

The
New Gothic Review

№ 2



The New Gothic Review



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Masthead

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Maria Buttuller

Note from the editors

Welcome to Issue Two of *New Gothic Review*!

This magazine emerged from the idea that some of the best Gothic literature happens on the periphery of other genres, lurking beyond the places where one might look. In this issue, you'll find stories that push the margins of what we consider to be Gothic literature today—bold and modern stories that rot from the inside out.

You'll find tales that embrace weird fiction and folk horror, ecogothic and supernatural. There are settings both familiar and new: from the English coast to the Outer Banks of the Carolinas and the barren stretches of Australia. There's no shortage of death, decay, and secret histories here. They've just been injected with DNA from the 21st century.

The Gothic genre allows us to confront and make sense of the darkness in our lives. It's a genre for the human condition, belonging to every culture and country. This issue is a celebration of those stories. We hope you enjoy.



SOMETIMES THEY ARRIVE LATE

Rebecca Parfitt

Illustration by Julia Wytrazek

It was rainy season in the Philippines. The locals hunkered down underneath porches and tarpaulin, the rain poured off their rooftops in waterfalls. Charcoal burned in street barbecues as chicken feet sizzled and chunks of pork belly turned on spits; rice steamed in huge stainless-steel pots. Despite the weather, the odd tourist still arrived, a holiday booked in the desperation of winter darkness. Leon and Chloe were two such people, booked into a chalet on Mumbakal Mountain Resort on Negros island. The place was dead. The large outdoor swimming pool had leaves floating on it. The heavy droplets of rain made craters on the surface. One lone sunlounger was abandoned by the pool. ‘You have it to yourself,’ the receptionist smiled as he handed over the keys.

Since arriving, Chloe searched for some sense of familiarity, but nothing came. Two generations removed from her Filipina roots and with no family to welcome her, she was just a tourist. All she had left were her grandmother’s anecdotes and her black hair and dark complexion. She looked at Leon who was unpacking his suitcase wearing shorts and flip-flops. He’s so pasty, she thought. His legs looked skinny and stick-like in his surf shorts.

They had met ten years earlier when his hair was thick and she was a little thinner and all she’d wanted was a good time. Now it was a baby. But the baby hadn’t come. She glanced at herself in the mirror. *I look young. But my looks lie. My body says I am too old to have a baby.* It was ‘too late,’ ‘highly unlikely,’ ‘a missed opportunity,’ the doctor said. As though she’d passed up a job offer or caught the wrong train. She thought maybe she’d settled for the wrong man. Maybe if she’d really wanted a baby

she wouldn't have waited so long. But this was the darkness of 'what if.' It's no good. *I am here now*, she thought. *We are here. There is a reason to go on.*

She went outside onto the veranda, pulling a beer from the ice bucket and opening a fresh pack of cigarettes. She sat and watched the rain. The evening was arriving. In the distance flying foxes were settling; Chloe remarked how large and terrifying they looked hanging from the branches—their wings wrapped like black cloaks around their rust red bodies. A few stray dogs passed; they paused to sniff but they knew she had nothing edible to share. Soon they disappeared back into the wet green undergrowth. She tried to remember some of the folklore her grandmother had told her—'*tabi-tabi*,' *let the spirits know you're there, that you mean no harm; don't point at a living thing, if you do, bite your finger or you will be cursed.* She wished she'd paid more attention. She barely remembered anything. Her mother was never interested in her Filipina heritage enough to pass anything down and she had shared no Ilonggo. Her grandmother had only taught her about things to be scared of. Leon popped his head out. Grinning he said, 'Right, unpacked. Food now?'

Picking their way in the rain through the path to the dining area they found the resort restaurant, which was empty. Their only company was a TV on the far side—a game show played. They sat patiently waiting for someone to notice them. Chloe stared into space, feeling distant. Leon leaned across the table, took her hand, broke her daydream. She smiled and took her hand back. The silence hung between them like a thick fog. Thankfully a young woman finally came out. 'The menu is off—out of season,' she said. 'But you are welcome to have some of what my family is eating.' Hungry, they had no choice but to accept.

After she'd disappeared back into the kitchen, Leon leaned forward. 'She's pregnant, did you see?'

'No.' Chloe had not noticed.

'She can't be more than about eighteen. How old do you think she is?'

'I don't know. People have kids young here. It's normal. Why? Are you bothered?' Chloe was irritated by his question.

'No, I'm just saying. I'm just making an observation.'

In his desperation to find something, anything to say, he had said just about the worst thing possible. Chloe snapped, 'And why do you always have to point out pregnant women to me? Are you trying to make me feel bad?'

Her tone was so sharp, he winced. He sucked in a breath, swallowed some words before he could make matters worse, 'I don't. I'm sorry. She's coming over.' The

young woman set down three dishes of steaming food. ‘Ah, it looks so delicious!’ Leon said. ‘What is it?’

‘Barbecue pork and rice and that,’ the woman pointed to a steaming bowl of something that looked like stew, ‘is *sinigang*. Traditional. Enjoy!’ and she turned and walked back to the kitchen.

Chloe eyed the pregnant woman’s neat bump. How easy it is for some, she thought. I bet she never even tried. It just happened, like it’s supposed to. If I had been careless, it could have happened to me. Now I just think about the time I wasted preventing something that was never going to happen anyway. All for nothing, she thought. The future is rarely what we think is waiting for us.

Leon was staring into the bowl, about to take a spoonful of *sinigang*. She was so angry, yet she pitied him at the same time. She felt sorry for him, stuck here with her so jagged and unsettled, struggling to make a fresh start. She felt so empty, she hardly knew herself. Sometimes she wasn’t sure if she still really loved him. Her anger bubbled up again and she hissed across the table, ‘So can you stop pointing these things out to me please. I have eyes. I can see. And sometimes I don’t want to see so if I haven’t seen, I don’t want you making me see.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry. No more talk of babies. No more. We have to let go of this. Move on. Be thankful we are two. We are still two...’ His voice was distant. She wasn’t really listening. She didn’t reply, just sat in silence pushing rice around her plate. The TV chattered away in the background.

‘Does it feel familiar?’ Leon suddenly asked. Chloe hadn’t heard him. ‘Chloe?’

‘What?’ she snapped.

He pushed on, ‘This place.’

‘I’ve never been here before. What are you talking about?’

‘I mean, do you remember anything from your grandmother’s tales of this place?’

‘Oh, bits.’ She thought for a minute. ‘Something hurt her deeply. She never liked to talk about it. Just the superstitions. They hung about her like shrouds. Those are the things that have stayed with me. Ghosts.’

‘Ghosts?’

Chloe paused for a minute. ‘She had a baby when she was very young. The baby—a girl—disappeared. She always believed something awful took her because of the nature in which she conceived. It was unnatural, it wasn’t a man exactly—’ She broke off.

‘It wasn’t a man?’ Leon pulled a face.

‘I know, they said it couldn’t have been because the baby, well, the baby wasn’t quite, I don’t know, not quite—’ she hesitated before she settled on the word, ‘*Right*.’

‘I see.’ Leon looked at her with disbelief.

‘Yeah, I promised my grandmother I believed, but now I say this out loud it sounds ridiculous.’

They laughed. The tension between them broke. They finished their meal in lightness. As they were leaving the restaurant the young woman said, ‘You are welcome for food every day. There is not much else out of season here.’

‘When is your baby due?’ Chloe asked. She couldn’t help herself.

The woman pressed her finger to her lips. Then came close to Chloe’s ear.

‘I am five months. It is customary not to say aloud in case *She* is listening. Aswang will want my baby for herself.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, how careless of me,’ Chloe replied, then added, ‘thank you for the meal.’

Leon and Chloe walked away down the low lit path back to their chalet.

When they got back they opened a bottle of San Miguel and sat out on the veranda. There were little lights dotted around the chalet and everything glistened in the rain and darkness.

‘What was she talking about?’ Leon asked, confused.

‘An Aswang, that’s what she was talking about. That’s what she’s afraid of—a wretched thin woman by day, hunter of unborn babies by night. She sucks them from the mother with a long tongue. Some say the Aswang can hear the sounds of death at a great distance and can change a human corpse into a pig carcass.’

Leon laughed. ‘That’s hideous.’

‘There is a monster for everything. You just have to believe.’

‘Back home I just fear magpies in odd numbers,’ Leon remarked.

‘And so you should. Everything has its own spirit—you must always be careful where you tread.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Maybe. Sometimes it is easier to believe the unbelievable.’

That night Chloe lay in bed enjoying the pattering of the rain above. She watched it slide down the high window above their bed. Leon, whose pale skin and British constitution could not really cope with the heat, was fast asleep. She closed her eyes,

listening closely to his breathing and the drip-drip of the rain above. A meditation of all that was beautiful and good. A serene calmness overcame her—something that had been absent this past year. She had largely felt a swelling sadness she feared would take her under. The isolation of it. Like screaming underwater, nobody could hear her. Nobody really knew how close she had come to never breaking the surface. How it had twisted up inside her, made her hateful, made her wish ill on the unborn of others. *Nothing can be done about it now*, she thought. *I must send this out into the world, it is no good to me now. Let it go, let it go, let it go*, was her mantra. *And listen, listen to the forest, the mountain spirit, the warm rain—*

Drip drip drip turned to *tap tap tap*, like a fingernail against the glass. She opened her eyes and fixed on a shape at the window above. She saw the pale thin face of a woman peering down at her. The woman's fingers, dark snakes, flat against the glass were so terribly, unnaturally long. They slid through the opening of the window, moving about as though they were tasting the air. Chloe lay still, watching. She ran her hand across her belly, 'I have nothing for you,' she whispered. "There is nothing in here." The long fingers retreated back through the window. The woman disappeared.

The next afternoon there was a brief pause in the rain. Leon and Chloe lunched at the same place, the only place. The same young woman served them. Chloe stared at the round of the woman's belly—nothing had got her yet. She watched the way the woman absentmindedly paused to rub it, as if to smooth it out.

'What do you do when you are home?' the woman asked as she was clearing their plates.

'We are doctors—researchers in science,' Leon said cheerfully.

'That is very good—you are married?'

'Yes,' they said in unison.

'Where are your children?' she asked.

'Um—' Leon looked at Chloe, afraid to speak.

'We don't have any,' Chloe interjected.

'Oh, one day.' The young woman smiled. 'I will pray for you. Sometimes they arrive late.'

Chloe looked at the woman's bump. 'Thank you.'

It felt rude to take away the hope and good wishes of a stranger.

The day suddenly felt heavy, oppressive. Leon looked exhausted; the heat was too much. The light had dimmed. The new beginning they sought was somehow lost again, disappeared into the depths of the forest. Chloe heard the voices of the spirits in the trees but they offered no comfort.

They sat in silence staring up at the flying foxes shuffling from one end of a tree branch to the other, constantly changing places. Swaddled in black shrouds, like changelings, their strange dog-like faces tucked in, turning to black angels when they flew. So many hanging from the trees like rotten fruit. She expected them to drop at any moment. Unlike the woods and forests back home, the forest here never hushed; they could hear the voices of things they'd never seen before.

'It's magic isn't it?' Chloe said. 'This was what my grandmother told me about. The spirits walk here too. Everything has a soul—even the voiceless can be heard.' She thought of the woman at the window. She wouldn't tell Leon; this was her secret, something she could never tell anyone. It was the harbinger she needed. Something will happen, she thought cheerfully.

That night Chloe lay awake staring at the window above, waiting to see the fingers slide through the open window again. She waited but something else crept in instead, a sound she had heard many times before: a cry that she had never had to answer, though she so desperately wanted to. A mewling somewhere out there in the dark. She rose silently from the bed, grabbing the small emergency torch from her bedside table, opened the front door and slipped out onto the veranda. She listened: a rustling in the foliage, eyes caught in the light, reflected. A cat sidled out of the darkness. The forest was hushed as if everything was waiting to hear the cry burst out. When it did, it squealed—an infant's glee? Hidden away in the forest where no one could find it. She imagined a mother and father hunting frantically. Chloe shone the torch into the darkness—another squeal—but this time it was followed by choked crying. Yes, a baby's cry. Chloe stepped out in the direction of the noise. There were all manner of things out here—she must get to it before anything else did.

She walked until she could no longer see the lights of the resort. The cry became steady. It sounded clearer. She was getting close. The dim light of a window flickered between the trees like a candle flame in a dark room. A small makeshift house of corrugated iron. She could smell burning charcoal and something else—incense and pork fat. She called out, 'Hello? Excuse me—' The crying stopped. She walked to the window, peered in. No sign of anybody. She walked round to the door and stepped

across the threshold. She could smell the perfume of herbs drying and the saltiness of pork. There were cuts of meat on the table from what looked like a suckling pig—bits of it. The head was placed at the centre. The ears had been cut, the snout lopped, it was pink, wrinkled, round and bloody. Chloe thought it resembled something of a newborn baby: mouth open in a fixed cry, eyes squished and tiny. Stranger still were its trotters, which resembled balled up little fists at either side of the mouth. And its hair, long, grey and spindly—like the crown of an aged old woman. The rain pattered gently on the iron roof of the shack. The voices of the forest whispered: *Aswang...Asswaanng...Assswaaannngg...* the name uttered in the slow sway of leaves in the damp tropical breeze.

Chloe was not afraid. At the corner of the room was a reed screen, and beside it was a metal day bed covered in cushions with a large mirror propped against the wall. It looked inviting, soft and comfortable. All Chloe wanted to do was lie down on it. She caught sight of herself in the mirror, the front of her nightdress was soaked in blood from her breasts down to her pelvis. She was not alarmed, though; something felt right, something familiar as though she had been here before. The blood-soaked fabric of her nightdress was heavy, warm against her skin. *There is nothing here I don't know*, she told herself. She had forgotten the crying baby. It no longer seemed important. What was important was that she had made it there. She had followed the command. She had made it *back*. She lay down on the day-bed and closed her eyes, waiting.

*

A voice, 'Chloe, Chloe? Wake up.' Chloe opened her eyes to see Leon's white knees, blue shorts and basketball shirt. 'Come on—the sun's out, we can go to the pool!' He'd slung a towel over his shoulder and was grinning like a kid. 'We might be lucky today. We might just catch some rays.'

'Let me take a shower,' she murmured. 'I'll see you there.'

She rose naked from the bed. Grabbed her pristine white nightdress from the chair and slipped it on, yawning. Standing in the shower she scrubbed the dirt from her fingernails, scrubbed her body clean in the cool water. The shower water turned a rust red. She turned it off and stepped out. As she was drying she noticed spots of blood on the tiles below her, blood on the white towel, blood trickling between her legs, blood down her thighs. She had not had a period for several months—they had become less and less frequent in the last year and she was beginning to think they had stopped

completely; there was blood under her fingernails too, little droplets started to bubble, had she really scrubbed so hard? She felt nothing, no pain anywhere on her body. Her periods had always been excruciating. So much, that she would have to lie down in a darkened room scrunched into a ball while the thick dark globules oozed out of her. This was a different kind of blood: unclotted, vivid red, fluid, new. *Such a beautiful inky red*, she thought.

Leon lay by the pool enjoying the sunshine. Dappled light filtered through the forest leaves. Sheltering from the sun this time, not the rain. It was quiet, peaceful, the birds hushed, the surface of the water still, cool, blue. It was time to take a dip. He sat down by the edge of the pool dangling his legs. Taking a deep breath he slid into the cold water, submerged, let the surface close over him. He dived deeper and opening his eyes he glanced to the surface, he saw the wavering outline of Chloe. Still in her nightdress—strange that she hadn't changed. He bubbled to the surface to greet her but she had slipped out of sight. From the pool he could only see the bright green leaves waving in the breeze. He called her name out, 'Chloe!' And behind him a large splash—a plunge into the water. It was Chloe in her white dress swimming towards him. She dived, tumbled under the water smiling, bubbles coming from her mouth. He surfaced, gasped a big breath before swimming down to join her.

But what was there was not Chloe, a woman, yes, wearing Chloe's nightdress. Her body was thin, she resembled a gnarled entanglement of branches and her fingers were long black and snake-like. She opened a hollow gaping mouth, as though a corpse whose flesh has long gone, allowing the jaw to drop away in a scream. Leon tumbled away from it, scrambled to the surface and dragged himself up and clear of the water. Heaving in shock, he looked down. All was calm, just blue, just a light turquoise—nothing untoward. Nothing could be seen but clear water.

Chloe stepped towards him emerging through the trees. She was wearing her red bikini, a multi-coloured sarong wrapped around her waist. She was so excited, bursting to tell him her news, that she did not notice the startled look on his face.

'Leon, guess what?'

'What?'

'My period's come!'

*

Eight months had passed since they returned. They had come back from that place with far more than a feeling of rejuvenation and newfound togetherness. Chloe had conceived. It was a wonder to everyone that could only be attributed to the warmth, the fruit, the herbs, the atmosphere of the place. The reconnection with Chloe's ancestral home and *the spirits*, her grandmother would have said. *The spirits gave you this. It could not have come from prayer only. God must see your sacrifice, your pain.* This was something that could not be asked for. The years passing had proved that.

But Chloe still thought of the young woman in the restaurant, whose promise to pray for them meant so much more. Chloe now had what that woman had. She was right, 'Sometimes they arrive late.' Now in her eighth month of pregnancy, the thought of what she found in the forest came creeping back. She was closer to it now, she knew the truth.

It came in the middle of a sweltering August. She was woken by the sound of a baby crying. It was early dawn, beginning to get light. The birds twittered awake. Without waking Leon she crept downstairs and out into the garden. The crying got louder and she felt a kick in her belly as she walked down to the woods at the end of the garden. Once under the trees the crying stopped.

Then a tearing sound, a tug in her abdomen and the sensation that something was slowly climbing down her legs. She knelt on all fours onto the mossy ground beneath. She had no desire to scream. There was nothing to scream for. Quietly, out it came—the baby she had longed for—walking on all fours as if the earth had always been beneath it. *I am lucky*, she thought, as she brought the small, pig-eyed, toothless old woman up to suckle at her breast. The suckling-hag nuzzled into her, and as Chloe tenderly stroked the few long strands of hair on the translucent scalp, she said, 'My little latecomer, I will cherish you.'



EPHEMERA

Holly Kybett Smith

Illustration by Zuzanna Kwiecien

There's a church on the Crest of St. Francis, though few have lived to see it. That is, few have lived to see it with their naked eyes. We've all seen the postcards, glossy and inviting, peeling at the corners now. We've all thumbed the guidebooks sitting in a stack in the school refectory, where they're occasionally put to use propping up the wobbly leg of a dining table—or, on the days when the nurses visit, socking each other on our newly-vaccinated arms.

The tidal island sits only a mile out from the mainland, visible from the beach on a clear day, but therein lies the problem: we don't get clear days anymore. Not since the fertiliser production plant arrived in town, bringing with it a steady stream of jobs and a steadier stream of photochemical smog. There used to be regulations on how much a plant was allowed to pollute the local air. There is nothing like that now. I don't remember a day in my life when I could step outside without the smog rushing to embrace me. Warm and lung-flooding, an unhealthy yellowish grey. It crowds for my attention. *We missed you. We missed you.*

Today, I work my rake along the beach, taking my time to pick through each layer of shingle. Beside me, a jute sack waits to be filled. I collect coffee stirrers, cigarette butts, soda cans and shreds of mutilated styrofoam. Human ephemera, not so ephemeral after all.

The Church sits out there somewhere: another thing we made and then abandoned to the sea. No-one is allowed to take a boat out in the mist, so we aren't sure how much of it is left intact. It must have at least partially fallen into ruin. I tell myself it doesn't matter. Someone will have excavated it already, taken and sold everything valuable

inside. It may not be legal but we get plenty of unlicensed wreck divers around here. Why not a church looter, too?

That's as much as I allow myself to think on it.

The Church has always unsettled me, and I have work to do.

As I scour the beach, I dread that I might happen across a shoe. I found one once, when I was twelve and fairly new to this job. It was the kind of shoe you might see on display in the window of a fancy sportswear shop, not the kind you would expect to find discarded in a tangle of seaweed and blue fishing wire. But I had been more curious than wary. The shoe had been lying on its side. It wasn't until I picked it up that I saw the white bone jutting out of it.

Needless to say, I completely lost my shit.

Later, as I shuddered my way through the milkshake Luis bought for me in pity, I learned that when a body decays underwater, it may float upside down due to air trapped in the shoes. The feet can remain while the rest of the body detaches and sinks into the abyss. It was a grisly revelation. Luis—eight years my senior, and therefore, my boss—had always been cavalier about such things. Hence the milkshake, bought in a gesture of kindness but not one of empathy: God knows how he expected me to keep anything down that morning.

The milkshake had lots of little red bits in it. Desiccated strawberry, I think, but all I could see was flesh. Dead, withered flesh clinging to that shard of bone, bleached white by seawater but still blushing pink at the centre. Not human anymore—just nondescript meat. A thing. A thing I found on the beach.

"In Japan, they have this idea about ghosts—called *yūrei* there, you understand," Luis said to me while I slurped on the shake. He had travelled to Himeji for a semester at uni and never failed to sneak it into conversation. "Ghosts float, right? So in Japan, they came to the conclusion that ghosts don't have feet. Why would they? They don't need to walk. Instead they just...trail off."

We never did find out whose shoe it was—whose *foot* it was—though they sent it off for testing. Staring out to sea, I wondered where the rest of the body had gone. I pictured it drifting slowly downward through an empty world of blue, its sightless eyes still open, white flesh sloughing off its skeletonised fingers. Silver bubbles stuck to its cheeks and its eyelashes; tiny fish swarmed in through an ear and out of its yawning mouth where the bottom jaw had fallen free.

All the while, it floated without care, trailing off like a *yūrei* at the ankles.

“Please don’t tell me any more weird shit,” I said.

Luis snickered. “Language, kid.”

He called me “kid” because he knew I didn’t like it.

It’s been three years since he disappeared. They never found his body. The popular theory is that he went out for a swim one day and got caught in a riptide, though some have speculated that he threw himself off a cliff. I reckon I’d put up with being called “kid” all day if it meant he came home safe to his mother and sister. As I scan the beach today—sixteen and still picking litter—it’s his red trainers I dread finding the most.

Ghosts float, right?

I hope not, Luis. I hope not.

The mist is blanket-thick this morning, thick enough to render me the compass point of an island barely a metre in radius. My jute sack hovers at the edge of my vision, a misshapen lump with no distinguishable features. Beyond that, the beach could be full of strangers—watching me, surrounding me—and I wouldn’t even know it.

There is that feeling, though, isn’t there? The one you get when something’s watching you. That prickling, niggling feeling that urges you to turn around and check—just in case. If I relied on that as a barometer for danger, though, my shifts down at the beach would all be hurricanes.

See, the worst part of this job has never been the risk of finding another severed foot. It’s the mist, curling around me the way a cat curls around a leg, rubbing up against my clothes and claiming me as its own. Usually I can ignore it, but not when I’m alone. Not when I’m down on the beach.

I pull my scarf up over my mouth.

The mist here is different from the mist up on the clifftops. It breathes.

Before the shoe incident, Luis used to tease me about ghosts. Would run up at me through the mist with waggling hands and shout, “*Whoooo!*”

I would flinch. I still do, sometimes, if I think I hear the crunching sound of footfalls in the distance. But I could never quit.

It’s not that I enjoy this job a particular amount, though I do find nice debris on occasion. I have a collection of sea glass that I keep in a jar on my bedroom windowsill where the light can catch it and project colours onto the opposite wall: swirling blues and greens and oranges like jewels. Beside it sits the dried-out body of a seahorse—

small enough to fit inside my palm—and a selection of my favourite shells: dog whelks, mussels, various bivalvia. When I'm stressed, I pick them up and run my fingers over them, feeling the grooves along their sides. Once I found an antique coin, which—after I'd cleaned it up—sold for almost thirty pounds.

If I were a more fanciful person, I might think these items were the sea's way of apologising for the severed foot. They all washed up within a year of my finding it. Except that the sea took Luis, just days after I found the coin, and I never got an apology for that.

The truth is, I do this job because it feels *right*. Like I'm supposed to be here, trudging the shores from sunrise 'til gone noon. (If it can be called sunrise, when the sun is little more than a torch beam shining through a tissue paper shroud.) My eyes have grown nimble, my hands dextrous from years of knowing what to look for. I've learned not to mind the ache at the base of my neck, the coastal chill through my thick homemade jumper. Even when I stray too close to the sea—when it rushes at me, soaking my socks and shoes—I can scarcely bring myself to care. I simply shed my shoes for the spare pair I keep in my backpack, and chide the mist for letting me wander so far.

The mist is eager to toy with me this morning. I don't know how I can tell, but—like my eye for spotting half-buried debris—it's something I've grown a knack for recognising. There's a motion to it: a tiptoeing, anxious sort of motion, like a child playing a game of *What's the Time, Mister Wolf?*

Perhaps I personify it that way to make it feel less scary. Because I do feel it, and it's not the bluster of a breeze. The air is still down here, between the cliffs: still and silent. The motion of the mist is entirely its own, but what dictates it has always been a mystery.

Of all the possibilities, a child's game feels the least threatening.

I kneel down to extricate a crab from a tangle of plastic netting—the type supermarkets used to wrap lemons and limes in, before importing lemons and limes got difficult—and the shingle bites into my knees, comfortably tangible. I've had to patch over my jeans twice this year; I'd rather not do it again for a while, but the thought of what colour thread I might use is enough to alleviate some of my unease. The mist drapes itself over me as if in pity. For a moment, I allow it to lean against my back.

When I lift my head, I am struck abruptly by the sense that I've moved.

I'm not sure what gives me the idea. The shingle slope runs the length of the bay, and there are no markers along it. I crouch in the exact same position as before, feeling the same shifting pebbles through the worn soles of my shoes, and I just *know*.

I am not where I was. I am very far from where I was.

The crab scuttles out of its net and settles on the back of my hand as I stare out through the nothingness. The land is not the sea, I remind myself. No current has caught me unawares, yanked me off to one side of the bay without my noticing. When I give in and glance over my shoulder, though, my stomach drops. My jute sack and rake have disappeared. I have left them behind.

Hesitantly, I stand, as if just lifting myself away from the ground might sever my contact with it. The crab falls to the shingle with a thud. Its brown body rolls twice before I lose it to the mist. A small part of me wishes I'd kept hold of it, just for the sake of not being alone—but somehow I know if I reach for it, I won't find it again.

When I look up, I'm almost not surprised by what I see.

There, at the far end of a tunnel through the mist, is the Crest of St Francis. At its peak sits an old stone church, its silhouette a charcoal smudge against the mist. If I squint, I can ascertain the shape of the bell in its tower, making mournful music as it moves. The sight is blurred, but the sound of that bell rings clear across the water.

Before I even think about it, I step closer.

A boat is waiting for me at the shoreline.

The bell tolls as I row across the dull grey water.

There is no other sound.

Not the slap of waves against the wooden hull; not the plunging, gushing cycle of the oars; not the restless sighing of the ocean at large. I can hear my breath, but it's faint—muffled—like I'm listening to it through a pane of glass. To break the silence, I hum my favourite songs to myself, stumbling with every interruption from the bell.

When I've run out of favourites, I hum the songs I hate. Catchy ones I've heard too many times on the radio. Songs from musicals I've never watched. Commercial jingles. Nursery rhymes. Anything. Everything I have.

The Crest sits only a mile out from the bay, yet it feels like I spend an eternity rowing out to it. My lips go numb from humming for so long. The sun sits still in the sky, a faint translucent dot in the mist. I don't know how to tell the time by its position,

but I can tell it hasn't moved since I began my journey. As I row, the mist closes over the water I've crossed, until all I can see is the clear path from my boat to the island.

I've only lowered my head briefly—with the idea to pause and check under the bench for food—when I feel the prow bump against something solid. When I look up, I have arrived. A moment ago, The Crest of St Francis had been nothing but a foggy outline on the horizon; now, it towers over me, its dark rocks as real as my bones.

The mist has swallowed everything behind me now, but the way ahead is clear, so I clamber out of the boat and onto the rocks. I consider tying the boat off somewhere, but there isn't a jetty, and I haven't any rope. I could drag it up above the tide line, but it looks heavier than I am strong, and the rocks are sharp enough that they could puncture the hull.

I tell myself that that's the only reason I leave it behind.

The Crest of St Francis is conical in shape, with convex whorls like those of a seashell. A path cuts through the rock, following the spiral to its peak, where the Church is waiting.

It takes me far less time to climb the Crest than it did to row out to it.

When I reach the top, I wager I should be able to see the whole island—including my little boat, bobbing faithfully on the waves at its shore—but all I see is the Church looming out through the nothing. Lichen crusts its walls, which strikes me as odd. Lichen acts as an environmental indicator; it only grows where the air quality is good. I don't know why this bothers me—there are more important matters at hand—but it does.

On the Church doors, one word has been carved into the wood, roughly and recently enough that the grooves are still pale and splintered. I remember the little pocket knife Luis used to carry for freeing sea creatures from nets and wonder idly whether it was him.

ASPHODEL

If it's in English, I don't know what it means.

Perhaps it's a warning.

Perhaps it's a welcome.

The mist is pushing at my back now; pushing with splayed hands, with force. The children have almost caught Mister Wolf. It is all a game, isn't it? The mist is a child

playing, or it's a predator. The debris I collected on my windowsill was an apology, or it was a lure.

I enter the Church, breaking the carving in half as I do. When the doors swing shut, the word will be whole again behind me, like I was never there.



THIS IS MY BODY, GIVEN FOR YOU

Heather Parry

Illustration by Joseph Gough

Content warning: *Graphic bodily imagery and themes of sexual assault*

Fermentation

No visitors, no letters, no laughing nor playing. They were children no longer; they were servants of God. They lived in cement cells with thin mattresses on the beds and cold water in the pipes. They had bible teachings all morning and work in the afternoon. They were looked after by twelve priests, all sour-faced and all with little patience for the young.

The girls had to learn to look after themselves. Self-sufficiency was key. They milled flour from locally-harvested wheat, churned cheese from local cows, made juice from the apples in their own orchard. They baked the thin wafers of the Body of Christ that they took in their mouths every morning at Mass as they knelt gingerly, their knees sore from crawling across stone, punishments given to make the girls learn the errors of their ways. The priests did not agree with spending money—not when the devil was waiting to make work for idle hands.

Lily, the new girl, was placed in the library, where her job was to neaten and tidy, to stack and arrange, to sit in a room alone and not cause any trouble. On the shelves, there were only books that taught the girls what they needed to know: how to grow

food, how to feed others, how good women should behave. Lily made it her mission to devour every issue of the *Farmer's Almanac*.

Lily had grown up with a baker mother and a farmer father. Her brother had learned to brew cider to support the family, and as a child she'd watched as each one perfected their craft. She spent hours with the almanacs filling the gaps in her knowledge, and soon she started visiting the kitchen after her library hours were over, teaching the other girls how to bake and brew and churn with skill, their knuckles rapped to bruises. They told each other how they'd arrived there, what sin they had committed to be sent away from home. They laughed and threw flour and were children once more, a brief respite from the rest of their existence.

As the girls in the kitchen improved under Lily's tutelage, the priests commented that the bread was lighter and airier, that the cheese was smoother and more tart. Lily suggested that Mass would be more enjoyable if the Host was her own sourdough, sliced thinly so as to mimic the wafers. After tasting her toast, the priests agreed. Lily, gambling on better treatment for herself and for the others if she pandered to the men, told the priests that said she could make something else too, something that would ease the stress of their dutiful lives. They brought her an apple press and yeast and bottles, and they moved her responsibilities from the library to the kitchen.

Lily showed the girls how to make cider in barrels, forty litres at a time. She took the seeds from the apple pulp, washed them and saved them, every single one. She promised herself and the others that when the time came, when they were released, they would use them to plant their very own orchard, so they could make money and look after themselves. The cider was sweet and tangy and very alcoholic. The priests took to drinking in the evenings, and it turned their cruelty in a new direction. They stumbled in the darkness, all hands and shushing lips.

It started with just one of the priests, and it started with Lily. He took her in the nights, when the others could hear.

Life went on as it had. Lily still made the bread and churned the cheese and brewed the cider.

In the kitchen the next day, her mind turning, she took handfuls of apples from the cider pile and chewed them until she could chew them no more. She spat the matter into a metal jug and took another mouthful. She chewed and spat until her jaw ached.

She juiced the pulp, covered it with a tea towel, set it aside from the rest of the cider, and went to bed to await her visitors.

By morning the process had already started. She added a little yeast and she went back day after day, but she waited. Her saliva sped up the process; after two weeks the special cider was ready. She could smell the alcoholic sweetness, could see the fermentation bubbles. She served it to the priests that night. They gulped it rather than sipped. It made them drunker than usual, and they came at her, this time in numbers.

But as they took her in the darkness, she thought: I am inside you.

Leaven

Lily grew sick, and then sore, and then larger by the day. She recognised the signs and said nothing. Her formless smocks covered her growing midriff, but as their hands slipped around her waist and onto her stomach at night, each one of them felt it. Each one broke a cold sweat and stopped, mumbling about the sanctity of human life and the indignity of fornication while pregnant. Each one, after a moment, continued.

She was not permitted to stop working. She kneaded the bread and churned the butter. She made the cider. The other girls helped as much as they could, but were shooed away by the priests and were beaten for trying. Lily passed eight months and could barely carry herself around the building, but if they saw her idle, they beat her.

While stirring the milk, Lily noticed wet patches on her chest. Her nipples, preparing for the child, were premature in their expulsion. Alone in the kitchen, she lifted her shirt and gently pressed her breasts; thin streams of watery-white liquid ran from both nipples, more freely than she'd imagined. She squeezed herself until no more would run, and she smiled as it dripped into the curdling milk in the pail. She stirred, watching it disappear into the mixture, and when she served the soft cheese up to the twelve priests, she had to turn away to keep from grinning. She was inside them.

The Rise

She squeezed and screamed and sweated out the baby in a bathroom on her own. None of the others were allowed inside, and the priests locked the door until the commotion was over. They gave her blankets and towels for it but refused further mention. The baby was a boy and she called it Grace.

It was three days until the priests started coming again. Her wet breasts, her ripe hips, the blood that would trickle from her after the act—they loved it all. Only when she grew sore and red, with white discharge leaking out and onto her underwear, did they change their methods. They spat in disgust and took her in her other orifices, where there was more pain but less trouble for them.

She was expected to work from a week after the birth, once she could settle the child and keep it quiet. The other girls crept into the kitchen to hold Grace when they could, and when none could come, Lily sat him on the counter, on the wheat sacks, on the cold floor, on her feet. She sifted and she churned and she brewed. Still her body grew more painful. She stopped drinking water because going to the toilet hurt so much her teeth tore into her cheeks. The mess in her underwear grew thicker and more yellow. Still the priests did not permit her to stop.

The solution came to her at night on a Friday, after their visits, when she lay awake both numb and alive with rage, the baby fastened to her breast, her hand stuck into her underwear to try and relieve the pain. She heard the screech of violation from the other room, the first time it had been anyone but her. She removed her fingers from inside herself and brought them up to shift the baby; she caught the sweet-sour, bready scent from beneath her nails, from the whiteish mess, and a voice spoke. She thought of the kitchen, of the oven. She lulled herself to sleep with the comforting thought of it, and the next morning she woke up feeling rested and alive.

She caught the other girls at their jobs, noting the dark circles around some of their eyes, the heaviness of their steps, and asked them to go and fetch some apples from the orchard. She took the baby to the kitchen and took the bread starter from its place on the shelf. She took a scoop of it and transferred it to a new bowl. With a chair against the door she slipped down her underwear and slid three fingers inside herself, the pain almost dropping her to the floor. When she drew them out, they were yellow-white. She took a wooden spoon and scraped the discharge into the starter, to which she added a little more flour and a little more water. She pulled up her underwear and left the mixture aside to grow. This part would bring her a bitter pleasure, but would not do what she needed it to do.

The girls brought her apples, as many as she'd asked for. She thanked them, kissing their cheeks, before sending them out of the kitchen, away from any blame. She peeled the apples, dicing them into small cubes, and set them on the stove in a thick pan with as much sugar as there was fruit. Setting the chair against the kitchen door once more, she retrieved her apple seeds from their hiding place, at the back of a

dark cupboard at the far end of the room. By that time, there were three glass jars full of them—hundreds, perhaps thousands of the things. The girls had been saving them too. She had no time to count them, or to work out whether they'd be enough.

She put a jarful of the seeds into a hessian bag and smashed them to pieces with a rolling pin. Her arm strained with the weight but she kept going, kept going, until the seeds were no more, and in their place was a pile of rough, crushed, toxic apple-seed powder. Into the pan they went, stirred to combine, thickening the jam so much that she could barely move the spoon. She turned the heat off and poured into jars; it was golden orange with thousands of flecks of red, almost more seed than apple.

The bread starter was bubbling and full of air. She made a dough, folded it in, and left it overnight to rise.

By Sunday morning, it was brimming over the edges of the loaf pan, more active than she'd ever seen it before. She pushed it into the oven and spent the next twenty-five minutes feeding her baby, their baby, the one they'd all created.

The bread baked like a dream.

She cooled it and halved it and sliced it into thin, tongue-sized segments, crispy and tasty and perfect for a ceremony. She took twelve slices and placed them at the front of the communion tray, saving the rest for later. She delivered it to the priest in the usual manner, on the usual platter, and though it was thicker and differently shaped to their usual offerings, the smell of the freshly baked body was too much to refuse. As each of the twelve clergymen took their turns to kneel, they opened their mouths wide and the priest placed the bread from the front of the tray on their tongues. They each held it there, ecstatically savouring, letting the Lord himself melt into their mouths and seep into their systems, and she felt an excitement that tingled through her, that almost made her laugh. She served the rest of the bread to them later, loaded with the apple jam, topped with the soft cheese, with a glass of the fermented drink. They drank and she fed them more and more, until the jam jars were almost empty. They were full and delirious when they went to bed. A special evening treat.

Lily lay in bed, clutching Grace, waiting for the hour when the first of them would usually arrive. None came. She stared up at the ceiling until daybreak, then walked slowly, calmly to the priests' quarters. She pushed open the door of the first bedroom. He was there, on his knees, pools of his own watery shit around him, blood streaming from his mouth and crotch, his hands clutching at his stomach and throat. Yellow-white discharge at the corners of his mouth. As the pain took him again he held his hand aloft, began shouting out the name of God, deliriously quoting verse, reality far

from his finger. She checked all twelve rooms and they were all the same: white spots in the mouth, cracked lips, dry, split tongue, vicious incontinence, hemorrhaging from all orifices, screaming for their lives.

The noise brought down the rest of the girls. They stood, hands at their mouths, trembling, hardly daring to see what they were seeing, hardly believing. Lily pointed at the flecks of seed in the streams of vomit; she showed the girls the white mess at the men's mouths. Gripping her swaddled child, Lily pulled up her dress and pushed her fingers inside herself again, to show them.



RED SKY AT MORNING

Alanna Smith

Illustrated by Katiana Robles

They left Boston around seven and reached the Outer Banks just as the sun merged with the western horizon.

“Red sky at night,” Cassie said, forehead pressed against the cool window glass. The AC system was still broken, and even mild April temperatures were unbearable after over twelve hours of highway driving.

“Sailor’s delight,” Colin responded. His left hand broke from its nine o’clock position and depressed the driver’s and passenger’s window buttons. Cool ocean air flowed into the cab. “Kitty Hawk,” he said, inclining his head toward a sign on the roadside.

Cassie whipped out her phone and caught a blurry picture of the sign.

“Maybe we can go Tuesday,” Colin said. “Take a few days to relax first.” He started pointing out places of interest. The pirate-themed mini golf place where he’d accidentally swung his club into his sister’s forehead. The first place he’d eaten lobster. (“But you’re from New England,” Cassie said.) The sprawling store where his dad had bought him a kite shaped like one of the Blue Angels.

“When was the last time you were down here with him?” Cassie asked.

Colin was silent for a minute. “Ten years, I think. Yeah. Ten. The summer before college.”

Cassie waited for him to elaborate, but he did not. This was the week, though. She’d been waiting to ask Colin about his dad for almost a year. He shut down every time she asked—so much so that she didn’t even know if his dad was alive or dead.

Her phone buzzed. Mom & Dad. *Almost there?* She smiled and sent them the Kitty Hawk pic. *Almost there.*

It was almost pitch black, but somehow, Colin found the house. The headlights of his SUV lit up a little seabird-shaped sign with the number 114 and the name “True Breeze” painted on it with unnecessary quotation marks. Exhaustion hit Cassie as soon as the car stopped, but she shook it off. She had to impress Colin’s family. She slid out the door into the balmy salt air. “I feel like I have sea legs,” she said, but her boyfriend was on the other side of the car.

Lights snapped on in the front of the house. It was massive. Three rows of windows. Two tiers of porches. And more people than Cassie could track pouring out the front door.

“Colin! I was just about to call to see if you were close!” The pack was led by a short, curvy woman with an aggressively professional haircut who ran up and embraced Colin. “And you must be Cassandra!” The woman pulled Cassie into a comfy hug. “Or is it Cassie?”

“Cassie is fantastic, Mrs...uh...”

“Margie is just fine, hun.”

Cassie breathed an internal sigh of relief. She’d forgotten to ask Colin what to call his mom, even in all the time they’d been driving. Not Mrs. Wheeler. She knew that much.

“And this is my husband Don,” Margie continued, “and my brother Ralph. And that’s my cousin Fred and his wife Debra...”

A swarm of people surrounded Cassie. Hands took her bags from her. She tried to say thank you, but didn’t know what direction to turn. Colin met her eyes over everyone’s heads and nodded. He could see she was getting overwhelmed.

“Hey mom, is there any dinner left over? Me and Cassie are starving,” he said.

The tide started making its way toward the house. Cassie let herself be pulled along.

“Yes, we made plenty of burgers and hot dogs. You eat meat, right Cassie?” Margie didn’t wait for an answer. “What about alcohol? We can fire up the margarita machine.”

They moved into the house, and Cassie blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brightness. The first thing to greet her was a hand-painted wood and wire sign with a smiling octopus and the caption “Welcome to paradise.” The second...

“Is that an elevator?” Cassie asked. “In a house?”

“Sure is!” Margie chirped. “How about you and Colin take it up to the kitchen? Third floor. The boys will put your bags in your room.”

In the elevator was another sign: “Wish I could stay at the beach forever,” framed in pastel seashells. After a very shaky, claustrophobic minute, the door opened to a large room with pale blue walls and a high, peaked ceiling. There were cushy couches around a fireplace on the left, an open-concept kitchen on the right, and windows facing black night to the east and west.

Unsurprisingly, Margie had beaten them by taking the stairs. “Help yourselves,” she said, setting two paper plates kitty-corner to each other at the end of the dining table. “Ralph will make us some margaritas when he gets up here.”

“I’m gonna do what, Margie?” Someone—presumably Ralph—called out as he walked up the last few stairs into the living room.

“Make me and the kids some margaritas,” Margie said with a laugh.

As soon as his mom’s back was turned, Colin flipped Cassie a double thumbs-up. A little knot of tension released inside her. She loaded up her plate with food. She snuck a glance at her phone. Almost 8:30. *I’ll try to stay awake another half an hour.* She hadn’t heard back from her parents, but that didn’t surprise her—there was almost no service.

Colin passed behind her, planting a quick kiss on the top of her head as he did so, and sat down next to her. “Mind if we go to bed soon?” he asked, grabbing a bottle of spicy mustard.

“You read my mind,” Cassie said. “I’m pooped. And I didn’t even drive.”

A rattling, whirring sound erupted behind them from the kitchen. Margie came over and sat across from Cassie. “So tell me, how was your drive? Did you hit a lot of traffic?”

Colin answered around bites of burger: “Just around the George Washington, of course...”

Cassie let his voice flow around her as she did her best to chew slowly and look engaged. A margarita materialized at her elbow with a “Here ya go, sweetheart” and she let its aggressive sugariness both shock and numb her system. Margie asked her a few questions. She answered cogently, or so she hoped. Another margarita appeared to replace the first, which had disappeared too quickly. Cassie sipped this one slower.

“Did your family have a regular vacation spot when you were growing up?” Margie asked. She licked some sugar off the rim of her cup.

“Yes, my dad’s family has a house on the Jersey Shore,” Cassie replied. She always felt awkward bringing her dad up around Colin, and that anxiety only doubled with his mom there. “It’s nothing like this, though. I’ve never been to the Outer Banks before. This is...wow.”

Margie laughed that resonant laugh of hers. “I guess I barely notice it now. But I was like you when Colin’s dad brought me here for the first time.”

Colin tapped Cassie on the arm. “Ready to get some sleep?”

Margie took the cue. “You two head to bed. I’ll clean up. Don’t worry about it,” she said, shooing Cassie’s hands away from her dirty plate. “See you in the morning.”

Their room was on the second floor, almost directly below the dining table. There was a king bed with a palm tree patterned duvet and a decorative pillow that said “Life’s a beach.” Cassie poked her head in one door: a walk-in closet. And the second door: “We get our own bathroom?” “Of course!” was Colin’s reply. She could hear the grin in his voice.

Cassie walked to the other side of the room to investigate the sliding door that took up most of the wall next to the bed. It really was dark outside. There were no big cities nearby. No towns really, either. Just them and the black horizon. She could see herself and Colin reflected in the glass, almost as clear as a mirror. “Can we sleep with the door open tonight? To hear the ocean?” She turned to look at him over her shoulder, but he wasn’t there.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Colin said, his voice emanating from the closet.

When Cassie reached to unlatch and crack open the door, the doubled reflection was gone from the window. *Guess I drank those margaritas too fast*, she thought. A cool breeze carried the soft, rhythmic roar of the ocean into their room.

Colin slipped his arms around her from behind and spoke into her hair. “I’m so happy to be here with you.”

Cassie allowed herself to close her eyes. “Me too.”

Cassie woke up to the smell of bacon. And when she opened her eyes, there it was on the nightstand: a plate of bacon, extra crispy. “Am I still dreaming?” she asked.

“No, you’re on vacation,” Colin said, standing by the sliding door. “Want to sit out here with me?”

“Do I have to share?” Cassie asked, swinging her legs out from the sheets.

“No, I’ve got my own plate.”

There were two Adirondack chairs in front of their door. Colin had left her a teal and pink striped mug of coffee on one of the armrests. She settled next to him, hoping her thin cotton PJs would protect her from splinters.

Before them was the Atlantic in all its glory. “When you said ocean views, I didn’t realize you meant ocean *front*,” Cassie said. “This is like paradise.”

The water was maybe a hundred feet away, with beach access granted via a gate in the wooden fence that surrounded the house. Couples walked along the sand. A few houses down, someone tossed a frisbee to a shaggy dog.

“Did I oversleep?” Cassie asked around a piece of bacon.

“Nope. It’s only 8:30,” Colin said. “We’re on shore time now. Early to bed, early to rise. My mom asked if you wanted to go to church with her and Don, but I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Oh. I hope she isn’t super disappointed.” An anxiety leak sprung in Cassie’s brain.

“No no no. Don’s the really religious one. My mom didn’t get big on church until after my dad...um.” Colin stopped and replaced his words with a big gulp of coffee.

Cassie held a piece of bacon between her fingers, but didn’t bring it to her mouth. A fly buzzed past them in lazy circles, and above the sand, a seagull flew in much wider circles. “Colin, this week, could you maybe tell me about your dad?” she asked. Her mouth was dry, but she didn’t want coffee yet. “I haven’t wanted to bug you about it, but now, I’m just afraid I might say the wrong thing or...something. I don’t know. I don’t want to insult your mom. I want her to like me.”

Colin stared upward and outward into the clear blue sky. “Yeah, I know. It’s time. It’s just really hard for me to talk about. Can you give me another day?” He reached over and squeezed her hand.

A little knot of tension untied in Cassie’s chest. She popped the bacon into her mouth and nodded. “Of course.”

The morning slipped by as easily as the tide. After a second cup of coffee, and then a third, Cassie showered, changed, and headed upstairs with a book. Colin’s family was evenly distributed between the living room and back porch. As far as Cassie could tell, there were eight people at the house, including her and Colin. She poured a glass of iced tea and headed outside to find a chair on the porch. She checked her phone before settling in with a thrift store copy of *Pharaoh’s Gold*. Still no word from her parents, even though she’d connected to the WiFi. She snapped a picture of the ocean and sent it to them, just so they’d know she was alive. The day ambled on,

with sandwiches for lunch and the margarita machine hacking away at four o'clock on the dot. Cassie went inside after the sun passed to the other side of the house, casting the oceanside porch in chilly spring shadows.

Most of Colin's family had gone down to the ground floor pool table when Cassie found herself sitting alone with Margie, staring at a thousand puzzle pieces that were supposed to form a Venetian canal. She had just placed the top of a striped gondola pole when Margie spoke.

"Colin's dad and I did our honeymoon in Italy. A six-city tour."

"Oh," said Cassie. "I didn't know."

"I learned that the best way to do a honeymoon is to spend it all in one spot," Margie said. "That's why Don and I didn't leave our resort in St. Lucia for our entire honeymoon. Most people don't get a do-over honeymoon, I suppose." She laughed, and finished a four-piece cluster of carnival masks with her perfectly manicured nails. "Did Colin tell you about what happened with his dad?"

Cassie shook her head. "Not yet. I didn't want to push him."

"That's good of you, hun," Margie said. "Colin—Colin Senior, I mean—was a good dad. He loved Colin and Erin. But I'll let my son tell you the way he wants to tell you."

Cassie's phone buzzed. It was sitting on a pillow embroidered with a dog relaxing on a beach towel and the words "Just Lyin' Around." She picked it up, hoping it was her parents, but instead it read: *Message failed to send.*

That night, Cassie and Colin sat in their Adirondack chairs with two IPAs between them. The sky was clear of clouds and freckled with millions of stars. A lone figure in black stood on the beach in front of the house, probably looking up at the sky as well. "I can't remember the last time I felt so relaxed," Cassie said.

Colin reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers. "You deserve it." He tipped back the rest of his beer. "Ready for bed?"

"In a minute," Cassie said. She kept staring at the stars as he went back inside.

The man in black stayed on the beach as well, and for a moment, it almost seemed as though he was facing the house. But then he walked away down the beach, towards the jetty.

She knew it was just her eyes playing tricks on her in the dark, but Cassie could swear that the figure left behind no footprints.

The light that woke Cassie the next morning was scarlet. She got out of bed and went to the sliding door. Red light limned the horizon, making the choppy whitecaps look like they were tipped with flecks of blood.

Colin stirred behind her. “Red sky at morning,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” Cassie said. “Are we supposed to get bad weather today?”

“I didn’t think so, but who knows? We’re on the ocean. Anything’s possible.”

They quickly got ready for the day and got on the road. Their destination: fresh doughnuts. It was the first time Cassie had seen the rest of the Outer Banks in the daylight. They drove past enormous beach houses—even more obnoxious than “True Breeze”—and protected sand dunes and shoreline. On the water, adventurous souls were taking advantage of high wind and waves to kite-surf. The sky was clear and blue, although the horizon was darker than Cassie would have liked. And then they reached the bridge.

The smell actually reached them first, since the windows were wide open. The blunt, wrong sweetness of roadkill. They littered the margins of the bridge: piles of feathers and crooked clawed feet, the remains of dozens of seagulls.

“Oh my God,” Cassie said. “This is awful.”

Colin rolled up the windows, but the stench remained. “They get sucked down by the wind around the bridge, I think,” he said. “And cars create a vacuum when they go by.”

Cassie eyed a seagull hovering a few feet above their car, but luckily they passed without an incident.

The bridge may have been bird hell, but the doughnut shop was Cassie heaven. The scent of frying dough and cinnamon sugar pushed the last wisps of decay from her nostrils. She bought a mixed dozen as a gift for Colin’s family. And Colin bought half a dozen maple bacon doughnuts for the two of them to share.

They started the thirty-minute drive back, both sipping from cardboard cups of scalding black coffee. Cassie held both boxes of doughnuts on her lap like they were chests of pirate gold.

“Would it be okay if I told you about my dad now?” Colin asked.

Cassie carefully put her coffee in the cupholder. “Yes. If you’re okay with that. I don’t want you to feel like I pressured you or anything.”

“No, you didn’t. It’s time. And it’s a pretty short story. Honestly, I should have told you sooner, but I was embarrassed.” Colin took a deep sip of coffee and then put his cup down as well. His eyes were still glued to the road. “My dad was pretty great

with me and Erin growing up, but he was always busy with work. He was pretty high up at First Boston Bank. He and my mom never got along great. And I guess spring of my freshman year, he and my mom were down here, and they had like, the big fight. And he left. Without saying goodbye.”

Colin swallowed hard, and Cassie could tell from his tight voice that he was trying not to cry. He took another minute to continue. “He moved to Montana, and then I guess one night he was driving home from a bar and... uh...hit someone. Killed them. And he went to prison. I think he’s on parole now, but yeah.”

Cassie felt like the bottom of her stomach had dropped. It was almost as bad as it could have been. “Oh Colin, I’m so sorry. That’s really, really awful. Have you talked to your dad at all since...everything?”

“He’s sent me and Erin like two letters. In nine years. But I’ve kind of accepted it, you know? He didn’t want us in his life. So I don’t have him in mine. It’s almost better to pretend that he’s dead—oh shit!”

The SUV swerved, and then Cassie heard a muffled *bonk*. She looked out the window. The bridge. They were back on the bridge. “Did we hit a seagull?”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” Colin said. “Luckily it didn’t hit the windshield. I’ll have to clean the feathers and stuff off the car when we get back, though.”

Cassie nodded and looked down at the pink doughnut boxes in her lap. She didn’t feel very hungry anymore.

By the late afternoon, the sky over the ocean was a solid strip of graphite. Margie looked out the window and shook her head. “I don’t think you kids will want to go to Kitty Hawk tomorrow.” By the evening, they could see dim flashes over the dark sea. And by the time everyone made their ways to bed, the first drops of rain began pattering against the roof. Cassie wanted to leave their porch door open a crack so they could hear the storm, but Colin warned against it. “You’ll hear it, trust me.” They fell asleep snuggled against each other.

But when Cassie woke up, they were on opposite sides of the bed. Her phone read 3:01. The thunderclaps were the loudest she’d ever heard. The wind screamed outside. And the house itself was shaking. She thought it was her imagination at first, but no—the framed beach scene over her nightstand was trembling.

Cassie got up and went to the bathroom to drink some water from a Dixie cup. The violent movements of the house were amplified in the smaller room. It was like

being on a train. She tried to throw out her cup, but missed the trash can, and just left it on the floor. *A morning problem.*

She padded over to the sliding door, considering waking Colin to watch the storm with her, but deciding against it. It was dark outside. Even darker than the cloudy night they'd arrived. But every few seconds, lightning illuminated the beach. The waves crashed against each other, and the water itself covered most of the sand, giving the impression that the ocean started at their fence. The dune grass was flat under the weight of the wind.

The lightning also revealed a lone figure standing in the water. A familiar silhouette. The man Cassie had seen the previous night, maybe. He seemed impervious to the chaos that swirled around him. With each flash, the figure seemed to get closer. Cassie wanted to believe it was her imagination, but then he was just outside the fence. *Flash.* Inside the fence. The wind didn't stir his clothing. *Flash.* His dark hair was plastered to his scalp.

Another flash and a synchronous rip of thunder. He was gone. Cassie let out the breath she'd been holding, but her heart didn't stop rattling in her ribs. It was just her anxiety. This was one of those waking nightmares. *Flash.* Nothing but the storm. She needed to go back to bed, close her eyes. *Flash.*

And then he was there, right outside the glass. Shredded clothing. White, ragged, soap-like skin. Strips of dull silver at his wrists and mouth. And eyes that were either deeply sunken, or completely gone.

Her scream was lost to the thunder.

Tuesday morning was grey and foggy, and a straight, steady rain fell. Cassie didn't remember getting into bed or going back to sleep, but when she woke up, she was wrapped in Colin's arms. *Just a dream.* But when she was brushing her teeth, she noticed a little paper cup lying by the trash can. In the shower, she picked up the slick bar of soap, and the white corpse-like face popped into her mind. She washed her body with shampoo instead.

"Are you feeling okay this morning?" Colin asked Cassie as she pushed the whites of her eggs around her breakfast plate.

"I didn't sleep well last night," she said. "I had horrible nightmares. I dreamed that I saw the ghost of a drowned guy, and it ruined my appetite." She slid her plate to Colin and grabbed a doughnut instead.

Ralph, Margie's brother, reached across the table and cut himself a thick pat of pale waxy butter for his toast. Cassie had to look away. "You know," he said, "there are a ton of ghost stories about the Outer Banks. It's a hotspot for shipwrecks."

"The 'Graveyard of the Atlantic,' they call it," chimed in Fred from where he sat reading the newspaper on the couch.

"Maybe I did see a ghost. Maybe someone died on this very beach," Cassie said in her best Vincent Price impression, trying to alleviate the sick feeling in her stomach with humor, but nobody laughed.

Margie set her mug of tea down on the table with a *thunk*, and some liquid sloshed out. "That would certainly be a tragedy, Cassie hun," she said as Ralph passed her a napkin.

"And it would definitely drop the property value," Ralph said. That got a laugh.

Since it was still raining when they finished breakfast, Cassie tried to find a comfy spot to read her book, but the sickly natural light reflected off the page in a nauseating way. Instead, she pulled out her phone. Finally, a text from Dad: *U ok? Saw there was big storm last nite*. She texted back: *Yep. You get my pictures?* She crossed her fingers that her text would get through. Feeling a little ashamed, but also morbidly curious, she pulled up a database of felons in Montana. She typed in *Wheeler*. There was a Connor Wheeler, listed as "Probation." And a Colleen, listed as "Secure." But no Colin.

Next, she switched to a search engine. *Colin Wheeler, First Boston Bank*. A photo of a handsome man in a suit and tie popped up. She'd never seen a picture of Mr. Wheeler, but he looked just like his son. The same dark cowlicked hair. The same hazel eyes. But that wasn't the only reason she recognized him. Dump a bucket of water on him, put a strip of duct tape over his mouth, and she was looking at the same face she'd seen last night. Whether it was a dream or a vision, it was the same face. A chill ran through her. Had she ever seen a picture of Mr. Wheeler before? On social media? A ragged photo in Colin's wallet? She wracked her brain, but in her gut, she knew she hadn't. It was like Colin had said. He'd erased him from his life.

Cassie sat staring at her phone, but the screen blurred in front of her. She was being paranoid. Why would she see the ghost of Colin's dad, bound with duct tape? That didn't make any sense. But he'd never been in prison in Montana, either, and that also didn't make any sense. Unless the database was wrong, or Colin lied to her, or made up a story...but why would he make up a story that seemed to cause him so much pain?

She spotted Margie heading to the kitchen. She followed.

“Hey hun, I’m just about to make some tea. Want some too?”

“Yeah, that sounds great.” Cassie did not want tea. Her stomach was churning. She lowered her voice. “Margie, Colin talked to me about his dad yesterday, and I just wanted to say how sorry I am that you had to go through that.”

“Oh thank you hun, I appreciate that,” Margie said, starting the kettle. “It was a long time ago, though, and obviously I am happy. Life’s been good to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Cassie said. “If you’ll excuse me for asking, where does Colin’s dad live now?”

Margie paused with her back to Cassie. “North Dakota. No, South. South Dakota. Why?”

“I thought Colin said Montana, and…” Panic welled up inside Cassie. “My mom’s best friend from college lives there. I was wondering if they lived in the same city.”

Margie turned, two mugs in her hands. “Oh that’s right, it is Montana. This is what happens when you get older, hun. You can’t remember your states. Ralph was our divorce lawyer. He’d know where Colin Senior is for certain.”

Cassie wandered back to her seat with a cup of tea she knew she wouldn’t drink. Something was wrong here. Or was it her anxiety? She’d been good about taking her medicine, but it had been such a stressful year. The rain trickled down the window in bars.

The power went out right before they were supposed to cook dinner. “And of course my phone’s dead!” Margie said, and laughed. “Cassie, mind if I borrow yours? I’ll see if I can order some pizza, provided everyone else hasn’t lost power.”

“Oh sure,” Cassie said, passing it over. “My service has been a little spotty, though. Passcode is oh-six-two-two. Me and Colin’s anniversary.”

Debra started lighting candles around the living room as Margie made some calls. After about ten minutes, she got through to a place—Antony’s, it sounded like—and placed an order. She finished up and handed Cassie back her phone with a “Thanks hun.”

Normally Cassie would have been salivating in anticipation of pizza, especially since Margie had ordered Hawaiian with bacon, but her stomach was still upset. She opened up her browser, and almost gasped. She had left her searches open. The picture of Mr. Wheeler in his bank suit stared at her, judging her for her carelessness.

Colin came and sat next to her. “You excited for pizza? Want to go pick it up with me?”

Cassie's stomach twinged with nausea. She stared across the room. Colin's family was crowded around the jigsaw puzzle, trying in vain to solve it by candlelight. The flame cast their shadows in a grotesque relief on the vaulted ceiling. "I think I'm going to go take a quick nap, if that's okay," she said. "I'm still tired from last night."

"I totally understand," he said. "I'll be back in like an hour, okay?"

"Okay," she said. "Please drive safe in the rain."

Cassie went downstairs to their room and lay down on the bed, leaving the door open a crack behind her. The sliding glass door framed nothing but the angry ocean, but she turned her back to it anyway. She heard Colin head out, and she closed her eyes. She didn't like him being gone. But she didn't like the idea of being outside in the night, either.

After maybe fifteen minutes, she heard someone come down the stairs. Footsteps crossed the hall, and paused outside her room. The door creaked, very gently, and then the footsteps retreated. Cassie held her breath, and though her blood was rushing through her ears, she swore she could hear someone upstairs say: "She's asleep."

Cassie's heart pounded. Colin was gone. His car was gone. And she was alone in a house with a group of people she barely knew. And one of them may have done something very bad. Maybe more than one. The wind shook the house like it wanted to get in. She prayed that Colin was okay driving. She should have just gone with him and napped in the car. The ceiling above her creaked as people moved around upstairs. What if they were collecting knives? Looking for duct tape?

Stop it. Stop being paranoid, she told herself. Her brain was just making up narratives to fit the spooky atmosphere. It wasn't as if Margie had killed Colin's dad...was it? Drowned him for his banker money or life insurance or giant Outer Banks beach house? *I wish I could stay at the beach forever.* The corny sign from the elevator flashed in her memory.

Cassie rolled onto her right side to face the porch door. Slowly, very slowly, she opened her eyes. He was there. The figure was there. Colin Senior, maybe, or something else entirely. She forced herself to sit up, even though she was shaking. Her head felt cold. Her chest felt fuzzy. He didn't look at her. She didn't think he could. The fish had taken his eyes.

Footsteps sounded at the top of the stairs. Multiple people coming down. The flicker of moving candlelight through the door crack. Cassie stood up and took a step. And another step. The awful sweet odor of decay tickled her nostrils, same as the seagull bridge. The figure stood still in front of her, behind the glass, and slowly raised

his bound wrists, as though pleading with her. His nails were very long and very sharp, she noticed.

The footsteps were in the hallway now. They were whispering, but Cassie could barely hear them over the wind and rain and pounding of her own heart. They were right outside her room. So was he. *I wish I could stay at the beach...forever.*

Cassie reached forward and slid open the door. The wind surged in.



PLUMAGE

Nadine Rodriguez

Illustration by Lauren Raye Snow

Alejandra had not dreamt of becoming a groundskeeper when she was a child. Even if she had, there was no possible way her parents would have let the dream bloom. They had always pushed her towards a series of career options, filling her bookshelf with books about science when she was in elementary school, history when she was in middle, and law when she was in high school. None of them ever really stuck. Alejandra's attention would bounce in between the spaces of overly complicated words on the pages.

When her mother brought home a book with a detailed illustration of half of a man's face on the cover and painter's tape holding the spine together, Alejandra had finally found her calling—for just five dollars from the thrift store by the bank her mother cleaned on weekdays. She was thrilled by the human body, the way the unseen came together in her own body, keeping her alive. When she announced to her parents she wanted to become a doctor, and that the university she had applied to had accepted her, they were thrilled.

“La primera doctora en la familia,” her father said, “¿lo puedes creer?”

It was difficult to pinpoint where exactly everything had derailed. She knew it wasn't one singular point. Realistically, there were a series of points one could connect in an unfortunate line. Her father, a groundskeeper for the last thirty years of his life, had passed in her sophomore year at college, during a microbiology lab final. Her professor, a thin woman with curled blonde hair that sat close to her scalp, had offered Alejandra an encouraging smile when she turned in her exam. Two minutes later, when she was waiting for the elevator out in the hall, her mother called.

Alejandra envisioned his warm terra-cotta skin as her mother spoke, trying to remember how it felt as a young girl, trying to trace the sunspots that dotted it during the summer when the two would sunbathe in their backyard.

An accident, her mother had said, “un accidente horrible, mija. No lo creo, no lo creo.”

Her father, her father whose heart had been beating and lungs had been working only hours before, had fallen. Not only that, but he had fallen from a second-story window onto the rough, unforgiving stone of the Espinoza estate’s patio.

As Alejandra’s hand mechanically pressed the elevator button, her mother continued, as if she wanted to know more. They hadn’t found him immediately. According to his coworker, the Señora of the estate had asked him to fix a window on the western side, far away from his coworkers. No-one had heard the sound that Alejandra imagined his skull made as it shattered over the whirl of their machinery grinding and digging up dirt. They had found him because of the ravens. Dozens of them, her mother explained. They were squawking and chirping obscenely. The daughter of the Señora found him, his body cooling, pecked, and nearly torn apart from the birds.

It was a closed casket funeral.

The points in the line marking Alejandra’s decline continued to emerge, like darts on a board, each landing further and further from the center. She failed her Physics II course and barely passed Biochemistry. The day after she found out she received a ‘C’ in the class, the curve to the letter stark and permanent on her laptop screen, her mother told her that she needed to get a second job to keep their home. Alejandra, an immediate witness to the way grief had settled under her mother’s eyes and cemented lines by the sides of her lips, said she would get a job to help. Before the start of her senior year, Alejandra chose to drop out.

Her mother had cried, and Alejandra sometimes wished she had too.

She wasn’t a bad groundskeeper. It had taken some time, of course. The scratches and cuts on her palms and the dirt in her eyes were something she had to get used to, but once she had, she excelled. Maybe it was genetics, maybe it was how she could be with her father again. Her mother disliked the notion at first, even rejected it. Those months were the worst, but eventually, she accepted it, as far as to even joke that maybe one day, Alejandra could open her own company. *Iglesias Landscaping Inc.*, in honor of her father. They made plans to overcharge the rich white men that built

hotels and resorts on stolen land and undercharge the families with overgrown yards that lived by them.

That never happened. Instead, Alejandra easily took over her father's role at the Espinoza Estate. She never really saw Señora Espinoza, only saw her outline behind the curtains of windows, watching them occasionally. A raven would perch on the window sill or the tiles above, and Alejandra would look away. Her coworkers, some of whom had worked with her father and welcomed her fondly, said they hadn't seen the Señora either. On a day when they were upgrading the sprinkler system, overturned earth revealing white and blue pipes, sweat beading on their brows and coating the backs of their necks, Alejandra asked about her.

Jose, a short man with a proud gut that always peeked out from under his shirt, answered.

"Hay cuervos viviendo en su cabello."

There are ravens living in her hair.

Beatriz, her daughter, was who Alejandra interacted with. She was a strange girl, but Alejandra didn't feel uncomfortable around her like some of the men did. She even tried to joke with her sometimes. They were the same age, and it felt like a victory whenever Beatriz's semi-permanent solemn expression cracked with muffled laughter or a hint of amusement. Her skin was almost as brown as Alejandra's, and her mouth was a quiet, pretty thing that fit her dark, almond eyes. More than once, Alejandra tried to put together how the Señora must look, but the mysterious illusion always faded into a shadow looming behind, signing the checks that went into Alejandra's bank account. Sometimes, she'd stare at the handwriting and try to envision the hand that wrote it, imagining how the bones inside would grip a pen and move.

The Señora passed only a year after Alejandra was officially hired. She wondered how Beatriz would react. Would she spiral, the way Alejandra had, or would she continue seamlessly, uninterrupted by the disarray that was grief?

"Alejandra," called Beatriz's willowy voice. "Do you know how to fix a sink?"

Alejandra, washing away dirt from her hands with a hose, looked up at her.

"I do."

"Follow me then, please."

Alejandra had never gone so far into the home before, not beyond the back door in the kitchen where she'd wait as Beatriz retrieved a check or a glass of water. She felt out of place in the unsullied white and blue kitchen, a moving stain splattered against the tiles. Yet when Alejandra took a look at her surroundings, glanced up at

the vaulted ceilings of the hallway connected to the kitchen, passed her hand over the wooden staircase, she felt how worn the house was. The floor creaked under her weight upstairs and the humidity made her shirt stick to her sweaty back.

Grief, during its infancy in Alejandra's home, had been devastating. Her mother cleaned less and less, as did Alejandra. Dust collected on tabletops and treasured porcelain figures that had never been anything but pristine before. The only immaculate area in the home was her father's side of the bedroom. Her mother kept everything clean and organized, a lit San Lazaro candle stayed on his nightstand throughout the first month after his death.

Beatriz's home wasn't in disarray, it was hollow.

No pictures were hanging on the walls, no art. Various rooms had no doors—just open, curved doorways that led to vacant spaces. Alejandra was guided to the bathroom, to a sink that was leaking. The floor was glistening and the dark blue rug rolled up by the tub was soaked.

"How long has it been leaking?"

Beatriz raised her shoulders in a shrug, "I'm not sure. Mother refused to fix things inside the home during her last few weeks."

"This isn't your bathroom?"

Beatriz shook her head, "No, it's hers. My room is on the east side, where the sun rises."

"Oh," Alejandra said. She felt her curiosity nudging at her to ask more, to find out why her mother was so solitary, but decided against it. Instead, she knelt by the sink, looking behind the surprisingly light counter to find the plumbing. The water was cold as Alejandra wrapped a hand around the connection, testing how tightly it was screwed. It was surprising, considering the heat outside, but Alejandra paid it no attention. She unscrewed the connection to make sure there was no clog forming that would become a problem later on. She saw something black peeking out from the end.

She reached into the pouch hanging on her hip for pliers and used them to pull out wet black feathers from the metal pipe. She brought them into the light and turned the pliers around in her hand to look. They were coated in some type of scentless black gunk.

"What is this?"

Beatriz stared at them, a hand held to her chest.

"I'm not sure. Mother used to bathe Perla in the sink, maybe her feathers went down the drain."

“Perla?”

Beatriz nodded before motioning for Alejandra to follow her out of the bathroom. Alejandra shuffled to her feet, took off her wet boots, and set them down by the sink before trailing after her. Beatriz led them to a bedroom two doors down from the bathroom, the furniture covered by white and black sheets, except for a singular large birdcage in the center. The light filtering through the teal curtains barely illuminated the large raven perched inside. It stared at Beatriz before squawking and looking over at Alejandra. Its body seemed to expand as it opened its wings once and then twice before flying towards the cage, banging its head against the bars.

“She doesn’t like strangers,” Beatriz said. “Forgive her behavior.”

Alejandra didn’t look away from the bird.

“Why is she in this room?”

Beatriz stepped towards the cage and placed a hand against its black metal frame, the bird relaxing somewhat at the closeness.

“It’s her room.”

Alejandra saw the inside of the home more and more after that day. It seemed Beatriz’s mother left things to rot and rust without telling anyone, so Alejandra was in charge of it. She fixed faulty light switches, air conditioning that only blew hot air and rusted plumbing. Sometimes she had to ask her coworkers for help, but when she would tell Beatriz that they were all coming in, Beatriz would say to forget about whatever it was. It was strange, but the paychecks were hefty. Alejandra read books and learned how to fix other things like cracked wooden floors and the oddly colored mold that grew in the crevices of cupboards. The house, in its strange way, was beautiful. Something was alluring about its haunting architecture and lack of light, and Alejandra found herself thinking that Beatriz was just as fascinating. She was beautiful, too, and she was trusting her with something, but Alejandra didn’t know what.

When Alejandra was startled out of sleep one night, her ringtone shrill in her ear, she hadn’t expected to see *B. Espinoza* on the screen. She groaned as she sat up, but answered regardless.

Beatriz immediately spoke, “Could you come?”

Alejandra ran a hand down her face, “What’s broken? Are you alright?”

She could hear Beatriz breathing through the phone, the noise faint and trembling.

“I can still feel her. It’s as if she’s never left.”

“Give me a minute, okay? I’ll be there soon.”

Alejandra didn't once pause to think or reconsider as she drove to the Espinoza home. When she parked her car by the main door, the house was dark. There wasn't a single light on in any of the windows, only dark ledges dotted with the empty, black windows greeting her. She had never been on the property alone at night. When she knocked on the door and looked up, she saw ravens perched on the window sills that had been empty moments before. She looked to the trees that surrounded the home and saw beady, glowing eyes watching her.

She took a step back, ready to leave, when the door opened and Beatriz emerged, illuminated in yellow by a lantern she held in one hand.

"You came, you really came," she said.

"Why aren't the lights on?" Alejandra asked. She stepped into the home when Beatriz moved to the side, the lantern swaying.

"The power goes off sometimes at night."

"Why haven't you told me? I could have fixed it by now."

"No, you couldn't have."

Beatriz turned then, walking away from Alejandra to the staircase. The thought of going home crossed her mind. She could imagine her mother and her father screaming at her, furious, yet she stayed. She followed, and Beatriz led them into the bedroom with Perla. Her feathers looked blue in the lantern light, her body an unmoving lumpy shape at the bottom of the cage.

"Is she dead?"

Beatriz nodded, and Alejandra hadn't realized how close together they were standing. She could see Beatriz's mouth quivering and noticed that the hand holding the lantern was shaking. She imagined what it must be like to have something else from your parent die, and felt her chest ache.

"I'm sorry," she said, softly.

She placed a hand on Beatriz's shoulder, and felt her unease from before return in the hand touching Beatriz. The shoulder she was touching felt strange; it shifted, like the flesh underneath the fabric of her sweater wasn't held together just right. Alejandra moved her hand away and exhaled shakily.

"I wanted to leave for so long, ever since I was a little girl, but I was born in still water, just like her."

Alejandra took a step back, "What?"

Beatriz turned to look at her, and Alejandra gasped. Her face, from what Alejandra could see in the dim light, was misshapen, her skin impossibly tight and her eyes resembling those of a raven.

“I thought about leaving. I was going to, tomorrow. My bags were packed and I was ready but then she *died*.”

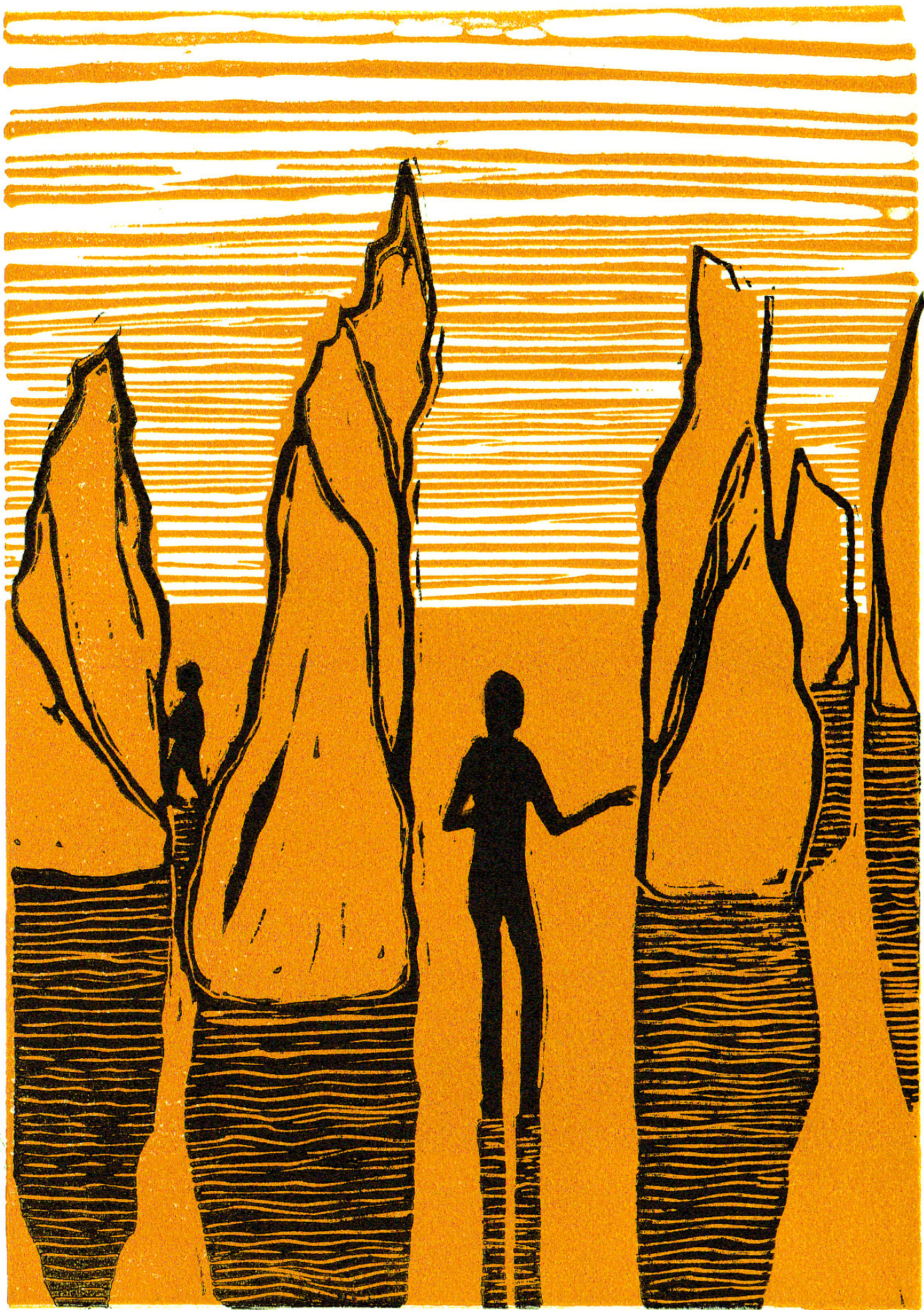
Her last word oozed venom. Alejandra managed to turn and look at Perla; the bird’s body was decomposed as if it had been deceased for weeks. Parts of its body were concave, others were covered in maggots.

“Beatriz?” she said, her voice unfamiliar to her ears. Had she ever been this afraid before?

The sounds of bone splintering and flesh tearing were her answer. She didn’t want to look back at the woman she knew. She didn’t want to face whatever was breathing so jaggedly next to her, but she did. She stepped back, mouth ajar, silent. Beaks and talons were emerging from Beatriz’s hair, catching on and knotting the thick strands. Feathers were pushing through her lips as the heads and bodies of ravens pressed against her skin, moving under it in frenzied manner, seeking a way to escape.

She ran out of the room when the ravens began to screech, the high-pitched sounds piercing her mind, the beginnings of a nose bleed dribbling out onto her lips. They sounded so human, somehow, as if Beatriz was the one screaming. The sounds of wings flapping and beaks opening and closing began to follow her through the house. Alejandra screamed.

She remembered her father, suddenly. She remembered her coworker’s words and began to cry as she finally made it to her car. She pulled away quickly, only looking back once. She saw the front door was open, Beatriz’s still silhouette watching from the doorway, her face too far off to truly recognize but still adorned by the warm glow of the lantern.



LET SHADOWS SLIP THROUGH

Kali Napier

Illustration by Heather Parr

The Pinnacles are an hour behind us but I'm still jittery. I check on him in the rear-view mirror. He's okay, bent over a picture book, his dark thick hair—like mine, not his father's, which is red and thin—hanging over his face.

'Billy,' I say, because I need to see his eyes, 'How's it going back there? Mummy loves you,' I add as I always do.

He looks up. I get my smile. 'Love you, Mummy.'

I breathe out. But my left knee trembles. Sweat snakes down my calf. Maybe I lied to the petrol station owner at Bullsbrook.

'How's the humidity?' he'd said, mopping his brow with his hairy arm while he rang up the packet of fruit lollies and the tank of petrol.

'I've been living in Brisbane for three years,' I'd said. 'This is nothing.' He was the fourth person today to comment on the weather. How can I have changed so much physically? Emotionally and psychologically, I can understand.

We stopped at the Pinnacles. Billy clambered over the rocky outcrops. Wind buffeted my ears, made snake trails across the landscape. My heart lurched each time I lost sight of him, the pocked stromatolites metres high, stark against the shifting dunes.

I told him off for scaring me when he reappeared. 'You might fall.'

He did fall. He cried.

He disappeared again. Shadows peeled from the heels of the limestone formations and rippled in the sand. I thought one was a man. Billy cried out and I jumped.

I brushed grains from his hands, cupped them as I washed them with water from the bottle in my handbag, and blew. He was okay then. As we walked to the carpark, the outlines of the few gums, the toilet block, the white Falcon seemed to separate, to let shadows slip through.

Just heat haze, I told myself. But I clicked the key-remote with a look over both shoulders, flick-flick. Only my funhouse-mirror shadow next to my child's. Nobody else here.

My heart barrelled one hundred and ten kilometres an hour up the highway, one hundred and thirty when I saw a flash of light glint off a windscreen far behind me.

The Caltex station at Dongara appears ahead of us. I'm calmer. Probably because Dongara means forty-five minutes until we're home. The first time in three years. The Caltex and the bakery that makes the best meat pies slide past.

I take the tight turn into the S-bend too fast and careen, wheels skidding. Billy screams as his head knocks against the edge of his booster seat. I pump the clutch, take it down a gear, grip the steering wheel until we're through to the straight.

It used to be intuitive, holding the inside curve steady at one hundred.

He's whimpering now.

'We're right. We're right. Don't cry.'

'Please, stop. Stop.'

I look at him in the mirror. His face is blotchy, tear-stained. The aircon doesn't work in the hire car.

'Okay, Mummy's stopping.' I pull off the road. To regroup. I hadn't even seen the sign for the S-bend. A few hours of driving under the saturated blue sky and things like signs and bleached scrub tend to merge into each other.

I get out, arch my back, face to the sun. The air burns, frizzles my lungs when I breathe it in. I've missed this, oh, I have missed it so much. This is who I used to be, before my ex moved us to Brisbane. It was only supposed to be for a year. Then it became three. Then a life sentence when he took me to court so I couldn't bring my child home.

I have ten days. I have to make it count, so that Billy doesn't forget where he comes from until I can next afford the trip over.

He releases his seat belt, climbs out.

'Don't go off. We're not stopping long.'

Billy kicks at the tyre. He is four. My counsellor says he might have been set back developmentally because of the stress his father has put us through. 'No, don't want to.' He's sniffing, smacks the door. Recoils. 'Owww, too hot.'

I touch the handle, the metal stings like a belting. I've forgotten this. Blisters from concrete pavers, buckles, white sand at the beach. It'll take the top layer off.

I pick him up, splay his legs on my hip as I walk up and down the soft bitumen. Our skin is sticky where we meet, and if I could, I would fold him into me. I turn and pace again.

The brown tourist marker is faded, has a few dings and someone's scratched I WAS HERE across the arrow. The fork-and-spoon and bed symbols for the Hampton Arms. Mum's mentioned something about the tea room there, something that happened, but whatever it is was lost in everything that's gone wrong this past year.

'Are you hungry?'

He lays his head on my shoulder, nods.

'Just five more minutes in the car.' I spread my fingers out. 'You can do that, can't you?'

*

I park in the shade next to a graffitied yellow minivan with Victorian plates and pray the tea room won't be noisy.

Around the courtyard are wooden pub benches and folded down umbrellas, and cacti spilling from pots. But I can't see a soul. I clench Billy's hand twice, our code for 'I love you,' as I follow the limestone walls to a latticed enclosure. Every door shut and padlocked, except one.

I'm heading towards it when a voice comes from behind me.

'What can I do you for?'

The man's wiping his hands on a tea towel. He's late fifties, grey hair, in navy stubbies and a dirty white t-shirt, worn black flip-flops.

'Sorry, I thought you were open.'

I glance up to the windows of the first floor; the hotel rooms closed years ago. A bed sheet for a curtain flaps in one window.

'Are you open?'

'Yeah, go on through,' he says, and ushers us ahead of him.

I keep Billy close, glancing over my shoulder at the man. Feels like crossing a carpark at night with my keys between my fingers.

The tea room is empty. Four tables covered in vinyl cloths, with salt and pepper shakers, serviettes and a sugar mill on each. A stack of magazines to read. I use Billy's hat to dab at the sweat on my brow then hook it over the corner of his chair, which scrapes the lino when I push him up to the table.

'I've got a fan I can bring in, if you like.'

'Thanks. If it's no trouble,' I say.

When the man goes, Billy slips down from the table. I sigh but can see what's caught his attention. There's an adjoining room. I follow him. The lights dim, filtered through wire screens thick with dust. Dust on almost every surface, in fact. His yellow shorts are filthy where he sits on the floor to pull out a shoebox of old toy cars.

It's quiet, apart from the clink of metal as he rattles the cars over the wooden floor boards, crashing them into each other.

'Ka-boosh.'

I glance at the framed sepia photographs on the walls. Greenough Hamlet of about a hundred years ago. Iron farm implements, kettles, an old packet of Bird's Custard, sit undisturbed on a large dresser. Small roadside museums used to fascinate me when I wrote for the *Geraldton Guardian*. You wouldn't think there'd be much traffic passing by, but their hopefulness would show in the presence of a guestbook.

I frown.

Someone drove that graffitied minivan here, the one I parked next to. Why did I park so close? All the space in the world. Where are they? You can't get through the dunes to the beach; the scrub is thick, and only a crazy person would go for a walk in the middle of nowhere in the heat of the day.

The man clears his throat behind me. Sneaking up on me again. And he's blocking the entry to the tea room.

'Can we make it takeaway, please? Two ham and cheese sandwiches.'

'I brought the fan.' He tilts his head, looks at my son in the corner playing with the cars.

'Billy.' I step between him and the man. 'Pack up, it's time to go.'

'I want to play.'

'You can play when we get to Grandma's,' I snap, and immediately regret it. I don't like strangers thinking I'm a bad mother. I don't like people who *know* me thinking it. It's not Billy's fault. But I'm so tense, he easily pushes me over the edge. I overcompensate every time, buying him Lego or icy poles, cuddling, telling him that

I love him, that he's part of me, like an arm. But the people who don't matter don't see that. They like to stand and tut, make faces.

'I'm sorry,' I say to the man, so he doesn't make a face too. 'I'm tired. We only got into Perth last night. It's a long flight from Brisbane.'

'Ah, well. You just relax. Sit in front of the fan in there while I make you up those sandwiches, and the boy can play some more.'

'Will you be okay?' I ask Billy uncertainly. Even though I've been sitting and driving all day I just want to sit some more. On my own. Just for a bit.

He nods without looking at me, driving his cars in a figure eight on the floor.

I wait at our table, pick up a three-year-old copy of *People's Friend* magazine stamped with 'Property of the Hampton Arms.' But after a few pages of cramped text, my head swims and I put it down to pull out my phone. I can manage small grabs of Facebook.

I tap on a few icons with no success. A black spot; there's no reception. I can't remember what time we arrived but it must be at least fifteen minutes since the man disappeared into the kitchen.

I roll up the magazine, drum it on the table as I wonder if we should move on.

The scrape of my chair echoes when I get up, and I'm thumped in the chest—by something I can't see, or *hear*.

I run into the silent museum room.

My child is gone.

Everything atomises, slamming me like a shock wave.

I scream his name along the darkened corridor to the kitchen where nothing's switched on, thunder up the stairs but the door at the top level has boards nailed across it. I bang my fists against them, realise I'm clenching the tightly rolled *People's Friend* in one hand. 'Billy!' I take the stairs down two at a time, stumble, turning my ankle as I emerge into the glare of sunshine. I shield my eyes with the magazine, limp through the empty courtyard, screaming, 'Anyone? Help me! My son's missing!'

The old man doesn't come.

No one comes.

Billy's not in the carpark. The one straw. The one straw I'd clung to was that he might have snuck out here.

I fall to my knees, whimpering, as grief crashes over me. It's like the magistrate's decision all over again. But this time, I've lost my baby completely.

The graffitied minivan is gone.

*

I jab my finger on the volume button of my phone, the other hand steadying the wheel, alternating with gear changes, as the metal sails on the highway welcome me to Geraldton.

‘Officer, I’ve already told you. Sixteenth of August 2009. He was born here, at the Geraldton Regional.’

I drop the phone to the passenger seat as I go through a red light. I’ve been going over one hundred and sixty; another misdemeanour won’t matter as I’m heading to the police station up ahead.

I park on the kerb, arse hanging over the road, grab the phone and my handbag. I don’t care that I’ve left the car open, and hurtle past two police officers coming through the glass doors.

‘This is a police station,’ one cautions me, like I’m some kind of idiot.

My throat constricts. There’s someone talking to the desk sergeant, who glances in my direction, before returning to the German windsurfer who’s complaining loudly that his wetsuits have been stolen.

‘Please?’ Tears roll down my face. ‘Please?’

The desk sergeant disappears, and comes out the side. ‘Do you need emergency assistance?’ he asks.

I grab his sleeve, nod. ‘I phoned...my son...he’s missing.’

My sight is narrow, like binoculars, and I don’t see where the other pair of arms comes from, but I’m taken into a room. I lift my face from my hands. A plastic cup of water is on the table.

I sip. It tastes of blood. Think of Billy. Convulse.

‘Do you have ID on you?’

A young, blonde and female officer. Good. Men never believe me, always take *his* side. She’s enough to give me hope. I take a deep breath. I must be rational, pass her my driver’s licence.

‘Mrs Kane, is it?’

‘No. I mean, yes, I was. I’m separated. Sarah Armitage now.’

‘Ms Armitage, I’m Constable Joanne Trotter. I’ll need some details from you.’ She sits across from me, sets down a notepad and pen.

‘Thank you, thank you.’ I brace myself, palms flat on the table.

Her hair is done up in a bun. There are three studs in her right ear, two in her left. I look her square. She will believe me. She has to. Part of me knows that she’s here

because they always give female cops the weepers, the kids, the hysterics. The victims of domestic violence.

‘Can you tell me, in your own words, what happened to your son?’

Who would be putting words in my mouth? The taste of blood is still in my mouth.

‘We stopped at the Hampton Arms for lunch. He was playing while the owner went to make our sandwiches.’

‘The owner? Did you get his name?’ The officer puts down her pen.

I shake my head. ‘I didn’t see him again. Not even when I was screaming for help when I lost Billy.’

‘You lost him? How?’

I clench my fists, press them together. ‘Not like that. I was in the next room, and everything was taking too long and I couldn’t hear anything. And when I went to check on him—he’d only been a few metres away from me, I swear—that’s when I discovered he wasn’t there.’

‘A few metres?’ She picks up her pen, checks her watch, and scratches notes on her pad. ‘Could he have wandered off when you weren’t looking?’

‘No!’ She looks up sharply. I lower my voice. ‘No. There was only one door to the room. I was right there in front of it. I checked the place out—but everywhere was bolted or blocked off.’ I turn my hands over, release the tension in my knuckles. Bleeding half-moons cross my life lines.

‘Okay. Ms Armitage, can you tell me where your son’s father is?’

I grit my teeth. ‘He’s in Brisbane. He’s got nothing to do with this.’

Cold sweat runs down my spine. They think Gordon has kidnapped his own son. That’s usually the case in these situations, isn’t it? He’s an arsehole, but he wouldn’t do this. Would he?

This is exactly what he would do.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Constable Trotter lays her hand on mine. I jolt.

‘We’ll give him a call.’

I nod, scroll through my contacts for his number and pass it to her. I need to know it wasn’t him.

When she returns, there’s another officer with her and I shrink. He looks like Gordon’s lawyer. All swagger, no compassion. Doesn’t care about destroying a life, he gets paid either way.

‘Mrs Kane,’ he says. Neither have sat down.

‘I’m not—’

‘Sarah Kane,’ he continues. ‘We’re holding you for questioning on suspicion of violating custody orders for your son, Billy Kane.’

I punch my fists into my temples. I can hear keening. I don’t know if it’s inside or outside of me. *No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.*

Trotter grips my wrist. It doesn’t feel kind; it hurts. I’m weak as water, no strength to struggle. ‘I’m...’ gasping ‘...his mother.’ Sobbing. Shuddering. ‘You don’t understand. There was a minivan.’

‘Your husband’s emailed the consent orders. You were considered a flight risk in court and emotionally unstable.’

Only because the magistrate believed his lies. Because he’s a man. They’re all in it together. I can’t bring myself to look at the male officer.

‘He’s done this. I know it,’ I say to Trotter. ‘Maybe not himself. He’s hired someone. What about the man at the Hampton Arms? Gordon’s a Freemason...’

Trotter lets go of me, turns away. Please look back. Please believe me.

‘Ms Armitage,’ Trotter looks back, chews on the inside of her cheek, head bobbing on her neck. ‘The Hampton Arms was razed last year. The land has been on the market ever since.’

I was there. I grab my handbag, but it falls, spills its contents. There is no *People’s Friend*, no “Property of the Hampton Arms.”

‘No!’

I hold my hands like claws before me, streaked with ash.

The male officer’s got me pinned against the wall in seconds.

I think of Billy, disappearing between the limestone formations of the Pinnacles.

I think of him kicking the tyre, burning his hand on the car door.

I think of my boy playing with toy cars in a sea of dust.

They’ll never find my son.

Contributors

Authors

Kali Napier lives in Meanjin Brisbane, on unceded Yuggera land. Her short fiction has been published in anthologies, literary journals and magazines, including *The Dark Magazine* and *Trickster's Treats #4*. She is the author of the novel *The Secrets at Ocean's Edge*, published in 2018 by Hachette Australia and Little, Brown Book Group.

Rebecca Parfitt has been published widely. Her debut poetry collection *The Days After* was published by Listen Softly London in 2017. In 2020 she was awarded a Literature Wales writer's bursary to complete her short story collection, *Sometimes They Arrive Late & Other Macabres*, of which she is still looking for a publisher. In August 2020 her first film, *Feeding Grief to Animals*, was commissioned by the BBC and FilmCymruWales. She is founder and editor of *The Ghastling*, a magazine devoted to quiet horror and the macabre. She lives in the wilds of south Wales, UK.

Heather Parry is a Glasgow-based writer, editor, event chair and podcast host. Her short stories have appeared internationally in numerous magazines and books, including *The Stinging Fly*, *F(r)iction* and *Gutter*, and have been performed at festivals across the UK. Her fiction explores self-deception, transformation, the grotesque and the body.

Nadine Rodriguez is a queer, non-binary Cuban-American writer and photographer born and raised in Miami, Florida and presently based in Marquette, Michigan. Currently, Nadine is an MFA candidate for Fiction and a graduate assistant at Northern Michigan University, and interns for *Sinister Wisdom*, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal. They have had photographic and written work featured in various blogs and zines.

Alanna Smith is a Boston-based copywriter by day and an M.F.A. candidate at Emerson College by night. After receiving her B.A. in creative writing from Providence College, she moved to Nepal, where she spent nine months teaching English and creative writing on a Fulbright grant. Her novelette about Jersey Shore vampires, *The Bloody Pub*, was recently published in *Blind Corner Literary Magazine*. You can follow her on Instagram @alanna.travels.

Holly Kybett Smith is a queer writer based in the south of England, who specialises in all things dark, whimsical and weird. Find her on twitter: @h_kybettsmith.

Illustrators

Maria Buttuller is a British artist and linoleum printmaker. Her prints are made by using traditional printmaking techniques at her Brighton-based home / studio—The Old Crooked House. Maria's designs explore unsettling narratives, shadowy creatures, Gothic literature, religion, folk horror, feminism and mythic imagery. She is inspired by everything from Aubrey Beardsley and Alexander Mc Queen to modern popular culture and a really good story. You can follow Maria and find details of her Etsy shop on Instagram @loveable_maria

Joseph Gough is a British born illustrator living in New York. His illustrations have appeared in a number of online and print publications such as The New Yorker, The Believer, Suspira Magazine, Hellebore and many more. His favourite Gothic fiction writers are Daphne Du Maurier, M.R James and Arthur Machen.

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.

Heather Parr is a printmaker and illustrator based in Brighton, UK. She uses a variety of different techniques, including linocut and wood engraving, often in combination with painting. Her work is inspired by myths and legends, folklore, ghost stories, gothic horror and Fortean topics. Heather lives with her partner and young daughter and when she's not making haunted pictures she works for a nature conservation charity.

Katiana Robles is a full-time artist working out of Orlando Florida. Her works spans a variety of media such as food art, sculpture, and 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 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.

Julia Wytrazek is an illustrator based in London, UK. Originally from Poland, and with a background in design, she has over 3 years industry experience. As well as working on editorial illustration and publishing projects, she has exhibited her work all across the UK.

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