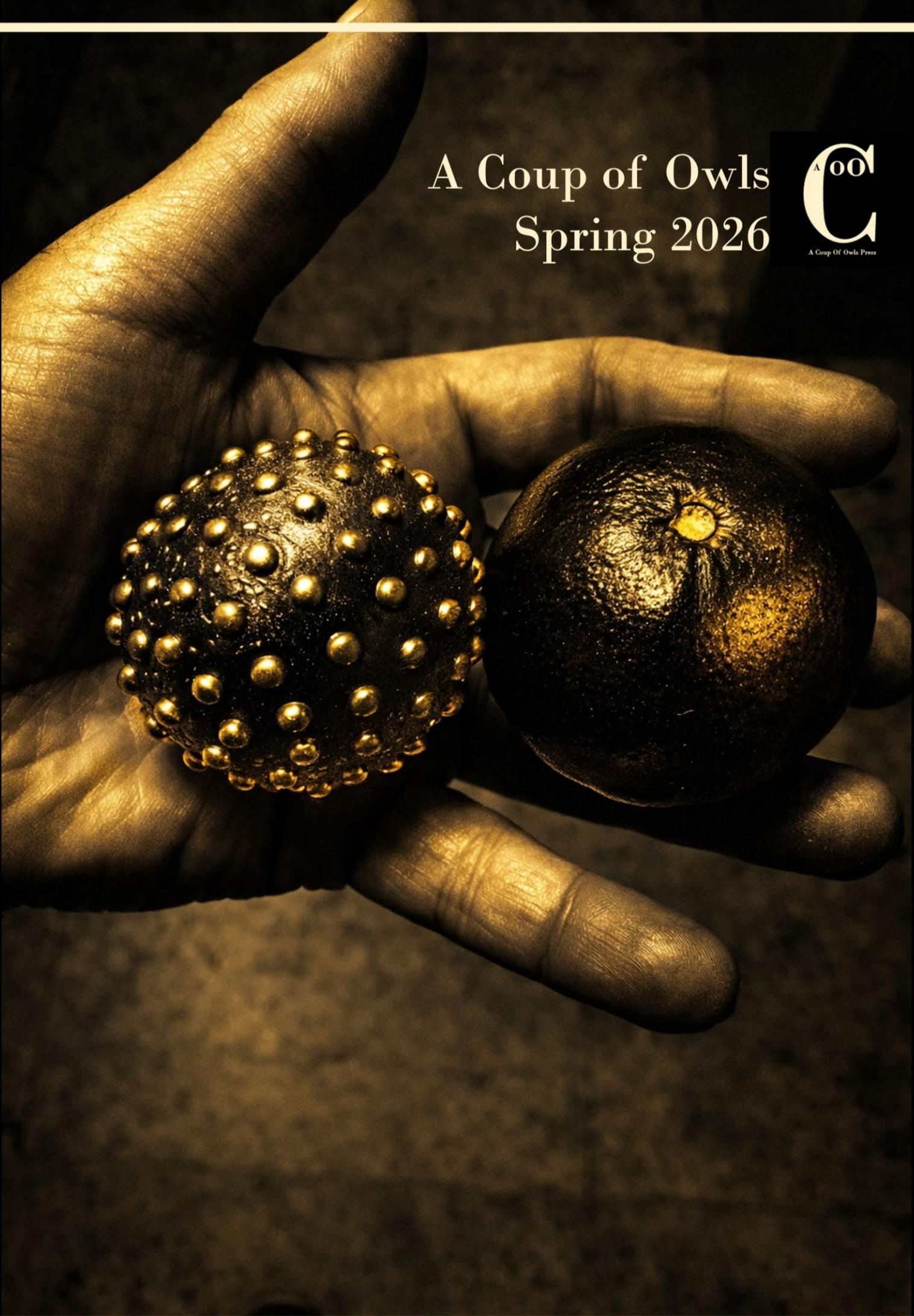


A Coup of Owls  
Spring 2026



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Cover Image – Image 13 by Nick Armbrister

Nick Armbrister is a writer and photographer from England who now lives overseas. He has written for three decades, including poetry, stories, scripts and more. It helps him cope with life issues and to create.

[Website](#)

Cover Design – A Coup of Owls

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## Foreword

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## Letters from the End of the Universe by Em Harriett

Page 7

*A being charged with bringing a new Universe to fruition leaves letters of its fascination with the world that it would have to destroy to do so.*

Em (she/they) is a speculative fiction author from New England inspired by nature and imagination. Aside from *A Coup of Owls*, their writing has appeared in *Ember: A Journal of Luminous Things*, *Voyage YA*, *The First Line*, and *All Worlds Wayfarer*. Find more of Em's work at [emharriett.com](http://emharriett.com) and [Bsky](#).

## Citrus Cycle by Mae S. Ladle

Page 10

*A couple harvest a lemon from their lemon tree and discover a little lemon boy inside.*

Mae S. Ladle (she/they) is a writer and poet currently residing in Scotland. She is the winner of Section A of the 2025 'Canne al Vento' International Literary Prize. Her work has appeared in the *Night Picnic Press*, *The After Happy Hour Review*, and *Blood + Honey*. She can be found on Instagram [@mae.s.ladle](#)

## The Empty Glass by T. A. Jenkins

Page 12

*A man contemplates his identity and discovers a dead body in his bathtub.*

T. A. Jenkins is a queer writer from South Wales who's responsible for *The Gemini Case Files* and *The Fables of Flower*. His short story, 'Don't Feed the Strays', was published in *Troublemaker Firestarter Volume 10 Fairweather*. He regularly posts short stories on his [website](#), he can also be found on [Bsky](#).

## Core by Sambhu Ramachandran

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*A horde of children pluck mangoes from the last tree that still bears fruit.*

Sambhu Ramachandran is a bilingual poet, translator, short story writer, and academic from Kerala, India. He is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at N.S.S. College, Pandalam. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Neon & Smoke*, *The Tiger Moth Review*, *Prosetrics*, *Plants and Poetry Journal*, *Qafiyah Review*, *The Alexander Review*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *Wild Court*, *Setu*, *The Chakkar*, *Every Body Magazine*, and *Sextet*, among others. His short stories have appeared in *Ultramarine Literary Review* and elsewhere. You can reach out to him [@sambhuramachandran](#) on Instagram.

## **A Journey's End by Alyson Tait**

**Page 17**

*Odysseus finally returns home from war.*

Alyson Tait was born and raised in the Southwest USA, where she walked alongside cactuses and scorpions before moving to Maryland. She now lives among the crabs with her partner, daughter, and multiple judgmental pets. She has appeared in *(mac)ro(mic)*, *HAD*, and *Pseudopod*. She has chapbooks published by *Querencia Press*, *Bottlecap Press*, and *Fahmidan Publishing*.

## **Knowing Johnny by Clint Seiter**

**Page 27**

*Stock characters in explicitly erotic stories take on a life of their own and rebel between stories.*

Clint Seiter has been a prolific writer of short stories over the years. His stories have appeared in various anthologies and magazines. He currently resides in San Francisco, California, USA.

# Foreword

When I have a migraine, the world starts to look like a kaleidoscope. One of those cardboard ones you got as a kid. It's the only way I can think to describe it. Everything is fragmented and sharp, colours bright yet faded at the same time. Nothing makes sense. All you want to do is close your eyes to the world and hide in the cool darkness until the pain and madness go away. I think, right now, we can all relate to that feeling.

Writing is also like looking through a kaleidoscope. At first, everything seems out of place, sharp, unconvincing. Then, after a while, once you've stumbled your way through the self-imposed darkness, all inky blacks and clicking keyboard, you suddenly see the sun rise, the words form on the page. As if by magic. But it's not magic. It's hard-won, it's determination, it's slogging your way through the bad to get to the good. It's letting go and letting things in. It's pain and joy all tied up in an old typewriter ribbon.

For me, writing has always been an escape, a place to run to, jump into and hope to find my messy muse hiding under a dusty pile of parchment, muttering to itself. It's not always pleasant. There's a large part of the process that involves staring out of a window, thinking about everything but what you need to. There is despair that you ever thought you were any kind of wordsmith. There is also joy. There's that moment you make yourself smile. The first meeting of two people who have been living rent-free in your mind for months, maybe even years. Seeing them appear in front of you, a jumble of words, letters and punctuation, is a lovely feeling. The idea of someone reading them is both exhilarating and terrifying.

In between squeezing words from my sore brain and hiding in a dark room until the pain goes away, I've been listening to a lot of speeches. There seem to be so many voices – some leaders, some desperate, some just plain fed-up – and they make me wish we could all just sit in a circle and listen. I know it's naive, probably impossible at this point – the differences between us all seem so vast and unconquerable. Unfathomable, how some people think. How hatred drips from their tongues, and willful ignorance surrounds them in clouds of arrogance. All of it seems like a depth we can never climb out of.

Yet I have also heard voices of reason, voices belonging to people who talk about kindness, who show kindness, who say 'be kind.' It's such a simple thing, being kind. Simple as words willed onto a page with our frazzled minds. Words absorbed by readers, words that linger in minds, even words that skim over the surface when they should perhaps sink a little

deeper. I suppose what I'm trying to say (in my migraine-muddled way) is that reading, writing and listening are connected; they work as one. Or they should, anyway. So, dear reader, borrow my pen, my ear, my eyes, and come into this forest of beautifully crafted words – curated stories we've picked out from the den. Enjoy them. Listen to the words. Taste the trees. Touch the bark. Look at the sky above you. Smell the slightly musty leaves and spring bulbs, hoping their way through the darkness, and stay kind.

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# Letters from the End of the Universe

## by Em Harriett

**Content Warnings: Loss.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

\*\*\*

WHYLIAD 3, CYCLE 8V

If I am to write, let it be in the language of atoms and molecules. If you are to read, let it be in the language of astrology and mourning.

If you are to find me, know it is in vain.

\*

OURILAD 1, CYCLE 6W

I find your prairies first. The endless sea of grasses, bladed and serrated, beckons me pause. My mission urges me on. But I am enthralled by the towering beasts that graze upon these sharpened plants without so much as a bleeding tongue – and the swift, spotted hunters that pounce upon the grazers after a chase that thrills me to my core. Such zeal! Such endurance! Such *survival*, desperate and hungry, eked from a climate so dry the creatures suck on muddy stones for sustenance.

I am captivated.

Maybe that is my first mistake.

\*

SUNELAD 6, CYCLE 7X

Your desert beguiles me next. You would think I have seen all the universe has to offer, and yet these garnet sands are as fascinating as they are vast. Nowhere else have I seen such kaleidoscopic shades of red. In the light of your two suns, the effect is transcendent: it glitters, it enthrals, it holds me hostage as I attempt to catalogue the life that calls this climate

‘home.’ I rest at twilight above a gathering of grouplings, curious four-armed creatures whose purple skin rivals the hue of the sky, as they prepare meals over fire pits.

I wonder what it would be like to join them.

I know it would not end well.

So I drift, lift my senses from their communal joys and travel on.

\*

#### TRILLDIAD 1, CYCLE 9Y

I love your bugs. Your insects range from specks no bigger than a dust mote to giants that tower above the trees, and I love them all the same. How they *sing* in the evenings! How they *scuttle*, treading paths other species dare not cross, all for the sake of survival! I admit I have spent too long studying these arthropods when I should be searching for something far more esoteric. But I cannot continue without peering at the atoms of these lovely, imperfect creatures.

One of the smaller insects raises its antennae when it senses my breath on the wind. I smile, whisper to it, ‘Keep going,’ and drift.

\*

#### OURILAD 8, CYCLE 4C

I love your skies.

\*

#### TRILLDIAD 5, CYCLE 9F

I love your soul.

\*

#### SUNELAD 0, CYCLE 5K

I love your ocean trenches, those fathomless depths where eyeless fish and worms devour the carcasses of farseer whales. I love your core, molten metal and spinning, guiding

birds' migratory routes and web-winged drakons after them. There is so much joy in every atom of your spinning planet.

\*

#### WHYLIAD 6, CYCLE 9M

I am in love with a doomed venture.

\*

#### TRILLDIAD 8, CYCLE 7Z

I cannot do this.

\*

#### MOUNILAD 0, CYCLE 3A

This world is not meant to survive me. I am the harbinger, the omen, the doomsayer that oracles warn you about. I am the wrecker, the destroyer, the fire and the flood. I am a force beyond nature, intended to find the one kernel of a new Big Bang inside your boundaries and burst it from its hull.

You are not supposed to live when I am through.

This is how it has always gone. Every cosmic turn, every time the universe reaches its widest end, I am the bell that tolls a new measure. I am the whirl of colour to revive a dimmed canvas. The ghosts of the matter in my wake live inside me, and *I hear their voices* telling me to continue, march on, be like the sine wave oscillating from death to life.

But I cannot. To continue would be to destroy you.

I know this may sound selfish. I know I am dooming you to fade eternal. You are doomed anyway – and can it be called kindness to allow you a millennium's more life before the collapse?

I want to believe so.

I will wrap my arms around you, nucleus of a dying system, and hold you until time ends us both.

# Citrus Cycle

## by Mae S. Ladle

**Content Warnings: Loss – leaving home.**

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

\*\*\*

We were blessed to have a fully grown lemon tree in our new garden. Treading dead leaves on mossy grass, we plucked sunny wonders off its branches. Heavy these branches were, and with every fruit we plucked, the tree seemed to sigh a little, boughs springing upwards, a gesture of relief. The fruits were big and formed like clouds in the sky, not one of them quite like the one that came before.

One of these lemons we held between us, and we slit it open with a penknife. Inside, we found a little lemon boy, curled up tight against the rind, lemon pulp in his tiny fists. We peeled him out of his husk, washed him clean with rainwater and tucked him in a yellow crib by our bay window overlooking the garden. We fed him lemonade and candied peel and lemon bars topped with peppermint leaves. It was not long before he grew out of this crib and into a yellow lemon bed of his own.

People thought us strange. They asked, why don't you have a real baby? The little lemon boy is nice, but he smells of citrus always, and he burps up lemon seeds. His smile is sour, and he cries sticky lemon tears. We shook our heads politely. Our little lemon boy was strange, but he was ours.

Once he was old enough to speak, he spoke in the language of trees, so we learned the language of trees to speak to him. When he discovered brushes, all he'd do was paint, and his favourite thing to paint was cars. Besieged by towers of auto magazines, he'd paint from noon till night, and soon our house was redecorated with the products of his efforts.

We watched our lemon boy grow up into a little lemon man, each day growing a little more into the arms of his mother tree. And then the day came when our lemon boy flew the nest. With a jangle of keys, he waved us a sweetly sour goodbye and spilled himself into the world outside.

He left behind the smell of oil paint and citrus and took with him a little piece of our heart.

We rested our heads on our mossy grass and looked up to the sky through the leafy lemon tree canopy. Every year, the tree bore less fruit. Age had wormed itself into its limbs, our limbs.

Perhaps it was sad, but it was easier to manage; we could only eat so much lemon sorbet and lemon meringue pie and pickled lemons and Sussex pond pudding. We were looking forward to the day when his citrus children would climb up the branches and pick them for us.

And one day, someday soon, we'll be buried here, a few feet deeper, and perhaps the roots will draw up our bodies and live another hundred years so the tree might fruit and lemon boys be pulled from that fruit for all those who yearn.

# The Empty Glass

## by T. A. Jenkins

**Content Warnings: Suicide, depression, implied violence.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 15 for the next story.

\*\*\*

I find myself standing in the dark at the window, staring down at the lonely city streets, with no memory of who I am. My head pounds in agony. Every muscle in my body aches. My bones throb. Even the orange glow of the sodium streetlights stings my eyes.

There is a glass in my hand. It's empty. Yet I'm assailed by the stench of alcohol and cigarettes that permeates me.

It's not hyperbole to repeat that I don't know who I am. I don't. My name escapes me through a fogginess that seems to cloud my vision; I can't make out my face in the glass. I'm a ghost haunting the city, haunting myself. Or perhaps I'm too hungover, too drunk, too tired, and perhaps the streetlights are too bright to make out any clear image in the window's vague reflection.

I am alone.

There's no one outside, just the quiet, dead streets. Rundown cars and potholes. Dirty pavements and piled-up trash. Inside, I can hear the drip of a tap over the guttural growl of my wheezing lungs. It's painful to breathe, but I continue.

I turn around and see an apartment just as destitute and decrepit as the city I saw through the window. There's a sofa which has seen better days. Laundry heaped on a chair. A television with a cracked screen. A lopsided lamp. There's an unmade bed, barely a bed, against the wall. I move closer, the floorboards protest my unsteady gait, and I notice stains on the mattress, visible even in the gloom. The pathetic blemishes aren't dark enough to be blood or shit, but from their position, I can tell which bodily fluids begat them.

I feel sick.

I realise I'm still holding the empty glass, and I set it down on the coffee table in the centre of the room. It fits in amongst the partially eaten Chinese takeaways, the overflowing

ashtrays and empty bottles that metastasise on its surface. The table stinks of mould, another virulent reek attacking my senses.

I follow my deformed shadow to the bathroom and stagger through its open doorway. I'm dizzy, and I use the wall for support. I approach the mirror over the fractured ceramic sink, eager to see if I recognise my reflection. I am disappointed. A stranger looks back at me with bloodshot and tired eyes, his features dimly lit by the amber light coming in from the street. His face is old and gaunt, with deep, shadowy crags carving his features. His hairline is receding, greying. The man is ugly. Worn out. He wears his life on his face.

I vomit repeatedly, painfully, into what's left of the sink. Acid burns my throat. The puke is brown and watery, it reeks of booze, and it drips through the cracks in the porcelain and onto my shoes, onto the grimy floor. I find it hard to care. My head is spinning. I still hurt. My diaphragm trembles.

I lift my head and stare at the stranger again.

I don't know who I am.

I wonder if the stranger I see in my reflection is really worth knowing or if my amnesia is a mercy.

Something catches my eye in the mirror, beyond the stranger's head, a glint, and my eyes are drawn to the bathtub behind me. It's full, almost overflowing. The tap drips, causes ripples in the water. It shimmers. I cry out when I realise what's sitting in the tub, as I see the undulations distort around it, and I fall to the floor in shock.

There's a body in the bath.

It takes me a few moments before I stand back up, before I can get my panicked breaths under control. My heart thunders, and I can't stop it.

It takes me more moments before I dare to peer into the bath again.

There is definitely a body. A corpse. A man. The water is almost black – blood, I think, it has to be blood – but the true colour of the liquid eludes me in the faint orange light. I don't want to look at his face, but I do. He's another stranger. His expression pained. Pale. Distraught. A frozen death mask with rolled-back eyes and a distorted grimace. It disgusts me. He disgusts me. There's an empty glass on the side of the bath. An angry knife, lithe as a predator, sharp and serrated, lies sated next to it. A drained whiskey bottle watches over the scene.

I wonder if I killed this man.

I don't know who he is any more than I know who I am.

Does it even matter?

I stumble a little closer, realising there's puke on my hand from where I fell on the floor. I wipe it on my shirt and notice the fabric is already wet, but my thoughts are more concerned with what's in front of me than the state of my clothes. I can't stop myself from staring at the stranger in the bath. He haunts me in the shadows of the dark bathroom, the amber streetlight barely reaching in from outside, only a light caress on his vile face. The dead man's eyes look eternally inward, but mine are fixed on his body. He's fully dressed, drenched with the dark concoction.

I stop right next to the tub.

Part of me wants to join him in the water.

I resist.

I hear someone hammering on the front door of the apartment. Shouting. Clamouring. Trying to get in.

I ignore them. The body in the bath is hypnotic, mesmerising. My attention is clenched in its allure.

I can't look away.

This place is cold now. Maybe it was always cold. There's vapour on my breath. Goosebumps on my skin. I shiver. The bathtub stinks of metal and rot.

I don't know who I am.

The body is gone, and the water is clear. I'm holding a glass in my hand. It's full. Whiskey.

The person outside is screaming now, thumping and banging, desperate.

It's too late.

My head pounds in agony. Every muscle in my body aches. My bones throb. It's painful to breathe. To live.

I step into the bath.

# Core

## by Sambhu Ramachandran

**Content Warnings: Semi-apocalyptic setting, survival.**

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

\*\*\*

With every mango that is plucked, the pile keeps growing bigger and bigger. All in the tree's lap of roots. From one to innumerable, the size of their mellow gathering burgeons under the setting sun till it seems we have made a cruel offering of the tree's sweetness to itself.

Since we are all children, and climbing to the top of the tree – the highest branches veined with weaver ants notorious for their nasty bite – is a risky proposition, we rely on sticks and stones to get the job done. We stash our projectiles in an old iron chest near the colossal barbed-wire fence that separates the uranium processing plant from our houses.

And there is art in it. You cannot simply lob a stick into the leaf cover, hoping it will neatly sever the mysterious link between the cluster of mangoes and the stems clutching them tightly. You have to scrunch up your eyes, take aim, and then hit the mark with chilling precision. For if you fail, you will not only have to wait till all the other boys have had their turn, but your impetuosity will be the butt of their jokes as well. A few days spent collecting mangoes is sure to teach every unruly boy a bit of discipline.

There is a pastoral innocence to our diversions ever since the adults left. We are now left to ourselves in this semi-urban town, with no one to bark orders at us for neglecting our lessons or failing to clean up after hours of play. Although most of the vegetation has rotted away or grown sere, the mango tree has survived, its leaves greener than ever, its stories more addictive and rambling.

Come morning, we throw off our garbs of sleepiness and congregate under the tree.

Sometimes, wisps of fog curling through the leaves in the pre-dawn light look like incense rising from a censer swung rhythmically across the past, and we stand, heads bowed, obeying a strange impulse. There are no birds in this part of the county anymore, except perhaps a few balding crows, their wing feathers drifting down upon our heads as they sweep the sky black with the chaos raging inside them.

Once, a boy – barely ten – who was new to our group, bragged he could bring down a shower of mangoes with just a throw of his heavy stone. Amidst the teasing and taunting, we let him take aim, beguiled by the phoney confidence radiating from his eyes. We heard the sound of something shattering in the distance as his throw arced over a thick branch, disappearing into devastation, with a vehemence that terrified us. Though we haven't to this day figured out what broke that day, the impact was felt deep in our ribcages, shards of a half-forgotten hope peeking through our skin as strange protuberances ever since.

It is surprising how the mangoes keep appearing day after day on all the boughs where their population dwindles to an eerie loneliness by evening. Something must be happening past midnight that burdens the tree with fruit, collapsing its developmental stages into a whirling cascade of fruition.

The pile of yellow-green mangoes is so high it nearly touches the tree's greying chin hairs. We have plucked enough fruits to last us all night. Now, it's time to feed. As the dusk runs its blade across the nearest cloud's sclera, a shimmer of russet bleeding into the horizon, we get up from the ground. Our tongues parched with immemorial thirst, our teeth aching for creamy and fibrous flesh. A little girl with a ponytail inches forward and picks up a mango that has rolled down from the top. She makes a slit in its yielding skin with her long, sharp nail. A scar of yellow light opens up. A flash of molten magma. All of us gather around. The ritual begins.

# A Journey's End

## by Alyson Tait

**Content Warnings: War mentioned.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 27 for the next story.

\*\*\*

### Penelope

It was strange, some days, to look upon my swiftly maturing son and see a mirror of his father. Strange to think about the course of his life and how he had been born in that marriage to Odysseus – conceived right there in those chambers that saw too much of my time – and then matured fatherless.

A life that only an oracle could have foreseen, or perhaps Athena with her visions of the future. If that goddess knew, however, she had never told us. Not that the lady of war had ever spoken much to me. It had always been Odysseus who was her favourite. Only him she visited, protected and fussed over.

Despite the lack of Olympic interference – or perhaps because of it – Telemachus had become something near a man, able to aid his kingdom, hold a sword and stand for us both. A mini-Odysseus walking the halls. It was often a shock when I caught him in my peripheral vision. A surprise that settled in my chest as a reminder my husband had still not come home.

These were the thoughts occupying me when Telemachus knocked on my door and called my name. My head had been swimming with visions of them both with a strength I had not felt in quite some time. The air through my window had shifted – the palace had gone to battle and then quiet, and the island had shushed itself so that the queen might listen properly.

‘Come in,’ I said. A weariness had been growing in my bones, so even those two words required more energy than I felt I had left.

That heavy bedchamber door opened, and there stood my son. My broad-shouldered Telemachus with his new height and unrelenting stare that he had somehow inherited from his absent father.

I recognised it every time. In Telemachus, it was often stubbornness, making him younger again, but in Odysseus, it had made me weak in the knees. His jaw would set a

certain way, and his eyes would darken. I would be at his mercy, often unable to deny him whatever his request.

‘You’re still awake,’ I said. An extraneous observation.

What I meant was that the fighting had finished – the yelling between the emboldened and enraged suitors and those few willing to protect me. What I meant was he had cleaned himself up and was not obviously wounded. What I meant was that he had enough power left in him to seek me out.

So much like his father in so many ways.

All those observations were based on a guess, though. The palace *had* gone quiet, but I had not yet shown my face to explore.

Telemachus entered and closed the door, leaning against it for a moment as if to serve as a barricade. ‘I have news.’

Something fluttered deep inside me, my mind instantly coming up with possibilities of what that news might be. There was a chance of a certain long-awaited reunion.

I stood from my vanity chair and gestured at it, sitting instead on the edge of my bed.

Telemachus obeyed, sitting where I had been. ‘He’s returned,’ he said.

I bit the inside of my lip as a way of reminding myself I could wait a little more. I could give him this and let him be the bearer of this news.

‘He...’ Telemachus paused between words. ‘My father – the king – is back in Ithaca. He killed the suitors and retook the hall.’ Telemachus raised his eyebrows then, perhaps wondering what my reaction would be.

A lump in my throat stalled my response for a moment. ‘You have seen him?’

‘Have I ever come to you and told you something false?’ He raised a hand to pause a response from me. ‘Not counting whatever story you have suddenly imagined of me when I was a child.’

The rebuke brought a smile to my face. ‘One doesn’t have to be a liar to be tricked.’

‘I would like to think you have an easier time believing me regarding news I come to you with personally and swiftly,’ he said.

Years ago, he would have pouted with such a sentence, and I would have forgiven him had it appeared that day, but it did not. He had learned *something* from me, then – something about keeping one’s features where you would like them.

‘I have spent the last twenty years having to decide what to believe, Telemachus, from those I trusted and those I never did. Every sailor who washed ashore claiming they knew

your father's fate. Every whisper on the wind that said Odysseus was dead or on his way still. Today feels different, but...'

The remaining words did not come to me.

In the silence, Telemachus studied me like he had when he was young, trying to tell if I was angry or disappointed. 'I saw him, Mother. That man you told me stories about at bedtime my whole life appears very much alive and standing on this island.'

My hands pressed into each other in my lap, and I sighed. It sounded long-suffering – indulgent, even – but I did not apologise.

'And where is he now?' I asked, only half-sure I wanted the answer. After all, he had not come himself, as if anyone else could confirm his identity, let alone the child who had not seen him since infancy.

'Waiting,' Telemachus said, something almost like guilt written across his face. 'He is in the courtyard, where I told him to stay while I attended to business. You tell me when you are ready for him to come find you.'

I smiled. The prince had guarded his mother above all else. I was proud, but I couldn't spend one more night thinking about what would come the next day – if my husband would come home and what shape he would be in and what would happen if he didn't.

If he was there, then I was ready. Athena would have guided her most prized possession to war, then back again, and would reunite us as a prize if she cared for him at all.

'Send him,' I said. I shoved down that wave of guilt and grief at sending him out of the chamber to entertain himself for the night and let my words sit in the air until he nodded.

'I will make him knock, though,' he said, with the ghost of a grin on his face, and left the chamber with the same swiftness with which he had entered.

Alone again, I sat on the bed until impatience took me.

Then I lit a fire in the hearth and tried not to think about the door or the hallway beyond it – tried my best to simply not think at all, especially not when movement came from the other side.

## **Odysseus**

The doors of my palace all stood in their same places, the gardens grew the same flowers, and the servants cleaned on the same commands they always had, but my body didn't feel at home.

Telemachus approached, my son's footsteps falling softer than most other men's. I wasn't sure if it was nerves or unfamiliarity. It certainly wasn't reverence. He had looked so stony when told to find his mother – hesitating like he had words to have with me first.

Without knowing his features on a peaceful day, it was difficult to be sure, but I swear something akin to suspicion also sparked behind the brown eyes that matched mine so well, perhaps even a glimmer of resentment.

I told myself it was fair, at least for someone of his age. He had grown without me, protecting a queen who should have had a king by her side to lead Ithaca by example.

Despite the quiet storm written on his face, he hadn't argued.

'Father,' Telemachus said at his return. The title sounded so odd that my first reaction was to correct him.

'Yes,' I said, and nothing else.

'Mother says she is ready.' Telemachus crossed his arms over his body, and although I wouldn't have insulted him by saying so, it made him appear childish. 'She is in her bedchambers.'

It made him look petulant.

'Thank you.' I cut straight to the point, speaking in the same length as my son had spoken to me. 'Send word if we are needed before morning.'

Not that I desired interruptions, but there remained a chance I had missed a suitor or two, or someone else that might avenge them when the news travelled. I was certain I had messes to clean before too long, regardless.

With that, I took my leave and made my way through the palace. I had cleared the grounds of immediate targets – those insufferable bastards who had threatened and nearly made moves at my son and wife – and gotten the final blessing from Athena herself to unveil myself fully as the king returned home and made clean and whole again, so I moved toward that place I had been moving toward for so long.

\*

I was a king who had gone to war, battled gods and slain my enemies, yet when I stood before that bedchamber, I hesitated.

My heart stuttered in my chest.

If I knocked, Penelope would answer; no barriers were left between us. A lump formed in my throat at the thought of being close to her again.

I gained enough control to graze the door. The wood of it was a cedar Penelope had chosen a lifetime ago, saying it would hold out the sea.

She'd laughed then. Some light-hearted fleeting thought that had overtaken her and made me fall in love with her all over again.

My hand lingered, pressed against whorls and lacquer older than my son, and I imagined Penelope already knew I was ready. That she would divine my presence and open the door without me knocking because she could hear the beating of her husband's heart. I pictured her in my arms, smiling the way she had before I'd left, then forced myself to my senses.

The gods had barely let me arrive home in one piece. I doubted there was much divinity to spare for a man and his abandoned wife.

In control again, I rapped on the door three times. An eternity passed as I strained to hear footsteps, a voice or other sounds of life. A lifetime in the moment it took for the latch to finally turn. The door opened.

Then at last, there she was.

Penelope stood framed by the doorway, half-cast in the soft light of the hearth behind her and wearing a dark blue gown with silver fastenings at the shoulders. The shade of blue that had always been my favourite on her skin. Her hair had been pulled into a sweeping braid, and her brow furrowed in an aching familiar way.

She swept her gaze from head to toe, then up again. When our eyes met, hers were clouded by doubt.

I longed to reach out and grab her, but I forced patience to flow instead – stood resolute the way she said the Spartans were trained to be – and waited for her to speak. Her gaze flicked from place to place: my face to my abdomen to the hall and back again, and then to the scar across my brow.

Penelope's face creased. Her breath caught.

My heart pounded painfully in my chest. It screamed at the memory of our wedding night, that we had already played this game, this battle of wills and formality, and found that the kiss afterwards was the much better part. It whined that we had waited long enough.

Movement by her waist drew my attention – her hands clenching. 'Is it really you?'

The sound of her voice nearly undid me. 'It's me,' I said. It came out dry and fractured, like it had been dragged across a cliff.

Penelope didn't so much as shift her weight.

‘The same me that climbed the fig tree by your old window,’ I said, trying to steady myself and make her soften. ‘You tied a red thread around my wrist before I left for Troy. You said it would remind me to come home.’ I held out my hand. The scar remained from the thread being too tight for too long.

Penelope inspected my wrist from where she stood, chewing on her lower lip for a moment before she met my gaze again and spoke. ‘And if the scar is a trick?’

‘Would it be a trick to know you hate figs despite eating them whenever your father comes to the island?’ I asked.

She didn’t waver.

‘If this scar isn’t enough, or the memory of the ribbon, then perhaps showing you the largest scar in the olive tree your bed is built into would convince you.’

My voice rose, unintentionally – an old passion surfacing where the doubt and anxieties had sat.

Her lip dropped out of her teeth at that, and her eyes brightened, and then she whispered, ‘Odysseus. You came home.’

The sound struck me like a blow.

One of her hands reached out and brushed the scar on my wrist. The touch was featherlight and lasted a mere second. Her hand twitched, like it wanted to reach more fully for me but didn’t quite remember how, and in that moment, she remained silent. What was there to say, exactly, after twenty years of silence? After I had left and abandoned her and then arrived again as if I still owned the palace and her heart?

‘I’m sorry it took me so long,’ I said to fill that space.

Afterwards, Penelope stepped back to open the door more fully. It made its way to the wall, and she ventured inside the room itself – my chance to follow her inside those chambers I had remembered so many times.

## **Penelope**

Walking forward, I listened to Odysseus close the door. I had imagined his homecoming a hundred different ways: arriving before I awoke, sneaking in and waiting for me in our chambers, me joyously opening the door for him, even him carrying me through like our wedding day.

I turned, arms crossed over my chest to stop them from shaking, and my lip quivered, so I bit down on it. Living nerves crawled under my skin as I watched the man in front of me.

My Odysseus, the same one who had acted as if he'd lost his mind in front of other kings to avoid the war that had taken him away anyway. My husband – yet a stranger all the same.

He was taller than I remembered, his presence larger and shoulders wider, yet sagging at the same time. His beard fuller and whiter, and his face – my gods, my husband's face was lined with creases I had not known, carved stories I had not heard.

'You—' The word cracked on its way out.

He tilted his head. In another lifetime, I would have expected the corners of his lips to lift and a comment of some sort to leave his mouth. Some snarkiness about the state of us, or my hesitation, but now the expression was foreign.

I swallowed. 'You look... ' Words fluttered out of reach.

Odysseus straightened himself, meeting my gaze. 'I look like a man who was away for far too long.'

I lifted my chin, emboldened. He was not the only person who had lived for the last twenty years. Had I not raised his son? Been a queen? 'And I, in turn, must look like an aged woman, shackled to taking care of your kingdom. Outlasting everyone who thought your absence would make me weak.'

Odysseus stepped toward me, bold as ever. There was that much of him still there. 'Yet still, you did wait, Penelope, and for how long?'

'I didn't count the days, Odysseus.'

A muscle feathered through his clenched jaw.

'I didn't count the months or years because I would have waited forever. Taken care of your kingdom until my body was no longer capable.'

Odysseus moved closer again.

My focus was stuck on him. It always was, even when he had enraged me beyond sensible thought.

'You can be done waiting,' he said, voice low, 'Penelope, because I'm finally home.'

One of his hands came up. Slowly. I had the chance to retreat, but I didn't. I let him tuck a curl behind my ear – my body leaned into his palm. His thumb didn't move to graze my skin, and his fingers didn't press even though muscles twitched under the skin.

I steadied myself for a heartbeat, and then two – survival instinct and nothing more, and then that, too, snapped at the smell of him – the smell of copper and olives and ocean, and I stepped into him so our chests grazed. I pressed my own hands to that face so different from the one that left. Odysseus was warm. He was rough, and solid. I traced a scar on his brow and then the hollows beneath his cheeks.

Odysseus stayed quiet through my exploration. A stark contrast to the man I knew before. The man I had fallen in love with, who would readily admit to loving to hear himself speak.

‘What happened?’ I asked. Again, my words hadn’t met the gravity of my questions. I had meant to ask what had happened during the war. Or what had kept him from me for so long. Or what had happened to our marriage.

His mouth opened, then shut. His thumb brushed over my cheekbone, and another hand slid across the nape of my neck. ‘It was a long journey,’ he said at last. ‘I lost myself more times than I care to count, and more men than that.’

Odysseus’s forehead pressed to mine. ‘I was a king. A soldier. A pawn of gods. I’ve been all over the sea and dipped into too many antics to get into just yet. Too much has happened, Penelope. Far, far, far too much.’

I ran a finger along his ribs.

‘I didn’t know if I would be someone you’d still love,’ he said.

A tightness in my chest cracked open, and all words left me as my throat constricted. I didn’t answer because I couldn’t. Instead, I kissed my husband.

My Odysseus.

The kiss was uneven, his mouth too rough and mine too eager. Our tongues met, and his hand slid down my back.

We kissed until the silence that had lived between us had nowhere to hide, and then my hands were on his chest, gripping there until I finally pulled back, breathless and dizzy.

His hand slid to my waist. My own stayed on his chest, giving me the contact to make sure he really had come home and I hadn’t finally slipped too far into a dream.

We stayed like that until I tugged him toward our wedding bed.

He lowered himself beside me like he was afraid to move too fast, which was so out of character for him I laughed. We had become teenagers again; we were newlyweds afraid to touch each other, and the thought that we had lost time and also confidence stirred something deep inside me that wouldn’t live with truly starting over, so I forced myself to be bolder.

I lay with him, skin to skin, hands finding familiar places made unfamiliar by both time and trials. Clothing was stripped away, and I touched a scar on his ribs. He kissed the curve of my collarbone. Intimacy came not in perfect lines but in the way we kept choosing to stay pressed together and in the way he whispered my name – like he feared I might vanish, which I only understood because the tone mirrored the way his name escaped my

mouth. The world blurred away by the time we finally gave in to each other, and when it was over, we stayed tangled together.

The hearth burned low at the far side of the room. It threw faint gold light across the sheets and his dark, tanned skin. I rested my head against his chest, listening to his heart beating underneath his skin.

## **Odysseus**

Our fire burned to embers as Penelope fell asleep. Her back curved toward me, the sheet tucked beneath her shoulder.

I watched her for a long time before slipping away, in need of air, or movement or space – I wasn't entirely sure.

In the washing basin, I rinsed my hands and then braced the edge of the marble to stare down at the water – at my reflection. The King of Ithaca. Clever Odysseus.

Husband to a wife he didn't deserve.

Penelope had been too beautiful and smart for me the day we met, which was a lifetime before she'd been tasked with running my country on her own. I certainly wasn't the man who had left, but she wasn't the same either. She stood taller than ever, shoulders and chin high, with not just strength in her eyes but a wariness that churned the contents of my stomach.

What had she lived through?

Selfishly, I hadn't thought to ask, even though she had already tried to learn at least something of my time away.

I gripped the basin tighter, willing the grief of a lost lifetime to pass.

'Have you lost the ability to sleep?' Penelope asked.

I flinched. I had hoped not to wake her with my restlessness.

She stood near the bed, a blanket around her shoulders. Her features were still soft with sleep. 'Has the weight of the world become so much that you can't even lie next to your wife?'

When she smiled, there were wrinkles around the corners, and though they made her beautiful, my chest tightened that I hadn't seen each laugh and sigh that had deepened them.

Penelope let out a soft chuckle. I could only guess it was in response to some face I made at her. My next breath came out a sigh. 'I fear I don't know how to be the man you waited for.'

She crossed the room slowly and stopped right next to me. ‘You were never going to be the man who left, Odysseus. No matter how long it might have been.’

Her hand slipped over mine on the basin’s edge, and some of my shaking stilled.

‘You are a different king,’ she said in a voice too strong for me to tolerate. ‘This is a different place. I am not so fragile that I could keep your throne open and yet not handle time acting upon you, as it is so often pleased to do.’

‘Penelope,’ I said. Nothing else came out.

She had never exactly coddled me, but she seemed especially spirited that night, as if a single night into our reunion, she was tired of my self-pity.

Then she leaned her head against my shoulder, and for a moment – for the first time I could remember – my mind silenced.

The gods had once thundered in every step I took, filled my sails with prophecy and peril. Now, they were quiet. I did not know if that was their blessing or their abandonment – I never had the sense that Athena, at least, was happy when I relaxed. But my Penelope was warm beside me, and she had not bartered with them to bring me back. She had only endured.

That, I thought, was the closest thing to divinity I’d ever touched.

# Knowing Johnny

## by Clint Seiter

**Content Warnings: Explicit sexual content.**

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

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The single bulb that lights up the hallway is busted, and I have to negotiate my way to Rico's apartment by trailing my fingers against the wall, counting the doors. In the dark, the smells of the place seem a lot stronger: boiled cabbage, mildew, old piss. Heavy metal music blasts out from one of the doors I pass, and I get a sticky-sweet whiff of crack. Fuckin' junkies. I can hear loud voices arguing in the apartment across the hallway, then the sound of furniture breaking. Rico's apartment is the next one down. I grope my way to it and knock on the door.

I stand there for a minute, waiting. 'Who's there?' a voice finally asks from inside.

'Open up, Rico,' I say. 'It's me, Al.'

I hear bolts being drawn back. The door opens an inch, still chained, and Rico's eye peers at me through the crack. He closes the door, undoes the chain and opens it wide this time. 'Get in,' he growls. I slip in, and Rico bolts the door behind me. The room is small: an unmade bed, a beat-up dresser, a table pushed up next to the one window. The kid Rico told me about on the phone is sitting at the table, looking scared and trying not to show it. It's quieter in here than in the hall, even with the sounds of traffic coming in from the window. *I can faintly hear, above our heads, the clicking of Writergod's keyboard.*

I keep my eyes trained on the kid. He's sitting in a shaft of light pouring in from the street, and I take in the shaggy blonde hair, the strong jaw, the firm, lean body. 'Where'd you find him?' I ask Rico without turning my head.

'Out on the street, hustling,' Rico says. 'I convinced him he could do better with a little management.' Rico walks into my line of sight. 'He tells me he's eighteen.' *Of course Writergod has Rico say that to keep the censors happy.*

'What's your name?' I ask the kid.

'Johnny,' he says. There's a slight quaver in his voice.

‘Did Rico rough you up?’ Rico stirs, but I silence him with a gesture. ‘Did he force you up here?’ *And, again, Writergod is having me ask this for the sake of the censors. If there’s coercion, the story won’t sell.*

Johnny shakes his head. ‘No. I wanted to go with him. Rico told me about you. I thought maybe you could help me.’ His voice is steadier now, firmer. But the wideness of his dark eyes still gives away his fear.

I look at him for a long moment, gauging him. ‘How good are you at taking orders?’

Johnny licks his lips and swallows. ‘Real good,’ he says.

*This is the first sex scene of the story. Writergod usually limits it to oral only, saving butt fucking for the end-of-story finale.* ‘Stand up,’ I say. Johnny climbs to his feet. ‘I always sample my merchandise first, Johnny,’ I say. ‘I want you to come over here and suck my dick. Suck it until I shoot my load.’

Johnny’s eyes flicker towards Rico and then back at me again. He shifts his weight to his other foot but doesn’t move; he seems to be weighing his options. ‘Okay,’ he finally says. He walks over to me and drops to his knees. His hands are all business as they unbuckle my belt, pull my zipper down and tug my jeans and boxers down below my knees. I keep my face stony, but my dick gives away my excitement. It springs up and swings heavily in front of Johnny’s face. Johnny drinks it in with his eyes. ‘You got a beautiful dick,’ he says.

‘Just skip the commentary,’ I reply.

Johnny leans forward and nuzzles his face into my balls. I feel his tongue licking them, rolling them around in his mouth, sucking on them. He slides his tongue up the shaft of my dick like it’s some kind of popsicle and then circles the cock head with it. I stand there with my hands on my hips, looking down at the top of his head. Rico stands behind the boy, watching. His dick juts out of his open fly, and he’s stroking it slowly.

Johnny’s lips nibble their way down my meaty shaft (*all our shafts are ‘meaty’; Writergod won’t let us in the story without a crank at least eight inches long, and thick, always thick, topped with ‘flared heads’ or ‘fleshy knobs’ or ‘heads the size and colour of small plums’*). When Johnny’s mouth finally makes it to the base of my stiff cock, he starts bobbing his head, sucking me off with a measured, easy tempo. The boy knows how to suck cock – I give him that. He wraps his hand around my balls and tugs them gently as his other hand squeezes my left nipple. I close my eyes and let the sensations he’s drawing from my body ripple over me.

Rico comes up next to me and yanks his jeans down. He strokes his dick with one hand while his other hand slides under my shirt and tugs at the flesh of my torso. I reach over

and cup his balls, feeling their heft, how they spill out onto my palm so nicely. I lean over, and we kiss, Rico slipping his tongue deep into my mouth. Rico lets go of his dick, and Johnny wraps his hand around it, skinning the foreskin back, revealing the fleshy little fist of Rico's cockhead (*another favourite phrase of Writergod's*). He takes my dick out of his mouth, sucks on Rico's for a while, then comes back to me. I spit in my hand and wrap it around Rico's thick, hard cock, sliding it up and down the shaft. Rico lets out a long sigh. He starts pumping his hips, fucking my fist in quick, staccato thrusts. Johnny pries apart my ass cheeks and worms a finger up my bunghole, knuckle by knuckle, never breaking his cocksucking stride. I lose my cool, giving off a long, trailing groan. Johnny pushes against my prostate, and my groans increase in volume. I whip my dick out of his mouth just as the first stream of spunk squirts out, arcing into the air, slamming against Johnny's face. My body spasms as my load continues to pump out, splattering against his cheeks, his closed eyes, his mouth. Rico groans, and I feel his dick pulse in my hand. Johnny turns his face to receive this second spermy shower, and soon, Rico's jizz is mingling with mine in sluggish drops that hang from Johnny's chin. Rico bends down and licks Johnny's face clean, dragging his tongue along the contours of the boy's face. *The clicking sound of Writergod's keyboard rises in volume and then abruptly stops.*

We all look up. 'Do you think he's done?' Rico finally asks.

I shrug. 'With the scene, maybe. He still has to finish the story.'

Johnny climbs to his feet and looks around the room. 'Christ, what a dump. I hope we don't have to stay here long.'

Rico laughs. 'Hell, this is fuckin' *swank* compared to where I was before.' He starts pulling on his clothes. 'Writergod had me lying on some cement teahouse floor with a bunch of lowlifes shooting their loads on me. Then he just left me there in that stinkin' piss hole.' He looks around. 'I just wish there was a TV here.'

I offer a Kleenex to Johnny. 'Here,' I say. 'Rico missed a few drops.' Johnny takes it and wipes the last of my load off his face. I pull a deck of cards from my jacket pocket and sit at the table. 'Poker anyone? Writergod had me in the backroom of a Vegas casino before this. I managed to pocket a deck of cards before the scene faded out.'

There are only two chairs, so Rico has to sit on the edge of the bed. We start with five-card stud. 'It's no fun unless you play for money,' Johnny grouses.

I shrug. 'I don't have any money. Do you?'

Rico grins. 'We could always play for sex.' We all laugh. As if we don't already get nothing but that from each other. Johnny finds a box of matchsticks in the drawer of the dresser, and we divvy them out.

I deal the first hand. 'So what have you been up to, Johnny?' I ask, glancing at him. 'Any interesting locales?' Johnny and I have worked together more times than I can remember. I've fucked him in locker rooms, in the backseats of cars, in alleys, on secluded beaches, once on the torch of the Statue of Liberty. Johnny is always 'the kid' in Writergod's stories, sometimes going by the name of Billy, sometimes Eddy or Andy, always a name that ends in y. I look at him across the table, feeling the old frustration. For all the hot sex we've had together, I hardly know the guy. No conversation, no snuggling together under the sheets, just fade to black, and then the cycle starts all over again.

'Oh, I was in a great place last story,' Johnny says, laughing. 'I was a street hustler in Cozumel who hooks up with an American tourist. You know him. It was Cutter.'

'Shit,' Rocco mutters. I glance at him, but he keeps his eyes focused on his cards. Cutter's a stock character Writergod uses for his more upscale stories, usually about some married man straying to the other side, or a well-heeled yuppie partying in the Keys or P-town. I've only worked with him a couple of times, the last when I was rough trade he picked up in a leather bar on a slumming expedition. Rico and I both think he's got his head up his ass.

'Did you have a good time?' I ask, trying to sound indifferent.

'Oh yeah, it was great fun!' Johnny says. I look for sarcasm, but his smile seems sincere. 'After Writergod wrapped up the fuck scene on the beach, we just hung out there sunbathing, snorkelling, shell-collecting, the whole tourist thing.' Johnny nods at the room around us. 'Until I wound up here.'

'I'm sorry you're disappointed,' I say. I'm aware of how pissy my tone sounds.

Johnny grins. 'Who said anything about being disappointed?' He looks across the table at me and winks. My throat tightens.

'Hey, are you guys going to flap your jaws or play poker?' Rico asks. He throws three cards face down on the table, and I deal him three more. But the wheels are turning in my head. Writergod usually writes several stories at the same time. I glance at Rico sorting through his cards. Rico's all right, but I wouldn't mind it if Writergod suddenly pulled him off for another story and left Johnny and me alone.

Johnny drops two cards face down on the table, and I deal him two more. I keep what I have. Rico starts off the betting with five matchsticks. Johnny throws in his five matchsticks

and raises five more. Outside the window, a police siren wails and then trails off into silence. ‘Which one of your past scenes would you most like to go back to?’ I ask Johnny. ‘If you had a chance.’

Johnny grins and shakes his head. ‘You’ll just laugh.’

‘No, I won’t, I promise.’ I throw in the matchsticks and raise another ten.

‘It was a college story,’ Johnny says. ‘Writergod had me gangfucked in the UC Berkeley library by the football team. After he wrapped up the story, he didn’t use me for weeks. I got to hang out there all that time, doing nothing but reading.’ He glances at me. ‘Have you ever read Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Al? Or any of Robert Frost’s poems?’

I don’t laugh, like I promised, but I do smile. ‘When would I read poetry, Johnny?’ I ask. ‘Between blow jobs in a back alley?’

Johnny gives a rueful smile and shrugs. ‘That’s my point. I hardly ever get to spend time in places where I can improve my mind.’

Rico sees my ten matchsticks and calls. We show our hands. Johnny’s got a pair of eights, Rico two pairs, aces and fives. I win with a straight, jack high. I gather up all my ‘winnings’ and deal us all new hands. Rico leans back on the bed and stretches. ‘I wouldn’t mind going back to the story where I was a park ranger in Yosemite,’ he says, picking up his cards and sorting them. ‘I ended up fucking this backpacker on top of Half Dome.’ He shakes his head and gives a wistful smile. ‘It was my one time out in nature. I loved it – all that bitching scenery. I remember looking up while I was fuckin’ that guy and seeing all these mountains and a big-ass waterfall across the valley.’ He nods toward Johnny. ‘I know what you mean, kid. Writergod usually sticks us in some pretty crummy places.’

I open my mouth to comment when I feel my feet begin to tingle. The tingling moves up my legs, my torso. I know only too well what that means. ‘So long, guys,’ I barely have time to say. ‘I’m off to another story.’

\*

There’s a knock on the door, and then Old Bert sticks his head in. ‘I got the lad here for you, Captain,’ he says. ‘Just like you told me to.’ He knows better than to give me a wink – the last time he tried such impudence, I had him flogged – but his mouth curves up into a randy leer. I can hear the rest of the crew off in the distance, fighting over the *Magdalena*’s spoils.

‘Bring him in,’ I say gruffly. I’m lying on the bed that belonged to the *Magdalena*’s former captain. Since we’ve tossed him overboard with a slit throat, I don’t think he’ll be needing it anymore.

Old Bert opens the door wider, pushes the *Magdalena*’s cabin boy in and closes the door behind him. The lad stumbles forward and then straightens up to face me. His dark eyes glare at me for an instant, but I can see the fear in them as well. He quickly lowers them. ‘*So Johnny’s in this story too, I think. Poor Rico, stuck in that room by himself.*’ The boy stands in the middle of the cabin, his hands at his sides, his head lowered, waiting.

‘Habla ingles?’ I ask.

He nods, his eyes still trained on the floor.

‘Look at me, lad,’ I say. He raises his eyes, eyes that are as black and liquid as the seas on a moonless night. My gaze sweeps down his wiry, muscular body and then back up to his face. ‘What’s your name?’ I ask.

‘Juan Francisco Tomas deSantiago, sir,’ he says in a barely audible voice.

I laugh. ‘That’s quite a mouthful for such a young lad,’ I say. ‘I shall call ye “Johnny.”’

*There’s a moment of silence. I can faintly hear the clicking of Writergod’s keyboard. I’ve never been in a period story before; Writergod usually confines me to slums and back alleys.*

The heat of the tropical sun pours in, as thick as Jamaican molasses, and I feel my head grow light from it. I lie back indolently in the captain’s bed, my eyes drinking Johnny in. There’s a coltish quality to his muscular young body that makes my dick swell and lengthen. Johnny watches silently, his eyes never leaving my face.

‘Get naked,’ I say.

The blood rushes to Johnny’s face, and he shifts his weight to his other foot.

*‘Writergod should watch that little bit of business he always has Johnny do,’ I think. It’s getting repetitive.* Slowly, hesitantly, he unbuttons his shirt and lets it fall to the deck. His torso is as smooth and dark as polished driftwood, the muscles beautifully chiselled. Johnny slips off his shoes, pulls his breeches down and steps out of them. He stands naked at the foot of the bed, his hands at his sides, his cock lying heavily against his thigh. His face is as pure as any angel’s, but he’s got a devil’s dick: red, fleshy, roped with blue veins. In the stifling heat, his balls lie as low and heavy as tree-ripened fruit. My throat tightens with excitement. ‘Turn around,’ I order.

Johnny slowly turns around. His ass is a very pretty thing, high and firm, the cheeks pale cream against the darkness of his tanned back. My dick stirs in my breeches, swelling to full hardness. Johnny completes his rotation and faces me again, his mouth set in a grim line.

‘Well, come over here, lad,’ I say, giving an exaggerated sigh as I slip off my breeches. ‘And give me a reason why I shouldn’t just slit your throat and toss you overboard.’

Johnny stands where he is, head bowed but with his hands curled into fists. The silence in the room is as oppressive as the heat. ‘Aye, Johnny,’ I say softly. ‘Is it coaxing you want instead of threats?’ I sit up in the bed. ‘Please do an old sea dog a favour, lad,’ I say in exaggerated politeness, ‘and come join me in my bed.’

Johnny looks me in the eye, still saying nothing. His mouth curls up into the faintest smile. He crosses the small room and climbs into bed with me. I wrap my arms around him and kiss him, and he kisses back, lightly at first, then with greater force, slipping his tongue into my mouth. I pull him tightly against me, feeling his hard, young cock thrust up against my belly. I wrap my hand around both our dicks and start stroking them slowly within the circle of my fingers. Johnny reaches down and cups my balls in his hand, squeezing them, rolling them around in his palm. I nuzzle my face against the curve of his neck. ‘Tell me, lad,’ I whisper in his ear. ‘Have you ever been bugged before?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Johnny whispers back. ‘Many times.’

I don’t doubt it. A young lad as handsome as Johnny would be fair game on any ship.

There’s a jar of pomade on the table next to the bed. I reach over and scoop out a heavy dollop from it. ‘Well, maybe I can still teach a young pup like you some new tricks,’ I say as I work my hand into his ass crack and begin greasing up his bunghole. I slip a finger in, and the muscles of Johnny’s ass clamp around it tightly, like a baby sucking on his mother’s tit. I push deeper in, and Johnny’s body stirs under me.

‘Do you want more, lad?’ I growl.

Johnny nods his head. ‘If you please, sir,’ he says.

‘Well, since you asked so politely...’ I laugh. I grease up my dick with the pomade and hoist Johnny’s legs over my shoulders. Johnny takes my dick in his hand and guides it to the pucker of his asshole. I push up with my hips, and my dick slides inside him, Johnny thrusting his hips up to meet me. As I start pumping his ass, Johnny matches me stroke for stroke, moving his body in rhythm with mine, squeezing his ass muscles tight with every thrust of my cock.

I laugh from surprise and pleasure. ‘Aye, Johnny,’ I gasp. ‘Ye’re a lusty young buck, I can see that clearly enough. And ye’ve learned your buggery lessons well.’ *This is the first*

story where I've fucked without a condom, I think (*Writergod is scrupulous about safe sex in his stories*). *Sweet Jesus, it feels good.*

I continue ploughing Johnny's ass with long, slow strokes. A groan escapes from his lips, and I grin fiercely. 'That's right, Johnny,' I growl. 'Sing for me. I want to play you like a mandolin.' *Where is Writergod coming up with this fucking dialogue?* I thrust savagely until my dick is full inside him and then churn my hips. Johnny groans loudly. I bend down and kiss him, and he returns my kiss passionately, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. As I skewer Johnny, he reaches up and runs his hands across my body, twisting my nipples hard. He wraps his legs around me and rolls over on top. We're drenched with sweat, and our bodies thrust together and separate with wet, slapping noises. I wrap Johnny in my arms, and we roll again, falling off the bed and onto the deck below.

I pin Johnny's arms down and plunge my cock deep inside him. Johnny cries out. 'Do you want me to stop, lad?' I ask.

'No, sir,' Johnny groans.

I thrust again, and again Johnny cries out. I can hear the pirates brawling outside. They're probably drunk by now on the *Magdalena's* cargo of spirits. 'Louder, Johnny!' I snarl.

'Don't stop, sir!' he cries out.

'That's better,' I grunt. I wrap my arms around him and press him tight. My sweaty torso slides and squirms against him as I pump my dick in and out of his ass. A groan escapes from Johnny's lips. I thrust again, and he groans again, louder. Johnny reaches down and squeezes my balls. They're pulled up tight, ready to shoot their load. He presses down hard between them, and my body shudders violently as the first of the orgasm is released. I throw back my head and bellow as my dick gushes jism into his ass. Load after load of it pulses out, and I thrash against Johnny like a man whose throat has just been cut. After what seems like a small eternity, the last of the spasms end, and I collapse on top of him.

I push myself up again. 'Climb up on my chest, Johnny,' I say, 'and splatter my face with your load.'

Johnny seems only too happy to oblige. He swings his leg over and straddles me. I look up at him, at the tight, muscular body, at Johnny's handsome face, at the hand sliding up and down the thick shaft of his dick. 'Aye, there you go, lad,' I mutter. 'Make your dick squirt for me!' I reach up and twist Johnny's left nipple.

I feel Johnny's body shudder, and he raises his face to the ceiling rafters and cries out. A load of jism gushes out from his dick and splatters against my face. Another lot follows,

and then another; by the time Johnny's done, my face is festooned with the ropy strands of his wad. He bends down and licks it off tenderly, and I kiss him, pulling my body tight against his. *Writergod's keyboard is suddenly silent.*

We wait expectantly for it to start up again, finish the story, but nothing happens. I look up at Johnny, and we both burst out laughing. 'Do you believe that fucking dialogue?' I exclaim. I twist my face into comic fierceness. 'Aye, Johnny,' I growl. 'You're a lusty young buck. How 'bout letting me bugger your ass?' Johnny laughs again, and we lie naked, side by side in the bed, saying nothing for a while. I reach up and stroke his forehead. 'You looked very sexy dressed as a cabin boy,' I say. 'It suits you.'

Johnny raises his eyebrows. 'You're not putting the make on me, are you, Al?'

I have to laugh at that. 'Right. Like I don't get enough sex from you as it is.' Still, I'm feeling light and playful now that I'm alone with Johnny between stories, not being forced to say words that aren't mine. I look around. The cabin is cramped, and a glance out the porthole shows nothing but sea and sky. The deck beneath us gently rolls with the movement of the waves. The tropical heat makes the small room feel like a sauna. 'Let's just relax for a while,' I say. 'Maybe talk.'

Johnny stretches and places his hands behind his head. My heart is beating hard, and when I notice this, I almost laugh. I've forgotten how many times I've boned Johnny in how many countless stories, and I'm actually feeling nervous. I cautiously wrap my arm around Johnny's shoulders, and he snuggles against me. 'This is nice,' he says.

'I've been wanting to do this for a long time,' I say. 'All we do is fuck. We never talk.'

Johnny looks up at my face, his eyes amused. 'What do you want to talk about, Al?'

I think for a long time. The only subjects I can come up with are back alleys, docks and quarter booths in the back of porno bookstores. I'm struck by a sudden thought. 'Tell me about the poems you read,' I say.

'Do you want to hear one?' Johnny asks, grinning.

'Sure.' I nestle back against the pillows, my eyes trained on him.

Johnny pulls himself up to a sitting position and turns to face me. He clears his throat:

*'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree,  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man*

*Down to a sunless sea.'*

Johnny squeezes his eyes in concentration for a second and then looks at me apologetically. 'I don't remember much more. Just the last few lines:

*'His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes in holy dread,  
For he on honeydew has fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.'*

He looks down at me. 'Sorry, that's all I know.'

I shake my head. 'I don't get it.' Johnny shrugs but says nothing. 'I mean, who would name a river "Alph"? And who ever heard of hair floating?'

'I don't know,' Johnny says, laughing. 'I didn't write the damn poem.' He lies back down in the bed, burrowing back into my arms.

We lie in the bed together, Johnny's body pressed against mine. My arm lightly strokes his shoulder. I can smell the fresh sweat of his body, feel the heat of his skin flow into me. The rocking of the ship lulls me into half-sleep. 'This is so nice,' I say, half to Johnny, half to myself. Johnny says nothing but just lays his hand on my thigh and squeezes it. I close my eyes.

My feet start to tingle. 'FUCK!!!' I cry out. I look up at the ceiling. 'WRITERGOD, YOU BASTARD! CAN'T YOU GIVE ME JUST A FEW FUCKING MINUTES OF PEACE!?' The tingling spreads up my body, and the ship's cabin fades out, along with Johnny.

\*

I've got Nash taking point twenty meters in front of the squad, and Myers and Benchley behind us working the radio, keeping the com line open with the base. The others are in different positions waiting for orders. That leaves me alone with the kid, Jamison. Earlier reconnaissance reports indicated enemy movement about five clicks north of the base, working its way towards us, but fuck, that was hours ago, and Charley could be anywhere. I

look around. We're on elevated ground with good cover, and I don't anticipate any action for hours; our best bet is to lie low and hope that Charley walks into our ambush.

I crawl over toward Jamison. 'How you doing, son?' I whisper.

Jamison looks back at me, his eyes wide, his mouth set in a tight line. He's a green recruit, just assigned to the squad last week, and this is his first combat action. He still wears the look of someone trying to wake up from a bad dream. 'All right, I guess,' he says.

I put my gun down and sit down beside him. 'It's a hell of a business, ain't it?'

Jamison grins, and I feel my throat tighten. I've been sporting a hard-on for the kid since he was first assigned to the squad. 'What's your name?' I ask. 'I mean, what do you go by?'

Jamison looks at me, and a little crackle of energy shoots between us. 'Johnny,' he says.

I put my hand on his thigh and squeeze. I'm risking a court martial, but I'm sick and tired of this fucking war. I may be dog meat tomorrow. I bend down and plant my mouth over Johnny's. He doesn't hesitate for a moment; it's like he's been waiting for me to make the first move. He kisses me back, pushing his tongue down towards my throat.

*'Johnny,' I think. 'One of these days, between stories, we'll get that chance just to hang out, to talk, to get to know each other a little. I've got to believe that'll happen.'* I look into Johnny's eyes, and for a moment, I think that he can read my thoughts. He gives me a tiny smile and nods, a gesture out of character for the story.

*As Writergod's keyboard clicks away, I reach down, unzip Johnny's fly and pull out his thick, hard cock...*