



A Coup of Owls  
Winter 2024

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Cover Photo by Manyu Varma  
via Unsplash  
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About the Photo: Theyyam is a ritual form in Kerala, India. This particular Theyyam is one variation of ‘Pottan Theyyam’, a vivid, lively and colourful ritualistic performance which comes in the traditional art form of Theyyam. It is believed Pottan Theyyam is a manifestation of Shiva. ‘Pottan Theyyam’ is traditionally performed with a large fire, the embers of which ‘Pottan Theyyam’ will rest upon (with the people insisting/requesting him to get up). After the performance and customs, the locals may approach and speak with ‘Pottan Theyyam’ and receive his response and blessing.

Find Manyu Varma on [Unsplash](#) and [Instagram](#)

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## Foreword

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## The Odd Couple by Alastair Millar

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*A man who is not who he appears to be finds that his lover is also not what she seems.*

Alastair Millar is an archaeologist by training, a translator by trade, and a writer by choice. A Briton by birth, he has for decades lived north of Prague, Czech Republic, where he enjoys good books, bad puns, coffee and travelling. His debut flash science fiction collection, 'Mars & More', was released in September 2024. Links to his social media and previously published uncollected writing can be found at <https://linktr.ee/alastairmillar>

## Barred Owl Basin by Gail Brown

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*A mother and child speak the charred Barred Owl Basin back to life.*

Gail Brown writes paired science fiction internal journey stories and novels full of hopes and dreams. She found science fiction brings hope and light through worlds of colorful dreams. It mirrors daily life as it could be. Perhaps should be, in some ways. Worlds where disability is accepted, and people live their lives without overwork and fear.

Find Gail: [UncoveredMyths](#), [Amazon](#), [Mastodon](#)

## Sweet Poison by Toshiya Kamei

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*A woman meets her suitor...*

Toshiya Kamei (she/they) is a queer, trans Asian writer who takes inspiration from fairy tales, folklore, and mythology. Her short stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and elsewhere. Her piece "Hungry Moon" won *Apex Magazine's October 2022 Microfiction Contest*.

## A Man of Singular Taste by Ria Hill

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*At the bedside of his betrothed, Sir Arthur Holmwood has an unexpected encounter with a creature of the night.*

Ria Hill is a writer, librarian, and nonbinary horror who lives in Toronto. They spend the majority of their non-work hours maintaining their recreational spreadsheet collection and regaling their friends and loved ones with deeply worrying story pitches. They can be found online at [riahill.weebly.com](http://riahill.weebly.com) and on Bluesky, Instagram, and Threads @riawritten.

*A nightmare inducing demon rises from the depths lusting for human fears and wishing to satisfy his hunger.*

Tom Okafor is a Nigerian writer and daydreamer who bends dreams into stories. He's had his dreams published in *Apparition Literary Magazine*, *A Coup of Owls Press*, *Gnashing Teeth Publishing*, *National Flash Flood Magazine*, *Metachrosis Literary Magazine*, among others. He's nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology, The Pushcart Prize and The Caine Prize. Reach him on Twitter @tomnotes1 and catch him celebrating writers all around the world, and sharing lots of Beyoncé content!

# Foreword

Writing is a complicated profession. It's filled with ebbs and flows. Times when the words flow like wine on a perfect summer's evening, and times when they are stuck at the bottom of a deep, dark well with no way out. It's interesting, though, when the words don't flow. Or they do, but in the wrong direction. They careen and burst the banks or dam up and get stuck in the mud. Your eyes blur everything into one big mound of 'What's the point?' I ask myself then, 'What *is* the point? Why am I writing this? Why has this muse decided to get tangled in the web of my brain? Surely it would be better off in far more proficient hands than these?' But alas, no, it's stuck in my brain.

Is it any wonder the Ancient Greeks came up with the muses? Beautiful, alluring and tricky creatures that sent the humans mad (poets the maddest of all; I say that with affection, dear poets, you do work I never could). It's a strange pastime, though, typing out these moments and somehow managing to stitch them together into a story.

Reading helps. I borrow another's muse, hoping to inspire a release through the way someone else has woven their intricate narrative together. That's the joy of this magazine: I get to read lots of wonderful words from such varied and fascinating muses.

Even my hobby reflects writing. I make quilts, and the processes of novel writing and stitching together a quilt are eerily similar. Both involve trying to make things go together that don't want to. Finding patterns. A confusing middle process where all is almost lost before the final product is birthed with relief but also annoyance as everyone oohs and ahs and all you can see are the mistakes you made... or is that just me?!

The best writers (like the ones in this forest) and quilters make it look easy. That's the problem. They make it look so easy, you think, 'I could do that.' So, you sit down and find it's far more difficult to make something look easy than you could imagine. The lesson I have learned through the tangled web of teasing a muse out from my frazzled synapses is to write. Write anything. Write it badly. The first and last drafts are always filled with soul-shaking doubt. That's what words do. But you know who isn't filled with doubt? Us. Your readers. We love your words. This forest is filled with owls who adore reading and gobbling up your stories like mice. Never doubt there is a home for your muse. Just keep writing, and we, and all the owls, will keep on reading...

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# The Odd Couple

## by Alastair Millar

**Content Warnings: None.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 7 for the next story.

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As we came in breathless and laughing after walking through the snowbound city, I realised I'd never been happier. Falling into a relationship with a local hadn't been on my agenda when I moved here, but now I owed her the truth: love can't be built on lies. Surprisingly, she didn't look at me like I was mad as I explained that I was an alien visitor but smiled indulgently. Out of words, I gazed nervously into her serenity. 'Don't worry, dear,' she said gently, pulling skin away from fingers to reveal the talons beneath, 'you're not the only one.'

# Barred Owl Basin

## by Gail Brown

**Content Warnings: Dystopian.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 13 for the next story.

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Ginger stepped out of her recycled home with her toddler, Vivian. The shattered remains kept them warm and safe. Across the walkway was a greenhouse designed from old vehicle windows and warmed with solar panels. It was filled with plants and a tub of fresh water Ginger had scavenged.

Thankfully, the greenhouse worked like a terrarium. Warm sunshine pulled water vapour onto windowpanes. At night, it rained back down gently on the food crops below.

Ginger lifted her arm to peer toward the horizon. No sign of life. Neither good nor bad. She reached down to pick up her battered backpack. ‘Come, Vivian. We have time to reach Barred Owl Basin before the sun is too high in the sky.’

Vivian stuck her right thumb in her mouth. She nodded. In her left hand dangled a bundle of sticks, held together by the dried remains of kudzu vines. The vine hadn’t rotted, though it was worn nearly away. One stick arm threatened to separate from the body of the stick doll.

They walked down the dusty track. No grass, or even weeds, grew on the open plain. No rain had fallen in almost a decade. Occasionally, they saw spots of metal, plastic or glass peeking out of the ground. Almost anything that could be sold for food or clothing was long gone. Painfully bright sunshine created a hot, dry and dusty day.

There was a dream. Words and memories repeated could bring hope and life to this decimated land. Barred Owl Basin Animal and Plant Preserve would return. The terrarium greenhouse was its birthplace.

Ginger stepped into what had once been a glade of shade trees. Beautiful trees, flowers and plants had grown here. Animals had thrived. Chipmunks and squirrels had chased each other through the forest debris, watered by a pond where reeds and cattails grew tall.

Ginger pushed against long-dead vines hanging from tree skeletons. Vivian had never seen this place bloom and blossom with sound and colour, enough to make their eyes water and ears ring.

Vivian pulled away and toddled over to a tree stump laid along the trail's edge. There hadn't been enough water for mushrooms to grow on the dried bark. She placed her stick doll in a cat-sized hole at the end. Nothing came out after her.

Once, Barred Owl Basin had been alive. Today, Ginger would make it live again, if only in her memory and Vivian's imagination. She had to bring life back here. Vivian would help rebuild the failed ecosystem.

The pond in front of her stank. It was dark and dank, nearly covered in a green slime. One tiny hole remained, almost as large as Ginger's fist. The green surface didn't ripple. There wasn't even a breeze to ruffle decayed stalks of long-dead cattails along the cracked and dried mud edges.

She pulled out a ratty, tattered quilt. It had once been a colourful weave of red, yellow and brown waves, thick with a heavy padding of previous tattered quilts. Now, there were fist-sized holes through all the layers.

Ginger placed it carefully on the ground, trying to avoid stones and sticks. At least she didn't have to watch for anthills or spider holes anymore. Nearly every living creature and plant was gone from the area. No plants for food for animals. No water for plants to thrive. No rain to replenish underground reservoirs.

Vivian tumbled toward her with the stick doll in one hand and grasped more twigs in the other. 'Face.'

Ginger took the doll; its head had disconnected from its body. She would pull more dead vines to repair it as they trundled back to their home.

Vivian sprawled on her chest to listen to the story. Her legs kicked effortlessly in the air. She rubbed two red sandstones together.

Ginger smiled and glanced at the old, dead tree that still stood watch over Barred Owl Basin. She peeked back at the still and non-oxygenated pond behind her. No need to fear anything creeping out of there. She reached for the sky to begin her story. Ginger closed her eyes. As the tale began, she allowed her arms to flow with the words.

'Once upon a time, not so long ago, this land was alive. As your name implies, the land, the water and the air breathed life into all of us. As we breathed life back into our world.'

Vivian looked up at her and shaded her eyes. 'My name?'



Ginger nodded. 'The sky filled with clouds that brought life-giving rain to ease the drought.' She raised her hand to create a shadow formed like a rain cloud on the ground.

Vivian smiled and reached for the shadow, distorting it more under the blazing sun. She giggled. Her knee brushed against the stick doll. One arm fell off.

'Thunder would roll across the plains like rocks rattling in a pan.' Ginger picked up two rocks and crashed them together. Her head tilted as the crack echoed somewhere far off.

Her hands went above her head and shimmered down to demonstrate rain to a daughter who had never seen a raindrop or flowing bodies of water. 'As rain slipped to the ground, it softened the dirt.'

She patted the dry sand, leaving imprints rather like extra-large raindrops. Interestingly, the places her fingers touched were darker, as if water could be found in the ground again.

Vivian touched the darkened dirt. Some stuck to her hand. She held it up to gaze at it as if to view the world that once was. Now, that world only lived in the memories of adults, scattered among the scrub brush.

Ginger placed her hands upon the ground. The darker spots felt cooler. 'As the rain filtered into the ground, the earthworms wiggled their way up.' She shimmered her hands back to her face.

'What did earthworms eat?' Vivian made more scratches with her sandstones.

Ginger had to think about how to describe them. It had been so long since she had seen one in the wild. 'We have them in the greenhouse. I can show you sometime. They dig around our plants and aerate the soil to help plants live and provide for us.'

She leaned back. Something was odd about the sun. It wasn't shining quite so over-bright. She shook her head. Had to be her imagination. Or adjusting to being outdoors.

Ginger spread her arms wide, taking in the whole area. 'This whole basin was alive. Mites, fleas and flies on the grasses that are long dried away. Grasshoppers, crickets and dragonflies flittered about, searching for food while trying not to become food for birds and other creatures.'

Vivian put her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her hands. 'Dragonflies?'

'Beautiful creatures. Long, thin bodies with colourful or clear wings. Four wings that kept them aloft skimming around the pond.' Ginger pulled out a tattered book. She had preserved the last dragonfly she had ever found. This one had a purple body and blue on its wings.

Vivian squealed. She reached her hand out, and one of the wings fluttered from the breeze her hands created.

Ginger placed the book on the ground between them to demonstrate the animal motions. ‘The pond was alive. Fish swam in the water. Frogs croaked along the banks, eating flies and dragonflies. They’d slip right into the water with a loud plop.’

‘They ate the flies and dragonflies? They ate them all.’ Vivian scrunched her face.

‘There were plenty to go around. Without them eating the insects, animals next up the food chain would be hungry, and there wouldn’t be any fertilizer for plants to grow.’

Vivian nodded. Hunger was something she did know about.

Something plopped behind them.

Ginger glanced back at the slime-covered pond. Was it her imagination, or did the tiny hole in the algae seem larger? Were there tiny ripples in the green algae?

She moved her arms in a waving motion. ‘Cattails grew tall and waved in the gentle breeze. Their motion created tiny ripples in the pond, keeping the oxygen fresh for fish and other creatures that called it home.’

Ginger closed her eyes at the memory of a long-ago summer. She hadn’t been much older than Vivian. She had toddled up to the cattail brake. Her toes had sunk in the muddy edge, and she’d reached her hands out and parted enough stems to view the pond. There were flowers growing on the glassy surface. And a green lily pad with a frog ready to dive into the water. A dragonfly buzzed her ear. An almost forgotten memory.

Her mother had touched her shoulder and pulled her back, warning of the danger of falling into the home of so many vital living creatures and plants.

Ginger turned the book’s page. There were pictures of mighty trees, many of which had once grown in Barred Owl Basin. Along with a piece of brittle grey tree bark.

Vivian leaned closer. ‘Can I touch the bark?’

Ginger shook her head. ‘It might crumble. This wood is from a branch from the burnt tree over there. Several of its smaller limbs formed your doll.’ The doll who was now falling apart at Vivian’s side. The doll whose clothes had been used to help cook food during the long, cold winter.

‘Tell me about the trees.’ Vivian clutched her doll closer.

‘Trees grew all around the basin. In places, you couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began. Limbs up high in the sky stayed leafed out and helped protect the tiny forest floor.’ Ginger raised her arms high and drew her hands together, interlacing her fingers as the branches had once done.

Ginger closed her eyes as another memory drifted in. One of being a teen and lying on the once-new quilt that now was tattered under them. This was the one place in the basin the trees had avoided. Grass and flowers had grown here. Butterflies had flittered in and out. Lots of them. All colours and sizes.

She turned the page. There were the remains of a butterfly. ‘Butterflies like this one grew here. Or we say they did. Here against where the trees grew were bushes full of caterpillars, almost ready to turn into butterflies to amuse us as they pollinated the flowers here among the grassy ramp.’ Again, a breeze from some unknown location ruffled the pressed and dried wings of the once golden monarch.

Vivian yawned. She wiggled into a comfier spot on the tattered quilt. Her hands reached into one of the holes and pulled through a tiny rock. ‘Tell me about the birds.’

Ginger smiled. This basin had been full of birds. All kinds had lived here. A spindle-legged stork had visited the pond once. ‘We had red birds, blue birds and so many more. Sometimes, they would chase squirrels, and the squirrels chased back. They had fun.’

She glanced at the last standing tree. ‘That tree there housed a family of barred owls. They watched over the basin and protected it. Their mother was named Melona.’

Vivian kicked her legs. ‘Did they save them?’

Ginger looked away. Once, this place had been an animal sanctuary. Protected by law. The animals had stayed as long as they could. How could she tell her daughter there had been nowhere for them to go?

‘One day, they were gone. The protectors of our land. Of our family.’ Ginger turned the book’s page. There was an owl feather. The last feather she had found after Melona and her owlets flew away. ‘One day, owls will be back. And when they return, they will bring this place back to life.’

Vivian looked down at the ground. ‘Is there anything I can do to bring them back?’

‘When the land was alive, you couldn’t walk anywhere without stepping on a living creature or plant. Someday, that will be true again. Next spring, we will plant a few new bushes from the greenhouse outdoors and hope they survive.’ Ginger sighed and closed the book. The ground around them appeared less brown and dry. The spots of dirt appeared to have a fine mist upon them. The quilt appeared a little less tattered, its red and yellow more vibrant than in many years.

Vivian pulled her hand out of the quilt’s hole. ‘Will I ever see a bird or butterfly?’

Ginger gasped. She pointed to the burnt owl tree where a large brown owl sat on a limb. Was the bird real or just a trick of her imagination and memory?

The owl dropped a mouse from its beak.

The mouse fell into dried leaves and skittered toward them. Mushrooms appeared on the stump closest to Ginger.

Vivian sat up and turned to see the owl. She held out her hand to wave to it. A monarch butterfly alighted on her finger.

The child clapped in delight.

The butterfly flew off toward the pond.

A definite plop occurred behind them. And a croak.

Ginger turned around. The frog from her memory of so many decades ago nestled next to the dead cattail stalks, with a fresh shoot from the long-dead cattail brake peeking up out of the not-so-murky water.

She glanced up. There was a cloud in the sky. A chance for rain. Something she hadn't seen or felt since before Vivian was born.

Vivian touched her stick doll. The sticks transformed into a fluffy teddy bear. She squealed with delight.

The owl didn't take flight. It simply tilted its head and stared at them.

From somewhere deep in her memory, Ginger sensed the words, 'Did you call my name?'

# Sweet Poison

by Toshiya Kamei

**Content Warnings: Poisoning.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 16 for the next story.

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On your first visit, you arrive with a sweet-scented bouquet in your hand. Townspeople believe the ghosts of my ancestors haunt our Gatsby-esque brick mansion, even in the daylight, but your assured gait tells me the opulence – or the grotesqueness – of my family doesn't faze you. The realisation brings a faint smile to my lips.

‘Clarice, sweetheart,’ I blurt, almost gushing, as I take in your getup: grey pants and a white shirt. No jacket. ‘You look dashing.’

It's the first time I've seen you in men's clothing, and butterflies flutter in my stomach. In the parlour, my mother rises from her chair and greets you. When she mistakes you for a male suitor despite your decidedly feminine name, I smother a chuckle.

I steal a glance at you as I lead you down the marble hallway, passing the wall of framed family portraits. Family lore says my great aunt was poisoned with arsenic-laced chocolates. Her cravings for sweets proved fatal; I inherited her sweet tooth.

We sit at a solitary wooden table under a weeping willow in the garden. The screech of cicadas saws at my eardrums. I feel the urge to open my legs and let the air blow through the skirt of my dress as I used to do as a girl. The fragrance of your flowers wafts up my nose.

‘Is that for me?’ I ask, noting the bouquet in your lap. The bell-shaped, purple petals look fragile, like they would crumble at my touch.

‘Of course.’ Our fingers brush as you hand the flowers to me, and a little shock of electricity runs up my arm. ‘I wanted to bring you chocolates, but I changed my mind; they would have melted in the heat.’

I wonder if you know how my great-aunt died, but I can't bring myself to ask. ‘How do you know I have a sweet tooth?’



‘Who doesn’t?’ you say with a shrug.

I bury my nose in the blossoms and take a long breath. ‘They’re belladonna. They bear sweet black fruit.’

You wrinkle your nose but nod, eyes the inky gloss of belladonna berries.

‘They’re poisonous,’ I say. ‘Ladies of Renaissance Italy applied an extract of belladonna to make their eyes sparkle.’

You hold my hand and gently caress it. ‘Your eyes are already beautiful.’ Despite your words and gestures, a chill runs down my spine, but I do my best to ignore it.

‘Beautiful things can be toxic,’ I say. Alas, you’re no exception, and I remind myself that I need to take you in small doses. ‘Even so, the world needs beauty. Don’t you agree?’

You smile, but only for a moment.

Little do you know I practise mithridatism like the king of Pontus who feared being poisoned; I take non-lethal amounts of all known venoms in an effort to build up tolerance against them. It has been months, but I can still recall the dulcet taste of belladonna.

A servant crosses the garden with a tray in her hands. I pull away from you as she dips into a curtsy. She sets two glasses of lemonade on the table.

‘Would you like me to put these in a vase and bring them to your room, miss?’ the servant asks.

‘Thank you,’ I say, and I hand her the flowers.

I raise my glass, and the ice cubes clink together. I sip my drink. The lemonade is so cold it hurts my teeth. Your eyes burn into mine, and a hot flush burns my face. I hold your gaze until I give in and turn away, afraid of what my expression may reveal. The collar of my blouse feels tight.

‘Would you deem me unladylike if I took off my shoes and propped up my legs?’

‘Certainly not.’ You shake your head, bemused. Your dare is apparent, but I control myself.

‘I like being a woman, mind you, but sometimes I wish I was a man.’

‘That’s quite natural,’ you say. ‘There are many species that alter sex. Particularly fish.’

I imagine myself as a fish swimming in the rough ocean. The salty water stings my eyes and enters my mouth.

Your hand on my cheek breaks my reverie. The incessant wailing of the cicadas dulls to a background drone. The butterflies return to my stomach, and warmth pools between my thighs.

I lean in, and my forehead touches yours. I wonder if you're about to kill me. Will it be a needle in the neck? A capsule of arsenic passed from you to me when we kiss? My body tingles. You open your mouth to kiss me, tongue pushing against my teeth, and the distinct flavours of curare and hemlock flood back. Will you kill me at dinner? Will you slip something into our wine? I part my lips, moaning. Why do you feel so perfect? I want to ask you if it's normal to be so self-destructive.

I can't help deepening our kiss, and as you explore inside me, I taste the sweetest poison.

# A Man of Singular Taste

by **Ria Hill**

**Content Warnings: Dubiously consensual vampire attack, shame/repression, infidelity if you squint.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 24 for the next story.

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Tonight, I intend to visit Lucy Westenra again. Since we became betrothed, I have seen her less and less, though she assures me this is not by design. Now, of course, I understand her plight. I never doubted that her reasons were pure, but God, when I saw her prostrate on that bed, I nearly lost myself to the terror and dismay I felt in that moment.

Of course I would assist in any way I could. Of course I would give her the very blood from my veins. What else was I to do?

It has been a day or two since first I gave her blood. This morning, I contributed still more. I believe Doctor Van Helsing has concerns about my physical state. He forces the weight of the transfusions to be distributed between the several of us. I find the thought of Doctor Seward, of Quincey Morris's blood entering the veins of my beloved more disquieting than perhaps I should. It's true we all love her. There can be no woman more worthy of any man's love than Lucy. I am more lucky than most that she loves me in return.

When I arrive at Lucy's residence, I am shown upstairs at once. The horrid-smelling bouquets are pinned to each window. I understand that these were placed at the behest of Doctor Van Helsing, but I remove them and open the window for a breath of night air. There is no reason why I should not, as my supervision will keep her safe as she relaxes.

Lucy greets my entrance with a smile, light as morning mist. I take her hand and sit at her side, my back to the draft at the window.

'I can only stay a short while,' I tell her. 'The good doctors wouldn't approve if they knew I had stopped in.'

'Please don't go,' she says. 'I am always surrounded by these men, my love, and yet so solitary. Please, I need you here.' Her voice is so soft and so weak, but I am powerless to resist the yearning in it.

'All night, if you wish it, my love,' I say.

Lucy clings to my hand in a near fever. 'Please, Arthur, I am afraid I won't live long enough to see our wedding night.'

This is an exchange that has passed between us before. 'Lucy, dearest, you *will* live. We will see to it. The doctors are giving everything they have, as am I.'

Her fingers trace a tender line across the crook of my elbow, where Van Helsing last took my blood. 'I do not wish to die having only had your blood inside me.'

As I scramble for some response to this, Lucy tugs at my hand. Her grasp is light as a feather, but I can still read the direction she is trying to lead me. I feel my face flush, and my mind flusters still further. 'Lucy, darling, what would your mother say?'

I assume that talk of her mother will cool her blood, but my lady's lip begins to tremble. 'Will you not even touch me?'

Though it shames me, I feel my heart ache towards her. I recognise the yearning in her gaze. It is a perfect match for that in my own body. The others have given her blood as well, of course, but I cannot allow them a further intimacy than I myself have with my betrothed.

I allow her to guide my hand to her neckline and ghost my fingertips over her bosom. Her light gasp, the flutter of her eyes, I cannot allow the hunger that she awakens in me to flourish. I have imagined, in my private moments, a wedding night for us. I am sure she has done the same. But as soon as I've pressed my hand to her soft skin and felt her nipple marble against my palm, I find the prospect of indefinite waiting to be utterly deplorable.

'Oh, Arthur,' she murmurs.

I gently trace my hand along the curve of her, feeling the rise and fall of her breaths as they quicken, then slow. Her smile is still affixed to her face, ghost-faint, as she drifts to sleep with my hand reverently cupping her breast.

I cannot permit myself to desire her carnally until we are wed, and certainly not when she is so weak. I reluctantly draw my hand from her bodice and glance my fingers over her fevered brow. I hope she dreams of me. In the meantime, I will stay and watch her at rest for a few moments longer.

Her bedroom is nearly silent, save for the quiet lilt of nighttime insects outside. I extinguish the lamp at her bedside. I am well aware that I will not be permitted to stay the night. Before too long, her maid will be up to shoo me away. But her face has relaxed into the careless sleep of the innocent, and until bade to move, I am helpless to leave her side.

'Do not turn your head.' The voice is enough to send a chill coursing through me. It is cold and firm, not at all the warm tones I expect from Van Helsing or the soft professionalism

of Seward's voice. This voice does not belong to either of them but to a stranger. I have heard no one enter, and it sounds as if it is coming from the direction of the window.

I want to turn and look, to face the man who has intruded into the bedroom of my betrothed, but some compulsion keeps my face trained on the bed in front of me. My love has not stirred. I wonder if this man has some responsibility for her current weakened state.

'You gave this woman blood,' the voice says. It's not a question, so I offer no response. 'There is no use denying it. I can smell it on your skin.'

I hold my breath, and I listen. The voice sounds closer somehow, but I have heard no movement. There has been neither creak of window nor footfall on the floor. What I smell when I inhale is something sweet and foul, like the rot of fruit or the decay of flowers. This stranger smells of perfume failing the dead.

'Who are you?' I keep my voice soft and level so I don't betray the new fear roiling in my gut. 'I must insist you leave this house.'

'You must be the fiancé,' the stranger says. He is nearly upon us now. I hear his voice as though inches from my ear. I can nearly feel him there, and yet I cannot make my head turn. When I look to Lucy, the shadow cast from the moonlight that streams through the window is only of my own seated form. It is as if the stranger has no body at all to speak of. He is only an incorporeal voice but one of unspeakable power.

'Leave this place at once,' I say. My voice rises only slightly, and Lucy whimpers in her sleep. There is a new small wrinkle in her brow, and I ache to take her hand once more or to smooth the care from her pretty face with a caress.

'Your blood is quite singular, Mr Holmwood,' the voice says. 'I could scent it individually in the amalgam I most recently claimed from your bride.'

I stand at once, nearly toppling my chair. If it's true what he's saying, if he has been in here – this spectre, this shadow without a shadow – taking blood from my love's veins... I must see him, this stranger. I try to turn my face to him once more, but my head remains locked forwards on my shoulders.

The stranger behind me tsks. 'Now, now, Mr Holmwood, I am offering you something that might be of interest to you and may be in the best interest of your dear lady. Will you listen?'

My fists clench uselessly at my sides. 'What could you possibly offer me?'

'A night of uninterrupted sleep for your future bride,' the spectre says. 'I shall not touch her this night.'



Dear Lucy's face has come to rest once more. She is still sickly pale, but I cannot imagine permitting this stranger to touch her now or ever again.

'And what are your demands?' I ask. I am sure that he will ask for something dreadful or impossible. I also know that there is nothing I would not do for the woman who lies before me now. For Lucy, I would move Heaven and Earth.

'I only ask that for tonight, you take her place.'

When I try to speak, I find that my mouth has gone suddenly dry. What I must have meant to say when I opened my mouth is lost to me. He is asking for my blood. I would, of course, give every drop in my veins to save my poor Lucy, as I am certain he knows. But offering it to her and providing it to this monster are entirely different matters.

'And how are they different, Mr Holmwood?' the stranger asks.

His voice has a cold grip on my heart. I'm sure I said nothing aloud.

'Why does it matter if I take the blood from your veins directly?' The voice is somehow nearer still, as if the deep tones are speaking from the apex of my spine, just below my skull, and reverberating through my bones. 'Whatever blood you provide for your sweetheart will find its way to me before too long.'

My cold fear turns to hot rage. Now, I shove against whatever force holds my head forwards. I manage only a rattling glance at the figure behind me before the force of my return to face the bed sends me gasping to my knees. I have seen him, now, but only briefly. Only barely have I seen this man. He is as if a shadow was cut from the room. He is a negative space. The heat of my anger still burns, but under something far more reserved.

I have to tell Doctor Van Helsing. But more importantly, I cannot let him near Lucy. Not ever again. If I am to protect her, to live long enough to speak to the good doctor in the morning, what choice do I have but to do what this mad stranger commands?

'I will take her place,' I say. I tell myself that the softness of my voice is a decision I have made, out of consideration for Lucy's sleep. I know that this is a damned lie, but I do my best to let myself believe it.

'Remove your shirt collar.'

This order is different from the one that bade me keep my eyes forwards. I wait for my body to move on its own, as if in a compulsion or a trance, but it does not. This is a request, as if I can rescind my consent any time I wish it.

God, this creature must know I can do no such thing.

I unknot my tie and slip the fabric from around my collar, hanging it over the arm of the chair I so recently sat on. I know there is a small part of me that is waiting for rescue,

hoping that some chambermaid will come in to check on her lady's honour. I don't even think I mind that she may find me in a position of terror. I only mind that any time she saves me in my desire to summon Van Helsing to this place is time that can be put toward saving my love's life.

My fingers trip on the buttonholes at my throat, struggling with the stud that holds my collar in place. I feel it open and slip from my shoulders, dangling in the back. When I reach to retrieve it, a cold hand brushes mine aside.

I feel the rhythm surge in my chest as long and dextrous fingers, cold as ice and reeking of earth, carefully lift the collar away and place it on the seat of my chair. My throat is exposed, and I recall with vicious clarity the dark red spots on Lucy's throat that so mystified Seward and Van Helsing. These same wounds which, I have no doubt, this devil means to replicate on my own body.

The stranger's fingers caress the side of my neck, featherlight, but it is as if I can feel their intent tilting my head to one side. At once, I am looking upon my lady in parallel. I had hoped to wake to this image for years to come, face to face with Lucy Westenra. As claw-like fingernails rake the line of my throat, I fear I will not live to see her face past this very night.

The creature's other hand grips my downturned cheek, lifting my face to position. The next thing I feel is the cold, wet press of the beast's lips against my throat. My teeth clench nearly against my will as I bite back the shout I feel pressing outward. My eyes will not turn towards what little of this spectre I am sure I can now see if I look.

Instead, I look to Lucy. It is for Lucy that I do all that I do. I can hear the rattling inhalations of the creature drawing my scent just below my ear.

My lady's eyes shift beneath their lids, ever so slightly, at the moment I feel my assailant's needle-sharp fangs pierce my skin. I am not certain when I took Lucy's bedspread in my hands, but I clutch at it as if it might pull me safely free. My eyes are locked on her face as her lashes tremble, and I fight my body to silence. I cannot allow her to wake. If she wakes, it will be into a nightmare.

I pull against his hold. It is reflex, and if I were clearer of mind, I would stay on Lucy's behalf without question, but even struggling, I am powerless against the grip he has on me. The hand that is not holding my throat against his jaws grips me under my arm. His hand is large, long fingers digging furrows in my ribs.

To my surprise, the fangs withdraw at once. I imagine he has finished his work until he presses his mouth to the wound and begins to suck. I feel his breath on my neck, strangely hot now, as he draws my life's blood into his waiting maw. I must surely feel horror at this, I

know I must, but in the absence of the agony brought on by his teeth, I can feel only his tongue lapping at the hollow of my throat and the hunger with which he presses against me.

My mouth is open, though I am not sure when I opened it. The sound that leaves my lips I quickly silence. I don't wish to wake Lucy, of course. I am shamed, somehow, to find that the sound is not a scream. I steady myself and even my breathing, but as my blood departs me in this manner, I can feel the thrum of my pulse in my body, made more prominent by the lack of heartbeat I feel in my aggressor's chest. His body is pressed to mine, and I wonder if he, too, has gotten to his knees.

My traitorous hands are still clutching at fabric in front of me, but this cloth is no longer that of Lucy's bedspread. I feel fine silk and wool between my fingers and realise I can only be clinging to the monster's clothes. Somehow, I have wrapped myself in my horror's cloak or cape. I feel my pulse quicken at this and hear a hungry growl behind me. This sound arouses further fear in me. I desperately wish that were all it had aroused.

My devil stops his work, pressing the flat of his tongue to the wound as if to stop the flow of blood. I hear myself whimper at this, and the dismay I feel at my own behaviour can be matched only by the more shameful sorrow I feel to realise this moment has reached its end.

*You are a man of singular taste*, I hear him say, though it would be impossible for him to speak intelligibly this way. His voice is inside my mind, and my mind reaches for it in a desperation I cannot explain. His praise unspools me, and I gasp at the hunger in it. I am certain, in this moment, that if I were to permit it, this beast would consume me entirely. I find myself less certain that I would not permit it.

I can smell him still, earth and sweet rot. The scent stings my eyes and nose, but the sweetness no longer cloys. The pain I feel and the scent of my own blood on this stranger's breath have pinned me like a rabbit before a wolf. All at once, I am desperate to be worthy of the words he has carefully placed in my mind.

'Thank you.' My words are barely a breath, but I can sense that he hears them still. I bite my lip before the next word slips out, the quiet *Master* I feel clambering at the back of my tongue, but a subtle tightening of his claws at my jawline assures me he heard it, nonetheless.

I gasp, and God, there is no fear in it. If I could rip out my own throat and lay it at his feet – at this moment, I would do it.

What has this monster done to me? What have I become in his hands?

*You could be mine.* The words are in my head and in my body both. I feel the flat of his tongue against my throat, still and hot, where I know he has opened my flesh to his will. *But I promised one night alone. One evening's repose for your lady. I would never presume to break a vow.*

The pain I feel at these words is beyond description. I quickly find myself choking on a thousand vows of my own. I cannot bear the fact that he would enact this decadent violence upon my person and then simply walk away. I know that I should be glad of his departure. I *must* be glad of it. But now that the decision is no longer mine to make, I feel I would swear anything to this man if he would claim my life as he is so briefly claiming my body. I feel his rejection as keenly as I felt his fangs, and the shame of that realisation is nearly more than I can bear.

In giving myself to my sins, I have made myself unworthy of Lucy's love. Now, by his own admission, my sin has found me unworthy of more than a few precious moments of torment.

I look at Lucy, still sleeping before me. I swore to protect and care for her. I swore to be her loving husband before God and man. What am I now? If my horror won't have me, I can only hope to offer what I have learned tonight to Van Helsing in the morning. I can only hope to use what I have learned this night to preserve her precious life.

I know this, but I cannot stop my own weak and desperate whisper.

'Please...'

I feel his grip ease, just slightly, and he lifts his mouth from my throat. His whisper, the first I have heard his voice in long minutes, undoes me.

'I can take some small bit more.' His voice is a hum in my ear, in my blood. 'But if I do, you will remember nothing of this night.'

He lifts my chin and locks his gaze on mine. It is the first time I have seen his eyes, bright and hungry. The potency of his stare roots me to the spot and makes my decision for me at once. This indescribable bliss can continue and, in doing so, allow me to forget my shame.

There is no other choice I can make.

Since I know I will forget this moment, I allow myself to call him *Master*. I cannot be sure I would have been able to stop myself even if I'd remember it for all my days.

His fangs lock onto my throat once more, and it is only at the tail of my ecstasy that I realise the cost of this forgetting. When I awake in the morning, at the bedside of my love, I

will have lost every lesson I bought with my blood and not merely those too disgraceful to repeat. Lucy will be back where she began.

I look at her pale face again as I begin to fade. Her eyes are still closed, still sleeping. She is still innocent in this, still precious unaware that I have given her to death in my own pursuit of pleasure. Unbearably, I know she would not blame me, and by my final choice, I have deprived the others of knowing the blame should be mine. I could not have killed her more surely if I cut off her unlucky head.

I feel my body slackening in my Master's arms, for I can call him nothing else. In my mind, I plead that he will break his promise to me as penance for the vow I broke to Lucy. I know he will not do this. I know he will take nothing more than what I have given him.

I close my eyes and allow myself to fall.



# God of Whispers

by Tom Okafor

**Content Warnings: Horror, Death, Torture, Child death.**

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end, see you next time...

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The night brings with it a hum, a sombre purr scuttling through the edges of the parturient darkness; tonight, the darkness is concrete, much more than a blotting of light, but a sentient architecture of the abyss platformed upon the Earth, sacking even the rumour of a dawning light in its wake. This darkness swells, reaches its elastic limit, erupts and spills its slurry over the horizon; the slurry cakes, smouldering the Earth in its cinch, and right there in the midst of the aggregating shadows, I rise from the deeps, my mouth clogged with whispers, the keys of the night in my hands.

The air is stale and idle, yet saturated with voices: desires, cares, anxieties, guilts, feelings of men – alive, awake and loud! Their owners lie asleep, yet these voices float unbridled, crashing into my form, arousing the phallus of urgency in me. I will go to them. I will answer their calls. I shall listen to the voices of their innermost interactions; I shall take them, twist them and whisper them back to their owners.

I stand before a steel bar gate, twelve feet high, eighteen feet wide and capped with thin metal spikes. A security guard clothed in long-sleeve coveralls and leather boots sits, asleep, on an iron chair, his hands clenching the AK-74 rifle lying against his thighs.

Men and their trust in false securities... laughable, pathetic.

I could easily pass through the gate unhindered, but no, I hold the keys to the night. Nothing can stand before me.

I release whispers, and in an instant shorter than the trajectory of sound, the gate clangs open; the force pulls the left compartment off its hinges, and it clatters against the tarred road, the impact squeezing sparks from the ground's pores.

The guard bolts up, pulls a torch from his pocket, flicks it on, and the light reveals nothing but a broken gate. He aims his gun into the crescendo of light and creeps towards the

fallen gate; I walk in, past its still-standing half. The guard stops beside a signpost a few inches away from the spikes jutting out, like spears of fallen warriors, from the collapsed gate. On the signpost is emblazoned: 'NWAKANNA ESTATE, ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.'

The guard squats, lays his gun beside him, slowly stretches out his hand, touches the broken gate and inspects it.

The light from his torch sours the darkness, my sweet, solid darkness, and it enrages me.

I whisper.

The signpost snaps, breaks in two and crashes against the gate. The guard jolts up. Loses his balance. Falls to the ground. Grabs his gun. Rises. Scurries away from the gate.

But the light burns still.

I whisper.

The torch explodes in his hands. The darkness swells again, yeasting over stolen territory, and the scab of light flakes away.

The guard shrieks. Flings the torch. Flees.

That's it... That fear, that apprehension, the fright. It courses through his body as he dashes away. It seeps out of him and diffuses the air – an incense, an offering, an oil of gladness. It crashes onto my form; I absorb it – more titillating than all the spectrums of pleasures men, in their decrepit flesh, could ever experience. I take the fear, all of it, and I proceed.

The voices of desire call out to me. The night, my abode, hungers for the warmth of my whispers and aches for the first fruits of terror, but it need not worry, for it shall be drunk with the excesses of my spectacles.

Nwakanna Estate, here I come.

I drift in a sea of night into the estate. I pass a cluster of overgrown hedges; climbers snake out of the thicket like slim worms, attaching themselves to the fence and crawling beyond it.

I make it to a T-junction with a roundabout at its centre. A statue of their Christ towers atop the roundabout. In the stiff darkness, the statue could pass for anything: an idol, a nobleman or Satan.

An agglomerate of bungalows stretches out on both sides of the junction, with a smattering of duplexes and multi-story buildings sticking out in arrogant ostentation, as unwelcome in the aesthetic uniformity of the field of view as a tumour is on the surface area of any lung. To the left, there is a tilted streetlight inclined to the floor at about sixty-five

degrees. There's no lamp on its head; stiff wires jut out of the pole, curled together like braids of lifelessness knitted in a unity of death. To the right is a towering palm tree, its boughs stiffened out like the arms of a desolate woman.

Beyond the wrecked streetlight and the bewailing palm tree, a discordant blend of voices sifts out of the houses beyond. Which voices to answer? Which way to go?

I whisper.

Waves of hushed sound stir into the atmosphere in sinuous wisps of iridescent black, as bright as light, yet in solemn matrimony with the darkness. The waves float awhile in the centre, then drift towards the tree.

Beautiful. I love wailing trees.

The first building I encounter in the street to the right of the junction is a shabby bungalow. A loose zinc sheet hangs from the roof, limp like a wilted twig. The wooden door, blackened with smoke, is held together with planks nailed horizontally in uneven intervals across the length of the slightly-over-six-foot door. Right beside the house is a mud shed housing charred pots, a heap of coal, logs of firewood and nocturnal rodents and insects.

Different voices seep through the house, but one echoes the loudest. A male voice screaming out, a strong odour oozing from it – the stench of lust.

I whisper.

The waves drift to the door, and I follow them. On the door is a sticker that says, 'THIS HOUSE IS COVERED WITH THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST!'

I guffaw.

Oh dear. Christians and their obsession with names and blood.

Nothing can stop me! I hold the keys of the night!

I rip the sticker off the door. I sieve through the wood and follow the waves as they guide me past a living room cluttered with Christian books, bibles, aprons, fake pictures of their Christ and worn furniture into a bedroom tiled with littered clothes. The waves settle around a boy's head: he's the one.

He's about nineteen years old, sprawled out on a raffia mat, wearing nothing but briefs, baptised in sweat. A wall fan hangs above the mat, plugged into a socket bereft of electricity. The wooden window adjacent to the fan hangs open, and crickets chirp in the grass beneath.

The room is sodden with the malodour of lust, and the voice of his desire cries out, begging to be eased.

I lean close to him, my face over his.

I whisper.

His chest heaves as breath escapes his mouth in a white-swathed twirl. I take his breath into my mouth and taste his hunger. The weight of his desire clogs my throat; I force it down and ingest it. It settles in my belly, and with his essence in me, I know, I see, I hear, and I find everything. Down to his deepest secrets, everything is bare to me. I find the root of his lust – a fibre amidst an unbridled tangle. I infuse darkness into it. I twist it and corrupt it. It bears my sigil now, and all it will yield is great, desperate darkness.

I pull the corrupted breath from my belly, hold it in my mouth, put my mouth against his and pour the breath in.

He stiffens and goes limp.

I whisper.

His body remains still, but he awakens in another sphere, another dimension, one in which my corruption rules.

I forge a seat for myself out of the darkness. I sit and peer into his new reality – a world familiar to him, a world like this one. All he sees, I see; all he knows, I know. He will not awaken until I reap the harvest of the seed I have planted in him.

His name tickles the tip of my tongue. ‘John,’ I say, and it begins.

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He finds himself sitting in a shop – Mama-Metu’s shop. The shop is about a hundred and fifty metres away from his house. To get to Mama-Metu’s shop, he would have to walk away from his street, not looking in the direction of Papa Amadi’s shop, which is a few steps past his house, nor in the direction of the other shops that he passes as he makes it to Mama-Metu’s shop.

The shop is a compact, purposeless, shoddy store. It is a provision store, a stationery store, a utensil store, a cosmetic store, a bedding store and more. Right in front of the bench on which John sits, a glass showcase stands, powdered with dust. The showcase contains biscuits, sweets, packets of Hollandia yoghurt and Chivita Exotic juice, rolls of tissue paper, exercise books, matchboxes, body lotions, bottles of deodorant, containers of talcum powder, toilet soaps, sachets of detergent, a cough syrup, different brands of toothpaste, two boxes of KY Jelly lubricants and a box of Golden Circle condoms.

John's eyes are soldered to the box of condoms. He's never held a condom before. What would it feel like against the tip of his penis or as it rolls down his shaft? Blood flows to his groin, accumulating between his thighs, hardening.

He looks away from the showcase, his fingers rubbing against the tip of a nail protruding from the bench. He faces the black curtain hanging against the wall behind the showcase. The curtain is patterned with red bulls with enormous horns. Why would they place a curtain against a wall? Is that their idea of decoration, or is there something behind the curtain?

Feet shuffle into the room, and he bounces from the bench.

It's her! The reason why he passes every other shop to get to this one. His fantasy. His muse.

'Johnnie,' she says. 'How far?'

'I'm good, Metu. I'm fine.' He scratches his head. His eyes face down.

Silence broods between them for a while, fermenting like sour grapes.

'Do you want anything?' Metu distils the silence.

'Yes! Yes, please. Give me coke.'

'Bottle?'

'No, plastic, please.'

'Okay.' She nods. 'Do you want it warm or chilled?'

'Very cold, please. Mortuary standard.' He chuckles.

She chuckles too. 'You know you don't have to say please all the time, right?'

'Oh!' He rubs his head. 'It's part of me. My father makes me say please for everything. I was raised like that.'

She smiles. 'It's okay. It's sweet, actually.'

'Really?' He tilts his bowed head in another direction.

She laughs. 'I swear, it's cute.'

'Thank you,' he says. 'Please, thank you.' They both laugh.

'Let me go and get the drink from the fridge. It's in the house.' She turns away.

For the first time since she walked into the shop, he looks at her. Their eyes meet. Her eyes are deep, full of speech and expression. He knows she likes him. Her eyes say it. But it's not just her eyes that get him; it's her whole face, the silkiness of it, the way it robs the atmosphere of its light so that her face becomes a water body holding the moon's sheen, a light source, a leaky aquifer of brightness spilling radiance from her pores, cradling a harmony of light and shadow in her smile such that her light never scorches but soothes,

pleases and beguiles. It wraps John in a warm embrace, the savour of light permeating his body. Before he can think of holding back the words, he says, 'You're beautiful.'

She pouts. 'I know.' She winks at him, giggles and struts away, her long braids swaying across her back.

He looks away and bites his lower lip, a smile curling up his lips. She'll be the end of him. He plops down on the bench. His eyes go straight to the condom. If he got the chance with her, he wouldn't use it, if he is honest with himself. Damn the consequences. It'd be his first. The pleasure would have to be complete. Blood pushes down again. He pictures her on his mat at home; no, not the mat. It has to be a bed. He puts a bed in place of the mat. He's on top of her, and her nails claw his back. His blue jean trousers bulge with his hardness. He adjusts himself. A slight breeze ruffles the curtain on the wall. He looks behind himself. He feels nothing. There must be an opening behind the curtain. He rises. Bedsheets, pillowcases and blankets are folded and arranged on a wooden slab nailed to the wall beside the curtain. He stands in front of the curtain. Feels it with his right hand. He pushes his arm into the curtain; it sinks with his push. He knew it! There must be a hole. He shifts the curtain aside.

'Jesus!' He jerks backwards at the sight of the solid concrete behind the curtain. The curtain spills from his hands.

How?

He stands, staring. He shifts the curtain again. Nothing but concrete. He lets it go. Shakes his head. He stretches his right hand. A gentle breeze ruffles the curtains again. It floats outwards towards John's face and settles again. John looks around. No one. He touches the curtain. Forces in a deep inhale, pushes against the curtain. This time, the surface ripples. His hand passes through the curtain itself. He pushes. His whole arm goes through. He pulls his arm out. But the curtain protrudes from the tip of his finger, a molten solid sticking to his fingers like liquid adhesive. He flaps his hands, trying to get the sticky curtain off them. The more he flaps, the more the black gelatinous substance streaked with red climbs up his arm. He gets frantic with the flapping; his whole right arm gets swallowed up in a black-and-red sheath. 'Help!' He darts his face around. 'Metu! Metu! Help!'

The creeping glue climbs across his chest, snaking to his other arm. He screams, wriggles his swallowed arm, stretches his left arm towards the wooden slab on the wall and grabs it. He pulls himself towards the slab, but the hold of the molten curtain is too firm. He pulls harder. His teeth knock against themselves. The force of the pull yanks the slab off the wall, the curtain vomits him, and he crashes into a tumble of wood and sheets. He flings the sheets off his face and sits up, panting. He lifts his right arm and inspects it. Froth sizzles on

the surface like meat being deep-fried in hot oil. His hand trembles. A wave of heat sears into the flesh, and the sizzling intensifies. Sobs break out of his mouth. He struggles to his feet, his arm lifted up before his eyes. He shambles towards the entrance. A flabby lump of flesh protuberates from the centre of the curtain at the same spot where John had dipped his hand, lying lifelessly on the ground. The lump bloats like a corpse, and it explodes. Gas bursts out of the exploded flesh and diffuses through the room. John is a few metres away from the door when the gas hits him. The heat crashes into his body. He slumps, writhing on the dusty ground. The sizzling intensifies, and the smell of burned flesh rises like incense. The heat seeps into his eyes, his ears and his pores until the entirety of his being is ablaze with an unholy sweltering.

John weeps, hands covering his eyes.

\*

And there it is... The fear. The desperation. The terror. As John lies asleep, sweat drips from his skin as thick as drops of blood. The fright oozes from his skin like a black mist. This mist circulates the room. It wraps me like a veil. And I love this mist. It is water for my thirst. Manna for my hunger. An orgasm for my desire. My pleasure. My happiness. My destiny. My harvest. It courses into my form, and I take it all. But the terror has only just begun.

\*

A soft voice crescendos from the edge of the room as John lies weeping.

‘I know what you came for.’

‘Please, I beg you,’ John says. ‘Let me go; please let me go.’

‘I know what you came for...’ The voice is louder now. Harsher.

‘I didn’t come for anything. I swear. Please...’

Silence... It trickles in; even the sizzling stops a while. The gas clears. John sees clearly. He sits up on the ground. He looks around, heaving. Behind him, the flabby skin creeps closer. The ceiling creaks.

‘I KNOW WHAT YOU CAME FOR!’ Mama-Metu yells into his face, hanging, stark naked, from the ceiling, her huge breasts smacking him across the face as hard as granite. He screams and rises in a flash, but the lump catches his right arm, pulls him and slams him into the curtain.



He sinks into a sea of living, molten black. He spins and twirls in nothingness, the weight of the blackness smothering him. He opens his mouth, and a slurry of black fluid spills in. He breathes, and the blackness clogs his nostrils and his lungs. He scratches his throat, choking on the molten blackness, suffocating in a swirl of night matter. Unable to breathe, unable to scream, he thrashes in the darkness.

\*

John convulses on the mat on which he lies, stretches out as though reaching for something. The mist thickens. My excitement heightens. The mist mothers me, invigorates me and anoints me with fragrant darkness. I sit still, reaping a harvest of fear – the mist swelling and thickening, the darkness taking root in John's quivering body, spreading and eating the last speckles of light away.

\*

The sea of darkness vomits him, and he crashes into the ground. Dust, unsettled, billows into his nostrils, triggering a cough. He's still surrounded by darkness, but in this darkness, he can breathe. He breathes, deep breaths. Slumps, panting.

A little light glows from the distance, almost as tiny as an ember. Footsteps resound. The light grows. He creeps backwards as their feet draw closer. Gasping.

The footsteps quicken – a jog now. He lifts himself and falls to the ground. Scurries backwards, his buttocks scraping the dust off the floor. His back hits a wall, and he curls up on himself.

He opens his mouth to plead, but only strained whispers make it out. The intruder inches closer to him. Soft echoes resound as the base of a lantern scratches the ground.

'It's me. Don't be afraid.'

John looks up. The lustre of the flame burning in the lantern spills from Metu's face. Encumbered in this pitch darkness, her face steals the light, as it always does, takes it and multiplies it.

John groans and whimpers. She embraces him.

'Did they injure you?' she asks, rubbing his face. He lifts his arms to show her the burns, but they're gone. He lets them fall.

‘I brought water.’ She grabs a bottle lying beside the lantern and opens it. She gestures for him to open his mouth. He does; he gulps up the water as it’s poured in. Not a drop escapes. He groans as liquid flows into his chapped throat.

‘Metu,’ he croaks. ‘It’s— it’s you.’

‘Yes, Johnnie mu. It’s me. You’re all right now. I promise.’

He lays his head against her breasts, and she holds him in place.

‘Don’t leave me, Metu. Please. Please stay. I need you, Biko.’

‘I’m here, my love. It’s okay.’ She pats his cheeks with supple hands and blows a gentle breeze from her mouth onto his face.

She called him ‘her love.’ He’s waited all his life to hear those words. Relief canoodles him, and he balances his head against her breasts. A sweet fragrance sweeps into his nose – the redolence of a million gardens wrapped up in one scent. He inhales the scent, as fresh as the smell of the first dews of morning nesting on the green paradise spread out on fields, valleys and alpine-ranged meadows. A tantalising nosegay fills his belly, and the horrors that unfolded in the shop flee at the entrance of the quickening scent. Overwhelmed, he kisses her breasts. Once, twice, then thrice. Inhales. Kisses. Once, twice, thrice. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Rinse. Wash.

His hands find their way to her breasts. He squeezes. His hands sink into her chest.

The smell of roses, daffodils and hibiscus morphs into rottenness. He pulls away from Metu’s chest, but Metu isn’t Metu anymore. What squats before him is a monstrosity. A mockery of nature. An indescribable hideousness. Unutterable perversion of flesh. A heap of maggot-suffused decay.

‘No, no, no!’ he cries, pulling his hands, but they’re stuck.

‘This is what you came for.’ A voice sounds from a corner.

John darts his face into the corner. The lantern goes off. He screams and struggles. Breathes rapidly.

‘I know what you came for.’

Lights go up, one after the other, in perfect synchronicity. Intervals of split milliseconds blend into each other and produce a concord of jaw-gaping lightening.

‘Here is your reward.’

The light reveals Mama-Metu. Stark naked again, the rolls of fat slumped from her belly covering her groin. She stretches her hand, and shadows burst out of the lights. The shadows are so thick that the light is smothered.

John screams, calls for Metu, calls for his father, his mother and his Christ. Nothing stops the shadows. They wring his hands free, dash him against the wall and wrap themselves around him, binding him in place. Four rusty hooks drop from the ceiling like clatters of metal rain.

The hooks lunge at him. The first one pierces his palate. The second pierces the root of his tongue. The third and fourth stab both sides of his cheeks.

His screams turn to wails, splattered wails. The sound of chains recoiling sends criss-crosses across John's body. He fights the shadows, but their grips are too firm. The chains attached to the hook tauten. John stiffens, anticipating the next pull. It doesn't come, but his mouth is wide open.

The monstrosity jerks to life. Its bones rattle, crack, twist and bend as it rises, each joint snapping into different angles as though to ascertain the most unnatural position. Its head is that of a bull with enormous horns. There's a gash across its right eye, sutured with wriggling worms. Its torso is rotten, bloated flesh dotted with pus-filled sores. Its hands are human legs, and its legs are breathing hands, swelling and shrinking at the dictates and movements of the squirming maggots trapped in them.

The thing stands on its hand-legs. Then, it twists itself and bends so its leg-hands are on the ground. It crawls. In John's direction.

John, who's worn from much struggling and from the tight grips of the shadows, somehow summons strength and fights. Pulling his arms with such force that some of the shadows break. Still, they're too much for him.

The thing approaches him. Its stench parades itself before his nose – such a great stench that no nose could bear its weight without crumpling and withering away.

The monstrosity stands on its hand-legs again, facing John, horns sticking out of its head like misplaced branches. A sore on its torso expands, getting larger and larger until it is the size of two breasts, yellowed with pus.

'Here's what you came for,' it grunts, pushing the breastified sore into John's mouth. The sore bursts, and the pus spills into John's mouth. Another sore expands, breastifies and is forced into John's throat. Pus, maggots and worms drip from John's mouth.

And the feeding continues... unending.

\*

The fear flooding through John's sleeping mass reaches a fever peak, bringing me heightened orgasm after heightened orgasm. I take every flake of fear, every ounce of terror, the meat and drink of the mist melting on my lips. I arise, and my seat dissipates into shadows.

I whisper.

The corrupted breath is drawn from John's belly. It floats awhile, hovering, seeking a resting place, then crashes into my garment and finds its home among millions of skeins of twisted breath.

John jerks up from the mat with a gasp.

I whisper.

The darkness shifts, particles of dark matter rearrange themselves, merge into each other, stretch out themselves, and a portal is formed right there in the cluttered room. I step in – one step into the hollow, the other on the streets of Nwakanna Estate, leaving poor John in a pool of his sweat with enough time alone to ponder his ways.

I drift away. Searching for the next voice that shall draw me to itself.

\*

The next is a deafening voice of guilt. It roars, soars, pushes past other voices and makes itself known.

These voices – they're not words or distinct speech. They're groans, inexpressible pleas of the soul, inaudible to useless ears of flesh. But I hear them, and I understand. The voices speak my language.

I follow this new voice to a decent bungalow. No stickers this time or wooden doors blackened with soot. I do not need a whisper to guide me to this voice. It's too loud. It pulls me like a magnet draws irons. I follow it, too keen on the voice to take any note of stupid furniture or pictures. I find the owner of the voice. A woman, asleep in a nightdress, curled up like a foetus.

Her name sits at the tip of my tongue even before I take in her breath, as though, at my arrival at her bedside, her voice crashed into my form and bared her name to me.

I whisper.

Breath rises through her mouth. I take it. I receive the history of each breath she's ever taken. I come to know the dimensions of her past: the breadth, the height and the depth. I know her as surely as every sparrow is known, as every strand of hair is documented and as

every shore grain is accounted for. I know. I see. I hear. What great guilt she carries! I taste it. Bitter. I infuse it with darkness and spit it out. It flies and floats above her mouth.

I whisper.

She draws it in. First, she stiffens, then limps.

I let her name go, and ‘Amara’ spills from my mouth.

Another sphere drifts into motion.

\*

She finds herself on an island. An erratic wind blows rain in different directions. Her afro is packed into a bun. She’s dressed in a white knee-length gown, standing still, staring into the horizon, the sun an opaque bulb casting off its final glows.

The first red spot appears on her dress. But she doesn’t see it. The second appears. Then, the third and the fourth. What she sees is a clenched fist floating adjacent to the setting sun on the horizon. Another shape carves itself against the azure sky. Then another, and another and another. A thud sounds beneath her. She snatches her gaze from the skyline. She finds that the rain has turned red, and her white dress is coated in crimson. She looks down. Gasps. A decapitated head. She steps back and retreats. She crushes something under her foot. She lifts her leg, a tiny heart. A tall form stands at the other side of the island, dressed in withered palm fronds, a mask across their face and a lash on their hand. Hundreds of black shapes are strewn across the sky now. A black hawk bellows from the distance, and the shapes come crashing down.

Heads, fingers, lungs. Tongues. Hearts. Arms. Legs. Intestines. The tall figure lets out a cry. She runs. They chase after her. Tears stream from her eyes as she squishes body parts beneath her feet. She gets to the edge of the island and jumps in.

\*

I wait for the mist, but it doesn’t come. It is not fear that oozes from her. It’s pain. It is not the pain I want. Pain won’t bring the mist. I want the mist. I need it. Its warmth. Its pleasure. Its milk on my lips. Its fruits melting on my tongue. The fear must come. I must squeeze it out of her.

I whisper.

The current sphere rolls away, and a new sphere takes its place.

\*

She's fifteen again. In her school uniform: navy-blue pinafore and a sky-blue shirt. Her hair is trimmed into a low cut. She kneels in a sitting room before her father, who's dressed in a black cassock with a preacher's collar around his neck.

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ she says, sobbing. ‘I couldn’t. I’m too young.’

Her father bows and shakes his head. He looks up at her again.

‘I’m sorry, too, Amara.’ He turns away and walks out.

Three hefty men walk in as he leaves. They lift her up. She struggles in their arms. She screams for her father. They strap her to a metal table. Her father returns, donning a light-blue surgical gown. He lays two boxes down. One leather. The other steel. He opens the leather box and pulls incision blades from it.

Fifteen-year-old Amara screams and begs. The men stand and watch as her father cuts her belly open. He cuts through layers of flesh and muscle until her bowels are exposed.

She lies still, panting. The pain would be impossible for three people to bear, yet she bears it alone.

Her father opens the steel box and pulls a cage from it. Four black rats, as huge as the men's fists, scurry around the cage.

Amara, too weak to cry out, groans. Father knows she hates rats.

He hands the cage to the men. They open it, grab the rats and place them in her belly.

Those rats? They are trained for a singular purpose: to eat.

And so, they eat. They feast on her intestinal walls as Father stitches her stomach, sealing them within her.

He places the surgical equipment back into the leather bag without washing it. He signals to the men. One of them leaves and comes back with a gas cylinder and a burner.

He places the burner under the metal table, connects it to the gas with a pipe and lights the burner. The table heats up. Amara heats up. And so do the rats.

Amara screams as she cooks, as the rats try to eat their way out of her.

‘Daddy, please. Mercy. Mercy, please,’ she cries. A teathed opening forms on her navel; whiskers pierce through it. She screams.

‘I warned you, Amara. I did. I begged you. Instructed you. And you disobeyed. The wages of sin is death. You have grieved the Spirit of God and...’

His voice trails off, her skin blisters and peels, and the rats, they...

\*

I prance around the room. Waiting for the mist. Waiting for the convulsion. For the sheaves of fear. All I get are stupid tears cascading from her eyes. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it! Her pain is stronger than her fear. But my darkness is greater than any pain.

I whisper.

Dark breath is pulled from her. I take it in again. I brood over it. Splurge my darkness onto it, and when it is laden, I pull it out. I lean against her, my weight lighter than a feather and softer than light. I pour the breath back into her.

I speak her name again. Another reality unfolds.

\*

She's surrounded by mirrors. Sixteen reflections of her peach blouse, ripped blue denim and bottom-length braids.

'Hello?' she calls. Her voice echoes, bounces against the reflections and falls to the ground.

'Hello,' she calls again.

'Hi,' a faint voice answers.

She darts her face around, looking for the voice.

'He— Hey... How are you?'

'I'm sorry,' the voice says. 'I can't answer that.'

'Why not?' Amara asks.

'I cannot be. I cannot feel. I am not. I have no ability to experience feeling. There is no means of being. I am a wisp, a memory and a trace of the past. You may not understand.'

'That sounds sad. Why do you hide? Show yourself. Do you have a body?'

'I have a body, but it's not pretty like yours.'

'I don't mind. Really. We're all beautiful.'

'I am far from beautiful. If I were anything close to it, beauty would be a curse.'

'I'm sorry,' Amara whispers.

'You seem nice. Can I call you mummy?'

Amara smiles. 'Yes, you can. I'd love that.'

'How are you, Mummy?'



Amara giggles. 'Mummy is fine.'

'You like the way Mummy sounds, don't you, Mummy?' The voice floats around the room, bouncing from mirror to mirror.

'I love it,' Amara says, following the voice. 'Can I see you? Please?'

The voice doesn't answer.

'Hello? Are you still—'

'Right behind you, Mummy.'

Amara shudders. 'You almost scared—' She yelps, loses her footing, falls to the ground and moves her body backwards with her leg.

'What, Mummy? You said we're all beautiful. DIDN'T YOU?'

Amara cups her mouth. Her back against a mirror, sobbing. Staring in disbelief at the pile of butchered meat and bones floating, shapeless, formless, a heap of disarray. Eyes split into eight parts; ears surrounded by a mass of sliced brain matter.

'Do you know my name, Mummy?'

Amara shakes her head, pushing hard into the mirror. It cracks, digs into her back and draws blood.

'I have no name. You killed me before I got one!' The heap of meat and bones charges towards Amara, spins itself into a whirlwind, lifts her up and smashes her against a mirror.

\*

The black mist forms around me again. I open my arms; the mist settles on my face, all over my form. I take it in. It's not as abundant or as thick, but it's just as precious.

A voice rings from somewhere. I look around and peer into the dreamscape. The voice does not belong there. What did I miss? What did I ignore?

'Mummy,' the voice calls. Light footsteps approach.

There's a living daughter!

Hells. Hells. Hells! Too thirsty for mist, it's blinded me!

This sphere must not be broken. I must stop the child.

I call forth dust from the four winds.

The child calls again. Much closer now.

I assemble the dust, knead it into flesh and bones, and fashion it into a semblance with Amara. I push myself into the body. I move, and the body moves.

Perfect.

I hasten out of the room and meet the little girl a few steps away from the door. I lift her into my arms and hush her.

‘It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.’

‘I need to pee, Mummy.’

‘Okay. Let’s go.’

The direction to the bathroom flashes in my eyes, and I follow. She eases herself, and I take her to her room.

I lay her on her bed.

‘Thank you, Mom. I love you.’

‘I love you, too, Anita.’ Her name rolls off my tongue.

Of all the words I’ve spoken in my entire existence, I’ve never uttered the word *love*. Until now.

I stand there awhile. Silence engulfs me. I hear no voices. I hear no pleas. The calm in the room, the purity, the freshness – it’s different. Warm. Warmer than the mist. I look in the direction of Amara’s room. I close my eyes; the flesh peels off in strips like linen bandages. Dust to dust; ashes to silence.

I whisper.

Breath rises from Anita’s mouth. In the spinning darkness, her breath is as bright as fire. Yet warm and soothing. A light that I do not hate. The breath dances before me; I do not ingest it.

I whisper.

The breath drifts into Amara’s room. I follow it. It seeps in through Amara’s nostrils, dives down into her bosom, and dispels the darkness.

The mist fades.

Amara awakens with a gasp.

She grabs a torchlight from beneath her pillow. Flicks it on. I brace myself for the influx of light, but it doesn’t burn.

The light doesn’t burn!

Amara walks into Anita’s room and lies down beside her. The pleas of guilt are gone from her. This house is a galaxy of silence. Ribbons of light float in the air. The silence is fragrant and soothing, and the lights are calm, mellow and soft. But I wasn’t built for silence. I wasn’t made for the light. I abide in the dark. I belong with darkness. It belongs with me.

*Hail darkness, full of darkness, darkness is with thee.*

I whisper.

A portal shifts into the air. I walk through it and into the streets. The voices come crashing in, and silence becomes nothing but wisps of the past.

I walk away into a cacophony of voices. I stop a few metres from the house.

I stand; I brood.

I'll see many more nights. A million more. Perhaps a billion.

Voices call out to me, pleading to be twisted into darkness, but tonight, I choose silence.

I whisper.