THE FUTURE FIRE

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> "Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation."
>
> — Angela Davis

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The Future Fire (http://futurefire.net/) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Regina de Búrca and Valeria Vitale; assistant editors Cécile Matthey, Bruce Stenning and Trace Yulie; occasional guest editors Kathryn Allan, Emma Bridges, Fábio Fernandes and Lori Selke, and copyeditors Brian Olszewski and Hûw Steer.

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad

There is perhaps a sense in which all art is progressive, and the very act of creating beauty for its own sake in a world where we're told "time is money" is an act of rebellion. At the same time it is surely possible to create art—whether fiction, painting, film, music, crochet—that's mean-spirited, too unimaginative to do more than replicate the lowest-common-denominator bigotries, violence and avarice of last century's phantasms. I hope we can do better than that.

So what is this progressive art that we consider important enough to quote Professor Davis's magazine article above? Rather than attempt a scholarly definition, we would (incompletely) answer that by example. Progressive stories, poems and illustrations include work that shows how crafting, that most domestic of art-forms, can be a means to survive, to connect with the earth, to serve society, indeed to become part of humanity again. And such art also shows the very act of surviving—that

other rebellion against petty tyrannies—pushing through what the world throws at us, enduring where fantastika and reality overlap, keeping going even when we are alone, when we are different, when we are old, and above all when we still manage to belong despite it all.

If your art can be progressive in some of these senses, and can at the same time be surprising and beautiful, then you may have done the most amazing thing in the world. And we think Marisca, Adriana, Joyce, Brackett, Jennifer, Annoka, Shelly, Eric, Josep, L.E., Katharine, Fluffgar and Dr T do all of these things, again and again.

My co-editors and I would like to dedicate this issue to our friend Maureen Kincaid Speller, who passed away two weeks ago, and will be missed by so many many people in the community of writers, readers, critics, and publishers in this genre. Her wit and generosity should be an inspiration to us all.

Djibril al-Ayad, October 2022

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:
http://press.futurefire.net/2022/10/new-issue-202263.html

A Sea Change

Shelly Jones

Illustration © 2022, Dr. T. Eratopo

Like many obsessions, yours started as a distraction, a way to keep your mind off the pain. The doctor said crocheting would be good for your arthritis, the gentle movement keeping your fingers limber. As we drove home from the appointment, we stopped at a craft store, despite our lingering doubts.

You selected the yarn carefully, chose a bamboo hook instead of metal, the soft wood natural in your hand. You were excited to show me the yarn, a new eco-friendly creation.

"Can you believe it's made from recycled plastic bottles?" you asked. You rubbed it against your skin to prove its silky texture: no burrs of plastic marring your flesh.

That first night you practiced a few basic stitches, creating a misshapen chain that ebbed and flowed, stitches added and lost in the process of learning. A few mornings later, I found you in the oversized chair, eyes bleary in the dim light.

"Couldn't sleep," you mumbled, your hands methodically swimming under and over the yarn, as if casting a spell. Overnight you had crocheted yourself a blanket that splayed across your lap as you nodded off.

"Perhaps you should slow down a bit. Give your hands a rest," I recommended, pouring your coffee. You nodded, accepting the mug eagerly. But by the time I left for work, your coffee sat cold and untouched at your side, four more rows of the blanket extending over you.

Another sleepless night, you sat in the darkened living room, awash in a blue aura from the television. The matter-of-fact voice of David Attenborough instructed on the mating rituals of blue-footed boobies, the predatory practices of an octopus. You were enthralled by its midden, a pile of shells heaped outside its den, like the compost we attempted one summer and then abandoned.

"Did you know the coral reefs are dying?" you called out to me as I brushed my teeth.

"What?" I asked, my mouth still full of foam.

"They blanch, lose all their color, their vibrancy. Then they die," you explained.

"Like people," I noted, stifling a yawn.

You said nothing, your hands still moving in the dark.

Now, months later, your nightstand is cluttered with books on coral reefs and algae. When not crocheting, you barricade yourself with patterns like a hermit crab tucked in its shell. You've even discovered a special technique that mimics the spiraling appearance of sea anemone.

"Isn't this what retirement is? Finding new ways to be happy?" a friend asks, attempting to reassure me.

Another suggests that a vacation might help. "Perhaps a cruise? Embrace the obsession. She'll appreciate the gesture."

How can I explain my irrational fear of losing you to the reef? At night I dream of you slipping beneath its tendrils as we snorkel, sting rays guarding you beyond my grasp. You sink further into the seafloor until I am forced to the surface, my lungs desperate for air.

"She needs space," the therapist announces. "She needs time to adjust to retirement, to accept where she is in life."

I nod sympathetically. But what if space grows to distance, to disinterest, to disdain? What if, like your hyperbolic crochet, we aren't headed in the same direction and are thus plummeting in opposite directions? How far are we willing to deviate before we've lost sight of one another?

In the summer, you decide to leave. A trip to the beach, you announce. You have already packed before I can ask if there is any room for me. At the sight of your

bag, all yarn and fiber arts magazines, I swallow my words, nod goodbye.

In the stillness of your absence, I explore the empty house as if wandering into unknown territory. I realize that I have learned where your space begins and mine ends.

Bags and boxes litter the storage room, all overflowing with yarn: skeins, balls and hanks of different sizes, hues, and thicknesses. I retreat to my office, the one refuge where yarn hasn't threaded its way through the keyhole like an industrious Theseus combing the labyrinth.

A few days later, you return from the beach, dragging bits of it with you. A brine permeates the house as you cloister yourself in the guest room.

"Shouldn't we talk?" I ask finally as you disappear again into your domain.

"Isn't this what you wanted? For me to have a hobby?" Your disembodied voice comes to me, garbled, as though from underwater.

I sigh, steeling myself as I follow your voice.

Standing in the doorway, I pause, too overwhelmed by the scene to continue. You have crocheted a giant coral reef made of algae from the beach that encompasses the entire room. Tentacles of color sway, titian fingers and saffron polyps line the walls, inching up to the ceiling. Terraces of vegetation are planted around the entire perimeter, cascading over the guest bed, draping over the nightstand. A blue, rotating light ripples along the sponges like waves and I swoon in the doorway, sea-sick from the fabricated motion.

"Love?"

For a moment you are lost to me, hidden within the undulating anemones. I cannot deduce where your body begins and where the reef ends, coral cushioning you like a lovers' arms, like my arms once cradled you.

I close the door, embarrassed for having witnessed you in such an intimate pose, adrift among the kelp, body splayed open to its rhythmic sway. My shoes leave wet footprints across the carpet, a wake of my betrayal, entering your watery domain.

Resigning myself to the couch, the murky blue light from your terrarium seeps out under the door, stretching toward me. Leaning back I feel something dig in my hip, a discarded crochet hook lost in the cushions. I pull out a skein of yarn and begin to chain on, my fingers remembering the deft maneuvers of your hands. For hours I craft this rope, watching it snake across the room towards you: a buoyant tether to anchor you to me once more.

First published in Myriad #1: Boundaries, December 2021.

AITA for throwing away my wife's haunted dolls?

Annika Barranti Klein

Illustration © 2022, Dr. T. Eratopo

Posted by u/TerribleRedditWife on June 27, 2021

My wife (f42) and I (f43) have been married for 15 years. We have two kids (f13, f11) and live in a very small apartment. She is a painter and keeps a small studio space about ten minutes away by car. These two rents are the absolute maximum our budget allows, so the girls share a bedroom and we all generally live on top of one another. Prior to the pandemic everyone's schedules overlapped in such a way that it wasn't too crowded most of the time, but this last year has been very challenging. I don't think we're special in this regard and I know it's been difficult for everyone, but there is one issue I am having that I believe is unique, and that's what I need your help with.

My wife has these dolls.

I can't really pinpoint when she started collecting them, because at least one of them is from her childhood and another one has similar sentimental value, though I do not remember the details (something about her middle school best friend, I think). Those two used to sit on her dresser, and it was no big deal except for one time when I "joked" that they were watching us sleep, which she did not like.

At some point after she rented the studio, which was about 5–6 years ago, so let's say this started 4–5 years ago, she began buying inexpensive antique objects to use as props for her paintings. That is, she would set up these tableaus and then paint them instead of using models. She mostly bought things from Etsy and eBay, cheap china and old children's toys. And dolls.

So, when the pandemic started her studio space shut down for a couple of months, and when it reopened we discussed whether she would go back to using it and agreed to wait until there was a vaccine, because it's shared ventilation and partially open air. So she went and got a few things she wanted to bring home, including the dolls.

All of the dolls.

They took over the apartment. There were dolls everywhere. I counted them when I threw them away (I'm getting there) and there were 13 dolls. It felt like more. I couldn't turn around without accidentally looking one of them in the eyes. It was creepy and unsettling. I felt like I didn't belong in my own home. And I swear they moved around the apartment on their own. There were SEVERAL occasions when I would leave a room and come back to a different arrangement of dolls, or a doll that had not previously been there. Either they were

moving or I was seeing things. So I collected them and threw away the 11 new ones. My wife's two original dolls are still on the dresser. I am not a monster.

She came home and when I told her the others were gone (I didn't say it like that, I took responsibility) she went into the bedroom with them and locked the door. She won't talk to me. I feel like one of the Reddit Terrible Husbands™, but I swear I was going to lose my mind if they stayed another minute. AITA?

INFO: I do have a mental illness, but it is anxiety and I have never hallucinated before. I will call my doctor, but I really don't think I was seeing things.

INFO: yes, it is possible that the girls were moving them around. We didn't do the elf on the shelf but I'm sure they could have gotten the idea elsewhere else. They're clever, they were bored, it's possible. That said, they seemed pretty freaked out by the dolls so I'm not sure it was them.

UPDATE: the dolls are back. I assume my wife got them out of the trash, but I didn't hear her leave the bedroom.

INFO: I'm sleeping on the couch. Yes, I do think she has the right to kick me out of my own bedroom. I might have done something that made me *feel* like a Reddit Terrible Husband™, but I'm *not* one.

UPDATE: my wife definitely is not the one who got the dolls out of the trash, and both girls deny it. I really think I would have heard any of them leave. I'm a fairly light sleeper and the couch is near the door.

INFO: it's the only door.

INFO: <del>~~see attached photo of some of the dolls.~~</del> EDIT: Okay, sorry, for some reason the

picture keeps loading as a blank image. So, here's how I know it wasn't her.

My wife yelled at me for lying about throwing the dolls away. She thought I had only hidden them and was hoping it would blow over. When I figured out that's why she was upset, I obviously denied it (because it's not what happened) and we compared notes to figure out if the girls (one or both) could be responsible. But I threw them away BEFORE trash day and they reappeared AFTER the trash collectors and the girls haven't left the apartment. It's all very mysterious.

UPDATE: Everything is fine, false alarm, sorry to worry you all.

UPDATE: Why everyone type such mean things? The dolls are good, actually.

Spindle House

Jennifer Hudak

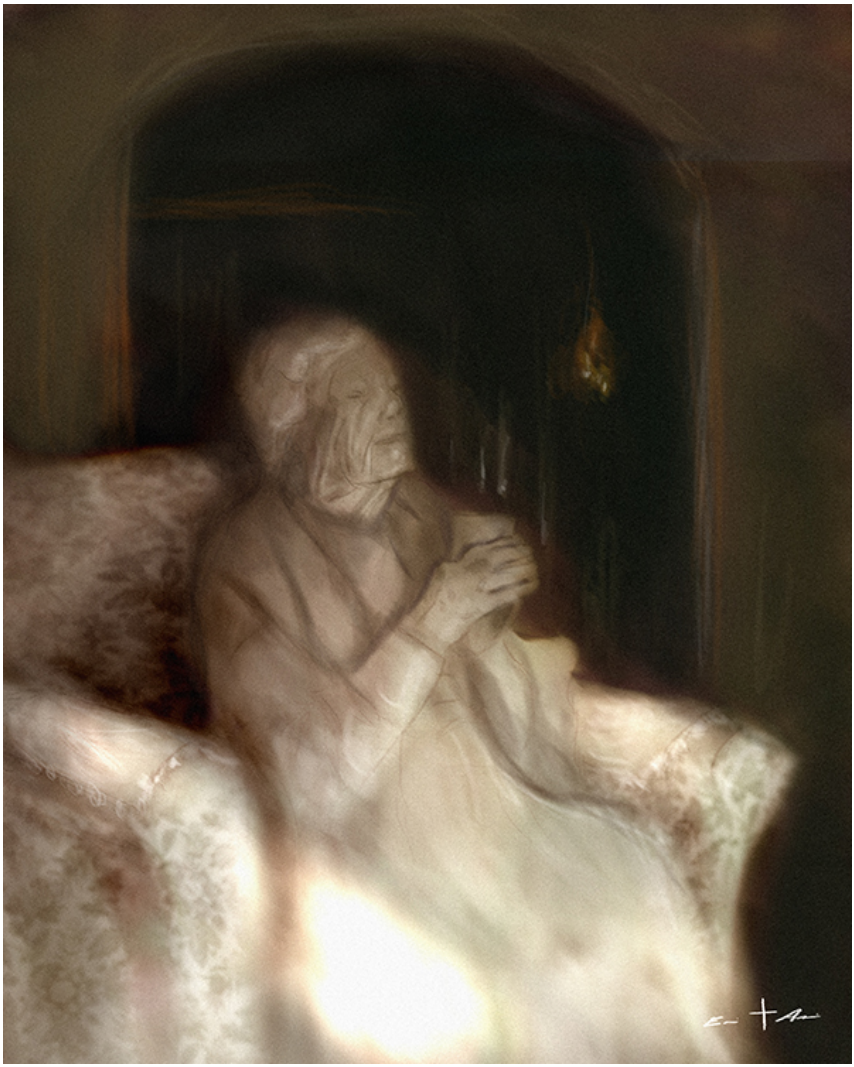

Illustration © 2022, Eric Asaris

Only the crones can hear Spindle House's call. They alone recognize the whispering of its windows and the keening of its attic, and the ones who follow the call all

the way to the front door are allowed admittance. Once ushered inside, the crones do not impose their will on the House, don't tear down the sagging porch or reupholster the sitting room chairs. They know enough to leave the cobwebs intact, and the House loves them for it. For the crones are no mere inhabitants, and the House is no object to be owned. They are, all of them, peers. They are confidants. They are a coven.

Today, Spindle House will open its doors, and the coven will welcome a new member.

Even now, footsteps sound on nearby pavement, thundering into the soil beneath, echoing along mole holes and up through the sump pump in Spindle House's basement. Someone is arriving, someone whose ears pricked up at Spindle House's song, someone whose loneliness and need sings right back. They will be here soon, and the crones need to prepare.

The House unlocks the front door.

Agata snorts and opens her eyes. She'd been napping, deeply, in the sturdy rocking chair she prefers, dreaming of mushroom soup. The House hates to rouse her—it hates to rouse any of the crones when they are getting some well-deserved rest—but it has no choice. And Agata is no fool. She hoists herself out of the rocking chair and peers at the door, whose deadbolt knob has snicked horizontal instead of vertical.

"Someone new is coming," she calls out.

"Are we sure?" Glory looks out the window. "I don't see anyone."

"The House always knows."

Glory has only been at Spindle House for a year, and there's a lot she still hasn't learned. She can't yet interpret the pattern of creaks in the attic steps, for example, or feel

the slight rumble as the House wriggles its toes in the dirt. But she knows that her own bones foretell imminent storms, and she assumes that the House's bones ache just the same.

She sets the kettle on to boil, and strokes her chin while she considers the jars lined up in the cupboard. Chamomile, that's easy. But also, she thinks, a pinch of peppermint, and some rosehip. She spoons the lot into a teapot and, after another moment's thought, takes down the wildflower honey. Then she nods, satisfied.

Meanwhile, Agata shakes out a set of bed linens. Last week, she laundered them, hung them to dry, and then folded them with a sprig of lavender. Now she spreads them on a recently-vacated bed. Clara's bed. Clara left Spindle House not long ago—gone to sky, to earth, to wind and dust. The crones mourn and celebrate at the same time. One cannot do one without the other. The new one won't replace Clara—crones are not interchangeable—but she will fit here if she wants to.

The crones found their way to Spindle House singly: Orderly Agata, who knows exactly where everything ought to be; Violet and her collection of knitting needles; Patricia, who armors herself with cosmetics and wigs, who wields her lacquered nails like swords; and Glory with her talent for mixing teas and tinctures. The House unlocked its doors for them one by one. Crones may travel in covens, but it's in the process of discovering a coven that one becomes a crone.

Now, they wait. They hush. Violet binds off the shawl she's been knitting. Agata checks their stock of mushrooms and makes a note to harvest a fresh crop from the basement, where they sprout from the dirt floor in a miniature forest. Patricia purses scarlet-painted lips and

sits primly on the edge of the sofa so that she doesn't wrinkle her skirt. Glory has never before witnessed an arrival and isn't sure of her place; Spindle House tries to soothe her by amplifying the steady tick of the large kitchen clock. Still, Glory is the only one who jumps when the door flings itself open.

The woman who presents herself to the House has gray hair pulled back into a bun, a thin coat thrown over a house dress, and practical pumps. Even though she has traveled to Spindle House purposefully and willingly, she hesitates before she crosses the threshold. The House makes itself as welcoming as it can, expanding its entryway to allow the woman space, fluffing its rug to cushion her feet; still she remains frozen in the doorway, as if caught in the act of committing a crime. This is a woman, Agata realizes, who has never been made to feel at home. A woman who has always served another's purpose, rather than her own.

Agata stands, favoring her right hip, and formally invites the woman inside. "Please," she says, reaching out her hand. "Spindle House is yours."

The woman still hesitates, but only for a moment. Then she inches inside, tentatively, her eyes darting birdlike around the room. Violet, having finished binding off the shawl, now stands to wrap it around the woman's shoulders. Patricia eyes the woman's raw, torn cuticles and offers up a jar of her thickest lotion. Glory pours the tea.

Agata wants very much to sit back down, but something feels… unfinished. The woman is here, the House has closed the door—gently, so as not to frighten her—and the coven gathers round. Everything should be in its place. But it's not. There's a loose end, as ugly and

obvious as a hanging tail of yarn in one of Violet's knits. It grates at Agata, and she can't relax.

This doesn't surprise the House. Agata is always the first to notice everything. And she's right: there is a loose end. It's approaching Spindle House right now, marching up its drive with heavy, angry steps. This is no crone searching for a coven. This is something else altogether.

Now the rest of the crones hear the footsteps approaching. The new woman clutches Patricia's arm with her newly moisturized fingers and murmurs something, her voice quieter than a whisper. Patricia leans close to hear.

"He doesn't *listen*."

This, the House understands. It knows how it feels to be ignored, dismissed, treated as less than sentient. It sends an angry hiss of water through its pipes, and tells the crones it will lock its door and throw the deadbolt. It will release the bats in its attic and the bees in its walls, and invite the poison ivy growing near the porch to rise up and weave itself around the interloper's ankles.

But the crones trade glances. They've met men like this before. And they know that he will not simply go away, no matter how loudly the House protests.

"I think," says Agata, "we ought to welcome him into our parlor."

The House's pipes stop their hissing, and its radiators tick thoughtfully. It has been years since the coven had someone for tea. The rest of the crones nod, alarmed but not afraid.

Someone turns the House's doorknob. "Mom?" calls a voice from outside. The woman cringes back as a young man opens the door wide and steps through, knocking twice on the frame as an afterthought. Agata bristles at

this breach in courtesy, and Violet reaches for her knitting needles. Only Glory and Patricia appear unfazed, Glory because she doesn't know any better, and Patricia because she is accustomed to wearing her face as a mask. Spindle House follows Patricia's example and smooths its area rugs and curtains, levels out its wonky stair.

The man spots the new arrival and throws out his hands. "Mom! What are you doing? This isn't your house!"

"She was invited," says Agata. "She's meant to be here."

The man registers Agata for only an instant; then his eyes slide past her, dismiss her—dismiss all the crones—as unnecessary.

"Sorry, ladies, she sometimes gets confused," he says, and then remembers to smile. "Mom, you know you're supposed to ask me before you leave the home."

The woman looks down at the floor. "I'm not your mom," she whispers.

He lets out an exaggerated sigh. "We'll get out of your hair," he says to the crones. "Come on, Mom."

The woman pulls Violet's shawl more tightly around her shoulders and raises her head. "I'm not your mom," she says again. The House amplifies her words, lets them echo through the room. "I've asked you to call me Margie."

The man laughs, loudly, showing all his teeth. "Well, okay, *Margie*. You know, I'm only calling you Mom because I'm speaking for both myself and Alice. Imagine everything I'm saying is coming from her, okay?"

"But Alice said I didn't have to move." Margie clears her throat, as if she is still unused to speaking. "She told

me I could stay in my house if I wanted to. I was just fine there. Alice said she could—"

"Alice needs to focus more on *our* house," says the man, his voice hardening. "I don't want her running off to help you every time you need to change a light bulb or go to the store."

"But she said it wouldn't be a problem."

"Alice shouldn't have said anything before checking with me."

Glory breathes in sharply. She hears the way the man speaks Alice's name, like a bitter tea in his mouth. Violet, too, sees the web this man has woven, how its strands tangle around both daughter and mother.

The man advances into the room. Step by step, deeper into the House, where he doesn't belong. He won't listen to Margie. He won't listen to any of them. Spindle House's floors vibrate in a barely-perceptible tremor that only the crones can feel. It hasn't done this in a long time. But it remembers how.

The crones begin their work.

Patricia steps between Margie and the man. His jaw clenches in irritation, but Patricia's powdered face is hard as armor. "We're so glad you could join us today," she says, hooking her shiny purple nails into his sleeve.

Glory hurries back into the kitchen and pinches herbs into a cup. When she pours water over them, a thick steam wafts up, winding its way into the vestibule where it coils like a rope. Meanwhile, Violet weaves her spell with strands of cotton-puff hair and wiry chin-whiskers, with balls of yarn and strips of cloth, with spider-webs that cling to corners and dust-bunnies that gather near baseboards.

And Agata, orderly Agata, gathers all their magic together, harnessing the power of the coven. A place for everything, and everything in its place, and that place is *here*: warped floorboards and out-of-square walls, low ceilings that weep in heavy rains. Here in the House that loves the crones so.

Spindle House flexes its ceiling joists.

The man flinches as if he's been stung. He slaps at his own arms, waves his hands near his face. He hasn't bothered looking at the crones carefully, and he still can't see the points of their knitting needles, the rough edges of their hangnails. He can't taste the kiss Patricia gives him, with her painted mouth as red as blood.

But Margie can see everything. For the first time in years, her eyes clear and sharpen. She's always been meek and compliant. She was taught that a lady ought to smile pleasantly and hold her tongue, that staying quiet meant staying safe—and she taught her daughter the same. How she regrets that now. How she regrets never teaching her daughter to use her voice.

But now, at long last, Margie will use her voice for the both of them. She draws in a deep breath, opens her mouth, and wails.

She wails for the husband who has long since returned to earth; for the daughter who once curled in her lap; for a world she barely recognizes but loves still, with a ferocity she's only now beginning to reclaim.

Her voice rises and rises, and Glory's steam coalesces around her in a thick halo of magic. Violet knits Margie into their spell. Patricia runs her hand roughly down the man's face, wiping away his faux-concern as if it were nothing more than rouge. And Agata gathers up Margie's voice as if it were a freshly-laundered sheet, shakes it out

with a snap, and folds it into a tidy incantation. Spindle House's walls bow in and out, breathing the crones' magic. Making it manifest.

The front door slams shut with a bang that makes the man jump. Regaining his composure, he strides to the door and jiggles the knob, violently, trying to force the door to open.

Spindle House will not be forced.

The front door shudders and bristles with splinters. One of them pulls itself from the wood and flings itself across the room, grazing the man's cheek as it flies by. He backs away from the door, stumbling on buckling floorboards.

"Hey!" he calls, jerking as another flying splinter aims itself at his eyes. "I'm just trying to help!"

"I don't. Need. Your help." Margie forces each word out with difficulty, and the man staggers back as if pushed.

"You're just confused!" he pleads.

Margie falters. She *is* confused, about so much. The world has grown so very strange, and there's so much she doesn't remember.

But still. She remembers this man. How he poisoned her daughter against her. How he poisons *everything*.

Spindle House rises around her, its old bones sturdy and strong, and Margie remembers that she is not helpless. Violet's shawl holds her together and shields her like a suit of armor. Agata's whispered incantation is a song Margie remembers, a sharp breeze cutting through fog. She breathes in deep, filling her lungs with Glory's steam and Patricia's perfume. She pauses, gathering her strength.

Then she screams.

"I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP!"

It's a wall of sound, and as it echoes through Spindle House, bouncing off its walls and filling up its corners and rafters, it pushes the man toward a door that yawns like an open mouth, a door that leads to the basement. Dust whirls and rises and makes his eyes water, and the floor bucks beneath his feet, and everything in Spindle House rises up to reject him like white blood cells fighting off an infection.

Margie's shriek grows hoarse but with one final push, it forces the man backwards, all at once, down the basement steps. His arms cartwheel; he grasps for Margie, for a railing, for anything to break his fall. But it's too late.

He lands roughly on the dirt floor at the bottom, injured, but still alive. For now.

Margie stands at the top of the stairs, looking down at the helpless, broken body the man has become, and thinks of Alice. When he doesn't return, will her daughter worry? Will she blame herself? Will she—Margie pales at the thought—will she find someone even worse?

"No," Margie whispers, and then she says it again, louder: "No." Like Margie, Alice is stronger than she appears. She just needs a chance to discover it for herself.

The dirt floor beneath the man rustles, and churns, and mushrooms pop up like bubbles in a cauldron, pale and soft and so delicate you might think you could crush them.

You would be wrong.

Up they spring, dozens of mushrooms, hundreds. White buttons grow between his fingers and legs; intricately-furled hens of the woods creep over his shirt and pants, up his neck toward his chin. He opens his

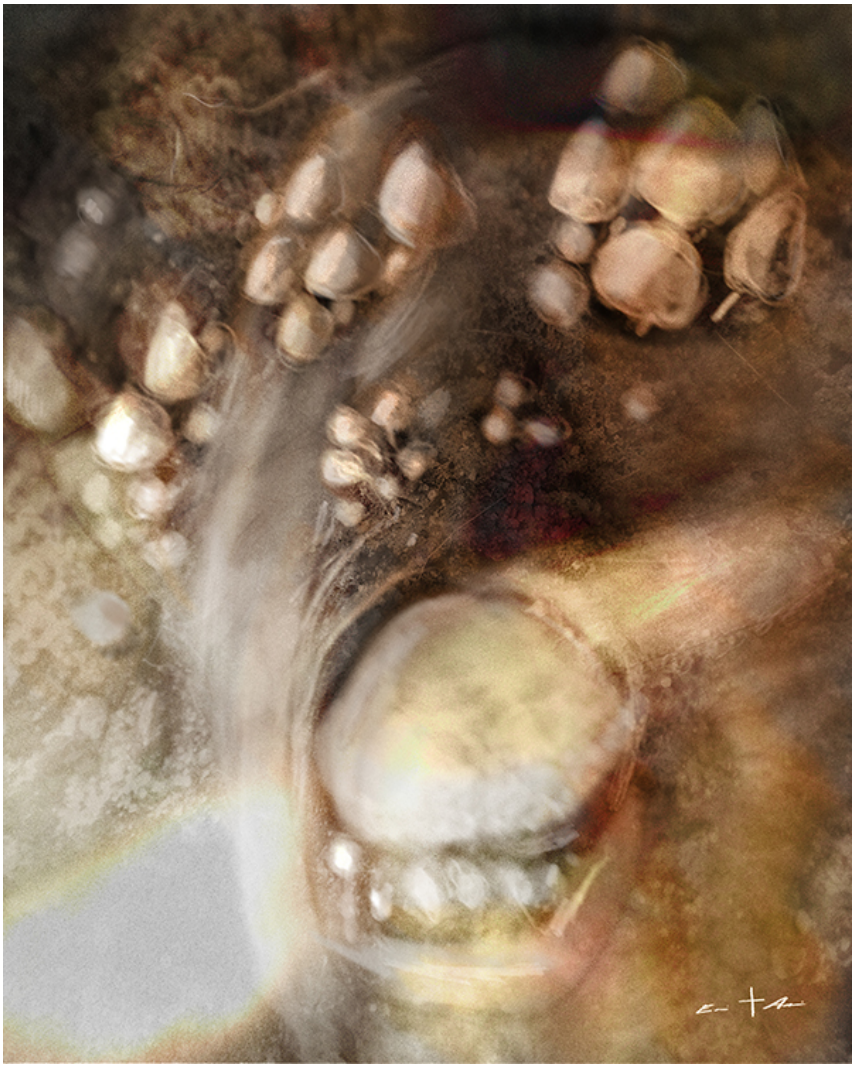

Illustration © 2022, Eric Asaris

mouth to scream and a portabella sprouts between his lips. Small toadstools with long arching stems emerge from his ears and his nostrils and his eyes, from every gaping orifice. Within minutes, he is indistinguishable from the fungus, just another fruiting body. He has returned to earth. He is gone.

The spell dissipates. Margie pants, and places her hand against the wall to steady herself. The House sighs and creaks. It takes longer, these days, for it to recover after an effort like this. It is not as young as it once was, but who is?

Agata offers to take Margie's coat, but she demurs and backs away, still shaken. Agata just shrugs. No one tells a crone what to wear, or what to do.

Glory pours a fresh cup of tea, and after a wary moment, Margie accepts it. She breathes in the steam and the muscles around her eyes and jaw unclench. She's still a skittish, frightened bird of a woman, but they all feel a change in her energy as her panic lessens. Agata nods approvingly at Glory, who flushes with embarrassed pride.

"My daughter," says Margie, her forehead creasing. "Alice."

"Maybe she'll find her way here," says Agata. "If she wants to." Agata is careful not to promise, because none of the crones lie to each other. But she offers hope, because in spite of everything, hope fills Spindle House like oxygen, like the scent of lavender tucked into sheets and mint steeping in tea, like cocoa-butter lotion rubbed into tired hands and knitted blankets piled on sofas. Alice is young—perhaps too young to hear Spindle House's call—but age alone does not make a crone. A crone chooses to be. Everything a crone needs to know is already within her foundations, in her bones.

Margie takes her tea and settles herself into the floral chair with lace doilies on the arms. The chair no one ever sits in, as if it's been waiting for her. And perhaps it has; Spindle House doesn't ask existential questions. It's simply a House.

The clock ticks, and the crones each sit in their preferred chair, and Spindle House retreats into its rafters to rest. They doze, and dream their own dreams. And, Agata promises herself, when they wake, there will be mushroom soup.

Bridge

S. Brackett Robertson

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The first time Linden didn't feel lost in eir new city was when ey found the bridge troll. Ey was late for dinner. Ey'd had rehearsal with the rest of the orchestra after school, but without the other kids from the same neighborhood to follow, ey couldn't quite find eir way home. Again. This city was made up of impossibly small streets all tumbling into one another, and Linden must have taken the wrong one, turned the wrong way, because instead of the usual playground ey passed, there was a bridge. It was small, narrower than the ones over the busy

river. A creek ran below it, one Linden had never noticed before. Ey would have remembered a creek. Creeks were special. Linden held eir viola a bit tighter, and stepped onto the bridge. Ey was probably still in the right neighborhood, couldn't be that far from home. Linden looked downstream, but the landscape curved too tightly to see where the creek was going.

Linden could hear something coming from under the bridge, a strange noise, and an occasional vibration. Ey walked down the creekside, starting tiny avalanches with each step. Ey peered cautiously under the arch of the bridge. There was a troll there. Ey hadn't ever seen a troll before. Eir friend Keisha had brought em to the river see a centaur but ey'd only seen a flicker in the woods. Ey wasn't quite sure if ey entirely had believed Keisha but ey'd wanted to. Some places always felt secret, and magic, and lived-in. But now, here. This wasn't just a flicker, this was absolutely a troll, under a bridge. The troll's skin was the same gray as the stone, and they were tall, their head almost touching the arch of the bridge, about eight feet up.

"Hello?" said Linden, cautiously. Ey didn't want to startle them.

"Did She send you?" said the troll, not turning around, "Tell her to leave me alone! I have claims-right!"

"I…" Linden started to respond when the troll turned.

"You're human," the troll said, dropping the rock they'd been holding, "I think anyway. I haven't seen a human in decades. I thought you were someone She'd sent, after the bridge again."

"Er… yes I'm human," Linden said. Ey hadn't expected other beings to rarely see humans. Ey'd never thought to ask Keisha about that, "Who's She?"

“The queen,” the troll said.

“Of trolls?” Linden said.

“Of all of us,” the troll said. The troll turned away from Linden, began arranging the branches of the bushes growing along the riverbank.

Linden turned away and looked around under the bridge. There was a nook there that Linden hadn’t noticed before. It was cement like the rest of the bridge, but shelves were carved out of it. Nothing was on the shelves.

“Who are you?”

“I am Galdina, the gatekeeper. I collected the tolls for the Queen. It is why she lets me live here, between her lands, under this bridge,” Galdina said, “The Queen appointed me, said ‘Galdina—she’ll collect the tolls at the westward bridge.’”

“This bridge? Not yours?” Linden asked.

“The Queen wants to claim it because it crosses over the creek. She can’t claim the creek, but she can claim both banks. I’ve lived here for years and years but I don’t have power like she does. If I try to challenge her, She’d win,” Galdina said.

“Well that’s unfair,” said Linden.

“She’s not fair,” Galdina said.

“What is the toll?” Linden had some small experiences with toll booths. There weren’t many in eir old city, but on road trips ey and eir dad would drive up to some small house in the middle of the highway and hand over change. Somehow Linden doubted tolls here would be like that.

“A soul is traditional,” said Galinda.

“A whole soul? That’s the most expensive toll I’ve ever heard of!” Linden said.

"Well, no one's given me any tolls for quite a while now. But," she said, in a quieter tone, "You could give me your faith. Your friendship with someone you've held close."

"I'm not religious. And I don't want to give my friends up just to cross a bridge."

"Ah," said Galdina, turning away. She seemed to be slightly deflated, discouraged.

Linden sat. The ground was rough, made up of many stones. They'd been smoothed, but they were still the size of Linden's fist and were not comfortable to sit on. Ey began to dig through them, feeling the way they shifted and moved together.

Eir gaze traveled upwards from the stones, to the gray cinderblock bricks. It looked smaller than when Linden had first arrived. Galdina looked smaller too, her head no longer obscured by the rafters. Linden's eyes shifted, looking a bit to the sides, behind Galdina and checked for tributes. If they were here, where were they? Or were most tributes not physical? Galdina had mentioned giving friendship. Perhaps what was valuable to a troll was different than what was valuable to humans.

Linden could see a faint trace of a painting behind Galdina's head. It had looked like the corner of some words at first, "we were here" scrawled onto the bridge, but Linden could see more of it now, see that those were only the edges. It was a large sketch of a tree, a gorgeous drawing, though the lines were fading out. It looked to have been there for at least fifty years but the tree reminded Linden of one outside eir window. It couldn't have stayed the same shape for fifty years. Ey traced eir eyes out from the sketch, seeing the wear on each brick

and following the paths of it. There were no other drawings.

"That was a payment, wasn't it?" Linden asked, nodding towards the painting.

Galdina turned slowly towards the sketch, and then slowly back to Linden. She was drawing herself out of some place, like pulling a spoon slowly out of molasses.

"Yes. The o… My token," Galdina said. She stood up as she spoke, turned and reached behind her to trace the drawing. Linden was amazed that her shoulders didn't cross the rafters of the bridge. She'd seemed to join with the structure of the bridge before.

"Could I play a song? As payment?" Linden asked. Ey hadn't thought art could count as payment.

"Of course," Galdina said.

Linden got eir viola out of the case, taking care to not drop it on the rocky bank. Ey wasn't sure what to play. Somehow the songs that ey was learning in band didn't seem right for this place, for Galdina. Linden started out improvising and gradually the notes resolved into something like a tune. Galdina was smiling as ey played, and seemed satisfied even as the song was short. Linden was struck by how much Galdina's approval reminded em of eir first teacher's face when ey first mastered a piece. Ey smiled in response.

"Thank you," Galdina said as Linden gathered eir viola up and walked back up the bank of the creek. Ey could see where ey was now, that ey was just uphill from eir new house. Linden smiled as ey started towards it. Somehow, being at the creek felt like being home.

Lunch was nerve-wracking here, with no one to sit with. It wasn't that the other students were mean, per se, but that Linden didn't know what place ey fit. At eir last school before the move ey had a table full of kids who didn't fit in with the other tables, but somehow fit together. They didn't have some unified theme either; each one had their own varied interests.

Here, at eir new school, it was different. Each sports team sat together, each club too. No one seemed mixed together like eir old school. For the first week Linden had been sitting by emself, and Linden had begun to head to eir usual spot when suddenly ey was flanked by Nadia and Ada Ramirez, two of the other band kids.

"Hey! Come sit with us," Ada said. In the back of eir mind Linden knew ey wanted to check if anyone else knew about the creek with the troll. Well, ey wouldn't ask about the troll part. Just the creek part. If it came up.

"Sure," Linden said. The twins were dragging em over to a tableful of the other kids in band and orchestra. Linden recognized most of them but there was one person who Linden hadn't seen before, sitting on the other side of Nadia Ramirez. Ey sat down between her and Nadia. There was something about the person ey hadn't seen before that reminded em of eir old friends, of home.

"Hi, can I sit here? I'm Linden," ey said to the new person.

"Sure! Yessenia."

"Linden's in orchestra," said Nadia, and resumed talking to the others rather rapidly. From what Linden could tell they were arguing about which was better, *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. Ey dug into eir sandwich.

"They have this argument at least once a week," Yessenia said, "Sometimes I like to pick a side, just to

mess with them, but I'm not that invested. I usually go back to reading my book."

"Ha! I'd do that too," Linden said, "What are you reading?"

"*The Westing Game*, for probably the millionth time," Yessenia said.

"I love that one! Before I moved, I'd bring it down next to the river all the time, to sit and read and watch the water go by. Know of any good creeks around here?"

"Just the big one in the park," said Yessenia.

"None in this neighborhood, though? I thought I heard one the other day."

"Nope," Yessenia said, turning the page in her book. Linden got out a book too. Both of them sitting there, reading their separate books made Linden think of eir old friends back home, and ey smiled. Maybe this town wasn't so bad after all.

The jazz band rehearsal ended at the same time as the orchestra rehearsal the next day, and Linden found emself following the Ramirez twins home. Ey often walked home with the Ramirez twins. They were loud and funny during the school day and would often riff off each other, but on the way home they always walked like this, one sister ahead of the other each plugged in to their headphones.

Linden didn't mind. Today it gave em even more of a chance to look for the bridge and Galdina. Most days it just relieved the pressure of coming up with something interesting to say. It was hard to talk to most of the people here, even the ones whose parents would exclaim "Oh but you have so much in common!" when their kids met em.

They weren't bad people, and Linden quite enjoyed their company, but they didn't make Linden relax the way people back home had.

Ey missed feeling the calm the creek gave em. There had been some people at home who gave that feeling: Makda, who would climb trees just to sit and sketch a different view, and Khoua, who liked walks. If Linden had been at home, would ey have shown Khoua this place by now?

It felt like the adults were trying to shove em together with other kids who were "like you", other queer kids, other musicians. But what ey missed was the friends ey could just sit in silence with in the hammock all summer, reading, napping, relaxed.

Ey didn't want to be like anyone else.

Linden sat with the other band kids for most of the days that week, but on Friday, ey just wanted to sit alone. Linden wasn't sure if the Ramirez sisters or the other band kids wouldn't try to drag em to the band table, or sit with em anyway, so ey decided not to go to the cafeteria at all. The school was having a spirit rally, or an assembly, or something school-spirit related that Linden didn't care for after lunch anyway, so ey went looking for a park to sit in instead. Ey didn't miss the noise of the school at all after going outside, the constant chatter in the halls. Ey was surprised, though, when ey brought out eir book, that ey was thinking of Yessenia. She would probably understand the need for quiet, the need to be alone and think.

Linden went back to eir book, just as a loud car zoomed past the park ey was sitting in. Still too loud. Ey

picked up eir backpack and viola, and began to walk in the direction ey thought led to eir house, or at least the direction that led away from the school and the busier streets that surrounded it. As the streets got a bit quieter, ey realized the song ey'd played for the troll was in eir head. Linden hadn't thought of the troll at all, not since last week. Not the troll. Galdina.

Ey could hear the creek now, the same one ey had found last time. This time there was no bridge right away, no troll yet. This time the road gently made way for pebbled banks, the street signs for trees.

And there. At the end of the creek, a bridge. Linden squinted. Galdina's form was familiar now, but still far enough away to not be completely clear. Galdina didn't seem to see Linden yet. She was facing the arch of the bridge, touching the stone, running her hands along it over and over again. She was singing something in a low voice. Linden turned away. Ey began to walk up the bank, leave Galdina some privacy, but once ey reached the trees ey could feel the air change, could hear Galdina's singing blending with the sound of eir feet on the rocky bank. Galdina turned around at the noise. Linden watched as the recognition overtook her face.

"You're back!" she said, "no one's ever come back before. Well, except the Queen." Her expression turned blank again.

"Hi, Galdina," Linden said. Ey wasn't sure if ey'd hoped this was true, that ey'd really met a troll, that there really were fairy queens and tithes and bridge tolls.

"There's been so few tolls," Galdina said, trailing her long fingers in the creek water. "And she's taken yours already. I can hardly feel the water, much less the footsteps of anyone coming now."

"Why can she take your tolls? Linden asked. "Why do you let her have power over you?"

"She has a stronger claim. She has the pledges of her whole court to uphold her rule. I'm courtless, but I've had a contract with her. I gather the tithes, and I can keep some small piece of this land, this bridge. But… There are two queens, you see. Two courts and a war over the points that touch the Human world. My land has power. And it isn't mine. It isn't really mine, not unless I can claim it. I'd have to go against her court to do that."

Linden walked down towards the water, picked up one of the pebbles that had been washed up alongside the river and tossed it as far down stream as it would go.

"Is there a way to get it back? Your bridge?" Ey pictured courts and lawyers, a room full of trolls in robes and suits, Galdina and emself standing in front, arguing their case.

"The court, I would have to fight… I," Galdina started, then trailed off. Linden watched her eyes trail away, watched her retreat from the thought of the battle. Eir eyes stopped tracing Galdina's, started seeing eir old home, along the river. This creek felt the same as that river, though it wasn't as big, but everything here felt right, felt familiar.

"Who? How? How would you have to fight? Isn't this important to you? Doesn't this matter!" Linden found emself standing taller, stepping up the bank towards Galdina. It matters to me, Linden thought to emself. This place matters to me.

Galdina's eyes went to the bridge. Linden went back towards the water again, reaching eir fingers down to trail along, make ripples. Ey was startled by how strongly ey

felt about the bridge. Galdina's bridge. Linden had to gather eir thoughts back together before ey spoke,

"There was a park back in the city I lived in before. It was near my school, and the students would go there at the end of lunch. It was lovely to be able to sit somewhere quiet, to be with the trees for a small part of the day. Until suddenly the school said we couldn't go there anymore. We weren't allowed outside during the day in winter, but this was spring. My friends Makda and Khoua and I started a petition but the school didn't listen. So one day, we got our whole grade to go to the park for lunch period. We brought our textbooks and read aloud to each other from the trees. After that, they let us have class in the park sometimes, if our teachers allowed it. We didn't get to go there at lunch again that school year, but they let us go outside during the day. It felt something like a victory.

"We fought then, and I want to fight now. I will stand with you. I will fight with you. I give you my word as payment for passage."

Galdina looked at Linden for a long moment, then at the creek, then she walked to the top of the bridge, where the embankment began. She pushed a stone aside, and a drawer pulled out. Taking something from it, Galdina neared Linden again.

"Here. Take this. It is a pledge. So I can call you again."

Galdina moved back up the bank, towards where the bridge met it and turned her back to Linden. She seemed to settle back in to a familiar spot there. Linden heard a low note, which resonated and echoed the sounds of the creek. Ey turned, and saw that Galdina had begun to sing. She was singing to the creek, and Linden almost thought it could understand. Linden began wading towards the

bank, holding the pledge carefully as ey crossed the creek.

The streets opened up once ey left the creek bed. The route untwisted and Linden followed each landmark to the next until ey was home. Linden paced a lot once ey reached eir street. Ey couldn't quite go inside, smile at eir Dad, act like the only thing that had happened today was school, not giving eir word to a mythical creature. Linden wasn't quite sure why ey'd done it. The words just rushed up on a wave of feelings about creeks, and water, and quiet spaces. Things that felt right. Ey wasn't sure if pledging emself to fight was reckless, but ey still felt the creek's calm. Linden knew ey wanted to return.

Linden returned to the creek that Saturday, managed to find it after walking around for about thirty minutes, taking street after street lined with houses until the houses fell away and there was woods and a creek and a sense of calm. Linden didn't take the bridge this time, but slowly climbed down the bank and sat on a stone, dipping eir feet in the water. The water helped em think, felt like a place ey belonged to.

Ey'd brought eir viola along on a whim, grabbed it before heading out the door. There weren't as many places to play outside here. Or maybe there were, but ey didn't know them yet, but it was comforting to carry, knowing that if the desire to play something struck, ey wouldn't be lacking.

There was a bench along the shore now, that ey hadn't remembered before. Ey sat on it, and pulled out eir viola. The bench was close enough to the water that ey could put eir feet in as ey played.

Linden played an old song, one ey knew ey'd heard before. Ey didn't think it usually sounded like this, with all of the notes racing each other, but one of the notes in this version was the same as the first note ey'd heard Galdina sing. Ey began to play with the melody, changing the rhythm, adding in variations. Linden found emself playing along with the water, notes hitting water and water hitting rock. Ey added in eir own part, added in a part that sounded like Galdina's movements. Ey had begun to try to build the bridge in notes, when the sound of laughter cut through eir concentration. It was Nadia, somewhere up above the creek. Ey stopped playing. The music had lost its shape again, gone back to the way it sounded in the band room and besides, Linden didn't want Nadia to see this place. Nadia Ramirez was part of a different world.

"And I told him that's the hardest note to play!" Nadia Ramirez was saying to her sister and a couple of the other band kids as Linden walked up.

Ey settled down at the lunch table and got out eir usual tuna sandwich. Ey'd fallen into the habit of sitting with the band kids after Nadia and Ana had dragged em over to their table. Ey was grateful for the gesture but the lunches tended to make em miss eir friends at home. Then, ey could keep up with the conversation, knew the jokes. Here, ey always felt slightly outside. Linden realized ey had begun to stare into space when Yessenia's hand and fork crossed eir line of sight. Yessenia caught Linden looking and smiled a bit.

"Whatcha looking at?"

"Nothing. Just thinking," Linden said. Yessenia was usually reading and quiet at lunch, but when she spoke Linden liked her wit. Today Linden thought ey'd caught the glimpse of a familiar cover under the table. Yessenia looked back down again, pulling her long black hair behind an ear and out of the way of the book pages.

"Have you ever had a place that felt like home to you immediately?" Linden asked.

"A couple, yeah. The library here at school, the meadow near my grandparents' new house, the beach."

"I felt that here the other day, for the first time since moving," said Linden.

"That's amazing!"

"I feel at home when I'm just sitting and reading with a friend," Linden said and Yessenia nodded at this. "And this place has that kind of quiet. I'm afraid of losing it though. I had to move away from so many of those spaces. I wouldn't want to lose my first one here."

Linden tried to talk to Galdina through the pledge, get more instructions, and when that didn't work ey just walked down to the creek again. Galdina was there, holding some kind of bundle of sticks close to her. She waved when she saw Linden approach.

"How do we defend your bridge? You said the Queen is trying to take it. How does she do that? How can we hold it?"

Galdina walked up the bank, towards where the bridge met the farther shore. She reached into the concrete. Eventually she brought out a woven circle of twigs. It shone with a somewhat dim light, but it shone with the glow Linden had come to think of as magic.

“I need to renew my claims-right, double it so we can leave one behind when we go to the Queen to defend. I gathered these sticks, this mud, all these parts of my home so long ago,” Galdina sat on the bank.

“So the claims-right is just pieces of the creek? Isn’t that easy to get?”

“It needs to be bound with energy and I don’t have enough from tolls, though, so there’s less to hold it together. And there needs to be a claims-right left here to defend this space when we go to meet with the Queen. The claims-right is currently too weak to be left alone. We need to strengthen it and gather a second one that we can take to the Queen.”

“Oh,” Linden said, “How do you gather one?”

Galdina paused, “I’m not entirely sure. I gathered this one when I first began living under the bridge, many years ago. At that time, the Queen was content to stay on her lands on one bank of the creek. I was able to gather it, but I don’t know if it has enough power.”

“Well, we can leave it to guard your bridge right? Maybe if we walk along the creek together we can gather the core of it first. It’s made out of sticks?” Linden squinted at it.

“It is made out of the branches that fall in this creek, the mud from the banks, water from the creek itself. You gather first and I’ll sit here with the claims-right. Then I’ll gather what we need to make it whole.”

Linden nodded and waded into the creek. Eir thoughts were muddled. What is the heart of this place? There wasn’t much ey could see in the water right away, mostly muddy streaks fed from upstream. Ey picked up a twig as it passed. I need a way to lay a claim, ey thought. Not with a court, but with myself.

The first home was the best, Linden thought. I had a treefort. I had a space. I remember the first move. I'd forget, when I woke up, where I was. Does this space remember? Does the bridge remember, the cement, the water?

Ey had walked down the bank for a while, feet half in and half out of the water. There wasn't pavement here. Just earth and rock and water. There were some strands of grass growing up, out from beneath the rocks and chunks of broken off concrete.

Linden grabbed a piece of the cement. It was solid and old, though it had fallen away from the bridge. Galdina might've touched it once, leaned against it when it was part of the wall. Ey grabbed a stone next. It seemed solid, connected to the water, as well as the bridge.

I wish I could hold the water too, ey thought, then reached down, scooped up some of the earth. I could turn it to mud, get it wet. It is mud under the water after all. Ey took the mud and cement and stone and held them together. They didn't exactly stay attached, but ey covered first the cement and then the stone in mud and carried it back to Galdina as it was drying. Galdina held a tightly woven basket that looked similar to the first claims-right. She used it to gather the creek water. Galdina began to press the mud and the twigs into the old claims-right and into another tight ball forming a new claims-right. After a while, Galdina spoke,

"These are the right shapes, the right materials, but I can tell they don't have enough power." She sat back, looking at the claims-rights. Linden looked at them too, then at the creek itself.

"What was that song you sang? The day I pledged myself to you. That seemed to resonate with the water. Could we use that to hold in the power?"

"Hmm. We could try that." Galdina began to sing, the same low notes but moving faster now. Linden thought the creek began to move a bit faster too. The claims-rights were changing. The new one solidified, became more than just sticks and mud, became its own object. The old one wove itself tighter together, grew stronger. Linden found the song ey'd played at the creek coming into eir mind unbidden. It was in the same key as Galdina's song.

When ey looked over, Galdina's eyes were closed. She stopped singing, sighed and said, "There. I'll summon you when the Queen calls me before her court."

Galdina called em a week later. Linden was sure it would be sooner and ey kept checking the pledge to see if ey'd missed something. Ey was certain it would flash or make a sound. Ey felt a little silly, checking on this rock more often than ey checked eir cellphone.

Ey needn't have worried. When Galdina called, Linden knew.

It was more of a feeling, a presence. Galdina just popped back into Linden's mind and wouldn't budge from there until ey went to the bridge.

Ey couldn't see Galdina at first. Linden feared ey'd walked down the wrong bank, that this was the wrong bridge, that somehow someone had stolen Galdina away. If she didn't own the bridge what was keeping her here?

Linden didn't let emself stay on that train of thought.

"Galdina?" ey called. "Are you there?"

"Mmph."

The sound came from the back of the bridge. Linden was surprised at eir relief. Was a week long enough to start worrying about someone?

Galdina's head emerged out of the shadows where bridge met bank. Linden noticed for the first time that her hair was the same color that the vines on the cement turned in autumn.

Galdina took the claims-right she'd sung into being and put it in a basket Linden had never seen before, leaving the older claims-right on the bank. Linden followed as Galdina started down the bank, although ey weren't quite as good at perching on the creekside stones. Ey bent down to pick up eir viola, and by the time ey had stood back up, Galdina had turned upstream and started walking in the creek.

"Where are we going, anyways?" Linden asked.

"Through the water," Galdina said simply. "We have to pass through water first." Linden mumbled something incoherent about new boots and mud and water stains but kept walking.

It seemed like the same creek, the same banks and the same shore that ey had walked along before, but ey could feel a tension, a tightness that sat in the air and wound up in eir muscles. Walking normally calmed em, but this walk just made eir back tighter and tighter until it felt taut.

"Galdina?"

"Yes?"

"When this is over—if I don't have the pledge anymore, will I find the bridge again, be able to visit you, find the creek?"

Galdina didn't answer right away, kept striding further downstream. Linden felt eir back muscles tighten further. The air was shifting too, getting stuffier despite

being outside. It smelled like the locker room at eir old middle school gym, the smell of sweat and tension and stress.

“I don’t know. No one has pledged to me before. Usually humans don’t see us when they pass by. Our tributes are mostly things they don’t know they’re losing.”

“I found it again last Saturday, just the creek, not your bridge. It was the same creek, though, I’m sure of it.”

“I expect you’ll find it when you need to, but I don’t know if you’ll always see me.”

Linden wasn’t sure how far they had walked. The banks looked the same as they did by Galdina’s bridge, but ey remembered walking for long enough for eir legs to ache and eir arm to be sore from keeping the viola case above the water.

There was no bridge here, though, and no calm feeling in the air. A different colored glow appeared on the horizon. It was a harsher light, bright and sterile. Once Linden’s eyes adjusted, ey could see a woman within. She looked regal, not just in her dress and crown, but in the way she carried herself. She walked with control.

The woman looked at Galdina as though she expected her to bow. Linden stood straight upright emself, trying to continue to look the Queen in the eye, taking eir cues from Galdina.

The eerie woman—the Queen—finally spoke,

“You lay claim to what is mine. You carry a claims-right to my bridge that crosses my territories.”

Galdina didn’t move, didn’t speak for a while. Linden tensed. Shouldn’t she be contesting the claim? The bridge was Galdina’s!

“The creek isn’t yours,” Galdina finally said, “And therefore, you cannot claim what crosses it. I have claims-right.”

“What claims-right?! It is made from mud of my banks, and by this young human at that.” The Queen’s light grew, reaching out towards the claims-right, sparking where it touched it.

Galdina crouched down a bit, but she didn’t bow, and she didn’t leave the creekwater.

“It is my claims-right. Built with my voice and my hands, and yes, Linden’s hands too. Ey pledged emself to me.”

Galdina was quiet for a moment, then started to sing the song she’d bound the claims-right with. The claims-right started glowing, and the water rushed faster, pushing away the Queen and her light. The Queen spoke a phrase under her breath and the light started creeping back towards water and Galdina’s notes started to waver. Galdina began singing louder.

Linden stood firm on the ground and thought of the quiet rushing of the creek, thought of the trees ey was named after, thought of home.

Ey took out eir viola and began to play. It wasn’t any of the songs ey’d played at the creek before, but something drawn from Galdina’s notes, meant to add back up, resonance. It sounded sort of like a song ey’d learned for the first time in the city of lakes, but ey had changed here in this city of swamps and arguments. As ey played and Galdina sang the claims-right began to emit its own light, push back the light of the Queen’s.

The Queen looked angry. She opened her mouth and began to sing some other song with notes that jarred with the song of Galdina and Linden and the creek. Little

spikes of the Queen's light started appearing, biting the water. The Queen smiled.

Linden began to add notes to eir song, make variations, try to make those bits of light go away, stop reaching towards em and Galdina and the claims-right but all eir song seemed to do was make the creek swirl around the spikes, not defeat them.

Then Galdina moved. She was still singing, but now she seemed to be dancing, her arms arching like the bridge over the creek, her body swaying with the rhythm of the small swirls Linden had begun to play. The claims-right began to change, solidify until it looked almost like Galdina's bridge. It started sending out its own glow, breaking up the Queen's spikes and pushing towards where she stood. The water got faster and faster again, pushing the Queen against one of the banks until finally she couldn't move unless she turned and left. She made one last attempt to grab the claims-right, but the water all moved as a wave and soaked her.

Galdina gathered the claims-right again and sat down on the bank which heaved a bit, made a seat for her. She took a deep breath. "Thank you."

She stood, then, and turned to walk back towards the bridge.

By the time they reached the bridge again, Galdina's singing had become louder than the rush of the water. It looked like the bridge was glowing, flashing bright every time Galdina sang a note. Linden hung back. Ey wanted Galdina to have the bridge to herself again, to let her be home.

Orchestra practice had gotten out at a weird time again, but this time Linden knew the route home, and even if ey did get lost, Yessenia was walking about twenty feet ahead, nose in a book. The rhythm of Yessenia's footsteps blended in with Linden's, and also something else. Running water.

The creek!

The road they were on was about to dead end into it, Yessenia looked up from her book in time to avoid walking into a tree.

"Huh. I didn't think I'd gotten lost," she said, as Linden caught up to her.

"There's a lovely creek through here," Linden said. "Would you like to follow me?"

Treacle Blood

Joyce Chng

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“You don’t have to cut open your veins,” the old woman warned me, “just to let them feed on you.”

It was the day after Qing Ming, when the tombs were swept and the visitors had already left in their cars. The hill of the graves was buried in its usual silence, filled only by the sound of wind and the skitter of spirit voices.

“My blood’s treacle,” I said quietly to the elder. “Like spun sugar.”

"Our lives are not a perpetual Spring Festival," the crone whispered and hobbled down the leaf-covered path, signaling the end of the conversation. She was always like this. I had grown used to her ways. The uncles who swept the tombs and kept the graveyard respected her, often giving her cigarettes and glass bottles she often hung on trees.

With a sigh, I drove off on my moped. I would be back again to seek her healing and counsel.

In the evenings, I sang to the crowd, strumming my guitar to the evening rush-hour traffic. I bared my veins and they fed. I felt good and bad at the same time. Their eyes glistened above their masks, gleaming at the prospect of a good feed.

My blood was treacle. Sweet. They lapped it up like sugar.

"Don't you feel tired after they feed on you?" Anna asked when I packed up for the night. She had insisted she accompany me when I busked on Singapore's streets.

"Yes," I said and took a sip of the isotonic drink.

"Then why do you keep doing this?" Anna sounded exasperated tonight. It was the full moon. She might turn into her true form later. I kept a close watch on her eyes.

"And this… after the virus has ravaged all of us? Why, Dawn, why?" she continued, relentless, like a wolf pursuing her prey.

"You're so pessimistic," I said curtly.

Even the mildest cases experienced Change. Some grew powerful. Some gained magical strength. Some developed animal traits.

Theories of the virus had percolated, gained popularity and then disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Flu. Cold. Disease. Change. Everyone still wore masks now, afraid of the virus and the change it had brought.

For me, my blood became sweet. Honey. Treacle. And they fed from me even when I bared my soul to the unkind world.

"I don't care if you were a singer or a writer or a poet," Anna growled even as black fur receded back into her skin. I cradled her in my arms. She shivered after her Change, her body trembling from the clash of cells, muscles and transformation.

I kissed her sweaty brow. I didn't care or thought I didn't, because my voice was my life. Wanting to create was my blood. I wanted to sing. I wanted to write.

"They feed from you," Anna said. "I don't like it, Dawn."

"Don't worry. I know how to protect myself," I lied.

I remembered watching the spun-sugar artist when he performed his craft in front of admiring eyes. He often showed up during Spring Festival, at the big fair, spinning molten amber sugar into delicate-looking dragons, phoenixes and goldfish. The air smelled sweet, like burnt sugar. The artist shaped fins, feathers and

scales like magic. When I bit into the dragon, sweetness burst in my mouth.

The artist loved making the golden figurines. He also loved the sounds of the admiring crowd.

When I grew up, music and words were my world. I loved making them. And like the spun-sugar artist, I loved the sounds of the crowd.

The old woman was at her usual spot amongst the graves of old colonial Singapore. The spirits chattered around her. They smelled me and salivated. She glared at them. Cowed by her stare, they fell back.

"You back for your cleansing ritual, ah?" the elderly lady said. She was the graveyard's guardian. The tomb sweepers gave her a wide berth whenever she was out and about on her business.

I removed my mask. "Yes," I nodded.

"Ah, today you show your true face," she chuckled, amused. "Most of them don't. Do you feel safe around me?"

"I do."

"Strange. The spirits are afraid of me."

"You guard the graves."

"Pity. I'm not usually that frightening."

She lit incense sticks with her beaten-up lighter. The sandalwood smoke wafted over me, creating a thin layer of protection over me. I sighed. I could feel myself healing already.

"So much damage," the old woman tsk-tsked. "They literally gouged you out."

"They were hungry."

"You need to protect yourself more often. Predators will eat and they don't care about your life."

She patched up the holes with the sandalwood smoke and incantations. They only worked for two weeks. Then I would be back again.

While I sat feeling the effects of the smoke infused with my blood, the grave guardian told me stories about Singapore, before the virus came, before Change came. So much joy. So much beauty. But what was normal didn't remain normal. Things went back to normal after that. People still wanted to feed.

What had changed were us. We changed.

I sang once more at the quay where the entertainment thrived and the vampires fed even as they dined on rare steaks and Pinot Noir. They gave me money. I needed it. They gave me shelter. I loved it.

The one-room apartment I shared with Anna was cosy enough. Having my own piece of air was an illusory joy. Anna made living a thing of beauty. Plants were everywhere in our little home. She placed pots of herbs on the ledge where the sunlight flooded in like a golden sheet. Mint. Rosemary. Lavender. Basil. The air was often fragrant with their sweet and sharp scents. We even salvaged wooden crates from the nearby supermarket for shelves and impromptu tables. We had tea-lights all over the apartment. In the dark, they glowed like tiny suns. This was our home, where we could be normal, relaxed, happy.

When I came back that night, Anna was not home. She had not been home for days now. She now craved being

in the open, in the rare forest fragments. I was afraid I had lost her, lost her to the change within her.

Would I be lost too?

Like her?

Suddenly feeling a wave of dizziness, I collapsed on the sofa. The vampires had fed hard tonight. But at least I had money to pay for my rent and bills.

My skin crawled. It felt as if it was inflamed.

I burned. I was on fire.

Then I caught something golden, gleaming down my arm.

Golden liquid flowed down open wounds. I gasped. I was criss-crossed with gold, with amber liquid that smelled like burnt sugar.

"Old lady, can you save them? Please?" the wolf said to the grave guardian. "They are dying."

Illustration © 2022, L.E. Badillo

The grave guardian gazed sadly at the emaciated figure before her. A spider-web of golden streaks covered the skin, dripped down the thighs.

"Aiyah, they are just too far gone," the old lady said, shaking her head. "They should have stopped baring the veins to the jiang shi."

"Is it too late to save them? Please, auntie, please save them."

The grave guardian stared back at the black wolf. A human's eyes gazed back at her.

"I told Dawn to protect themselves. Our lives were too fragile to feed a world that wants to eat us."

"And look at them now. So weak, no blood at all."

The old lady lit her incense sticks and readied her incantations.

"I will see what I can do," she declared. The spirits shrank at the tone of her voice.

Then she sang down the skies, the earth and the stars. The sandalwood smoke wrapped the figure like a gentle loving cocoon.

And there was silence amongst the graves.

I came to and stared into Anna's golden eyes.

You need to stop feeding them, the wolf seemed to plead.

Please stop, I beg you.

I sang to the crowd.

I needed to.

My golden blood flowed inside me, singing, dancing, glowing.

I sang.

They fed.

The wounds grew bigger.

I beg you.

Please stop.

I sang.

The old woman shook her head.

“The sandalwood smoke can’t protect you forever.”

I sang because I had treacle blood.

I would keep on baring my veins to them.

I didn’t know why.

Please stop.

When I visited the graveyard, the old crone was no longer there. The uncles told me that she was “just gone” like that. Like incense smoke. She left me a present, apparently. They came back with bundle of sandalwood incense sticks.

In the wind, I heard her gentle laughter.

Seams of Iron

Adriana C. Grigore

Illustration © 2022, Katharine A. Viola

When Erin first found the witch's hut, it was past dusk, and birds were slicing the last spill of sunlight from the horizon, letting it fall like ribbons into the wild, rippling sea. The wind was so strong that the wood of the walls creaked, as if the hut was of half a mind to just let itself be taken away, broken and splashed into the air, like a dry image of a shipwreck. The thistle and chamomile and hyssop that lay around the garden fence were blown back from the cliffside, nearly doubled down to the earth, then shaken around, when the wind turned.

It was cold, but wonderfully so. Erin rushed to get out of the feeble shelter of the hut's shadow and turned to face the sea, letting the gale splash into her like the waves down below. She could barely hear them at the bottom of

that grey cliff, so loud was the call of the world, the winds that pulled the night from over the horizon.

It made her feel clean.

It made her feel *light*, as if she could have let go and flown away at once with the house. Yet she didn't, and the house held its ground too, in quiet solidarity. Instead, Erin swept her ruffled hair out of her face, took a deep breath of sharp, brackish air, and pushed the gate of the witch's fence inward, dragging the frayed edges of her dress up the short, pebbled path to the door.

The witch didn't answer her knocks for a good long while, so long that Erin thought of seating herself and her stuffed wicker basket down by the door and waiting for the morning, when maybe she would come out. Yet, on her fifth round of knocks, something was knocked over in turn on the other side, and she heard a string of curses muttered far within, before the door finally opened, forcefully enough to make the wood of its frame groan.

The witch looked at her as if Erin was someone come to beg the last piece of bread off her—tired, irritated and drained of patience. She was tall, and younger than Erin had expected someone like her to be, with only a few untimely strips of grey in her long, dark hair. Her eyes were like the sea at night, her face like a wraith's lost in the forest. She stared at Erin loudly enough that she didn't need words.

Erin made herself smile and held her basket up between them. "Do you need a cloak?"

Her father used to have the most wonderful cloaks when she was younger. Not few were the days when Erin would take one of them, wrap it around her body, and run

to the edge of the woods, imagining she was a huntress, or maybe a woodsman, or a groundskeeper like her father. She was so short then that she would come back home with the hems all muddy and scratched by briars, and she'd do her best to put them all to rights again before anyone saw.

She mostly learned stitching through that alone. The rest she learned from the castle maids, who were only too happy to see her busying herself every once in a while with something more sensible than play-fighting with her brothers, wearing her father's clothes, or following him around the castle grounds.

They weren't a wealthy family—that was what they said, when someone saw the brooches holding their robes and wondered at their frayed clothes.

When their great-grandfather had been offered the chance of living in the castle, their father told them once, he'd already been groundskeeper for half his life. At the time, he'd refused the king, politely, meekly, saying that their home was already close enough. Yet, afterwards, the walls of the castle grounds had started shifting, year after year, until they had stretched far enough to encase their home too. As if it had been the land itself that wanted to hold its keeper close; and nobody had ever realised when it had happened, least of all the groundskeeper, or the royalty.

They hadn't been born into richness. Rather, it had gathered at their seams, like dirt in the wrinkles of their clothes, like dust lingering in the corners of a hastily swept room. Royalty was always something next-door, something that was always there, with all its funny ways of being, familiar and unfamiliar, like anyone seen only through a window.

They *weren't* a wealthy family, yet sometimes dregs of wealth slipped in under the door. At wintertide, Erin and her siblings were gifted golden brooches on one side of the garden wall and straw dolls on the other, and rejoiced equally over both. At summertide, their father served them venison on wooden plates and plum pie in silver bowls. It was a strange dance they did around fortune, blending it in their life while hanging on to an idea of humility.

A peculiarity, that was all it was. While others had neighbours that liked to sleep in bed with their chickens, they had neighbours that liked to sleep on sheets of silk, kings and queens and eleven princes with golden birds hanging over their beds.

The witch went deeper into the darkened hut and sat heavily in a chair. There were a great number of pots and cups gathered on a long table beside her, and before turning to Erin again, she busied herself by adding another spoonful of dark honey in a steaming mug and stirring it too little for it to actually melt.

When she faced Erin again, her sour expression had not changed.

"I can't stay outside in all that wind. I'm gonna catch my death," the witch said, a bit hoarsely. "What did you want from me again?"

Erin held her basket tight. "To give you a cloak," she said.

"Why?"

It was a dry word, and colder than the wind outside. The witch raised the mug to her mouth and took a deep gulp. Yet her eyes did not leave Erin, as if she expected

her to try to steal something from right under her nose, or maybe take a poisonous snake out of her basket and throw it at her. Others had thought the same.

"I thought you might need one," Erin said, nevertheless.

"I do?" the witch asked, and set the mug down. "How would you know that? What do you know of me?"

"Nothing," Erin admitted. "I just thought this cloak was meant for you."

Here, at last, the witch's gaze lowered to her basket, and Erin only wasted a moment of that sombre stare before pulling out the cloak and holding it up to the dim candlelight. It was a good size, almost as tall as her.

"What is that?" asked the witch, after a few moments. "Nettles?"

"Yes," Erin agreed, and lowered the cloak just enough so that they could look at each other again. "I finished it just yesterday."

It had taken her little longer than a month. She'd gotten fast, over the years.

This time, the witch, seemingly overcome by a bit of curiosity, rose from the chair and took a couple steps closer. "How am I to wear this?" she asked.

"You won't," Erin said. "I mean, you will, but not like this. I need to give it to you first."

Then, instead of trying to explain herself further, she shook the cloak in the air once, and in place of the wilted, brownish green of before, it turned to a smooth grey, like the face of the cliff they were standing on. She held it out to the witch, only getting to feel the softness of the fabric for a moment before it was taken at last out of her hands.

Erin then stood there, with only nettles and other weeds left in her basket, and feeling both a bit relieved

and a bit empty, as she always did after doing this. She watched the witch turn the cloak this way and that, as if to see if any trace of the nettle thread still remained. It didn't—there was Erin's needlework, her careful hemming, the very pattern she had chosen to knit into it, but the thread she'd used had disappeared completely. As it ought to. It was a rather pretty cloak, all in all.

The wind was roiling outside, as if goading her to come back, to come outside and let it press her on another path, another road. Already, Erin could almost feel her bruised fingers itching to begin again.

The witch raised her eyes to her again, suspicious, distrustful, but perhaps still a bit curious.

"You're not a witch," she said, but she didn't seem to doubt that, at least.

A welcome change.

Erin felt like smiling again. "No," she said. "Just cursed."

She remembered that day in bits and pieces, shards and glances. The important and unimportant alike took equal space in her mind, offering her only what was most vivid. It had been sunny, nearly summer, and Erin had been sixteen.

She was out at the edge of the woods, picking old cones she wanted to fashion into a sort of present for one of her brothers, when a cry from deeper into the trees made her look up. When she listened more closely, she recognised some of them as laughter, yelps of joy, but also something else, there, at the edge of hearing. The cry of a stricken bird.

Leaving her basket on the ground, Erin started walking farther into the forest. The deeper she went, the more clearly she could hear the pained chirps hidden behind more laughter. She was almost afraid to step into the clearing when she found it, but once she did, she found the crown princes gathered together, boasting at one another.

They were clad in the brightest white, and their hems and seams were of golden thread, beautifully sewn, but in their hands they held crude slings, and around them were the bloodied bodies of several small birds already.

"What are you doing?" Erin called, but her voice was swallowed by another cry, impossibly loud, piercing the air.

And a raven fell into the grass. A great bird, larger than any that flew around there, longer than her arm, twitching like a twig in the wind. They all marvelled at it, but only for a moment.

Then the winds shifted and the woods cracked, almost as loudly as the cry of the bird, and into the meadow stepped an old woman, prim and tall, dressed in peasant's clothes. She looked at the raven for a long while, before raising her gaze to the princes, something in her pale blue eyes making them take a step back.

"Who did this?" she asked, but then she saw the slings they all held, the other birds lying around, and her expression soured. "Ah, so it's like that. You've hurt my dear…"

She went closer to the raven and gingerly picked it up in her arms.

The princes were silent as never before. Erin held her breath too, trembling. The sorceress looked back at them.

"Such black hearts in such fair faces," she said. "To be so wicked while so young, you must have been rotting from the cradle. I saw, however, that even bad seeds need a chance to grow. So let's see what can be done. May you spend half of every day as those that you so joyfully killed here, and may your eyes not see sunlight but through their eyes, and may it be so that, when seven years have passed, you will be all the wiser for it."

Then the sorceress shifted one hand, and mist started enveloping the helpless princes, and before they were even completely hidden by it, Erin saw them twist and turn to birds, great black ravens, which all gave a cry when the spell was done, loud enough to shake the woods. And took flight, disappearing into the trees, leaving all their fine clothes and slings behind.

The sorceress then looked at Erin, who still could not flee, terrified to her core. And she too must have only seen her brooch, glimmering in the light, and not her simple clothes and calloused hands, for when she spoke again, it was as if she thought Erin, too, was of royal blood. That was, at least, what she'd reasoned later.

"You have never given a thing away in your life," the sorceress spat, in the same tone. "Not because you wanted to, not because it gave you joy."

She couldn't say, *That is not me*. She couldn't even think it. The shriek of ravens was the only sound left in her lungs, echoing endlessly, hollowing her from the inside out. She'd left her basket at the edge of the woods. It hadn't been much, but it had been hers to give. And she couldn't say a thing.

"So I curse you to *give*, all your life, only what was sewn by your own hands," the sorceress went on mercilessly. "I curse you to give them to whoever is in

need around you. And only weeds are to be your thread, and may thorns pierce your heart if you ever think of locking yourself away from this."

A *curse*. No way to break it. Erin stared at her, petrified, all her bones trembling within her. Then the old sorceress raised her chin, and pointed a finger at her. "Seven years, and no sound. Do as I said, and speak no words, and when seven years are passed, your hands will be yours again."

The storm came soon after Erin left the witch's hut and lasted for days, so that when she was finally able to go into the woods again, all the plants were soaked, feeble in her hands. It was a bit better in that the nettles didn't sting as much now, but it also meant she would have to be thrifty with her thread while the weeds dried enough for her to spin them into anything new.

The witch found her just as she was carefully gathering sprigs of burdock in her basket, one clear, early summer morning. She didn't move loudly, nor softly enough to seem unnatural. In fact, in the light of day, she seemed like quite a common person, a tired woman not much older than her. She was wearing the cloak Erin had given her, though, and she didn't seem sick anymore, so it had worked well.

"I thought the rain had washed you out," she said, as a way of greeting.

Erin glanced up with a smile. "I have deeper roots than that," she said, then yanked a more stubborn stem right out of the wet soil as a comparison.

The witch said nothing at that, choosing instead to look at the small sleeve poking out from under the weeds gathered in the basket. “Who is this for?”

“I don’t know yet,” Erin said, breaking off a couple more sprigs and then getting to her feet. “I only know when it’s done.”

“That’s a strange curse,” the witch said.

Erin shrugged. “It’s the one I have.”

This made the witch smile, just a bit. It was nice, Erin realised, to talk about this freely for once, easily, where others would have either shrunk back or shown only pity. She hadn’t been around any other witches since she'd been cursed. And so, she decided to chance it.

“What’s your name?”

“Sigrun,” the witch said, unexpectedly easily. “What’s yours?”

“Erin,” she said.

Sigrun pulled the cloak tighter around her, a thoughtful frown on her face. “My cough stopped when I put it on,” she said.

Erin smiled again. “It was meant to.”

Sigrun didn’t seem to want to say anything more after that, but wandered off a bit as Erin peeled lichens off a tree. Yet, when her basket was full, Sigrun came near again, hands full of plants and a strange, conflicted look on her ashen face.

“Can I watch you?” she asked then. “While you’re making it?”

Erin blinked in surprise, beyond words as she hadn’t been in years. Yet—

“Of course,” she found herself saying.

Seven years of her life had passed loudly enough to make her turn her head against the wind, if only to quiet everything else. That was why, in the end, she let herself be led to the sea. She'd thought the earth louder than the world.

After the crown princes had fled from the castle in the form of ravens, Erin came back crying to see the castle in utter chaos, the news having been passed to them without her help. And in all that shared turmoil, few other than her family observed her own distress, and none knew what she had to do. Not even herself.

The next morning, she found herself walking outside, barefoot, up to the wildest corner of their garden, gathering the newly-grown nettles there. She couldn't stop or move away. She just sat there, kneeling, until she'd gathered them all, and afterwards she took them, one by one, and started rubbing their needles in her palms, teeth gritted against the pain. That had been her first thread.

She'd started knitting it while hiding in the stables, making stitch after clumsy stitch, purls and knits intermingled badly. It took her two months to finish that first shirt, and then ten more followed. She spent her first year under the spell that way, rubbing blisters into her fingers and poking herself bloody with the knitting needles, but, in the end, finishing all eleven shirts.

She made them all from memory alone, adding a few inches, guessing and sometimes staring at her brothers long enough to make them even more wary than her silence had. For, unlike her, the princes did not return to the castle, neither by day, nor by night. Sometimes, Erin wondered if that hadn't been the wiser decision, sheltering them from any dubious stares as they nursed

their curse in solitude. Sometimes, she thought she felt their dark, beady eyes following her from the trees.

The first shirt was the smallest, and the least well-made, and the seams around one sleeve kept coming undone, no matter what she tried. Yet, they were there. She hid them in the topmost tower of the castle while being watched from the window by a flock of dark birds with human eyes.

Then she left home for good. No words for her father, none for her brothers. She dressed, gathered all her remaining thread, and set off. Her fingers were burning from the nettles, but also itching to start another cloth, and then another. And these seemed to call her from far away.

She passed through villages and towns, sleeping in the open or in barns or in kindly-lent rooms. Every time she passed by a new place, her hands spurred her to start another shirt, another sweater, another cloak. She never knew what she was to do with them until she did, and it always helped. Something to soothe the bones of a weary miner, the eyes of a scribe, the sickness of a maid. They always helped, somehow. That was the good part.

For seven years, Erin didn't utter a word.

Then, on the seventh summer, the day for which she'd counted in her mind again and again reached her, when she'd just finished a woollen, burdock-spun coat, and given it to a lonely mother somewhere halfway between her home and the sea. Erin stood by a narrow road crowned by rustling trees and rose bushes. She fretted her blistered hands, wondering—was this it?

She expected someone to appear, a bird to come flying out of the sky and set her free, give her back the freedom she'd lost the feel of. And she thought she saw exactly

that, too, a glimpse of wide, dark wings, floating somewhere far away, coming towards her, and her heart hammered, and her breath quickened, and she had to lean back on a rose-decked fence as she watched it come closer.

But then, her awe was shattered by the loud sound of a child coughing, a bit lower down the path. And, surprised, Erin turned towards them, and saw them stop their little cart of wares and raise a hand to their mouth. The sounds they made were wet and wracking, horrible to see coming out of such a small frame. Erin had heard their like enough times, along the years.

"You've kept your word," a voice said then, and Erin wheeled around in a panic and came face to face with the sorceress from seven years past, now standing across the path from her.

Farther away on the fence Erin had been leaning on, her raven preened, seemingly completely healthy and even larger than Erin remembered.

"And you've done good work," the sorceress continued. "The princes too, they're all back with their family. They appreciated the shirts you left them, even with a fallen sleeve. It's your turn now. I didn't expect you to go quite so far."

She raised her hand, and Erin widened her eyes, holding her breath. Then, once again, she heard the coughing of that child. One, two times, before it got even worse. She forcefully turned her head that way, and saw them doubled over, one hand over their chest. They couldn't last many more weeks like that. She'd known some who hadn't. She'd known some who had been cured of it by her own work. Was she to chance it?

"What's the matter?" the sorceress asked.

When Erin looked back at her, her hand was still raised, no smoke or mist around her yet. Erin opened her mouth, then closed it again, and bit her lips. Her hands itched.

The child coughed. The sorceress stared. And Erin felt like crying. *It wasn't fair*.

She pushed away from the fence and ran to the child's side, helping them stand up. Their lips were a bit bluish already, their face wet with sweat and tears. Erin pushed their hair out of their eyes and ran her hand over their back.

"It's alright," Erin said, tears brimming in her eyes. Her first words, a possible lie. "It's alright. We'll do something, I'll make you something, and you'll be alright."

The child's breaths started evening in her arms, as Erin kept rubbing their back and shoulders with hands that almost burned with how much they wanted her to pick up the knitting needles once more. Which she would. She would go back to where she'd buried them when she'd thought this all done, and pick them up again.

Her life was a bitter thing at the back of her throat. When she looked back, both sorceress and raven had disappeared from the path.

"How old were you then?"

"Twenty-three," Erin said.

Sigrun's hut was a less sombre thing in daylight. Erin had found this out maybe the third time she'd returned there, after taking another garment to another person in need of it. Dawn and dusk both seemed to avoid her shabby windows, and yet, so close to the cliff's edge as it

was, there was nothing to keep it in shadow, and the sea and the pale blue horizon seemed to be enough to see by, on most clear days.

"How old are you now?" Sigrun asked after another moment.

Erin had given up counting after it became irrelevant. She counted now. "Twenty-seven."

Sigrun kept quiet and continued mixing seeds and powders in a salve someone in the nearest village had begged her for a day before. They were both helping in their trades, willingly or not.

"That's still young," Sigrun said, but without any easily perceived emotion and without looking at her.

"It's enough," Erin said, and watched her instead.

She'd set her work aside for the day, wanting to focus on Sigrun's. Sigrun's hands were as calloused as hers where they gripped the mortar and pestle. The grey hairs on her head might have been mirrored in Erin's, had her hair been darker. She spoke little, and yet she was not quiet, and didn't seem to mind Erin getting into her space every so often, to bring fresh flowers into the house or clean herself a little corner for knitting.

When Erin knit, Sigrun seemed to take it all in, watching her twist fresh leaves into thread and then cast it into neat stitches as if it was a nature of spell she had yet to learn. When Sigrun worked, though, it didn't look like a spell. It reminded Erin more of watching the kitchen maids prepare bread and broths than of the witches people had to stay away from. She made it seem easy, but also complicated, and altogether very natural. It was everything Erin's strange thread-making wasn't.

Her gaze drifted back to her weeds and nettles, deep green and grey and purple, half-knit in her basket. Her

blistered fingers urged her to get back to them immediately, but she'd wanted to move around, to ignore them for a while. It didn't do to spoil curses too much, lest they grew of their own volition. This, she'd learned only later.

"It's a wicked spell," Sigrun said.

"It's the one I have," Erin said again, and grinned when Sigrun scowled at her.

Yet, she was always swift with her looks, and her face soon softened again, and she ran her pestle gently over Erin's hands. The salve it left in its trail was greenish against her reddened fingers and it soothed them almost instantly.

"I don't know how you can keep yourself so cheery," Sigrun said.

This time, Erin let her smile turn a bit wry. "It's the same either way, isn't it? My attitude won't change it. It's out of my hands." She chuckled, and held her hands up. "Actually, it's *in* my hands."

Sigrun let out what could almost be an amused huff then, and returned to pestling the last ingredients into the salve.

Maybe they were both a bit lonely, a bit alone, living there by the sea or out in the open road. Maybe she'd grown used to it, Erin thought, in what she now realised had been a ten-year journey far from home. Yet, it was nice to feel her heart opening a bit more still, to receive friendship after being quietly starved of it for so long.

She was, like she'd said, resilient. Her life had deep roots in the earth, even if her feet didn't. Threadbare as she'd felt for years, her seams were iron.

A while ago, she'd started a new cloth, far more complicated than those before. She could only hope that,

wherever she would have to go next, it would never be too far for her to come back, in the end.

When she was little, she'd wanted to know big things about the world. Now that she was a bit bigger, Erin found herself wanting to know little things.

She liked being taught how to prepare teas for different kinds of ailments and how to make them taste better. She liked letting Sigrun test various ointments on her bruised fingers and being carefully listened to when she described the effects she was feeling. She liked watching the sea change colour outside the window and listening to the ceaseless cries of birds, so different from those at home.

Most of all, she liked almost living with someone again. She liked getting to know someone more slowly, not over the course of one meal before she set off again, but day by day.

After living all her childhood with so many brothers and beside a castle that seemed always full, it was as if she'd lost part of herself once she had nobody to share it with anymore. There was that shade of her that wanted to be known, to be seen and understood, and to see and understand in kind. It was the simple happiness of having someone to share a thought only you could have had.

Crammed in a small window seat overlooking the sea, Sigrun watched the gulls soaring by. *Like flies, but peskier*, she called them.

She had been cursed with a heart of iron, was what she'd said. Or was it stone? Some cruel, age-old spell that had made her go far away from all that loved her, for fear of her heart stopping in her chest, or she stopping theirs.

It was alright with Erin, though. The cursed didn't poison each other; it was thought they were already too full of their own venom.

"Was there anyone you missed?" Erin asked, carefully arranging their plates into order.

Sigrun frowned a bit at the sea, a grimace smothered in her palm. "Not quite," she said.

Erin missed her father and her brothers with a dull ache that seemed to coat her soul. She'd go back one day, she'd told herself. But had never been ready to see the pity in their eyes again.

"All my childhood," Sigrun began, almost tentatively, "I've longed to have someone close. I wanted a hand in mine, when needed, someone with whom to appreciate the warmth of a winter fire, the first taste of summer. I realised, when I was betrothed, that I wasn't going to get that with the one promised me, however. So, no, I guess I didn't miss a thing."

"You didn't like them?"

There was something more unsure than displeased about the downturn of Sigrun's mouth. "It wasn't that," she said. "It seemed like we got along, at first, and then our expectations suddenly split in two different directions. I didn't mind marrying. I liked the constancy of it, but I didn't understand the passion that came with it, the infatuation, the jealousy. I didn't like it and I didn't feel any of it back, nor did I wish to. When the curse set, I almost thought, *Good*."

Erin looked at her, tried to see past the reflection of the sky in her eyes. She had a feeling she might have seen something she recognised there.

"It doesn't have to be selfish," she said.

"I know," Sigrun shook her head and sighed. "But I still felt like what I wanted was for others some sort of a middle ground, just a path that led from one place to another. And nobody wants to live their life on the side of the road."

The gulls cried outside, yet between the two of them it was quiet, quiet.

"My father never married," Erin said.

Sigrun looked up.

"All of us, we were just… children nobody cared for, that nobody had time and food for. If someone had a child they could not raise, they looked for him. He was such a lonely man, and he lived all alone, they used to say. He never refused a soul. But for all that, I don't think he ever felt lonely. He was constant and content by himself, yet I know he loved us all well enough. Was that a life spent on the side?"

"I don't know," Sigrun said, yet there was something petulant about her now.

She did know. Erin smiled.

Sigrun seemed to feel her smile, for she scowled and pushed herself off the window seat. "I'll make tea. Stop your smirking."

And Erin did, although only on the outside.

"What did *you* want to do, before all this?" Sigrun asked her, somewhat reproachfully. "Did *you* ever want to marry?"

After a beat, Erin burst into laughter. "No, no," she said, hands on her cheeks. "I wanted to be a candlemaker!"

"A candlemaker?" Sigrun asked, confused.

"Yes," Erin grinned. She'd forgotten. The memory was sweet as honey. "We kept bees at the castle, and sometimes we would carve patterns into the wax."

She didn't remember if she'd ever told that to anyone. At the time, it had just seemed like something she would get around to do one day. Back when her life had seemed to stretch endlessly and quietly before her.

"I make candles sometimes," Sigrun said, tentatively, as if she still didn't think Erin was completely serious. "I use tallow, but you can help me, if you like."

Erin beamed. She had around her a frayed sweater someone lower in the village had given her, months before, and she pulled it closer now, thinking—this was a nice place to live.

"You'll have to teach me," she said.

Sigrun raised an eyebrow at the mugs she was filling with hot water. "From what I gathered, you can teach yourself."

The new cloth seemed to take her longer than anything before, and she didn't know if it was because she was purposefully slower, or because she was constantly changing the pattern. Yet, it was not done. *Not yet, not yet*.

She would have gathered her seconds one by one, like grains of sand from the beach, if she could.

It was a cold, yet clean autumn day, maybe a year after she'd first reached the coast, when Erin climbed down the precarious rock-strewn path to the shore and let the wind and sea-drizzle envelop her like a low-ground storm. She drew her knees to her chest and pushed the hems of her

dress under her bare feet to keep it in place and let out a sigh, watching the ashen sea.

Earlier that morning, she'd finished the garment she'd been working on for nearly as long as she'd been there. It was a coat, long and heavy, a dozen patterns whirling like the wind over its wilted surface. She'd felt no pull, no knowledge of whom it belonged to, not yet. Perhaps she had come to the sea so that it would roar loudly enough in her ears that she would never hear it, that the gales would keep that part of the spell at bay.

She didn't want to go away. She'd left her home once before. This time, she just wanted to hold onto something for herself.

She didn't expect it, when she glanced to the side and saw the sorceress, but neither was she frightened. After eleven years living with someone's curse, you started to learn something about them. She'd never regretted a day's work, when she gave her garments away and saw the gloom over a person's head lift a bit.

Yet, a curse was a curse—it refused to let itself be cherished. At the end of the day, any compulsion tasted bitter on your tongue.

"You've been difficult to find," said the sorceress.

Erin raised a shoulder, looking back to the sea. "I've been here."

The sorceress came closer, her dark dress and cloak already gathering the pale dust of sand, making her look nearly statuesque. She watched the sea too, for a while. Her raven was a bit farther away, following and running away from waves in a rhythmic hopping-about.

"I wanted to give you this," she said. "It was wicked to see it cling to you and do nothing."

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From the sleeve of her cloak, she pulled out a single swan feather, lighter than the whitened sky. She held the feather out to Erin, and she took it, before the wind could tear it away.

“When you wish to, break it in two,” the sorceress said. “The curse will go then.”

Erin gazed at the feather, turning it between her fingers. So feeble, it seemed. She wouldn’t have to do much to break it at all. Yet, it was strange. She almost

wanted to put it safe, to be sure she didn't break it by mistake.

"You'll have to give something to yourself too. Can you do that?" the sorceress asked.

Erin gazed up at her, then took a breath of air and saltwater.

"Could you give me something for my friend too?" she asked, quietly.

The sorceress looked at her, then she wrapped her cloak more tightly around herself. "I already did, it seems."

When Erin reached the hut again, she found Sigrun tending to the last autumn plants in her garden. She looked back at Erin in surprise, for she had come panting past the garden gate, but any words she might have said were lost as Erin bounded into the house.

She came out with her basket of threads and needles on one arm and the coat on the other, and then she marched with them to where the fence was closest to the cliff side. Then, before she could hesitate at all, she tossed the basket over the side. It should have been impossible for it to reach the sea, and yet, when she leaned over, she saw it splash into the roiling waves.

"What are you doing?" Sigrun asked, having risen to her feet to watch her.

Yet, Erin did not say a word as she held out the weedy coat in front of her, and then gave it a forceful shake in the wind. It turned woolly and light grey in her hands, almost in an instant.

"This is mine!" she told Sigrun, voice a bit frantic, short of breath still. She twisted the coat around and

wrapped it over her shoulders, and then she pulled the swan feather out of her pocket. “And this is me.”

Then Erin broke the feather in two.

And somewhere, birds cried, but not in pain. Almost at once, it was as if a great weight was lifted from her soul, out of her bones, so that she was so light that only the heavy woollen cloak seemed to hold her feet to the ground. Before her, Sigrun raised a hand to her chest and looked down in wonder.

“Is your heart iron still?” Erin asked, voice catching, the wind almost stealing her words.

“No,” Sigrun said, after a while.

Then she raised her eyes to Erin, and she smiled, at last.

“It’s light as thread.”

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charybdis

Marisca Pichette

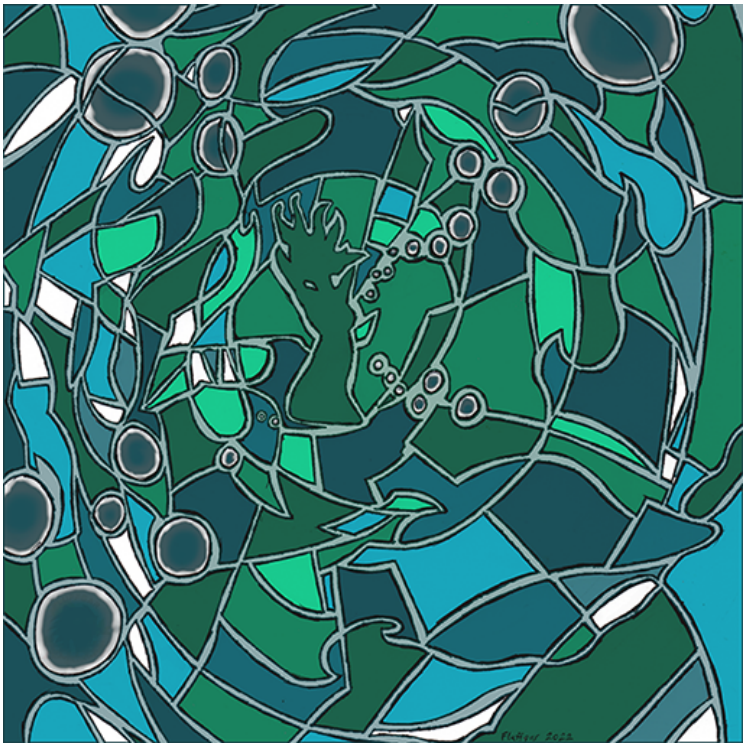

Illustration © 2022, Fluffgar

see her:
dancing at the bottom
—whirlpool kisses—
streams of bubbles
i forgot to taste as i swam
gasping
in circles.

her toes are pointed fins
her hair the current

hugging me tighter
tighter, drawing me
    down
to her show.

    in the ocean's roar
she's laughing.
in the deepest darkness
her teeth shine
like abalone.

i'm sinking again
like yesterday and tomorrow
counting her fingers
    her toes
her eyelashes batting the barnacles
away

she is smaller than i remember
    happier than i was
more imperfect than i wanted
to see.

    waves reflect tears
into laughter,
    warp drowning
into dancing.

at the bottom she spins
and spins, spins
spins me in her skin,
enfolds me in a high tide of joy
    washing the sand
from my eyes.

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The Future Fire welcomes submissions of speculative fiction and poetry with progressive, inclusive and socially aware disposition. We are particularly interested in feminist, queer, postcolonial and ecological themes, and writing by under-represented voices.

- Fiction (up to 1000 words): pay $10 per story
- Fiction (up to 17500 words): pay $20 per story
- Poetry: pay $10 per poem
- Illustrations: pay $10 per story illustrated (+$10 for the image we use as cover art).

Submissions by email. Responses with 30 days. No multiple or simultaneous submissions, please.

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