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Foreword

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Grief of the Ones Left Behind by Lavanya Arora

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Remembering and grieving the loss of a loved one.

Lavanya Arora (they/he) is an independent researcher and writer currently based in Bengaluru, India. Their work has appeared or forthcoming in *Frontier Poetry*, *Soft Union*, *Kitaab*, and elsewhere. They can be found on Instagram @lavaurora.

Drain by Fallon Buchholz

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It's hard to break the cycle.

Fallon is a Wisconsin-based writer and director who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English Studies from University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh. Fallon enjoys writing short stories, poetry, books, articles, and screenplays. Fallon has been published in journals such as *Vine Leaves Press* and *Half and One*. When Fallon is not writing or making their show *Instability*, they enjoy spending time with their loved ones, including their cats Chip and Goose; playing volleyball; reading; watching great television shows; karaoke, roller skating, and traveling. You can find Fallon on Medium as fallonbuchholz11 and on social media as fallonwrites.

L'amour, Thy Name is Ana by Sylvie Soul

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A woman obsessed with a coworker takes matters into her own hands.

Sylvie Soulet is a Black cis-female dual American/Canadian citizen living in Toronto, Canada. When not smoothing out plot holes, Sylvie can be found enjoying time with her husband and daughter, indulging in cheap pho, and waxing poetic about box office data and the 16-bit era of video games. Sylvie has published stories in *Midnight & Indigo*, *Gwyllion*, and *Brink*. She has also published a short story in the anthology *Gothic Fantasy: Black Sci-Fi Stories* by Flame Tree Press. Sylvie is currently writing her first novel. You can follow Sylvie's writing journey on Instagram at @sylviesoulwriter and at sylviesoul.com.

The Visitation by Nwafor Emmanuel Okechukwu

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A young man encounters a midnight stranger who issues him a task which he carries out and in the process discovers himself, and experiences culture.

Nwafor Emmanuel is a lawyer who resides in Nigeria. He loves folklores and supernatural manifestations. His works are forthcoming and are in *Brussels Review*, *Decolonial Passage*, *African Writer*, and *Brittle Paper*. He is a *Pushcart Prize* nominee and was shortlisted for the *2024 Toyin Falola Prize*. He can be reached on X: @eyesiclenwafor and Facebook: Spirit Emmanuel.

The Hand That Feeds by Phoebe Bush

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A retelling of the Norse myth of Fenrir and Tyr... from Fenrir's perspective.

Phoebe is a writer from Essex, UK, who graduated from the Warwick Writing MA, and has since been lucky enough to be published by *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Haunted Words Press*, and *The Selkie*. When she is not writing, she can most likely be found getting lost in her local countryside, or haunting old buildings.

Backpacking Through the Book of Exodus, or I Get a Gig as God's Social Media Manager and Satan's Reluctant Sidekick by Rowan Tate

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A humanities major hitchhiking in Jordan encounters Yahweh and Satan, embarking on a quirky road trip that becomes a mysterious quest for the Ark of the Covenant.

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative and curator of beauty. Her writing appears in the *Stinging Fly*, *the Shore*, *Josephine Quarterly*, and *Meniscus Literary Journal*, among others. She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

Miracle Aisle by Bethany L. Sherwood

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An aimless retail worker discovers new, elusive residents of the store, and decides to be delighted rather than frightened.

Bethany Sherwood writes, reads, knits, edits, spins, and bakes somewhere deep in Western Massachusetts, overseen by her cat, Annabelle. Being born on Cape Cod gave her a deep love for the ocean, and a childhood in the Midwest gave her a lifetime of tornado-related anxiety. She posts on Bluesky at bsky.app/profile/theherocomplex, and blogs intermittently at <https://ohtheherocomplex.blog/>

Foreword

I hate funerals. Always have. I really don't understand the point. I understand the concepts of saying goodbye, honouring someone and getting closure, but I don't think they come from funerals. When I think about death, the afterlife or lack thereof, I turn to the living world around me. I find the rustle of trees in an autumn wind, a cascade of bright yellow falling against a cold blue sky, reminds me of someone who has passed far more than a wooden box.

Many of this issue's stories deal with death and grief. This subject is strangely relevant to me at the moment with the loss of a close family friend, but grief and death are things everybody grows up with. Everyone remembers the first person they knew who died, perhaps a grandparent or other elderly relative. Someone whose loss, though sad, was not unexpected. Except, somehow, it's always unexpected. Always a shock. You can imagine it, but you can never really feel that finality until it happens, even if you've experienced loss before. Grief is not linear either. Never a straight path to an exit. You can think you are out and then turn a corner and wonder who turned out all the lights. I think of it as an ocean, waves crashing, no idea which way is up and which is down.

For all their confusion and pain, though, grief and death can unite us. In the car on the way to my grandfather's funeral, all of my cousins and I were together, laughing and telling stories about this very unusual man. He had completely white hair except for one yellow streak, a result of his chain-smoking roll-up cigarettes. He lost all his eyebrows one day – woke up, and they were gone. He drank whisky all day and all night. He had the best laugh and an even better smile. I always think of him when I smell cigarette smoke or a strong, cheap whisky. He is brown cardigans and worn corduroys. He is the sound of an old record player spinning and skipping on its needle. He is always with me. We all have that one person whose loss stays with us, their memory always there at the back of our minds and in our hearts. We can all understand smelling a particular scent, seeing a familiar piece of clothing or tasting a food that brings us straight back to that person. When I was laughing with my cousins about my wonderful grandfather's antics, we all felt how a shared memory helps to heal a shared broken heart.

As you read this issue, you'll find wonderful stories. From taking a road trip with God to drinking away painful memories, biting off more than you can chew to finding satisfaction in magic, watching the ghost of your ancestors walk through a wall to finding solace in a love

that still lingers even after they've gone. Know that we have all walked the winding path of grief, we have all swum under the waves and come back up gasping. Death and grief may come for us all, but through this pain, you can always catch another's eye, share a memory and smile. In these increasingly doom-laden times, it's even more important to wander into our forest and take solace in the darkness together.

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Grief of the Ones Left Behind

by Lavanya Arora

Content Warnings: Implied death of a partner.

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

The raindrops I collected for you one misty morning in Munnar still reflect the garlands of jasmine flowers you loved to wear in your hair. They still remember the khanak of your anklets running around your ancestral house in the middle of nowhere.

That old, empty house.

Your sporadic laughter bloomed through its cracks.

On foggy days, it spills our secrets to all the surrounding ferns and saprophytes. I keep collecting them for soups and curries you no longer slurp straight from the blazing pot. Sometimes, I wonder if all I have done right in my entire life was love you.

Drain

by Fallon Buchholz

Content Warnings: Addiction.

Not your thing? Skip to page 9 for the next story.

It smelt of smoke and coffee as Janna sat at the kitchen table. Her fingers tapped against the table rapidly as her eyes outlined every pattern on the bare, white walls. The papers were piled around her, surrounding her; it felt never-ending.

‘Conditions of release,’ Janna repeated as she read the first of the scattered documents she could find. ‘No partaking in illegal substances or alcohol.’ She scoffed and rolled her eyes before throwing her cigarette butt into the ashtray.

After pushing the papers away, she found herself in front of the fridge. The shelves were near empty, except for some bread, milk, shredded cheese and an unlabelled cardboard box. She pulled the box out of the fridge, ripped the tabs apart to find three beer cans staring back at her.

She grabbed a can and lifted the tab off it and stared inside. She took a deep breath in, walked to the sink and poured the can out. She took another deep breath before pulling the second’s tab, and the beer within made it down the drain. She took the final beer, cracked it open and walked to the sink again. Her eyes shifted between the drain and the open beer can; the house smelled like her dad. The can touched her lips, and the beer disappeared down a drain.

L'amour, Thy Name is Ana

by Sylvie Soul

Content Warnings: Disordered eating.

Not your thing? Skip to page 12 for the next story.

Hold your breath, make a wish, count to three. –Willy Wonka

*

You'd think I'd be tempted all the time, working in the marketing department of a big-name chocolate company. Quite the contrary – when all you see is alluring, decadent, expensive European chocolate and are paid to push the stuff onto the masses, it quickly loses its lustre.

Besides, who needs the vice of processed cocoa when I have you, in all your natural glory?

I see you. Collared shirt. Smart slacks. Context-sensitive ties that change based on the day and your mood. I see you, and I want you – I want you so badly, against all rhyme and reason, like the existence of white chocolate. But I don't know if you can see me.

In a sea of beautiful, uniform bonbons, all colour-coordinated in their identical shiny wrappers, I feel like the pedestrian, perennial chocolate cherry blossom. Bulky. Goopy. Unrefined.

Perhaps there is too much of me to be seen and that's the problem. I need to make myself scarce. A moratorium needs to be placed on my mocha.

I skip lunch today. I convince myself I don't need it, that thoughts of you alone are enough to sate my aching physical appetite.

On days when we're hybrid, during Zoom calls, you keep your camera off, concealing your face so I can't see you. But your voice... your voice tingles me in the most delightful ways. Auditory erogeny. You speak in an unhurried manner that eschews contractions. I leave my camera on for your benefit, yet I still don't think you can see me.

Dinner seems extraneous at the end of the day. I'm so invigorated by thoughts of you I want to rush to bed to continue my devotion. I sleep in the nude, lulled to slumber by the hypnotic movements of my breasts, each of which, I am dismayed, looks an awful lot like molten lava cake.

My alarm clock rouses me to another day of work, where I can be near you. I have a cup of coffee but forego breakfast; I'm wired on caffeine and a steady flow of dopamine fed into my bloodstream. Dark chocolate could never.

You stop by my workstation for a quick chat. Today, your tie is a solid shade of bright yellow (sorry – chartreuse, you are quick to point out) in honour of International Sun Day.

I worry you can hear the tempest raging in my body, the rapid beating of my heart in tandem with the low, primal, incessant growls of my stomach. The hunger pains are getting relentless, but I ignore them. Denying food is my pastime now, my penance.

I starve myself as a form of self-flagellation for my failure to get you to see me, to truly see me. I starve my body the same way you starve me of your affection. My lustful Lent pervades.

My coworkers have commented on how slim I've looked lately, that I've lost a lot of weight. The confidence and newfound attention embolden me to keep going, to keep shrinking. Perhaps soon, there will be so little of me to see that I'll no longer be invisible to you.

Our company is releasing a new chocolate onto the market. A work colleague brings a case to my desk to share with friends and family. I accept it graciously, then promptly feed it to my trash bin when I arrive home.

I often daydream of taking you with abandon at work, surreptitiously behind the closed doors of a locked supply closet or in the 3.5 seconds it takes to ascend to our floor at the office. I long to infuse these tight spaces with a heady cocktail of us, an effusion of cocoa butter, perspiration and arousal. Though I'm drawn to you, penetrative sex is not my epicurean preference; coital fantasies have been substituted with those of an oral fixation. Kissing, licking, biting. I imagine you'd be quite adept at going down on a woman.

Given the opportunity, I would gladly melt in your mouth as well as your hands.

Less and less food passes through my lips, so more and more intrusive thoughts of my lips pressing against yours are my sustenance.

Calls of concern flow from my parents like ambergris from a whale. Unlike the flow of my menstrual cycle, which has ceased. I am cold all the time. And I'm constantly hungry.

But I tamp those urges down with the belief that your eyes rest a little bit longer on my face, on my body.

And then one day... success! I collapse into your arms at work, weak but euphoric from your embrace.

You ask if I am all right. God... hearing your concern is my manna from heaven.

The elation is short-lived; I am admitted to a hospital not long after for my condition. 'Disordered eating,' they call it. Such bullshit. The only disorder is that I need to consume food to survive, when all my body craves is you.

I watch the liquid of the IV drip into my veins. I plan ahead. There is more work to be done. Perhaps if I waste away until I am just a memory, you'll come to mourn me at my funeral. I close my eyes. I can see it now: you'll bring me flowers. You'll approach my coffin. You'll stare at my face, the decorated visage of my corpse in mortuary makeup, and finally give me your attention, the only Thanksgiving I'll ever truly need.

The Visitation

by Nwafor Emmanuel Okechukwu

Content Warnings: Ghosts, haunting.

Not your thing? Skip to page 17 for the next story.

1.

A man appears in my yellow-lit room on the eve of my twenty-seventh birthday. I feel a sense of foreboding as I behold his rugged masculinity. The yellow lights emanating from the wall brackets reveal his face, and I recognise him from a tainted photograph my father once showed me. I can no longer hear the whirring of the rotating ceiling fan. The man sits on the only chair in my room, a wooden armchair, resting his back on the white shirt and blue jeans draped over the chair. My dim eyes spread a little bit wider, and my lips part in an inaudible scream. My heartbeat is a grumbling, thunder-gathering momentum. My bristles quickly stiffen. The man doesn't speak at first, and when our eyes meet, his are translucent.

Outside, the din of the Garden City is exhausted, and the city is purring like a limp body exorcised of lust.

The man eventually speaks. His voice is gentle, like water trickling from a slightly opened sink tap.

You have abandoned my grave. Weeds protrude from the numerous cracks on the surface. My heart bleeds. I can no longer lie at ease. Do something about it, please.

He rises from the chair. *Also, kindly do something about your body odour.*

He walks through a wall, and the croaking of mating toads gnaws at my ears. In his absence, the light bulbs in the room flicker, restoring the former ambience. The whirring of the fan resumes. Orange smiley stickers on my wall console me. My armpits are slimy, and my bare chest is liquid-shiny. His last sentence plunges me into shame.

2.

The road to my village, Ezinkwo, is riddled with numerous craters and potholes and bribe-seeking policemen. I count twenty policemen along the way. The full bus hops along,

carrying me and other eastern passengers from the bustling One Mile Park and connecting to the scanty Aba Road. The fuel scarcity takes the blame for the reduction of cars on the road. The bus fare has tripled since the government increased the price of fuel. The bus climbs three flyovers, passes vehicles queuing in front of filling stations, diverts at intersections and connects to the massive roundabout undergoing reconstruction close to the entrance of the city's airport. The bus leaves the city behind in a cloud of dust and slices through neighbouring states. I feel the wind rush into my face and neck and ripple my yellow polka-dot shirt through an open window. My neighbour, a teenager, inevitably wrinkles her nose and flashes me a forced smile. I get the message. She has to endure. I make a mental note to get deodorant when I reach my destination.

When my skin is cold, I shut the window and glare at the passing scenery with squinting eyes, enjoying the rushing greenery and tolerating the drive as my hip-hop blaring headphones flow rhythms from my head to my flip-flops.

*

I jerk awake as the bus plunges into another crater created by the erosion munching the elongated tarred road like a grater eats wafers. The terrain is familiar. The soil, the colour of manila, shows off dark green foliage sandwiched between the tarmac and the edges. The buildings here are behind elongated fences, some secluded. They brandish gleaming marble tiles, massive columns, parapets and terraced roofs. The Easterners believed in making a statement with their country homes, no matter their status in society, and they walked the talk. The bus drives through the dust-clouded park at Ekwulobia. The bus driver is an elderly, cool-headed, grey-bearded, non-smiling man who maintains a safe speed limit. There is an ongoing haphazard construction of the road being handled by an unknown construction company at a snail's pace.

I disembark with others when the bus finally stops and flag down a commercial bike rider, who screeches to a halt. I mount the bike, and together, we fly to my final destination. We pass wailing hawkers covered in brown, selling piles of edibles: sliced pineapples in cellophane bags, watermelons, *okpa ntucha*, peeled melon seeds, bottled cashew nuts, palm nuts, kola nuts, and loaves of bread placed on aluminium trays mounted on wooden rostrums. We pass a polytechnic with students milling around the gated entrance, shrines and churches standing side by side along the erosion-tainted tarmac. The bike stops in front of my family house. My home is a blue duplex sitting on a large expanse of land growing oranges, pears,

plantains, bitter leaves, scented leaves, flowers, sprawling weeds and guavas. I sight the grave lying before a flourishing orange tree. It is a relic of the past. The rectangular surface is cracked, and weeds sprout from those zigzagging cracks. The cemented sides are chipped and reveal loose soil. I do a sign of the cross and enter the corridor of the house. Father emerges to greet me. He must have seen me through the French windows. We share a hasty embrace and ask after each other's welfare. His belly is robust, and I recognise his disarming smile dancing on his moustached lips, illuminating his dark and chubby face. I let my travelling bag rest on a chair made of fabric-covered wrought iron.

*

'I wonder why my father came to you. He never met you, you know, Err; he died of typhoid two weeks before you were born. I feel jealous, you know.'

'You gave me his name, Dad,' I respond, surprised at his utterance. I took a quick shower before, and we are now sitting in the expansive compound facing the grave. Around us, dusk is germinating with its accompanying pastoral sounds: the chirping of insects, the cawing of birds flying to their nests, and the lone hooting of an owl. Before us, a wooden table holds a transparent jar of palm wine and two full glasses. My grandmother is missing, and when I enquire after her, Dad says she went to stay with Auntie Adaku for the weekend. Adaku is my father's eldest sister. Father had returned to the village to begin afresh when the bank he worked in declared bankruptcy and folded. He started a financial firm, which thrived in the area, and swore never to return to the city, to my mother's chagrin. Although his decision put a strain on the family, they met each other halfway by visiting in turns every fortnight.

'I still wonder why he didn't come to me. I am his first. Or he would have gone to my brother Udoka, even if that one is a drunk and they never got along in his lifetime.' Father pauses for a while. 'But he would have gotten across to Adaku, his favourite. She nursed him diligently before he passed. Hmm.' He swigs his palm wine. 'Despite my yearly sacrifices to him and our ancestors, he chose you, hmm.'

Father's making a mountain out of a molehill. I've never seen him react like this before. He has a right to feel the way he's feeling, but I'm surprised this bothers him.

'It doesn't matter,' I quip.

'Well, he has given you a task, you'll get it to it, then.'

‘But Grandma and her help sweep the compound every morning. They would have seen to the wedding, at least.’

Father shoots me a stern look, and I fake a loud yawn.

*

I squat beside the grave with a mason. I had called him the previous night to explain the task ahead, and he’d reeled off the items to be bought, which I did before 9 a.m. at the morning market in the neighbouring town of Oko. The mason, Chike, who had handled minor works for my father, got to work at 10 a.m., and in less than an hour, he had finished the job. I pay him after supervising the work. The grave wears a new look. Dark tiles cover its length, and a headstone bearing my grandfather’s name stands at the edge. Father joins me later. Together, we stand watching the new grave as a cock crows in the background.

*

I see the door to my room creak ajar in slow motion. Moonlight fills the dark opening space. A silhouette is carved into the silver background. My heart thuds a little, skipping a few beats. The night is still; the air is chilly. I sit up in bed and fumble with the knob of the rechargeable lantern I had charged before the generator spluttered off before midnight. The light doesn’t come on. I try again and again, and a watery voice stills my jittery fingers.

‘Don’t bother, it won’t come on.’

I relax my unsteady hand.

‘I’m here to thank you for what you have done for me, for your kindness. I know the question drumming in your heart, and I’ll answer you. The reason I chose you for this task is because I live in you. We share the same semblance, and I’ve watched you and led you thus far. For this act, I’ll lead you farther, even beyond your expectations. I’ll keep watching you, and you’ll feel the extraordinary signs of my presence at your lowest moments. I say no more than this.

‘As for my son, your father, tell him I love him, and I and his ancestors appreciate all he’s doing, and we are watching over him. In fact, I’ll visit him tonight and repeat this to him so he believes it when you tell him. I await their sacrifices this Ikeji festival. I see you’ve bought a deodorant. Your smell is better.’

A smile twists my lips, and as I blink in the dark, a bright light sears my eyes, and I shut them. When I open them and try to adjust to the brightness, a cock is passionately crowing in the background. From the parted curtains, daylight penetrates the window and embraces my awakening state. My heart expands as mirth fills it. At this moment, I feel accomplished, and the weight of my worries drops off my shoulders.

The Hand That Feeds

by Phoebe Bush

Content Warnings: Violence, blood, limb amputation, claustrophobia.

Not your thing? Skip to page 21 for the next story.

You stand there, your beard grizzled and your face lined with pain.

The sight of you is enough to bring my bold laughter to an end. It leaves me glancing around at the amassed Asgardians, at the several gold-clad gods smiling and holding a length of ribbon that seems fit for little more than binding a woman's dress.

You told me it was little more than a challenge: a test of strength for the beast who could crush the skulls of frost giants, who could rattle the World Tree with his howl.

But if you knew, if you truly believed it, why linger at the back like a stranger? Why come all of this way, to this island surrounded by mountains, to appear so shamefaced?

Doubt leeches into me as I snuff at the broken chains in the dirt.

'Very well,' I decide. 'I shall test my strength once more.' Your eyes meet mine in the crowd. 'But if I am to trust you, then one of you must put your hand in my mouth.'

The Asgardians part, they part and part and part until they reveal you: gripping at your cloak – lost as any toddling mortal child. You edge back as if to refuse.

Then, someone steps forth and smacks you squarely on the back.

'Come along, Tyr!' they cry. 'Go on, Tyr!' 'Be careful of those teeth, Tyr!'

As if you were not the one who fed me scraps from the butcher's block, as if you weren't the one to scratch the itches behind my ears. As if you were never the one to wrestle with me in the dust, then laugh as I pinned you down and licked your face.

You approach me on unsteady legs. And that, my Tyr, is how I know it is a trap. You never meet my gaze, and in a small voice, you say: 'Please. Do not do this.'

'And forsake my honour? A little late for that, don't you think?'

You glance back to your weak, fleshy kin. Your jaw works, on the verge of doing, on the verge of saying. Instead, you extend your hand.

I shudder. I tell myself it is merely from the droplets that cling to my fur, from my swim across the lake. Not your action. Not your choice of *them* over *me*.

‘Very well,’ you say. ‘I shall put my hand into the mouth of the beast.’

The beast. Not Fenris Wolf. Not Fenrir. Not even, with a touch of fondness, Fen.

I snarl. You pale, and I am suddenly, perversely glad of it. If you can play your little part in front of your friends, then so can I. Call me a beast, and a beast I will be.

Upholding the charade, I open my maw and allow you to place your hand inside.

Your palm is smooth against my tongue, and your fingers splay across my taste buds as I close my jaws – my front teeth touching the bare skin of your wrist.

You inhale, sharp. Whether from the realisation that you may lose your hand or the wet warmth of my jaws, I do not know. ‘Are you afraid, Tyr?’ I ask.

You take a steadying breath. ‘No.’

‘Good. After all, what is this but a game of strength?’

You wince, and I know it is anything but.

‘Unless, of course, you are lying to me?’

‘Please,’ you beg, like a dog. ‘Please. Don’t make this any harder.’

Your words take me aback, and suddenly, I want nothing more than for this to be over, to hear you beg for mercy. ‘Begin,’ I growl.

Asgardians, foolish, fickle things, do not think I notice their sighs of relief nor their speed as they bind me. But my attention is not on them, not the ribbon, not the way the lake reflects the swelling grey heavens and mountains.

No. In that moment, my burning stare only belongs to you, old friend.

The tang of salt spreads across my tongue as you begin to sweat. Beads of it glisten on your forehead. What next? The salt of tears, the metallic taste of blood?

The ribbon is pulled taut. It bites through my fur and into my skin. Then, like the chains before it, it is tied carefully to the metal rings hammered into the rock – proof that this was planned and that all present came to this story knowing its end.

Yes, Tyr, including you. With smug grins and satisfied nods, the Asgardians step back. All, of course, apart from you. You give me the barest of nods.

Go on, then, it says. *Go ahead, try and break it.*

‘Come along, Wolf,’ says one Asgardian, leaning on a hammer. ‘We don’t have all day.’

Shame courses hot through me like I have devoured the sun. I want to crush him in my jaws. I want to seize each and every one of them and tear them to shreds. But you, you who have wounded me deepest and most, you I would never touch. Not after today.

My muscles bunch as I strain under the ribbon. I dig my claws into the dirt, trying to find purchase, some sort of breaking point. But no matter how I twist or thrash or try to wrestle my way free of the ribbon, it only tightens.

I begin to tremble. My breaths come in harsh, fast pants.

The Asgardians are cheering. I can hear them laughing, congratulating one another.

But I am trapped. I am trapped, I am trapped—

‘Steady, Fen,’ you say, laying your free hand on my snout. ‘It’s all right, I’m here.’

Your words have always been a balm to me. In that moment, they are again: my fur lies flat, my muscles unclench. Then, you say: ‘There we go, Fen. Good boy.’

As if you were not the one who put me here in the first place.

My eyes meet yours. You look tired, saddened, no doubt seeing not the monster I have become but the pup I once was, tail wagging, stumbling at your heels.

Good, I think, my tongue moving against your palm.

‘The beast is bound!’ cheers the one with the hammer. ‘Asgardians, rejoice!’

I bow my head as the crowd celebrates, letting them think me bound, letting them think me tethered. Letting them think, just for a moment, that they have won.

You sigh, thinking the same, and go to slip your hand from my mouth.

Except, you cannot. Not with my teeth closed around your wrist.

An ugly snarl echoes through me, rattling the iron rings hammered into the rock, rippling the water of the surrounding lake, cracking the dry ground at my feet.

The crowd goes silent, and you tug feebly at your trapped wrist.

‘Fen?’ you ask. ‘Fen, please. What are you doing?’

‘Betrayal!’ I hiss. ‘You came to me with truth but have given me nothing but lies!’

‘Fen, please. Come on, Fen. Let me go.’

‘You promised a test of strength and have shown me weakness.’

A group of Asgardians stagger towards us and try to drag you free.

‘You were my friend,’ I say, voice breaking. ‘But have become my enemy.’

You are on your knees, now. You are pale and whimpering. The Asgardians seize my mouth, yank desperately at my muzzle. But there is only one way this could end, and you knew it. You knew it the moment you held out your hand to me.

‘For this,’ I say. ‘There is but one price.’

You scream, a horrible sound, as I wrench my head to one side and tear off your hand. Then, with a single snap of my jaws, I take the twitching limb that once fed me, and I swallow it whole.

Backpacking Through the Book of Exodus, or I Get a Gig as God's Social Media Manager and Satan's Reluctant Sidekick

by Rowan Tate

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 38 for the next story.

I am hitchhiking in Jordan when Yahweh pulls over. He's driving a Saab 900 Convertible and has his hair up in a man bun. I can't explain how I know it's him except that there's no way you wouldn't. He pulls over and looks at me over his vintage Kalichromes.

— Are you getting in?

— Where are you going? I ask.

— Just out for a drive. Nothing's too inconvenient.

I stand there dumbly a little longer, listening to the Smiths' 'The Boy with the Thorn in His Side' pulse through his speakers. Then I get in. I hold my backpack in my lap like it's a child. There's a ginger and acerola kombucha in his cup holder.

— What do you have in that bag?

— Clothes.

— I hope not garments of cloth made of two kinds of material, or clothes of wool and linen woven together.

— Um.

— I'm just kidding. Where are you going?

— Wadi Musa.

— You don't want to go to Wadi Rum?

— I have a whole itinerary.

— That's great.

— It's not really open to discussion.

— No worries.

Yahweh puts the Saab in motion.

— How come you have a car? I say.

— Oh, I'm looking for the Ark of the Covenant.

— You lost it?

— *I* didn't lose it, Yahweh clarifies. *They* did.

— You don't know where they put it?

— It's been a while.

— I thought you know everything.

— Did I say that?

— They say that.

— People say a lot of things about you when you're God.

Yahweh slows to let someone pass him.

— So why do you need the Ark of the Covenant?

— I left something in there.

— Now it occurs to you?

— With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

He winks. We drive to his playlist of indie pop-rock soundtracks until he reaches over to turn it off.

— Could I ask you for a favour? he says.

— As long as you don't make me pregnant.

— Fair.

— What do you want?

— Could you help me set up my socials?

— As in media?

— Instagram, TikTok, whatever.

— You want an Instagram account?

— I've heard people don't read much anymore.

— You don't have a PR guy in heaven?

— That's the kind of stuff I usually outsource.

— I'm a humanities major who reads and has no social media; maybe I'm not the best pick for the job.

— Those are the ones I usually like.

— How has that worked out for you?

— You know what else I like?

— Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

— You're hilarious. A good brunch spot. Do you want eggs Benedict?

We stop to eat at a trendy restaurant, the kind with a moss wall and exposed bulbs and a monochromatic palate. Yahweh requests a table on the outdoor patio.

— My treat, he says, sitting across from me.

— You've been here before?

— One of the seraphim recommended it. He said they make their own sourdough bread.

— Everyone used to do that, I say. Now we pay \$10 for a slice of toast.

Yahweh can't decide between the eggs Benedict or the peaches and salmon salad, so he orders them both, with a mimosa. I order fried chicken and waffles. The waiter leaves with our order. Yahweh leans in.

— What do you think is a good username? he asks.

— Um.

— No 123s. Something memorable. With personality.

— Funny, I say dryly, I would have thought you were more into omnipresence than online presence.

— Let's hope this wit of yours translates to your captions.

— I can't tell if this is a joke.

— I'm God, he says. I have to be where the people are, keep up with the times.

— How do you expect anyone to believe it's actually you?

A waiter brings us our drinks.

— I want to reach a wider audience, Yahweh says after a sip.

— The Bible is the best-selling book of all time.

— Try it, he says, offering me his drink.

I wave his hand away.

— What exactly will you post? Prophecies? Supernatural reports? Hashtag blessed?

— I have some pretty epic throwback Thursdays in mind.

— 'Throwback to when I created light.'

— Oh, that's a good one.

— No, it's not, I say, smoothing a napkin across my lap. No one does that anymore.

— You wouldn't know, you're not doing it.

— Well, now I am, I say. And I have some terms and conditions.

— Girls have gotten so assertive in this millennium, it's nice to see.

— No recruiting influencers to be prophets.

— So 2000 BC, Yahweh quips, rolling his eyes.

— No smiting or turning people into pillars of salt.

— That was one time.

— Deal?

— That's it?

— Is this a paid gig?

— It is more blessed to give than to receive, for with the measure you give freely the Lord will repay you tenfold.

— So, pro bono.

— A hundredfold.

— Whatever.

— I'll get you a milkshake.

— Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever.

I find Yahweh predictable, in that he has a habit of intruding suddenly on humans and demanding absurd acts from them. He has big emotions and a good sense of humour, seems sensitive and overly concerned about his image, given his oscillations between being very private and very public. I ask Yahweh to tell me funny stories about Jesus as a kid while we eat. He obliges and is apologetic about not being able to ask Jesus to join us, given that Jesus promised not to eat or drink until the kingdom of God is fulfilled.

— Jesus has nice hair, I say, wiping my fingers.

Yahweh's mouth is full of smoked salmon and mint.

— Nicer than mine, I say. And longer.

— It runs in the family, he says.

Yahweh reaches over the table and takes a stab at my waffle. I take out my phone and download Instagram.

— This is really out of character for me, you know, I say, typing.

— Is @god taken? he asks. Or @yahweh?

— Shockingly, yes.

— By who?

— Some guy named Joseph.

I show him.

— I don't see anything.

— His account is private.

— Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight!

— Let's try El Shaddai or Jehovah, I say, typing. Yea. They're taken. It's pretty late in the game for monograms.

— Alpha and Omega?

— That's kind of a lot.

— I go by many names.

— Can you get one of these usernames back?

— Can I?

— Never mind, I'll make a filler. You can always change it.

I type '@godjustpostingstuff.'

— What do you want to use as your profile picture?

— No one has ever seen the face of God and lived, he says.

— I'm looking right at you, I say.

— For now.

— Do you want me to take a picture for you?

— Sure.

Yahweh drops me off at Mousa's Spring, trying to act like he's not sentimental about being back where he and the Israelites got to know each other while hanging out in the desert for forty years in moderate dysfunction.

— How do I contact you? If I have any questions?

— Don't worry about that, Yahweh says.

— Do you want to see something before I post it?

— I trust you.

— Are you sure? I wouldn't. Do you have a phone number?

— From my distress, I called upon the Lord and he answered me.

Silence.

— Just kidding.

Petra is great. A part of me wishes Yahweh had been there to provide historical context and also dinner. I spend two nights in Wadi Rum with the Bedouins and forget about the Instagram account.

The Levant is perhaps the most invaded part of the world. It's been conquered by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonians, the Jews, the Romans, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Fatimids, the Seljuk Turks, the Crusader Armies, the Mamluks, the Mongols, the Ottomans, the British, the French and the United States. The food is that good. I find it funny how everyone reacts when I tell them I am solo backpacking in the Middle East. They don't seem to realise the most unsafe cities in the world are in the Americas.

I am standing on the King's Highway with my fist thrust out for a ride when Satan pulls up in a Bugatti W16 Mistral. I turn away and groan.

— Hey there, he says.

— Absolutely not.

— Don't be like that. I got you *knafeh*.

He waves a styrofoam box between us.

— How did you know?

— From roaming to and fro.

— Is there a Bible verse for this?

— Get in.

I do. His hair is slicked back, and the sleeves of his linen button-up are rolled past his elbows. He smells spicy, bergamot and sandalwood. There are Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses propped on his head.

— What do you want? I say.

— Where are we going?

— Aqaba.

— Ride a boat, he advises coolly. You can see four countries from the Gulf: Egypt, Israel, Jordan *and* Saudi Arabia.

— Did Yahweh put you up to this?

— I heard you're his new social media manager.

— I haven't done anything yet.

— What's in it for you?

— Another bullet point on my resume.
— Under ‘dishwasher at Denny’s’?
— I knew that was you.
— Don’t be like that, Satan says, feigning hurt. I was just as disappointed as you were.

— Am I going to get in trouble for this?
Satan hands me a warm takeaway box of sticky pastry.
— Yahweh’s chill, he says and hands me his iPhone. Pick a Spotify playlist.
— Since when is Yahweh chill, Genesis or Revelation?
— Okay, I’m picking.
— Jazz would be great.
— Blues or ragtime?
— You have too much time on your hands.
Satan flicks his sunglasses onto his nose and blasts the air conditioning.
— Eternity is a long time, he says.

The King’s Highway was a 5,000-mile-long trading route that arched from Egypt to Syria. We call it Highway 35 now. It’s a single-lane tarmacked road that demands a motorcycle. Satan says he’s done that before, not too long ago, and it felt like flying through fire. I know he knows I’m jealous.

— Are you helping Yahweh look for the Ark of the Covenant? I ask.
Satan cocks his head.
— Is that why he’s been so hard to pin down recently?
— Maybe I wasn’t supposed to mention that.
— Don’t worry about it, he says. I’m good at keeping secrets.
— You know where it is.
— I didn’t say that.
— Where is it?

Satan turns the volume up.

I turn it back down.

— Do you have an Instagram account?
— If I did, no offence, but I wouldn’t hire you to manage it.
— Not offended, I say. I don’t even have one.
— Do you want to charge your phone?

Satan hands me a cord. I check my battery.

— Girl, please, he says. I know you.

It is extremely unclear how I am supposed to go about being God on the internet. Does he ‘friend’ everyone, or does he accept the request of whoever is bold enough to follow a private account for God with no posts and no followers? Is his content cryptic or clear? Are we selling something? Do I even know God well enough to curate his online image? Satan says my stress is giving him a headache, and this is my thing, not his, so can we please focus on the glass-bottom boat excursion and enjoy it while it lasts?

In the *oud*-incensed lobby of the hotel where Satan has gotten us two rooms, I splice together a reel of us in Aqaba: a spread of *sayyadie* and *houh*, Satan’s head poking out of the sand, pretend sword fighting in Mamluk Castle. Satan says he’s flattered and could I airdrop that to him, please, but it’s probably not the best move to put content on Yahweh’s account that has him in it. I say, duh, of course I did it for practice. He ruffles my hair. Satan wants to go to the Berenice Beach Club. I pretend to fall asleep immediately. He pokes me as if I’m dead. Let’s go to Egypt, I say, snapping upright suddenly. Been there, done that, he says.

We go to Egypt. At the border, I catch a glimpse of Satan’s passport, which reads Lucius Shaitan. He skips breakfast, sips on a double-shot cappuccino. I notice he’s wearing Gucci. Once we’re on the ferry, I ask him to retell historical events from his point of view. Satan says these days he prefers to be less controversial.

— Oh my God, look.

— Darling, I’m driving.

— You missed it. Why didn’t you stop? Turn around!

— I’m only stopping if it’s the Ark of the Covenant, Bulgakov, or a bathroom.

— It was a bathroom.

— We’ll stop for lunch in an hour and a half, deal?

— But I want *that*.

— May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I do not get you *feteer meshaltet*.

Meshaltet is a flaky pastry of layered dough, ghee and cheese. I want to marry it. Satan says it can do better. My mouth is full, so I can neither snap back nor be offended. Maybe God is a

foodie? I say, filming the cheese pull as I reach for another slice. Satan seems displeased. Whatever you post will be more a reflection of you than of God, he comments. Since the beginning of time, I say in response, man has been making God in his image. Satan raises an eyebrow. I watch him eat his *hamam mahshi* (rice-stuffed pigeon) with a knife and a fork. Satan is bougie. He seems misunderstood. I ask him, do you feel misunderstood? He chews slowly, swallows a sip of Chateau Des Reves Cabernet Sauvignon and dabs at his mouth with a cloth napkin. Everything that you are not, he says, you misunderstand.

We make it to Cairo that night. Satan gets me a three-star room by the Nile and forwards me the booking confirmation. He says he has some errands to run, can I take it from here? I feel slightly deflated. Thank God, I say. Good riddance. He drops me off by the National Museum and waves with two fingers as he merges into traffic. It's an hour to sunset. The museum is closed. I check Google Maps for bus routes. The internet says Al Azhar Park is the best place to watch the sunset.

I'm in bed, damp with a shower and Dead Sea lotion, tired but not tired enough to sleep, googling *where is the ark of the covenant*. Apparently, it was last seen before the Babylonians sacked the temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C., which is a long time ago. Some say it is hidden underground in the Holy of Holies or in a maze of tunnels. Possibly the Prophet Jeremiah hid it in a cave on Mount Nebo, which is in Jordan, and I could have checked. The Ethiopian Orthodox church claims it is guarded by a virgin monk in a chapel in the small highland town of Aksum, due to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba having a son who snagged it as a souvenir of sorts. Apparently, Ron Wyatt found the Ark in the 1980s with the Ten Commandments inside and Christ's blood on the mercy seat, which he had DNA tested. I wonder what on earth Yahweh needs it for now, 4,000 years later.

The hotel breakfast the next day is modest, with *baladi* flatbread, *foul medames*, a white fresh cheese called *gibna beda* and a tomato-cucumber salad. I arrange my plate to look like a face and look for a table. I sit by the window. The man in front of me is reading a scroll. The back of his neck is sunburnt and peeling. I eat with my fingers. The man gets up for seconds. When he comes back, I choke on my fava beans.

- I thought you were in Jordan, Yahweh says, setting his plate down on his table.
- I was, I say, covering my mouth as I chew. Yesterday.
- Come sit here, he says. Or do you want me to move?

I move.

— Is that Hebrew?

— Second Maccabees. Do you want tea?

— It's too hot for tea.

— I like it, Yahweh says, leaning back in his chair. It's like being in a sauna.

— This explains why the Bible wasn't set in Canada.

I pull up Instagram on my phone and turn it towards him. Yahweh bends over it, peering.

— How many followers do I have?

— Twelve.

— Twelve? But I have so many followers in real life. How is that possible?

— It's Instagram. You're competing with cat videos and influencer reels. It takes time to build an audience.

— You're not trying very hard.

— I am not.

I take my phone back. The first post is a carousel of videos mirroring the days of creation: the writhe of water, a time-lapse of the sky, grass bobbing in a breeze, a skittering lizard. Caption: the heaven and earth were created in six days, who is to say your life can't change in one? Some epic photos from Wadi Rum. There was a camel meme, but on second thought, I deleted it.

— We could do a TikTok dance, I say. It would break the internet.

— As long as it doesn't break the Seventh Seal, that should be fine.

— I don't really get it.

— Have you read Revelations?

— No, I mean why you're on Instagram.

— It's just a fad.

— Since when do you give in to fads?

— Kings were a fad. Prophets were a fad.

— Animal sacrifice was a fad.

— They're useful, he says, ignoring that.

— For what?

— For my mission?

— Which is?

He hugs his cup of tea with both hands and gives me a goofy grin.

Yahweh is a bit of a nerd about Egypt. He thinks the gods are funny and gets carried away reading hieroglyphics. Humans are so creative, he says, endeared. He tells me about the Museo Egizio in Torino and its sixty-foot-long papyrus scroll of the Book of the Dead. They have a replica of the Hall of Kings, but would I like to see the real one? I say *um, yes*, and we check out together, getting in his convertible and driving towards the pyramids to a playlist of Tamer Hosny and Hisham Abbas. To my delight, he knows all the words to Amr Diab's 'Illa Habibi.'

The pyramids are insane. I cry. I ask Yahweh how they did it, and he says telekinesis.

Waiting in line to purchase our entrance tickets at the Visitor Centre, I wonder what people's reaction would be if they realised God was standing behind them.

— Do you hide things and then forget about them on purpose?

— What, like a scavenger hunt?

— So you won't get bored.

— Humans are very entertaining, Yahweh says. I could never get bored.

— We are very dramatic.

— I know.

— Do you like watching movies?

— Yes, he says.

— What kind? I say.

— Period dramas, he says.

— *Pride and Prejudice*.

— Right? he says.

— The BBC version?

— A girl after my own heart.

The line shuffles forward.

— Do you ever think about getting rid of mosquitoes?

I stick out my bite-dotted arm between us.

— Or not the mosquitoes, I offer, just the stinging juice.

Yahweh makes a pouty face, lining his arm up next to mine. We compare polkadots.

— I am not really in charge of micropredators' evolutionary biology, Yahweh says sadly.

— That's unfortunate. My next complaint was going to be ingrown hairs.

— Jesus said shared toilet sponges, but you've resolved that since then, it seems.

— I'm going to be honest, sometimes I wonder how much you care about our suffering.

— And?

— It's just that I see some areas that could be improved on.

— That's good, I'm glad.

— That I'm complaining?

— No, that you care enough to look.

— Oh.

A fan fills the silence with the sound of someone endlessly clearing their throat.

— Is that not annoying? I whisper.

— My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, he whispers back.

— You're not helping.

— It is *very* annoying.

In the tombs, Yahweh explains that the pharaohs' tombs moved to the Valley of the Kings because the pyramids kept getting robbed. He points out the false walls, dummy passages, drop traps and 'diversion' chambers with lesser treasures to distract thieves, all of which ultimately failed, given that we are standing in their sacred tombs. Egyptians thought the brain was useless, did you know? They loved board games and were scared of hippopotami and were the first people depicted juggling. Yahweh goes on and on. I zone out. I find it hard to wrap my mind around the fact that there were 3,000 years of Egyptian history after the Great Pyramid was built, and then came the Romans, and then came the invention of sliced bread, 2,000 years later.

On the way to dinner, we have a car accident. It's more my fault than Yahweh's because I asked for a stick of gum, and he looked down to get the Hubba Bubba, and in that split second, the car in front of us stopped, and he hit it. It's just a bump, and we are trying not to make a big deal out of it. The guy in front is trying to make money off of us. I am getting hungry. I imagine getting sunstroke. Why don't you travel around in a chariot of fire? I ask while we wait for the guy to get his documents. Yahweh says they don't give permits for those these days.

Yahweh puts his dented convertible in gear.

- Sorry about that, I say. It was my fault.
- That's alright, he was nice in the end.
- Anyone will be nice to you if you give them money.
- Including you.
- Especially me.
- What do you want?
- Isn't it obvious?
- I'm pretty dehydrated.
- The Ark of the Covenant.
- I knew it.
- I'm undercover for the FBI. I've been using you for information this whole time.
- I will feed you to the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields!
- Feed me anything, please, I'll take it.
- Do your parents know where you are and what you're up to?
- I gesture vaguely to the palm trees and billboard ads springing up around us and say, these are my mother and these are my brothers.

It is dusk when we get to the Al Moudira Hotel. Sticky and sun-slick, we lean back into the cool of the evening. I stare at the spacelessness of sky as if into Earth's eyes.

- Do you ever miss the old world? I ask.
- Air conditioning is nice.
- It's been a lot.
- The feeling's mutual.
- It's just that it's really hard to get a job these days.
- Am I not paying you enough?
- You're not paying me at all.
- We are literally parked in front of a five-star resort.
- I've submitted forty applications and *nothing*.
- Were any of those your dream job?
- I don't *want* a job.
- I don't understand, Yahweh says. Am I not answering your prayer?
- I don't want to be a cog in the machine. I don't want to make spreadsheets. I want to go back in time to a world more enchanted than this.

— I'm not convinced the world is any less enchanted.

— Were the gods real?

— They've retired now.

— No worries, we've replaced them with celebrities.

Yahweh cracks his neck.

— Humans have always needed someone to look up to and something to believe in,
he says.

— You've been trying to talk to us for a long time, I say quietly.

— You seemed lonely and confused.

— You didn't really make it any less confusing.

Silence.

— I met Satan.

— I figured he'd reach out.

— He's a charmer. Great attention to detail.

— One of the best.

Yahweh opens the door. I peel my thighs off the seat.

— Do you worry about AI?

— I invented you, Yahweh says, the original AI. I've been worried for ages.

In bed, I spend too much time staring at the mostly inactive Instagram page, wondering if there is anything I could do to convince anyone this is God.

I don't see Yahweh at breakfast the next day and assume he slept in. He misses out on baked feta, persimmons and fresh honeycomb. I go for a swim and do a hot yoga session. I shower and comb out my pixie and wish I could put my hair up. This trip ended up being much nicer than I had planned, I say to the gold-encrusted mirror. There's a knock on my door. It's Yahweh. Don't I look revived, what do I have planned for today? My plan is I have no plan, I say. Would I mind following a lead on the Ark while he sorts out a little emergency? Not at all. Great, Yahweh says. Satan will be going with you.

We drive to the airport, and Yahweh leaves the car, saying Michael will pick it up later. My flight to Istanbul leaves from gate A15 and his flight to South Sudan leaves from gate B2. I offer to buy him a coffee while we stand around. He says no thanks, he had two cups already.

I'm going to assume this isn't a dangerous mission, given that you're sending me, I say.
Don't be afraid of dying, he says. It's like taking a long nap.

Yahweh walks me to my gate since my flight leaves first. I tell him I like to be the last one boarding so I can stand less and also sit in an open row if I see one. He says *that's my girl*, and we sit to the side, watching people crowd behind the ticket counter.

— Didn't you have anything better to do? I ask him.

— I can't think of any.

— An Instagram account, a lost box and a depressed Gen Z-er were the most pressing crisis.

Yahweh seems confused.

— What are your priorities? I ask.

— You've just graduated and don't know what to do with your life, you're estranged from your family and have no home to go back to, you need counselling, but you can't afford it, and you're afraid of growing up because you've had to be a grown-up all your life.

The silence between us pulses.

— But you haven't fixed any of that, I say quietly.

— I just thought you'd like to not be alone.

— There she is, Satan says, sliding his phone into his back pocket. He is leaning back against his Bugatti Mistral, wearing a white rib-knit collared shirt and white trousers.

— Did you get a tattoo?

— It's henna, he says, but yours are nice.

— Thanks, I say. Tell me, do divine beings communicate by email or text?

— By carrier pigeon.

He opens the car door for me. There's sparkling water in the cup holders.

— I don't understand this, I say.

— That's kind of our *schtick*, he says.

The door closes. Satan gets in. As the car starts, so does Sharmoofers' 'Easy Money'.

— Are you tired of shawarmas yet? he asks.

Satan takes me to his favourite spot, Alagar Döner, and we order two doner kebabs, one spicy and one not. It feels hotter inside the kebab shop than it is outside. They call our order; Satan grabs the bag and tips. I open the door for him. He begins to step, then jumps back and

screams like a little girl. A whip snake is coiled on the step. I stomp my foot beside it, and it skitters away.

— You're scared of snakes?

— I'm scared of snakes, he says.

— You're welcome, I say.

— Thank you.

We sit outside and unwrap our shawarmas.

— You know, you're surprisingly nice.

— Well, you make my job easy.

— What's your title exactly?

— It's like a prosecuting attorney.

— Is that a good guy or a bad guy?

— It's part of the heavenly court, Satan says, but I spend more time down here than up there.

— Doing what?

— Let's say I help you want God.

— By making us suffer?

Satan has taken a bite and holds up a finger while he swallows.

— You're going to suffer whether I'm involved or not, he says. I help you see what it's for.

— 'Everything happens for a reason.'

— No, he says, but it can be made meaningful.

— Do you like it?

— There is no work-life balance.

— We keep multiplying, sorry.

— Well, it was a command.

We chew, heat-soaked. When we finish, I crumple my wrapper, and Satan folds his into a square.

— Do you ever go by Lucifer? I ask.

— Only in fanfiction.

— Were you the snake in the Garden of Eden?

— No, he says. That was just a talking snake.

The kebab is all right, but I don't tell Satan that. I say *this hit the spot* and *thank you very much*.

Back in the car, Satan offers me hand sanitiser.

— Where are we going? he asks.

— You're asking me?

— I've been instructed to transport the Ark of the Covenant safely back to its place of origin.

— We found it?

Silence.

— Oh, come on, I say.

— Humans are so literal these days, he says, amused.

— What about the Instagram?

— I don't think Yahweh ever cared about that.

I stare at my face in my phone's black screen.

— Then what was it for?

Satan smiles.

— I think he just wanted an excuse to check in on you.

I tell Satan I need a nice view to think, so he takes me to Menekşe Sahil, and we sit on a bench facing the Sea of Marmara at golden hour. Satan offers to share a cigar. It's a Padron. I accept. God has a very strange way of making introductions, I say. It's been uphill since Job, he says. The air around us becomes sweet and smoky. An ant crawls up my arm, and I let it. It curls across my skin in confusion. The sun sets, and the cigar shortens. The ant is crossing deserts across my body. I wonder what I would tell it, if I could become an ant to help it find its way home.

Miracle Aisle

by Bethany L. Sherwood

Content Warnings: Mild self-harm.

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

A shattered lotion bottle is waiting for you in the makeup aisle as you make your rounds an hour before the store opens. Broom in hand, you slouch onward, wilting under the half-power lights because, once again, you stayed up too late, too bored to sleep, too tired to find something to do.

No one in their right mind would connect the smell – sweet, thick, underlaid with notes of off-gassing plastic – with the cherry blossoms on the bottle. You can smell the lotion two aisles away, which means it'll probably linger long enough for your manager to complain about it to you when she arrives. An hour from now, right as the store opens.

The glass shards look more like plastic in the pre-customer gloom, scattered across the tile floor you have swept every day since you were hired, but the expected puddles of knock-off lotion are nowhere in sight. Not a smear on the remains of the bottle. Just the clean, glittering glass and the smell haunting the air.

Just like yesterday and the day before.

Your knees crack when you bend down to examine the mess, because you're on your feet all day here, but it's not the right kind of exercise, so every joint sounds off like popping bubble wrap. Something in your back twinges, thanks to falling asleep on the couch again instead of your bed, when you finally did sleep, but none of this is new. Just more of the same routine, down to the broken lotion bottle here in the makeup aisle, which you could buy for yourself if you felt like spending three hours' worth of your paycheck, ten per cent employee discount included.

Up close, you see one of the glass shards has a tiny mark on it. Your heart kicks a little as you peer at it, holding your breath against the fake cherry blossom reek, so sharp your eyes water. And there, just like you hoped, is a tiny handprint. Three fingers and a thumb, the whole thing smaller than the nail on your pinky.

Can't be a miracle. Nothing so holy could happen under the bleached light pouring out of the overheads – full strength now, heralding half an hour till the customers arrive – but *it is* a mystery. You take the shard, cup it in the cradle of your palm, and gently wipe the handprint away. Then into your pocket it goes, not a moment's hesitation, and you don't think about why as you sweep the rest of the mess into your dustpan.

*

That wasn't so bad, you tell yourself as you walk out of the store nine hours after you walked in. An hour for lunch, two fifteen-minute breaks; you only got one today because the front was short a cashier, so instead of letting you clock out early, your manager had you spend the last fifteen minutes of your shift in the break room. Which at least has air conditioning. Your car does not.

No one is an outright dick, most of the time, and so what if the store only pays you the absolute minimum legal wage? So what if it's been two years and you still have no idea what your options are, let alone which ones are appealing. Easier to stay right here, as-is, pacing the aisles of the store like the minotaur who hunted through the labyrinth. Except the minotaur wasn't looking for a way out, was it? Well then, neither are you.

*

Your manager starts off your next shift with a lecture, or as she puts it, *checking the connections*. She loves phrases like that, or *touching base*, or *getting on the same page*, each one a package of nothing, as neat as the boxes of diapers and ten-packs of men's underwear, and she spends most of the lecture running through all her greatest hits. *Let's circle back. We want you guys to think of us like a family here. Teamwork is one of our core values. It's going to be a real game-changer. Let's keep our eyes on the ball.*

'There have been some issues with shrinkage,' she says when she finally closes in on her point. 'I'm not pointing fingers, but it's not looking great, guys.'

Across the circle, two of the garden centre guys are dozing on their feet. Next to them, the shift lead for the health and beauty section is checking her makeup on her phone's camera. It is, as always, exquisite. She smells like cherry blossom lotion, which, as a shift lead, she gets at fifteen per cent off. All you think of as you smell it is the glitter of broken glass on a dingy tile floor.

Without thinking too hard about it (you're still not interested in asking yourself *why*, about any of this), you slide your hand into your pocket and press a fingertip to the point of the glass shard you couldn't make yourself throw away. Not hard enough to break the skin, just hard enough to hurt. After you pull your finger away, it throbs. You hope it'll ache all day.

'...listening? You come in early enough to see if anyone's broken in.'

You jolt back to the present with a reflex nod. Your manager very clearly does not roll her eyes, but her lips briefly purse. She doesn't like you, for reasons you have yet to discover, but they can't be very good ones since you've been here for two years and she hasn't tried to get rid of you yet.

Or maybe you're just that good at your job. Now it's your turn to purse your lips, to hold back a smile your manager will almost definitely misinterpret.

'I've checked the security footage,' you say, which is true, but not for the reasons your manager would prefer. 'There hasn't been—'

Your manager waves your words away. 'It's not always about what's on the footage,' she says. While you're trying to parse that, she adds, 'If it's too much responsibility for you...'

Obvious bait, but you rise to it anyways. 'I'll take care of it,' you say, even though you don't care about this job, or your responsibilities, whatever they are, or this so-called 'shrinkage'. Your hand folds closed around the glass shard, tight enough to feel every vicious edge. Hard enough to cut.

*

You offered blood. Everything else makes perfect sense when you view it from that angle.

*

The whole store is short-staffed today, so you get stuck till closing.

'It's fine,' you say when your manager makes the pretence of asking. 'Happy to help.'

A lie so thin a sneeze would shatter it, but it does the trick. You are a good member of the little store family in your manager's eyes, for now.

Staying late today means you get to pace up and down the aisles of the health and beauty section for an extra five hours. From here, you can't see the exits, not a single one.

Not even an exit sign.

‘Take an extra break if you need it,’ says your manager over her shoulder as she walks away. ‘Your contributions are noted!’

You think about how she hasn’t said your name once in two years.

Now: here you are, wandering your part of the labyrinth, the whole four aisles of it. You ask the customers – the *guests*, your manager wants you to call them – if they need help finding anything. If they have any questions. None of them do, most of them don’t even meet your eyes, but that’s fine. That’s business as usual. You keep moving, smiling, watching the aisles, trying to resist the urge to squeeze the glass shards in your pocket until your hand starts bleeding again.

Stupid of you to keep it. There probably never was anything on it except some overpriced crappy lotion – and who puts that stuff in a glass bottle, anyways? – let alone a handprint, tiny and perfect and wrong.

You were tired. The lights are always weird when they’re at half-power. You can see anything under those circumstances.

You’ve almost convinced yourself when a woman – sorry, a guest – walks up to you, her face creased into a frown. The how-to-de-escalate script goes right out of your head as she approaches.

‘You’ve got a problem over in the deli,’ she snaps. ‘It’s disgusting. Ants everywhere.’

‘Thank you for telling me?’ you say, a beat too late.

She makes a pissy little noise and moves off. Maybe to tell your manager about your apathy. Because all good retail peons should be delighted by any of the shit that comes out of a guest’s mouth.

You shift over to the deli, half-wondering why you shouldn’t just call over to the deli guys and then go back to your pacing, and stop dead in front of the display cases. Something plummets in your chest, like your heart is a lead weight.

It does look like ants if you’re not paying close attention to the shapes, just to the movement. Dark and seething, crawling over the to-go meals like a shadow. Then you tilt your head, and you see faces, seamed and mottled like old stained wood, with eyes like lit matches staring at you.

One of them opens its mouth, bares its teeth in a silent hiss. Its hands, tiny and perfect and wrong, clutch the side of a mauled plastic bag that you realise, after a moment, holds a rotisserie chicken. Or did. Most of the meat has disappeared into all the little mouths that are now hissing at you in unison. Grease around their thin lips, meat caught in all those sharp

teeth.

Fear isn't even in the equation. None of them is bigger than your foot. Give it two minutes and a pair of Doc Martens, and you could take care of all of them. But you think, as you stare at them, these small ferocious things, that this might be the first interesting thing to happen to you in your entire life.

Two steps forward, and you rip what's left of the chicken out of their hands. One of them tries to bite you and gets close enough that you feel their teeth whisper against the back of your hand. You pull away in time, and with the bag held in front of you like you would if you were getting ready to give a dog a treat, you back behind the deli counter.

It's past nine. Everything here is shut down; the guest who found you to complain has already gone home. The meats and cheeses and 'Just Like Mom's Cooking' dishes are covered for the night. No one will come back here till you do tomorrow morning, broom in hand, but you lead them – still hissing – into the farthest corner. Then you set the chicken down and listen for the clicking of tiny feet across the tiles. They swarm the food, and mixed in with the tearing of plastic, you hear the wet smacking noises as they feast.

You don't think too much. You grab another cold chicken from the case, because no one will miss it, and toss it toward the seething, wet centre of the noise.

Then you leave. You don't look back. That's the important part, you think. Don't look too long. Don't put too much weight on a miracle.

*

Over the next month, the store loses two people in grocery, one in accounting, and three over in clothing. No one gives a reason, but they were all on the morning shift. They walked in the half-light, too, and you wonder. What did they see, or not-see, what couldn't they explain away?

Or maybe they wanted something else. Maybe they were bored. Maybe you are.

You come across your manager in the break room one morning, poring over a massive stack of printouts, her presence so unexpected your mind can't make sense of it for a moment.

You say hello because you're not an asshole, but she just mutters something about the end of the quarter and *drilling down* into the numbers. It's not clear if she knows it was you, the cog she can fit just about anywhere, or if she knows there was anyone there at all. You back out of the break room, smiling and nodding, shifting your broom from one hand to the

other, and as you pass the threshold, you see a small shadow flit across the tidy cap of her hair. It moves like a bird, and in its dark outline, you see what might be wings, four of them. When you look toward the ceiling, there's nothing. Just the lights, faintly buzzing.

*

Today you're over in housewares because your manager bumped everyone scheduled there today to the departments left short by all the resignations. You have your broom in hand, dustcloth in your pocket and the smell of toilet bleach clinging to your uniform vest because odds are you'll get called back to your usual post before the day is out. If only so your manager can be sure you're not going to start angling for a promotion you neither deserve nor want.

It's quiet, here among the flower-spangled plates supposedly designed by famous cooking bloggers, the appliances in cheerful colours that no one truly needs, the tempting racks of kitchen knives. You take your time lining up stacks of microwave-safe bowls in varying shades of grey and beige with the tips of your fingers. The way you've seen the shift lead over here do it, minimal effort to ensure you look like you're actually doing something, in case your manager passes by. There's a coating on some of the bowls, slimy and squeaky, that makes your fingers twinge. When you go to wipe them off on your vest, the pads of your fingers look scalded.

Something in the packaging, you decide. A leftover bit of industrial runoff. You should warn your manager, but she's just going to tell you to deal with it, to *show some initiative*, so you head for the end of the aisle to grab a basket.

One of the bowls crashes to the floor when your back is turned.

You look over your shoulder in time to see the second bowl slip over the edge of the shelf, then fall to spread its broken pieces with the first. Bowl number three falls as you turn around, and you're facing it dead-on when the fourth, last bowl takes its fatal tumble.

Maybe you brushed the first bowl on your way past and started the chain reaction – but you shake off that thought. It's not your fault. You were half an aisle away. Something pushed them out.

Yeah right. If only. You hoist your broom into position to sweep up the shattered bits of cheap ceramic – got to move fast, before a guest comes along, but instead you find yourself bending a little to peer into the dark hole where the bowls used to be.

You can see clear through to the aisle wall, pencil-sized holes in the painted metal

letting through the sullen light from the other side. Nothing's there, you tell yourself, even as your eyes lock onto the long slime trail smeared across the shelf. It runs back into the dark, beyond the rest of the dishes. Smells rotted and sweet. Familiar, if not comforting.

A rustle, like dry wings beating against thick metal. The broom clatters to the ground – your manager would come unglued if she saw you so derelict in your duties – and you reach in, careful not to get your hand gummed up in the slime, though you make sure to use the still-smarting one so as not to fuck up both hands, until you feel something warm give under the press of your fingers.

Not your brightest idea. The shard of glass in your pocket feels hot against your hip.

It's a wasp's nest, you think, feeling the papery layers shift under the pressure of your hand. Trying not to be disappointed, you push a little more, telling yourself that if the wasps haven't stung you by now, the whole nest is dead, and you'll pull it out and toss it, but then—

—it's wet. It's wet, the way the inside of your body is wet and hot and giving.

Something tongue-adjacent runs along your fingers, licking into every knuckle, every line on your palm, thrusting into the space between your thumb and forefinger. A curious avidness, as appalling as the heat and the wetness, if not *more*, because curiosity means there's a mind behind it all, somewhere. Something driving this rough, shapeless questing.

You yank your hand back, lungs aching from where you haven't been breathing, and stare down at the thick gloss of saliva webbed between your fingers. It looks yellow, but that's the sickly lights, right? They play all sorts of tricks.

More rustling, moving toward the empty hole on the shelf. Toward you. A single bright eye, looking out.

Later, your manager writes you up for leaving the mess of broken bowls spread across the aisle, but that's after you spend half an hour hiding in a bathroom stall, door locked, lights out, 'Caution! Wet Surface' sign playing sentinel outside. That's after you wash the jaundice-coloured saliva from your hands, chasing the soap with the stuff you use to wash the floors.

*

Up next in the depletion sweepstakes: the craft department, the garden centre, home improvement, all down two people apiece. You see the craft department head on her way out, shaking her head and glancing back at the racks of embroidery floss and cheap fleece. Nothing more than that, but you commit it to memory, thumbing at the glass in your pocket.

Your palm is criss-crossed with scars, drawn through your skin in absent moments.

Your manager is now a fixture in the break room, grinding her teeth as she flips through printouts stacked as high as your thumb is tall. The shift lead for the jewellery department asks her what's wrong with her office, but your manager barely acknowledges she was asked a question, let alone the phrasing of that question.

You're keeping an eye out for fast-moving shadows up near the dust-draped ceiling fan, which hasn't worked the whole time you've been here, and so you are only paying half-attention to what's going on around you. Too busy tracing the edges of the glass in your pocket to really listen. When the jewellery shift lead clears her throat and asks, again, what is wrong with your manager's office, you drag your eyes away from the ceiling and wait to see what happens next.

Nothing much does, for a long moment. Your manager keeps flipping between pages, tracking one finger down long columns of nonsense data, and the jewellery shift lead is about to stomp out of the room when, finally, an answer arrives.

'It's got an infestation,' says your manager, distracted but also like it hurts to get the words out. 'Needs to be fumigated.'

The jewellery shift lead flaps a hand in your direction. 'Why wait? You've got them doing everything else under the sun. Have them do it.'

Your manager looks up. All your half-formed internal pleas to be spared that duty get washed away when you see her red-rimmed eyes, the dandruff along her hairline, the way her hands shake on the printouts.

'Great idea,' says your manager. 'Take care of it.'

Back to the printouts, the idiot numbers. Forgetting you as soon as her head turns. The jewellery shift lead gives you a shrug, like it wasn't her who suggested you for this, and shuffles out.

You eat the last of your peanut butter crackers, then leave your manager behind. Heading to her office by way of the deli. No one says a word when you take a cold chicken from the display, then a second. No one is even paying attention.

Something flies across the ceiling lights. A bird, probably, if it hadn't been moving so fast.

*

In the days that follow, the tricks the lights play on your eyes hit the dozens. Maybe the hundreds. Floors that look dry turn out to be streaked with puddles of something too viscous

to be water. A shadow paces you as you slouch through the maze of aisles but then becomes just one of those floating motes inside your eye when you whip around to catch it. A sudden flickering of the lights themselves, always exactly overhead of where you're standing.

The tricks are played on the rest of your senses, too: a persistent smell like brine, but sweet too. Burnt sugar and hot salt. Patches of humid air in the middle of the hardware section, and when you brace yourself and walk through them, you feel an invisible cloud of gnats against your face and a humming in your ears like someone singing underwater.

More people quit. Your manager no longer leaves the break room, stays hunched over her printouts, though she does work up the energy to pounce whenever you clock in or take your breaks.

'When's my office going to be ready?' she asks, her voice a frayed wire. 'Where are we on the fumigation?'

'It's going to take a few rounds,' you say, remembering the grateful chorus of tiny, feral voices that greeted you last night when you opened the door and tossed the cold chickens inside. 'But I'm on it.'

She snorts, but the numbers in front of her call her back. You fall out of her awareness.

Back on the floor, you watch a billowing cloud rise over electronics, heavy-bellied and grey, turning silver as it twists into itself, like a murmuration of swallows. Lightning crackles in the cloud's depths, but as it passes through the stream of an air vent, it shudders and breaks apart.

'God,' says a guest as they pass you by. 'What's that smell? Is that an electrical fire?'

You assure them that no, everything is up to code, perhaps it's just dust in the vents. They seem comforted, if not convinced; you are grateful, for possibly the first time, for the misplaced authority your work vest gives you. Tell a lie with a smile while wearing it, and half the battle is won.

The shadow at the corner of your eye nods in agreement, then vanishes when you turn your head.

*

The store is officially down to half-staffed, despite the cheery NOW HIRING! JOIN THE FAMILY! signs you designed, printed and hung over the main doors at your manager's urging. No one has so much as taken an application, but you find piles of them, shredded into

nests, in the shoe section.

In exchange for your usefulness, your manager has not given you a day off in weeks. You are there to open the doors in the morning, and you are there to lock them at night.

‘We’re all making sacrifices,’ says your manager when you protest, highlighting your exhaustion, your legally mandated time off, your failure to meet any of the arbitrary quotas she assigns you. ‘Are you part of the family?’

She’s forgotten about her office. You attribute this to the rumoured visit from the regional manager, a figure often mentioned but rarely glimpsed, who is being called in to address your manager’s failings. No longer frantic, she sits in the break room, surrounded by layers of paper, staring at the fan overhead as it steadfastly refuses to churn the sluggish, sour air.

‘I am,’ you say, which is a lie so blatant only your manager’s imminent reckoning keeps her from realising it. ‘I just— It’s been like, three weeks. Since I had a day off? I close *and* open, that’s not leg—’

She shrieks and leaps off her chair, jabbing a finger at the ceiling.

‘Did you see that?’ she yells, still pointing. ‘It moved. Swear to God, it moved. Did you see it?’

You follow the line of her finger, heart thumping in your chest. At first, you see nothing but the unmoving fan blades, but the longer you look, the more it becomes clear: a long, sinuous form slithering under the paint on the ceiling, wriggling from one wall to the other.

Your manager looks at you, pleading. She wants you to agree, to lessen her terror by sharing it – but you’re not scared, are you? You never have been, despite the eye, the teeth, the curious fingers stroking the nape of your neck. You’ve been waiting for something like this for a long, long time.

And you are not inclined to share it.

The glass shard in your pocket pricks your finger, a familiar, friendly pain, but you push harder, waiting for the give of tearing skin and the faint warmth of blood before you look up at your manager with a smile.

‘I don’t see anything,’ you tell her. ‘Nothing at all.’

*

Two more weeks flow by. You see your manager, maybe five other employees, a scattered

handful of customers who wander the store like they can't remember why they're here or how they arrived. Conversation, when it happens, is sparse, monosyllabic. The way you like it. You can spend all your attention on wonder, trying to guess what might be waiting for you in the next aisle over.

You don't mind the long hours anymore. You mind the hours at home, lying on the couch, thinking only about getting back to the store to see what will happen next.

Small things, always. Easy to miss. Another shattered bottle of that cherry blossom crap, all of the lotion evaporated or sunk into the cracks in the tiles or – your mouth goes dry, thinking of this possibility – licked up by dozens of dark, root-like tongues.

Or: pinkish mud oozing out of an air vent, the consistency of the cheap cake frosting the store sells by the carton. It smells of brine and sugar, left for hours under a hot sun.

Or: the contents of the break room vending machine turning to powder as soon as you touch the glass. Not that you planned to eat anything, but it's still a shock to see vast, colourful handfuls of grit fall to the bottom of the machine. The next day, everything is back in place, but the colours slide away when you look at them.

Or: your manager, sitting in the break room, without moving. Staring at all that paperwork, staring at the ceiling. Not so remarkable, on first glance, then you see the curling vine wrapped in and around her ear, taking care to fit itself into every whorl.

That makes the decision for you. No more waiting to see what's next.

*

When you carry the cold chickens to your manager's office that night, you pause on the threshold. A phrase you've read in many permutations, but never expected to live out for yourself. Not you, a perpetual victim of inertia.

But here you are, the chickens clammy in their plastic cases, the smell of sugar and brine high in your lungs. Thinking of the glass shard in your pocket, your blood lying where the handprint once did. Of what it will be like tomorrow, to look on the aisles and cash registers with new eyes.

So you hope. The miracle is strong enough to bear your weight, but you could be wrong.

You push open the door, step into the dark, musty office. The smell of old meat and dried shit hits you, swamping you with a wave of nausea when it combines with the sweet-salt already in your nose. Just a few steps forward, you tell yourself, juggling the

chickens from hand to hand. Almost there.

Their voices, rough and thick, like their throats are full of dirt, chorus at you as the door closes and locks you all in darkness. Hot and demanding, tiny fingers pulling at your work pants. Not so tiny anymore, you realise with a burst of pride. You've been feeding them well.

You pop the covers off and set the chickens in a row on the floor, pushing away the picked-clean bones of previous meals. The wet crunches and slurps start immediately, punctuated with squalling as brief skirmishes break out, then are abandoned in pursuit of meat.

There's enough light coming from under the door for you to pick out a clean patch of floor to kneel on. The feasting noises ebb for a moment, but you aren't interesting enough for a full pause. You don't blame them. What have you done to prove yourself?

Only this: the blood and the waiting.

You bend down, heart throbbing in your throat, every breath whining out of your mouth, and push forward on your hands and knees until your mouth finds the meat.

There is no celebration. They don't welcome you. You feel small clawed hands scratching at your face, trying to push you away, but while you're not fast, you do have the advantage of size – that, and the wild gladness filling you as your teeth tear into slippery fat, thin bone.

Tomorrow you will greet your manager, and hers, with bones in your hair, with lukewarm fat smeared on your cheeks and lips slick with grease. Scratches across your nose, your eyes. Blood, from where they caught your lip and tore. You will be smiling the entire time, like you're smiling now.