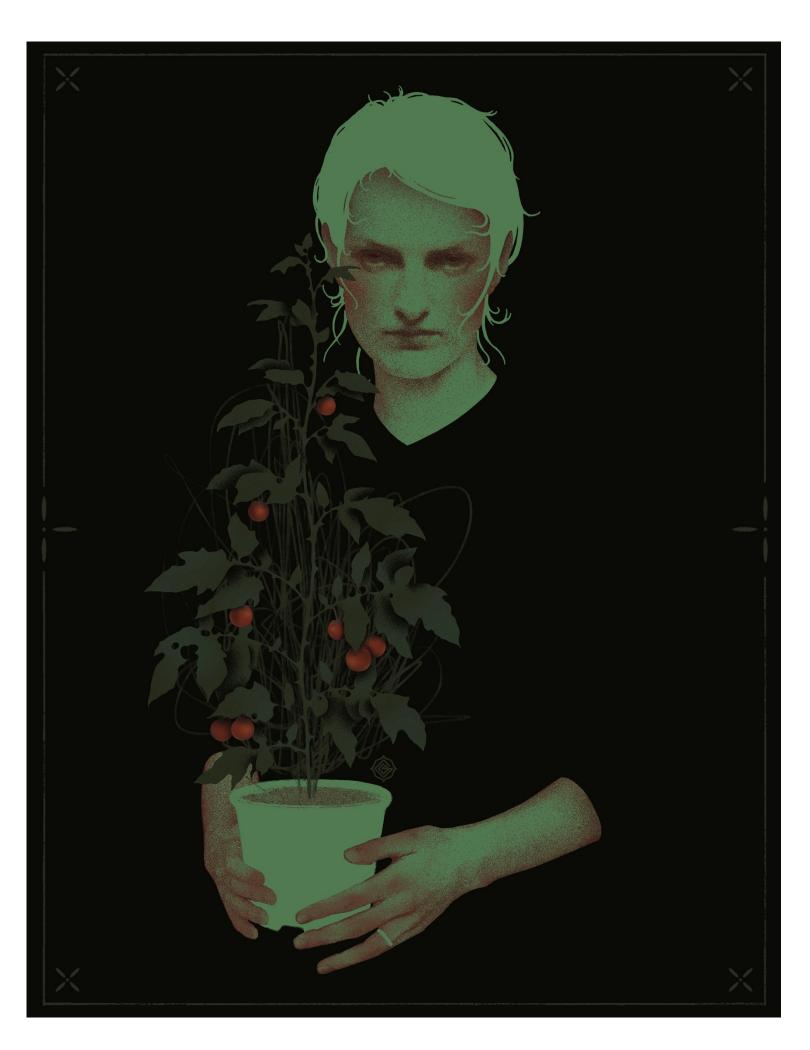
It is an orange Friday in September when I'm allowed to go for a walk by myself. It's nice seeing the glances people try to hide and how little children stare. I'm wearing a sleeveless vest to show my arms off. They swing lightly in the breeze, ending in two round bumps that now and then catch the sunlight. It would almost be nice to have

hands to feel their smoothness. But electric blue fills my body most days now despite the other challenges, so I can't complain.

After a while, I find a park bench. Content to sit there and just be. A mum is struggling with getting a pushchair through the gate. Our eyes meet and the woman smiles. Not in the weird or pitying sort of way I've become used to. Normal. The child in the pushchair has a rounded bump instead of a foot. Smooth and whole. My feet are exposed in sandals. They are so ugly, fat little toes sticking out. Why had I never noticed before?

I try clinging to the electric blue inside of me.

But it is gone.



My Husband's Garden

Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick

Illustration by Jana Galushkina

y husband has taken a lover, and to make up for it, he is growing me a garden.

The first day he met her, he brought home a tomato plant. It was already potted in something cheap and plastic, its vines growing up the cage that surrounded it.

"What do you plan to do with that?" I asked. Our apartment was small, and my husband had never shown an interest in plants before.

"I'm going to put it on the fire escape," he said. "I'm going to grow you fresh tomatoes. Won't you like that?"

I barely ate tomatoes. I hated the way the skin peeled away from the flesh when I bit them, getting stuck on my gums and the lining of my throat. "I guess," I said.

My husband beamed and walked across our apartment to the window, opening it and ducking through to our fire escape. He placed it carefully in the one spot that seemed to get constant sunlight. It was where I liked to sit and read during warm days, but he didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he didn't know. He came back through the window, looking very pleased with himself.

"A new girl started work in our office today," he said casually.

A month later, my husband came home very late after a work happy hour. One of his coworkers was leaving the company, and they planned a going away party for him. My husband invited me to come, but I told him to have fun without me.

"I barely know the guy," I said. "Besides, it's been a very long week. All I want to do is curl up with a glass of wine, watch a movie, and go to bed early."

My husband said that was fine. "I won't be home late," he promised.

By ten o'clock, I began wondering where he was. I assumed the happy hour had turned into a longer, drunker celebration. I wasn't worried, but I texted him just to check in.

"Hope you're having fun," I typed. "Going to bed, I love you."

"Be home late, love you too," he responded an hour later.

I woke up at two, then three, then four o'clock, and my husband still wasn't home. Around five in the morning he finally stumbled in, reeking of alcohol and sweat and cigarettes I knew he didn't smoke. I pretended to be asleep as he stood by the bed, looking at me. Then he went into the bathroom and closed the door quietly. I heard the shower running, and the sound finally lulled me to sleep.

I woke up around ten the next morning, and though his side of the bed was rumpled, my husband was not next to me. I heard sounds coming from the kitchen and, pulling on my robe, I walked out of the bedroom to find my husband cooking pancakes. He looked tired, but he was whistling softly and couldn't keep a smile off his face. Seeing me, his grin faltered for a minute, but he collected himself quickly.

"Good morning, hun," he said, coming over to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Coffee?"

I poured myself a cup. "I'm surprised you're up already, you got home so late," I said. "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, sorry, I didn't expect to stay out as long as I did," my husband said. "Everyone just kept buying rounds, and then we started moving to different bars. You know how it is."

"It's fine," I said, and it was. I didn't mind him staying out. "Who managed to hang until the end?"

He coughed. "It was me, Lindsey, and a few guys from accounting."

"Do I know Lindsey?" I asked, trying to remember the names of his coworkers. It was an innocent question. I was not suspicious, not yet.

"Lindsey is new," he said. "I told you about her."

My husband wouldn't meet my eye as he walked over to the window and pointed out at our fire escape.

"Look," he said. "When I ran out to get milk this morning, I bought you a new plant."

Hanging in a planter to the left of the window was a fern. Its leaves hung down over the sides of its container and reached towards the window, as though asking to come in.

After that, there seemed to be new plants every week, and soon it escalated to every other day. Lamb's ear after he stayed late at the office one night, English lavender after he had to take what he insisted was a work call at midnight. He told me his manager was making him go on a weekend-long team building retreat, and he returned with a lemon tree. I had to help him hoist it through the window.

Soon our little fire escape was full, but the plants didn't stop coming. Instead, my husband started filling up the apartment with snake plants and orchids and pothos and peace lilies. There were sunflowers and roses in vases scattered around the house. I found ivy in the bathroom and a cactus in our bedroom that was as tall as I was. My husband was careless about where he placed these plants. There seemed to be no real rhyme or reason to it. He'd just set them down wherever there was a free space, until there was no surface left bare. I'd come home and find even forgotten water cups occupied, flowers with torn-up roots floating in the glasses as though my husband had ripped them from the cracks in the sidewalk.

I don't know when I realized my husband was being unfaithful. Somewhere between the jade and the gardenias, maybe. One day I turned to him quickly, absently, wanting to ask some banal question about a grocery list. But I caught him by surprise, and he couldn't avoid looking me directly in the eyes. His guilt and pity were plain on his face and I just knew. He left in a panic and came back with an armful of succulents.

Now, I can barely move without tipping over a planter or brushing up against leaves. When I walk, I leave trails of potting soil in my wake. My husband says the plants are his gift to me, but he has stopped caring for them. It's my job to water them, and I just fling cups of water over my shoulder. If any have died, I have no way of knowing; the survivors grow over them, forming a coverage so thick that I can't see the floor. I go to sleep every night with dirt crusted underneath my fingernails. And still, my husband brings home more and more.

I've been dreaming about the plants.

In my dreams, the plants begin popping up on their own, without help from my husband. Every time he kisses his lover, a new flower blooms. When she sighs his name in bed, the ivy begins crawling across the walls. They twitch and sway when he is with her, pressing closer around me. The way they rub their leaves against me feels tender. He may have brought them here, but they are on my side.

My husband doesn't talk to me much anymore. It's not malicious; it's like he doesn't even see me.

When he comes to bed at night, I feel him settle into our mattress. I turn to face him, but the plants have crept between us and built a wall down the middle of the bed. I think for a second that I smell her perfume on him, but the scent of lavender and rosemary and damp, rich earth overpowers any rival smells he brings with him. In the morning, I hear him humming to himself as he turns the coffee pot on. He sounds so happy and doesn't even realize when he fills the machine with soil instead of coffee grounds. I try to leave the bedroom and go to him, but I struggle to move through the thick forest of roots and vines. By the time I make it into the kitchen, he has already left for work. I hear a beep and look down at my phone.

"Working late tonight," he texts. "Don't wait up."

My husband does not end his messages with "love you" any more. I don't think he even realizes it. His head is filled with her, and my head is filled with the plants.

I have never seen my husband's lover. I daydream about her sometimes. She must be so lovely, for my husband to feel the way he does. Yellow hair like sunflowers, or the deep red of poppies. Pink azalea lips and forget-me-not eyes. I think back to that first tomato plant and wish I knew if her cheeks were as red as the fruit. I wonder if he brings me plants that remind him of her. If he chooses them at random, or if he is trying to give me a piece of her as well. He is building me a garden that feels like his lover. Maybe that should disturb me, but I find comfort in the thought.

My husband has not been home in three days.

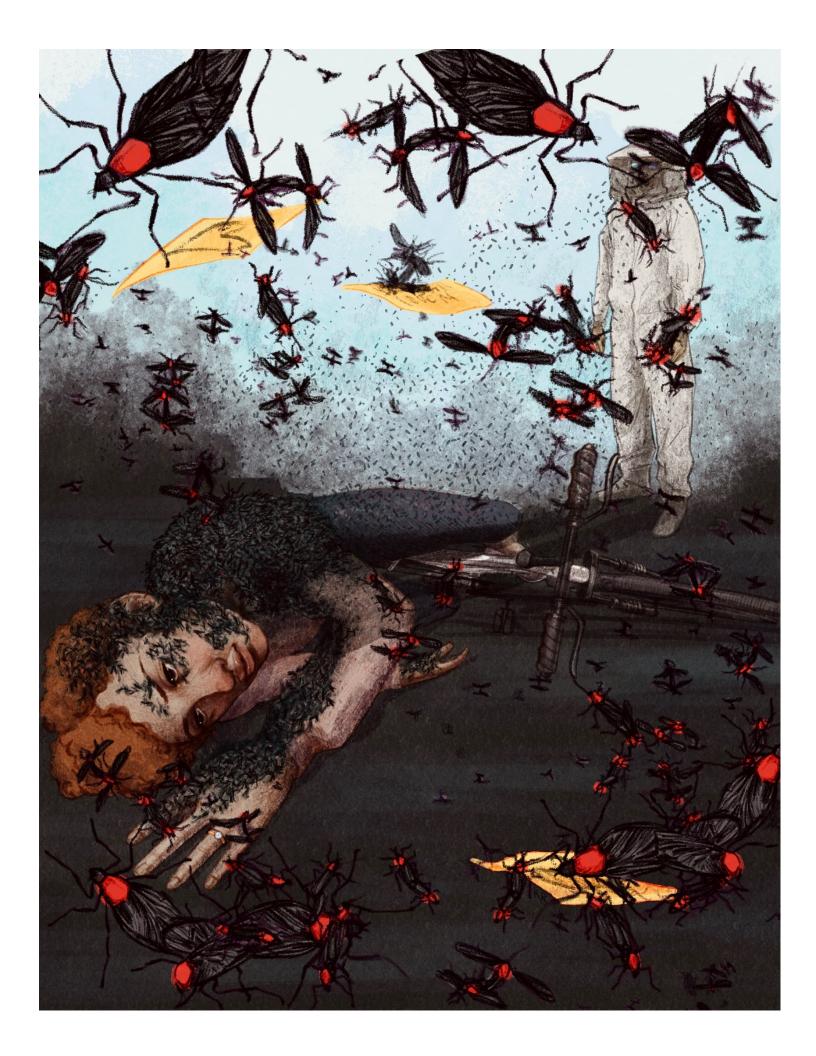
He cannot keep his excuses straight. First he says it is a work trip, some last minute meeting with very important clients. But later he calls me and says he is having a great time with the guys.

"It's a bachelor party," he says. "Don't you remember?"

I can't hear anything in the background. I tell him it sounds like a very quiet bachelor party, and he laughs nervously before hanging up.

Alone in our apartment, I walk over to where our sofa used to sit. Now it is just a mound of moss, but I lay across it anyway. I stare at the ceiling, but I cannot see it any longer. Instead there is green, the delicate veins of leaves illuminated by the sunlight streaming through the windows. There are no walls anymore, no furniture, just a garden where my home used to be. I lay my hand against the floor and run my fingers through the dirt, taking a fistful and pouring it over my head until it is in my eyes, my nose, my mouth. Vines begin to slither over me and I invite them in. I feel them enter my side and move across my ribs, clinging like ivy on lattice. My fingers and toes extend into roots and burrow into the floor, and I feel them tangle with the roots of the others, until I cannot separate myself from the plants around me. I feel blooms in my head and my chest and my throat and I think, this is good, this is right. This is how I should be.

When he comes home he will find me like this, rose petals dripping from my lips and dahlias bursting from my eye sockets. My hair is a tangle of baby's breath. I am so, so beautiful, and when my husband sees me he will remember that he loves me. I have made myself a garden for him, and maybe he will bring pieces of me to his lover. I will live in vases across her home and he will not be able to forget me.



THE LOVEBUGS

Jenna Dietzer

Illustrated by Katiana Robles

A fter a summer of record-setting heat, Carissa longed for the day when she could ride her bicycle to work again. She stood in her red, sweat-stained uniform under the overhang of Prime Foods and squinted across the parking lot in search of her fiancé's truck. He'd offered to pick up her bike at the repair shop and swing by at the end of her shift. She loved how he remembered the name of her bike, Pearl, dubbed for its milky white frame and saddle, and that he treated it with as much devotion as a man his age would a hot rod. He loved it just because she loved it.

Her cell phone buzzed in her purse: I need to see u. Can I come over tonight?

Carissa rolled her eyes. Brad. She'd blocked his number a dozen times since they broke up two years ago. But he always demanded her attention as soon as she thought herself free.

Cars at the edge of the parking lot seemed to float along in phantom pools, reflective mirages of sky that cut apart the pavement, as if Prime Foods was nestled along the Florida shoreline and a slow, crawling tide was about to come in.

Darius's truck emerged from that tide as Carissa slid the phone back into her purse. She waved as he pulled up beside her.

The truck looked covered in fleas, but it was the lovebugs. Hundreds of tiny, black, two-by-two bodies smashed against the grill, with their dull, yellow guts streaked across the truck's shiny paint. Carissa peered into the back. Pearl had been stowed away from the threat of the lovebugs, her pristine white coat still as fresh as fallen snow.

Carissa opened the door and climbed into the chassis beside Darius.

"I'm gonna need to wash her down again when we get home," Darius told her. "Doesn't matter which road I choose. They're everywhere."

Carissa nodded. "It's May. Lovebug season in Florida. Sorry, babe. I should have warned you."

Darius cupped her hand in his and pulled the truck out of the parking lot and onto the road.

He'd uprooted his life in Oklahoma after they were engaged in the spring, moving to the Lake Okeechobee house Carissa inherited from her grandmother. It was the first time any man had moved anywhere for Carissa. This and Darius's calm in the face of summer threats new to him—heatwaves, hurricanes, and lovebugs—meant he must truly be the one.

Carissa let this thought ease her mind as the air conditioning cooled her skin and blew her worries about Brad's message into their rear view. She freed her ponytail and erased her lipstick in the mirror with a napkin, then unpinned the name badge from her chest.

"Better," she sighed.

The Florida sunshine glimmered against her engagement ring. A small but proud round diamond, with a gold band.

"Still like it?" Darius asked, noticing her noticing the ring.

"I love it," she said. "And the man who gave it to me, of course."

"Must be an awesome guy," he teased.

They switched the radio to a local news station, where the hosts talked about the fishing forecast, the enduring presence of mosquitoes, and the return of the lovebugs.

"You know," he said, "I heard from some guy at the gas station that those things were created at the University of Florida. Said it was a botched experiment, trying to create sterile females to mate with the male mosquitoes."

Carissa chuckled. "That's not true. I don't know why people still believe that."

"Can't really be sure, though. Can we?" asked Darius. "Only the bugs know the truth."

She was sure.

She glanced out her window at the brown-baked yards passing beside them. Deteriorating trailers. Roadkill. Weeds. She could be sure, because Brad had worked as an entomologist with the University of Florida before he was fired and forced to take a part-time job as a cashier at Prime Foods. When she'd met his friends, former colleagues, they'd assured her the lovebugs weren't an invention of the faculty.

Carissa couldn't tell Darius this. For him, Brad didn't exist, and she liked it that way. If Brad didn't exist, then all the things he'd done to hurt her didn't exist either. How, in front of customers, he once told her if she ever left, he'd kill them both. How, after he was fired from Prime Foods and they broke up, he kept trying to intercept her at her car at the end of her shift. How she still occasionally found voice messages left by an unfamiliar number, with Brad's breath reverberating in her ear.

Within the first year apart, she was certain he'd planted a scorpion in her mailbox and a black widow spider on the bike rack outside of Prime Foods, right next to Pearl's lock. She slowly began to learn that whenever something felt out of place, Brad was nearby.

When Darius offered to move in with her, she was relieved. No creatures except the usual Florida pests had appeared since he'd moved in.

As they pulled into the driveway, Carissa felt phone vibrations in her purse again. She slipped a hand into the folds to mute it.

The truck braked in the middle of the drive instead of pulling up to the garage. "What the hell?" Darius said, peering past her and out the window.

Scattered beside their front door and the small staircase leading to it were the remains of the house number tiles, once cemented to the concrete block exterior. Whatever removed it had also sheared the colonial blue paint off the side of the house.

They got out of the truck and paced around the front entrance. Carissa noticed a gas can was resting on top of the bushes against the house, spout down and emptied. Darius smelled it first. He quickly covered his mouth and nose, then she smelled it, too.

"Someone seriously poured gas on the bushes all around your grandma's house?" he muttered through his fingers. "What did they think they were going to do—light concrete blocks on fire?"

At the end of the block, tires squealed, and a car bolted from down the road. She felt a lump fill her throat as the car sped out of sight.

Darius turned to her. "All these plants are going to die now. I'm sorry, hun."

She shook her head and told him she wanted to go inside. They climbed back into the truck and closed the garage door behind them.

Darius unloaded her bike while she excused herself to the bathroom. The minute she closed the bathroom door, she pulled out her phone.

Brad texted: I got u some new lights for ur bike.

Why aren't u responding? What are u hiding?

Do u think u can get rid of me that easy?

U never appreciated me. Just text back.

And so on. She pieced together a plot suited to Brad. At the height of his anger, he must have driven to her house and vandalized the house number and poured the gasoline. She wondered if he knew about Darius and the engagement, wondered how many times he had driven by the house since Darius had moved in.

The summer afternoon rains poured all the way into the night. She told Darius the thunder put her on edge when he asked why she kept checking her phone. But even after the thunder stopped, she jumped each time a twig snapped or an animal cried through the darkness outside. Carissa didn't know what to expect next. Brad tapping a finger against her window? Him showing up at her doorstep with a match?

Darius hugged her tight as they snuggled into bed. He was usually snoring before she finished brushing her teeth. "The vandalism got you shook up, sweetie? Everything okay?"

She shook her head yes and watched him turn out the light. As the snoring began, Carissa stared wide-eyed through the bedroom window, through sheets of rain, waiting for the shadow of Brad to materialize.

Carissa woke the next morning to an empty bed, the smell of coffee, and a note from Darius beside the coffee pot: Went to work early, then the farmer's market to get that honey you like. Cooler this morning after the rain. Perfect for a bike ride. I'll pick you and Pearl up if you girls need it.

She retrieved her helmet from a pile in the corner of the garage and set it on the table beside her coffee. But a stench that seemed to seep through the kitchen windows killed her appetite. After dressing into her uniform, she stepped outside. The putrid gas smell from last night persisted, in spite of the rain. Death marked the hedges and

flower beds, curled and browned as if the summer heat had wilted them. She covered her nose with both her hands and walked back inside.

Darius was right about the morning ride. With overcast clouds blocking the sun and the dew of last night's rain still cooling every surface, Carissa rode Pearl the fifteen minutes to work without breaking a sweat. But by the middle of the day, the story had changed. Heat simmered on the ground and threatened to suffocate every living thing as it clawed its way up. A blanket of gray still covered the sky.

Just as Carissa clocked out for lunch, Darius texted her: *Check the news if you can.* She greeted a few coworkers in the breakroom and found them surrounding the one small television in the corner. The farmer's market was in the middle of the screen. White tents in narrow rows covered in millions of black specks. The lovebugs fluttered across the screen as if the cameraman had walked into a swarm of bees. One or two people rushed between the tents and tried to take video footage with their phones, hands waving and arms smacking in front of their faces. Every piece of jewelry, jar of honey, framed photo, and trash can was dotted with lovebugs.

The footage ended when a blurry oval body entered the edge of the screen, followed by another and another, until the screen went black.

Her phone buzzed again: Got your honey. But they're shutting down the market and half of downtown until this stops.

The news report switched to a story about a driver who lost control of his car along the highway. Lovebugs were to blame. Witnesses said they struggled to see the road after the swarm descended.

Are you home yet? Carissa texted back. They're causing accidents.

She finished a last, nervous bite of her sandwich when Darius texted back: *Safe at home*.

Carissa breathed a sigh of relief.

For the rest of her shift, the lovebug infestation was the talk of every grocery shopper. One manager let the staff know that toilet paper and eggs were being purchased in large quantities. If she was low at home, she needed to grab some now. But her grandmother, raised during the Depression, had enough storage space built into the house that Carissa felt obligated to keep the shelves stocked.

Then the manager ordered them to close the store. The swarm was headed to their part of town, and it might be dangerous for them to drive home if they waited much longer.

Carissa texted Darius that she was on her way. He offered to come pick her up, but she insisted on biking. The last thing she wanted was an injured or stranded fiancé because of the swarm, and she knew the route better than him.

She clipped on her helmet and popped up the kickstand, only to hear another text ding on her phone: *This has gone on long enough. I can't live without u. I'm at the edge of the parking lot. Plz come talk.*

Carissa crouched down and rolled her bike backward into the shadow of the Prime Foods overhang. She imagined him circling his parked vehicle like a buzzard killing time. When the sliding doors reopened, she slid back inside the store. She waved to her manager on her way toward the back exit, but he was preoccupied with wrapping up deli meats.

She rounded the building and pedaled toward the side road, picking up her pace. A cloud of black loomed along the horizon behind her, ready to overtake the shadowy sky.

Small batches of lovebugs already floated through the path back home. Carissa knew they didn't bite or sting. But the sheer number of them smothering full-stop traffic along the road and forcing people to abandon their cars frightened her. She witnessed one man, his figure overtaken by an animated swarm, drop to his knees and fight against them.

Carissa switched gears and peddled through the cloud of bugs as fast as Pearl and her legs would let her.

At the house only a few pests littered the mailbox and driveway concrete. Darius had left the garage door open for her. Once inside, she ran for the switch to close it. She was breathless by the time she reached the living room, where Darius sat, transfixed by the television.

"They nearly got a news reporter," he said, not even turning toward her. "Covered his neck and started crawling in his mouth, until someone pulled him inside the news van."

Carissa gulped. She couldn't tell Darius she saw a man nearly buried in lovebugs back on the highway.

He turned to Carissa then, his eyes framed by tired wrinkles and his brow furrowed in worry. "They said we aren't allowed to leave our homes. Is this normal?"

Carissa shook her head and eased onto the couch beside him.

When the news went to a commercial break, she slipped into the bathroom and changed out of her work clothes. Sweat stains lined the middle of the back and formed a ring around the collar. The pale smell of gasoline had latched onto the wet fabric. Carissa pressed the shirt against her nostrils and almost gagged.

When she glanced down at her phone, she saw more texts from Brad.

I know u still love me. Why'd u leave? I come to rescue u from the lovebugs, and this is what I get?

Another lump caught in her throat. She remembered the myth about the lovebugs' origin and his time at the University of Florida, how he was fired for some undisclosed problem—and, in retrospect, she had just assumed it was stalking another ex.

She messaged him: Did you have something to do with this?

The ellipsis on the screen indicated he was responding for several minutes. Then it stopped. *Maybe. Maybe not*.

She threw the phone onto the floor, then cupped her face in her hands. If she told Darius everything about Brad now, she didn't know how he would react.

"You okay?" Darius breathed through the bathroom door. "Been in there a while."

"I'll be out in a minute," she said. She could practically taste the gasoline in her mouth.

The infestation grew throughout the afternoon. More reports of fleeing, more accidents, even a witness who claimed to see the bugs kill someone. Carissa and Darius made dinner for themselves but couldn't finish.

Outside, against the windows facing the street, they noticed the dull black flecks gathering. A random film across the glass at first. Then they overflowed the gutters above, until one of the frailer connectors collapsed. Water and leaves crashed onto the lawn. The lovebugs covered that, too.

Carissa remembered what Brad said about lovebugs one summer when they were still together, why the bugs thrived in southern states like Florida. The dampness and decaying plant matter made for a perfect meal. This was also why they congregated along the highways, where the smell of gasoline exhaust mimicked the smell of decay.

Gasoline. Carissa leaned her head against the windowpane of the living room. Below, every bush butting up against the house was covered, abuzz with double heads and legs stepping over each other. She glanced across the street to find her neighbor's front door and windows covered as well. All that remained of their mailbox, shaped like a dolphin, was its silhouette. Even the ground below it pooled with lovebugs.

A car crept into view and inched into her neighbor's driveway, spewing a trail of exhaust behind it. The red brake lights beamed through the hail of lovebugs, then flashed off into park. But after a few more moments, she watched the car navigate a turnaround and park once again at the end of the drive, facing her property this time.

The insects whirred around the car, sank onto the hood and sacrificed their bellies to the brightness and warmth of the headlights. The driver cut the engine.

Carissa waited for one of her neighbors to evacuate the vehicle, to run, hands waving through the air. She waited for them to keep their mouths and eyes shielded from the storm of bugs. But no one appeared.

She squinted, and through the sea of legs and wings, she caught the glimpse of a man seated at the wheel. Dark eyes behind thick, rectangular glasses. A slim beard along his chin. Brad.

She gasped and hid beneath the window frame. Darius immediately ran to her side.

He placed his palm against her back. "The gas smell got you sick? Just stay back from the window. Over here."

He started standing, but Carissa grabbed him by the collar, pulling him down on top of her.

"Don't. Just don't look out there," she whispered. "Please. Help me close all of the window blinds."

Darius was confused, but he helped her crawl along the living room carpet and grasp the plastic knobs at the end of each cord to pull the blinds shut.

The room went dark except for the glow of the television screen. Darius stood again. But Carissa remained on the floor, her hands visibly shaking. Every time the engagement ring caught the light of the screen, it seemed to flash an SOS.

Darius recognized her fear and bent down again, hugging her until the shaking slowed. "He's here," she whispered through her tears. "He's here."

"Who?"

"My ex."

Darius released her from his embrace. "Outside? In this? But why?"

She freed every detail of the past in breathless sentences—the texts, the threats, the stalking. How Brad felt she owed him another chance and wouldn't stop until she gave it to him. How he may have something to do with the lovebugs.

"At the very least, Brad knew they were coming," she told him. "He wasn't trying to burn down the house yesterday. He was trying to kill all of our plants. The lovebugs are attracted to the smell of gas and decay."

Darius remained calm. "Do you think we can still make a run for it? The news said it's not happening anywhere but Okeechobee."

She shook her head. "You saw the reports. It's too dangerous. We shouldn't leave the house."

Darius nodded, but as he turned toward the windows again, his lower jaw clenched. "Think it's at least safe enough to go out there and rip your ex's head off?"

"I'm hoping, now that he can't see us, he'll go away."

They turned their attention back to the house, devising ways to fortify it from the lovebugs. They were small enough to wiggle into the crawl space beneath or attic above, but she doubted they could get through the vents.

"They could also cut off the air conditioning unit outside. But they'd have to—"

As the last word fell from her mouth, a loud sputter rang from outside. The air handler hiccupped and died.

"Shit," Carissa hissed.

Two taps sounded at their front door. They both jumped, then Darius put a finger to his lips. She tiptoed to the window again and made a narrow slit between the blinds. A figure dressed in white stood on the front porch steps. At first it looked like an astronaut. But as Carissa blinked, the helmet morphed into a mesh veil with zippers securing it to the neck. A beekeeper's suit. Flocks of lovebugs buzzed around and landed on the suit. But they never overwhelmed it.

The figure knocked on the door again, more insistent this time. Through the mesh she saw the beard and glasses.

"It's him. Oh, God," she said, stepping back. "He's at the front door. Why can't he just leave me alone?"

Darius rolled up his sleeves and grabbed the door handle.

"No!" she screamed.

"Lock this door behind me—and don't open it again until I've beat the shit out of him. Understand?"

Carissa didn't have time to respond. Darius bolted onto the porch. Then the door slammed shut behind him, and she lunged forward to twist the deadbolt. Some lovebugs infiltrated in the commotion. They fluttered around her face and landed on the walls. She reached for the fly swatter and struck every pair she could find.

Outside, the sound of shouts and fists pounding echoed. Someone slammed into the door with such force, she thought it might break open. Then everything quieted to the dull rhythm of the lovebugs beating against the house.

"Darius?" she said, her cheek pressed against the door. "Darius?"

She scurried to the window and looked through the blinds. Someone lay crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, covered in bugs, a tar-like mound. Carissa couldn't even make out the color of his hair, the shade of his eyes, his shape.

Then something moved in her peripheral vision, just in front of the door. The beekeeper's suit raised its hand and knocked twice more.

She covered her mouth in horror. The black mound was Darius. Lovebugs, drilling into his ear canals. Lovebugs, covering his eyes until he couldn't see to strike. Lovebugs, crawling into his mouth and nose until they cornered him into his last breath. She wanted to tear through the door and cover his body with her own.

Her head spun. She closed her eyes and pressed her shoulder against the wall, where the smell of gas threatened to take her own breath away. "Darius," she cried out, and when silence answered, she screamed louder. "Darius!"

Carissa didn't know when Brad returned to his car, when the sun set, when she stopped screaming. But her voice, hoarse and raw, eventually gave up and left the shell of her body behind. The summer heat trapped inside the house matted her hair against her scalp. Another shirt soaked. But this time, she couldn't tell if it was sweat or tears.

It was hard to sleep that night, between the heat and the thoughts throbbing inside her head. What if she kept her past with Brad a secret? Or what if she'd mentioned him sooner? Would Darius still be here, safe beside her? Would Brad have been scared off so long ago that the lovebugs never manifested? Either fate was preferable to this one. She could have made that choice. She should have.

At one point before dawn, her cell phone lost its signal, and the texts from Brad stopped. But he persisted. Each time she glanced out the door's peephole, she saw the car still parked in the neighbor's driveway. Every few hours, knocks came at the door, and she would cover her ears until he stopped. She lost track of time and days as the dark circles beneath her eyes grew darker. She wished for sleep only so she could wake up from this nightmare. More than anything, she shuddered at the thought of Brad stepping over Darius's body—that Darius's body was even out there.

She woke one morning to find notes plastered across the living room windows. Hearts with her and Brad's initials in thick, black, permanent marker. *You still love me.* It was fate that your fiancé died. Now we can be together. The paper pieces were like fat exclamation marks drawn across a black chalkboard. She felt the darkened walls and ceilings and floors begin to close on her. She grabbed a figurine off a nearby bookshelf just in case.

A noise came from down the hallway, closer to the bedroom. If Brad had made it into the house, she would be ready for him. She tiptoed past the couches and toward the hallway. Along the ceiling, near the opening to the attic, a dozen lovebug pairs swarmed. She batted them away with her hands and spit at any that neared her mouth. But they kept leaking out of the edges of the attic door as if it were a faucet. When the stream became too much to hold back, Carissa backed away toward the living room again.

Slowly, a pair floated past her face, one of the lovebugs awkwardly dragging the other behind it, still attached but lifeless. She remembered Brad once told her how the mating of the lovebugs ends. The male dies, but he refuses to let go. His body clings to the female until she's ready to lay eggs. Then they detach, and she dies as well.

The pair piloted their jagged and clumsy path toward the garage door and landed there. Carissa opened the door and watched as the pair spun circles in the air, then fluttered down to the black handlebars of her bike. Except for the tiny red thoraxes at each end, the pair seemed to disappear into the grip. She placed her hand beside them and the female crawled onto Carissa's ring finger. The proud, round diamond still shone brightly through their dark bodies.

She lifted the kickstand and pressed the button to open the garage door, letting the flood of bugs enter the house. She wheeled Pearl forward carefully and sat on the saddle. Across the street was Brad in his beekeeper suit, just exiting his car again.

As Brad watched the garage door raise, his eyes widened, and the edges of his beard lifted. He jogged across the street toward the house, toward her, his arms outstretched. But the joy on his face turned to anguish as the bugs covered Carissa's legs. They climbed her torso and neck, swept their black bodies across her lips. He froze and lifted his hands to his mouth, forgetting about the suit. She smiled. Then Brad and the gasoline odor and everything disappeared.

As the lovebugs enveloped her, Carissa remembered the first morning she woke up beside Darius. That warm cocoon of his arms around her, hands tickling, buried beneath their sheets. His kisses landed on every inch of her body until her skin felt alive.

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PASSENGERS

Rhys Owain Williams

Illustration by Zuzanna Kwiecien

S he greets me at the door in a bright red dressing gown and hair curlers, her smudged-lipstick mouth locked in a yawning 'O.'

'Hello, I've got a room booked—my office called to say I'd be a little late?'

It isn't a question I need answering—I was there when Siân phoned this afternoon. But I find conflict is less likely if you allow your tone to rise.

'Yes, yes. You're much later than I expected.'

She has an accent that suggests undeserved privilege. I choose not to respond to her suggestion that I'm an inconvenience, and instead wait in silence for her to invite me in. A few awkward seconds pass before her breeding gets the better of her, and she opens the door wider.

'Do come in. I hope your journey wasn't too onerous?'

Creative train travel is economising—or so I'm told by Siân—but it usually means travelling in the dead of night, waking up the landlady of the B&B to get my room key. I don't come across many landlords if I'm honest, not living ones anyway. There's often a black and white photo on the mantelpiece—a shot of a bride and groom beneath a lychgate, or a portrait of a young man in the armed forces. I try not to draw attention to them; I don't want to lose an hour to a life story. I suppose that's another one of Siân's cost savers: find the absolute cheapest place for me to stay. I'd prefer the anonymity of one of the budget hotel chains (not to mention their 24-hour check-in

desks), but these widows marketing their spare bedrooms as executive suites must be cheaper.

'Your room is just through there, in the annex. You can't miss it. There's an ensuite bathroom with a macerator lavatory, but if you must pass anything solid then please use the family bathroom upstairs.' She makes an elaborate swish-and-point gesture with her hand, pausing to make sure I understand the concept of the house having a second floor. 'Breakfast is served from 6:30 until 8, checkout 9:30. Sharp.'

I take the key from her and raise it slightly in the air, pursing my lips together to let her know that I've got a handle on things from here. The 'annex' is actually a converted garage at the back, linked to the house by one of those cheap extensions people put up in the 1970s. The extension isn't big enough to be anything other than a corridor, though two mismatched dining chairs and a slim bookcase create a pathetic-looking sitting area at the end nearest the house. Moss is layered on the clear plastic roof, and there are long green streaks of dried rainwater down the single-paned windows on either side. A strip light whirrs above me. The extension isn't that long, perhaps 10 yards or so stretching between the house and the garage, but walking down it I suddenly feel vulnerable—too exposed to the night outside. For the second time this evening, I can feel someone watching me.

I hadn't wanted to get into it with my robe-wearing host, but my journey this evening was actually quite onerous. The train out of Cardiff Central was my fourth: a single-carriage affair, and the last until morning (I don't really understand why four changes are cheaper than a seat on the earlier express train, or the direct bus, but Siân knows best). Each of the windows was open. The chill wind rushing through the carriage was invigorating at first, but as the journey went on I began to feel the cold in my bones. Of the handful of my fellow passengers, only one seemed to be similarly bothered. Watching him struggle with his window was enough to put me off attempting to close mine. Each time he managed to slam the window shut it sprung back open, causing the rest of us to look up from our phones and secondhand newspapers. Flustered by failure, after his final attempt he made a point of saying something to the carriage, but I don't think anyone could really hear him over the wind. I decided to dig through my bag for tomorrow's jumper instead.

Despite my hatred for Siân's elaborate journeys, I do love travelling on a night train. Even if there's been a big match on in Cardiff, by this point in the evening the carriages are quiet, and the world that flies past outside is pitch black, save for the occasional cluster of street lights in the distance. It's the closest you can get to experiencing sleep while awake. Eventually I'll start up driving lessons again (or get a better job, perish the thought), and these nocturnal commutes will be consigned to memory. I won't miss running between platforms to make the changes, nor having to wake up the landladies of every crap B&B in the British Isles, but I will miss the night trains.

Tonight's train journey began much the same as the others Siân had sent me on, as I alternated between enjoying the experience and absent-mindedly unlocking my phone and getting lost in clickbait listicles. I was thumb-deep in '47 Memes That Will Make You Feel Better About Your Life' when we reached Newport, and vaguely remember a procession of tired bodies knocking into my seat as they exited the train. I didn't look up from my phone again until we came to a standstill at some half-forgotten request stop. Porthsgiwed Halt read the bleached sign on the platform, then underneath in smaller lettering: Change Here for the Black Rock Ferry.

The windows of the station house had been bricked up, but—in the age of smartphone ticket apps—that didn't mean the stop wasn't still in use. I couldn't see how anyone could reach the platform though; brambles and vines had filled the gaps surrounding the building, stretching out from the underwood behind. Porthsgiwed Halt must be one of those rare disused stations that had escaped both a taxpayer-sponsored demolition and a Channel 4-endorsed renovation. Probably closed for decades, but here it stood.

Returning to my phone screen, preparing to search for photos of Porthsgiwed Halt in its heyday, a shock of white caught my eye. I hadn't glanced up to confirm, but after Newport I'd presumed I was the only remaining passenger on the train. Yet there he was, facing me from the seats at the other end of the carriage, staring a hole through my head. It was his hair I'd seen in my periphery—alabaster-white, swept back and swelling outwards. The rest of what I could see of him was white too, but more the colour of pale ash—save for two dark circles beneath his eyes, and a pair of fat purpled lips. Normally when I lock eyes with a stranger I look away quickly, hoping they won't think I was looking at them first, but he was so unearthly I couldn't help but stare back.

One arm hung down at the side of his seat, hovering above the centre aisle, covered by a heavy-wool coat sleeve. Water dripped steadily from his long fingers, pooling on the faded carpet. It hadn't rained for days. As the train finally began to move I managed to draw my eyes away from him, back to my phone. I prayed for a guard to appear collecting tickets, something to break the unsettled moment, but they never bother punching tickets on the night trains. I reckon you could cross the whole island of Britain for free if you travel exclusively between the hours of 11 p.m. and 3 a.m., though I'd never share this theory with Siân.

The train picked up the pace after our unscheduled stop, and the carriage was once again deafened by the wind. Every so often I looked up to check if he was still there, if he was still staring. He always was, his eyes never left me—an unrelenting gaze. I'd encountered the unsavoury on these night trains before—mostly drunks and smackheads, but also men who were just angry and looking for a fight, not influenced by substance. I'd learned to be passive, to let the drama play out. I'd never had one focus so hard on me before though, always lucky enough to meet them on trains a bit more populated. I thought about retreating to the toilet, locking the door until the next station, but it felt dangerous not to know where he was, what he was doing. I slowly typed the numbers 9-9-9 on my phone screen, let my thumb hover over the 'Call' button. It would be stupid to call the police, I told myself, nothing had happened. Just two men travelling through the night at opposite ends of a train carriage.

Suddenly we plunged into darkness, the whole carriage losing light. For a second I thought we'd entered a tunnel, then realised that wouldn't explain why the lights in the train had gone off too. And I could still see him at the other end, moonlight illuminating the shock of hair, the surface of his pale skin taking on a waxen translucence. He stood up, his movement slow but deliberate enough to send a shiver. The wind continued to howl. As he began walking towards me, disappearing into the shadows of a darker space in the carriage, I looked down at my phone. It had locked itself. Desperately swiping the screen to bring up the passcode entry—or the flashlight button, the camera, anything—the whole thing slipped from my hands and fell beneath the seat in front of me. As I stretched down to grab it, his steady footsteps became louder, then his grim face was moonlit once more. Making one last attempt for the phone, I shot down between the chairs, reached my hand out in the darkness to feel for its familiar shape. Thump. A plastic bottle. Thump. A sandwich wrapper. Thump. A

coffee cup. Though I didn't look up, I heard him above me now, air rasping from that dreadful mouth. Why had I stayed in my seat? Why had I reached for my phone? Why hadn't I run, when I had the chance?

The carriage lights sprung back on. I saw my phone immediately, but there was no set of legs next to my chair, no pools of water collecting on the faded carpet. From what I could see, when I finally lifted myself up from the floor, the carriage was completely empty. A tinny voice emerged from the tannoy and announced our imminent arrival at Chepstow, my final stop. The sight of the platform was welcome. I grabbed my bag and got up from my seat in one movement. Not looking back, I quickly left the train. I rushed across the footbridge as fast as my slippery work brogues would take me, then practically launched myself into the single taxi parked outside the station. Only as we drove away—the driver holding Siân's handwritten directions to the B&B in his hand—did I look back to see if my fellow passenger had followed me off the train. But there was no sign of him. The station was deserted.

I'm surprised to find that, despite being located in a converted garage, the B&B's bed is on the comfortable side. A mattress topper hides all manner of hard springs and other ills, and the bedding is clearly from one of the more upmarket department stores. My host has even sprayed the pillows with essential oils, though no amount of lavender scent will allow me to close my eyes. I can never sleep the night before a client presentation anyway—nerves getting the better of me—but tonight I can't get that man out of my head. Only a few hours have passed since I was on the train, but I'm wondering if I've already begun to make the experience more disturbing in my mind. Was his face really the colour of pale ash? His hair alabaster? Surely not. Perhaps he wasn't even staring at me. He may have been looking at a space slightly above my head—the train's scrolling announcement board perhaps. No, he was definitely staring at me. I could feel those unwavering sunken eyes.

Could I have imagined him? Might I have been half-asleep, dreaming? That might explain the blackout. But Porthsgiwed Halt certainly seemed real. I could have touched the vines surrounding the station house from the train's open window. I reach for my phone on the bedside table and unlock the screen. 3:30 a.m. A search for 'Porthsgiwed Halt' only brings up a small number of results: a miniscule entry on disusedstations.com, an eBay listing for a colourised postcard, and a decade-old

Western Mail article: '125 Years On From the Black Rock Drowning.' I open the article link but a mass of adverts on the page make it largely unreadable. In the introduction, the journalist calls it one of the River Severn's worst disasters, a passenger ferry overturning on a sandbank early one autumn morning. Then a video detailing Swansea's ten hippest nightspots begins playing without my permission, and I quickly lock my phone to stop the stock music. But the station was real. No surprise really, I would never have dreamt up a name like Porthsgiwed Halt. I don't even know what a 'Halt' is.

My phone back on the bedside table, I return to staring at the closed curtains. They cover a long squat window, probably the length of the old garage door, and don't quite meet in the middle. There's a sliver of darkness between them, only a small amount of moonlight hitting the fields behind the B&B. In a few hours I'll be in another taxi headed back to Chepstow, this sleepless purgatory at an end. I wonder how close this B&B is to the banks of the Severn, to the Black Rock—if I'll be able to see either from the window when the sun rises.

I'm not sure how much time passes while I lie staring at the curtains but, like clockwork, as soon as I begin to feel close to anything that resembles sleep, there's a pang in my bladder. I throw the heavy duvet off, shuffle across the room to the ensuite. Lifting the seat, I notice a scrap of paper on the cistern: Please only use during daylight hours. I don't understand; that's not what she said when I arrived, was it? I stare at the ornate, cursive handwriting for a minute or two, once again pining for a budget hotel chain. Eventually I make up my mind to proceed, but then I'm stopped by the faint memory of an ancient macerator toilet rocking my grandfather's house to its foundations. Best go upstairs.

Water finally passed, and with an almost-soundless flush to boot, I pause on the landing outside the family bathroom. Next to the stairs is a large stained-glass window, the type of Edwardian single-glaze that's never replaced. It's not much to look at, a few waning pink flowers framed by green rectangles, but beyond it the dark fields stretch towards a glistening blue-black body. Above the trees at the edge of the fields, the safety lights on the Severn Bridge cast four blood-red strips upon the water.

A loud gasp escapes my body when I see her standing in the nearest field, the wind whipping her dressing gown around her legs. She's facing away from the house, looking towards the trees, to the river. My initial reaction is to return to my room, not

get involved. Then I think of my grandfather again, his neighbours finding him in their front garden after dark, bringing him indoors still shivering. The beginning of his quick decline. I can't see her face, but she looks lost. Perhaps this is her first night-time outing, perhaps she isn't used to the cold. I might wake up to her dead in the field next to my window, and then who would serve me breakfast? And throughout this rapid track of thought, one phrase keeps repeating: do the right thing.

The front door is locked, but there's a set of keys hanging to the side of the coat rack. It doesn't take long to find the right one. I borrow a coat too, thick and scratchy. The old wool bristles against my forearms. Outside, the wind is far colder than it was earlier on the train, hitting me full force in the face. Jogging to the back of the house, past the annex, I climb over the back wall into the field. She isn't there. She isn't anywhere I can see—no sight of her bright robe across any of the low fields. I stand up on the wall, try to see beyond the trees. Nothing.

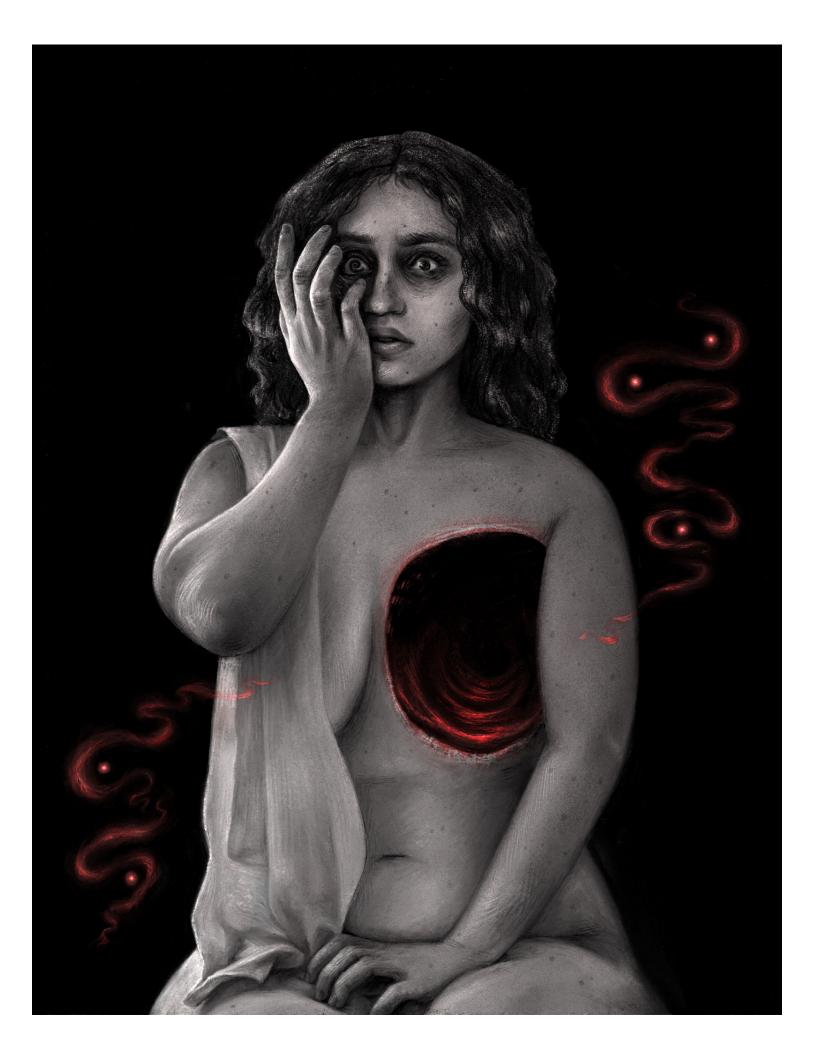
It's when I look back at the house I see him. The curtains in the annex wide open, him standing centred in the window. Alabaster hair. Pale-ash skin. Fat purpled lips. Staring. Staring. Staring. Without thinking I start running, running away from the house into the dark, flat fields as fast as my work brogues will take me. A hazy plan forms to reach the river, follow it down as far as I can, back to bright lights: a new housing estate, a road, a petrol station, the bridge itself. At the edge of the fields I reach an old cycle path, glance back for the first time as I scale a fence. My stomach drops when I see he's following me—running too, perhaps half a field away. Just aim for the bridge, the red strips upon the water.

The cycle path is overgrown, full of potholes. I'm glad my distrust of other people's carpets made me put on my brogues, as stupid as they looked beneath my jogging bottoms. There's no way I could have run this path without them. It's winding, and each time I look back I can't see beyond the last curve. What if he's overtaken me in the undergrowth, is ready to jump out onto the path in front? I spy a set of concrete steps leading down to the river, make a quick decision to run down them. The river's rising, but there's just enough of the bank still showing to avoid getting stuck in the mudflats. I keep following it, aiming for those lights on the water. Beyond the bridge, the first hints of dawn extend across the horizon. The lights don't feel like they're getting any closer.

Eventually the bank opens up, and I reach a picnic area above a sea wall. All paths from here go inland, the span of the river growing even larger than before. Across from the sea wall a rusted lighthouse sits on a black rock, jutting out of the water. Beyond it I can just about see a passenger ferry, overturned in the darkness. Faint cries of Help. Help, please. Help. The hints of dawn have disappeared, thick fog rolling up the river, surrounding the Black Rock. The passenger ferry becomes a discord of shapes, fades from view. But the cries continue, louder. In the water between me and the rock I see a woman, white dress billowing around her. She clutches a wailing baby to her chest. I look back up the river, for the man that was following me. It's clear of fog, he's nowhere to be seen. I can't leave them. Can't keep running while they're in danger. Just do the right thing. There are no lifebuoys in the picnic area. My phone is still in the room at the B&B. I wade out, the water freezing. The wool coat becomes heavier, drags my shoulders downward. Help, Help, please. Help. I shout to her that I'm coming. The current gets faster, the water deeper. I begin to swim. Help. Help, please. Help. Somehow I reach an almost-touching distance. I should have removed the coat. She keeps shouting. Help, Please. Help, I'm so close to her now, but she doesn't look at me. She just keeps shouting, her lifeless eyes never moving from the shore. Help, Help, please. Help. I begin swallowing water. The current is too fast. Help. Help, please. Before I go under, I look back at the river bank. See him standing there. Alabaster hair. Pale-ash skin. Heavy-wool coat.

When the train arrives, the man squinting out at the bleached sign on the platform, the bricked-up station house, is familiar, though I'm not sure why I recognise him. What I do know, though, is that this is the beginning of the coil—the last moment before the descent begins. Once he reaches the next station it'll be too late. I have to warn him.

I'm not sure how long I've waited for this train, but I board it slowly, quietly. Sit as far away from him as I can. He hasn't seen me yet. The lights flicker. I hope a plan comes to mind quickly. Soon enough, a shock of white will catch his eye.



A HAUNTING TOO CLOSE TO THE HEART

Charlotte Heather

Illustration by Lauren Raye Snow

She dreams of mutilation. She wakes up and can pluck each dream like ripe fruit to examine in her mind, they are so familiar to her. She does not. She leaves them be. She tries to roll over but is impeded by the hefty noise-cancelling headphones, which are still pumping out discordant jazz, muffled slightly by the earplugs. She cradles the hot water bottle to her chest, it needs refilling. She tries to blink the dreams away, pleading with herself for a little more sleep, perhaps even a little less dreaming.

People often have asymmetrical breasts. It is very common. 'Normal.'

Ellie was told so when she quietly asked her friend Jennifer Kelly about it in high school, a hot blush rising in her cheeks. It was normal, totally normal, she was told again by internet searches at 1 a.m. beneath the covers. She was normal.

She didn't like it, her lopsided body. She didn't like having breasts at all, really. She wanted her body to be ramrod straight. Something efficient and severe. She wanted her body to be sharp.

But she would have lived with it, been normal, and coped, she is sure, if it weren't for the dreams. The dreams and all that came with them.

A quickening of the pulse, a tightening of the skin, a crawling feeling—like when you sense someone is behind you and turn quickly to catch them. Except, she doesn't feel like there is someone behind her.

They are inside her.

Hiding in her soft and pliable flesh.

The dreams became more graphic as she grew older. A gaping hole in her left breast, beside the nipple, and inside it might be all fuzzy-wet and yellow, almost crystalline, like an infected cut that has dried. Or sometimes there would be an abyss. Sometimes the glint of an eye.

Wrong-feeling dreams came every night after her breasts had fully developed at fourteen. Dreams that smelled like dust and damp. She would twist her neck and tilt her head upwards to be as far away from the smell of the breast as possible. She would wake up sweating, with a crick in her neck, she'd slap her boob to see if it was still there. It looked fine. That large, flopping breast. Normal. Completely normal.

Being a teenager was meant to be difficult. She knew that much. Everybody hated something about their body, it seemed. Maybe the dreams were all tangled up in that, the dizzying cocktail of changing bodies, hormones and rapidly evolving sexualities.

Chloe Dillard hated her ankles with a passion, wearing boots whenever possible.

Jo Benson had wanted a nose job since the age of eleven.

Matty O'Sullivan complained quietly about the acne that scattered across his back, appearing beneath his shirt collar in an angry red constellation.

And Jennifer Kelly, who hated her own small chest, who shamelessly took off her shirt when they were both drunk and 16, pointed at her nipples and complained they were far too long for such a flat chest and, like Ellie's, lopsided.

Ellie stayed silent, envious of Jen's innocuous chest.

Yes the right nipple pointed a little more straight, the left a little lower, Ellie could see if she really, really concentrated. It was kind of sweet, like two moles, noses sniffing in ever so slightly different directions.

Nothing sinister about it.

They had kissed that night and Ellie fell asleep drunk and happy and wondering if perhaps they were all in the same boat. Perhaps everybody's bodies betrayed them a little. She knew somewhere in the back of her mind, it wasn't the same.

It wasn't until the nipple became consistently bullet hard and erect that she went to the doctor. She was 18 years old and taking a year out to decide what she wanted to do with herself, working in a local cafe that served full English breakfasts for £6.95.

There was nothing physically wrong with her, according to the doctor. Perhaps she was allergic to her detergent, he proffered, frowning. She didn't bother asking how she could only be allergic in one nipple. There was no point.

She went back to work that afternoon and ate a mountain of hash browns and fried mushrooms, letting the grease leak down her chin. Her stomach felt swollen and heavy. The doctor was wrong. Everyone was wrong. She knew that if someone, anyone, kept looking for long enough, they would find something incredibly wrong with her left breast.

With the left breast. It ceased to belong to her. And yet somehow it was also at her core.

She became very clumsy, ignoring her arms and legs. The rest of her body was nothing but peripheral vision. It lost her the cafe job. Too many customers were scalded with tea or baked beans.

She cried for nearly a full day, wiped her raw face and got on with things.

She found another job at a call centre in town. She was sure whoever sat to the left of her was always turned slightly away.

She went through a short phase of one-night stands. Ellie would try to lose herself in the act, in the drink, but always became analytical, watching for proof. Soft kisses and hard bites would somehow divert around the left breast. It was left cold and alone. She gave up on those moments of quickfire intimacy.

It was colder, she was sure of it, than the rest of her body.

Ellie met Clara at the call center. Clara, thick bodied with a laugh that could crack glass. Clara who loved, loved, breasts. Of all kinds. It bordered on obsessive, Ellie thought. Clara was the kind of person who received ceramic boob mugs for Christmas, an apron with the body of a buxom beauty on it for birthdays, a stress ball with a nipple on just for fun.

Clara would make Ellie giggle 'til her belly ached. She made her feel like she could perhaps leave the house that day, at least to get to work.

Clara would be so beautifully attentive to Ellie's right breast, smothering it with tenderness, hands and mouth praying to it, all the while never as much as glancing at the left.

After sex, four months into the relationship, Ellie asked Clara about it.

'I don't know,' Clara said, 'I just feel more drawn to the right.'

'Are you disgusted by the left?'

'Of course not!' Clara had rolled her eyes, but her teeth started to tear at the quicks of her fingers, telling Ellie a different truth.

'I can't do this anymore.' Clara said.

Ellie had been accusing Clara of being afraid of the breast, again. She had collected evidence, saved up in the notes on her phone. She reeled off the list of incidents to Clara:

- 'When we got a shower you stood behind me and put soap on my skin, onto my right breast and did a large circle around the left.
- In bed you only spoon me, never me spooning you so that you don't have to feel it pressed up against you.
 - You always hug me from behind or from the right.
- I grazed you with the left breast in the hallway and you flinched, you shuddered.'

'This is too much, I'm sorry, I can't handle this. I think you need to see someone. There isn't room here for anything else—you know? It's unhealthy. Like a kinda paranoid obsession? I don't know. There's a self referral service someone told me about, you could try that? I'm so sorry.'

Clara put a hand to Ellie's face, brushing a thumb over her cheek and then squeezing her earlobe. It's the last time Ellie remembers being touched.

Ellie did need help. But not the kind Clara meant. The rest wasn't true though. It had driven Clara away. That thing that dwells inside her. It wants her to itself.

The dreams became more violent once Clara was gone.

Ellie would cut it off with garden shears, or some other sharp and violent tool, in each night's dreamscape. Sometimes it would develop row upon row of serrated teeth and contort itself round to gnash off her poor little right breast.

She tried sleeping pills, to get so deep that the dreams couldn't touch her. For a while, it just about worked.

She was beating it, she thought.

And then, of course, it started to hum.

It was quiet but sad, mournful. It would hit unnatural tones that turned her stomach and begged for the attention she refused to give it. She bound her chest up in bandages to muffle the sound so she could at least leave the house. So she could go to the shop. To work.

Everywhere she went, she sang, even though she could not hold a tune. She found herself speaking more loudly to people she interacted with, trying to mask the warbling sound, her breast strapped down tightly. She never went out for long and the humming only got louder, punctuated by whispers that she couldn't quite make out, sniggers and gasps.

She left the call centre. Got another job doing the same kind of thing but from home. Calling people with thick headphones on, holding the microphone to her mouth from below so that it was as unlikely as possible to catch the sounds coming from her chest.

She knew it wasn't hers. Something that couldn't let go had lodged itself in there, freezing it to the core. Even with the bandages, the erect nipple could be seen through her t-shirt. Cold and hard and full of its wailing song. She spent her money on noise cancelling headphones, she built a bra full of foam to quieten it. She tried to soundproof herself.

She stayed indoors.

She stays indoors today, listening to her loud, erratic jazz. Anything with a regular rhythm seems to wear down, allowing the grotesque sounds back in. She turns the music up to full volume as she gets out of bed, knowing that sleep has left her now.

She makes herself toast with peanut butter and drums her fingers along to the music. She watches birds through the window of her flat, landing on the bird feeder in the flat below's garden. Little blue and brown bodies flit back and forth with a sweet yet nervous energy. As if moving in time to her music. She would like to go outside.

Tonight she will dream of mutilation.

She is learning to be alone.

But, of course, she's not.

Contributors

Authors

Jenna Dietzer is a technology process geek by day and writer by night. She resides in Tampa, Florida with her partner and their five fur-kids. Her short story "Why She Dreams of Alligators" is forthcoming in the Women of Horror Anthology Vol. 4 by Kandisha Press. You can find her on Twitter @duh jenna.

Melissa Elborn is a writer of contemporary gothic fiction, exploring the uncanny and the abject. Her short fiction has appeared in Horla Horror, Spelk Fiction, Black Hare Press and is forthcoming in The Dread Machine. Melissa haunts deepest, darkest Bedfordshire in England. Follow her on Twitter @MelissaElborn.

Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick lives in Philadelphia with her husband and black cat. Her fiction, essays, and reviews have appeared in Condé Nast Traveler, Maudlin House, Bustle, and the Barnes & Noble Book Blog, among others. You can find her on Instagram at @shaunyfitz.

Charlotte Heather is a writer currently teaching creative writing online and running 'the remote body', a project that works to platform and collaborate on accessible digital events that prioritise chronically ill and disabled people. Charlotte's writing tends to explore tangled notions of chronic illness, queerness and liminality.

Rhys Owain Williams is a writer and editor from Swansea, Wales. His short fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies, including A Flock of Shadows: 13 Tales of the Contemporary Gothic (Parthian, 2015). He is assistant editor of The Ghastling: a magazine devoted to quiet horror and the macabre. Find out more about his writing at www.rhysowainwilliams.com

Catherine Wilson is a Scottish spoken word poet and writer originally from the Highlands, now based in Edinburgh. Her work has been published by Extra Teeth magazine, Gutter magazine, The Scotsman and The Scottish Book Trust. In 2018, her work was selected by the E.U.N.I.C's Transpoesie Festival to be displayed across Brussel's transport system.

Illustrators

Jana Galushkina is an illustrator and designer from Brest, Belarus. She is currently studying and living in Poland. Her favored techniques are circulation graphics and digital illustration. At the same time, she often experiments with techniques by uniquely combining watercolors, computer graphics and various types of handprints. She is madly in love with complex patterns, eccentric color schemes, prints, and ethnic motifs.

Pollyanna Johnson is an artist working in Norfolk, England. Specialising in painting after graduating with a Masters at The Royal Drawing School, she has recently started a limited edition series of ceramics inspired by women from art. Pollyannajohnson.com

Zuzanna Kwiecien is an illustrator based in Warsaw, Poland. With her practice she aims to develop bodies of work that capture the visual narrative of the subject and combine it with a distinct atmosphere. As an artist, she values time and effort put into the construction of a high-quality work of art. Her illustrations usually feature intricate linework and patterns. She enjoys creating pen and ink illustrations with a focus on detail and with foundations on dark folklore.

Deena So Oteh Originally from Saint-Petersburg Russia, Deena is an illustrator, graphic novelist and educator currently living and drawing in NYC. She holds an MFA in Illustration as Visual Essay from the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been recognized by the Society of Illustrators West, American Illustration and 3x3 Magazine. Deena is passionate about the world around her and uses visual storytelling to translate things that are difficult to express with words. She is interested in illustrating stories that explore complex emotional depth, environment, history and tap into the mysterious/magical side of things. Represented by Chad W. Beckerman @The CAT Agency.

Katiana Robles is a full-time artist and freelance illustrator working out of Orlando Florida. Her works spans a variety of media such as food art, sculpture, and digital illustration. She has exhibited throughout Central Florida; most notably at Orlando City Hall, City Arts Factory, and Osceola Arts. To see more of her whimsical work visit KatRobles.com and follow her on Instagram @kat_robles.

Lauren Raye Snow is an illustrator and fine artist from South Texas. Through her art, she explores intangible, uncanny visions and feelings that are ill described in language – and the anxiety that this obscurity can cause. She is inspired by the Symbolists and the Pre-Raphaelites, by the Catholic and Indigenous religious icons of her native South Texas, as well as works of horror, romance and

beauty in literature and music. Find her on Instagram and Twitter at @laurenrayesnow and on her website: rayedraws.com.

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