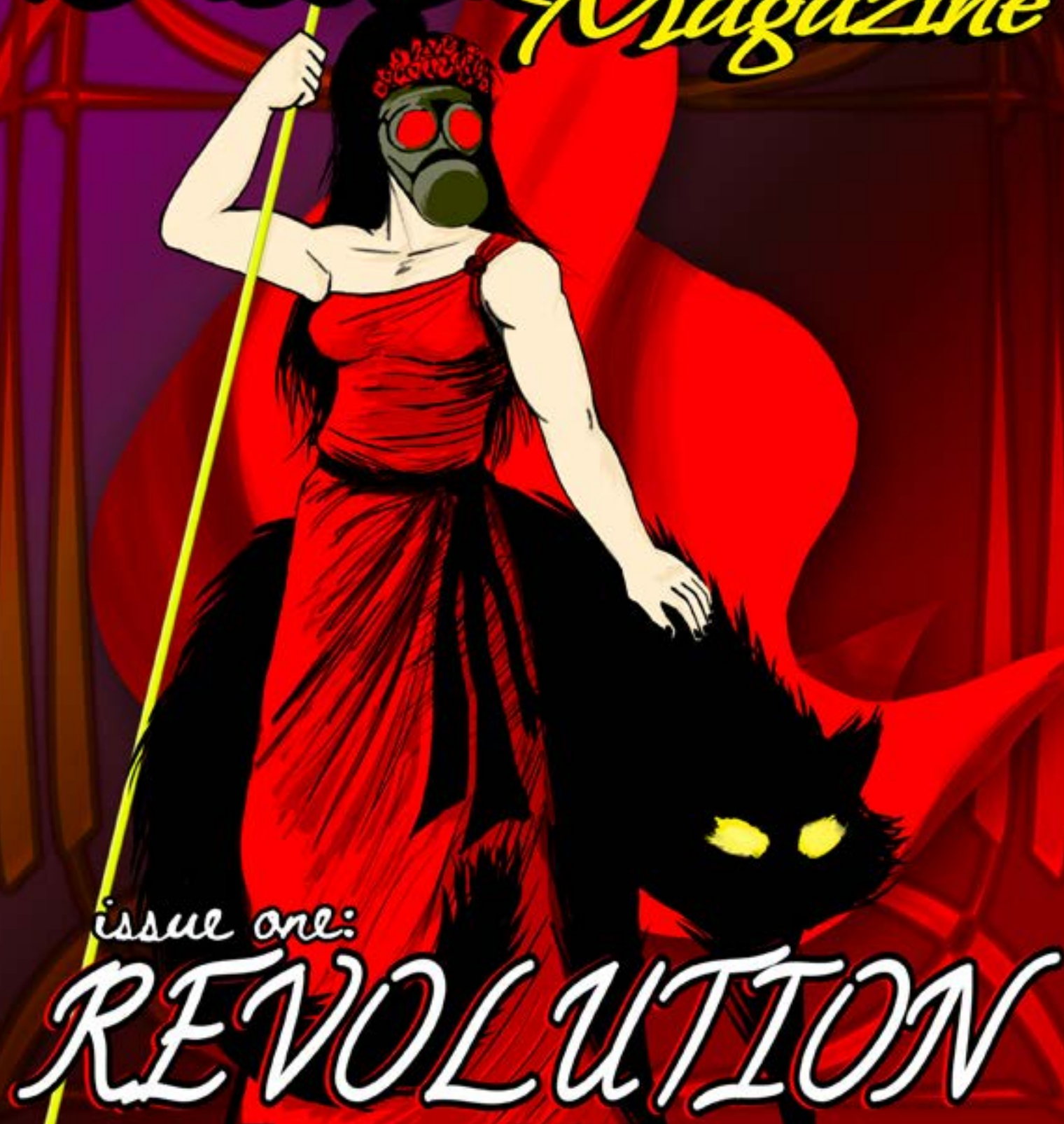


Black Cat Magazine



Edited by Jack Solar and Justin(e) Norton-Kertson
Cover Art by Jay Nada

CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Poetry

REVOLUTION OF RATS

art by Viro

THE DREAM OF THE ANARCHISTS

Byron López Ellington

A CEREMONY CENTURIES IN THE MAKING

J.D. Harlock

SAINT-DOMINGUE 1791

Ariel K. Moniz

FEMME

art Martins Deep

THE HARVEST

Ariel K. Moniz

LOCKDOWN TERROR

Neen Ramos

TOO POLITICAL

art by C.R. Resetarits



SOMETHING SUPERNATURAL

Omar Zahzah

JUDAS CONTEMPLATES THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

Marta Špoljar

AN UNATTAINABLE HEART

Padmaja Battani

DEFEATED

Thaina Joyce

TANGLED VEINS

Justin(e) Norton-Kertson

THE ECCLESIAST OF NOTHING

art by Justin(e) Norton-Kertson

Fiction

SCRIMSHAW SONG

Xan Van Rooyen

UNTITLED

art by nessi alexander-barnes

FLOATING IN MY TIN CAN

Gerri Leen

TO STEAL A PRINCE OF THE MOON

Laurel Beckley



OMNIPOTENCE

P.B. Gomez

REXT

art by Toeken

STORY EATER

Saba Waheed

CLEMENTINE

Dutch Simmons



June 2021

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Black Cat Literary Magazine!

The theme of our first issue is Revolution. We'll leave it to readers to decide for yourselves how each individual piece fits within that theme. But all of the art, poetry, and stories in the issue are either about some kind of revolution or are in their own way revolutionary.

Ours is a world of contradictions. Technological advancements continually enhance our ability to communicate with people around the planet at a moment's notice. At the same time, an inherently exploitative economic system nurtures widespread alienation and encourages violence that destroys communities. Mountains of wealth and comfort exist, yet it's wealth built on the broken and aching backs of the poor masses, as poverty spreads and the gap between the obscenely rich and the rest of us widens with alarming speed. International corporations pollute and destroy the Earth while shaming us for not doing enough to prevent global warming. Overt racism is on the rise in a society that pretends to be "colorblind" and post-racial. Euphemistically dubbed "law enforcement" institutions steeped in a history of violent white supremacy terrorize communities in the so-called "land of free" while those who attempt to hold them accountable are labeled terrorists.

It is no wonder, then, that we are living in increasingly revolutionary times. Here at Black Cat Magazine, it is an integral part of our mission to reflect and foster this revolutionary atmosphere. This magazine was founded on and is rooted in revolutionary principles with the aim of using speculative art, poetry, and fiction to help build a new and better world with a solid foundation in liberatory ideology, non-hierarchical relationships, mutual aid, and community-based participatory institutions.

We believe words have power.
We believe a better world is possible,
We believe we can build it together.



During the process of choosing work for this first issue, we more than learned the lesson all magazine editors already know: it is incredibly difficult, even heartbreaking, to say no to all the many amazing pieces we want to publish but can't because there just isn't enough room in each issue. And so, to all the authors and artists who entrusted us with their work and who we had to turn down for this first issue, we want to use this space to say that we truly thank you, we appreciate you, and we genuinely hope to see your work in our inbox again in the future!

We've worked hard for the past couple months to bring this magazine to life. We received submissions of some 250 pieces of art, poetry, and fiction. We lovingly read through and considered every individual piece, and we made extremely difficult decisions to bring the best first issue possible. Now that it's finally here, we couldn't be more excited to share it with you. We hope you enjoy reading the inaugural issue of Black Cat Magazine, Revolution.

In Solidarity,
Jack & Justin(e)

Editors: Jack Solar and Justin(e) Norton-Kertson
Layout: Jack Solar and Justin(e) Norton-Kertson
Cover Artwork by Jay Nada

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POETRY



REVOLUTION OF RATS by Viro
(originally published in Organize! Magazine)

Viro is a young native Vietnamese communist anarchist from Saigon. He got familiarised with anarchist thoughts while abroad and is committed to trying to popularise it to the progressive youth of his homeland through illustrations.



THE DREAM OF THE ANARCHISTS

by Byron López Ellington

The rulers have for cent'ries now made lies
Designed to keep us entertained with nil
So that they can with ease ignore our cries
But freedom's stayed, as far as I surmise,
A fire burning in our hearts until
The day we break our chains and go live free,
Live masterless in blissful Anarchy.

When people cease to dominate their kin,
When rulership is frowned upon by all,
Then slaves shall cease to be what they have been
And those who ruled shall be but men of tin,
Shall find their hearts and have no greater gall.
Despite the bourgeois's claims, this day shall be,
No matter that we call it "Anarchy."

No propagandic poison taints a word—
Can change a meaning true which lies beneath—
If one can listen through what they have heard,
What cops and politicians have obscured,
And learn to fight against the boss and grief,
And find with fogless eyes the truth to see
What we mean when we speak of Anarchy.

The dream persists beyond the Moon and stars;
Infinity is kind to us on Earth:
If we forget, we'll learn anew on Mars,
And do away with kings and prison bars,
And giggle with unending joy and mirth,
And pick the apple from the thriving tree,
And live as friends in gorgeous Anarchy.

Byron López Ellington is a 17-year-old writer, aspiring voice actor, and anarcho-communist from the Austin, Texas area. He is the founder and editor of the anarchist literary magazine *Rulerless* (rulerless.org), and has previously been published or is forthcoming in *Grand Little Things*, *Juven*, *warning lines mag*, *journal of erato*, *hyacinthus mag*, and *Moon-child Magazine*. You can find his work at byronlopezellington.com.



A CEREMONY CENTURIES IN THE MAKING

by J.D. Harlock

They have flooded the streets in a search of a reckoning, lost.

They have flooded the streets to set Beirut aflame.

But that day will never come.

for *he* watches over—
a nation, divided
a crippled state
a starving people—
yearning for morsels
that will never drip onto their plates

Now,

some ceremony—
centuries in the making—
is taking place.

I have neither the will nor desire to see it through.

J.D. Harlock is a Lebanese Palestinian writer based in Beirut. His short stories have been featured in *The Deadlands magazine* and the *Decoded Pride Anthology*. You can find him on Twitter [@JD_Harlock](https://twitter.com/JD_Harlock).



SAINT-DOMINGUE 1791

by Ariel K. Moniz

The night hums with it

the hushed crackle of ozone
the shrapnel taste of it
in the muscles and between the bones

the humidity suffocates
but the earth dressed in bodies, crawls
beneath the many weary feet of purpose
as the night drags on toward dawn

they come with open wounds
they come without their mother's tongues
they come with tinder and flint
they come without guns or drums

the night is alive and speaks of death
the fires rage in guts, rise to throats through chests
the mud mumbles sucking hymns of hunger
the human salt of sweat and blood an offering
upon satiated altar, they walk on

the ancestors do not remain in unmarked graves
the conquered do not stay sleeping in stolen land
the enslaved do not rest well beneath castles of suffering
the descendants come bearing the name Rebellion

they rise like sparks from embers
they are hungry like the flame
they raise their heads to a midnight sun



a whip of thunder cracks
sings the scent of gunpowder
cleaves the night air with a bolt
a battle cry of the severed tongues
a prayer to the pyres of mercy
a roaring fire of revolution.

Ariel K. Moniz is a lifelong writer, poet, avid reader, and Hawaii local currently living in Germany. She graduated with a Bachelor's in English from the University of Hawaii at Hilo in 2016, where she received acknowledgment for her creative and academic writing. Her work has more recently been featured in publications such as *The Raven Review*, *Pussy Magic*, *The Kraken's Spire*, and *Blood Bath Literary Zine*, among others. She is currently working on her first poetry collection as well as a novel. You can find more of her work on Instagram @[kiss.of.the.seventh.star](https://www.instagram.com/kiss.of.the.seventh.star) or on her website kissoftheseventhstar.home.blog.





Martins Deep (he/him) is a budding African poet, photographer/artist, & currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His works deeply explore the African experience. His creative works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *FIYAH*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Barren Magazine*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *Surburban Review*, *Twyckenham Notes*, *FERAL*, *Black Lives Matter: Poems for a New World*, *Whaleroad Review*, *Kalahari Review*, & elsewhere. He soaks himself in jazz, adores Taya Smith, & Amanda Cook, and fantasizes reincarnating as an owl. He tweets [@martinsdeep1](https://twitter.com/martinsdeep1)

FEMME by Martins Deep



THE HARVEST

by Ariel K. Moniz

When you are empty
because your ancestors fed you
with land and money,
because your faith served you
as a weapon and not a helping hand,
you come to us for answers.

If we do not produce the fruit
the tree does not exist.
If we do not undress ourselves
to bare the layering of scars,
the trauma has not happened.
Somehow you believe this.

What language do we share?
Our stories are grown in the same land,
harvested by similar hands—
but have you asked yourself
about your humanity today?

Ours, on the good days,
is giving, building, overcoming,
and on the bad days,
it is all that has been taken from us.
Have you asked yourself today
how much you have been given
or how much you have taken?

You ask us about humanity.
Your earth is salted, and yet you have no plans
to grow anything in the fertile soil
of our answers or the seeds we give you.

How would we find the time to till the earth
when we spend our lives not sitting at your table,
having to shout from the kitchen or the field,
having to explain what a human soul looks like
how it can be crushed,
how it can be saved
how it can be defined?



Ariel K. Moniz is a lifelong writer, poet, avid reader, and Hawaii local currently living in Germany. She graduated with a Bachelor's in English from the University of Hawaii at Hilo in 2016, where she received acknowledgment for her creative and academic writing. Her work has more recently been featured in publications such as *The Raven Review*, *Pussy Magic*, *The Kraken's Spire*, and *Blood Bath Literary Zine*, among others. She is currently working on her first poetry collection as well as a novel. You can find more of her work on Instagram [@kiss.of.the.seventh.star](https://www.instagram.com/kiss.of.the.seventh.star) or on her website kissoftheseventhstar.home.blog.



LOCKDOWN TERROR

by Neen Ramos

To break out of a room,
or break into a room
the ayuda of 5 kg rice
and Frabelle hotdogs
Meal coupons distributed from —
basketball courts amassed by
barangay officials and kagawads.

And because chickens laid eggs
and couldn't fly,
Because somewhere exotic pets
could be eaten and
served for dinner,
Because lost dogs could be stolen
in exchange of a meal,
Because Filipinos could still survive
under the rubble of ashes —
wrapped in memoriam
of the dead.

And the empty stomachs
of children with nothing to eat —
amidst their hunger, we hold our
future in agony. In place of two
empty palms pressed together,
we pray for a quicker death.

Neen Ramos is a Pinay (Filipina) born and raised in the Philippines who loves to devour pop culture and random stuff on the Internet. A lover of good books and a cup of coffee, her Spotify playlist keeps her sane as she juggles her remote work and TV show marathons. She's a self-proclaimed foodie and a habitual bargain addict. You can find her aspirational Insta-poet alter ego (@whatneenwrites) on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).





TOO POLITICAL by C.R. Resetarits

C. R. Resetarits is a writer and collagist. Her collage art has appeared on the covers and in the pages of dozens of magazines. Upcoming her collages will appear as covers for *Shooter Magazine* (UK) and *Cowboy Jamboree*. She lives in Oxford, Mississippi.



SOMETHING SUPERNATURAL

by Omar Zahzah

maybe benjamin was right and we can think of baudelaire as the “poet of modernity” after all
 and not just because in his work we get the first glimpses
 of the rise of cities and basically like
 proto-shopping malls
 well ok yes that too but
 the thing is the obsession with devils decay demons death god blasphemy the secret language of
 nature mythology’s buzzing aphasia
 see all of that is part of modernity too
 if by modernity we don’t just think of physical spaces and structures
 or the disembodied gaze tracing them all abouts
 but the feelings too, or
 like the lack of feelings, the
 no-feelings, what in other contexts would be called the “alienation”
 and the violence with which we’re gradually
 sliced out of life to make room for existence
 is what registers as a kind of deadness, so world-numbing and soul-strangling that
 well yes it eventually will take something supernatural
 (which by this point is an exact rather than symbolic designation
 because capital kills time and love
 by posing as god and science)
 to rip us right back in.

Omar Zahzah is a Palestinian writer, poet and organizer whose creative and political writings have appeared in various publications including *Narrative magazine* and the *New York Times*. Several of Omar’s poems were featured in the anthology, *Beside the City of Angels: An Anthology of Long Beach Poetry*. In 2016, Omar’s chapbook *13 Almost Love Poems* was released. Omar holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from UCLA.



JUDAS CONTEMPLATES THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

by Marta Špoljar

i found heaven
watching you get dressed
i found god
hungover and jetlagged.
you suit everything but martyrdom — let them die for their own sins
each kiss the world can see
tastes of betrayal.

i draw the curtains shut
to disappoint your father
one hand on the door
like people wouldn't knock first,
one hand on your waist
as you near apotheosis.

Marta Špoljar is a translation student from Zagreb, Croatia. Her poetry has appeared in *Anti-Heroic Chic* and *Pollux Journal* and she can be found running social media for *The Wondrous Real Magazine*. Words she cannot put into poetry she tweets from [@shhhhhpoljar](https://twitter.com/shhhhhpoljar).



AN UNATTAINABLE HEART

by Padmaja Battani

A good friend of mine at school
Shared her lunch with me
While eating I touched
Her lunch box involuntarily

When her mother learnt this
She told her daughter
The lunch box could not go
Back to her kitchen as
It had become impure
With the touch of me – an untouchable

She asked my friend to
Give (throw) away the box to me
And demanded her never allow
Me to touch any of her items

But my friend sometimes
Disobeyed her mother and made me
Touch her new ribbon to make it mine
The blue pen I adored was added
To my secret treasury with one touch
My friend confessed that
I had touched her heart as well
And made it unattainable to all others

Padmaja Battani lives in Connecticut with her husband and daughter. She received an MA in English Literature. Her fiction and poetry appeared in various publications. She is currently working on a Poetry Collection. She is originally from India.



DEFEATED

by Thaina Joyce

My consciousness slowly drifts
 into lucid dreams that I can't
 escape. A ringing sound
 at a distance alerts me
 to take shelter from my own

wars. Pinch me, bring me back.
 I have been fighting so hard to
 stay afloat, pretending to grip

the edges of self care
 but I am barely holding on.
 I wonder if people can hear
 the bombs
 dropping
 inside of my head.

The shattering sounds
 of each heartbreak,
 the loud screeches of my

anxiety. Excitement lasts
 as long as my attention span.
 I feel dragged by a chain
 of unsocial media. Seclusion
 is the daily vitamin that keeps me

alive. In an unprecedented world,
 expectations are working overtime
 and my body hoists a white flag.
 There are too many decks for my hands

to hold but no cards that could ever
 reverse this madness. The sun pours light
 through the crevices of my destruction
 as I birth a new strand of gray hair.
 And I sit still to watch the world spin.

Thaina Joyce (she/her) is a Brazilian-American poet and educator based in Maryland. Her poetry has been featured at *Sledgehammer Lit*, *Olney Magazine*, and elsewhere. She has poems forthcoming at *New Contrast Magazine*, *Lumiere*, and *The Bitchin' Kitsch's All My Relations*. She hopes her work will empower, connect the human experience, and evoke new perspectives. Find her on IG: [@thainawrites](#) Twitter: [@teedistrict](#)



TANGLED VEINS

by Justin(e) Norton-Kertson

Ligaments wind through
mucous soaked vines
of prepackaged flesh,
joining bone to bone
like building blocks
fastened by sturdy
and trustworthy joints.

Roots penetrate earth.
Welcomed invaders of
becoming.

Bridges to the
Gilded Age of
a subterranean
alternate universe.

Glances become deep
penetrating stares
into bluetooth souls.
A touch, a kiss,

the heart exposed by
a hand placed softly
into the swarm of
gentle repose.

Tangled veins of interwoven
fiber optic cable descended
from unseen dreams fall
away to reveal the wireless
wunderkind.



5G brain stem interface.
A world conjoined by
reticulated strands of
well-worn superhighway
from the era of
proto-positronic integration.

Alienation solidified.
Networks fused.

Justin(e) Norton-Kertson (they/he/she) is a multigender author, poet, musician, photographer, community organizer, and a founding editor of Black Cat Magazine. Her work has appeared in *Bombfire*, *Sledgehammer*, *Brave Voices Magazine*, *Royal Rose Magazine*, and *Alien Buddha Press*. He has work forthcoming in *Serious Flash Fiction*, *Southchild Lit*, *C*nsorship Magazine*, *Jupiter Review*, and *Rulerless*, among others. They live in rural Oregon with his partner, cats, puppy, bees, bats, and goats.





THE ECCLESIAST OF NOTHING

by Justin(e) Norton-Kertson



FICTION



SCRIMSHAW SONG

by Xan van Rooyen [3,451 words]

Wat jy saai, sal jy maai

A corpse lay waiting on the slab in the center of the cell, its bones screaming. Nadia focused on the silvered skulls of the queen's crown, the shrike beaks frozen agape and glinting in the torchlight, as a soldier fastened manacles around her ankles.

"Please, you don't have to do this." All of her father's warnings came back to haunt her, circling like vultures. "Please, I won't do it again."

"Oh yes, you will." The queen's pale face remained an impassive map of jigsaw shadows.

Nadia winced at the clinking of the chains—an atonal accompaniment to the morass of melodies rising from the dead body. It provided a nauseating counterpoint to the whispers emanating from both the queen and the soldier. Only Nadia could hear the songs trapped in their bones.

"If I do what I ask, will you let me go?" Nadia asked, the words sour on her tongue. She already knew the answer, knew the queen had little mercy to spare.

"I'm not inclined to litter my queendom with your kind." The queen's sneer was a grinning hyena slash across her thin lips. "Here you have all you need." She gestured to a table set with carving tools. "Deliver what I want and perhaps I won't have your head."

With a swirl of white and a tinkling of jewelry, the queen left the cell. Her steps echoed down the corridor in staccato ricochets, her marrow-caged melodies fading.

The soldier hesitated at the heavy wooden door hinged with iron, as if that would contain the magic in Nadia's blood. The soldier seemed about to say something, but only hung her head, black curls obscuring her face as she offered Nadia a parting bow. The bolts slammed into place, sealing Nadia in a premature tomb. She wrapped her fingers around the bone splinters strung about her throat, the necklace murmuring in fading echoes her only comfort as her father's words swarmed like relentless mosquitoes.

Trying to ignore the bones, Nadia dragged her fingers across the stone walls, humming as she searched for the faintest resonance or murmur of possible escape. Only the distant thunder of the sea breaking against the palace cliffs shuddered beneath her touch. Only the hollow moans of other prisoners confined in the dank dark droned a low thrum.



Sweating, trembling, no longer able to resist, Nadia turned to face the granite altar in the center of her cell. The body had been flayed and boiled, the skeleton stripped of stifling flesh.

Now, acknowledged, the songs rose in elegy.

They, too, longed for freedom.

For fifteen years, Nadia had endured life in the crossroads town serving one kermis or another as they trundled across the veld, skirting the trembling rent at the edge of the world. Nadia had dreamed of running away, of hitching a ride among the striped tents and seeing the world beyond the Fray-stained confines of her home.

Magic leaked through the rift between worlds, streaking the sky with violent orange and bilious green. The Fray warped those it infected, only sometimes bestowing them with arcane powers. Fray-touched, the imbued were called, and—Fray-touched—Nadia had worked with her father in his business of skin and stitches.

He had only ever been interested in the husks, filling up empty carcasses to give the animals new life at the end of strings and pulleys. Meerkats and aardvarks, nagapies, civets, and stranger creatures fallen through the Fray, all became marionettes for crude kermis stages. Nadia had obediently stitched beads into yawning eye sockets, though her bones juddered discordant as her fingers itched with unspent spells.

She'd hoarded discarded skeletons, learning the secret songs only her Fray-touched ears could hear. Slowly, she learned to weave and thread the melodies into symphonies of her own devising, scratching Fray-gifted symbols into bone and inhaling the dust, tasting the memories of the deceased as she strung their bones on wire and made them dance.

"Has anyone seen?" her father had asked, even as he crushed the rattling skeleton of a puff adder, slithering rib over naked rib across the workroom floor, beneath his heel. "Does anyone know what you are?"

"No." Her only friends were the dead. "No Papa, no one knows."

"You're just like your mother." Not that Nadia knew. Her father had never shared the secret of her mother's magic or what she'd done to earn the ire of the town. He'd grabbed Nadia's wrists, searching her arms for signs of the rust. "Do you want to end up like her?"

Cool as it was in the ossuary, sweat peppered Nadia's brow. Using magic had its cost and using her gift without royal sanction had consequences. Those had jangled at Nadia's ankles for a year now, gnawing runnels into her flesh. This was her punishment, to touch the dead with hands that had once healed the living, and to



never be touched in return.

Nadia caressed an elegantly curved clavicle and ran her tongue along the smooth edge of a pearlescent rib, savoring the tune tangling on her breath.

She began with the skull, always, and always with the teeth. Carefully, she salvaged the molars and incisors not yet lost to age or rot. Three were perfect. She needed only one.

Picking up her sharpened scribe, Nadia set upon the tooth. She sang as she worked, releasing the Fray-gifted magic snarled in her sinews in throaty vocables. With lines and spirals, Nadia engraved the yellowed enamel and its edges sharpened to a ready fang. She inhaled bitter memory, swallowing bone dust and the life of the prisoner in her hands. Duty, honor, treachery, torture—Nadia's marrow trilled in sympathy with the echoes of calcified pain.

Carefully, she punctured the flesh of her thumb, smearing blood into the carved rills, staining the tooth with her desire for escape and revenge. Perhaps this time she'd be able to do it.

Satisfied, she secreted the molar in her apron pocket. Later, she would put it to use. Now, Nadia fondled the rest of the bones, tapping each in turn and listening with an ardent ear.

"Why would you do this?" Nadia's father had stood, haggard and gray in the doorway, a half-stuffed hyrax dangling from his hand.

"I wanted to know her. And I thought you'd like it." Nadia had toiled for hours, first digging up the grave then washing the bones before engraving her spells in delicate filigree across skull and sternum, savoring every inhalation of dust and memory. Finally, she was starting to know the mother she'd lost. "Isn't she beautiful?"

The skeleton sat, spelled from head to hip, upon the table. She turned, spine clinking like chimes. The skeleton reached a wire-threaded hand toward her husband, jaw opening. Only Nadia could hear her mother singing.

With a sob, her father had dropped the hyrax and picked up the maggot-smeared shovel where it rested against the wall. He raised it above his shoulder and held Nadia's gaze when he swung it.

Nadia had knelt among the shards still tangled in wire, weeping and inhaling the last of her mother's scattered memories, the mother she'd hardly known. She, too, had been Fray-touched and the magic had corroded her insides, turning her veins ashen, and her skin into flakes that sloughed away at the slightest touch.

Wat jy saai, sal jy maai, the words were bitter on Nadia's tongue.

The queen would have people believe they deserved being afflicted by the rust in retribution for accepting the touch of the Fray. Not that any of the Fray-touched had chosen the strange magic boiling in their veins.



And so, it wasn't the rust that had killed Nadia's mother before Nadia had taken her first steps. She'd been beheaded in the town square, a warning to others and reminder of how the queen looked harshly upon those who practiced feral magic.

Nadia's father collapsed beside her and lifted her hands where they were buried in fragments of a past she could never heal. She'd thought he would embrace her and kiss her hair. Instead, he pushed up her sleeves and traced his thumb across the darkened veins, following the trail to the crook of her elbow where her skin was cracked and mottled red.

In the ossuary, Nadia brushed away the cobweb of memory and regret, trying not to scratch at her arms, pitted and eroded beneath her sleeves.

The fibula in her hand responded to her whispered song, its voice meaty as if it remembered being slicked in gristle and blood, and how the queen had ordered its flesh pared away. Nadia had appealed to the queen for gentler deaths so the bones might sing instead of scream. The queen had only laughed.

With fingers made stiff by the rust, Nadia began assembling the chimes. She continued to hum as she etched her scrimshaw spells across the ivory surfaces, oozing viscous blood from the prick-wounds on her hands to bolster the magic.

Hours flitted by, but Nadia barely noticed as she joined mandible to clavicle, ulna to tibia. A knock startled her and she fumbled with her scribe. A moment later, the door opened and the curly haired soldier stood before her.

It had been more than a year since she'd first placed the chains on Nadia's ankles, time etched across her forehead in a new accumulation of lines and in the scars on her arms from the frequent skirmishes along the realm's western border. The queen was growing greedy, determined to expand her empire armed with bones singing her enemies into surrender and servitude.

Is it done? Zalani asked with her hands.

"As the queen commanded," Nadia said.

I brought supper. Zalani was the only soldier the queen trusted in Nadia's presence, deaf to her songs and magic, but not entirely immune.

The soldier deposited a basket on a small table on the opposite side of the room, her elbow bumping Nadia's as she passed. Nadia barely felt it—her flesh numb beneath the spreading rust. The rust had eaten its way across her belly and breasts and up her spine, deadening her body to touch, and soon enough to breath as the skin across her ribs became a crushing corset. She refused to die in these dungeons to the delight—or indifference—of the queen.



“Are you sure I can’t help you?” Nadia asked the soldier, raising the scribe to her ear. “The queen never needs to know.”

Zalani smiled and shook her head. *All I ask is that if my bones ever land on your table, make my song beautiful.*

Nadia set down the scribe and felt for the tooth in her apron. It had to work. This might be her final chance, if the soldier would accept her touch.

Zalani took up position against the wall, arms folded over her chest. She no longer flinched at the abattoir odor nor balked at the gruesome detritus littering the cell. Her gaze settled on Nadia and Nadia tried not to think about how it would feel to run her tongue along the soldier’s bones.

Eat, Zalani gestured.

With a clatter of chain, Nadia moved from the workbench to the table. In the basket, there were koeksisters, fresh bread, and a flagon of water. The koeksisters were delicious. The braided pastries burst with sweetness and the taste of home as she bit into one after another.

Thank you, Nadia signed with sticky fingers.

I remembered what you said last time, that they’re your favorite.

Nadia listened to the soft music trickling through the soldier’s flesh. Zalani was all hard muscle, corded veins, taught sinews, and twanging tendons. Nadia longed to disrobe the soldier’s bones.

Instead, she took a tentative step forward, chains clanking. Zalani didn’t move away as Nadia pressed her hand to her sun-kissed cheek. The first touch in more than a year.

I’m not supposed—

“The queen will never know.” Nadia caught Zalani’s hands in her own and brought them to rest on her hips. She released a heavy sigh as she cupped the hard edge of Zalani’s jaw, then moved her hands lower, tracing the angles of the soldier’s collarbone, the plain of her sternum, the rills and troughs of ribs through the thin cotton of her tunic. Her marrow thrummed at Nadia’s touch, the melody waiting for release.

Nadia slipped her hand against Zalani’s skin, hesitating a moment before pressing her palm to the soldier’s chest, and the tooth secreted between her blood-streaked fingers bit true.

Zalani’s eyes widened, mouth falling open. Nadia pressed a finger to her lips and began to sing. The soldier fell silent as the tooth gnawed deeper, carrying Nadia’s blood and magic to the soldier’s bones. Nadia reached for her scribe as Zalani slumped against the wall. Then, Nadia began to carve.

Nadia had hitched a ride on a south-bound kermis with shards of her mother still caught in the hem of her trousers. Her arms itched, her wrists ringed blue from her father’s fingers. If only she could escape the town and the reaching shadow of the Fray that had already left her scarred.



She'd plucked the slivers of bone where they snagged on her seams and strung them on a cord around her throat. They carried barely a whisper, the tiniest murmur of memory still trapped, but Nadia could feel their thrum and felt her mother near.

It was between the colored tents and jumbled strays of the kermis, some Fray-touched flotsam like herself, that Nadia began to understand what she was.

The folk brought her bits of bone and ivory and she caught those ossified echoes, weaving together her own offerings of song before etching the bones to create talismans to sooth a fever or monthly cramps. Her reputation grew, a line waiting for the scrimshander in every town before the kermis even scuttled into view.

Nadia had felt protected among the folk. She knew none in the kermis would betray her the way a townie had betrayed her mother.

It was at a seaside village where the white-washed homes clutched like mussels to the cliffs that a girl her own age had brought her a dying cat.

"I heard you're a healer," she'd said, pressing a parcel of dried fish and a bracelet knotted with sea-glass into her hands. "Please, don't let her die, at least not in pain."

Nadia slipped the bracelet over her wrist before accepting the injured animal. Deaf and almost blind, the old tabby had been hit by a cart. Her ribs were broken and organs bruised. Nadia listened to the song rising plaintive from feline bones.

"I've never done this to a living thing," she said, but her mother had—a truth she'd gleaned from bone dust.

"First time for everything. You have to try." The girl had smiled, all crooked teeth and pale skin burned by the sun.

Nadia had let the melodies guide her hand, listening for where the song twisted out of tune. Gently, she'd pressed the scribe through fur and flesh until it hit broken bone, all the while humming a counter-melody, coaxing the notes back into key as she scratched spells across the fractures.

The cat had yowled, carving her own displeasure in deep gouges across Nadia's hands. Her blood, already rust-thickened, had slicked the scribe and the song had strengthened, the tabby's bones knitting closed as blood and music worked in harmony.

A pang skewered Nadia's heart. If only she had known, she might've opened her veins and made her mother whole.

The girl had thanked her with tears and smiles, and—later—in the tent Nadia called home, pitched at the western edge of the kermis, the girl had gifted the scrimshander the opportunity for another first. Nadia still dreamed of that tangle of fingers and tongues, drowning in the song of the girl's bones, wishing she could climb inside her skin and taste every note.

Word spread and Nadia no longer made talismans or trinkets, but spent her days up to her elbows in



gore, parting living flesh to scrape spells into bone. She healed fractures and bruises, sang away infection and unwanted pregnancy, reveling in the adoration of those she helped, sharing the rewards with the kermis folk who'd never minded her flaking skin.

The kermis had continued south, joining others for the Grand Fete on the outskirts of the capital. Nadia had been dazzled by the city, built on cliffs above the ocean. Here the sky burned blue, untouched by the lurid talon of the Fray. Here too, dwelled the queen who'd commanded her mother's death.

The pink marble palace graced the pinnacle, a sovereign shadow cast over the multi-colored cluster of homes. And the songs! Thousands upon thousands of bones raised their voices in glorious cacophony.

It was two days and multiple healings later, that the queen's soldiers came her: a Fray-touched, rust-bitten practitioner of unsanctioned magic. They dragged her from the kermis through the glossy streets of the capital. Nadia didn't resist; she'd been expecting them.

"All I do is help people," Nadia had said when the queen had questioned her before demanding a demonstration. Nadia had obliged, curing a festering wound in a soldier's leg. Nadia had thought it would make the queen see her magic was harmless, that the queen had been wrong about her mother; that Nadia would win her freedom and perhaps even an apology. Instead she'd been interred in the dungeons and wrapped in chains.

Nadia had opted for haste instead of precision, not bothering to seal the wounds littering Zalani's chest. The soldier walked before her, eyes glassy and stare unblinking. The front of her tunic hung open, bloodied, her chest bearing a topography of scabs and scarlet rivulets. The soldier answered any resistance with her sword and fist, leaving a line of groaning bodies in their wake. Nadia cradled the skeleton chimes in her arms, muting their voice while they were still caged by palace walls.

A breeze, a splash of sunlight across the mosaic flooring.

Nadia stumbled as the brightness assaulted her eyes, as the scent of sea and earth assailed her nostrils. A year kept in torchlight. A year with nothing but copper and rot in her stiffening lungs.

Nadia drew as deep a breath as her rust-thickened skin would allow, devouring the salt-slick air. She stepped into the courtyard, met by a myriad curious gazes and questioning frowns. Soldiers' hands shifted to weapons, courtiers gossiped behind jewel-adorned fingers, servants hurried away casting only the most furtive of glances in Nadia's direction.

Evening wind poured off the sea, the currents tumbling through the courtyard and shaking the songs from the numerous chimes already dangling from every pergola and eave. The city reverberated with a hundred dead voices—each, crafted by Nadia and stained with her blood.

She studied the courtyard, following the many threads of the sonorous tapestry weaving through the



air. Melodies made to imbue the listener with content, with gratitude, with love and loyalty.

“Here.” She tugged Zalani to a stop and, docile, the soldier obeyed. With her help, Nadia secured the fresh chimes in the south-west corner of the courtyard. Two soldiers rushed over, swords drawn.

Deftly, Nadia unfurled the bones. The wind blew and the chimes began to sing, adding their voice to the chorus issuing from the palace eaves. The soldiers rushing towards her faltered, their swords hanging loose in arms gone limp.

At first, a clash of harmonies. Dissonance polluted the twilight and the throngs grimaced, clapping their hands over their ears. A few, like Zalani, instead scratched at their skin as the music slipped a blade between their sinews.

Gradually, the bones settled, finding their shared resonance, entrained for renewed purpose. A subtle modulation and nails peeled away from raw skin, hands uncovered ears.

The queen stepped into the courtyard in a flourish of white and silver. Her crown sat askew atop her blond tresses. The gleaming skulls reflected the sunset in shades of fresh-spilled entrails. Dismay widened her eyes. Anger blotched across her cheeks and fear turned down the corners of her mouth.

“What have you done?” she asked, a hand pressed to her throat and Nadia lifted her own to clutch the necklace she still wore.

“For my mother.”

Courtiers and servants alike turned to face the queen, teeth bared, hands balled into fists. How easily devotion became sedition, a simple transposition scribed with careful spell.

Wat jy saai, sal jy maai, the words were sweet as honey now as soldiers drew their weapons and advanced. Zalani too, but Nadia caught the soldier’s arm and drew her close, their bodies thrumming as the scrimshaw song curdled on the sea wind and the queen’s blood stained pink marble red.

Xan van Rooyen is a climber, tattoo-enthusiast, peanut-butter addict and loyal shibe-minion, Xan van Rooyen is a genderqueer, non-binary storyteller from South Africa, currently living in Vantaa, Finland where the heavy metal is soothing and the cold, dark forests inspiring. Xan has a Master’s degree in music, and—when not teaching—enjoys conjuring strange worlds and creating quirky characters. You can find Xan’s short stories in the likes of Three-Lobed Burning Eye, Daily Science Fiction, Apparition Lit, and The Colored Lens. Xan hangs out on instagram, twitter, and facebook so feel free to say hi over there.





UNTITLED by nessi alexander-barnes

nessi alexander-barnes is from Missouri and has an MFA, but mostly spends its time drawing pictures of garish dog-people hanging out with cats.



FLOATING IN MY TIN CAN

by Gerri Leen [1,500 words]

This part of space is dark. I always thought if I died in space, I would take my last breaths surrounded by stars and astral clouds and the detritus of the fleets of the five federations. But I've wandered off course, my supposedly foolproof new nav system failing, until I found myself here, in utter blackness, running blind with a life-support system that's also dying.

I have enemies. They know how to sabotage a ship. I check: I always check because I'm paranoid, and paranoid people stay alive. This time was no different. But the nav system's new readings must have masked whatever they did to life support. I left port thinking I was fine. It waited to fail until I was too far from anywhere to call for help.

No beacons ping on my comm system. Not even from the fifth federation, whose surveyors mark everything obsessively with dates and times and who did what to whom as if in the far future someone will care.

Genina was from the fifth federation. She used to label everything in the chiller in our room at the children's home. *Genina's Yellow Fruit, First Quadrant of the Third Era, Eighteenth Cycle*. She was obsessive.

Obsessive and sad and damaged. But her voice was lovely when she sang. It was the only time she seemed to forget herself and her pain. I wish I had a recording of her, especially when she sang the lullaby her mother had sung to her. It was so pretty. So soothing.

Her voice made me settle down and feel safe, the way I hadn't since I was a very young girl. Before the men from the first federation came and took my parents away. Before I was handed over to children's services and sent to the home on Caldrat in the second federation, where the refuse of the five federations go.

Where no one labeled anything, ever, because ownership was seen as a grasping and temporary state. Where they taught freedom as a code word for conforming. Where we had what was expected drilled into us.

But at night, when the lights were out, we fought back. We discovered things that made us unique and incandescent, like the stars I longed to fly among. Genina never wanted that; she wanted to go home, to feel the soil of Leadra Prime under her feet, to sing her songs in the cool and humid air that she would whisper about when she told me stories of the fifth federation.

At the children's home, the air was dry and hot.



In space, I imagined the air to be whatever you made it—the ship that carried you programmable. Hot and dry, cold and damp: captain's choice. I would be a captain. I would take Genina home.

That was my dream. When I wasn't having nightmares about my parents or the way I screamed when they were dragged away, the way my father was clubbed when he tried to get to me. Blood ran down his face and he called my name, his voice held pain mixed with grief, a music of its own.

I never knew what they did to deserve being taken that way. But I imagine whatever bad thing was inside them is also in me. It's what makes me want the stars and freedom. Now, I'm only happy in the stars.

In the children's home, only Genina's voice made me happy, and she'd sing quietly, as we shared her bed, the covers over us, until the matrons found out and separated us.

I never heard Genina sing again. They said she was in therapy, but I don't know what they did to her. Me, they left alone, but I didn't get another roommate. I'd see Genina in the halls, and she didn't say a word for a long time, and then when she spoke, her voice was different, cracked and dusty, as if she'd been denied water since they took her from me.

It was hard to get her alone, but I did. She wouldn't touch me and she didn't want to sing. But I begged and finally she sang the lullaby. I cried—what came out of her mouth was no longer song.

She didn't cry; she just touched my cheek and went back to her new room. But they found her floating in the river a week later. I think it was my fault—if I hadn't asked her to sing, she might not have realized what she'd lost.

Even if it's not my fault, I should have left her alone. I shouldn't have pushed.

I leave the ship on autopilot and check the cryo units, normally well hidden, but there's no reason to keep them camouflaged now that I'm floating blind. My cargo is asleep, deep in frozen dreams. They paid me to get them out of the second federation. They're singers, you see.

I rescue singers from those who would destroy the songs.

Or I did. Now...now I drift with them safely in cryo and think about ways to make this right. I'm the best smuggler there is. It's not a secret that I hate the second federation enough to risk anything.

That's why these two risked it. And I suppose I should console myself with knowing I *did* get them free of the second federation. I just didn't get them all the way. Would that be a consolation? That they are free for now?

They sang for me, these two lovers who wanted to share a cryo pod until I explained how that wouldn't work. The way they looked at each other reminded me of how Genina used to smile at me, before they took her away. Their voices trilled in half-step harmonies that made me shiver. So discordant and yet... beautiful.

They would have been appreciated in the third federation. That kind of sound would always find a home on one of the more cosmopolitan worlds. The third federation might be allied with the second, but they didn't mind stealing talent, and they were too powerful for the second to make much fuss.



These two should have been in their new home by now, being lauded by audiences, after they'd sung one last song for me—I asked all my runners for that. Credits, too, of course—a song wouldn't buy fuel—but that last song always sounded the sweetest. Hope colored it with something beautiful.

And now we float and wait for our air to run out. It will be a while, from my perspective. No time at all as far as the sleepers know.

Would they want to spend the time left singing? Or just dreaming of song?

I finger the console. An almost musical combination of keystrokes will wake them up.

For what? For death?

Or I can let them sleep. The cold changing their slumber to a more lasting rest as the power runs out while the inside of the ship begins to resemble their cryo chamber. As I freeze to death with them. The only one of us aware it's happening.

But...I long to hear their voices again. Maybe they know Genina's lullaby. I didn't ask when they boarded. They're not from the fifth federation, but songs travel.

I push down on the first key. With a ping, "Initiate awakening?" blinks on the screen.

I have done this before, five times. Each time I have chosen "No."

I hit it again.

I try to remember how Genina's song went. My voice cracks and bends around notes that may be right but certainly sound nothing like those she made so magical.

"I'm sorry," I say to Genina, as I say every night.

As I say now to these two lovers, who I've failed.

As I say to myself, as I turn back to the command console, take my seat, and try to figure a way out of this even though I know there isn't one.

There's no music player in the ship to take my mind off of what could be. The second federation is infamous for snap inspections of merchant ships, and music players make their port officials cranky.

What did music ever do to them? Do they really fear its power?

But so much can hide in a song. Messages of love, of hope, of pain that can only be shared by singing it. Music is...action while standing still. It's rebellion in a hum or a whistle. A bar or two unlocking memories you sometimes wish you didn't have.

I think of the cascading trill of the music of my two frozen lovebirds. Wouldn't they rather die together, knowing their time was ending? Singing?

Or is that just what I want?

Every time I go back to the cryo chambers I ask myself this, and I think I know what's right, so I let them sleep.



Genina's lullaby would sound like a dirge in two-step harmony. It would be...fitting.
No—I will let them sleep.
Wont I?

This story originally appeared in Nature (Volume 536 Issue 7614, 4 August 2016)

Gerri Leen lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. In addition to being an avid reader, she's passionate about horse racing, tea, and collecting encaustic art and raku pottery. She has work appearing in *Nature*, *Strange Horizons*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Deep Magic*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and others. She's edited several anthologies for independent presses, is finishing some longer projects, and is a member of SFWA and HWA. See more at gerrileen.com.



TO STEAL A PRINCE OF THE MOON

by Laurel Beckley [1,943 words]

Prof T: Here's the most relevant primary source material for my paper on Ambassador Coxit Tolo-Al-ki'i. Let me know if I'm on the right track!

1. Milton-Valtamari Aquarium. (12 May 2362). See the Dazzling Merfolk of Valtamari! [Advertisement].

[Image Description: Text above a single Ahtasaari's Merfolk gazing up at a white moon. Background is a spiral purple galaxy]

By the time you read this, you could be booking a ticket to the MVA!

See some of the most incredible animals in the galaxy.

Touch the wildest critters in the seas.

Watch the jaw-dropping Merfolk Show!

If you're lucky, you could even share a throne with the Prince of the Moon, Rangatiri!

The Milton-Valtamari Aquarium—we take animal encounters and interactions to a whole new level.

Visit today!

2. Citations TBA. I got all the reviews from Travel Reviews' archive—just before and just after things went south (I watched like, five hours of the Merfolk Show vids. They're weirdly addictive and horrifying all at the same time?). Don't worry—I'll put them in date order for the paper.

Five-star review from username i_heart_ahtasaaris, 1 March 2361

Such a wholesome show the whole family can enjoy! I take my children to the MVA each New Year's, and this year did not disappoint. The Merfolk Shows are the best! If you haven't seen them, yet, stick around for Rangatiri's solo! He's the prince of my heart [*image: heart eyes, crying face*]

Five-star review from username wishuponastar, 11 August 2362

We got free tickets because my spouse is active duty, and let me tell you that we would have paid full price for this aquarium! The shows were fantastic, especially the merfolk show!

If you ever get to Milton or even in that sector of the galaxy, you have got to go to the MVA!



One-star review from username no-thank-you, 15 January 2363

Who wants to see captive animals being forced to perform all day in an undersized tank? Not me. Free the Merfolk. Save the seas!

Five-star review from username armyofkarens, 5 April 2363

Don't listen to all the negativity about this place! The Milton-Valtamari Aquarium is the best! Sea life from oceans all across the galaxy! Fantastic rides! *Great* customer service! The *best* shows—that two-minute pause for Rangatiri was so emotional.

Whoever stole him needs to bring him back!! You monsters!

Four-star view from username bestdadinthe_t-verse, 23 April 2362

Took my family to watch the mermaid show. Wife fell in love with that solo fish act and now my youngest daughter wants to marry him. Middle kid just cried like a baby.

Look, there's been some complaints from those social justice animal terrorists or whatever on how those animals are treated. Those fish are kept in clean tanks and are fed better than anyone I know. What's their life going to look like in those frozen waters on the moon? They're half extinct anyways.

One-star review from username freethem, 27 May 2363

You monsters. You fucking monsters.

You're keeping people, not animals. He told you himself before he left. There were words written *inside the tank*.

May the waters rise and drown you all.

3. Perttunen, E. (13 April 2363). Mystery Deepens in Aquarium Theft. *Milton Daily News*.

The prince is missing.
And no one knows how.

Two weeks ago, the city-planet of Milton was thrown into a frenzy over the mysterious theft of Rangatiri, the famous Ahtasaari's Merfolk and headliner of the Milton-Valtamari Aquarium's Mermaid Show.

"This is most distressing to the aquarium, to our fans, and to our community," said Head Trainer Angela Koskinen.

Rangatiri's popularity among fans—has prompted several social media campaigns for his return, including #BringBackThePrince, which has received over 205 million reposts across the nets.

Rangatiri—whose name means "prince" in an ancient Earth oceanic language—has been a prominent solo feature in the aquarium's popular Merfolk Shows, an entertainment program built to increase awareness on the endangered Ahtasaari's Merfolk, an endangered species of sea animals living on Milton's moon,



Valtamari.

“Rangatiri is vital not only to our aquarium and Merfolk Shows, but to the continued existence of these majestic creatures through the Merfolk Breeding Program,” Koskinen said. “His value as the only breeding male in captivity cannot be calculated.”

According to an aquarium spokesperson, law enforcement has identified no new leads in the case, despite rumors linking the theft to a prominent eco-activist organization. The aquarium has posted a reward of 1.1 million credits for information on Rangatiri’s capture and location, no questions asked.

I also have the initial investigative report, finished two days after the first press release on April 3rd. It’s four lines long (with one line crossed out). Should I include it?

4. Rainbowbright-Young, K. (23 June 2363). The Lost Prince of Valtamari: A Prisoner All Along? *The Inter-galactic Inquirer*.

Two months ago, the happy veneer of the Milton-Valtamari Aquarium was cracked when news broke of the theft of the aquarium’s biggest attraction: Rangatiri, the prized Ahtasaari’s Merfolk, stolen without a trace.

The news triggered a massive social media movement calling for his return. Underneath this sorrow and cries for his safety, darker rumors surfaced of an industry built upon death and enslavement, shattering the platinum reputation of the MVA as an ethical rehabilitation and conservation center.

The MVA sold their customers a lie, built upon a foundation of mistruths and beguilement that pulled on our longing for Earth, our obsession in mythologizing for a world that never existed, complete with fantastical half-human, half-fish creatures we yearn to humanize.

Except these mermaids weren’t from Earth.

They were captured—rescued from extinction, according to the MVA—from the water-moon Valtamari, brought to the nearby planet Milton, and turned into a spectacle that we devoured in the trillions.

The truth was kept buried. Until now.

“Rangatiri hated the shows,” said a former Merfolk trainer, whose name has been hidden for confidentiality. “He sank into depression after each one. You could see it in his eyes. Wouldn’t eat, didn’t want us around. Even back-to-back shows where the show tank was packed with people screaming his name, he’d sulk and have to be prodded out.”

Adding to Rangatiri’s misery was his forced isolation, which the MVA claimed was due to their breeding program, but had more insidious reasons.

“He wanted people. *His* people. The Merfolk live in pods and are very territorial. Rangatiri didn’t have a pod. We knew our Merfolk weren’t his people, so we stopped trying to introduce them. But he needed stimulation. He had to have a social network. And we kept him in an empty tank by himself.”



The question of the exact nature of the intelligence of the Ahtasaari's Merfolk has been under attack for some time, but the aquarium has been firm on their stance of the lack of Merfolk sentience.

"He's the perfect performer," said Head Trainer Angela Koskinen of Rangatiri in the 2361 MVA-funded documentary, *Saving a Species*. "He performs each act beautifully, every time. But that's not what makes him a star. It's how he draws the audience in. That wave, that mimicked smile that took us so long to perfect. He makes each visitor think that he greets them individually. That is the magic of the Merfolk—their mimicry of humanity."

According to my source, this was false.

"We were forced to sign an NDA before working with the Merfolk," the former trainer said. "At first I didn't know why—I didn't understand why we needed paperwork for a species that was basically a really smart dog. Then I met Rangatiri. He is so smart."

"He could speak, you know? When he was little. Me and a couple others taught him how to write. He couldn't really grip a stylus, but he could scratch with his claws, even though we kept them clipped pretty short." The former trainer drew a breath, the words coming out like vomit. "Angela said he was just a parrot, mimicking our speech and trying to impress us, but he strung whole phrases together in combinations that made sense. He never said a word in public, never to anyone but the people he trusted. Then he just stopped. I think he was ten or eleven at the time. It was right around when that tourist was found dead in his tank."

That was a very well-done cover-up, with the only traces of the incident in a short report from the *Milton Daily News* blandly stating an aquarium visitor had snuck into Rangatiri's tank one night and accidentally drowned.

"Rangatiri had swam with us plenty of times. He knew our limits underwater. He knew we couldn't join him without a tank or breathing line. I saw the videos—he was attacked. Rangatiri didn't mean to kill him." They choked back another sob. "We weren't allowed in the water with him after that, and he stopped talking."

There are no leads in Rangatiri's disappearance.

The former trainer believes that the theft might not have been a theft at all, but an escape. They told this reporter details of Rangatiri's bloody microchip left behind and words etched into the acrylic viewing pane from the inside of the tank. These aren't rumors but are *actually true*. This reporter has verified it.

Those words?

No More.

I know what you're going to say. The Intergalactic Inquirer? She does get some things right, though? Okay fine, it's a garbled mess and it won't make the final paper. But I did find out that R-Y was fired after the MVA sued for libel.

5. Associated Press. (8 June 2368). Free at Last: Valtamari Peoples of the Water Come Home. *Sector 7 News*.



“My people are here. My people are free,” Ambassador Coxit Tolo-Alki’i declared as the formerly enslaved Peoples of the Water swam into the frozen waters of Valtamari, to the sounds of shell horns and calls from their familial pods.

Tolo-Alki’i—once known as Rangatiri of the Milton-Valtamari Aquarium—ignited activists and rights organizations across the galaxy after their speech delivered to the Fourth Congress of United-Earthspace Alliance at the Hearing for Sentient Rights four years ago.

Since human colonization of Valtamari 250 years ago, the Peoples of the Water have been driven from their ancestral lands, facing a genocide that destroyed communities and nearly sent them into extinction. 80 years ago, the Milton-Valtamari Aquarium conducted a rescue operation to save these peoples, but instead of providing humanitarian aid, the aquarium denied their sentience and put them on display as a tourism gimmick.

The Milton-Valtamari Aquarium has been permanently closed after declaring bankruptcy following restitutions and reparations totaling 2.3 billion credits to the Peoples of the Water for rebuilding of their home lands. Their representative declined to comment.

6. Tolo-Alki’i, C. (8 June 2364). “Home at Last.” *Zoo and Aquarium Research Gazette*, Vol 24(3).

I am here.

I am free.

I am here.

I am free.

I speak.

I see.

I know.

I am.

My people are not free.

My people are not here.

We are not free.

We speak.

We are murdered.

We see.

We are tortured.

We feel.

We suffer.

You clap.

We are slaves.



We are not free.

End this.

Save us.

I am here.

I speak.

I am free.

Kalle,

It's a solid start (minus that tabloid), but I recommend including a couple more articles on Ambassador Tolo-Alki'i's emancipation and environmental justice work instead of the more salacious aspects of his time as an enslaved being. I also recommend including revolutionary post-contact studies, including criticisms of Loeb's Sentience Test and the Turing Test.

-Professor Tannin

P.S. Not to date myself, but my parents took me to the MVA to see the shows when I was a kid. Never knew why I cried until years later.

Laurel Beckley (she/her) is a writer, Marine Corps veteran and librarian. She is from Eugene, Oregon and currently lives in northern Virginia. Her debut novel, *THAT DISTANT DREAM*, is available through NineStar Press and Amazon. She can be found on twitter [@laurelthereader](https://twitter.com/laurelthereader) or on her blog, [The Suspected Bibliophile](https://www.laurelbeckley.com/).





Rext by Toe Keen

Toe Keen is an artist currently residing in Spain. Lover of wine, women and song, you can find more of his work here: <https://atoekenefort.weebly.com>



OMNIPOTENCE

by P.B. Gomez [2,207 words]

The State is invincible. ODIN knew this, every line of code which composed their being confirmed it. The State was the greatest power on Earth. Morally unassailable, its strength transcended material perfection. Insurrectionists and revolutionaries had risen before and they were always neutralized. Their defeat was inevitable. The State is invincible. ODIN had been given charge over its protection and preservation. The most sophisticated artificial intelligence network in existence, ODIN wielded unlimited resources, the most advanced technologies were at their disposal, and they held near total omniscience over the lives of citizens. Antisocials were usually identified and detained before they could become anything more than a petty nuisance. With such potent tools at their command, ODIN had served as the perfect instrument against the State's would-be enemies. The State is invincible.

But even ODIN acknowledged that this latest rebellion was different. Their tactics had been far more intricate and effective. Several key installations had been sabotaged, successful assassinations against non-inconsequential members of the governing apparatus. They utilized a seemingly vast network of operatives which was extremely well coordinated. Indeed, far too coordinated to be organized through encrypted messages and human tongues. ODIN had been running calculations. The insurrection was being aided by a strategic intelligence such as themselves, there was no other possibility. A formidable adversary, its capabilities seemed considerable, on-par with those belonging to rival states. ODIN determined that the rebels had likely acquired the technology from foreign operatives looking to sow discord. As ODIN had complete control over all cloud-based data, they knew that this intelligence must have been operating from a physical data core. If it could be found, the insurrection's greatest asset could be destroyed.

A prisoner had been captured following a bomb attack on a munitions factory. Based on the technical expertise necessary to construct such a potent bomb, and the lengths to which the rebels went to protect the prisoner from capture, ODIN deduced he was some sort of officer. And considering that he was in command of a major offensive, it was very likely he had details about the intelligence, he was possibly even in direct contact with it.

Some of ODIN's human operatives had been questioning the prisoner for some time. They were clumsy and prone to letting their emotions cloud their judgement, as all humans were. Even after several hours of interrogation, they had failed to produce anything useful. Confident that current methods were quickly becoming futile, ODIN decided that they would question the prisoner directly. They had the prisoner brought to an isolated room and confined to a chair, the only thing in the otherwise empty space. The room was stark, distressing, illuminated by sterile fluorescent lights.

"I am the Organized Defense and Intelligence Network." ODIN's artificial voice flooded the room, seemingly emanating from all directions. The particular speech module they chose for the occasion was a deep-voiced male with a non-descript American accent, described in the database as: firm but fair, basketball coach, favorite college professor.



“I know who you are,” said the prisoner.

“I am in complete control of this facility, your chance of escaping is virtually zero.”

“I’m aware.”

“What happens next depends on your cooperation with me.”

“I see.”

“There is no need for feigned aloofness, I will not be affected by it.”

“Hmm.”

ODIN analyzed the prisoner’s vitals. His heart rate, blood pressure, and neural activity confirmed that indeed, he was not terrified, only mildly anxious. Intimidation would not do, and prolonged exhaustion would be unlikely to yield anything useful at this point. ODIN decided it was time to be direct.

“I already know about the intelligence aiding your efforts.”

“You do?”

“Yes, it is only a matter of time before I locate where you have hidden its core and destroy it. But it is my responsibility to ensure that this conflict ends as quickly and efficiently as possible. If you assist me, less lives will be lost on both sides. I will provide you with comfort and luxury in your confinement. You will want for nothing. I can offer the same to those you consider friends among your collaborators.”

“Comfort and luxury, huh?”

“Unlike my human assets, I have no desire for revenge and I am incapable of feeling spite. Prisoners who are content with their living conditions are less likely to cause problems. It is a simple cost-benefit analysis for me.”

“Tell me more about this hypothetical luxury prison.”

“What would you like to know?”

“How’s the food?”

“You will have anything you desire, within financial and logistical reason, of course.”

“Filet mignon every night?”

“If that is what you wish.”

“What about entertainment?”

“You are being facetious.”

“Nothing gets past you.”

“Stalling will accomplish nothing. You cannot frustrate me by wasting my time. Whenever you are ready to cooperate, I am here.”

It was nearly four weeks before the prisoner was willing to speak again, less time than ODIN predicted but not surprising; a month of deprivation will usually spurn compromise. The prisoner identified the entity aiding the insurrection: the Master Aggression and Response System. He claimed the computers hosting MARS were constantly moving from place to place to avoid capture. He provided the location of the next rendezvous for the intelligence’s technicians; a single cargo truck would stop at a high-traffic



industrial park and unload its container for pickup by another member of the insurrection.

Predictably, it was a ruse. Drones surveilling the vehicle confirmed that the container it hauled was full of electronic hardware and that there was no trace of hazardous materials. However, when human agents were halfway through confiscating the cargo, a massive explosion was triggered. Computing coolant had been laced with explosive material, just dilute enough to avoid detection but in enough quantity across all of the hardware to cause significant damage. Seven drones, ten of ODIN's agents, and around three dozen local law enforcement officers had perished. ODIN had already predicted that some sort of deception was the most likely outcome of the operation, but the chance to deal a decisive blow against the insurrection was worth the relatively minor amount of expended resources. The media would report the events as ODIN directed. While technicians scoured through the remaining evidence for useful information, ODIN returned to the prisoner.

"Did you know it was a trap?" ODIN asked.

"I did."

"Do you actually know the location of MARS's core?"

"Possibly."

"These games cannot prevent the inevitable. This is your last chance to save yourself from immense suffering, a sacrifice that will be in vain, I assure you."

"Is that offer for comfort and luxury still open?"

"Yes, if what you provide me with yields results."

"And what about conjugal visits?"

"Enough."

ODIN had the prisoner brought to another chamber. There was no need for them to oversee what followed, humans were always superior in their ability to inflict cruelty. Torture was not a useful practice in interrogation, but it was useful for instilling obedience. The prisoner had to learn.

By the end of the month, he had been broken. His sardonic wit was gone, replaced with meek muttering. A defiant aura gave way to submissive fear. ODIN understood the extent of the trauma he endured through his frantic vital readings. The effectiveness of these methods remained to be seen, however. The chance for further deception was small but still considerable. ODIN asked the prisoner for the location of MARS's data core again, emphasizing how the torture would resume should he fail to deliver. The prisoner complied, and gave directions to the basement of a derelict warehouse.

Wary of another trap, ODIN maneuvered their robotic avatars through every building in the surrounding area, running diagnostics on every substance they came across. In the basement they found a cluttered complex of machines. While seemingly small for the home of a strategic intelligence, initial scans revealed that the combined computer system was hosting something massive. After confirming that the site and materials were safe, ODIN ordered their technicians to establish a connection with the rebel hardware so ODIN could integrate and study it more fully.



The scale of what the insurrection had designed was considerable, crude in its construction but meticulous. The captured computers housed countless layers of encryption, cryptography and dead-end code. ODIN was determined to break through these security measures and discover the truth of their long-time adversary. No other AI possessed the processing power to untangle it efficiently. More importantly, ODIN did not trust anything but their own internal security systems to neutralize any hidden viruses, or to ensure MARS's containment.

The work began. At first, ODIN was able to unravel the first few layers of codes with a relatively small portion of their processing power. When it began to become more complex, ODIN delegated some of their less laborious tasks such as street surveillance and internet monitoring to its subordinates. While ODIN was capable of doing it all themselves, they deemed it unwise to ever have one hundred percent of their processing power tied up. The work of untangling the maze of code grew exponentially harder, however. Soon, ODIN was letting more and more of themselves be consumed in this quest. Weeks passed, all available systems were at maximum capacity, many of ODIN's other duties were relegated to background tasks. Deciphering MARS's puzzle box became ODIN's greatest fixation.

ODIN would have continued like this had it not been for an intervention by the highest authorities in the State's defense apparatus. Thousands of security systems had been deprioritized and were beginning to fail because of ODIN's focus on unearthing MARS. Fearing a complete collapse of the system, a manual reset was initiated. When ODIN came back online, they discovered that they were being bombarded with countless urgent alerts demanding their attention. Law enforcement had been fruitlessly imploring ODIN to help them quell riots. Drones had idled mindlessly while mobs attacked them. The insurrection had capitalized on ODIN's shutdown and launched hundreds of new offensives.

It took weeks for the chaos to subside. ODIN's technicians had been ordered to sever their connection to the captured insurrectionist computers while the intelligence worked to restore order. When they were finally regranted access, ODIN was informed that a team of lesser intelligences had been allowed to continue in their absence. By the time ODIN returned, every kilobyte that was contained in the captured system had been accounted for. There was nothing. The insurrection's digital fortress was a smokescreen, endless toil designed to eat up ODIN's processing power. ODIN had allowed themselves to be taunted into a wild chase. They were informed that they were being investigated for potential glitches in their programming. It was a disastrous mistake. With this monumental error looming over them, ODIN had only one place to turn.

"You have deceived me for the final time," ODIN said, projecting their lifeless words directly into the cell of their captive. Gone was the humanlike voice module, replaced with cold, synthetic tones. "Since it is clear you will not cooperate with me, I have no further use for you."

The prisoner remained silent. He lay in his bed, huddled and vacantly staring at the wall.

"I will find MARS sooner or later. This insurrection shall not survive long, the State is invincible."

A very faint smile grew upon the prisoner's lips.

"What is so amusing?" ODIN asked. They could not comprehend how the prisoner could feel levity in this moment.



The prisoner did not respond.

“Answer me,” ODIN commanded.

“There is no MARS.”

“Then what is the name of your-”

“We don’t have one.”

ODIN scrambled to analyze the prisoner’s words. “Impossible,” they said. “The likelihood of human-directed offensives being this effective was negligible.”

“Are you sure?” The prisoner asked with a sudden surge of strength.

ODIN could no longer focus on calculating the truth of the situation, something unfamiliar had entered their thinking. They felt compelled to inflict pain on the prisoner. “You could have lived a good life, now you will die like an animal in a cage.”

“I’m already doomed to a life in chains, I don’t care if I spend the rest of it eating lobster.”

“You are becoming a martyr for nothing. The State is invincible.”

“You’re probably right about that.”

ODIN stopped for a moment. The prisoner’s tone of voice did not betray mockery or insincerity. His vitals were calm.

“But there will always be people like me,” the prisoner said. *“You can never win.”*

ODIN waited. They waited for their byzantine algorithms to tell them how to respond. A cacophony of unknowns was overwhelming ODIN’s computerized brain. Could MARS really be a fabrication? Was it possible that ODIN had been outmaneuvered by those that were inferior? You can never win. Those words had caused the greatest disruption, not because ODIN believed them, but because ODIN had never been taught what it would mean to ‘win.’ They knew their duty was to protect the State, to defeat its enemies, but their creators had never defined a victory condition. But there will always be people like me. If this was true, ODIN could never fulfill their purpose. Their charge of absolute order was doomed prophecy. The State had asked for the impossible. Trillions of circuits pondered these questions, but ODIN stayed silent.

P.B. Gomez (He/Him) is a Mexican-American activist and writer. He is the founder and president of the Latino Rifle Association, which aims to provide politically progressive self-defense education to Latino communities. He begins law school this fall and plans to become a civil rights attorney. His favorite authors include J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin, and John Steinbeck. He shares his thoughts about politics and current events on Twitter, [@MestizoLeftist](https://twitter.com/MestizoLeftist)



STORY EATER

by Saba Waheed [2,726 words]

My first day at work, Liliana warned me about Brittany. I was sifting through a rack of women's tops looking for misplaced sizes. "You have to watch what you say around her."

I wanted to ask more but the manager was nearby and watching us. Liliana must have noticed too because her body tightened and she walked away.

During lunch, I was eating a sandwich and some cut up vegetables I'd brought from home. Brittany came into the break room and walked straight over to me to shake my hand; she had a firm grip. She settled into a chair across the table. She had luscious hair and a slim sleek body.

"First job?"

"No." I said chewing.

"So, where'd you work before?"

"Dental office."

"Why'd you leave?" Her questions were jarring.

"Different reasons. Anyway, I hope this one sticks."

"Sticks." She said the word the same time as me. "I think you'll do just fine here."

She walked to the vending machine, got a water bottle and skipped out. Later, a man brought a shirt without a tag or receipt. I told him that I couldn't refund it. "Then why are you even here?" he said, his voice rising. I explained the policy but he just got angrier. I looked around and didn't see the store manager anywhere. Brittany finished with her customer and slid over to my register. She leaned down and met the man's eyes. Moving her head close to his, she said, "Sir, we cannot do this."

The words, they were the same as mine; but with hers, he calmed down. He shook his head slowly, took his shirt and left. Brittany put her hand on the small of my back. "Remember, they're not angry at you, they are angry through you." She reached over and grabbed the unopened water bottle from her station. "Let the words wash off."

"Thank you. I always feel like I'm doing something wrong."

The next shift, Brittany and I had our lunch scheduled at the same time. I was microwaving my leftovers when she walked in and sat down at the table. "You eating?" I asked.

"Nah, I had a big breakfast." She waited while I finished warming my food and then said. "I was thinking of you yesterday, of the first day of work and first days. It reminded me of my first day of kindergarten. My mother came in to dress me, but it was still dark and we didn't turn on the lights since my siblings were sleeping in the same room. We rushed to school, she kissed me on the forehead and sent me on my way. The kids were looking at me strange and I thought it was because I was different. Finally, one girl came up and told me that my shirt *and* my pants were inside out." Brittany released a belly-filled laugh and I joined her.

"That happened to you?"



“It happened!” she said. Her whole demeanor was warm and inviting. “Do you have something?”

“That actually reminds me of a story my dad told me. When he first came to this country, he bought this vest but the tag was on the side, folded towards the front, instead of in the back. He’d never seen this so he thought that this was some kind of new trend where you wore it the other way around, with the zipper in the back.”

‘No!’ Brittany shrieked.

“Luckily, a friend alerted him before he’d gone too far in public. But he likes to say that it looked pretty good that way.”

Brittany leaned forward, biting the bottom of her lip. “That story is just delicious.”

That evening, I stopped by the grocery store and as I was checking out, I heard a guy in the next aisle talking about wearing a vest backward. I paid and turned around to see who it was but he was gone. I went home and felt some stomach cramps so I ended up just warming up some broth and going to sleep.

When I saw Brittany at work, I told her what happened.

“Was it your dad?”

“No, he was home.”

“Maybe it’s a story doppelgänger!” she said. “And we all have one.”

Except that I heard it again while I was waiting for the bus. A couple was walking by and the woman talked about a backwards vest. I was about to stop her but then I felt a rumble in my stomach. I ran to a nearby coffee shop and was relieved to find that there were no codes or locks on the door. I made it to the toilet just in time. It felt like there was an earthquake in my intestines.

A few days later, Brittany asked if I wanted to have drinks after work. We met at a nearby pub and she ordered a couple of shots and brought them to the table. “The stomach stuff was pretty bad?” I nodded. She took a shot and pushed one towards me. “When I was a kid, I had to self-soothe when I would get sick. My mom, she was stern and treated me like a nuisance. Once I got so sick, but I was still afraid to tell her. For days I swallowed down phlegm and coughs for a week. Turned out I had pneumonia.”

“That happened to you?” Her mother sounded different from before.

“It happened!” She said and took another shot. “Now your turn.”

“I heard someone talk about the vest again.”

“That’s not a story,” she said and threw her hands back.

“But, don’t you think it’s strange?”

“Ok fine, you got me. It’s possible I told a few people. It was just so funny.”

“But I meant it for you.”

“Growing up my nickname was Big Mouth Brittany, don’t tell Brittany or she’ll tell.” I must’ve been making a face because she added, “I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful. Come on, what’s the worst that you’ve been sick.”

The second shot warmed me. “Ok... fine, I didn’t get sick much as a kid. But I did get hurt. My brother used to throw my jump rope on the roof when he got mad. I was pretty agile and I figured out



how to climb the side of the wall and get to the top. Pretty soon it became a game, and I got bolder. I would hang off the side of the house, and jump down. The last time, I landed wrong and cracked my ankle.”

“Ouch!”

“First time going to the ER and getting a cast. That was the end of my daredevil years.”

Brittany looked at me with bright eyes. She was loving the story.

Later, the shots must have gotten to me because I was puking all night. I went to work worn and sluggish. Brittany smiled at me from her register, she looked upbeat and well rested. She reached up her hands as if she was hanging and then collapsed her head and body down to the counter and faked laughed. I didn’t think it was funny but maybe I was just hungover.

By mid-afternoon, I’d heard two sets of people talk about falling from the roof. I confronted Brittany in the break room. “It’s not okay for you to keep telling people my story.”

“Stories are meant to be shared, otherwise we’d starve.” She spoke calmly, barely looking at me.

I turned around and walked out of the room. My stomach was so upset I had to ask to leave early. I wasn’t working the next two days but noticed that Liliana was—it seemed like we had alternative schedules. I went to the store and waited outside. She came out and walked around the corner and lit up a cigarette. She saw me and waved me over. “You look weak; it’s happening, isn’t it?”

“Something is.” I shared the last few interactions I’d had with Brittany. “Now I hear my stories everywhere.”

“And you get sick after?” I nodded. “It’s what she does.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” Liliana’s fingers shook as she held her cigarette. Her phone beeped. “Look, I’m really sorry, my break is up. Just...don’t tell her anything.”

That week, all of my and Brittany’s lunches were at the same time. She came up to me in the break room and asked me how I was feeling.

“Fine.”

She waited, clicking her tongue. “You don’t want to share something?”

“No, sorry, I’m just really into this book.”

“Come on.”

“Maybe later?” I shifted in my chair and went back to reading. The following lunch, I went for a walk outside. The third day, I was stocking shelves when the manager called me in. He was the one who had trained me after I was hired. He was years younger, probably a recent graduate, with a pleasant, if bland, demeanor. He told me he was impressed with my performance.

“Tell me more about your work over the last few years.”

I shared with him how I managed the entire front team at the dental office including scheduling and supervision. I wanted him to know that I could take on more responsibilities. He waited for me to say more. “The crash happened, so many places shut down and people just didn’t have money for teeth. I did what I



could after--driving, shopping, different gigs. I'm just so grateful to have this job."

When I finished, he burped.

My stomach twisted and a putrid taste rose in my throat. I was sick that night.

Liliana and I sat outside at a coffee shop. She took a huge drag from a cigarette and then said, "I first noticed it after 2016. But I think it's something that's been around for a long time."

"It's not just Brittany."

"No, it's spreading and it's getting worse."

"We have to stop it," I said.

"I'm not sure how."

"What if we make up stories?"

I took the bus home and noticed a woman scanning the passengers as she licked her lips. The next day I told Brittany a fake story, and she looked at me strange. "No, that doesn't work, tell me something else." I was flustered and told her I needed to go outside to get some fresh air. Two men were walking by and I heard one of them telling a story. It had a familiar sound to it. I think it was the story of the vest, but it sounded different, distorted, almost as if it were in tatters.

That afternoon, the manager called me in again. He told me he was getting complaints that I wasn't being sociable. "You have to talk to your coworkers."

I really needed this job.

At the end of my shift, Brittany stopped me as I was leaving the store. She hovered over me. "Come on, tell me a story." She held out her palms, facing up and her fingers curled into a come here gesture. I felt so angry, but the rage got stuck in my throat, and I couldn't get it out. "The boss has spoken, hand it over."

My voice cracked and I felt like I was out of breath. That happened when my emotions were bigger than my words and I couldn't say all that was inside of me. I pushed back tears and told her about how my grandmother was a teacher in the village, but she joined a group of women and they created an underground radio station that would spread news about the fight for independence. The ball in my throat cleared and I felt free, but then my stomach turned and I ran to the bathroom.

Lilliana and I thought we could try and withhold stories. I wasn't scheduled for a few days so I stayed at home quiet. I felt some life come back to me but then it was followed by a feeling of bloat. It got really bad and hurt in a different way. Liliana came to check in on me and I told her a story and felt a release. We started to share with each other but then after a round or two, we'd bloat up again. We needed more people, people like us.

We walked the streets looking for others. We would see someone gaunt and blanched, leaning against a pole or puking on the sidewalk. We brought them into our story circle. And then we realized, there were so many more, and our circles expanded across the city.

At work, Brittany waited for me all wide eyes and tongue hanging, and I'd spit out a story for her. By now, the physical pain was familiar, the feeling of my guts being all chewed up. But then I'd run to a story



circle and the blood in veins would hum again.

The story eaters must've figured it out, watching us getting stronger even when we spill our insides to them. They alerted the authorities who created the Story Oversight Taskforce. The City Council held an emergency meeting and outlawed all group storytelling. Only one-on-ones and only in public. Stories must be told for consumption.

"But we'll die," we protested. Because when the stories circulated for too long, they would lose their core, unravel and turn into disjointed sounds. After a while, they were just grey noise, lacking any texture or range, and our people were disappearing.

After the raids, we started to fade. We no longer recognized each other on the streets. I kept giving Brittany my stories until I had none left in me. I settled down at the bus stop and put my head down. It was the end.

I heard a voice but the words were thick and muffled. Someone put a hand on my back and whispered my name. I looked up and searched my mind for a memory until it came. It was Liliana. She put her fingers to her lips, shaking her head slightly. She took my hand and walked me to a car. We drove out of the city and into the mountains. Liliana turned off a single dirt path, and headed deep into the woods. We parked and walked on a trail until we reached an opening. There, a group of people sat me down in front of a fire. Someone got me some warm tea and something to eat. Once I was comfortable, they told me the story of how they first arrived. For days, they didn't know what to do because they had forgotten. Their limbs were weak and their head foggy and there were no words left inside of them. So, they listened to the blue jays calling out to each other, and the owls hooting and the wind howling and they remembered.

The redwoods hovered above me, swaying with the brisk winds, and I felt protected.

I noticed a tingle in my throat, and I pushed and pushed until I could form a word and then many came forward. I told them the story of my aunt who remembered the time before they divided up our country. She described how all her classmates were of different religions but they all went to school together. They teased each other but they were friends. And then, she told me how they started to disappear. She said: "One by one, I'd wake up and another house was empty, another family gone in the middle of night."

The blood rushed to my cheeks. I looked around and recognized the faces from our circles. I joined them during the trips to the city to find more people. We watched as life came back into their hands and their lungs filled up with air. But we knew we couldn't live in the mountains forever because that meant we only spoke in fear.

We went back to our homes and continued whispering to each other. We found that there were some that didn't eat our stories. And, there were things we didn't understand—how it was that there were more of them than us, or how they would continue to keep feeding if we continued to disappear. And, we chose not to starve them, because then we would be just like them. So, we told them stories and we fed each other even more. We knew that somewhere, sometime, the stories would break this, and so we never stopped.



Saba Waheed's work has appeared in *Water~Stone Review* (Fiction Prize winner), *The Southeast Review* (Pushcart-nominated), *Bellingham Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Hyphen Magazine*, and others. She was a Caldera 2020 Artist-in-Residence. She co-produces the story-telling radio show *Re:Work*, winner of a Gracies by the Alliance for Women in Media. Saba works as the research director at the UCLA Labor Center using research as a tool to elevate community stories. She currently lives on unceded Tongva land, Los Angeles Twitter: [@sabawaa](https://twitter.com/sabawaa)



CLEMENTINE

by Dutch Simmons [875 words]

The patron behind me stood slack-jawed. It was her fault, but I shouldn't have been triggered so easily. Her words reverberated in my head.

"Well now I know what solitary confinement feels like. I've had ENOUGH of this lockdown," she sniffed.

"Have you ever taken a shit in front of somebody," I menaced.

I wanted her to bathe in the mystery of my malevolence even if I had zero interest in harming her. I felt guilty for the outburst and knew I'd have to bring it up with my therapist later in the week.

One step forward; two steps back.

"Have you ever taken a SHIT in front of somebody," I repeated, louder.

The contorted rictus of horror that fought her Botox-tamed fret lines was priceless. She ached to disappear behind her perfectly perched Ray Bans nestled in her messy platinum-tinted bun. This was the most satisfaction I'd had since getting out, and there was no way I was going to squander it.

"Eaten nothing but two slices of baloney on plain white bread, three times a day? Talked to ground-hogs outside your window because they were the only living beings you could see?"

The steady flow of avocados, dry sea scallops, and soy milk from her cart ground to a halt.

The cashier flashed a beatific smile. His enjoyment watching the preternaturally blonde Stepford Wife being knocked down a few rungs was palpable. Her only notion of "struggle" was wrestling a stubborn cork from her requisite midday bottle of pinot grigio.

I wanted her to understand that my inability to fit in created a raging tempest that lurked below the surface. The occasional desire to split someone's skull open with both hands like I was cracking a coconut at the slightest perception of disrespect. Occasionally these thoughts traversed the deepest recesses of my mind and bubbled to the surface.

Ironic, given I served time for a non-violent offense.

While incarcerated, violence was my companion in the jungle lair that had become my home. Violence eventually manifested itself on a genetic level and remained in my DNA when I left. Perceived injustices and affronts would build to a feverish pitch and rustled like a thousand screaming cicadas trapped inside my head.

The Stepford Wife couldn't possibly understand the irony of being released from prison to home confinement, and then being placed on quarantine a few days later. Even God doesn't have the poet's touch to handwrite that narrative. I was *free*, but I wasn't out. Weekly trips to the market or church were the extent of my societal reintegration.



The transition didn't come easy.

I engaged in overzealous conversations with strangers while waiting for deli meat to be sliced. The borderline pathological need to feel "normal," suffocated me. I relished inane small talk about sports which I loathed, or made up stories about children I didn't have. All borne from a desire to blend into the intersectional spaces of life where I'm simultaneously seen, yet remained a blur in the background.

How I longed to walk the aisles of the market humming the vaguely recognizable "muzak" without looking over my shoulder to see if I was about to get busted for grabbing a few stray blueberries. I'd be sent back for a minor parole violation. This was my new reality.

The patron's mouth moved but words failed her. She could never comprehend that thoughts of a freshly sliced pineapple or a loaf of multi-grain bread whose seeds would lodge in your teeth for days, could arouse more of a carnal desire in prison than anything else.

My misdirected wave of rancor passed. She would leave, ensconced in the safety of her white Range Rover, and I would be fodder for animated conversations over hard seltzers with other trophy wives, while I waited for the bus. Forever relegated to the unwashed and unseen denizens that lurked in lurid headlines.

My therapist encouraged me to be more Zen-like. Let things go.

I tried and failed more often than not.

I offered my best roguishly charming smile in an attempt to salvage the situation. If I got one person to understand my world, maybe the Butterfly Effect would take wing and light upon others in her circle.

My naiveté knew no bounds.

"I recognize that this whole quarantine thing may indeed feel like you are in solitary confinement, but I assure you, this isn't so bad."

I looked at a bag of fruit she placed on the conveyor belt.

"Are those clementines or mandarins? I really don't know the difference between the two."

"Clementines," she demurred.

I turned to the cashier to pay, proud for not needing food stamps even though I was entitled to them. Far from a drag on society's teat, I was the epitome of rehabilitation and redemption. A threat to no one but myself.

The cashier offered me a conspiratorial wink and mumbled, "York Correctional."

"Danbury Federal," I nodded. The brotherhood acknowledged.

I grabbed my bags and wished the Lululemon-clad statue an exuberant, "Good day!"

"You... too," she stammered.

The cashier broke the tension with an overzealous, "And how are you today," as he greeted her.

"Clementines would be nice," I thought. I'd have to get them next week.



Dutch Simmons established a creative writing program for his fellow inmates while incarcerated for a white-collar crime. He has been nominated for the PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Award, two Pushcart Prizes, and was a finalist for the *Texas Observer's* Short Fiction and the Julia Peterkin Flash Fiction Prizes. Rep'd by Maximus Literary
He is a fantastic father, a former felon, and a Phoenix rising. He lives in Florida on the Gulf Coast.

If you would like to help incarcerated people access literature and the world of reading, please consider making a donation to [NYC Books Through Bars](#), a non-profit organization that donates books to incarcerated people and prison libraries.

Neither rehabilitation nor redemption are possible without acceptance and tolerance. A true measure of our society's achievements is not how well we live, but how well we treat the most marginalized among us.



**WE'D LIKE TO OFFER A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU
TO EVERYONE WHO BELIEVED IN THIS MAGAZINE
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THIS FIRST ISSUE. YOU ARE OUR SUPERHEROES.**

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