

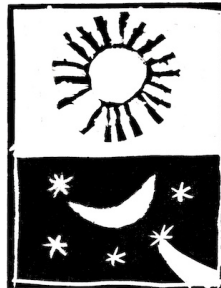
LampLight

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LampLight

Poster of a Forest at Night

Eammon M. Garland

“Willow cannot see the river; she can only swim down its current.”

* * *

At seven thirty-three on a Wednesday, she began her pedal to the city. The sky was heavy and grey, about to burst, infusing the morning's light with a hazy blue. She worked her own hours, but she found her routine comforting. It also gave her a certain guilty pleasure to be awake while, she thought, so many of her classmates would be wasting their summers sleeping in. The pedal to the city wasn't very difficult. Far, yes, but mostly downhill with little traffic. Tall pine trees flanked her on either side, and morning mist moved in between them, obscuring her view into the forest.

A leather messenger bag bobbed at her side.

The ride passed uneventfully, as it always had, but when she arrived at the gas station bike rack, she could barely remember it. She remembered her mother telling her about “Highway Hypnosis” when she first started biking places herself, how the silent ride that seemed so clear to her faded in her mind so quickly once she arrived. The convenience store doors chirped as they opened for her, and cold air blew in her face as she passed the threshold.

A tall hairy man stood behind the checkout table, he had a well-kept, soft round face and deep set chestnut eyes. He gave a familiar nod to the girl as she walked in. She nodded back. She picked up a *Summer Moon: Serious Impact* energy

bar for later and an *Egg-in-a-Muffin* for now. As she was placing the paper wrapped breakfast in the microwave at the back of the store, the door chirped again.

Her hand moved to her messenger bag.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the new customer. It was a tattered looking elderly man with a gray beard wearing tracksuit pants. He walked into the store, right up to the counter. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw him looking at the store window. His odor washed over her. Her fingers clenched. The smell stung like bile. She began to sweat. She knew him. He exchanged muffled words with the cashier. But from where? It smelled like someone had shot a firecracker just below her feet. Hot dread crawled up her spine. The smell assaulted her senses. Her breathing was stuttering. She peeked over at him and saw his face. Sharp dark blue eyes. She tasted the smell in her mouth now. Her face was warm. She could almost hear the smell ringing in her ears. The man turned to leave. Thank God. The smell still increased its intensity. She felt lightheaded. Was she going to pass out? He was almost at the door now.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The door's chime was swallowed by the microwave's 'done' alarm, and the man looked back at her. No. No. Sharp dark blue eyes met hers. Oh, God. Recognition flared between them. The bile smell dug its way into her sinuses crawling towards her brain.

Do you see it yet?

In a moment he was out the door, and the awful smell followed him.

The girl took a moment to regain her composure. Who was he? Why did he terrify her so? Had he said something to her? No, he hadn't. Had she thought that question? She grabbed the *Egg-in-a-Muffin* and walked over to the hairy cashier. He scanned the items and didn't say anything. There's only so many times you can ask "Will that be all?" until you realise that that's always going to be it. She was ready to leave when the tall man leaned over. "Hey, did you know that guy?" he asked.

“No, why?”

“He came in a couple days ago and took down your poster. Asked me about who put it up. I told him to call the number on the poster and he left. Now he comes here asking again about who put up that poster. Don’t worry, I didn’t say nothin’.”

“Fuck, I owe you one. What a creep. Did you smell that guy?”

“Uhhh, yeah, I guess he smelled pretty bad.” Dumbstruck. How could he not smell that? Was he just being polite? Does he not have a sense of smell?

She took out a poster and her roll of tape from her messenger bag.

“You mind if I put up another one? My boss wants them up all the way until the concert. Can’t miss any eyes.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Are you sure?”

“Well I get paid by the stack and the hour, so if I have to replace a poster, that’s easy money for me.”

She taped the four corners of the poster up in the front window of the convenience store and stuffed the energy bar and the muffin in her bag. She had lost her appetite for now. The door chirped as she walked out.

“Hey,” the tall man said. She turned to look at him. His chestnut eyes bulged with concern. “Be careful.”

She spent the rest of her work day putting up posters from the Downtown West Market all the way to the 88.3 Radio Tower. She stopped by some other stores she’d already hit to check on their posters, and they were for the most part, still intact. She didn’t see or hear anything else about the man with sharp dark blue eyes.

* * *

Poster of a forest at night.

- Sky. Dark Indigo. Hex#2A0049
- Moon. Waning Gibbous. Yellow. Hex#FACB23. Craters. Dark Yellow. Hex#F68606
- No Stars.

- Forest Silhouette. Two pine-covered hills converging off-center to the right.
 - Hills. Black. Hex#0A0A0A
 - Pine Trees. Dark Green Hex#001509
- Upright Stone. Center. Dark Gray Hex#7f7f7f
- Top Text, in bold. Yellow. Hex#FACB23
 - “COME TO THE / FOREST”
 - “O” in FOREST obscured by the moon
 - FOREST partially behind the tops of the Pine Trees.
- Bottom Text, smaller. Yellow. Hex#FACB23
 - “Friday, June Twenty-first. Free Midnight Concert. Wiley Forest.”
 - *DT Entertainment Company* — Contact Information.

* * *

“Anything else you remember?” Arnold’s voice was fuzzy on the other end of the phone. “He had blue eyes.” the girl said, “sh... dark blue eyes.” She could tell that her boss was writing something down. “Alright, Willow, if that’s it I can have it filed with the police by this evening.” Arnold paused, “Is there anything else you need?”

“I’m fine, sir, thank you.” she responded.

“Are you sure? Why don’t you take it easy? The concert’s in just two days, we can find...”

“I am completely fine, sir. This job is the only thing keeping me busy this summer. Tomorrow I’m hitting up Midtown. Where the parks are quiet and the cafés all have little samples. Sounds like a perfect morning. Besides, ‘we can’t miss any eyes.’”

She was quoting him. She heard him sigh and laugh at the same time. “You’re the boss, Willow. Remember to send me your hours tomorrow before two so I can have your pay on Friday.”

“You’re the boss, Arnold.”

Willow hung up her phone and started pedaling back home.

* * *

“No single thread can gaze upon the tapestry it is a piece of. Fear not for our sacred rites.”

* * *

Willow returned home just before one o’clock. The sky was still on the precipice of rain, and the windchill was a much greater factor in her small town than it was in the city below. She parked her bike in the shed in the backyard and entered the house by the back door. Her parents were both at work and she had invited her friends over to hang out before they went to the movies that night. But that wouldn’t be for another hour. No. Hour and a Half. Her friends wouldn’t even think about leaving until the time they were supposed to be there.

She placed the messenger bag beside her desk.

* * *

“Keep the incense burning!”

* * *

Pretzels. Cheesy chips. Soda. She put the food into large serving bowls and placed them in the living room, and plastic cups beside them. Willow and her “crew” had met in their freshman year homeroom, where they bonded over books, movies, and gossip that they enjoyed. She was excited to see the four of them, and she always felt like impressing her best friends. Willow showered, put on some clothes that she thought looked nice and waited for her crew to show up.

She thought about the bearded man and the intrusive thought that she had had while she set-up the get-together. “Do you see it now?” A thought that was hers, but not hers. It was a feeling she wasn’t unfamiliar with. There would be

times when she couldn't help but think something. Like the life story of the author she was reading. The architecture of the turkey sandwich she was eating. The dimensions of her desk. The number of lines on a sheet of paper. The thoughts came and went like the wind, but they had never asked her question before.

It was the first time they had seen each other since school got out, but they all settled in to their usual roles by the time that chips and soda were flowing through their collective system. Wendy brought her boyfriend Chris, a blond guy with an easy, nervous looking face. He was precisely Wendy's type. Willow enjoyed having fresh faces in the crew, but she felt a little guilty whenever someone else was among them. To an outsider, she thought, it would be like they were speaking to one another in a language of inside jokes and highly specific references that only the five of them could understand, so that in the end, although boyfriends and girlfriends came and went, there were only five in *the crew*. They left for the movies at five forty-five.

But before she left, Willow grabbed her leather messenger bag.

* * *

Contents of Willow Kelly's leather messenger bag:

- Phone, smart, black;
- Three keys on a ring for
 - her house (brass),
 - her bike lock (nickel), and
 - her high school's band room (nickel);
- Wallet, brown with blue inlay,
 - with eighteen dollars and seventy five cents,
 - a punch card for *Yoghurt Submarine* (two spaces unpunched out of eight),
 - and an unused credit card "for emergencies only";
- Tampon, regular absorbance;
- Pepper spray, Expires January twenty-fifth, two-thousand and twenty-

two;

- 100 Tablet Ibuprofen Bottle (missing nineteen);
- Two safety pins;
- Roll of tape, double sided;
- and
- Thirty-nine posters of a forest at night.

* * *

They arrived at the Cragstow local movie theatre in Jaime's beat up 1995 *Piece-of-Crap*. Wendy had had to sit on her boyfriend's lap to fit him in the gang's car. Fuck, they were gross. They couldn't see it. Willow couldn't get the image out of her head, of sardines locked in a tin can, fucking. She wondered what the hell they were doing all summer, besides playing video-games and going to parties to get drunk. She had gone with them once. To a party. She had had two disgusting beers and felt hazy. It was unbearable, the observations in her mind got sloppy and unspecific. She had stumbled around and cried on her way home. Why they felt any desire to poison their brains, Willow would never understand.

They purchased their tickets from a fellow pimple-faced teen. Willow stopped while the crew headed in looking at the front window outside the ticket booth, brightly colored flyers suspended like gallows of venues. The words that were and were not her own expelled themselves from her lips to the pimple faced kid.

"Can you put this up in your window?"

She rejoined her friends and they seated themselves in the back.

* * *

"Foe of the night's dark, burn away the indolent!"

* * *

That night she had a dream.

Through a foggy street she ran, with knickerbockers rolled up to her knees, darting between people's waists, carriages, and puttering automobiles. Her shoes tapped over the cobblestones until she reached her destination. She looked up at her boss. "Papers, sir?" The voice from her mouth was and was not hers, it was Cockney and shrill.

"William!" the man's face was Arnold's, she was going under a boy's name for the work. "Very important press today, my boy, if you get another stack sold before noon there's an extra shilling in it for you." She grabbed a stack of newspapers and headed over to her corner right by the river.

She passed by other faces she knew, lost faces, but they would distract her if she stopped to talk. She passed beggars with chitinous clawed hands and sardine heads, merchants with voices like angels. Some shouted at her. "Iä! Iä! Hch'luxja! Iä! Iä!" Bird headed constables reached at her. To grab her. To stop her from doing her job. She was too fast, her little feet pumped up and down and she glided past them like the wind was behind her. She made it to her corner in front of a stone public house. She stood at her corner and yelled the quintessential newsie phrase.

"Hear the call of the Dread Trumpeter and be unsatiated! Rouse yourselves and Harken!"

That wasn't right.

Nevertheless the people came and bought paper after paper. The man with the beard bought one. The pimple-faced kid bought one. The convenience store guy bought one. The line grew longer and the cost of each paper kept growing, but they kept coming and the stack was growing. "The Dread Trumpeter calls you!" she said, handing out newspapers faster and faster, "Gather and receive your satiation! Listen for the call!" Suddenly she smelled something.

Do you see it yet?

She looked down at the headline and awoke screaming.

It was cloudy this morning too. Willow tiptoed past her parent's room, she didn't wish to wake them a second time. They had looked so worried, and Willow felt so awful to wake them, knowing the precious few hours they got to sleep. So like an assassin she went about her morning routine. But she couldn't shake the dream that she had. The dream she barely remembered.

She picked up her leather messenger bag and left her home.

When she reached the road to the city, she saw the pimple-faced kid riding his own bike. Seeing the girl, he turned and bridled up beside her.

"Hey, you're that chick with the posters right?"

Fear strangled her with cold hands.

"What's it to ya?"

"Buncha people came around asking about it, some of them even got a little aggressive, wanted to take it for themselves. Some of them even tried to get in, but I had a lock in the booth. Really gave me a scare." There was something wolf-like in his eyes. Something sharp. "You got any more?"

"What?"

"It's the least you could do for all that trouble you caused me." His knuckles whitened on his handlebars. A bead of sweat ran around his baggy eyes. He looked sleepless. Wired.

"Why..."

"Just give me a fucking poster. Jesus." The smell returned. "Don't you... Can't you see it...?"

Do you see it yet?

She had to get out. Get away from him. He was going to hurt her and take the posters. She knew it. Before her mind ventured further, she was gone. He pedaled behind her. Neither gaining, neither losing, they pedaled. She looked behind her. She knew his eyes. The boy's eyes burned a sharp dark blue when they met hers. He *was* gaining. They were among the pines now. Hunter and

Prey.

The smell, oh God, the smell was back. It burned. The wind blew into her face, and yet the smell persisted, strengthened, even. It pushed at a memory. Some memory before the movie theater, before the convenience store, before summer started, maybe even before she was born.

Do you see it, yet?

She threw away that line of thinking. She had to focus on her breathing. On pedaling. She made minute adjustments to avoid small rocks on the road, anything to help keep up her speed. The morning mists spilled out from between the pines. Silence abounded besides the cranking of the pedals. Willow's breath began to feel cold in her lungs and hot sweat permeated her armpits. She wouldn't be able to keep this pace up for very long. They were alone here in the forest. Stupid. Why did she come here? She should have just gone for help. He was yelling behind her. She only had to give him the posters then he would leave her alone.

But she did not. The leather messenger bag only wagged behind her.

The pimple faced kid stretched his arm out. To grab the bag. The posters. The mists grew heavier, stretching to the road. Her muscles strained in effort to push her bicycle harder, but they wouldn't take anymore. Visibility was decreasing. The mists surrounded them. The smell bit at her nose. The boy's sharp eyes boiled with desire. His crooked fingertips were almost at the bag. The mist pressed inwards. They could not see the road. The sour stench saturated her. He grazed her leather messenger bag.

As soon as his hand was touching the bag, she jerked her bicycle in his direction. Their wheels collided and they both struggled to regain balance and control. He swore as his bike wobbled and fell over. He was swallowed by the mist, and her bike stayed true.

Willow could not hear the pimple faced boy behind her. She kept pushing herself to be safe, but after a while, the mists receded. And the boy was nowhere to be found. Willow pedaled to the city. She needed to get to the bottom of this.

* * *

“None shall sleep while It shines. Grovel in awe before the Bearer of The Sign,”

* * *

She parked her bike at the outskirts of the city and took out her phone. It was time to figure out what the hell was going on. She had given the poster to her friends, put it up in her school, but no one had even given it a second glance. They probably looked at it once and threw it away, the dicks. She felt like she was in a river leading to a waterfall, and every move she made to escape only sealed her fate further. She had passed by stores she hit and there were only tape markings left of them.

“Hey, Willow, how’s my chief advertising executive?” Arnold’s voice on the phone sounded like a caffeine high.

“I need to know about the posters.”

Arnold paused. “The posters?”

“Yeah the posters. People are going crazy because of it.”

“Well I’d hope so! We spent a pretty penny for the desi...”

“No Arnold, actually crazy. They’re changing. People want the posters for themselves.”

“I don’t understand. What do they want with our posters? We’ve put that design through a gauntlet of focus groups and it didn’t even raise an eyebrow.”

Willow couldn’t answer. She took one of the posters out of her bag and examined it, every line and curve in the design. “I don’t know... I think...” Her gut fell. She felt so stupid. “I think they see something in it.”

“Do *you* see it?”

Her blood ran cold. He must know something, she could almost smell it, and her desire to know flared in her heart.

“What did you say?”

“I asked if you could see any reason that they would be offended by the poster.”

No, he's not going to weasle himself out of this one.

"Stay there, Arnold, I'm coming over, and we're going to talk."

* * *

She passed by the gas station and slowed down to a stop. It reeked. A police officer's whirling lights danced in front of the convenience store. The door opened, but the girl was too far away to hear the chirp. The tall hairy man had his hands behind his back and a cop was leading him into the squad car. His chestnut eyes met hers. There was something sharp and dark and blue about them. A twisted smile grew on his face, stretching chapped lips under his well-kept moustache. "You owe me another one, poster girl!" An ambulance came wailing and screeching to the gas station, but not before Willow saw the blood on the automatic door.

* * *

"Patience, reader, your Dread Trumpeter shall emerge."

* * *

Willow sat in the Police Station waiting room, numb. Her mother looked at her with eyes bulging with concern. "Are you alright, sweetheart?" No. Willow didn't know what to feel. They had taken the posters. Why had they taken the posters from her? Her world felt massively heavy and she was impotent to keep it aloft. She didn't even know Krikor's name before he killed that man. But she saw him almost every day. She didn't think much of her silent rapport with the convenience store cashier but it had seemed like the most important part of her life to the police. The police questioned her about her work, what happened the day before, the bearded man with the tracksuit pants, even the poster. Especially the poster. What were they doing with her posters?

They had kept asking if she saw anything that day. Like that. They asked what did she *see* in relation to Krikor. What did you *see*? Dots connected in

Willows head.

Does Krikor see it? Could that pimple-faced kid see it? Did the dead man see it? Why couldn't she see it? She had to get the posters back in her hands. She needed to look at them to find out what the hell was going on. Ask some of the storeowners, see how widespread this is. Maybe even talk to someone with sharp dark blue eyes. Someone who *sees it*.

Before her mother could say anything, Arnold emerged from the questioning room, an officer with buck teeth walking right next to him. Arnold's mouth smiled as he approached Willow.

He was carrying her leather messenger bag.

"...and if you need anything, Arnold, don't you hesitate to ask," the officer said.

"Thank you, Dirk." He waved away the police officer, handing him one of the posters. "How are you doing, Willow?"

She needed those posters back. They were the key to all of this. She needed to know. She needed to *see*.

"Willow?" her mother asked. "Who is this?"

Her mind danced between focus and confusion.

"He's my boss." Willow lowered her head slightly, she could feel her mother about to erupt.

"Is he now?" her mother said. She walked right up to him. "Well you've got *some nerve*. I don't know where you get off thinking that you could make my daughter hand out this garbage." She pulled a wrinkled poster from her purse. Where did she get one? A person has *been murdered* because of this. And you thought that a *child* should be the one putting these up?"

"I assure you that we had no idea it would affect anyone like this." Arnold's shoulders relaxed. It looked like an alien had taught someone how to seem reassuring. "I assure you, Mrs. Kelly, I would never put Willow in a situation that would jeopardize her safety."

"Wouldn't you? I hear this was the second time something has happened. I wasn't notified at all. You filed a report with the police and didn't even think to

relieve my daughter, let alone tell me?"

A surprised look tried to inch its way onto Arnold's face. "She insisted to continue. Willow, did you not tell your parents about what happened on Wednesday?"

No. She hadn't.

"Why didn't you tell me, sweetheart?"

Why? Because this would happen. Her mother or her father would blow up and take her job away from her. The one thing that was only hers. They would sit her down in her house and make her wait for summer to end. Shun productivity. Hang out with her friends half an hour after they agreed to meet. Sedate her mind. They would feed her like an idle cow in a factory. Doing nothing. Rotting away. The image of her own personal hell appearing before her.

"You were busy," she responded. "It wasn't a big deal."

"*I'll* say if it was a 'big deal' or not." Her mother scowled at her.

"No you won't." Willow's eyes didn't meet her mother's.

Silence.

Willow Kelly, age seventeen, first chair in the orchestra, honor roll student looking at Valedictorian, stood up to her mother like she had never done before. Something was trying to stop her from putting these posters up, and Willow wasn't going to give it the satisfaction

Arnold's voice cut through her train of thought. "Well you don't have to worry any more, Mrs. Kelly. The concert is tomorrow night. We don't need any more posters up, and I never wanted to step on any toes." Arnold looked down at Willow. "Sorry, boss, I guess you're out of a job."

No. That wasn't right. Arnold would never say that. She wasn't needed? She couldn't be. She felt so close to figuring it out, and now her whole summer will be meaningless. She just needed that bag and her bike and everything would make sense again. She would be *doing* something. Her fear took hold of her and she spoke with a voice that was and was not her own.

"I'm going to get on my bike and I'm going to find out what's going on.

Because no one will or nobody else can.” She looked at the clock. Eleven thirty-nine. “Give me back my bag, Arnold.”

Willow reached out her hand and Arnold slung the messenger bag in it.

Willow looked at her mother and reached out her other hand. Her mother didn’t look angry or upset anymore. She just looked at her. Like a bird who didn’t mean to push her chick off of the tree quite yet. “May I?” Willow asked. Something died inside the woman.

Her mother handed her wrinkled paper and everything else fell away. As she glanced at this poster that was so familiar to her, that she’d seen every day, *she saw it*. How had she not before? It was right there in the middle of the thing. It shone so clearly.

The Sign.

Her blue eyes grew sharp.

* * *

That night, Willow had one final dream.

Her bare feet felt the cool damp earth below her as she strode between dark pine trees. Her feet moved under her effortlessly, gliding her over the stones, grass, and dirt. The forest mists were gone this evening. So were the animals. So were the stars. The moon towered over the forest, looming onto the night earth as a man looks at a colony of insects. None slept while It shone. It’s malevolent yellow light fell on all the forest and Willow’s arms stretched to bask in Foe-of-the-Night’s-Dark.

She ran until she heard the chanting. She ran until she reached the Clearing of The Stone.

The Stone stood tall in the clearing. The Near-Round moon shone softly there, its pale yellow gaze emphasizing the dark indigo richness of the night forest.

Others were waiting there for her, everyone from the village; everyone, it seemed, from every village. None slept while It shone. In their hands they held

the tools of their trades. The peasant farmers held aloft their mattocks and scythes. The shepherds held aloft their crooks. The cobbler and the blacksmith held their hammers high. The priests swung censers around The Stone. The incense stung familiar in her nose. The smell cut like bile through her mind.

The High Priest's chanting cut through the crowd, forest, and the universe, his words were heard in the minds of those gathered and those far away. He saw the girl and turned to the crowd. He had Arnold's face and his voice shot through her.

* * *

"Grovel for the Voice of Hch'luxja! Bearer of the Sign, Wielder of the Dread Trumpet!"

* * *

Those gathered saw her and fell prostrate onto the dew-covered earth before her samite garments. All but the priests who kept the vespers singing and their incense burning.

The voice of the moon, a voice that was and was not her own, came rushing through her throat.

"Hail, ye vigil-keepers. Your pilgrimage was not in vain. Keep up the chants. Our sacred rites will rouse the sleepers." The earth heaved beneath them, rejoicing up and down, as though breathing, quaking in fear or excitement. Something terrible was above them, in the sky. Something that was once asleep. Her blood ran cold beholding its sharp dark eyes. Its yellow light pierced the souls of those gathered. The light was white hot.

The villagers stood and cried round the stone. "Iä! Iä! Hch'luxja! Hail the wandering god, mother of the thousand labors! The Taskmaster! Hail to the Near-Round Moon! Burn away the indolent and the idle! Burn away the sleepers! Iä! Iä! Hch'luxja! Iä! Iä! Hch'luxja!" Their eyes shone sharp dark blue under the light. The priests madly poured incense into the fires. Its stink was all that there was and white smoke filled the forest like mist. The pine trees surrounding the clearing strained and creaked as the earth below them grew and

shrank, almost yawning, almost screaming in fear.

“...*Foe of the Night’s Dark...*”

The girl approached The Stone. Closer than even the High Priest dared venture.

“...*Burn away the indolent!...*”

The incense stung her eyes with its foul bile smell as she reached out her hand.

“...*The tapestry is complete!...*”

There on the stone was etched, ancient and terrible to behold, *The Sign*.

“...*None shall sleep...*”

She touched the stone where it bore *The Sign* and felt it touch her mind.

“...*while It shines!...*”

Now she could not stop. She was only an observer to her body’s actions.

“...*Iä! Iä!... Iä! Iä!...*”

Willow’s arms brought the horn to her lips and her lungs let sound the call.

* * *

Weather Forecast for Friday, June twenty-first. From FM 88.3 *Mainely on Topic*. Greg Marstow, meteorologist.

“*Bundle up and bring your umbrella, folks, it’s looking like rain today!* [laughter] *I know, I know, but today... today I’m sure of it. Sorry about those false alarms last couple days, I really thought it was comin’.* [studio door opens] *Ummm... We’re lookin’ at highs of sixty-seven degrees and lows of...*

...*Come bask in the light... Come tonight... In Wiley forest find our sacred rites...*”

* * *

Willow awoke silently. The gibbous moon shone into her bedroom. She opened her wardrobe. There hung the samite gown. She put it on under the yellow light. The girl reached under her bed and took her trumpet from its case. She walked barefoot to the woods.

A Depth of Years

RB Kelly

I first found the banshee by accident, crawling on the broken stones beneath the cliff face in the threshold hour between day and dusk. She didn't see me and so I watched her for a while as she slithered and snatched at the foamy scum on the surface of the pools, while Bran cowered, whining, around my legs.

I wasn't afraid. That's what I remember most clearly about the moment: I wasn't afraid.

Of course, I didn't know then exactly what she was, but anyone could tell that she wasn't of this world. She moved like a four-legged spider, emaciated limbs more bone than flesh protruding from a torso poorly covered by ragged, filthy scraps of material. It looked like a burial shroud, I thought later, but that was only after the benefit of time to reflect. In the dying light of the day, she was built of shadow and haloed by a thick fog of something that felt like pure grief. It flowed off her in waves, winding fingers of despair through the matted, steel-grey rat-tails of her hair; tap-tapping a tattoo of sadness with every strike of her long, dirty nails against rock. I watched her and I thought of my grandmother, my mother, the father I never knew. I thought of what I'd so nearly done, and I felt tears sting my eyes as they tried to fall.

She was terrible, but there was nothing terrifying about her. She was just a hungry creature left alone for too long, and aren't we all, really? I'd brought sandwiches from the caravan in my backpack, intending to sit for a while at the edge of the tide and watch the sunset, but I peeled them from their cellophane wrapping and left them on the pebbles for her instead. I didn't have to tell Bran

not to touch them. And I didn't have to call him with me when I turned and headed towards the steep bank that led back up towards the cliffs: he ran ahead of me, turning once he'd reached a safe distance to make sure that I was following, alone. Unhindered.

* * *

That night, she found the caravan.

The tap-tapping of her nails woke me, and, for a long and terrible moment, I thought it was Phil. I thought he'd tracked me down. I could barely catch my breath as I fumbled in the thick country darkness for my mobile phone, and the only sounds in the silence were the scratches on the thin metal hull and the roaring of my blood in my ears. Even Bran was quiet: a shadow in trembling granite on the end of my narrow cot, his furious growls pitched too low for human ears.

My phone display said 03:22. There were no reception bars. The only place that gets a signal in the caravan is the far end of the living room, right up by the big window that looks out over the old house. There are curtains, and I make sure to close them every night, locking them together with a couple of pegs so that nobody can peer in from outside, but they're as thin as aged paper and I wouldn't trust them not to silhouette me against the faint green light from the microwave display. But the inside of my bedroom was completely dark and the curtains here sit slightly proud of the window. There was a knife under my pillow: a good one, expensive, the edge sharp enough that I keep it sheathed in an old sock so that I don't take off a fingertip in the throes of a bad dream. I clutched it to my chest as I flattened my face against the wall, one eye lined up with the gap between pane and fabric, and I waited for the noises to circle back around.

There was no moon that night. Even the stars were shy, buried above banks of thick November cloud. The nearest light was the far-off yellow pinprick of a fishing trawler close to the horizon. But she walked wrapped in a glow that seemed to drizzle from her milk-white skin: not light, as such, but rather a kind

of phosphorescence that shades things the wrong kind of dark. If I hadn't been looking at her directly, I wouldn't have seen her. But I was, and I did, and she saw me too.

We watched each other for a soft, lazy moment. My heart was a painful hammer against my ribcage and every breath seared my throat, but the only thing that mattered just then was that she wasn't *him*. Her eyes met mine, and she straightened slowly, painfully, as though every vertebra in her spine were made of sandpaper. Stringy threads of hair fell away from her face, and I saw that she had been beautiful once. Her skin had a depth of years etched into every line and fold, but her eyes were the eyes of someone who has known what it is to be loved. I met her gaze and held it, feeling the adrenaline tide gently ebb, the vice around my chest release, and, in the liquid blackness that stared back at me, I saw recognition and something else. Something kinder. Something warm, and aching, and bewildered.

Bran whined, a tiny, muted sound, and nuzzled at my elbow. I turned my head to see to him, and when I looked back, the banshee was gone.

In the morning, I found a little collection of pebbles in a line across the step by my front door.

* * *

The old house was cold and dead-eyed that frosty November dawn. Bran doesn't come with me when I make the trek across the damp field and so I never stay longer than I need to. He's my sentinel, my early-warning system. I'm naked without him and he knows that, and he hates to let me go. But he still won't come with me to the house.

We needed water to refill the caravan's tank, though, and I'd been too long without a proper wash. Cliona keeps the spare key beneath the sisal mat at the back door, though, in truth, she could afford to leave it unlocked. There's nothing in it to steal. The house will be beautiful again one day, but for now it's a project for the summers between the long winters when necessity keeps her in the city and she can't follow her heart's calling back to the north coast. But

there's a bathroom downstairs with an electric shower that works most days, and, though my breath mists in front of my face when I step inside the cool, mildewed shadows, it's warm enough when the water's on.

I always keep my head facing forwards while I shower so that I can have eyes on the frosted glass window to my right and the door to my left. The door doesn't lock. Twice that morning, I caught sight of something moving on the other side of the pane and I fetched my knife from my backpack, though I could tell that it wasn't him. The shape outside was too small, too slight. By the time I emerged, wet-headed and sharp with unease, there was no sign of life around the house, though I circled it four times. Instead, piled on every window sill, were lines of white pebbles, damp in the morning mist.

* * *

I looked for her again that evening. Bran and I wandered for over an hour, until dusk had fallen so heavily that I was obliged to fish the torch from my backpack and swing it ahead of me so that I wouldn't lose my footing on the way back to the caravan. We circled, as always, before entering, but Bran's hackles were down and he trotted easily at my heel. I shone the torch into every uncurtained window, one by one, but the van was quiet and empty, waiting for us to return. On every sill sat a line of white pebbles to match the one across my front doorstep, like a beacon to welcome us home.

Inside, I opened a can of food for Bran and heated up a curry for one in the microwave as he ate hungrily. I hadn't closed the curtains on the wide window at the base of the sitting room, and it niggled at me, like a static field across my skin, as though the act of looking could cause the old house to burst into phantom lights and draw forth shadowy figures from another age across the long grass that separated us. But ghosts don't frighten me. The living are where the true horrors lie.

I knew I was watching for her. But I knew, just as surely, that watching wouldn't bring her. She would come when she was ready. So I put together three rounds of ham sandwiches, poured a glass of milk, and left them on the doorstep,

just outside of the little line of stones, when I went to bed that night. I didn't hear her come. I slept well that night and only woke three times.

In the morning, the plate and glass were empty, and there was a pebble set carefully on both where the food had been.

* * *

On Wednesdays, Bran and I drive to the village to pick up supplies and to collect any mail that's been delivered to my box at the post office. The postmaster is the only person here who knows my real name: McQuillan isn't common enough in these parts that I'd risk letting it get around. Cliona had sent one of her fortnightly postcards, a bright, chirrupy missive about the city in the run-up to Christmas, and, as they always do, I felt it anchor me back to a life that was dead but not quite laid to rest.

I bought more bread and more ham, microwave meals, tins for Bran, who waited patiently outside. A flyer on the community notice board advertised ghost tours for the visitors who still make it to these parts in the colder months, and a part of me warmed to see it. Like I'd been given a special gift that nobody else could see.

* * *

We walked down to the shore again at sundown, and there she was, foraging among the rocks, her long, ragged robes fanning out behind her in the pools as she scuttled. Bran, braver now, let out a muffled *whuff* of protest and she looked up, hair dripping a veil of water across her face, and saw us.

For a moment, neither of us moved. And then I slung my backpack from my shoulders, pulled out a package of sandwiches, and set them down in front of me on the pebbles. The stones were cold and soft beneath my legs as I kneeled down to wait for her, and for a long minute or two I thought she wouldn't come. But she did. Bran whined and circled behind me as she approached, first on all fours, and then, as she descended from the rocks, on two bowed legs. Her eyes were so much older than her face and they never left mine as she faltered

forwards. She clutched her hands to her thin chest as though I might strike her and I wondered just how long she'd been waiting to feel a little kindness.

I nodded at the sandwiches. "Take them," I told her as she came closer. "They're for you."

She didn't speak. Her upper lip curled backwards, as though she might hiss, and I saw a line of jagged little teeth, but there was nothing hostile in her face.

"Was it you," I said softly, "that I heard crying for me that night at the hospital?"

Sadness sagged her cheeks. Her shoulders dropped, hands falling heavily to her sides. Still, she didn't speak, but the answer was in her eyes.

I peeled off my gloves. The cold sea air bit at my fingers as I tugged at the ends of my coat sleeves, folding them back far enough that I could shuck up the sleeves of my jumper above my wrists. The scars will fade in time, I'm told, but for now they're an angry, livid pink, and I like that. They are reassuringly real.

"It was... bad," I said. I've tried out other words. None of them are big enough. "And I thought there was no other way to escape."

Stones crunched against stones as she stepped closer. Her feet were bare and ashen-white. Long, yellow nails curled from the toes. Her eyes met mine again and I read the question there. I nodded. I wouldn't have nodded for anyone else.

Gently, like a mother stroking a baby's face, she reached out a hooked finger and touched it to my healing skin. I was prepared for the cold but not the care. Bran nuzzled his head into my armpit but was silent, and the banshee never took her eyes off my wrist.

"I thought there was nobody," I said. "He told me nobody would care."

I think I knew he was lying even then, but it's so hard to see clearly when the world is completely black. Cliona found me in the long days after I'd regained consciousness, and when I asked her how she'd come to look for me, she couldn't tell me. She said she'd just had a feeling, and she knew my grandmother would never have forgiven her if she hadn't at least tried. I thought that was the beginning of the long climb out of the hole that Phil had dug for

me, but, in truth, I think it started before I even opened my eyes to sterile white walls and a nasogastric feeding tube. I think it started when I heard a high, keening wail sing to me out of the long night.

The banshee's hand released my wrist. Cold as her skin felt against mine, I was colder when she let me go. But then, hesitantly, her finger rose to point at my neck. A ragged fingernail swept the hair back from my jaw, and I knew that she'd seen the other scar there. The one that's had time to bleach white against the skin of my throat.

"Ah, that." I found that I could no longer meet the question in her stare. "That one... wasn't me."

* * *

We sat for a long time together on the stones. Above us, night birds wheeled and called and, to the west, the sun sank below the horizon in a blaze of amber. In the ochre shadows, her face seemed to soften, as though the years peeled back, and, though she said nothing and I said nothing more, I felt known in a way I don't remember feeling since my mother died.

I stayed much longer than I ought to have done. I know that now. I was just afraid that when I left the beach I wouldn't see her again, not until it was time for her to call for me once more, and I didn't want to be alone again for so long.

In the end, she made the decision for me. Darkness had settled heavily around us, lit only sparingly by the cold light of the stars in the moonless sky. Bran was curled along one of my thighs, his sleeping head resting on my lap, and the banshee was a dark silhouette against the darkness beside me. Suddenly, she moved, head tilting into the wind that was wending its way down the cliff face towards us. She scented the air and was gone so quickly that I hardly had time to register the movement. If it weren't for the rapid clack-clack of her long nails against the stones, I would have thought that she'd disappeared into the night.

I felt the parting. I felt the loss. But I didn't feel broken by it. And I didn't feel alone.

Clouds were pouring in from the distant hills as Bran and I made our way back up the grassy slope, and, as we reached the summit and the flat expanse of field and hedgerows that marked our way home, a drizzle descended like a wall of mobile mist. I didn't want to use my torch, but I couldn't see well enough even to discern the line of trees that marked the boundary of Cliona's land without it. Bran followed at my heel, a scent rather than a presence, but, as we approached the old house from the eastern side, he circled off towards the caravan, as he always did. We were almost home. I could feel it near enough to whisper to me, a soft warm bed on a cold night, and, like a siren call, it soothed away the rest of the world around it.

My knife was in my backpack as always. But I never got a chance to use it. He caught me from behind in the shadow of the old house's ancient walls, his thick-coated arm around my neck, and the air was knocked out of me before I could even find the breath to cry out.

I'd have known him by his smell if nothing else. His aftershave. The gel he uses in his hair. The laundry-scent of his clothes and the faint musk of mildew because he never lets them dry properly. The metal tang of his weatherproof raincoat and the sharp-sweetness of his breath. I'd always known, deep down, that he would find me again. But not yet; not yet. Not now. Not tonight.

My fingers struggled at his grip against my neck. I grasped at fragments of air, not enough to ease the burning in my lungs. From a long way off, I heard screaming, but my vision was blurring and the roaring in my ears was deafening. I couldn't fight him, though I kicked backwards with booted feet and writhed and twisted and clawed at him. Bran was barking somewhere, a furious, frenzied snarling and, dimly, I was aware of Phil muttering something, kicking out at the air. A yelp, a whine, a thud. The screaming was getting louder but the world around me was fading. I wanted my dog. I wanted to know that my dog was all right. I just wanted to know that he would have the sense to run when it was all over before Phil came for him too.

And then, suddenly, there was a blow at my back and I could breathe again. I couldn't hold myself upright and I pitched forwards into the rain-soaked gravel

that surrounds the old house. The screaming was everywhere; it was as though it was the air itself around me. But, more than that, below it and above it, there was another noise: a noise of pure terror. A noise of primal horror, slicing down the octaves into a visceral, bubbling rasp. Bran was nosing at my face and whining but I couldn't make my eyes open. I couldn't move my hands to let him know I was alive. I couldn't do anything while the screaming tore the air apart.

Hush, I told him in my mind. Hush, now, pup. It'll be all right. Everything will be all right.

* * *

I don't know how I made it back to the caravan. I woke on the floor beside my front door as dawn seeped a watery grey light through the uncurtained windows, and I was so cold and so stiff that I could barely unfold myself enough to crawl to the bedroom. Bran's fur had dried tacky around a nasty cut to his flank and his eyes were white with fear and uncertainty, so I made myself smile for him as I peeled off my chilled, soaking clothes. There was blood in all of them. I couldn't see it but I could smell it. It was in my hair, matting it to my face, and streaking black-red rivulets over the bruise on my throat. I touched the purpling skin carefully, but only once. Then I wrapped myself in three warm blankets and went through to the kitchen to turn on the heating and make a warm drink.

When I went over to the old house to shower away the cold and the violence, the rain had washed away the worst of the gore from the courtyard outside. A couple of buckets from the ancient kitchen sink, sluiced across the gravel, drove most of the rest into the land, and the heavy clouds overhead would take care of what was left. I felt... empty. Light; lighter than I had in years. As though I might float away. As though I might fly.

* * *

The banshee has never showed herself to me again, though I wait for her sometimes on the broken stones beneath the cliff face, in that threshold hour

between day and dusk. The bruises fade, the emptiness fills in unexpected ways, and the days cycle through the long nights of winter towards another spring. Cliona's postcards are full of city strictures and a longing for the sea, and Bran and I fill our hours with walking and watching, searching for a huddled shape on the horizon, straining to hear a mournful song on the breeze. We sleep well, and I, at least, hardly dream at all.

But every night we leave a plate and a glass out on the doorstep of our caravan. And every morning they're empty, with only a couple of stones to mark the offering as received.

Eroding

Mo Usavage

He comes out of the sky like a bird and crushes the top of our barn.

Like a bird, like a bird. When I was young I found a bird fallen from the rocks too early. This is how I found him. Splayed at the bottom of a great height. His blood on the wrong side and seeping into the clay.

My father would not let me save the bird. He said that some things are meant to die. He says this now looking at this one here, his metal clothing shorn apart, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Is he a fish or a bird? my father asks.

His tears and blood are soaking into the clay. Feathers of dark hair escape his metal hat. Even with my grandmother blocking much of the door the barn is light like the day, sun streaming down through the hole made by the coughing bird.

Please, I beg my father.

He gives in. Gather the clay.

We pack him in the metal crate he was sent in. Grandmother watches us from the doorway. I wish she could help, but she isn't ready.

We work quickly. The clay sits on his body, heavy and wet.

Will it mix? I ask. I am worried. I have never seen a man crash from the sky before. I have never seen anyone who was not my family.

It will mix, my father assures me. He is made of the same stuff we are. He's just stiff.

We work him until he is incorporated. Then we can move him from the

metal down to the floor where the packing and shaping will be easier.

My father is sweating before long. He wipes his brow with the back of his hand, leaving a rich streak.

He will be finished in the clay before your grandparents, he claims.

I think he is optimistic. The clay crackles on his forehead and falls to the floor, crumbling to dust.

It would be nice to have him last longer in the clay. Then he could be my grandparents' child, and I would have a mother again.

Six is a better number, my father agrees. Less likely to get caught alone with six. Is that why you saved him?

His face had looked so terrified. Never before had I seen someone look so scared. Broken bird, falling from the sky, landing here alone. When you are alone, there is no one there to help you into the clay. There is no one there to pull you out. Don't worry, don't worry, I tell him. There is no need to be afraid.

We leave him in the barn when we are finished. Great-grandmother, sister, is waiting for us by the door to our home. She is almost done with the clay. She has been almost done with the clay since I was three years out. I have been waiting for her.

She will nearly be your child this time, he says. It's a big responsibility. A different type of relationship.

He reminds me of this every time a new crack forms on the clay. I was anxious for it as a child. Now I feel each piece of clay fall as if it came from my own stomach.

You'll be ready, he promised me. The timing always seems to work out.

There was a time where I had three siblings. There was a time when there were ten siblings, all at once. Children, then adults, then in the clay all together again. That was a long time ago. That was so long ago I think I might have dreamt it.

I dream there are more of us often. I dream there are hundreds of us sleeping in the clay, waiting to be found.

We're all that's left, Father says. The rest crumbled to the wind, or got

caught alone.

It's his turn to be old, so he holds a surety in the shape of the world. But it's my turn to be young, and I will hold the dream.

Father spends the night sleeping in the lap of grandfather out in the field. Great-grandmother, sister, son, feels too fragile for me to use as my pillow, so I return to the barn.

He lays at the bottom of the crater we dug from the floor. I climb down, feeling the newly churned clay curdle against my healthy skin. When I lay my head against his chest I notice the difference between fresh packed and long packed—he is so wet. He is so soft.

We had to work hard to incorporate him into the clay. His bones had been unwilling. His flesh seemed unsure. Maybe that will make him take longer. Maybe he will take so long he will come out of the clay next with me, and we will be brothers. Or it will be so fast he will come tomorrow, and we will be like sisters. Don't worry, I tell him. You're not alone anymore. There's no need to be afraid.

I lay my head on the chest of my broken bird. The clay sucks at my skin gently and shelters me from the breeze coming through the broken roof. There is no need to be afraid.

End Days

Anne Perez

She lives inside a sigh. In the hollow boundaried by screaming on one side and silence on the other. Nursed on government blocks of bologna and cheese that said you're too hungry. Too quiet. Too needy. Weaned on wine of you aren't enough rolled across the palate, held on the tongue, then swallowed, again and again and again.

Laura shudders a bit in the damp and fingers the card sitting deep in the pocket of her hoodie. Pets it, really. Like an old cat rescued years before that still hasn't learned to trust and might take a swipe at her ragged cuticles. Someone who doesn't know better might think a Death Card is equivalent to a playing card: an ace, a three of clubs, or a joker. Or, if they're prone to melodrama, a Tarot card, with a dark and intricate design, passed through generations of dusty women from deathbed to marriage bed.

But life is never like that, never so romantic and mysterious. Laura knows death isn't like that either. It's the mundanity of a quiet heart attack, a plain white business card. Death herself looks like any other old lady in a polyester housecoat who takes too long to count out her change on Saturday morning at the supermarket, or watches through cloudy, squinting eyes to yell at the guy who forgets to clean the lint screen in the laundry room.

If she lets herself fully press into the handball wall she's leaning against, she can pretend she's somewhere else, someone else, the cold seeping up from the cement under her a snowbank in Alaska, the thunk and echo of a basketball on the other side of the playground the call of some wild animal she can't but should

be able to name. Maybe a moose. Can she identify a moose if she sees one? Had she ever? She thinks back to both school trips taken to the Bronx Zoo, but can't remember.

"Laura, hey Laura! Your mom's looking for you."

Nattie's voice, deep and insistent, same message as the last twenty-odd years, brings her away from the tundra and back to the South Brooklyn playground.

She doesn't know why Nattie always starts calling from a block away, like Laura's lost in some woods and desperate to find bagel crumbs to follow in a twisted urban fairy tale. Laura isn't lost. Not physically, anyway. And Nattie knows exactly where she is. Summer she's in the shade of the big oak behind the sprinklers, spring she's tucked into the sag of the fence separating the elementary school from the playground, fall she takes the bench where the old men play dominoes after they're chased inside by October winds, and her favorite now, winter, finds her here on the handball court, with the park at its emptiest and bitter air that smells almost clean.

Her friend is coming to tell her to go home, her mother is hungry and wants to eat. It's time, she knows it. She's had her hour to herself, irate customers and watchers from the corporate office left behind for the day. Corporate is pissed at her because she won't accept an offered promotion. It's a decent job, she knows she's lucky to have it, but she doesn't want to trade vague paycheck loyalty up for a pledge of her life for their profits. She likes organizing the dumps at the ends of the aisles, toilet paper stacked just so, clear and neat and clean.

Iris, Laura's mom, didn't come around to the idea of schedules until about ten years ago, Laura just barely legal drinking age then, but had already been responsible for the cooking—and the shopping and the fast swiping of the irregular child support and odd job checks to pay for the groceries and the rent and the electric for many years at that point. She thanks something—God? the universe? Death? rent includes gas, and that by the time Iris figured out how to have her money go direct deposit Laura was receiving her own paychecks.

"Is she pissed?" Laura says as Nattie walks up.

“Why, is she going to ground you if she is? Jesus. You’re thirty-two years old.”

“Thirty-one.”

“Your birthday’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow isn’t today, don’t rush me.”

Laura’s throat clutches for a second.

“Aren’t you the one always flirts with death?” Nattie says.

“That’s disgusting. She’s an old lady, like a grandma to me.”

“My grandma offers me flan and \$20 for my birthday, not a one-way trip to hell.”

“Do you really think I’ll go to hell?”

“In a handbasket, if you play that card you’re holding.”

Laura doesn’t think so. She doesn’t know if she believes in hell at all. Definitely not heaven. But she does believe in Death. Real grandma or not, she’s been there for her, offering peace and *someplace else* since they’d met on Laura’s ninth birthday. Death hadn’t come for her—she’d come for the super—but when she saw the girl’s frayed sweatshirt and heard the roar of her empty belly, she’d changed her mind and offered the card to Laura.

It was a gift, she’d said. Laura’s to keep, to play or not, no expiration date, free and clear. Like any card game though, there were rules.

Rule Number One: She couldn’t give the card to anyone else. It was hers, period.

Rule Number Two: Once she declared the card in play, she couldn’t change her mind.

Rule Number Three: She couldn’t play the card if she was already dying.

Laura’d understood the first rule right away. It was fair, if she didn’t think about the fact the card had been intended for the super. Still, it was Death’s prerogative to change her mind, not Laura’s. She understood the second rule too. Just a fancy way of saying no take-backsies.

The third rule, though. At first it didn’t make sense. If she was already dying, she wouldn’t need the card, would she? But the following year, one of the

popular girls, one whose mom never forgot her lunch and bought her matching barrettes for her never-torn-and-just-the-right-size t-shirts, got cancer. Even a kid like Laura who'd learned exactly when to cruise past the big garbage pail against the wall of the lunchroom and skim a barely touched pb&j sandwich—real fancy jam—off the top could see it was bad. Bad enough that when the girl's coveted barrettes began falling out as her hair thinned, she didn't seem to care. Didn't say a peep when those same barrettes began appearing on other girls' heads, at the best lunch table closest to the playground exit, where she used to sit. Laura saw the way the girl began walking different. A pain walk, like glass slivers had made their way inside her bones. Laura saw, and she didn't want that, not even for matching barrettes and seedless raspberry jam.

And later, when she was in the tenth grade, Mr. Rosenberg from the second floor of their building started forgetting. He forgot her name, then he forgot his son's name, then he forgot to wait for the sun and put his pants on before going outside, and then he forgot his own name. It took way too long for him to forget to keep breathing, in Laura's opinion.

That third rule is totally unfair, but she accepts it, because Death said so. Sometimes Death plays tricks, waiting too long to show up, or popping up and then disappearing, until the person she had an appointment with was begging for her to come, and sometimes she won't look Laura in the eye when she doesn't want to answer a question, but so far as Laura knows, the rules are true. There's an unofficial rule, too, but she isn't sure Death is aware she knows this one. No one can destroy the card. Iris tried, many times.

The first time her mother found it she got mad, thought one of her old boyfriends had left it as a parting gift, like genital warts. Laura didn't understand why she was so angry. Just the week before she'd been studying for a history test and asked her mom if there was a name for this time: like Stone Age, Iron Age, etc. Her mom hadn't paused wrapping her hair around the big hot rollers and replied these were the End Days. But when she saw the card Iris had stomped and growled about morbid deadbeats and spoiled children who didn't know how to *be grateful* and took it straight down the hall to the compactor chute. When

Laura woke the next morning, it was pressed between her cheek and the pillow, a little gluey at the edges from sleep drool.

She was grateful.

But she'd failed that history test. A big red 53 scrawled across the top of the paper.

Iris had found it and tried to get rid of it—by hiding, crumpling, burning—several more times, but always it reappeared in Laura's pocket, hand, once even stuck to her maxi pad, each incident left it more beat up but still tangible and legible. Until her mother had decided the card Meant Something, represented something special about them and their lives, somehow tangled up in twelve steps and a higher power and Laura as a vessel for Big Things.

Laura's been tempted to play the card. The first time when she realized she was going to fail tenth grade English and she just didn't want to spend another year staring at Ms. Nuzzio's swollen ankles. Once because she had the flu with 103° fever but her boss yelled through the phone he didn't care if she had to drink a whole bottle of NyQuil, her ass had better be at work when her shift started, all while she folded and unfolded the electric bill with the FINAL WARNING: SHUTOFF NOTICE printed on it in big red letters, once because she had got caught up on all the bills and it seemed as good a time to bow out as would ever be, but most times because she was tired. Tired of being told to smile, tired of stocking shelves, tired of being grateful, tired of the million and one daily feints that added up to her pretend life.

Today she's thinking about it again. Use it or lose it. Or maybe things would be better if she didn't have it. Maybe she's been wrong, and she can destroy it, even if Iris can't. Laura tries to imagine this. No, even if Death is on her side, there's no way she can be better at destruction than Iris.

Maybe Iris was right before she found AA and a mission, and it's a false temptation. Maybe Iris will stop harping on her responsibilities to the greater community if there's no little card to wave under their neighbor's noses. It isn't like Death shows up by invitation only, she gets to everyone in her own time, whether they want her or not.

“So?” Dry leaves crack and crumble under Nattie’s boots as she enters the court.

“So what? Don’t you have to go make dinner for your kids or something?” She doesn’t mean it the way her voice comes out. Nattie’s a good mom, same as she’s a good friend. What she wants to say is, please leave me alone. Let me sit with my card and decide to use it or not. Feel the curious, numbing cold that tingles up the nerves from her fingertips to her chest when she finds the quiet spot in her brain that envisions playing it, the lobe that doesn’t whisper but sings, *be grateful*. But she can’t, she doesn’t want to start an argument. Or hurt Nattie’s feelings. She reaches along the bottom of the wall for bits of gravel, wipes each one free of dirt with a hand that shakes just a bit, then places them into formation of two straight lines to boundary the inches between her own crossed legs and the spot where Nattie’s poised to drop.

Laura’s stomach adds its own commentary, un-ignorable in the quiet. In response, Nattie takes a protein bar out of her pocket and throws it into Laura’s lap, then eases down, legs stretched out and taking all the room she wants. “If you aren’t ready to go home, at least eat something. I don’t know why you do this self-deprivation bullshit, but I wish you wouldn’t,” Nattie says.

“I wish you wouldn’t say words like self-deprivation. If you start telling me about self care I’m leaving. Talk to my mom about that junk, not me. They call them self help books so you’ll keep them to yourself.”

Nattie rolled her eyes. “Maybe if you actually read one you’d learn how to help yourself. Like eating when your stomach is telling you it’s fucking hungry.”

“I don’t need to read them. You always tell me what they’re about after you’re done.”

A habit they’d fallen into way back in elementary school and never outgrown.

“Are you just going to leave that bar sitting there until a squirrel comes and steals it?”

Laura picks up the snack, still sealed but bent from the curve of Nattie’s pocket. Chocolate peanut butter. Nattie always buys the good flavors, and Laura

is grateful. She smoothes it out and drops it into the side compartment of her backpack for another time. In case of emergency.

“Just eat it, Laura. Even if you run home right now, it’ll be at least a while before the food’s ready. Is Iris trying to convince you to go on a diet again?”

Iris is always touting whatever diet she’d seen most heavily advertised online. For a flatter stomach, perkier buns, clarity of thought, purity of spirit.

“I’m not hungry enough yet.”

Laura isn’t skinny or fat. Her belly is comfortably soft and her legs strong, and as long as she doesn’t gain or lose enough weight she has to buy new clothes, she doesn’t care much one way or the other.

When Laura and Nattie were young, they used to tell people they were cousins, which everyone in their world knew was a lie, but it felt true to them. Same age, same schools—after third grade, when Nattie’s father, Eddie, got mad at the nuns in the Catholic school and switched her to the neighborhood public elementary—same building they called home, same favorite music and snacks. They had dinner together at least twice a week, served by Eddie on side by side stools in the shadowy corner of the local dive where he was everyone’s favorite bartender, and Iris planted at the other end, wilting, everyone’s least favorite barfly.

Laura knows she is supposed to miss those days, but she doesn’t. Nattie talks about it. Iris talks about it. Many of her memories are bound with the rich sound of her mother’s laugh, always a surprise. Such a shrill voice, but her laugh is deep and filled with the music she’s always ready to dance to. A laugh that invites all around her to join. Or stay back, depending on the pitch.

Maybe you have to become a parent to miss childhood. She looks at her friend, remembers her going into labor with her daughter, gasping at the bar to tell her father to meet her and Laura at the hospital after last call while the regulars clamored for a free round in celebration. Maybe nostalgia is there all along, like eggs waiting to be fertilized, take root with a heartbeat, and then come out in a rush with trembling legs and amniotic fluid.

She’s never heard Death laugh. An occasional smile, but no joy. Also no

yelling, crying, or berating the fates. Calm. The old fashioned polyester kerchief that protects her curlers seems hemmed in peace. A little frayed if she looks close, at the back where it's knotted tight, but it holds no matter how the wind blows.

Laura's fingers march along the rows of gravel and she pockets the sharpest one while Nattie drones on about what they can do and where they can go for her birthday tomorrow night. She looks past her friend to the bench in front of the bodega across the street, hoping to see Death and find the quiet that comes with her. No one, not even the kid who sells loosies stolen from his mother's purse.

"Ok. I'm ready."

"You want to come down after dinner?"

"It's Wednesday."

Wednesday night is laundry night, no exceptions.

"You sure? The kids were asking. I'm asking. You're better at the voices for their bedtime stories."

Something she's gotten from Iris. "Nope."

"Some friend you are, picking your undies over my kids." Nattie grins with that last. It's no secret Laura will choose clean underwear over anyone.

"Don't forget we're going out to tomorrow. You may not want candles, but I'm not giving up margarita night. And don't invite your creepy grandma friend."

"Once, it was only once she showed up." Laura stands and then extends a hand to Nattie to pull her up.

"Once was enough."

She agrees, but not because Death might show. Why does she have to do this every year, like there's going to be a magician and pony rides. But she knows why. Because Nattie wants to, and Laura is grateful.

Out of the park, they wait at the corner for the light to change, even though a freezing rain has begun to fall and there's a perfectly timed gap in the cars slicking down the avenue where they could cross. Nattie's become particular about that since her youngest started toddling on his own feet, waiting for green

lights.

Laura doesn't care if Death wants a margarita with them, she doesn't want to go out tomorrow night. She doesn't particularly want to turn thirty-two, either. She can't explain this ambivalence, she doesn't mind being in her thirties, isn't afraid of growing older. It's the way she's catching up to herself that feels wrong. She'd been one of those kids, maybe never told she was wise beyond her years (that'd been saved for Nattie, by one vaguely and one not so vaguely lecherous teacher), but told she was mature over and over throughout elementary and middle school. By the time she was in high school, comments about her maturity were preceded by assumptions that she was years older than she was, she heard the whispers from the doorway of the Language Arts department, the laundromat she hurried past on her way to the little butcher/grocery store—an after school job with assigned hours that began twenty-five minutes before last period ended.

Nattie's little bounce let her know it was time to keep moving. How did her friend have so much energy, always? Even her complaints about being tired are energetic. And she is tired, she works hard, even though hers is now a desk job. She didn't fall into it, she worked for it. After high school she went to community college during the day and waited tables at night,; half the time while pregnant, the other half while not sleeping because she was taking care of her babies. Even when her husband had finished his plumbing apprenticeship and decided he didn't want to live in Brooklyn anymore, or be her husband, or a father, she'd packed her business casual outfits, the kids' sippy cups, and moved back in with her father, Nattie'd grown up. Laura didn't so much grow up as catch up to herself, but now that she had, what? Life isn't any different than it had been when she was fourteen. She doesn't feel any different.

But here they are, dinnertime, getting on the elevator that reeks of the liver and onions Miss Lindy on the second floor cooks every Wednesday, to be shared with the little rat dog companion she thinks is a secret. When Nattie steps off on the third floor she turns back to Laura.

“You aren't going to flake out on me tomorrow, right? You're going to

remember to come down early enough so the kids can give you a candle cupcake, you aren't going to use your stupid card?"

Laura realizes Nattie knows why she hasn't taken her hand out of her pocket. The circles under the other woman's eyes are showing, the rain had left tracks through her concealer. This is her friend. Her tired, bouncing, always-an-extra-protein-bar friend.

She feels Iris's sigh pulling her upstairs, to dinner, while Death's sigh pulls from below, in the laundry room, by the pipe that empties waste water into the channel behind the washers.

She unfolds her hand from around the card and flashes her empty palm as the elevator door closes.

Mired

Jessica Peter

September 1916, Courcellette, France

She shudders, huddled against the mud at her back. The mud at her feet. The mud, soaking into her socks, her tunic, even into that holy-of-holies, her sleeping sack in the dugout.

Her feet haven't been dry since Calais.

Richardson pops up in front of her, youthful face spotted with freckles, reddish baby fuzz on his chin gleaming in the torchlight.

"Jonesy! I wanted to tell you something." He's more earnest than she could ever be. His voice is too exuberant for this place, a farmboy plunked in from some Prairie province who didn't seem to notice the endless death. His mouth keeps moving, but the thundering rumble of a tank drowns out the rest of his words. "Every time!" He shakes his head, slapping the trench wall behind her in good-natured camaraderie.

He tilts his head back to give his customary laugh, grin so wide it splits his face, inexplicable joy in this hell.

Then, one shot. Just one, in the never-ending clamour.

Liquid sprays across her mouth. Richardson freezes. He thuds to his knees, then onto his side, cap sliding off to settle beside him.

She moves fast, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth as she drops down too. Her hand comes away grey, but she doesn't have the capacity to figure that out, not yet. She crawls over to him.

Richardson groans, an animal sound of pain. Still alive, then. He shouldn't be.

The top of his head is gone; lumpy pinkish bits visible. His cap is splashed with the same grey that was on her mouth.

Once she would have dry heaved here, or even shed a tear.

She doesn't.

He sucks in a breath which rattles out of him on its release. "Freddy," he gurgles.

She winces at the sound of her brother's name. Guilt pricks her—not for coming here as him, she'd be his protector to the last—but for deceiving her fellow soldiers. They fight, they bleed, and they die together. They deserve better than her lies. They deserve to know *her*, her true self. But that's the one thing she can't give.

"Yes," she says, unable to say anything else.

"Kill me." The garbled voice is barely words anymore, but she understands. In more ways than one. Richardson's groans give way to a high-pitched keening.

No more questions. There's no one else around. Grabbing the canvas bag from her dugout, she pushes it over his mouth and nose and holds it there. He doesn't fight; soon he's still. She drops the bag back where it came from and goes in search of soap and water. She doesn't speak to anyone on the way, doesn't make eye contact.

When she finds what she's searching for, she scrubs, scrubs, scrubs. She shouldn't feel guilty for giving mercy when she's done so much worse to so many more. But the rest was war, and this is personal. The loss of Richardson has done a number on her. He's that person she wishes she was: open-minded, heart on his sleeve, everyone's best friend. Or at least he *was*. Now he's gone and she's what's left.

So she does feel guilty. And she can't get clean.

She's Lady Macbeth and it's out damned spot and who would have thought the young man had so much *brain* in him and soon her hands and face are pristine, the cleanest things in this whole damned trench, the only thing the mud

doesn't touch.

Except there *is* a spot. A tiny black spot south of her left thumb. The more she scrubs, the bigger it gets, until her hands are red and chapped and still so pristine, other than the spot. That damned spot.

Now it's the size of a penny.

She looks away, her breath coming quicker and quicker again. Maybe if she stopped washing, stopped thinking, stopped looking—just stopped. So, she takes a break. Except for the thinking; that she can't stop. And it's not only about the deception anymore. No, it's this whole thing. The whole thing where she thought coming here would bring her family pride, show what she was made of, prove herself in valorous combat. Be home by Christmas. But instead it's... this. Mud and blood and lies.

She looks back and the spot is the size of a quarter.

When she goes to touch it, her finger goes nowhere. Literally nowhere. No skin, no muscle, no tendon, no bone. A gap in her; a gap in reality.

But men are calling and it's time to move. She's nothing if not efficient in following commands. In seconds she has everything she owns, and they're off.

Off, a line of army ants, out the back of the trench and along thin planks of wood surrounded by sucking clay deep enough to sink a man. Off, in the coal blackness toward the red flashes and the rolling thunder. Off, toward the sharp punctuations of whizz-bangs and the screaming of shells.

She swings her arms briskly.

But her left hand is gone.

There's only a fuzzy stump at the end of that arm. No pain, just emptiness again. She stops, shifting to the edge of the plank so others can pass.

"Vicky," a voice sighs from the darkness.

She jumps, the sound of her own name scaring her more than the damned spot that is her left hand. No, the spot that is her arm. For the gap has spread, and it's as if she never had a left arm at all.

Then she sees a white moon face in the clay, tears running down his cheeks to splash into the muck surrounding him.

“Vicky,” he says again. She doesn’t jump this time. He’s a fellow soldier, but a stranger, crying out for a woman that mattered to him: not her. A coincidence.

Except that nobody else stops. Nobody else seems to see the man, who’s about to get sucked under. Not that there’s anything anyone could do.

So she stays, a final vigil. In a moment, the clay does what clay does—it sucks the man under with a pop. And he’s gone. One more life sacrificed to this blood-soaked and blood-hungry land.

She shifts to swing her bag over her shoulder with her right arm, but it’s gone too, the bag itself nowhere to be found. The men snaking along the boards no longer edge past her, they tramp on by as if she isn’t there at all.

And maybe she isn’t. When she looks down where her body should be, there’s nothing but blackness. Blackness and clay.

She’d bought the lie along with so many young men. A generation, splattered across the battlefields of Western Europe. Death by imperialism.

The guilt keeps pricking. For her deception, for her arrogance, for her willingness to kill the farmboys with peach fuzz and wide grins on the other side. She hadn’t come only to protect her brother. She’d come for the guns and the glory. She’d found the guns, but no glory. Just death, and the mud.

Always the mud.

And then, nothing.

The Masque of the Red Death

Edgar Allan Poe

The “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince’s own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress nor egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the “Red Death”.

It was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. These were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different, as might have been expected from the duke's love of the *bizarre*. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose colour varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the colour of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet—a deep blood colour. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire, that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect

of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to harken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes, (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies,) there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

But, in spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colours and effects. He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be *sure* that he was not.

He had directed, in great part, the movable embellishments of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great *fête*; and it was his own guiding taste which

had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been since seen in “Hernani”. There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—they have endured but an instant—and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many tinted windows through which stream the rays from the tripods. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven, there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-coloured panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appals; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who indulged in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of the waltzers were quieted; and there was an uneasy cessation of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened, perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who revelled. And thus too, it happened, perhaps, that before the

last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumour of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation. In truth the masquerade licence of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad revellers around. But the mummer had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in *blood*—and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of the Prince Prospero fell upon this spectral image (which, with a slow and solemn movement, as if more fully to sustain its role, stalked to and fro among the waltzers) he was seen to be convulsed, in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste; but, in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

“Who dares,” —he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near him—“who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the

battlements!”

It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which stood the Prince Prospero as he uttered these words. They rang throughout the seven rooms loudly and clearly, for the prince was a bold and robust man, and the music had become hushed at the waving of his hand.

It was in the blue room where stood the prince, with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing movement of this group in the direction of the intruder, who at the moment was also near at hand, and now, with deliberate and stately step, made closer approach to the speaker. But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were found none who put forth hand to seize him; so that, unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the prince’s person; and, while the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centres of the rooms to the walls, he made his way uninterruptedly, but with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet, ere a decided movement had been made to arrest him. It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers, while none followed him on account of a deadly terror that had seized upon all. He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness,

untenanted by any tangible form.

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

Writer Bios

Eammon M. Garland - Eammon M. Garland is a bookkeeper based in San Luis Obispo, California. Besides writing stories and riddles for his friends playing Dungeons and Dragons, he plays trombone in the community band, and he's trying to play the banjo, but he's not very good yet. If he could have any superpower he would choose to shapeshift. You can follow his future endeavors at eammonmgarland.blogspot.com.

RB Kelly - RB Kelly's debut novel, *Edge of Heaven*, was shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award and the ESFS Award for Best Work of Fiction. The sequel, *On The Brink*, was published in May 2022. She has a PhD in film theory and, with Robert JE Simpson, runs CinePunked, an organisation dedicated to bridging the gap between academia and film fandom.

Anne Perez - Anne Perez is a lifelong New Yorker who explores the extraordinary of the ordinary through fiction and sporadic blogging. Recent work can be found in *The Northwest Review*, *Canned Magazine*, and *Versification*. She can usually be found blathering on Twitter @MrsFringe

Jessica Peter - Jessica Peter is a social worker and health researcher from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. You can find her work, now or soon, in *Howls from the Dark Ages: A Medieval Horror Anthology*, *NoSleep Podcast*, and *Frost Zone Zine*. Or find her on Twitter @jessicapeter1, or at jessicapeter.net.

Mo Usavage - Mo Usavage (they/them) is a queer, trans author currently living in the midwest. They work with animals and avoid people. You can find them posting sporadically on twitter @UsavageMo.

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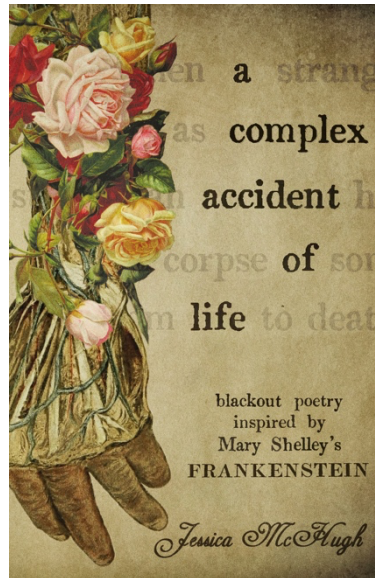
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LampLight Volume 1

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This 450 page anthology of the first year of LampLight Magazine collects four amazing issues from September 2012 - June 2013.

Features the complete serial novella “And I Watered It With Tears” by Kevin Lucia. Fiction and interviews with Robert Ford, Kelli Owen, Ronald Malfi, and Elizabeth Massie.

J.F. Gonzalez takes us through the history of the genre with his Shadows in the Attic articles. LampLight classics bring you some of those past voices to experience again.

Fiction by William Meikle, Nathan Yocum, Rahul Kanakia, Ian Creasey, Mandy DeGeit, D.J. Cockburn, Christopher Fryer, Christopher Kelly, Tim Lieder, Jamie Lackey, Matthew Warner, Sheri White, Dinos Kellis, S. R. Mastrantone, Mjke Wood, Delbert R. Gardner, Michele Mixell, Sarah Rhett, Armel Dagorn, E. Catherine Tobler

