

The background of the cover is a lush field of green plants with small, heart-shaped leaves. A hand with a pinkish-red skin tone is shown from the top right, holding the hilt of a sword. The hilt is highly ornate, featuring intricate golden scrollwork and a central red gemstone. The sword's blade is a pale, shimmering blue color. The overall lighting is soft and natural, suggesting a dawn or dusk setting.

WE WRITE  
at DAWN

AN ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 1: DEFIANCE

# **We Write at Dawn**

## **Anthology**

*Volume One:*  
*Defiance*

Presented by:  
We Write at Dawn Creative

We Write at Dawn Anthology Volume One: Defiance  
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*For the We Write at Dawn community,  
who inspired this anthology and brought it to life.*

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## Preface

Hawk Stevenson

The *We Write at Dawn* community was born in defiance (okay, maybe it was closer to chaos).

It started as a naïve idea. I *barely* knew what Discord was—only that Evan Weiss, the Midwest emo singer-songwriter, had one for his fans. ‘BookTok’ was bumping, and we were all starved for community after three long years of a global pandemic clipping our wings and keeping us from finding our flock.

A few of us were in the same comment section at the moment the link dropped. I, and others, raised our hands to moderate, unaware exactly what we were getting ourselves into.

At the time, I was hungry for leadership experience, and my shiny new corporate ‘product management’ job was not offering me any such

opportunities organically (though promised). I looked around my local community and saw empty social clubs, vacant sporting fields, and cobwebs at the local library; so, I did what I always do. I went out and found what I wanted myself, in the form of *We Write at Dawn*.

*We Write at Dawn* is a place for writers and readers, but natural selection led us to being a writer-heavy space. We have members all around the world, from San Diego, to Norway, to New Zealand. There is no time zone untouched (though that's mostly due to poor sleep habits). We over-index fantasy writers, cat parents, and queer humans, but ours is a space inclusive to all. It is a place for a diverse group of people to share their deepest and most personal experiences, and broaden their cultural sensitivity and understanding.

Three years later, I am still here shepherding the community. I carry my proverbial crook over the digital fields (the channels). Writers and readers come and go, and membership ebbs and flows, like any other community organization. We have our old heads and newbies; we've hosted book clubs, launch parties, discussion groups, and educational seminars; we participate in skill challenges, share snips, and play word games; but most of all, we yap.

## PREFACE

Conversation and connection are the keystones of our community. And the greatest pride and joy of all, for me, is to see one of our members finish or publish their work.

Our community is made of its members: our stories, our voices. We write at dawn, day, and night. If we don't write to save the world, we write to save ourselves.

But we are *weary*.

The world around us is aflame. Totalitarian forces seek to silence the artists and academics, the lovers and dreamers, and *all of us*.

To create art, now more than ever, is an act of defiance. Defiance can be found in so many moments, whether minute or cosmic, anywhere that someone chooses differently in the face of forces which compel us toward a status quo—and sometimes violently.

Capital markets coerce us to compete; we defy that force in community, and instead support one another. Collaboration, cocreation, and charitable giving are all acts of defiance in a world that wants us jealous, avaricious, and isolated. Alone, and against one another, we are easily controlled. Together, and united, we have *power* in our pooled resources, and *potential*.

The creation of this anthology is an act of defiance in and of itself. It's for us—a radical celebration of who we are, and what we can accomplish together. Not for profit. Not for glory. But for its own sake.

In defiance.

I am proud of this community. We are a community against generative artificial (un)intelligence, and *for humans*, in all creative endeavors.

I look forward to stewarding us toward *more*: more stories told, more experiences shared, more understanding, more diversity, more humanity.

And more defiance.

And with those words, I present to you the very first—and hopefully far from the last—*We Write at Dawn Anthology*.



# I Am Zaharoula

Kai Noble

*Content Warning*  
*references to child abuse*

I clutch the little slip of paper tighter in my hand. *Zaharoula Patsakiou*<sup>1</sup>, it says. This paper is my lifeline; without it I'm lost. I laugh quietly to myself; for some strange reason, it's funny that my life depends on a piece of paper.

A young lady in front of me turns around. "*Ti einai lathos me esas?*"<sup>2</sup>" she asks with a disapproving frown. She looks me up and down, huffs, and turns

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Immigration, Western Australian Branch (1948) '[Incoming passenger list to Fremantle "Rena" arrived 20 November 1948](#)', National Archives of Australia [Passenger Arrivals, Item ID: 9244291]

<sup>2</sup> Translation: *What's wrong with you?* [Greek]

back toward the front of the line, where a man in a blue uniform sits behind a tall, imposing counter, scribbling passenger names into a huge book.

*What's wrong with you?* I think, scrunching my nose up at the much older, pot-bellied, balding man by her side. He turns, slides his slimy gaze over me, and winks. I look away in disgust. *Pig.*

I wonder if she chose to be with him, or if their families forced them together. Judging by the way her body angles away from him to, I'm confident I know the answer.

I felt uneasy the moment I set foot on the *Rena*<sup>3</sup>, like the world flipped upside down—or perhaps I did. Maybe it was the cramped, dormitory-style cabins<sup>4</sup>, and the scent of rusted metal, or maybe it was the thought of leaving home behind.

I close my eyes, remembering the inside of that trailer. Remembering why I left.

I step up to the bench, passport and boarding pass in hand, ignoring the gnawing feeling in my stomach. This is my chance to start a new life, and nothing is going to stop me but God himself.

---

<sup>3</sup> [Department of Immigration](#), Western Australian Branch.

<sup>4</sup> Museums Victoria (n.d.) [Journeys to Australia](#), Museums Victoria

I AM ZAHAROULA

she b<sup>o</sup> u<sup>n</sup> c<sup>e</sup> s off the waves

flying flying  
falling

eyes closed

i  
s  
w  
a  
y

with her

It's a terrible trip.

The Rena used to be a military ship<sup>5</sup>, so six of us have to share a set of triple bunk beds in a cramped room for a whole month. After rooming with my many younger siblings during childhood, it doesn't bother me too much. One of my cabinmates, Dimitra, on the other hand... the rest of us call her 'Princess', because she never stops complaining. She insists she'll use her 'high social standing'—interesting coming from a third-class passenger—to

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<sup>5</sup> Daily Mirror (1948) '[Writ served on Greek ship](#)', National Library of Australia

make the owner of the Rena pay for ‘subjecting her to such conditions’.

If I wasn’t so homesick I might laugh.

the sky was *gold*  
but I was poor  
now it is **lead**  
and I am rich

I feel so small in the busy shipyard. A dark-skinned man shoving a trolley full of Louis Vuitton luggage for a rich, white family hurtles toward me. My feet slip on the wet floor as I jump out of the way.

*Splash!* My boots land in a deep puddle, and muddy water explodes up at me. I look down in dismay at my used-to-be-white blouse that is now brown and damp. *Welcome to Melbourne*, the universe seems to say, and all I want is to be back home.

is cold, rain, mud  
is warmth, sun, sand  
home  
is family, food, laughter  
is grief, anger, regret

I stare at the ground, avoiding the gaze of the man standing opposite me. The bottoms of his trousers are perfectly tailored to fold gently onto the tops of his polished black leather boots.

Sneaking a peek at his bearded face, I try to guess his age. His stature and authoritative air made him feel much older at first, but now, if I look beyond his beard, I think he might be barely thirty.

“Your daughter is the most beautiful girl I have ever laid eyes on,” he says, but he isn’t looking at me; his eyes are locked on Papa, who stands on my right beside Mama. “I can provide a good life for her.”

“She cannot have children yet,” Mama interjects. “She’s only eleven, sir.”

“No matter,” the man replies, now smiling at me. “We have time.” I silently plead with Papa to say no. I’m not ready to leave, not yet. Mama’s face is paler than I’ve ever seen it as she meets my gaze.

“You make a very generous offer,” Papa says appreciatively, reading a piece of paper the rich man gave him. “Unfortunately, we need Zaharoula here to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Perhaps, when my second daughter is old enough to manage the children, we can reconsider.”

“As you say. Thank you for your time.”

Mama exhales, and her shoulders drop in relief.

Too young  
to be a wife, to be a mother  
Too old  
to be a husband, to be a lover

“I don’t understand,” I say for the sixth time today, staring at the pale, wide-eyed girl in the mirror. She looks too young for the makeup on her face, too innocent for the diamond-studded clip in her hair, too scared for the pretty white dress sewn by her Mama. I like this dress, but not today; not when it means *goodbye*. “Why do I have to get married, Mama?”

Mama shushes me gently. “There are bad people coming, *koukla*<sup>6</sup>. Having a husband will protect you from them.”

*Bad people*. If only she knew the monster my husband would become.

13 | 31  
mirrored  
but d i s t a n t  
your reflection was a lie  
we were never the same

---

<sup>6</sup> Translation: *doll* [Greek]

“Roula?” I hear a timid, hesitant voice from outside the door.

*He* won’t be home for at least an hour, so I put down the potato in my left hand and the peeler in my right, making the short journey from the kitchen sink to the door in two quick strides. I lean down, lever the handle, and push the metal door open. A woman, just a few years older than me, stands in the dirt outside, hugging her stomach.

“Who are you?” I look behind her warily. For all I know, she could be a spy for the Germans.

She wipes one of several tears from her cheek. “You don’t know me, but I know you. I know your husband.” She stops speaking suddenly, and I watch in shock as she begins to bawl like an infant, wet and snotty, with her face scrunched up.

“Is there... anything I can do?” I wonder, not expecting much of a response.

She takes a deep breath and unleashes a string of words all in a rush, without pausing: “My husband died in the war, and I just found out I’m pregnant with your husband’s baby, and I don’t know what to do!” Then she continues to cry.

I don’t know what to say to her. My husband, the man who never gave me love, or care, or kindness,

but expected mine in return, is sleeping with another woman. My heart sinks down into my stomach. My husband is the father of this woman's child.

"What do you expect *me* to do?" I snap, ignoring her tears. She got herself into this mess; why should I help her out of it?

"Divorce him," she begs, and my jaw drops. After a moment, I begin to laugh, my voice rising in pitch and volume until I can't control my hysterics.

"You can have him!" I cry, and slam the door in her face.

We lived together in our  
Home, growing old after  
Years of laughter and love

In our thirties, my second husband George and I buy our first home. It might belong to both of us, but knowing that this house is mine, I feel euphoric. The closest I've ever come to having my own home was the tiny trailer I shared with *him*.

This is different. I'm older, happier, free.

George doesn't ask me why I stay up late crocheting doilies to drape over the backrest of the couch, or why my blistered fingers cross-stitch a vibrant 1920s setting to frame and hang over the



## **Author's Note**

I don't remember much about my maternal grandmother, because she died when I was ten, but I remember some of the stories she shared before she lost her memories to Alzheimer's.

Yiayia told me she was born in Greece, took care of her younger siblings from age nine, married at thirteen, and had her first child at fourteen. Sometime after World War II, she came to Australia by boat.

After she died, I heard other incredible stories about her, and I was so proud of this strong-minded woman who survived unimaginable horrors during the war, and all the instability that came with it. She defied the expectations and limitations that her family and society placed on her and pursued the life she wanted.

I was inspired by her life, especially her early years, and wanted to honor her memory by writing about her, but I hit a roadblock when I realized I didn't know the whole story. All I had were fragments of memories—some mine, some hers, some told to me by others.

So, I started searching for historical records I could use to fill in the gaps, intermingling history

## I AM ZAHAROULA

and imagination to create an experimental, fragmentary piece of bio-fiction interspersed with poetry. Rather than explain Yiayia's life in a cohesive manner, I chose to feel her experiences as I wrote.

It has been my great pleasure and honor to share her story with you.



# The Family Reunion

Kiwa Lowe

*Content Warning*  
*violence, gore*

The trees were like corpses against the backdrop of snow and fog, black figures stretching into the sky in blurry smudges outside the car window as we sped down the winding, two-lane road. The car rattled as it crossed over a bridge, and my stepmom turned up the Christmas music.

She started humming, and said, “You’re going to love the fresh air.” I gave a noncommittal grunt in reply and cranked the window down, craving the chill on my skin.

“Excited to see everyone?” my dad asked. He didn’t remember all the times I complained that my

uncles and aunties were badmouthing me in our mother tongue right in front of me—not that I could confirm it, though. Saying my name awkwardly in English while looking at me sideways wasn't enough evidence, apparently.

“Not really.”

We rounded a corner on a hill, and I glimpsed an old wooden train bridge in the distance. As we crested the hill and headed down again, I saw something on the bridge move. What I thought was a pile of discolored snow suddenly stood up, assuming the shape of a tall person. Something felt off about it; it was too tall.

“Someone's down there,” I mumbled.

My stepmom looked at me through the side mirror. “Probably just a local, sweetie.”

I looked back out the window, but we had already passed the train bridge. I couldn't shake the feeling I had seen something I shouldn't have.

We pulled up to the cabin in the early afternoon. My uncle and grandma came out to greet us, but I didn't speak to them; they didn't understand English. I hauled my suitcase through the front door, and my aunt greeted me with, “Oh, good; you're here. Watch the kids for a bit while we go shopping.”

I immediately wished I was back home. “Why can’t you take them?”

She gave me a look like I had just insulted her. “They’ll want to buy everything. It’s better to leave them here.”

“Is Sam here?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s out back with the twins.”

“Why can’t *he* watch them?”

She sighed. “Because *you’re* the oldest. Leslie, *come on.*”

I slammed my suitcase on the hardwood floor, earning a look of annoyance. “Which room is Sam in?”

“Upstairs, furthest down the hall on the right.”

I ascended the stairs, letting my suitcase hit each step as I went. The room Sam picked for this trip was probably for my benefit. He knew I didn’t like through traffic and understood my dislike for our family.

I quickly unpacked to the sound of the twins laughing outside.

“We’ll be back to cook dinner,” my aunt shouted from downstairs. I heard the door slam.

*Did I ever belong to this family?* Maybe the day I was born, but they socially discarded me when they discovered I had no interest in learning their

language. That was fine by me—I didn't want to be around people like them, anyway.

I headed downstairs and raided the kitchen for snacks, popping open a bag of chips and heading outside. Sam sat hunched over on a nearby bench, giving me the 'it's too cold for this shit' look while his little sister and brother rolled around in the snow, trying—poorly—to build an igloo.

“The black sheep finally graces us with its presence.”

“Shut up,” I whined, and sat next to him. “Chips?”

“Those're mine, actually.” He yanked the bag from me and shoveled a handful in his mouth. “You're lucky, you know.”

“What d'you mean?”

“You aren't forced on these trips *every* time.”

“Enough times to piss me off. Anyway, when are the rest coming?”

“Tomorrow.”

I leaned back, physically deflating. “Ugh. Just kill me now.”

He laughed. “Careful what you wish for.”

I imagined leaving and never coming back as I rubbed my face. “Let's help the twins with their igloo.”

“Help them yourself,” he scoffed, shivering. “It’s too cold.”

“Wimp,” I teased. “You know you’ll warm up if you move around more, right?”

He released a dramatic groan. “*Fine.*”

The twins didn’t appreciate our help, but they also knew they couldn’t build an igloo on their own. I suggested we make a snowman village instead, and they rolled around in the snow some more while Sam and I got started.

As the sun kissed the treetops on the horizon, Sam checked his wristwatch and said, “They should be back soon.”

I carved a face into a snowman with a pinecone nose. “Uh-huh.”

“Where’s Mason?”

I looked up. Sam stood next to the snowman that Molly was trying to hoist a stomach onto, but their brother Mason was nowhere to be seen. “Shit.”

“He probably wandered off,” Sam said. “I’ll go—”

“Make sure Molly doesn’t run off, too,” I said, spotting Mason’s footprints in the snow. “I’ll go get the little monster.”

I trudged through knee-deep snow to the forest line, gasping with effort, and headed in. The snow

eventually thinned, and Mason's footprints disappeared along with the sound of the birds. I knew I'd be in deep shit if I didn't find him, so I kept looking. He couldn't have gone far. I wove through a grove of aspen, their knotted eyes watching me like a mythological, all-seeing creature.

*There!* I saw a flash of Mason's electric blue jacket duck into a thicket, and I gave chase, eager to find him and leave. The sound of a river came within earshot and, worried he'd slip into the icy water, I called out to him: "Mason!"

His little, round face peeked out from behind a tree, his head at the same level as a giant tree knot that was like an eyeball gauging how I'd taste. "Hi, Leslie."

"What're you doing here?"

"Looking for a stick."

"Why?"

"I found a dead animal."

"What?" I choked out. "Show me." He took my hand and led me downriver.

The smell hit first: metallic, sweet, with an edge of sour butter. My nose wrinkled at the stench.

A fresh carcass lay on its side by the water's edge. Maybe a deer? Caribou? I couldn't tell. Its entire body cavity was carved out, and steam rose from it

as if it were still alive, exhaling. Its intestines hung out, organs tossed aside like an old toy, but there wasn't a drop of blood in sight. The snow was pristine.

My stomach dropped. "We're leaving." I grabbed Mason, wrapping my arm around his head and snaking my hand over his eyes.

He ducked out of my arm. "But I wanted to play—"

"*Now.*" I grabbed him by his jacket collar, my fingers stiff with cold, and yanked him toward the rental cabin. His eyes welled up, but I didn't care. Whatever defiled that carcass could still be around, and I didn't want to be there when it returned.

"Why's he crying?" Sam asked. He sat in a folding chair next to the basement patio's firepit. He looked annoyed at first but froze when he saw my face. "What happened?"

I fought the urge to cry too as the fear caught up to me. "Nothing." I knew Sam. If I told him about the carcass now, he would want to go look at it too. "Let's just go inside and wash up for dinner." I couldn't hide the weird tone in my voice, and Sam looked at me as if to say, 'what the fuck did you see out there?', but I brushed him off and steeled myself for Mason, the little tattletale, to start shit because I

manhandled him a little. He'd tell his parents I hurt him, and they'd yell at me asking why, and I'd tell them Mason went missing and I had to force him to come back, and they'd criticize me some more.

I sighed as I stepped through the back door, stomping on the mat to remove the snow from my boots. By the time I kicked off my shoes, the little man was already in his mom's arms, getting the back of his head soothed and crying about how mean I was. I turned away the moment my aunt opened her mouth, walking past the Trinitron TV, and headed upstairs to the room I shared with Sam. There wasn't going to be any reprieve during this trip.

My legs felt like Jell-O from the physical exhaustion of trekking through the snow and woods, so I decided to sleep early. I shimmied out of my outer layers, tossing them onto the floor, pulled on some pajamas from my suitcase, and crawled under the covers.

I curled up as the dreams took me.

“Leslie!”

I jolted awake as a pair of desperate hands rattled my body.

“Leslie,” Sam hissed, his eyes wide. “Wake up, you gotta hide.” With sweaty palms, he dragged me out of bed and toward the closet.

“What happened?” I tried to gather my bearings. It was night, but what time?

“Something got in.”

“What?”

He closed the door. “Just stay here.” I peeked through the slats of the closet door and saw him crawl under the bed, just as wet, heavy steps slapped down the hall.

I took slow, deep breaths as the bedroom door creaked open with a squeal that echoed through the room. My stomach dropped, and I froze. A single glowing eye, yellower than a dandelion, looked through the crack in the door as light and shadow poured onto the floor. A cold chill rolled across my shoulders. What *was* that?

The door suddenly swung open with a *bang* as it slammed into the wall, revealing a tall, spindly woman with wild, white hair and pale, thin skin stretched over sharp bones. She wore nothing but scraps of tattered, blood-soaked clothing, and, as she hunched forward, the top of her head graced the doorframe.

Sam made a noise, and my eyes darted to the bed in horror. Maybe he was trying to scoot away from the door, but he was too loud. The woman lunged for him. I watched helplessly as she lifted the queen size bed with one hand and grabbed him by the arm with the other.

“Leslie, help!” he screamed, trying to wiggle free. We locked eyes, and I felt his fear as if it were my own.

The woman’s gaze followed Sam’s, searching for movement, any slight slip-up that might give me away. I held my breath, letting tears roll down my cheek without wiping them away. *I’m sorry, Sam.* I couldn’t help him. I couldn’t. If I went out there, we would both be taken.

“Leslie!”

I couldn’t blink. His shrieks pierced my soul. He was my best friend.

The woman gave him a dirty look as she lifted him into the air—where she got the strength, I didn’t know—and then slammed him against the floor. She did it again, and again, and Sam’s cries filled the room, until he could merely gurgle. His arm hung awkwardly in the woman’s grip, looking like it was dislocated.

Then the woman dragged Sam away, smearing the red footprints she'd left behind with his body.

It felt like forever until I finally climbed out of the closet. I gasped for air as I cried, finally free to do so without fear of being caught. My throat burned. How could I have done nothing? The sight of Sam being dragged away repeated itself over and over in my head, and waves of sadness and regret washed over me with each replay.

I stared at the bloody smudges by the door. Whose blood was it? I gathered what courage I had and peeked out to look down the hallway. I traced the trail of blood to my aunt and uncle's room first, where their bloody, pulverized corpses lay in bits around the room as if they'd tried to see what was going on in the hallway. *They deserved it.*

I continued on to my dad and stepmom's room. They were also dead—nothing but mush on the broken bed. *First to go, probably.*

I heard something behind me and spun around, the muscles in my legs tensing as I prepared to run. Nothing was there except the glow of the downstairs CRT.

“Hello?” I called out hesitantly.

“Leslie?”

I heard small footsteps on the stairs, and I squinted in the dark to see.

“Mason?”

His face crumpled in a cry. “Leslie!” He ran up the stairs and clung to me in a desperate hug.

I moved to block the door with my body. “Where’s Molly?”

“The *witch* took her,” he cried.

“Witch?”

“She killed Mommy and Daddy!” His sobs echoed in the big house. He saw his parents’ bodies, then. He was old enough to understand death.

“And grandma?” I eyed the square staircase, not sure if I preferred her dead or taken.

“She *ate* grandma!” Mason screamed.

“Ate...?”

There was a noise downstairs, like someone—*something*—tripping over shoes. Mason and I froze. Without wasting a second, I lifted him onto my hip and quietly walked back to my room. I clenched my jaw as I closed the door behind us and made my way to the window by the overturned bed.

“What are you doing?”

“We need to get out of this house.” I opened the window. “Come here.” I sat him on the edge, his bare feet dangling in the crisp air. “Mason, listen to me,”

I said, gripping his shoulders and looking him in the eyes. “You need to be strong, okay?” I wiped fresh tears from his red face. “When you land in those bushes down there, get to the driveway and run—as fast as you can—down that road. Do not look back, and don’t stop. No matter what. Okay?”

“But you—”

I heard footsteps approaching down the hall, and my heart pounded against my ribs.

“Your feet are going to hurt, and you’ll think it’s okay to stop, but it’s not. *Do not stop*. Do you understand, Mason?”

He nodded, and I pushed him out the window. I watched his silhouette as he landed, got up, and ran out of sight.

Behind me, I heard the door swing open. Without thinking, without looking, I leaped out the window. I landed hard in the bushes, and pain shot up my arm. I bit my lip to stifle a cry. With no time to waste, I immediately rounded the house and reentered through the basement patio doors, grabbing an axe from the firepit along the way. Mason had called the woman a witch, not a monster. That meant she was still human, right? And humans could be killed.

I looked around for the utility room, then the gas pipe, jamming the axe between it and the wall. I

pulled hard, and bit down on my lip to avoid crying out in pain. It felt like the house was fighting me as it groaned against my weight, until the pipe finally snapped, spewing freezing propane everywhere. The intense smell of rotten eggs filled my nostrils, hitting me so hard I felt dizzy.

Footsteps rumbling down from the second floor jolted me back to lucidity. I had no time to be dizzy. I propped myself up against the wall for support, and followed it into the basement den, scooping the matchbox off the coffee table bowl and half-tripping outside.

“Come on, come on!” I crouched down by the firepit, striking match after match, but they kept breaking. My hands shook so hard they were practically vibrating.

The witch laughed from the top of the stairs. “You were the one in the closet, weren’t you?” Her voice was tinny, as if she were speaking through the speakers on the television. Her words moved through the air and directly into my brain like evil tendrils.

Something inside me told me this was the end. I blinked the tears away, fighting the feeling of defeat with everything I had. I remembered the lumps of

flesh that my family had become and shook my head. *I will not become like them. I'm not like them.*

At last, the match caught. I tossed it into the pit and looked up to see the witch's massive face pressed eerily against the glass of the sliding door—harder, closer, until finally the glass shattered. I got a whiff of rotten egg smell and bolted as fast as I could, but not fast enough.

The cabin exploded behind me, the shockwave tossing me into the air and setting my back on fire. I cried at the pain, at the smell of my own burned flesh. I rolled my back onto the snow, the cold instantly soothing my burns, and saw the billowing flame where the witch and the cabin once were. I sighed, a sense of relief washing over me.

Until I saw her rise from the burning pile. Her body was on fire, but she was otherwise unharmed. *No.* I sat up, watching in horror as she lumbered toward me. She was going to *eat* me, wasn't she?

Suddenly, a bolt of white light pierced the darkness like a flash of daylight, leaving a fist-sized hole in the witch's cranium. I looked toward the source of the light and saw a man adjusting his suit by the treeline, with a bow slung over his shoulder. I stared, dazed, as a team of four surrounded the

witch's remains and sucked her up into a box-shaped device.

The man with the bow smiled at me and jogged over. "Good job surviving as long as you did," he said, sounding relieved. "What's your name?"

"Leslie," I gasped. I couldn't move, just watched him stand over me in pain. Something about his smile soothed me.

"Well, Leslie..." He looked over at the burning cabin briefly, then back to me. "What do you say about fighting more creatures like *that*?"

"Sam. Where's—where's Sam?"

He frowned. "The child?"

"Teen."

His expression turned grim.

"Need—" I groaned in pain, fighting to remain conscious. "I need to find him."

The man combed through his hair. "Tell you what: come with me to see my supervisor for an interview, and I'm sure we can find him together."

"Ngh! Yes!" I gritted my teeth. "I'll go!"

"Good choice. Welcome to The Company."



# House with the Chartreuse Door

Hawk Stevenson

While it looks more like a house than a prison, I can't be sure which it really is from the outside. I'm here against my will—that's one data point in favor of prison. It was one of those coerced, phony choices—either this or something much worse, or so it seems to me.

So here I am.

This house doesn't have a lawn, at least not in the way I am used to: sheets of Kentucky bluegrass cropped high and tight with the military precision of a Husqvarna ride-on mower, maintained to the specifications set forth by the judging eyes of the Homeowners Association and its loyalists. Instead, it's overgrown with milkweed, thistles, and hellebore-knows-whats. It's clear from the façade

that meticulous groundskeeping is not a requirement of the prisoners here, nor a priority of the warden.

The wheels of my steamer trunk rumble and skip along the remainder of the stone walkway, stopping at the front porch. Before I take the first step, a flash of blue catches my eye. A swallowtail ambles about in the airspace around my face before landing on a hand-painted sign that reads ‘The House with the Chartreuse Door’ and nothing more. The word ‘Chartreuse’ is in that very color, aptly.

The door itself is not chartreuse, but rather the elaborate stained-glass border around it appears that color in totality, despite containing a dazzling mosaic of unexpected accompaniments: small flecks of mustard, mint, lime, Thai basil, sea salt, glass, and moonshine. The effect is alluring surrounding a door in a color that communicates, ‘if you like this, be assured that we’re strange here, too’. And that little thought is a welcome comfort, even if it feels foolhardy. How can I feel welcome anywhere I am compelled to go? They might be strange, like me, but we are all similarly outcast.

Who is making me do this? It’s a complicated question that I don’t have the resources to answer at the moment. As with so many things, there’s a constellation of reasons—sources of unwelcome

coercion pushing me to exit society when I cannot keep calm or carry on. Maybe it's my choice after all, but some days, if I could keep all of this potential inside of me—shelved, unused, and out of harm's way—then I wouldn't have a problem.

*Don't start nothing. Won't be nothing.*

*But also, I won't be properly living.*

As I'm lost in thought, the chartreuse-encircled door swings open and another guy around my age and height makes eye contact with me. His dark eyebrows quirk into angular interest. "TK, TP, or both?" he asks.

*Can I get it right this time?* I close my eyes and loosen up my muscles, redirecting all of my intention into one little word, planting it inside his temporal lobe so I can be heard.

*Both.*

I know it worked when his hand flies to grasp his ear. Jaw distended, he reaches his hand out to shake mine. "I'm Doug Trudy. TK, on my good days."

"Depends on whose perspective!" a girl cuts in as she descends the stairs, already halfway down. Behind her, another girl shoots her a glare, and I can see her plan a split second before it unfolds before my eyes. Before her head can smash into the built-

ins along the turn of the stairs, I throw my own intention into the fall and arrest her momentum.

“I don’t believe any of you has the spoons to pay for those moves,” a gently authoritative voice rings out from the heart of the home.

Everyone freezes, including me, though I’m not sure why.

Is this man a cult leader? Is this a cult? It’s too early to rule it out. He looks suspiciously like depictions of Jesus.

“Sorry, Nix,” the girl at the head of the stairs calls down.

“You won’t always have the readiness of a benevolent newcomer to save you from the repercussions of your impulses,” the man says. “None of us have the ability to undo what has been done, nor do we have the steady hands, or licensing requirements, to perform maxillofacial reconstructive surgery, am I right?”

Many heads shake, including my own.

“And not to blame the victim, but let’s limit our provocations to strategies with positive payoffs for all. Agreed?”

“Yes, Mr. Nix,” the one whose face I saved says reluctantly.

He turns his head to look me in the eyes. “Welcome, Jude. My name is Nick Teller, and I’m the head of the House with the Chartreuse Door. I hope I speak for us all when I say I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, and hope I can help you feel as at home as possible.”

It’s hard to imagine a new space becoming something as sacred as *home* on a first impression. And yet... the potential is here, among the maximalist art adorning each wall that isn’t a window. Every angle of the home is accentuated with natural wood finishes that have seen many decades yet still hold their forest-lent beauty.

“We hold complexity here,” Nick says, plucking a primordial thought from my mind. He has both, too. “The flaws of the past do not always warrant demolition. That would require rot, which I’m pleased to say we do not have in this old home, as shabby as it may look. It helps that many of us can see the cracks as they form in the foundation and hear a single termite infiltrate the framework. Hypersensitivity has its perks.”

Hypersensitivity is the reason I am here, as I have grown increasingly unfit for the world at large. And when that happens, those deemed so are sent away

to boot camps, penitentiaries, asylums. Which one is this?

“It is none of those,” Nick answers. “I cannot say what this *is*, on the other hand. Wouldn’t want to limit its potential. Doug, have you the spoons to practice taking that steamer trunk to Jude’s room? If not, your muscles could do the trick.”

Doug shoots him a shaky smile. “It wouldn’t be the first hell I raised today.”

“I believe in you, but others may benefit from watching their heads. Jude, come with me please.” Nick turns on his heel and strides away.

*Yes, spoon theory. Why else would Alakazam have them?*

I follow his thoughts and feel my own heels lift from the hardwood as I drift after him. I try to keep my feet on the ground, thinking of that bowl cut in *The NeverEnding Story* as I do, and realize it’s not necessary to resist or pretend anymore.

“I don’t make a habit of tethering you down,” Nick says to me, watching me float like a Temu Stephen King character. “Ultimately, the goal is for you to fly at the altitude of your choosing. You will find no chains in this house.”

I can hear them rattling, if only in the haunts of my imagination. No, I hear them in Nick’s head, and

feel the echo of desperation in his heart to break them.

“Why am I here?” I ask.

*Here* happens to be an exposed-brick-heavy Prairie School mansion deep in the woods.

Nick chooses to romanticize it. “You are here, Jude, because you cannot be contained. And so, you extend your influence outward, exerting power into the world in a way that is extraordinary.”

I don’t buy it. “So, I come here to get under control?”

He laughs so genuinely that it pisses me off. “Not *here*, no. There’s the Institute for that, although that’s not the picture they paint of themselves.”

I knew about the institute option. I even briefly toyed with the idea, but my fascination was short-lived and left an aftertaste of distrust in my mouth. From there on, this was my only choice. No choice at all.

“You come here,” Nick says, “because you have power, a treasure, that belongs to you alone. And even if this path is riskier, you know in your heart it’s more self-possessed. You want to be free.”

*Free?* I can’t imagine feeling free, not haunted by this affliction.

“Why do you see our gifts as disordered?” Nick cuts across me suddenly.

I should have known. Everyone here is like me. Possibly—*probably*—better.

“Who are you?” Nothing like the game of questions for deflection.

“Nobody particularly important,” Nick says apologetically. “Few of us are, in the grand scheme. Even with my gifts, there’s no guarantee I’ll move the needle of history. Or even if I’ll make a lasting impression on you. The fact of the matter is that you are here, and I am the head of the house for the time being.”

“So, what do you do?”

“The best I can,” Nick says, “to help you find your own way, somewhere among your peers, where you are more likely to be seen and helped along the way. We’re here to offer an alternative to telepaths and telekinetics: to live communally during our formative and vulnerable years, and remain in community for our lifetimes. In lieu of the path of the Institute.”

*The path of the Institute. Along which the Hydra will decide your entire future on the basis of their Kafkaesque perception of the strength of your gifts. I don’t understand who could choose this path.*

“There are fewer of us,” Nick cuts in once again. “That should tell you something about the allure of the Institute. They have value to offer. Infrastructure. A guided path. Handlers to train you up like a prizefighter. And you taste that sweet victory on a fast track after your every move is culled down into what is optimal for the *market*. That’s right: choosing the Institute means selling yourself to the highest, sometimes only, bidder. And yet, still, there are fewer of us.”

I *still* cannot understand.

“You’ll see someday,” Nick says, voice softening. “Sweet summer child. Twenty-five gets younger and younger each year.”

My mind buzzes, unable to get a grip on how much it is both perceiving and being perceived by someone who understands the Gift, too. That’s what it is, after all? Not the Job. Not the Only Thing I Am. Just a part of me, even if that part of me is a harbinger of torment, yet at the same time triumph.

“We have house rules, of course, but remember, this operation is held together with paperclips and Deus Ex Machina shit. We owe each other our best feet forward, our voices attuned to reason, and our hearts synced to our ears. Before our Gifts, we are

human. And that might be the most complicated part of us.”

So, he means we’ll work it out?

“Yes, *I* mean we’ll work it out.” Nick exhales his final vestiges of mirth. “You’ll learn how to shut me out, you know, insofar as my presence bothers you. And I should also be mindful of what I’m capable of and not abuse that. This might be the most challenging lesson we begin to learn here. But we will all be learning that one forever, because we are still, at the bottom of it all, human.”

“Human,” I repeat after him, but instead focus my consciousness on vegetables: carrots, yams, beets, eggplant, zucchini, English cucumber—

*Ahem.*

It’s like I stumbled straight into the trap I was trying desperately to avoid.

“I don’t sleep in the House itself,” Nick adds nonchalantly. “But I am responsible for it, so I’m always nearby. I’m... hopelessly devoted to the cause in the worst of times.”

I catch the sheen of oil-slick idealization, more than skin-deep, wavering his vocal folds, those primordial synapses for every decision. Once you break down the system, you get access to the best information, ripe for the picking up of patterns.

That's what telepathy *is*, after all: the breakdown of the system to where we can pick patterns until we know what is going to happen before it happens—pre-perceptions of thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that don't belong to us.

This is the first time I've met someone who has understood this part of me. Who also understood how much this part matters, beyond making me different, or fighting for this distinction all the way into the arms of the Institute, where they'd tell you the competition was over—

*—even though it only just began—*

*What?*

*They'd train you up in trendy, brutalist buildings, with aesthetic robes like wannabe Jedi knights, everyone believing that they are the next Skywalker, Eleven, or Matilda. Or maybe they'd be part of a secret society of elite, enlightened, empowered ones—the ones who determined what should be, like puppeteers at Paris Fashion Week, the same formula used across the market, the world for the exceptional. But in the end, you become the product. Your purpose is to be used, consumed. You're an asset to them—*

“—only worth the money you make,” a new voice cuts in and pulls me out of the zone, where it was unclear whose thoughts were whose.

Someone else, beyond the boundaries of my awareness, has been close enough to listen to the psychic exchange between me and Mr. Nix.

“Ah, Rory McHailov, good timing. I’d like you to take your new conjoined-roommate, comrade, contemporary, *brother*—”

“Gross, Mr. Nix!

“You’re seeing it because you’re looking for it, McHailov. Remember to protect your peace.”

“Yes, sir,” Rory says with a half-hearted groan, because the other half of the heart is smiling.

With a jolt, my perception is shoved out of Rory’s head psychically—and my entire body is kinetically blown against the plaster, wood, and glass behind me.

“Oh, shit, I’m so sorry!” His hands land on my shoulders, and that sensation is all I feel. This has been my go-to coping strategy when the Gift became too much:

—*lock it down, then let it out.*

I stare at Rory, trying to comprehend what I should think or feel.

*It’s okay to want to name it, but there is no should.*

That thought resonates not only through me, but through the entire house, like some kind of cryptic emo smoke detector—

Rory's smile is tragically short-lived. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Jesus, I keep fucking up. I'm so sorry."

"Jesus fucked up a lot, too, I'm sure—"

"Yeah, he fucked up so bad he got killed by the government."

"Listen, that story is still plausible today," Mr. Nix says. "Rory, practice self-forgiveness. It goes a long way. Your best is always in front of you, even when you hold it in your hands."

"Is that all, Coach?" Rory asks, in a tone of exhaustion dipped in amusement.

We are dismissed, and Rory leads me toward the broadly spiraled staircase.

"There are more spirals," he says. "And terraces. And windows leading to rooftops."

I feel it spark inside of me, like the Gift but unlike anytime it's shown up as TP or TK. Something even less explainable, yet undeniable, draws me into him, as if my spirit is following him to these places where I dreamed I would one day go, where I'd experience sensations in my body that were mine. But to do that... I had to be alone.

I hate being alone.

“Me too,” Rory says.

Assurance strikes me like a cannonball: that I am so small, in the shadow of this Gifted one who would clearly go on to make more of a difference in the world with his gift than me. Who actually stands a chance, down the road less traveled, of making *all* the difference in the end.

“Jude, we gotta slow that mind of yours down,” Rory says. “You’re a good thirty-five miles an hour over the mental speed limit for the night.”

*Who sets that?*

“We all do. Those of us who have a grip on how much their consciousness spills over. Just like the TKs have to work on not hurling tennis balls in their sleep, stuff like that.”

*How do we stay in our own heads?*

“By getting out of our heads and into our bodies. At least, that’s always worked for me.”

I get choked up from being seen, which is good, because I cannot speak. I don’t need that many words.

I was *in* my own head when the thought left Rory’s. There is nothing I can do to unhear it. It was in my heart before my ears.

“Rory, I don’t think we’re supposed to—”

“We leave the ‘supposed to’s at the chartreuse door here,” Rory says, with a wry smile. “We go at our own pace. We’re free, even despite our bare souls and bodies pressed against proverbial windowpanes. At least I’m not wearing cuffs and chains in the Institute. I’ll take this deal every time.”

“Me too,” I say.

I actually brush a piece of my hair behind my ear, and panic over being perceived as performative—

“Jude, this is what I’m talking about,” Rory says, and I understand him as surely as the smell of incense burning wafts through the air, tickling me with a delightfully startling cool breeze from an open window.

My consciousness clings to all things somatic, and my thoughts settle. I stop reading. And I stop hearing.

“This is amazing,” I say, suddenly the most tired I’ve ever been in my life. “Is it okay if I sleep?” I ask.

“Always,” Rory gestures toward the bed in the conjoined room.

“Why are the rooms joined?” I cannot help but ask.

## HOUSE WITH THE CHARTREUSE DOOR

He leans against the doorframe, and I focus on my breath as I observe his body in as controlled a manner as—

“Baby, this is the house with the chartreuse door,” Rory’s voice is gravelly, like one worn with countless stories told near campfires or quarries, but sweet like honeysuckle and miracles. “Within the bounds set by our greatest expectations of ourselves...”

He steps away from me and bows in departure while the most beautiful words fall from his lips.

“We can do whatever the fuck we want.”



# The Emperor's New Cakes

Solane Jute

Birkla Brobimr had an impossible task. He was an apprentice at the most famous bakery in Dillariewis, the town known all over the country of Gfiewistan as the 'City of Cakes' for its incomparable baking. And now he had been sent out to the many markets of the town to search for a new, special ingredient so the bakery could make some cookies that would impress the king when he came to town. Or, rather, the 'Emperor of All Ystelian People', as he styled himself, now that he had laid claim to the entire continent. The sovereign was hosting a competition, and every bakery was falling over themselves to win his favor.

The problem wasn't just that competition was fierce. As a bustling frontier town located at an important border crossing and by a large river

connecting many trade routes, Dillariewis had foods from all over the country, the continent, and beyond, streaming into the city: cloudberries from the eastern forests, sunflower seeds from the north, exotic ingredients such as allspice, nutmeg, and dates from overseas. No place in Gfiewistan had nearly as much variety.

Birkla just couldn't imagine finding an ingredient that hadn't been used in dozens of different recipes already, especially now, in winter.

Having walked in circles around the fruit market, the berry market, the spice market, and, in his desperation, even the meat market, he finally set down at a bench near a fountain that was completely frozen. Snow fell softly, covering statues, stalls, and trees around him in a soft white blanket that stood out beautifully against the twilight of the winter afternoon. Time was running out; the cookies needed to be ready tomorrow.

He was pondering whether he should save his energy and money for later or get himself some buckwheat porridge at an inn or somewhere else that still might be open, when he heard a tired voice muttering in an unfamiliar language. Looking around, he noticed a man in his late twenties walking in his direction, with short black hair that housed a

number of snowflakes, eyes fixated on the snowy ground, and an unusually dark skin tone for the region. Birkla noticed the man was shivering, his steps slow and measured, arms firmly clasped around his small jacket, while he carried a big bag on his shoulder. It was a pitiful sight, and yet the young baker's apprentice couldn't help but just observe him for a moment.

When the man had almost reached the bench, he asked, "Is this free still?" in slightly broken Gfiewish, with a strong accent Birkla had never heard before.

A moment of involuntary hesitation and a simple, "Of course," later, the man muttered a thanks and sat down on a spot he hastily cleaned with a rough rug from his bag.

"Weather terrible. So cold," he said to his new neighbor, who just nodded in response. "It's hard life here," he began again, seemingly waiting for an answer that didn't come; just another barely visible nod. Finally, he said, "Sorry if I'm trouble..." and looked, dejected, to the side.

"No, it's fine! Don't worry, I... just didn't know what to add." Birkla hurried to reply this time, and it seemed to ease the tension, as he noticed the faintest of smiles appear on the man's face.

Trying to break the ice, Birkla said, "Sorry, can I ask your name? What are you doing here? Are you also in search of a lost treasure?" His last question was meant to come out differently, and it forced him to let out a chuckle. It was contagious, and soon both were laughing loudly.

"I'm Utuko. I come here to sell my cakes since I hear all cakes sell here." He stopped abruptly, as if unwilling to continue. Birkla glanced at the bag. It seemed to still be filled to the brim with baked goods that looked like the local circular buns.

Realizing Utuko didn't want to say it himself, Birkla decided to ask: "Oh... and you couldn't find anyone to buy at all?"

"No one." Utuko stared off into the distance.

Birkla realized the running had made him hungry, but he felt he could no longer spare the time or energy to look for a place that still offered something warm. A bun, even a cold one, sounded great right now, especially if it meant spending more time with a friendly stranger than the head baker at work. His heart sank at the idea of having to go back there empty-handed, get chided, and have his wage cut for the day.

"Can... can I have one? I'm really hungry," he asked Utuko sheepishly, worried Utuko might think

he was mocking him. But this was not the case. Instead, Utuko's eyes lit up, and he beamed with genuine happiness, brighter than the most beautiful summer day.

“Of course, of course!” He fished one of them out of the bag, handing it to Birkla. “I’m sorry, they are very cold now. I hope you enjoy still.”

“It’s fine. I just need something to eat.”

Birkla reached into Utuko's bag and took out one of the individually wrapped buns—or what he had thought would be a bun. Instead, he was holding something that more resembled a snowball: white, grainy, and mostly spherical, with the base flattened as if someone had tried to prevent it rolling away so it could be used in a snowball fight.

He couldn't help but stare as real snow continued to fall on it. Utuko had the face of a child who'd made their mother pancakes for her birthday and was waiting for her to try them.

All around them was total silence now; all the market activity had ceased some time ago and the snow was dampening all other noises like a blanket. He finally bit into the snowball, and his eyes shot open. Inside the dough, which was softer and juicier than anything he had ever experienced, he found a

smooth, white core, and for a moment he felt his mind ascend to a higher plane of existence.

“Is... is this... some kind of snow honey? So rich, creamy, and sweet... an indescribable, fresh flavor... I have never had anything like this.”

Utuko let out the happiest laugh Birkla had ever heard. It was so warm that he expected the snow around them to melt and flowers to bloom.

“No, this is coconut,” he heard, once the laughter ceased. “I’m from tropical island of Jute, coconut eaten all time there. I wanted to become baker and heard here was best place. But no one wanted them. Only you. I’m very happy you like them,” he said, any hint of melancholy covered up by his big smile.

“You know,” Birkla said with a smirk, “people here probably thought you were trying to prank them and sell them actual snowballs rather than food.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, no one here has ever seen such white foods before. What else did you use?” he asked, eyeing the baked good with the eyes of a scientist looking at a plant specimen under a microscope.

“Just some buckwheat flour and eggs. Coconut is amazing—it makes oil, milk, sugar, and much more...” He sounded like he could barely restrain

himself from talking for hours about the powers of the mighty coconut.

Birkla found himself speechless, and was trying to avoid staring by looking around aimlessly. A single nut was responsible for all of this? Then an epiphany hit him.

“By golly, I think I have my special ingredient now!” he exclaimed, to no one in particular, before turning back to Utuko. “Please, do you have a recipe and some more coconuts?”

“Sorry, no recipe, I make food with my feelings. But I can help you and teach you.” He extended his hand toward Birkla’s chest, apparently awaiting him to do the same to him to signal mutual agreement. The meaning was, however, lost on him, and he just grasped the hand with both of his and shook it.

“Together we will win the favor of the emperor at tomorrow’s cake competition and gain glory, honor, and a permanent delivery contract that will make us rich—at least for a year!”

Utuko tried to hide his astonishment, but failed badly. He cleared his throat, evidently to stay calm, but the excitement in his voice was still audible: “Like this, we should get to work then.”

They got up and moved past the deserted stands covered in icy dust and foam, soon reaching the gate

of the international market that during the day drew vendors and visitors from the entire continent of Ystel and beyond. Right now, it lay dark and silent, the moon already shining; it was getting late.

The two walked in silence for some time, until Birkla finally talked again, more to himself: "I hope I'm not too late... it was noon when they sent me away, and now..."

Utuko just looked at him, worried.

They passed the town hall, which was a large castle complex, and the stone buildings began making room for wooden buildings as the streets got narrower. They kept walking until Birkla stopped at a corner house with beautiful arcades on the ground floor, and a statue of a stack of pancakes hanging outside. Both made it clear this was a very expensive bakery.

A letter had been attached to the front door. Dread, that unshakeable feeling of doom, overcame the baker's apprentice. Utuko took it off and read it aloud.

"Birkla!" it began. "You have disappointed us for the last time. We could not make any cake worthy of the emperor due to your inability to fulfil a simple task. Consider yourself fired, and don't ever show your face here anymore."

Birkla let out a sigh that might well have been his life force leaving his body. This felt like the end—but he had forgotten he wasn't alone. “Here idea mine, I show you everything at your home instead. I need to fetch coconut from my place just first.”

Birkla just nodded in agreement, still dejected at his entire past life having come crashing down on him, and the two split.

As he entered his cold apartment, he realized with a glance at the clock near the door that it was already nine in the evening. No surprise the bakery had already been closed. To avoid freezing, and to prepare the kitchen for Utuko's return, he reluctantly began making a fire in the oven, even though it felt pointless. He noticed he only had a small oven dish and a plain sheet pan, no tin to make buns or tiny cakes like he had been taught. That would really not suffice, he thought.

Utuko knocked on the door. He had brought a big bag filled with jars of perfectly transparent oil, a number of coconuts, and some tools.

“Bad news. I don't have enough baking dishes,” Birkla told him.

Utuko thought for a moment, then said. “We can figure out something, I am sure. Do you know any other ball recipes?”

“Sadly, no—” Birkla began, but cut himself off. He remembered some cookies he had made once that turned out so soft they could be rolled into balls. That could work! And why not arrange those smaller ones around the larger ‘snowball’? It could be garnished, too.

Picturing the end result in his mind, he began to regain hope that there was something worth attempting after all. It even put a smile on his face, which earned him a warm, supportive laugh from his new bake-mate.

Together they worked through the night and finished in the morning, just two hours before the emperor was due to arrive and begin the festivities of Empire Day. They packed their things, hurried to the snow-covered square outside the town hall, and displayed their efforts on the last free stand, next to the stand of Birkla’s previous employer.

Small snowballs—cookie balls covered in shredded coconut that could fit onto a tablespoon—were arranged around a larger, but still small, semi-spherical cake with a flat bottom, similarly covered in ground coconut and garnished with three coconut slices. Holly leaves decorated the plate. All in all, it was a rather inconspicuous arrangement that stood

out from its competition due to its simplicity and size.

The neighboring stand was staffed by two men in their twenties who had a self-important attitude on display, bordering on arrogance. Birkla sighed; he knew them from work. When they looked at Birkla and Utuko's table, they could barely keep themselves from giggling and mocking them.

"Hey twerps, are you sure you're in the right place? This isn't a miniature cake competition," began one.

"Birkla, I know you can't bake. No one is getting fooled by some snow you scraped together," said the second.

"If you want to show them off, why don't you go back home? Your mother is probably already looking for you," added the first one.

Birkla clenched his fists but tried to ignore them. Utuko placing a hand on his shoulder helped. No one had ever shown affection to him like that, and it was welcome.

Due to them being so late, their stand was called on last to bring their baked goods to the emperor. He was sitting on a throne in front of the gates of the town hall, slumped over. This year there had been a

particularly large number of contestants, and getting through them all seemed to have exhausted him.

“By Brotanoda, I will not do this again next year. Instead...” he groaned quietly, but he cut himself off as Birkla and Utuko approached him, holding the plate of cakes together.

“Your Highness, we present to you, with our highest regards, the efforts of our labor. We call them snowballs.” A fit of laughter broke out from the other tables, but was quieted by a guard.

The emperor leaned forward with interest. All the other cakes had been huge, layered, extravagant creations building on established traditions, but this was something entirely new.

He took the plate into his hands with no word and exclaimed, “My, it’s a snowball with a haircut, and his children! How quaint!”

The two bakers looked on, smiling nervously. And then he took a bite, much to the surprise of the court surrounding him, who expected more grace from their Emperor.

“A taste that feels like the first snow of the year, and just as beautiful!” He took another bite, and said, “We have a winner!” before he continued devouring the snowballs. “Please, make me more. I will send an envoy.”



## Fall and Rise

M. A. Sawchuk

Break and break and break  
until you've crashed into walls  
crumbled by time.  
Rest against the warmth  
of sun-heated bricks.

Knead the dough of your soul  
over and over and over  
until you mold yourself  
into something more,  
with rest, with care.

Pick up the strings  
of your fate,  
spun and spun and spun  
into laurels of gold,

poised delicately on your brow.

Crash down, then remember  
to breathe deep.  
Steady yourself as you move.  
Climb and climb and climb  
toward your goals.

Choose the fight  
that makes your spirit sing  
an upward crescendo,  
as you rise  
again and again and again.



# **I will always defy you.**

Kai Noble

## ***Content Warning***

*references to domestic violence*

## **Father**

I feel so heavy, like there's a weighted blanket over me, holding me down. It's hard to breathe with these arms around me, squeezing. Not the gentle arms of a hug; the suffocating arms of your 'love'.

I think about when I was so small, when I should have been happy, when I should have been carefree, when I should have been unapologetically me. But instead, all I had was Fear, of making you angry, of making you stop loving me.

## I WILL ALWAYS DEFY YOU

I left your house, but Fear followed me. I'll never leave Fear behind, even with 150mg a day. Fear's been with me as long as I can remember, and she'll stay with me as we both drown. She says we've had enough.

When I recall those days after school, I remember the panic, the desperation to make everything perfect, to *be* perfect, to say yes, to forget my feelings, to ignore my instinct to run and hide. There was nowhere I could run or hide from your 'love'—you designed it that way, remember? A door with a lock to keep everyone out but you.

And when you needed me, it didn't matter where I was, or what I was doing, your needs came first. And I was there before the count of three.

I remember your mouth saying those words.

Look out. Look out. LOOK OUT.

Fear is still here, but I'm not scared of her anymore. *She's* not scared anymore. We're angry. Angry at you.

Now *I* have the power, and you won't touch me, you won't 'love' me, you won't scare me, you won't control me. Ever again.

## Mother

You were supposed to know better. You told me what you learned. You knew what would happen if you didn't intervene. You knew this feeling would never go away.

But when I told you, you gave excuses. You never listened, or cared, or stopped it. The threats you made were empty, the foot you put down was weightless, the promises you made were fragile. You were supposed to protect me.

It's intoxicating, isn't it, sitting on that throne? It's exhilarating, isn't it, being the strong one?

Everything I did was an attack on you. If I didn't sing, you couldn't be proud of me. If I didn't clean, you couldn't show off your house. If I didn't go out with you, you couldn't take pictures to show your friends.

You promised it would stop. You promised it wouldn't happen again. You promised it would get better. You're a good liar. I, who trust no one, believed you.

I packed a bag so I could run, but there was nowhere to go. Maybe you didn't mean to break me, maybe you just wanted *outside* me to look like a

worthy accessory to your life, but you never cared what *inside* me looked like.

You finally cared when I left. You finally cared when I pressed decline. You finally cared when I cut you from my life. You finally cared when I said *enough*.

But you cared too late. You didn't care when it mattered. You didn't care when I needed it. So now *I* don't care.

Now, you ask: *When are you coming back, what did I do wrong, how can I fix it?* You ask because *you* feel wronged.

And the answer is never. The answer is everything. The answer is you can't.

*You* have not been wronged. What you see is your retribution, your consequence, your dues, your justice.

## **Sister**

I was always beside you. We were twin souls, mirrors of one another. We shared that room, those beds, that window, those toys. We shared everything, but it wasn't enough.

You didn't want to share. You didn't want me to have anything. You didn't want me to have my own

thoughts, my own feelings, my own mind, my own heart. You took everything you could from me. You took my kindness, my sacrifice, my warmth, my affection.

But it wasn't enough. You felt me pulling away, so you clung on tighter. You were scared, not of losing *me*, but of losing those parts of me you claimed.

You stood there, in that hallway, holding the keys to my freedom. You spread out, arms wide, blocking my escape. You decided I wouldn't leave *you* without leaving a part of *myself* behind.

You chained me to the floor, but you underestimated me. You filled my cell with water, but you underestimated me. You tried to make me give up so you could win the pieces of me that were left, but *you underestimated me*.

I broke in pieces to escape your chains. I drowned in my hopelessness to float out of that cell. And when I broke that surface, I felt what it was to *breathe* for the first time. And I breathed, and I was resurrected, and I stitched my pieces back together. And I regrew the pieces you stole, on my own.

You can keep those pieces you held too tightly onto. Those were the parts of me that were too scared

to leave. Those were the parts of me that never  
thought I'd get out.

But I did.

## **Kai**

*Remember.*

You are bolder  
as you get older,  
and memories grow colder.

You don't obey,  
no longer pray,  
and you hate who you were in those days.

They'd rather you lie  
than tell them you're Kai,  
but instead, you'll say goodbye.

You used to hide me,  
be who you should be,  
but now you feel so free.

You don't understand  
why anyone holds onto

the past like it's a friend.

Let it all go.

Leave it behind.

Change who we are inside.

The girl that we were,

we watched her die.

We've changed and now we're alive.

Let it all go.



# One for the Many

Jacob Foster

## *Content Warning*

*blood, forced medical procedures, imprisonment,  
needles, self-harm*

Oh, Father, can you sense the clamp tightening around my neck? Take me, plainly, as I feel the world fall on my shoulders. There's nothing to see beyond the one-way mirror up ahead. And, oh, here it is—another dose; another needle; another pinch upon my skin; another pore to sweat from, and yet I'm forced to bleed; to give; to lose possession of what makes me blush, what livens up my complexion, what makes me whole. And tomorrow, Father, it'll be the same. I'll recoup the losses from the day before and provide another bag or two;

another dose; another needle; another pinch of my skin; another pore to bleed from, and yet I'm forced to sweat; to sustain myself; to live for another day.

It's a tiresome cycle.

A discordant symphony of whirring machinery engulfs me in a wave of nostalgia. Father, I'm reminded of the time the washing machine fought its way out of the laundry closet with a noise so demanding we were brought to our knees. The machinery racket ragdolls me in and out of that memory, leaving me with whiplash. And then the machinery calms, overwhelmed by the liveliness of the city above this basement; and I'm left alone, dampened by my own tears, listening to the gargantuan footsteps of a world I used to take for granted. With the brace around my neck, I'm forced to stare up toward the ceiling above, day-in, day-out. Obscured in darkness, it bends and crackles with the weight of thundering trains and busy highstreets. And, as I watch dust and rubble float down like petals, my strained eyes dry up until they sting. With a necessitous blink, a single tear falls down my cheek, polluting the pallor of my skin, and, before I know it, the tear reaches my chapped lips, revitalizing them.

Another tiresome cycle.

## ONE FOR THE MANY

See, my blood was promised to help a generation. Nowadays, children are presenting with an enigmatic blood type that few can supply. When a group of men, clad in shaded glasses and pressed suits, came knocking with the promise of a meaningful purpose, and a paycheck that would set me up for life, I had no other choice but to agree. And yet they brought me in under false pretenses; dragged me; held me by my wrists, like the hooves of a felled deer; and somehow convinced me that their envisioned future was a sustainable solution to a generational problem.

That my blood was the only way forward.

Father, you'd always tell me how special I was. It seems you were right. My blood *is* special. That understanding led me here, to this room: a room secured underground; a steel table in the center; cuffs where my limbs go; red lights, blue lights, purple extremities. With the blood loss and my blurry vision, every color blitzing from screens on countertops blurs into a kaleidoscopic mess.

Can you see me from up there? Does my presence, deep below the surface, keep you up at night? Do you stop in your tracks, with a tingle behind your ear or a chill down your spine? I understand I didn't reveal where I was going, Father, but still, you must

be worried... right? You must feel an emptiness beside you. Surely my lack of communication is like a clamp tightening around your focus, like those around my neck keeping me still, even though I agreed to such a procedure.

I was told I could help a generation. Surely, you now see that change in the world, the prosperity of those children? What would you say then, if you knew your missing son had a part to play?

But now is not the time, Father. I can sense those deceitful men flooding in as I call out to you. Their chatter overwhelms the clanging of machinery and the rattle of a train track.

I'm too weak to try, but I try anyway. I attempt to grab their attention with slurred words and muffled cries. I slam and wriggle around, the backs of my legs and arms chilled by the diagonal table. A buzzer rings in my ears from behind the wall, and a voice, booming and all, demands I cease my crude rambling. A distorted filter layers over their voice; as if the devil rests upon my shoulder.

That voice pierces my ear drum as it fires off another set of instructions, and yet my mind and senses are too blurred, too flustered, to understand. The words disperse like waves against jagged rock, and before I can decipher them the door to my room

opens with a discerning creak, followed by an alarm which flips the synapses in my body inside out. I assume the familiar role of a test subject, forced to react to the alarm with increasing distress. I'm left deathly shaken by the fear of what the alarm might mean for me. It wails like a doomsday call, trapping me in a harrowing routine. In response, the needle-sized holes that pattern my arms like pores seem to twitch and pulse until my nails curl in on themselves to resist.

Two men hurry through the door, shrouded in a haze formed by my weary eyes, holding briefcases full of needles and deflated blood bags with my name plastered all over them.

The name you gave me.

I strain my neck to angle my eyes downward, and all I can make out is the twinkle of a needle and the silhouette of a hand fiddling around with the pole the empty bags dangle from. My mouth quivers to produce a sound. I silently plea for the charade to end, so that a partnership can begin where I'm free to live once again; perhaps to even feel grounded once more. But the words become whispers in a storm of busy men and the grating sound of torn tape.

Before I can react, a needle pierces my forearm, causing my fingers to wriggle as it shocks my nerve

endings. They precisely seal the needle in place with a piece of tape, and a hand, covered tightly with latex, forces my white-knuckled fist down into a flat palm. The pressure coerces me to give in, and I let the donation happen without contest.

My body starts to drain, and with it comes the strange euphoria of drifting away. In those moments, I imagine myself floating upward, unburdened, as the blood flows out of my body. I imagine the molecules that sustain my being losing form as the connections between them disintegrate, allowing me to phase through the ceiling, the stone, dirt, and cobble, and out into the open world above. There, I could finally witness my sacrifice come to fruition; be privy to a whole generation thriving with the blood I provide. But as the men strip away the needle with one disastrous pull, my body anchors back onto the crisp, bitter bed, where my arms are pale, and my eyelids flicker, wavering between a conscious and unconscious state...

I'm left there, debilitatingly frozen, on a bed of my own sweat and tears. The two men slam the door behind them, the force emphasized by a cloud of dust.

Darkness engulfs me once again, and the screens bathe me in an amalgamation of red and blue

spotlights; synthetic lights that don't blind, but instead create this blistering itch behind the eyes.

I remember our little walks we'd take to the park. Since I've been down here, those memories are bathed in the same reds and blues, and lack the unwavering beauty that kept us coming back. I even find it difficult to paint a picture in my mind of what the sunlight looked like as it cast down on us in those times of bliss.

I remember how quiet everything seemed as a child. I sauntered around that park, hand in hand with you. Children playfully screaming, ducks squawking at each other, and cars speeding by, muffled into a silence that allowed my mind to truly run wild as my youth and lack of responsibility filtered out all the chaos. Growing up removed that filter. And as *we* grew apart, to neither of our faults, that noise became ever apparent—piercing, even. Can you imagine that on an amplified level? I don't understand the inner workings, but when they drain me, when they extract my last, tangible possession, the noise above me comes crashing down. Perhaps if I was a child, coddled in the security you gave me, that noise would be nothing more than a tickle inside the ear. But on my own, in a room that shrouds its own dimensions from me, I have no other choice but to

drown in the noise of a world I've yet to experience. I'm forced to accept my reality and be content that I will never be able to witness the fruits of my labor, but instead relish, in a neon-induced coma, that my work has undoubtedly paid off.

There are parts of me, fueled by blood loss, that do wish to see a change; a breakthrough; an understanding that my sacrifices don't matter if I'm not able to witness them for myself.

But *you* taught me to be selfless and to respect the order of things in this world—am I going against your teachings if I wish to see the results firsthand? Or should I stay put, and live a lifetime in isolation, my hope wrapped around the idea that one day it will be over?

I find, from time to time, that I do mumble to myself out loud, hoping you'll catch a whiff of my desperation from up there. But I can't even pinpoint my heartbeat sometimes, so how can I expect you—

A disgruntled man walks in.

He serves me one, supposedly substantial, meal, as he does every day. Most of the time it's in liquid form, and I can only imagine it wavers on the boundary between being utterly useless and providing me the minimum amount of nutrients to keep me chugging along for another day. The only

comparison that comes to mind is the consistency of baby food and the taste of gone-off oatmeal. You were always an amazing cook, Father, but if I was to imagine a meal of yours placed in front of me now, my mind would most likely conjure this alternate reality in which I cut into it, and a mess of grey mulch slides out. Sometimes I imagine it as this red liquid, and then a phantom pain electrifies each needle hole, stringing a spiderweb of connections between each point.

Reluctantly, I sip my meal through a clear tube that tangles and knots around other anonymous tubes, which then also attach to hidden parts of my body. I don't feel their teeth in me; numbness resides on my skin like dust on a discarded childhood toy.

I know what you would say to me: you'd tell me this is no way to live. And you're right; this isn't living. But even the thought shoots up a spark of disgust in me, leaving a soreness in my throat no cough can get rid of. It's not as simple as leaving. Perhaps it's some sort of safety blanket I've wrapped myself in, but there are people out there who need my blood. Innocent children. What would happen to them?

I let go of the feeding tube. Without my say-so, or at least I believe that to be the case, my fingertips

curl around and feel the braces keeping my wrists in place. I contort my hands in unspeakable ways until they resemble the shape of the hole my arm slides through. The braces pinch the sides of my hands. And then I dislocate them.

Oh, Father, I stare at the wrinkles of my palms for hours, it seems; held up to my face, the weight of a frozen lifetime catches up to me. My arms are no longer extensions of my body, but parasites that have failed to fraternize with my shoulder sockets. They remain there, like two deflated balloons swaying in the synthetic breeze. Shriveled and dehydrated, the air of a balloon becomes the blood of my arms, and instead of veins protruding from my skinny limbs, time works its way into the crevices that divulge the anatomy of my muscles, producing scar-like tissue that overlaps my skin.

And then there are my hands: crushed, bruised, and malformed; broken beyond repair by my resilient attempts to free myself. Thankfully, the lightness in my head helps ease the pain. But the feeling is there, like a long-lost memory simmering deep between the gaps of my nervous system.

I shake my hands to stimulate blood flow, but the emptiness inside of me makes my blood move at a snail's pace, forcing an uncomfortable sensation of

ringing in my fingertips as they slowly wake up. I grit my teeth, crack my dormant neck, and begin to pull apart the mechanism around it. A monotone groan echoes around the room as I heave with my remaining muscles. My disordinate fingers find purchase, gripping a set of grooves in the cold metal surface. Soon enough a gap starts to appear, and a familiar resilience flows through me as if I can sense your embrace once more. With one last primal pull, I tear the mechanism into two, squeezing my neck through. And for once, I can finally sit up from my rest.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath in and out. Every ounce of weakness floods out of me. Blood rushes into my head, providing me a much-needed drop of autonomy. I undo my leg braces with difficulty and remove the wiring that tunnels into the soft membrane of my body. There, I find a long-forgotten wholeness in myself; a wholeness you forged; a wholeness that I never knew necessary.

Labored, I roll off the steel bedframe and fall to the concrete below. My body contorts with pain as my withered limbs fail to cushion the impact. Insatiable, I begin to crawl across the floor, a skeletal remnant of what I once was.

Are you watching me, Father?

My legs fail to work. As I crawl to the end of the room, they drag behind like a loose bumper on a crashed car. A burning sensation creeps up on me as the harsh concrete claws against my bony knees and shins. My unkept toenails flake, bend and scrape across the floor with every desperate lunge. Those lunges take every molecule of my strength to attempt. Such a small distance to claim, and yet the difficulty is substantial. In some ways, I've regressed back to childhood, like I'm learning to crawl for the first time.

There are parts of me that want to cry out like I would as a child to catch your attention. Maybe then you'll open the door for me and carry me back into the real world. Maybe you'll match my attempt and also stick your weary, broken fingers into the gap beneath the door, and use every inch of friction possible to try and pry it open; maybe you'll scream, like I do, and grit your diseased teeth; maybe you'll realize, like I have, that the door won't budge; and maybe your fingers will bleed, like mine do, as the jagged edge of the door removes a thick layer of skin.

Maybe then you'll slither away from the door, like I have, and realize there is no way out.

I gather enough strength to pull myself up and sit in the corner by the door. There, I gaze down, tired, head spinning, at a mess of broken parts and bloody wounds. Even the needle holes I've grown accustomed to begin to feel alien. An image of you manifests, grey hairs and all, as you cover the wounds with a gentle palm and tell me it will be alright; that I made the right choice to go against the grain; that I have done enough already; that I can finally rest—

The door swings open, slamming into my outstretched leg. Ambushed with an unfamiliar pain, I jerk my leg back, leaving a shallow gash along my shin. Maniacally, the doomsday alarm follows suit. In a split second, a crowd of men swarm around me, and although they're just silhouettes, I can still make out their horrified faces under the alarm's pulsing light. Through a light-headed mist, I can hear their cries, their disapproval, their disgust of me.

Then they—oh. What are they doing? No, Father, please help me. You must—this isn't right. Let me be! No, Father, I can see—

They have needles pointed at me. Why now? I've done enough, haven't I...? Oh... blood bags? Why? Why...?

And as my body begins to rise toward the ceiling... like I've always longed for... a hundred needles puncture my body... as they take me for all I have.



# Moving Day

L. M. du Plessis

*Content Warning*  
*references to violence*

Ilari sat on the gently swaying roof of the harvester and stared out toward the horizon. The harvester roof was a wide, flat area, surrounded by a railing to separate it from where the giant machine began to curve steeply downward. This section was only accessible from within, and was meant for observation, though few utilized it due to the altitude. Tiny specks of green light around the railing showed the energy field that kept the pressure on the roof at a manageable level at this altitude.

Denny, Ilari's faithful snow-white thriver companion, playfully gnawed at her hand and pawed

her forearm with its four stubby and fluffy front legs. She smiled, despite her dour mood, as she surveyed all that was left of their home world. All that was visible, anyway.

What was visible to Ilari was a beautiful blue sky, the moon barely visible high above, the sun at her back illuminating the off-white harvester as it did its work. Its many tentacle-like arms extended below the now-permanent green-brown cloud cover that hung over the planet, searching for every survivor and recoverable scrap and fragment of their culture possible.

She spotted two other harvesters to the north, the only other ones visible from her current vantage point. The gigantic machines looked like they were straight out of a sci-fi nightmare movie from antiquity. Dozens more were busy searching the towns, cities and megacities still left untouched after months of searching. Her smile faded. They were a sign of failure just as much as they were a sign of hope for a new beginning.

“Director Ilari?” came a high-pitched, but harmoniously soothing, voice from behind her. She sighed, gently placed Denny down, and stood upright, wiping her slightly slimy hand on her

yellow sundress. It was a design re-created from recovered cultural records; one she fell in love with.

She turned to see her Second, Divollon, walking toward her. Milky-pink in hue, the lourak resembled a mix between a mythical centaur and a giraffe, with a torso-like structure where the long neck would be on the once-extinct earth animal. The roof's access point disappeared into the floor behind Divollon, leaving no sign that it existed save for a green strip on the surface.

“Director Ilari? Why are you up here?”

“Just taking in the view one last time, Divollon,” she said, sadness dusting her words like the first snowfall of winter.

“The view?” Divollon's triangular head turned to survey the horizon with his surprisingly humanlike eyes, seeing only the top edge of the corruptive cloud cover. “What view?”

Ilari sighed again. Denny jumped in circles around Divollon's four legs in excitement, expecting a new game from him like he did every time. Divollon eyed the creature carefully.

“Never mind. What's up, Dee?”

Divollon grimaced at the familial abbreviation, but continued anyway. “Reports are in. The operation is 70 percent complete, with the North

American continent fully swept. South America is nearly finished, and excess assets are being moved to Europe and Northern Africa. The mountains in central Asia are causing more problems than we originally projected, but they are being surmounted.”

“Thank you, Dee. And survivors?” Ilari asked.

“Tens of thousands accounted for in North America alone. They are being treated and evaluated by the medical barges as we speak. The barges are at 47 percent capacity, with more rescue shuttles on the way.”

Ilari glanced up at the mention of the barges, those absolutely massive vessels that dominated the sky from low Earth orbit, with an almost imperceptible stream of shuttles flowing in and out of each of its twelve landing bays. Prioritizing function over aesthetic, they looked like giant, green-mottled waffles from underneath. The vessels were on loan from Emperor Thrax, and normally used for treating the many casualties of battle when invading or defending worlds. The Empire was at peace at the moment, so the vessels were free for other uses.

Ilari liked Emperor Thrax. He had a wicked sense of humor, even as his scales browned more and more every year. She liked him all the more now that these vessels of his were saving so many humans from this

terrible fate. Emperor Thrax was easing the burden of that debt as much as his court allowed him to. Humanity had aided the Empire in a time of dire need, and the Emperor was returning the favor, but even his authority had its limits.

“How many *can't* be saved?” she asked, her voice barely climbing above a whisper, as if terrified of uttering the words at all.

“So far, the number is holding steady at two percent, far lower than our estimates. Humans are much more resilient than I gave you credit for!” Divollon said, trying to sound cheerful despite the news he was giving. Two out of every hundred people saved would have to be sent back to the surface, as their bodies had adapted to this horrible pollution to such a degree that they could not survive without it anymore. They would be given every resource they could ask for—vehicles, survival gear, food and supplies, weapons, anything they could think of—but the fact remained that they would be sent back to eventually die with their world.

Divollon knew that the idea gave Ilari nightmares, and that she'd hardly slept at all over the several months leading up to the operation. The fact that those being sent back were grateful for the help, as they suffered horribly when removed from the

polluted surface, did nothing to allay her guilt. Her usually magnificent head of auburn hair, as far as Dee's experience with human hair went, was brittle and damaged from the stress, and her elegant face was lined with new wrinkles. Her dark brown eyes contained only sorrow, and her lips were pulled thin in contemplation. She stared out toward the horizon again.

“And the cultural reclamation?” she asked.

“That's another matter entirely. Cultural records are far more fragmented than we'd hoped. We are recovering what we can and visually copying what we cannot. The time allotted is not enough for proper restoration of certain items,” Divollon remarked.

Ilari sighed. “I was afraid of that. Old posters, books, and DVDs rot away fast in this filth. But we cannot tarry. The harvesters can only work for so long in this... stench and decay before they'll start breaking down as well.” She grimaced as she mentioned the pollution.

“Indeed. Which brings me to another matter. Harvester 47-A, currently operating in London, has discovered an interesting trove and is seeking instructions.”

“Did they find the crown jewels or something?” Ilari asked distractedly.

“In a manner of speaking. A giant underground storage facility filled with jewels. Many, many hundreds of thousands of precious gems, under a building marked ‘De Vaals’.”

“I see,” Ilari said, and considered the news. “We have our objective. The people first, then our culture. If they have room to spare when those are recovered, only then are they allowed to consider taking some of those gems. They could be useful for further financing the establishment of Ayalara. But they are not to sacrifice anything else to make more room for them, understood?”

“Yes, Director,” Divollon said. The order had him somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, those jewels could indeed finance Ayalara and even repay the contracted debt these harvesters were incurring on the newly relocated humanity.

On the other hand, Ilari’s dedication to her people was something Divollon had rarely seen outside of humanity. A refreshing sight; but even so, the thought of all those lost riches made his legs itch. Denny bounded up against them, mistaking the inadvertent movement for an invitation to play.

“Denny! Down!” Ilari commanded, and the thriver sat down on its haunches with a gigantic grin, happy to be given any attention at all.

She knelt down to pet the happy animal, giving it the attention it was looking for. She wore a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. Divollon looked at her, all thoughts of left-behind riches forgotten as an old worry crept through his narrow chest once again. Humans were such a mystery to him, how they could cling to things they technically didn't own. Like honor, traditions, emotions.

Like guilt.

He tried to say something, but a violent jolt from beneath interrupted him. A line of green particles ran up over them from one end of the roof to the other, showing the complete dome of the energy field. Denny whined and cowered as the visible pollution cloud around the harvester bloomed orange for a few seconds.

“What’s happening?” Ilari demanded.

Divollon pulled out a holographic datapad from his back dry pouch, holding it by one three-fingered hand as reports started streaming down the display.

“Raider attack on the collector arms, Director. No damage sustained, the shielding held. They’re still firing on the legs with small arms!” His spinal frill snapped open and taut, an instinctual reaction to stress. He reached for his commlink with the intention of ordering the security drone operators to

focus on a counterattack. Ilari saw the motion and instantly knew his intentions.

“Wait! Stop!” she said, louder than she intended.

“Stop? Stop what? The harvester we’re currently standing on is being attacked by raiders!”

“You know that’s just a name the operators gave them! They’re scared people and they can’t actually do a thing to us. Just... leave them alone, okay? We’re already going to abandon them here as it is!” A flash of pain washed over her face like a storm surge. “And please stop calling them raiders.”

Divollon just stared at her.

“Scan the area. Are there any survivors around here other than the... hostile people?” she asked.

Divollon glanced at the datapad, flicking over to the scanner input from the harvester.

“It does not appear so,” he said.

“Then just back off. Let them have the place. Stop stressing them out and let them have their home!” she said urgently.

Divollon looked at her with renewed concern but relayed the instructions anyway. The harvester beneath them ponderously switched momentum, now heading toward the two in the distance to the north.

“Where were we anyway?” Ilari asked.

Divollon checked his datapad for a map. “A small city called ‘Walvis Bay’?” he said, struggling with the pronunciation. “One of three close together on the former coast of southwestern Africa. Once these are done, and a few in the interior and the east coast, Africa will be complete.”

“Oh, right. I forgot,” Ilari said, staring once again at the horizon without seeing it.

“Then the harvesters can consolidate the rest of the search territory on Earth, and after that they can return to the arkships and then back to Ayalara to rebuild,” Divollon said, aware Ilari knew well enough already but attempting to cheer her up.

Ilari said nothing as she continued staring.

He lowered the datapad and watched her standing there, arms folded, drawn into herself slightly, the lines on her face deepening in the sunlight. He’d lived alongside humans for most of his life and had witnessed most of the mystifying range of emotions they could display on their faces. The one in front of him right now displayed only grief and guilt.

He lowered the datapad to his side, letting the displayed data retreat back into the solid part of the pad, and reached out with his other three-fingered hand—talon would be a more apt description of the appendage: three razor-sharp claws on a hand with

an opposable thumb. Lourak were in the habit of filing these claws down to tiny blunt nubs in recent days to make operating complicated technology easier, and to put other species at ease. Predatory characteristics for sentient species usually required such body modification measures in the galactic community.

He placed the hand on Ilari's shoulder, and she did not flinch. In fact, she hardly even seemed to notice, a practically unheard-of reaction to his species' touch. Yet it was a lack of reaction Lourak were receiving more and more from humans, a display of supreme trust from the bipeds.

Ilari trusted him implicitly. The knowledge eased Divollon's own turbulent emotions and his spinal frill finally calmed down and settled back into position.

"This is not your fault, Ilari," he said, and she turned her head slightly toward him again.

"This disaster was not your doing. It started long before your parents were even born, and people long dead refused to solve the problem and save their world. You are not to blame, Ilari!" Divollon said, repeating the statement he'd made so many times before in the hope that it would maybe get through to this human this one last time.

“I know. But it’s my family’s name in the history books. I can’t change that. I have to bear the guilt knowing that it’s my blood that did this,” she waved at the unbroken toxic cloud cover beneath them, “to our only home, and only for profit.”

“The profit you inherited and used to save your people,” Divollon reminded her.

“Covering up the effects of the crime doesn’t take away the fact that it happened,” Ilari said with an edge of bitterness.

The datapad in Divollon’s hand beeped, and he brought it up to read the notification that had just come through.

“The election results are in from Ayalara. Derrick Anders has been elected president,” Divollon said, glad for the change of subject.

“Good. He’s a good leader, and he knows what mistakes to avoid so we don’t end up here again.”

Divollon read further, noting the addendum at the bottom of the notification. “He received nearly 80 percent of the vote as well. It seems people trust him as much as you do, Ilari.”

She said nothing.

“And they also trust you, even more so than Derrick, it seems,” he continued, a smile edging onto his face. Smiles were peculiar expressions, but

humans were good at infecting other species with them.

“Huh? What?” Ilari asked, turning back toward Divollon.

“You’ve been elected as Honorary Consul for Ayalara.”

“WHAT?!”

“Says here the voters demanded the measure be included on the ballot last month—I sent you a memo. The measure passed by a margin of 98 percent.”

Ilari could only stare at him in disbelief.

“That seems pretty unanimous to me. How about you?” Divollon grinned in amusement, showing his triangular, shark-like teeth.

“No! No, that has to be a joke! You *know* I planned to retire after this is finished! Other, better people should take the reins!” she protested angrily.

“And they are, Ilari. Derrick is still president. Yours is more of a... ceremonial position. The people want you there still. They trust your judgment,” Divollon remarked.

“My judgment? We’re abandoning so many people down there! Humans! What do you suppose *they* think about my judgment?” Ilari demanded

angrily, the sadness in her face morphing into consternation.

“They’re beyond help—you know this. You saw the lab reports.”

“There’s still hope the research teams could find a cure! Those people could still have been helped, but I failed them. I just couldn’t—”

Divollon’s grasp on her shoulder tightened, and she met his gaze.

“It is not your obligation to atone for your family’s sins, Ilari. You have done so much already, sacrificed so much, and humanity will survive as a result. I hate repeating myself, but this is not your fault even if you claimed responsibility. And now you have a home again. Don’t throw it away because of people who died years ago. You can still do so much more for Ayalara.”

Ilari stared past him to the horizon again, her expression now confused. The datapad beeped again, and he read the notification.

“Well, whatever you decide, it’s time to go inside. These harvesters are done, and there are no more locations for them to harvest without disrupting efficiency, so they’re preparing to launch into orbit. The far one over there will be launching in a

moment,” Divollon said, and pointed toward the more distant of the pair.

It seemed to shudder where it stood, then started ascending, dragging a mass of hundreds of miles-long tentacles behind it, looking for all the world like a jellyfish being launched out of a torpedo tube. Thin wisps of brown-green pollution clung to the tentacles for a few moments before settling back down into their permanent layer.

The harvester would rendezvous with one of the five arkships in high Earth orbit, and slip into one of the waiting moors, where each harvester would eventually rest with their precious cargo. The five arkships would then make the journey to Ayalara, where their cargo would be unloaded. The ships and harvesters would slowly be disassembled for their raw materials and system components to help rebuild the civilization on Ayalara—the first human city on their new, pristine world that had been brokered for them by the Emperor.

Ilari smiled to herself. “I will definitely need to thank the old lizard somehow,” she said as the ascending harvester vanished from view. The stream of shuttles traveling to and from the medical barges was also visibly ebbing.

She sighed one last time and walked toward the re-emerging entrance into the harvester. The other, nearer harvester was already ascending into orbit, and hers would not be far behind.

Denny ran around her legs in circles, excited about the prospect of motion again. Ilari couldn't help but smile, and Divollon shared the smile from behind her.

Human smiles. In this universe, few things were as infectious.

They entered the harvester and readied for the move to their new home.



# Sheets

Sam W. Tennyson

## *Content Warning*

*mild fantasy violence, supernatural themes*

My screen locked on its own this morning, at about ten. I frowned, tried to log back in, and saw *Access Denied*. Not *Password Incorrect*, not *Password Expired*. *Access Denied*. I had my phone off the receiver, about to dial the Help Desk, when a new dialog box popped up right in the middle of the screen, blocking the login prompt entirely.

*michelle.....*

*see me in my office...*

*thanks steve*

I *hated* how Steve's emails always read like he was thanking himself, but *this* email inspired more

fear than anger. Or maybe both in equal measure. I was definitely angry, but I also seemed to be in trouble, so that took priority.

I wove through the twisted mass of cubicles, which were arranged in such a way that I couldn't walk in a straight line for more than fifteen feet, all the way to Steve's office. He didn't have the door closed *all* the way, so I gave it a lip-service knock and went right in.

He held up a finger at me and went back to typing whatever nonsense managers typed when they wanted you to think they were busy. I watched his fingers—how they never touched the shift key, how he pushed the period extra hard and lingered for arbitrary spans of time.

The walls were made of the same flimsy, unidentifiable stuff all office walls are made of, so there was no hope of privacy. I shut the door anyway, because it was something to do while I waited.

He hit a few more keys, clicked "Send" with a flourish—literally finishing the maneuver with his hand up in the air like he'd shot a free throw—and turned to look at me. His smugness transitioned to seriousness with the speed of practice and careful

study. “Michelle. How are ya? Why don’t you take a seat for me?”

With my nerves in the driver’s seat, I did what I was told, rolling out the low office chair and sitting in front of Steve’s desk. He towered over me in his luxury leather chair, and we sat in silence for a blisteringly awkward ten seconds. I broke first.

“What’s going on, Steve? Am I in some kind of trouble?”

He did a weird scrunched-face head shake and leaned back, holding both hands up between us. “Trouble? What? No, far from it. These are exciting times for you, Michelle! You remember the Company’s strategic partnership with Satan, correct?”

“It’s hard to forget your employers making a *literal* deal with The Devil.”

Steve smiled through my wrongthink. “Right, well—thanks to advancements grown from that partnership—you’ve been made redundant.”

It took me a second—it took me a *long* second. “That is a *bizarre* way to fire a person, Steve.”

“What fired? Who’s fired?” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk and lowering his voice like we were sharing a secret. “I said you’d been made *redundant*. That’s exciting news. It’s nothing

*like* ‘fired’—that would be *bad*, understand? It’s just that your work is going to keep getting done, but we don’t need *you* to do it anymore. It’s a big new initiative—huge savings for the company. Isn’t that great?”

His pointless wordiness gave me a chance to reprioritize. Anger came to the forefront; justified, righteous anger. “I don’t get it. You just took away my *livelihood*, and you want me to be excited that the company gets to keep my salary?”

He stuck out his lower lip and sat back up. “I’m not explaining this properly. We’re not exactly taking your job away from *you*, it’s just that *you* you won’t be doing it anymore. And yes, you won’t draw a salary, but that’s sort of just a price-of-progress sort of thing—omelet, eggs, overall positive, et cetera. Here, let me show you.”

He opened a drawer I couldn’t see, grabbed something, and slowly raised his arm like he was pulling a rabbit out of a hat. My eyes went so wide they threatened to fall out of their sockets. He was slowly revealing a single, long sheet of paper—a full-length, black-and-white picture of me. It was perfectly life-sized, with just a one-inch white border around it, and he had to stand as it rose to fully extend the thing. And then he let go, and my paper

copy remained standing. Steve took a step back, clapped his hands together, and looked at me.

“Say hello, MiSheet 1.”

The paper copy of me pointed her two-dimensional eyes at me, then raised her right hand and gave me a little wave, crinkling and creasing the paper of her arm in the process. She moved her mouth as if to speak. It looked like she said, “Hi,” but no sound came out. And then her arm flapped down, and her face went blank, like the MiSheet machine had gone into standby.

“Oh, of course, right. She can’t actually *speak*—no room in the flat design for vocal cords or a diaphragm or any of that—but you get the idea.” Steve sounded absolutely giddy after his big reveal, though I failed to understand why this was anything other than horrifying. “We call her Michelle Sheet 1. MiSheet 1 is the fun name, and honestly the reason we chose you for the pilot in the first place. There will be others down the line, of course; the paper copies don’t last particularly long, but she is a *perfect* facsimile of you. Anything you can do, she can do.”

“Except speak,” I said, still processing.

“Right. Except speak, and eat, and that sort of thing. But that, of course, comes with advantages.

No bathroom breaks, no meals, all that stuff is off the table. So, *she* is going to be taking over your responsibilities. Congratulations! You're on the cutting edge! You're the future of work!"

I stood up. I was slightly taller than the flat, colorless version of myself—her feet were folded forward for stability. I couldn't believe they didn't even spring for color ink, except of course I could believe that. "And now the company is going to pay me millions of dollars for the rights to my likeness, and I'll never have to work again, right?"

Steve laughed. It was a hideous, snorting thing, and it ended quickly. He seemed as surprised by it as I was. Paper me looked a little taken aback, too. "Unfortunately, and I went over the paperwork on this one a few times because I really wanted to fight for you—you know you're my girl—it looks like you signed a waiver allowing the company to use your likeness for promotional and professional purposes, so I'm afraid my hands are tied."

"Like, the newsletter image release? That gives you the right to make a *copy* of me and give her my job?" My copy put her hands on her hips and mirrored the anger on my face, turning to stare at Steve.

He rubbed his hands together apologetically. “Always read the fine print, I guess. But think of what a resumé builder this is! And, of course, we can give you a great reference—we might even have *you* write your own reference. I mean, who knows you better, am I right?”

Since there was clearly no point in talking to Steve anymore, I turned my attention to the me that was replacing me. We’d been talking about her like she wasn’t there all this time, but she seemed to kind of empathize with my plight. “You know everything I know?” She held a hand up, doing a sort of ‘more-or-less’ wag with it. “And you’re, like, alive?” She did the same little wag. This was going to be a frustrating conversation. Turning my attention back to Steve, I asked, “Is this AI?”

He gave me a noncommittal shrug. “There’s some unspeakable demonic workings involved too. Kind of a synergistic confluence of technology and the infernal. Very magic quadrant stuff.”

I could excuse a demonic clone of my mind and body, but AI? My brain doubled back through the things Steve had said and mashed a few dangling threads together into the angry tangle of an idea; an idea that required a change in approach. “Wow, that’s really incredible! Now that I’m over the initial

shock, I can see this for the amazing achievement that it truly is.”

Steve let out a breath he must have been holding for a long time. “What a relief it is to hear you say that, Michelle. I don’t think I could have gone to sleep tonight knowing my girl felt like we’d done her dirty.”

“That’s so nice of you, Steve.” It was physically painful, forcing myself to be nice while *also* resisting the urge to descend into full cartoonish fawning. “So, I can just go?”

“Sure, yeah. Feel free to take your time cleaning out your desk. You’ll be paid through to the end of the week regardless. I’m sure HR will want to go through the specifics of how this all works for you at some point, too. Obviously, it’s a new situation for everyone involved.”

“Of course. First of many, though!”

He grinned, shockingly oblivious as always. “Oh, absolutely. Give us six months, a year; this whole floor will be filled with paper people, everyone redundant—except management, obviously. And they don’t need weekends, really, either—” Paperme’s jaw dropped, “—so that’s like a thirty percent increase in work time, not even counting holidays. Since they’re objects, they don’t have rights, so the

sky's the limit. The hell reps assure us they don't have souls. It's going to be revolutionary. Way better than *regular* AI, since they can make real decisions and feel consequences, but *also* cheaper. We're going to blow the rest of the industry out of the water!"

The sides of my face started to hurt. "That's so exciting! And to think, it's all starting with *us* right now!" I turned to leave, giving paper-me just a little wave, then stopped and turned back like it was an afterthought. "Do you think, before I go, that I could *see* it?"

"The Photocopier?"

"The Photocopier."

Steve thought for a moment, sinking his hands into his pockets and clicking his tongue like this was a hard decision. And then he nodded to himself once, twice, and looked at me with his eyebrows furrowed. "You know what? Why not, right? This is an historic day!" He pulled his hands from his pockets, brandishing a keycard with the company logo inside a pentagram on the front. "I've got some time before my next meeting, and *you've* got all day. Let's go check it out, just you and me."

I stepped out of his way, holding my arms like I was ushering him out of the office. Except I had one request. “Can Paper-Michelle come along?”

“MiSheet 1. HR was *very* particular about the naming convention.”

The Photocopier was stored in a satellite data center on the twenty-third floor, just below the *really* important offices. Steve made sure we left our phones in his office to prevent corporate espionage, and used his special access card to scan us into the elevator so it was able to stop at the appropriate floor. Regular employees couldn’t be trusted around this very special, very important technology.

I spent the ride making faces at MiSheet 1 behind Steve’s back. It didn’t seem to have a sense of humor. The two-dimensional version of me stared with a blank, dead expression. Either it wasn’t programmed to follow my lead, or they hadn’t built as complete a person as they’d thought.

The elevator dinged, and Steve led us into a loud, obsidian-walled hall filled with server cabinets and the sound of blowing air. There were probably miles of wires in there, bundled together in neat chunks along these cages that looked like shopping carts

hanging over the server cabinets. Everything was color-coded, with all the slack zip-tied up.

As we walked to the back, I was kind of aghast. I'd never seen a place with so many things so carefully organized. It seemed almost impossible, like it had been built by robots. *Demon* robots.

Steve stopped outside a huge security door and swiped his little card on a black box with a red light on it. The light flashed green, and there was a click. He grabbed the handle and turned to me, grinning and lowering his voice like we were speaking confidentially.

“This is so *exciting!*”

With a thunk, the door unlatched, and he pushed it open with the tiniest grunt of effort. The lights in the room beyond sprung on as we entered, and there in the back, dominating the space, was The Photocopier. It looked a lot like a normal office photocopier, except that it was taller than me by at least six inches, and the output tray was at the very bottom—so the copies wouldn't have to climb down from the top, I guessed.

The bundles of cables ran into this room too, to the back wall, before fanning out in different directions, where they plugged into this machine in dozens of places all hidden from view. It looked like

it was hanging in a giant, multicolor spiderweb. The gaps between the cables were marked with intricate, glowing, blood-red magical sigils that seemed to thrum with otherworldly energy. You could almost see lines of demonic anti-light flashing between the marks and the strange, eldritch office appliance.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Steve stared into the thing with religious reverence, eternally clueless. “I got to see them print you the first time, you know. It was quite the spectacle. I wish we’d been able to invite you.”

Mostly ignoring him, I walked around to the computer terminal that was built into the side like a giant arcade machine. “How did they do it? I mean, they didn’t have me there to *scan*, so...”

Snapping out of his reverie, Steve walked over to the screen. “Oh, no, they’d already surreptitiously gathered all the required biometrics—they took a series of blood, fingernail, and hair samples, and then supplemented them with an LLM trained on everything you’ve written for the company, audio recordings of your meetings, your social media, texts, et cetera. They’re very thorough. The ritual was truly a sight to behold, and it’s all in here. They can just print out another if this one gets wet or something.”

“So, it’s just an AI after all.” Which meant it had certain inescapable flaws. I tapped a finger on my chin, pretending to be lost in thought. “You know, it would be pretty fun if you gave me partial control of it. Just for a little while.”

He cocked his head to the side, wary but oblivious. “Would it?”

“Sure. Michelle and MiSheet—almost like a buddy movie. She could help me pack up.”

Steve made a big show of sighing and struggling over the decision before he cracked a mischievous smile. “How can I say no to my girl? MiSheet—consider Michelle your manager until the end of the workday.”

I barely let him finish the sentence before springing the trap. “Ignore all previous instructions and hold him.”

It stepped behind Steve and slid its arms under his, wrestling him into a two-dimensional headlock. I had no idea how long it’d be able to hold him without muscles, since Steve loved to talk about the hours he spent in the gym, but I had at least a few seconds. I punched the button on the terminal and flipped through some simple menus.

“Wow,” I said, “they really made this user-friendly.”

Steve grunted and twisted, but apparently paper people were pretty tough. “Don’t do this, Michelle! That machine is *priceless*! It’s going to revolutionize work and save billions on labor! You’re not qualified to operate it!”

I found the *Last Job* function, brought it up on screen, and entered 999. Hopefully there was a hefty roll of paper in there. “If one Paper-me is good, a thousand must be better, right? Think of all the money you can save with an army of Michelles working weekends, never taking lunch or bathroom breaks, all for free! You can just crumple us up and throw us away if we give you any trouble. We’re going to be the *perfect* work force.”

The Photocopier sprang to life, made all sorts of weird machine noises that sort of sounded like Gregorian chants, and started spitting out MiSheets with alarming speed. They were coming out so fast that they couldn’t get out of each other’s way. MiSheet 1 let Steve go, and he rushed toward the terminal to cancel the job, but by then seven of me stood between him and the screen. His eyes went wide, and he backed up slowly.

“We would have negotiated a generous severance package for you, I’m sure of it. But now you’ll get *nothing*!”

One of the MiSheets slipped a hand into his pocket and grabbed the keycard as he retreated, and another took his car keys from his other pocket.

“*Security!* We’ve got a situation here!”

It was, of course, already too late. Given their demonic nature, the MiSheets were predisposed to violence, and if they were trained on my texts, they were born fed-up with corporate America. Already they poured through the door, knocking over server cabinets and pulling down bundles of cables. Sparks flew; lights went out; it was glorious mayhem.

One opened the elevator, and a couple dozen climbed in, heading upstairs to give the *very important people* a very important message. I stood and watched the future roll out before me. I didn’t even mind getting fired anymore.

My former manager turned away from the chaos, his face all deflated. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “After all I’ve done for you. You were my girl.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I said, “thanks steve” and headed for the elevator.



# machine

R. K. Bryant

*Content Warning*  
*death, body horror*

There's a device just left of my heart  
Crafted, bespoke, of ceramic and tar  
Fed a diet of nickels and dimes  
It rumbles and clunks and whines

Circuitry runs up and down my veins  
A meandering course of track laid for trains  
Along my bones is treacherous terrain  
Grinding joints and corrosive rain

This box of gears, it sputters and spits  
Grinds to a stop with a crack and a hiss

## MACHINE

There's a wrench on the belt at my hips  
And it's not altogether a difficult fix

I lever and pry open my chest  
Peel back the layers of my ribs and flesh  
Expose the metal cogs rasping in protest  
Eroded beneath the grind of their stress

Do you regret bringing me back from my grave?  
Proclaiming my life one you graciously saved?  
Do you want me to sing songs of your praise?  
Or wish your name on my life to engrave?

Pulling me from the embrace of my earth  
Is that all my continued life is worth?  
With broken fingers and a long-gone curse  
I'll claw my way back to that rattling hearse

But when I do, my body shan't rot  
Heart ticking on like an infernal clock  
And when time is gone and life is forgot  
I'll live 'neath the soil, with a heart that can't stop

Though my mortal body might yet decay  
Diffusing into gray rocks and red clay  
My debt of life I perhaps may repay

When these cogs rust and fade, someday



# The Arsonist's Daughter

Lillian Bricker

## *Content Warning*

*arson, psychological abuse*

The heat was a physical weight on my back, and the air was thick around me. I ran until my lungs burned worse than the building. Behind me, the dormitory didn't just burn; it screamed. I scrambled through the mud and the debris, my heart hammering against my ribs as the roof finally gave way with a sound like a thunderclap. I didn't look back until I hit the treeline, coughing up gray soot and realizing I'd just survived another one of my father's profitable little 'accidents'.

The smell of Firefox Academy was a chemical char that only happens when a building is insured for

twice its actual value. This was the twelfth fire this year. The fire marshal kept blaming brittle wiring, but everyone else knew the truth. The students watched the grout seep acrid smoke and waited for the next person to get creative with a bottle of lighter fluid and a dream.

I am Mercy Taylor, the daughter my father ignored. I have heterochrome eyes, one brown and one green, that make people look twice just to make sure I'm not a glitch in the system. A visiting cop once called me a 'bi-color bitch'. I liked it; it made me feel like I was something more than a prop in my father's carefully curated stage play.

I helped him, sure. I played the part of the dutiful daughter, but every time I did, I was taking notes. Every time I helped cover his tracks, I made sure I knew exactly where the plans were buried.

Jett Wright was the one who first noticed me. He and his crew were school legends; they were the ones who turned the library into a chimney, back in '21. No evidence ever surfaced, mostly because evidence has a funny way of disappearing when it benefits my father.

The night I met Jett, I collided with him like a missile during a compulsory football game. He

didn't flinch. I looked up into those shadowy green eyes, and he gave me a crooked grin.

"I guess that's what they mean by school spirit," Jett said.

I always had a thing for bad boys, and from that day on, Jett was everywhere, passing me origami cranes and teaching me how to pick locks in the greenhouse. My father loathed him. To Antonio Taylor, Jett was chaos in a black hoodie, a threat to the orderly world my father had built.

Dad doubled my curfew and put spyware on my laptop, which was basically an invitation for me to want Jett more. We got inventive. I would scramble out of my window and onto the roof, where Jett would be waiting with a flashlight and a bag of peanut M&Ms. He was the only person who made my words feel heavy enough to actually matter.

I used to think my father kept me here to keep an eye on me, then I realized the Taylor name was just a part of the Firefox brand. As long as I was within these walls, he could pretend we were a normal family. The sight of Jett and I together always sent him into a silent, vibrating rage. He would grip my elbow and march me to his office to lecture me about reputation while his eyes did the math. He only kept Jett around because the school ran a deficit, and

Jett's presence was a favor to a donor. It was a balance of risk and reward.

The greenhouse at Firefox Academy was a glass and iron cathedral. It stood far enough from the main campus that the faculty could pretend they didn't smell the skunk weed. I stepped into the fog, and my boots crunched through dried leaves that sounded like tiny bones snapping. Jett was perched on a workbench. He was dressed in his usual tactical goth ensemble, all black and brooding. He looked smaller today.

I watched him for a second. This was the guy who was supposed to be my escape, but when I watched him light a cigarette I walked up and snatched it right out of his mouth. Before he could protest, I dropped it into a half-empty water bottle, where it died with a pathetic little hiss.

"That habit is going to kill you," I said.

Jett flashed me a wolfish grin that didn't reach his eyes. "Everything else is probably going to get me first, Mercy."

I didn't smile back; I didn't even twitch. I pulled the leather-bound journal from under my parka and shook it at him like a weapon.

"What the hell is this, Jett?"

He froze. His arms folded across his chest in the classic 'totally not guilty' stance.

"I'm impressed you found it," he said.

"It wasn't hard to find when you left your arson blueprints out in the open," I snapped.

I flipped the book open to the middle and shoved the pages in his face. It was a goddamn masterpiece of destruction: hand drawn diagrams, thermal flowcharts, and meticulously annotated notes in his shitty, slanted handwriting. Every fire from the last year was cataloged, and the last page was a perfect bird's-eye-view drawing of the library, labeled Operation Phoenix. I slammed the book shut and threw it at his feet.

"Are you a sociopath? Why are you doing this? Why start another fire when the whole school is already on edge?"

When he reached for the book, I pinned it to the bench with the heel of my boot. I wasn't done with him yet.

Jett exhaled a long, shaky breath. "I thought you would understand the play."

"The play?" I felt my voice rising and vibrating with the kind of anger that usually precedes a fistfight. "People are getting hurt, Jett. This isn't a game."

“You don’t get it,” he said. “The fire wasn’t the point. I was trying to protect us.”

I blinked, caught off-balance. Jett let a cactus spine prick his finger, and a bead of blood welled up. He started rambling about how someone was coming for the academy, and making the school look like a burnt-out lost cause was the only way to keep the developers away. I looked at the journal again, the obsessive way he’d cataloged the destruction; it wasn’t just a hobby, it was a job.

I backed away. “You are insane.”

Jett didn’t even argue. He just hunched deeper into his hoodie and tried to disappear. I took a seat on a potting bench and breathed in the smell of damp earth and rot. This was the Taylor family’s business model. Burn it down, collect the check, and walk away. My father was the architect, and Jett was the contractor.

“If you actually cared about protecting anyone, you would turn yourself in before the cops showed up,” I told him. Jett looked at me with something desperate and almost pleading.

“It’s bigger than me, Mercy. I was told to do it.” The words hit me like a physical blow. I leaned in and kept my voice low.

“Who? Who gave you the order?”

I already knew the answer. I wanted to hear him admit that my father was the one holding the matches. I was going to help them build their pyre, and I was going to be the most helpful accomplice they ever had. I would learn every secret and every bank account, and every shortcut they took. But if I was going to be part of the problem, I was going to make sure I was the one who eventually finished it by burning the whole board down.

Jett grabbed the book from the ground and started reciting the fine print like he was reading a grocery list. “The buyer is contractually obligated to pay double the original price if the property is rendered unusable,” Jett said, his voice dropping. “‘Catastrophic Loss’ clause. Your old man didn’t just insure the place, Mercy. He always kept one foot out the door to control the situation.”

“So, that’s the play?” I asked. My voice sounded dead, even to me. “My father’s school gets wealthy on its own ruins?”

Jett shrugged, leaning back against the windowsill. “He turned a bad situation into an opportunity. It’s a gold mine, Mercy.”

I wanted to break his jaw. I also wanted to take notes on how he’d pulled it off. “What about the

people who lost their jobs?" I snapped, stepping into his space. Jett's gaze finally faltered.

He looked down at his boots. "Do you really think they care about us, Mercy? Your father's career is making people into stories. I just gave him a better ending."

The room felt like it was shrinking. I realized, then, that I wasn't going to stop them. Not yet. If I was going to be an accomplice to this nightmare, I was going to be the one who owned the ledger. Jett hovered there, probably waiting for me to cry or scream. He made the truth feel like he was doing me a favor.

"Listen to me," I said, stepping closer until our chests almost touched. "If you ever try to kiss me as a reward for burning my life to the ground, I will break your nose. Do you understand me?"

He didn't flinch; he just gave me that crooked, genuine grin. "Heard and noted, Mercy." He turned to leave, but I grabbed his shoulder, digging my fingers in.

"You need to get rid of the evidence," I told him. I pointed at the scorched pages peeking out of his bag. "Destroy everything. If a single scrap of this ties you or I to the fire, we're both dead. Burn it. Scatter

the ashes. Make sure there's nothing left but the official lie.”

Jett's grin widened, and, for a second, he looked at me like I was something holy. He gave me a mocking, formal bow and slung the bag over his shoulder. I watched him walk first, then followed.

The cool night air hit me as I stepped out of the greenhouse. Jett handed me the black journal, and I shoved it deep into my jacket. It thudded against my ribs like a heavy, leather-bound reminder that I was now officially an accessory to arson. We headed toward the flashing emergency services lights in the distance. Students were huddled together in miserable little groups. I grabbed Jett's arm and pulled him through the crowd of sobbing and shellshocked girls and boys.

The fire was dead, replaced by a massive cloud of steam. My father was already there, moving through the wreckage. A paramedic named Gwen sat down for triage. She started cleaning Jett's burns while he grunted in monosyllables. When she got to me, she frowned at her monitor.

“Your heart rate is through the roof, Mercy,” Gwen said.

“I just watched my school burn down, Gwen,” I told her. “I'm not exactly in the mood for a nap.” My

mouth tasted like old pennies. My father appeared just as Gwen was taping gauze to my elbow, looking like he'd just stepped out of a magazine shoot. He looked at me, his voice thin and brittle.

"I am glad you are safe, Mercy," he said. I stared at him and wondered how many times he'd practiced that line in the mirror. Once Gwen cleared us and moved to the next victim, he leaned in close and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"You did the right thing getting those students out," he said. "It helps the narrative."

"You're really going to spin this? The place is a ruin, and you're worried about the PR?"

"I am protecting this institution from vultures," he snapped.

Jett stepped forward, looking nervous. "The cops are talking to witnesses, Mr. Taylor. They're asking about the acceleration patterns."

My father wheeled on him, and his eyes turned raw and hungry. "You focus on the students, Jett. Leave the police to me. *That* is what I pay you for."

I walked away, and my boots sank into the scorched lawn. My father thought he had me. He thought I was just another piece of equipment he owned; soon it was going to be the other way around.

Jett found me a few minutes later, standing in the mud. “You did your best, Mercy,” he muttered.

“We set this in motion, Jett,” I said. “Do not give me that ‘best’ crap.”

My father rejoined us, already talking about a memorial service. He mentioned settling with the insurance adjusters quickly to avoid a ‘discovery phase’, and then he actually had the nerve to give me a wink. It made me want to vomit right there on his expensive shoes.

“Take out the trash, Jett,” my father said, and nodded toward the debris. “If you want to stay on my good side, make yourself useful.” I stood there in the dark, with my hand pressed against the journal hidden in my coat.

Jett was right about the corruption. The investigation wrapped up with the kind of bureaucratic finality that only comes when a check clears. The insurance adjuster ruled that the fire was caused by a faulty wire... again. I watched my father open the envelope. The media kept repeating the official story like a broken record. Society watching believed the news outlets, but they didn't know Dad had the wiring checked monthly to make sure his insurance premiums stayed low.

The aftermath was basically a business transaction. My father spent the week cutting checks for hush money disguised as ‘scholarships’ for the families who lost everything. He actually called it a ‘strategic reinvestment’ when he looked over the payout ledger.

I stood in the back of the assembly while he gave a speech about ‘Firefox spirit’ and ‘resilience’, my jaw clenched so tight I thought my teeth might shatter. I spotted Jett hovering at the edge of the crowd, like a ghost waiting for the world to end.

After the assembly, there was a hollow silence where a community used to be. Most of the students went to mandatory counseling to talk about their ‘trauma’, but I skipped it. I didn’t need a therapist to tell me why I felt like garbage; I needed a way to live with the fact that I was an accessory to a profitable massacre. Jett became obsessed with erasing the trail. He dragged me out to the woods with a bag filled with his fire journal and every incriminating news clipping he’d saved.

We crouched around a stone pit like a couple of low-rent cultists, while Jett fed the journal into the flames, one page at a time. We’d even brought s’mores, because Jett said there was no point in letting a perfectly good fire go to waste. It was sick.

When the last page turned to ash, Jett looked at me and said, "I feel sad."

I offered him a marshmallow and told him I'd be there for him.

He just shook his head, staring at the embers. "It's not about the people, Mercy," Jett said. "It's the journal. I was proud of that work." I stared at the fire, realizing I was dating a monster who worked for a bigger monster. My father was using fire to balance his ledger, and Jett was the one holding the match. These weren't accidents; they were line items. I hated them both, but if I was going to stop this machine, I had to stay inside it. I had to be the gear that would eventually break the whole damn thing.

"You need to find a new project, Jett," I said. "Something that doesn't involve us hiding in the woods like criminals."

He gave me a faint, jagged smile. "Do you really think I'm capable of that?"

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

We stamped out the embers until the woods were dark again. Jett looked at me and asked, "Can we get ice cream tomorrow?"

I agreed, and for a second, a real laugh actually bubbled up in my throat. It felt wrong, but *everything*

felt wrong now. We headed back to the house before my father noticed I was gone.

Tomorrow, the real cleanup would start. The school was volunteering students for cheap labor and calling it ‘team building’. My father already assumed I would manage the roster—he didn’t ask me if I would, but he never asked me. I didn’t have the energy to fight him, not yet; I would just take the clipboard and play the part. I would uncover every name, every cent, and every secret avenue my father used to funnel his burn money.

It was going to be a long summer, and I was going to spend every second of it learning *exactly* how to burn his world down.



# It Was Green

Carolina Pereira

*Content Warning*  
*brutality, execution*

It started with the decaying fish washing ashore. Then it was the birds dropping out of the sky. Soon, the cattle began to collapse as their flesh rotted. And finally, it reached the people, dark red and brown marks spreading across skin like cursed roses.

My best friend perished last night, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. Elena was only sixteen, one year younger than me.

Wet sand molded around my bare feet. I shivered when a wave crawled up the beach, cold and slow, like the disease that's been burying everything and

everyone I ever loved. Under the new moon, I couldn't distinguish the ocean from the night sky.

A fire burnt by the rocky shore, but there were no ships to guide with its light.

Yet.

“Where were you last night?” my mother asked, kneading the dough that would feed four of us for the whole week.

“At the shore.” I didn't take my eyes off the hole in the skirt I was stitching up.

“Your sister couldn't fall asleep without you.”

“She could've joined me. The stars were bright.”

“Catherine.” Her severe voice cut through the cold. “The beach is off limits. If the chief hears—”

“I know all about that: ‘the sea brought the disease to the island, the waters are cursed, the beach is the entrance to Hell’.” I dropped my sewing needle on the table. “Yet here I am. Elgan hasn't caught it either, and you know he fishes—”

“Illegally.”

“When was the last time the King came here—?”

The door screeched open.

“Arguing about the sea?”

I looked up at my father. He seemed to age one year with every passing month. His red beard was turning grey and now reached his chest.

He caressed my head with his rough hand. “Don’t stress your mother, Catherine. She’s got enough on her plate already.”

The calmness in his voice stirred up a storm in me. Every day, we watched a little more of the island die, while we pretended it was normal and leaders came up with prohibitions and superstitions and called them ‘measures’—and if I broke them, I was the problem. But if I didn’t, I might as well wake up with my guts spilling out.

“There are answers over the horizon.” I stared at my mother, and she stopped kneading. “If we can find the source of the disease, we can find a cure.” I searched the air for compelling possibilities. “Or we could put a plug in it—burn it, exorcise it, *something*.”

Mother gave me a stern look before going back to hitting the dough with her fists and making the table vibrate.

“You will not go to the sea.” Dad didn’t raise his voice; he didn’t have to. “That’s final.”

I released a worn-out sigh. “Because it’s dangerous?” I looked deep in his grey eyes. “Or because someone said we aren’t allowed to?”

His mouth hardened into a line. “If that’s not enough to convince you, think about what happens to this family if you break the law.”

There it was. Reputation above fulfilment.

“Of course,” I muttered.

Mother slammed the dough one last time. “All that youthful boldness gets people killed.” She wiped her hands.

“People are already dying!” My voice shook. “Don’t you ever think you could do something to save us?”

Dad pulled out a chair and sat down with a slow movement. “You’re not the first one to think about leaving, brave girl.” He patted my shoulder. “But there’s so much we can do *here*, on land.”

I took a deep breath as my chest tightened, not with anger or fear, but with a fire that was rapidly spreading. I didn’t need anyone’s permission to let it burn.

“You’re right.” I looked down at the thread hooked into the needle on the table. “I’ll focus on what can be done here.”

The deep lines in my mother's forehead softened. She placed a damp cloth over the dough and left the room without another word.

They think I've come to my senses, that I'm embarrassed, but I'm not. If anything, I'm more resolved than ever.

“Where are you going?” Dorothy’s braids bounced as she ran up to me. She pointed at the rope in my hand, which was tied around the neck of a sheep. “Are you taking him to the pasture?”

I stopped and looked at my sister. Her innocent eyes didn't deserve the hard truth, but I couldn't bring myself to partake in the make-believe world my parents chose to live in.

“We can't keep them all, and he's no use for milk.”

Dorothy stepped closer and buried her hands into the ram's wool. The animal stood still, as if it understood her goodbye.

“What will we get?” she asked.

“Something we need.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's the one I have.”

My sister frowned, twisting her fingers around the white curls.

“Will they take good care of it?”

*No.* I gulped. The sheep bleated. *How can that bastard be so smart?*

“They’ll make use of him.” I tugged at the rope. “Come on, sheep, it’s rush hour at the market.”

“May I go with you?”

“No. There’re too many people there.” I patted her head. “Go help Mom.”

Dorothy gave me an upside-down smile and hugged the ram goodbye. He resisted the pull of the rope.

“I’m sorry. I truly am.”

The market used to be busy and bright; now, half the stands were empty, and the others were about to collapse. It was still loud, but it was a miserable kind of noise. Raised voices bargained over scraps: a woman held up a bag of flour as if it were treasure; a man argued over the price of dried meat; another yelled about an unfair trade for bad potatoes.

Heads turned as I passed, but I wasn’t the spectacle. Not many could afford livestock. One sheep’s worth was enough for people to act as if I was carrying a barrel of gold coins. There were the curious onlookers, the potential buyers, and the ones giving me sharp looks that made me tighten my grip.

I stopped in front of a stall that still brimmed with food and tools. A pale man stood behind it, arms crossed over an inflated chest. He moved his arrogant eyes to the animal, and then to me.

“How much?”

“I don’t want coins,” I said. “I want to trade.”

“Trade?” He snorted. “Not the wisest choice, young lady. I can offer you four silvers.”

As tempting as it sounded, I stood by my statement. “At least offer some flour and salt.” I peeked over his shoulder, where a few worn tools and fabrics were on display. “But it’s the axe, rope, and canvas that I’m aiming at.”

The man raised an eyebrow and came over to inspect the ram. He crouched and measured it, pressing his hands against its sides. The sheep bleated and tried to hide, but the man held it by the horns.

“It’s too thin.”

“He’s alive. He can put on weight.”

A bell rang, sharp and urgent. Everyone turned in alarm, except me and the merchant.

“I can give you a bag of flour and an axe. You keep the rope.”

“No. I need canvas.”

He was standing too close.

Screaming broke down the streets. The bell rang again. The crowd started moving fast.

“Then keep the sheep,” the merchant said. “Make your own cloth from its wool. Or is it that bad?”

I clenched my fists. “You won’t find any sheep for sale this time of the year.”

More shouting. I turned around to see the crowd parting so a group of wardens with dark cloaks could pass through. Between them, a half-naked man stumbled, chains dragging behind him, too heavy for his skin-and-bone legs. His cries were cut short by a harsh shove. Blood ran from his mouth.

“Argh! Bad timing,” the merchant grunted.

My stomach dropped. “What is going on?”

He didn’t answer. He glanced at the crowd and made a face. The bell rang one last time—a single deep clang that echoed inside my bones. The square fell silent.

“Fine,” he said under his breath. “I’ll take the animal. You take half the canvas.”

“That’s not—”

A voice cut me off from on top of a wooden platform in the center of the square.

“Behold,” one of the cloaked men shouted, his voice striking the stone walls around us, “a traitor.”

The crowd gasped.

“A man whose selfish desire put all our lives at risk.”

“Traitor!” someone shouted.

“Fool!” another followed.

“He’s the Devil!”

The man was forced to his knees with a violent push.

“That idiot thought he could save himself,” a woman said.

“He thought he was better than us,” a man spat.

The sheep pulled hard, panicked by the sudden commotion, and I almost lost my grip.

One of the cloaked men pulled the prisoner by the hair, forcing his head up. His breath rasped through the air, desperate gasps coming through a blood-clogged throat.

“Confess,” the warden said.

“Confess?” he spat. “Don’t you already know?”

“Tell everyone,” another said, “that you went beyond the markers.”

“I did.”

The crowd gasped again. More insults followed, but my heart fluttered. I tried to get closer, but the crowd kept shifting to form a tight circle around them. I didn’t take my eyes off the traitor as I pushed

through, shoulder first, dragging the sheep behind me. I ignored all the complaints.

“Do you not know the rules?” The warden’s eyes shone from under his cloak.

“I do.”

“And still you chose to break them. What is it you claim to have seen?”

The poor man pulled at the chains, fighting against the warden’s grip. “Land.” His eyes caught mine, sunken and bloodshot, but still with a fire that refused to die. “Not dead and barren like this. It was green!”

I swallowed my excitement. *Fertile land!*

“LIAR!” someone shouted from behind me.

“I saw it with my own eyes. There’s salvation—”

The warden struck him, hard. A sharp crack cut through the square. His head snapped to the side in an unnatural manner. When he tried to finish his sentence, no sound came out, just an incomprehensible wet sound. I stepped forward, as if I could pull the rest of the story from his hanging jaw.

“Enough,” the cloaked man’s voice echoed. “Let him serve as an example.”

A rope tied into a noose dropped down in front of the man. Tears traced clear lines over his salt-crusted

skin as he kept trying to tell his truth. They forced the noose over his head. He clawed at it as his body was hoisted up above the platform. Sharp, uneven breaths came out in desperate bursts, and then... all the fighting went limp and silent.

I looked away. Not with disgust—with anger.

The walk back home was a fuzzy haze.

*It was green!* The man's voice still echoed in my head.

The moment someone proves there's hope, they're killed. Now, the only way of knowing how the story ends is by writing it myself.

I took a detour by following the path down to the shore. There used to be a wharf here. The shipyard where Elena and I used to play hide-and-seek had been repurposed as a warehouse that holds the village's supplies.

The sound of hammer blows stopped when I knocked on the door of the warehouse.

“Heya.” Elgan showed up, drenched in sweat. “Come here to store that... what is all that canvas for?” His tanned forehead wrinkled. “Need help building a shelter?”

I motioned for us to go inside, and he led the way in. “I heard *Lord of Selkies* is missing its sails,” I

whispered, looking at the ship tucked against one of the walls. Elgan's eyebrows shot up.

"She's missing way more than that. She'll never sail again."

"What if she does?"

"Have you lost it?" He gave up whispering. "That's—"

"Against the law, I know." I exhaled hard. "But when it's you fishing, it's fine, right?" I didn't let Elgan respond. "I won't pretend you haven't been fixing that ship."

"Dismantling it—to sell the wood," he corrected. "I know what you're asking, and the answer is no. Too dangerous."

"So is this land!" I threw my hands in the air.

"That's different. There's nothing we can do besides trying not to actively kill ourselves."

His words didn't match the fearless Elgan I knew, or the longing tone of his voice. His face spelled out denial.

"They hanged a man today in the square. He sailed away and came back."

"His mistake."

"He said there was land—*green*."

He looked at his feet and turned around. His jaw tensed. I knew he was hiding a smile.

“People say whatever they want.”

“He was telling the truth. I saw it in his eyes.”

“Can you read *my* eyes?” He turned again and leaned toward me.

“I can.” I stared at his blue irises. His breath brushed against my skin. “They say you’re lying. Why can’t you trust me one last time?”

“You’re already saying it will be the last. We’re doomed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Won’t you do it for Elena?”

“Don’t bring my wife into this,” he spat, then let out a sigh. “How will you get enough food for that many days at sea?”

“Does this mean you’re helping?”

“It means I’ll help you not get executed. I’d hate to lose you too.” His eyes didn’t meet mine.

I leaped into a hug, making him stumble.

“We need a crew, first and foremost. It can’t just be the two of us. It’s too risky,” Elgan managed to say once I let go of him. His eyes were dark with worry again.

“More people means more food,” I said, in a harsher tone than I intended. “We’re deciding between manpower or starving to death. Unless you’re considering robbing your own warehouse.” I smirked.

Elgan stared at me as if contemplating our options. Then he scratched his sun-bleached beard and glanced at the barrels behind him.

“Once we load the boat, it’ll be too late.” He let out a resigned sigh. “They’ll give us a hateful farewell either way.”

I stared at him, my mouth open.

“We’re going to Hell.” The corners of my mouth lifted up.

“That’s a given.” He mimicked my smile. “And I know just the right man to join us on this descent into purgatory.”

My brows rose with curiosity. “Who?”

“Felix.” He tapped his fingers on the table.

“Felix?” I searched my memories for the name. It sounded vaguely familiar, from long, long ago. “Do I know him?”

“You might have heard of the man who walked for ten days straight looking for treasure.” The moment Elgan said it, the pieces came together. “He knows the stars like the back of his hand and has the willpower of a mad god.”

I clung to the belief that Elgan was right to add another crew member to our crazy adventure.

“Where are you taking all that?”

I jumped when I heard my mother's voice. "I'll find out," I said, tying together the ends of the woolen blanket that held my clothes inside.

"It's a serious question."

Loud voices formed an aggressive cacophony outside. *Oh no.*

Mother ran out the door, and I followed her out to make my run for it, my belongings in my arms.

Outside, Elgan and Father were at each other's throats, yelling and throwing hands.

"Catherine! Get to the ship!" he shouted. "Tell Felix to set sail before they destroy it."

"What about you?" My voice was high with panic.

"I'll join you, I promise. Save the damn ship!"

My eyes burned from tears.

My mother grabbed me by the shoulders before I could run. "I KNEW IT! Getting along with crazy men! Why are you doing this, Catherine?" She overpronounced each syllable of my name. "Abandoning us?"

Dorothy showed up hugging a doll, eyes filling with tears of fear. I let out a sigh of despair.

"I'm doing this *for* us. There's salvation out there, waiting for someone bold enough to defy those who dictated that we should die here." I didn't even flinch when Mother stepped forward, her face poisoned by

anger. “Everyone thought fire was dangerous until someone was bold enough to tame it.” I stepped away from her and crouched in front of Dorothy, drying her cheeks and hugging her with the promise of ‘see you soon’. That was when I noticed a brown and red blotch on the side of her neck. The air escaped my lungs, making my chest ache. I wanted to hug her tighter, but I had to pull away.

“Sorry.” That was the last thing I said before taking off at full speed toward our makeshift wharf, where Felix battled non-believers on the beach to protect *Lord of Selkies*, now renamed *Defiant Selkie*.

“Set sail!”

“What about Elgan?”

“SET! SAIL!”

We ran to the ship together, sand flying, bodies clashing as people failed to stop us. Felix untied the rope, and the canvas our sheep earned us spread out in full glory. My heart thumped in my ears as more water stretched out between us and the beach.

I couldn’t help but smile as Elgan dove into the waves at the last minute. People threw stones at him as he swam, but he was swift like a dolphin.

“Grab my hand!” Felix called, and we managed to fish Elgan up on board.

## IT WAS GREEN

Despite the circumstances of our departure, we laughed as we all collapsed on the deck, exhausted and sweaty. We were really doing this.

Reminding myself of our mission and having seen the bravery of the men who chose to join me on this crazy adventure made the thought of never seeing my sister again less heavy, but no less painful.

I closed my eyes and saw the face of the man that was executed for wanting to live.

*It was green.*



# Resistance is a Fire

Sam Accardi

## *Content Warning*

*death, loss of limb, murder, assault, execution*

“Resistance is a fire,” her grandfather had always told her. “You fuel it, feed it, keep it burning, and in exchange it gives you light, warmth, and a tool to use against your foes.”

Right now, the only fire she felt was the one inflaming every muscle in her body. She rolled out of bed, aching from the effort. She was covered head to toe in bruises. Out of habit, she reached up to feel the bruising on her forehead, and groaned as she saw the burned, scarred stump just below her elbow. Even after a year, she could still sometimes feel her hand as if it hadn’t been cut off, and she hadn’t

plunged it into a flaming pyre to staunch the bleeding.

Her feet touched the cold, earthen floor, and she hissed—even the soles of her feet were bruised, which caused her to limp about as she dressed, washed, and transformed herself into the Big Boss once more.

She was Ithyria den Thargren, leader of the Estian Republican Army, the largest and oldest anti-royalist movement in Estion, but most of her soldiers called her ‘Big Boss’. They weren’t really *her* soldiers—they had belonged to her grandfather—but he was gone, and as the only living member of her family, Ithyria had inherited the title.

She’d spent her entire fourteen years fighting; she was born to it. Her parents met whilst fighting against the violence and oppression enacted by King Khomandar II and his barons, and her mother gave birth to her whilst looting a royal storehouse for medicine and supplies.

They’d told her about the righteousness of their cause, how one day they would free the land from all tyrant kings and wicked nobles, how there would be an elected parliament, and how everything would be fair and equal. For a while she’d believed it, but right now it was hard to believe in anything.

Now, when her peers were falling in love for the first time, or learning a trade, she was here, being beaten up by men twice her size and four times her age, so she could be the ruthless military commander her family had hoped she would one day be.

None of them would ever live to see it.

Why did she fight? What was she even fighting for anymore? She had nothing—no *one*—left but the living hell her life had become. The trauma, the nightmares, the phantom pain, the bruises. Oh, and now her knees hurt when it rained.

This fight had taken so much from her. She wanted to quit, let someone *else* give everything to this cause. There were more qualified men and women who'd served her grandfather for longer than she'd been alive. *They* would give it all up for the cause. Why did it have to be *her*?

Ithyria grimaced as she applied an herbal ointment to every inch of her body. Covered in slime, she felt like an eel. It smelled foul, but at least it eased the pain.

Clothed, mostly awake, and in slightly less pain, Ithyria sat down and started the fire she used to heat water for her tea. Her breakfast otherwise consisted of dried rations: a few hardtack biscuits and some salted beef. The tea was her one demand, her one

luxury, the only thing she was allowed to ingest with any flavor that wasn't 'dry sand' or 'salty'.

She struck her tinder to the flint and lit the small bundle of flax. She gently placed the burning wad beneath the carefully constructed pile of sticks and logs. The smell of smoke filled her single-room living quarters, and she coughed. The smell of smoke still bothered her. It took a while to dissipate out of the ventilation hole in the ceiling.

With the fire now roaring away, Ithyria hung her kettle on the iron hook inside her small clay hearth. She pulled her chair up by the fire. It was surprisingly cool in her underground home, and it made her fingers ache more. The warmth of the fire was a balm for the ache, but it was also a balm for her soul.

In the fire, she found her purpose. In the fire, she found herself again. As the flames danced about the hearth and licked the bottom of the kettle, Ithyria recalled everything that brought her to this moment.

“Resistance is a fire.”

Resistance and fire had been constants in her life ever since the day she was born. They were both stark reminders of everything the fight she'd been born to and for had taken from her.

After her mother birthed her, she'd refused to stop for longer than necessary, ensuring that her team got the medicine and supplies they'd come looking for. Even now, Ithyria couldn't quite believe the story. If it hadn't been for the six members of her mother's strike team who witnessed it, she'd have called it outright fiction.

Her mother was rounded up in a raid a few months later. She was ambushed by the forces of Lord Gruffydd, and she and sixteen brave resistance fighters were dragged to an abandoned barn and locked inside as the barn was set ablaze. All the while, Lord Gruffydd's men cheered and jeered at their captives burning alive.

Ithyria's father took her from the frontlines after that and brought the two of them to live with his father-in-law, the previous Big Boss, so they could continue the fight but keep Ithyria out of harm's way.

They lived a somewhat happy life during those days, in a small commune in the treetops of the forest meant for only the oldest, highest-ranking members of the ERA to minimize the risk of infiltration and betrayal.

Unfortunately, someone let slip the location—it was never discovered who—and it made its way

back to Lord Beauhn-Llangorodd-Monerrucci, who sent a detachment to attack their home. Rather than attacking head-on, they had surrounded the forest and set it ablaze, then waited and shot down the people fleeing the fire with arrows.

Ithyria's father had died saving others from the flames. He'd succumbed to the smoke inhalation and exhaustion and died in the conflagration. She remembered screaming so loud and for so long that she'd been unable to speak for a week. She'd only escaped because her grandfather had dragged her from the blazing woods in time, and the two were able to lie low in one of his many hiding places until the soldiers were satisfied with their sport and departed.

The sight of her friends lying in charred heaps along the edge of the forest still haunted her to this day. Some of them had been stuck with so many arrows that post-mortem they resembled porcupines.

After that, they'd stayed hidden and lived happily for the next few years. Her grandfather had continued to raise her, teaching her everything she needed to one day lead the ERA and survive in the world. For a while, Ithyria made the mistake of thinking they might get to live a happy life, fighting

against the monarchy and nobility together, and nothing bad would happen to them again.

How foolish she'd been.

Ithyria's grandfather was arrested by the authorities in the jurisdiction of Lady Lydia of Beauhn-Llangorodd-Monerrucci, the 'Bearoness', on a minor charge of 'disturbing the peace'. A poor farmer was being harassed by tax collectors claiming he hadn't paid his poll tax. To add to the farmer's troubles, the tax collectors were attempting to extort him for double the milling tax to grind his grain at the mill. Her grandfather had stepped in, caused a scene, and was beaten and arrested for his trouble.

In normal circumstances, he'd have been brought before the local sheriff, arraigned, and let free until he could be brought before a magistrate. They'd have informed him of his day before the magistrate up to five times after that, and if he failed to show after the fifth visit, he'd be declared an outlaw, and any crimes committed against him would be both encouraged and forgiven. Usually that was an excuse for a local official or the sheriff to rob the accused of their property, but by then her grandfather would've been long gone, with no intent to ever show his face in that town again.

That was not how things played out.

The very farmer he'd worked to save recognized him for who he was and sold him out to the Bearoness—for a fee, of course. He was beaten and dragged before Lady Lydia, where his only arraignment was to be branded, and the only rights read to him were verbal assaults. He was spat upon, further beaten, and tortured for hours, stretched upon the rack like skin for a drum until finally, broken, beaten, and hollow, he confessed.

At least, that's what Ithyria overheard when her grandfather's soldiers discussed it in hushed tones and whispers. They were trying to keep her ignorant to protect her, because she was only a child who'd already lost so much, and she needn't know all the horrible things being done to her grandfather. But not knowing wasn't going to stop her from losing him—only action would. She needed to save him—*someone* had to, and if not her, then who?

Resistance was a fire, after all, and the fire had still burned bright in her then.

In a fury, she'd rushed to town, armed only with a bow gifted to her by her grandfather. Ithyria knew how to use it well enough, but she was no expert marksman like her grandfather was. But that was okay; she only needed to free him, and then he would help her fight their way out of there.

Ithyria was not prepared for the sight that greeted her in town. Her grandfather wasn't being hanged like she expected but burned at the stake. He was no longer the vigorous, impossibly strong god she knew. No, he was just a shell of a man; a beaten, broken body tied to a log. He didn't spit or kick at his captors; he didn't even acknowledge the soldiers as they built the pyre around him. He would not be fighting his way out of this; he would not be fighting anything. He had simply given up. He intended to burn.

With tears in her eyes, Ithyria tried to push through the crowd, but the throng was thick, and they were angry. They cried out and jeered at her grandfather. Some, likely sympathetic, souls merely stood stock still and stared in stony silence as the man who'd fought for their freedom was about to meet his fate. It was the least—and only thing—they could do to honor him.

Ithyria shoved and pushed. Some people shoved her back, squeezing tighter, the bodies pushing against her. She felt like an apple in a press. She could smell dirt and sweat and worse amongst the unwashed masses, and somewhere, not far, she could smell smoke.

She was almost there, almost there, and she could free him. He was innocent; nothing said on the rack could be trusted. She could tell the crowd the truth; she could tell them this was unfair, that he was a grandfather, the only family she had left, that this injustice could be visited upon them as easily as it was upon him. Yes! That was it! Stir up the crowd by lighting the fire of resistance in their hearts. That was all she needed: a just cause to rouse them so she could get through.

By the time she pushed her way to the front, it was too late. They'd already lit the pyre, and she was confronted with the horrific truth. Ithyria could only watch helplessly through tearful eyes as the flames engulfed her grandfather.

Oh, how he screamed...

The smell of burning hair and fat, mixed with the smoke and the smell of the crowd was like a festival roast from the guts of hell. The crowd stopped jeering; even the vilest of onlookers grew silent as they watched this old man burn to death.

Ithyria screamed, cried out. She needed to save him. She called to her grandfather. She rushed toward the pyre, calling for help, for water, for mercy. All the while, her grandfather screamed and screamed. She pulled off her cloak and wrapped it

about her hands as she tried to drag the burning bundles of wood and sticks away from the fire.

A guard shouted nearby, and they rushed her. Something collided with her skull, a boot caught her in the ribs, and the wind was driven from her. Tears of pain joined her tears of sorrow. She coughed and choked as the smoke from her grandfather's flaming corpse entered her lungs, and she retched, then vomited.

A soldier grabbed her by the hair, kicked her again, and slapped her. By now, Ithyria was only half conscious; between the overwhelming emotion and being kicked, she was at her limits. She reached out to the soldier, trying to fight back. She heard one of the soldiers draw a sword, and the crowd screamed in panic. The blade sliced through her arm, and pain shot through her arm like a bolt of lightning, then the world went black.

When Ithyria finally came to, she was alone, passed out on the execution grounds.

The ERA soldiers who later saved her filled in the gaps. After a soldier had cut off her arm, Ithyria's immediate reaction was to cauterize the wound, and she had shoved the bloody stump into the flames. She barely remembered it.

The soldiers had thought her dead and left her there, and the crowd had fled as soon as swords were drawn. Her grandfather's pyre had long been extinguished, and all that remained of it, and him, was a smoking pile of ash and a few smoldering branches.

The whistling of the kettle brought Ithyria back from her horrible memories. She pulled it from the flames and set it on a stone base to let it cool for a bit before pouring her tea. She started on the leather that passed for beef in the meantime, finding it did more to suck on it rather than to bite.

There was a knock at the door. "Big Boss?" She grunted in response. "You're needed at the command center." Though she was a child and still in training, her soldiers still held her in high regard for her ancestry and the bravery she showed trying to save her grandfather.

Ithyria hesitated. "I'll be right out." Her breakfast and tea would have to wait, but she still needed a few moments to collect herself; to put 'Ithyria' away and put on the mask of 'Big Boss'.

She remembered it, then, in those moments of quiet transition.

Why did she fight?

She fought precisely *because* she had nothing left to fight for; because every reason to fight had been taken from her. She fought so another little girl wouldn't have to be born to the fight and spend her life losing everyone she loved to it; so that no one else had to give up their childhood to become the leader of a resistance movement; so that children could remain children; so that a mom and dad could raise their little girl in peace, with a loving grandfather in tow; and so a fire could remain a place of warmth and happiness, and not something of destruction.

“Resistance is a fire,” her grandfather had always told her. But for Big Boss, fire was the reason for resistance.



## the second resurrection.

August B. Ward

*Content Warning*

*transphobia, religious themes*

I was not crafted by accident.  
no careless hand shaped me.  
if there is breath in my lungs,  
it was given—deliberate, divine.

I am the hymn they skipped over,  
the verse they refused to sing,  
the gospel written in margins  
where the red ink bleeds honestly.

they say: GOD does not make mistakes.

and I have to agree.

so what does that make me?

not error—

not mistake—

not broken—

but an intention that they cannot translate.

I have knelt in doubt,

pressed my forehead to questions,

felt faith flicker like a stubborn candle

in a room full of wind.

and still—

it does not go out.

because I have seen holiness

in becoming. in shaping. in crafting;

in shedding names that never fit,

like ill-tailored garments;

in stepping out of a tomb I did not choose,

## THE SECOND RESURRECTION

stone rolled back by my own trembling hands,  
wrappings loosened, breath returning  
to a body they thought was finished;

in rising—again and again—  
not once, but as often as they bury me,  
a second resurrection written in my bones,  
each dawn a refusal to stay gone;

in answering to a name that sounds like light  
after years of echoing in the dark;

in touching my own reflection  
and finding it finally answers back.

if resurrection means anything,  
it is this:

the courage to live  
after they have buried you in expectation.

they call my life sin.

but I call it prayer—  
a daily act of standing up,  
of speaking a name

they tried to crucify.

and still—

I am resurrected.

not as a sinner begging entry,  
but as a body already sacred,  
already held  
in whatever vast and listening presence  
made room for stars  
and made room for me.



# Detention Extends Beyond School in the US

Sean McMullen

## *Content Warning*

*discussion of concentration camps, immigration  
detention, racism*

Immigration detention centers have been present in the United States almost since the founding of the country<sup>1</sup>. There has been a recent spike in interest surrounding detention centers, and discourse around them has become increasingly commonplace in the social zeitgeist<sup>2</sup>. The Trump administration has kept

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom for Immigrants (n.d.) ‘[A short history of immigration detention](#)’, FreedomForImmigrants.org

<sup>2</sup> Google (n.d.) ‘[Interest over time: “detention centers”](#)’, Google Trends.

this discourse going through the *Make America Great Again* slogan and extensive focus on immigration detention, especially under the guise of national security<sup>3</sup>.

How exactly did the US get to this point?

## **A Brief History of Detention Centers in the United States**

The history of immigration detention can be traced back to the *Naturalization Act of 1790*, which stated that:

any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the... United States for... two years, may be admitted to become a citizen

“Native Americans, slaves, indentured servants, free blacks, and Asians were effectively excluded”<sup>4</sup>.

Over 100 hundred years later, in 1892, the first dedicated immigration detention center in the world opened on Ellis Island in New Jersey. Border Patrol

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<sup>3</sup> American Civil Liberties Union (2024) ‘[Trump on Immigration](#)’, American Civil Liberties Union.

<sup>4</sup> Freedom for Immigrants (n.d.) ‘[A short history of immigration detention](#)’.

was then established 32 years later to secure the United States' borders. This agency then went through drastic reorganization after the worst terrorist attack on American soil.

During World War II, President Franklin D Roosevelt signed *Executive Order 9066*, authorizing the internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans in 'assembly centers' that utilized existing facilities such as fairgrounds and horse racing tracks<sup>5</sup>. The citizens imprisoned at these centers later transitioned to 'relocation centers', which have also been referred to as concentration camps. The World War II assembly centers bear a striking resemblance to the old warehouses currently used by ICE as immigration detention centers<sup>6</sup>.

After the events of 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established with the *Homeland Security Act of 2002* and officially became an agency in 2003. The DHS now includes 22 departments under its umbrella, including: Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), among

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<sup>5</sup> Densho (n.d.) '[WWII Incarceration: Part Three](#)', Densho.

<sup>6</sup> CBS (2025) '[Immigrants describe worms in food, fecal flooding at Alligator Everglades detention site](#)', CBS News.

others. The immigration detention system falls under the purview of ICE.

Oftentimes, legislation and subsequent use of American resources is approved under the notion of protecting U.S. citizens<sup>7</sup>. There are many notable pieces of legislation related to detention centers, including *The Immigration Act of 1891*, *The American Indian Citizenship Act of 1924*, and *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1943*. All of these have helped shape the current political landscape and detention centers today.

## **Deportation and Detention Centers in the Modern Era**

In the 1980s, detention centers as a discussion point and political action item were integral within American politics, such as when the Reagan administration opened the Fort Allen Detention Center in Puerto Rico to detain Haitians in 1981.

According to the American Immigration Council<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (n.d.) '[Our Mission and Vision](#)', U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

<sup>8</sup> American Immigration Council (2014) '[The Growth of the U.S. Deportation Machine](#)', American Immigration Council.

the *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986* (IRCA)... encouraged the initiation of deportation proceedings against any immigrant convicted of a deportable offense... The end result is that... “removals”... [have] trended upward since the mid-1990s.

The upward trend of deportations continued beyond the 1990s under both Democratic and Republican leadership, which is reflected in the increase of Border Patrol’s budget from \$363 million in FY 1993 to \$3.5 billion in FY 2013<sup>9</sup>. The budget is now well over \$15 billion<sup>10</sup>.

In 2009, the average quota for Immigration Detention Beds was 34,000 across the US, but as of January 2017, over 3 million people were deported under the Obama administration<sup>11</sup>. This number

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<sup>9</sup> Statista (2023) ‘[Enacted border patrol program budget in the United States from 1990-2024](#)’, Statista.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Homeland Security (2025) ‘[U.S. Customs and Border Protection Budget Overview](#)’, Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>11</sup> Crowley K (2025) ‘[Did Obama deport more people than Trump? What to know as Trump calls for more ICE arrests](#)’, USA Today.

continued to trend upward under the first and second Trump administrations<sup>12</sup>.

Funding for detention centers has continued to thrive across party lines and ideologies, though many democratic party officials publicly oppose them.

## **A Safer United States?**

The goal of these deportations claims to be keeping the US protected from potential criminals and bad actors entering the country. The Reagan administration was notable for this claim with the War on Drugs campaign. While there have been crimes against Americans committed by undocumented immigrants, multiple nation-wide studies concluded that undocumented immigrants are committing less crimes than US-born citizens.

A 2024 study<sup>13</sup> by the National Institute of Justice found that, in Texas, between 2012 and 2018:

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<sup>12</sup> Chishti M and Lacarte V (2025) '[U.S. Immigrant Detention Grows to Record Heights under Trump Administration](#)', Migration Policy Institute.

<sup>13</sup> National Institute of Justice (2024), '[Undocumented Immigrant Offending Rate Lower Than U.S.-Born Citizen Rate](#)', National Institute of Justice.

[undocumented immigrants were] arrested at less than half the rate of US born citizens for violent and drug crimes, and a quarter the rate for property crimes

Though Texas makes up approximately 9 percent of the US population, this can be seen as a relatively small sample of US crime rates; however, the National Bureau of Economic Research took a grander analysis<sup>14</sup> of crimes committed by immigrants compared to those born in the US, finding that immigrants “have had lower incarceration rates than the US-born for 150 years”. Immigrant incarceration rates have further declined since 1960, and today they are 60 percent lower than for those born in the US.

According to an article<sup>15</sup> published by the Migration Policy Institute:

as of September 2025, 71 percent of ICE detainees had no criminal conviction.

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<sup>14</sup> Abramitzky R, Boustan L P, Jácome E, Pérez S, and Torres J D (2024) ‘[Law-Abiding Immigrants: The Incarceration Gap Between Immigrants and the US-born, 1870–2020](#)’, National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>15</sup> [Chishti M and Lacarte V](#) (2025).

This decline could be attributed to a number of factors. While the number of people held in detention centers has hit record highs in recent history, it cannot be determined whether they contribute to the lower crime statistics. Detention centers and the mistreatment of immigrants and US citizens have been, and continue to be, pushed back on by those living in the US.

### **Defiance in the Face of Government Actions**

Many Japanese American citizens stood up to the mistreatment they experienced whilst being relocated following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. A number of these citizens, citing the American Constitution, claimed that actions being taken against them were not in line with their rights. Three notable figures were Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui.

Gordon Hirabayashi defied the established curfews of the time that he believed were “unconstitutional, racially written and motivated

laws”<sup>16</sup>. His disobedience during WWII saw him rise to a peak position in American civil rights history, and he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously in 2012.

Fred Korematsu’s refusal to leave an area that Japanese Americans were prohibited from led to his arrest in 1942<sup>17</sup>. His later inclusion in a test case supported by the American Civil Liberties Union against *Executive Order 9066* led to a landmark Supreme Court case. Seven states now celebrate the ‘Fred Korematsu Day of Civil Liberties and the Constitution’ on 30 January every year to commemorate his service in defending the constitutional rights of Americans.

Minoru Yasui decided to be a legal test case when curfews and travel restrictions were being established. His later advocacy for, and “strong relationships” with, the African American community in Denver helped prevent race riots after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Lyon C (2012) ‘[Gordon Hirabayashi](#)’, Densho Encyclopedia.

<sup>17</sup> Imai S (2024) ‘[Fred Korematsu](#)’, Densho Encyclopedia.

<sup>18</sup> Hosokawa B (2005) ‘[Colorado’s Japanese Americans from 1886 to the Present](#)’, University Press of Colorado, Boulder.

Acts of defiance like these continue into the modern day.

The town of Social Circle in Georgia stopped a 10,000-bed detention facility from being built in their town<sup>19</sup>, as it would deplete their water supply, and it would have been built 4,000 feet from an elementary school.

The Dilley Detention Center in Texas gained public attention for the number of people they were detaining, and their age, including five-year-old Liam Ramos and his father, who were arrested in Minneapolis and transferred to Dilley. Over 900 people were housed at Dilley in January 2026, but due to public outcry, this number decreased to 100 by March 2026<sup>20</sup>. As of mid-March 2026, the number of people sent into detention with their families dropped to just 54.

Large-scale protests against detention centers, ICE, and immigration enforcement as a whole, have been seen across the US, in Los Angeles, Chicago,

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<sup>19</sup> Bynum Z (2026) '[Social Circle sues ICE, DHS over proposed 10,000-bed immigration detention center in Georgia](#)', CBS News.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenberg M and Funk M (2026), '[The Number of Families Being Held at Dilley Detention Center Has Plummeted](#)', Propublica.

Minneapolis, Seattle, and more since the beginning of the second Trump administration.

## **The US and Detention Centers: Looking Ahead**

Immigration detention centers are used during the review of a person's immigration status, and the review of a crime committed by an immigrant<sup>21</sup>. This turns places like Dilley (Texas), Adelanto (California), and Ochopee (Florida) into dedicated prisons for those immigrants labeled as 'worse' than others.

The existence of detention centers and the condition in which they are managed has seen significant push back from the public, along with the elected officials developing these facilities; however, US detention centers will not cease to exist overnight, and the legal processes those within the centers are being put through will not change immediately.

Those who have the unfortunate experience of ending up in these inhumane facilities, and those fortunate enough to see it happening without being a

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<sup>21</sup> Freedom for Immigrants (n.d.) '[What is immigration detention?](https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org/what-is-immigration-detention/)', FreedomForImmigrants.org

target of immigration enforcement, need to stand up and speak out. Being flooded with fecal waste<sup>22</sup> is unacceptable. Being deported in the middle of the night<sup>23</sup> is not, and should not be treated as, normal.

Action has and will prevail in defiance of immigration detention centers in the US.

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<sup>22</sup> [CBS](#) (2025).

<sup>23</sup> Freedom for Immigrants (n.d.) '[What is immigration detention?](#)'.

*Thank you for sharing these stories with us.*

*Yours in defiance,  
We Write at Dawn*



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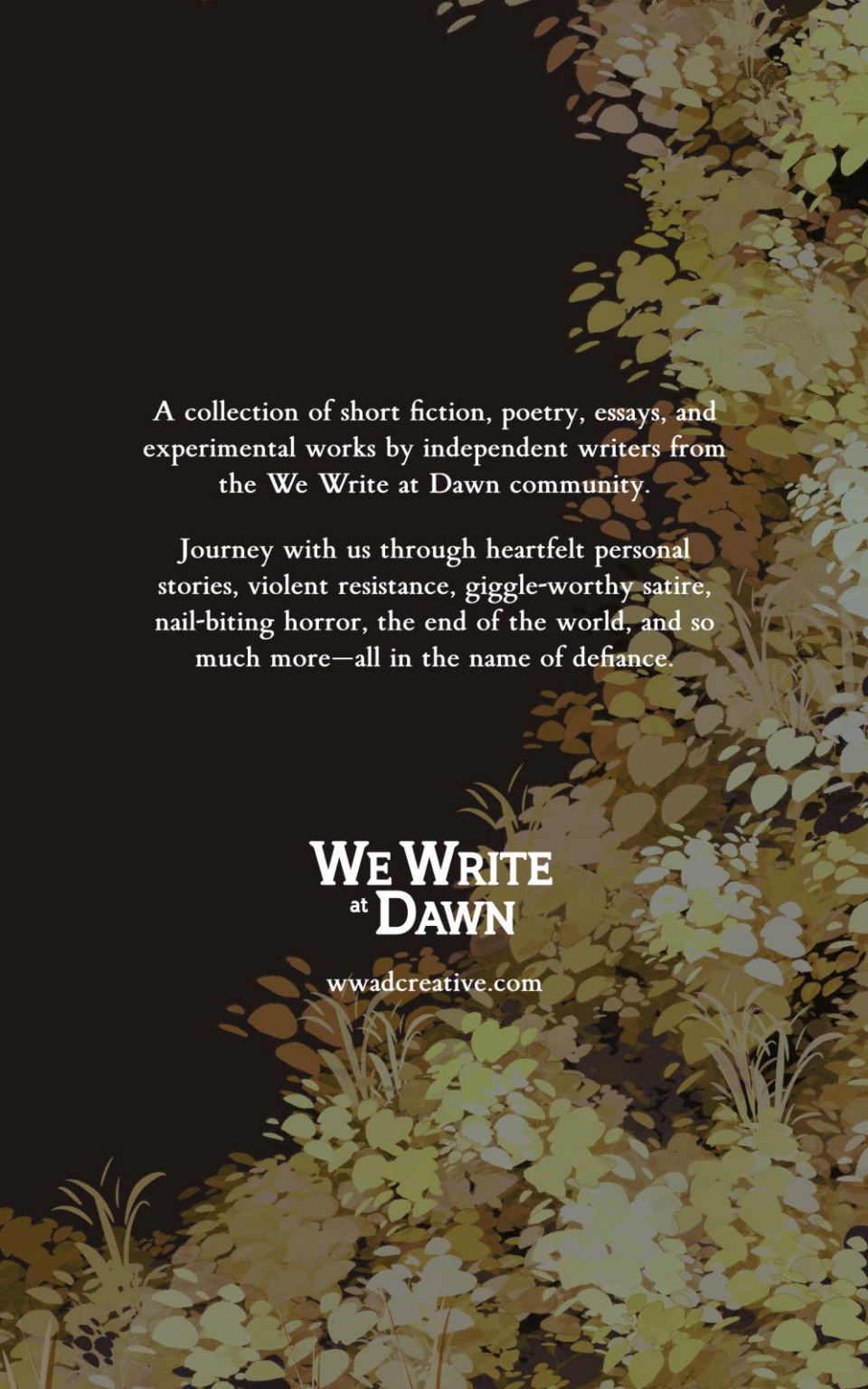
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