

A Coup of Owls
Summer 2026

C^{OOD}

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Cover Image – Girls by Kinga Howard via [Unsplash](#)

You don't have to have everything figured out, let the future be the future, be present now and have trust that you will end up where you're supposed to be.

Cover Design – A Coup of Owls

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Foreword**Page 6****Bayo. Big Ideas, No Money. by Solape Adetutu Adeyemi****Page 8**

Unforgettably delicious.

Solape Adetutu Adeyemi has a Bachelor's degree in Microbiology and a Master's in Environmental Management. She is a passionate environmental sustainability enthusiast and a talented award winning creative writer, with her works published in over 40 esteemed journals, anthologies and magazines, including the *New York Times*, the *London Grip Poetry magazine*, the *Guardian newspaper*, the *Kalahari review* and the *Indiana review*. You can reach her on [Facebook](#) and via email - solapeadeyemi1@gmail.com

Signed Away by Bec McKenzie**Page 11**

It's a hot day in LA, and an unnamed actress is interviewed by a reporter trying to get more info about her agent, an implied supernatural creature she signed her True Name away to in exchange for stardom.

Bec McKenzie is a disabled genderfluid writer who lives in North Carolina. Their work has also appeared in *Unburied Fables*, an anthology of queer fairy tales. He goes by any pronouns.

Part of a Woman's Life by Camden Rose**Page 15**

When their coworker dies, two women are left struggling to figure out what to talk about.

Camden Rose is a queer author who loves seeking out magic beneath the everyday world. Her works have appeared with *FlashPoint SF* and *Heartlines Spec*. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her spouse, black cats, and collection of books and board games. You can find her online at www.camdenscorner.com.

The Evening Tide by Nivara Lune

Page 18

A woman attends a solstice festival hoping to find her way back to the sister she signed away, only to be made to watch herself do it again.

Nivara Lune is the pen name of a writer and storyteller writing ebooks, blogs, web novels and serialised tales across genres including horror, romance, and supernatural fiction. Her work blends creativity, insight, and engaging storytelling, drawing readers into worlds where suspense, emotion, and hidden truths collide. She explores themes of love, identity, and self-discovery, often with a queer or supernatural twist. Nivara Lune contributes to platforms *Zoetic Press*, *Brown Hound Press*, and elsewhere. She can be found on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

To See What We Cannot Unsee by Mandira Pattnaik

Page 24

Malti, Rani, and the narrator are the ugly interns in the Monitoring Room at Death Depot. Their training is limited to watching people via giant CCTV screens, and when they must observe Preeti Taneja and her loathed White husband, things might remain unfinished.

Mandira Pattnaik is a writer, editor and columnist. She enjoys versatility, and writes in different genres and categories including poetry, speculative fiction, experimental and hybrid nonfiction, and literary fiction. Published in over 380 venues in seventeen countries, she is the author of eight collections including "White, Hot Moon" forthcoming in 2026. More about her work can be found at mandirapattnaik.com

Madame Fern by Lisa Cai

Page 31

In the 2050s, detective Mrs Sui enters a fundamentalist commune to investigate human trafficking incidents related to the settlement. Joining a Canadian diplomatic mission to the commune, she arranges a temporary marriage with Madame Fern to find out what happened.

Lisa Cai is from Toronto, Canada. Her works have appeared in *Diabolical Plots*, *The Dark*, *Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and others. She was shortlisted for the 2025 *Brave New Weird* award. When not reading or writing, she is probably wrangling with IT at a university, watching anime, taking a long walk, or solving crimes in *Among Us*. Her socials are listed at <https://linktr.ee/lisacai>.

Good as Gold by Kelly Murashige

Page 43

A girl struggles with her confusion and feelings of inadequacy as she and her mother prepare for the Rapture.

Born and raised in Hawai'i, Kelly Murashige is the author of the award-winning YA novels *The Lost Souls of Benzaiten* and *The Yomigaeri Tunnel*, as well as the upcoming adult novel *Milkiverse* (2027). Her work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions. Though she can be shy, she loves obsessing over books, video games, and strange animals. She can be found at <https://www.kellymurashige.com/>

Accretion Disk by Meagan Kane

Page 49

A black hole makes herself a coat.

Meagan Kane flunked out of physics, but refuses to stop writing about space. She lives in Minneapolis with her wife. Her work has appeared in *Adventitious*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *PseudoPod*, among others. Find her full bibliography online at mkanewrites.com and on [Bluesky](https://www.bluesky.com).

Foreword

Is there anything worse than a blank mind in front of an equally blank, expectant page? I started writing this foreword three times. First, I had a whole spiel about summer, death and growth. But it left me as cold as the winter days I (as a hater of summer) long for. Then I tried writing about change and how we evolve. That just seemed tired. Next, I found an unused draft about my haunted childhood home – it was good but not seasonally appropriate; I'll keep it for Halloween. Then, it struck me: why not write about what I'm feeling? What all writers experience at one point or another. The terror of the blank page. The horror of writer's block. The dawning realisation that you have used up your last idea. The knowledge that you have, somehow, seemingly overnight, lost your ability to express in words what you see in your mind.

I love working with Coup. I love writing these forewords too. But here I am, typing while rain comes down in sheets outside, trying and failing to think of something summery to write. Welcome to an English summer; it *is* summer, it just looks like monsoon season. But it gets me thinking: just like summer in the UK, all the stories in this issue have a dark side. They might be set against a backdrop of heat, but they carry the weight of grief and death in their hot little hands. And finally, inspiration hits me: perhaps the juxtaposition is what I should be focusing on. The wonderful marriage of heat and horror. Of summer and death.

How many horror movies are set in the summer? Summer camps overrun with murderous, axe-wielding maniacs, summer holidays disturbed by serial killers. And ok, an argument could be made that it's just an excuse to get the cast into swimsuits and jumping into lakes before they are unceremoniously killed and left half-naked for some poor teenager to find, but I digress. Personally, I love that trope. Summer, for me, is too hot and sticky, so I love the idea of darker, scarier things happening while the sun beats down. Dust, radiation burns and a sun breaking through a much thinner atmosphere. A monster created through destruction, wreaking havoc on the remaining population. It makes sense to me: there's nowhere to hide from the heat, your body cannot function, and your brain is being boiled. There's also a kind of abandon when it's hot. We become freer. Summer festivals are filled with sunburned and dehydrated revellers. The days are longer, and nighttime never really seems to settle in. Everything is brighter and clearer. It's a perfect setting for death and mayhem of the kind you'll find throughout this issue.

I hope you enjoy these wonderfully bright dark tales. And I hope you are never visited by the horror of the blank page and the oppressive mental wall of writer's block. Remember, the sun may be shining in our forest, but the ground is dark and filled with holes. Don't worry, though; if you fall down a hole, we'll be right there with a rope made of delicious tales for us to share...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Bayo. Big Ideas, No Money.

by Solape Adetutu Adeyemi

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 11 for the next story.

His name is Bayo the Magnificent. He added the Magnificent himself. Printed it on a single complimentary card he designed at a cybercafé and never paid for. Under his name it says Consultant & Visionary. Visionary of what? We are still envisioning.

Bayo is poor.

Not poetic-poor. Not ‘I’m between investments’ poor. I mean open-the-fridge-and-the-light-is-the-most-nutritious-thing-inside poor. Pure water sachet reclining in the freezer like it has accepted its fate. One onion ageing with dignity. That is the inventory.

But pride? Pride lives in that room rent-free. Pride has a standing fan and stable electricity.

His mattress is so thin it feels like it’s fasting. The bedsheet has seen things. The ceiling fan rotates with the reluctant commitment of a government project. One plastic chair stands in the corner like a loyal friend who has endured too much. The gas cylinder coughs before igniting, as if clearing its throat before another performance.

Yet watch him step outside.

Shoes slightly chewed by Lagos roads, yes – but Bayo walks like he owns half of Victoria Island and is just doing routine inspection. Chin up. Shoulders back. Sunglasses tilted. One arm of the glasses bent like it survived economic hardship. He greets bus conductors like junior colleagues.

‘Good afternoon, gentlemen.’

Gentlemen.

He says it like he has shares in three banks and a pending meeting in Abuja.

Last month his landlord knocked. The kind of disrespectful knock reserved for tenants who owe.

‘Bayo, my rent.’

Bayo opened the door slowly, leaned on the frame like he was considering structural renovations.

‘Chief, calm down. Liquidity is not the issue. It is strategic cash flow alignment.’

Strategic.

Cash flow.

Alignment.

This is a man who owes three months’ rent and PHCN bills, but he is discussing alignment.

Inside, alignment means he has aligned hunger with hope.

He cooks Indomie like a Michelin-star chef. He sprinkles seasoning with a flourish. Stirs thoughtfully. Nods after tasting. ‘I don’t eat heavy at night,’ he’ll tell you. ‘Discipline is wealth.’

While his stomach is staging an unpeaceful protest.

That one shirt he owns? It has attended more events than a socialite. Weddings. Interviews. Naming ceremonies. Burial receptions. That shirt has seen champagne it was never allowed to taste. He irons it until it shines with determination.

At parties, Bayo does not hover near the food. No. He positions himself by the drinks and speaks on macroeconomics.

‘Nigeria’s problem is not resources,’ he declares, sipping chilled malt like aged wine. ‘It is mindset.’

Someone offers him small chops. He hesitates half a heartbeat too long.

‘I’m watching my intake.’

Sir. We watched you calculate that spring roll like it was a loan repayment plan.

His phone screen is badly cracked and tied with a rubber band, but the ringtone is orchestral. When it rings, he pauses before answering.

‘Yes, send the documents to my email.’

Email full of promotional messages and one CV he has been ‘updating’ since three administrations ago. He writes motivational captions about grinding. Posts quotes about elevation. Data subscription borrowed.

But here is the thing.

At night, when generators go silent and mosquitoes begin their national anthem, Bayo lies on that exhausted mattress and stares at the ceiling. And in that darkness, something shifts. He is not performing. He is building empires in his head. Buying land in Lekki. Importing cars. Planning businesses with names that end in ‘Global Ventures.’

‘Next year, soft life,’ he whispers.

He has said it every year.

With conviction.

Because Bayo’s pocket is empty, yes – but his audacity? Overflowing. His imagination is fully funded. His dignity refuses eviction. His confidence does not bounce.

He steps into each day like tomorrow personally owes him money. Talks like a senator without salary. Tips mechanics with advice. Calls hunger ‘intermittent fasting.’ Calls lack ‘minimalism.’ Calls struggle ‘capacity building.’

And somehow – somehow – you almost believe him.

Because in a country where currency falls and promises expire, Bayo’s audacity does not depreciate.

He may be poor.

But in his head?

He has already made it.

And he is gracious enough to forgive us for not noticing.

Signed Away

by **Bec McKenzie**

Content Warnings: Brief reference to homophobia in the Classic Hollywood era.

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

It's hot outside. Whatever the time of year, it's always warm in Southern California – pleasantly or otherwise. The eternal summer that Los Angeles enjoys is as dull to her as its residents. She misses real seasons, the likes of which she now only experiences when shooting on location somewhere far away.

She knows she hails from a place that has bitterly cold winters, but all that comes to mind when she tries to recall more is huddling by a wood stove while the wind howled outside. That, and being hungry all the time. She's much better off now, so it's probably not worth remembering such a miserable place.

She tells the reporter as much, and he laughs incredulously.

'That could be anywhere. The Midwest, Canada, Siberia...' He leans in closer. 'Do you *really* not remember where you're from? I mean, honestly?'

She lapses into a posh English accent as she replies, 'I'm from wherever the script requires, sir.'

To American audiences, a British accent of almost any origin is synonymous with sophistication and royalty. The affectation comes as easily as any other, but she's not from anywhere in the UK, either. By default, she has the sort of American accent associated with newscasters – well enunciated and from nowhere in particular. It's fitting.

The reporter forces a smile at her supposed stonewalling before wiping a bead of sweat off his notepad. The setting for their interview is her back patio, where she happened to be sitting when the reporter arrived two hours late, dashing her hopes he wouldn't turn up at all.

The air by the pool is stifling. The high walls around her property seem to hold in the heat on days like this – with too little wind to bring any relief. She feels like a bug trapped in

a jar, particularly with the reporter staring at her so intently. Two can play that game, but not just yet.

‘Upholding the mystique, then,’ he says while making a note. ‘I can respect that.’

He doesn’t. She knows this because she knows how reporters think – and this one is no better than the others. He wants answers. He wants all her dirty little secrets. He wants a scoop. He’s insatiable like every paid gossip in this artificial oasis. She’s been in LA long enough to know everyone and everything in it is fake. Including her.

They sit in silence while the reporter considers a new approach. She’s stretched out on her only lounge chair, a gauzy robe over her bathing suit for modesty’s sake, and he’s sweating through his shirt in a chair dragged over from the umbrella table. She stares longingly at the pool, wishing the nosy bastard would get on with it so she can go for her afternoon swim.

The sunlight reflecting off the water isn’t quite so dazzling when seen through the dark lenses of oversized sunglasses she was paid to wear. She readjusts them before glancing back at the reporter. For some reason, he followed her gaze to the pool. He squints against the glare as if there was anything to see. Maybe he longs for a dip in the cool water as well, but he won’t get so much as a toe in. It’s *her* pool, and only she can use it.

As she looks at him, she wonders if he’s the type to embellish his articles, going on and on about her statuesque beauty and palatial mansion before finally getting to the real meat of the story. The pages are almost always skipped by the reader until they see the bold print of all they care about: the questions and answers. Such pointless garnishes are the hallmark of a frustrated ‘real’ writer who moonlights as a Hollywood reporter and not the other way around. Or so they claim. This man is a pretender. They both are. Except *she* doesn’t worry about who or what she is – until people like *him* start prying, making her try to grasp memories that are beyond her reach.

The past doesn’t matter, and the future is nothing but a setting in movie scripts she’s too good to accept. All that matters is the present, here where she’s rich and adored – preferably from afar.

The reporter clears his throat as he notices her staring at him. He flips to a new page as an excuse to look away.

‘What about your past relationships?’

She lowers her sunglasses, and he squirms under her direct, unobstructed gaze. Something about her eyes has that effect on people. She smiles. He grimaces.

‘Yes, *what about* my past relationships?’

Having his words thrown back at him makes the reporter even more uncomfortable.

‘Well, uh...’

‘Are you referring to the fact one was recently outed as a homosexual, Mr...?’

‘Mathis,’ he replies, surely thinking she’s toying with him. The truth is, she genuinely forgot his name. His features are so bland she’ll forget those as well when he’s gone.

And his departure can’t come soon enough.

‘Obviously I had no idea,’ she lies. ‘He was good to me and a *very* enthusiastic lover.’

More lies. They never had sex. She doesn’t care for it, nor did she care who her now-infamous ex saw on the side. It was a fine arrangement while it lasted, but when it was over, he said that even when she was on his arm, it was like she wasn’t there. But no reporter needs to know that.

‘Right. Got it.’ Mr Mathis looks vaguely disappointed as he takes down the quote.

‘What about your acting methods? The way you disappear into a role is quite impressive, staying in character even on set...’ He kindly stops himself before going so far as to compare her to Brando.

The lounge chair creaks as she settles back into it, tired of looking at Mr Mathis and his pencil-thin moustache – the only memorable thing about him.

‘I never heard of Stanislavski before people like you started asking,’ she says, watching a passenger jet fly overhead. ‘The fact that my “acting methods” overlap is pure coincidence, as I’ve said at least a dozen times now.’

‘Nevertheless, it’s led to some friction on set with your more, uh, *villainous* roles.’

‘No one ever thinks of themselves as a villain, Mr Mathis.’

The reporter, for instance, is a villain for keeping her from the pool with his inane questions.

‘What about your relationship with Robert Glass?’

She doesn’t look away from the contrails left by the jet.

‘Are you asking if I’m fucking my agent, Mr Mathis?’

‘N-no, I just meant...’ He pauses to compose himself before continuing. ‘What do you think of him? Do you get along? That sort of thing.’

‘I don’t think of him much at all until he calls me about work,’ she answers truthfully.

‘And I assure you, Mr Mathis, that’s all he ever calls about. Strictly business.’

‘Then how did you come to be involved with him – I mean professionally, of course.’

‘*Of course...*’

She lets him stew for a bit while thinking back on it. The memory of sitting in Mr Glass's office for the first time is very vivid, unlike that of her childhood home. She remembers sitting at his desk with a contract in front of her that she hadn't read. She remembers putting pen to paper with a hand shaking from excitement, but her memory won't go as far as the name she signed. It's gone now. Signed away to Mr Glass.

Try as she might, all that comes to mind is very carefully making the cursive loops in her signature, but not what letters they formed. These days, after so many autographs of her stage name, her signature is a highly valued but illegible flourish.

'I apologise, but I'm getting a headache.' She rubs her forehead for emphasis. 'Will this take much longer?'

'We only just started,' Mr Mathis objects. 'And you didn't answer the question.'

'I walked into his office, and he hired me,' she replies brusquely. 'There wasn't anything sinister about it, if that's what you're implying.'

'That's not what I meant.' The defensive forcefulness of the words betrays him. 'It's just that Mr Glass is a very elusive figure, and—'

'You were hoping maybe I could introduce you,' she finishes for him. *Most* reporters have the decency not to ask about her agent, but she saw the hungry look in this one the moment her butler brought him outside. 'As you're aware, Mr Glass is a very private man.'

'But he has those parties!' Mr Mathis retorts, desperation plain in his voice.

'Ah, yes, those legendary, very *exclusive* parties,' she scoffs. 'I'm afraid I can get you neither an invite nor an interview, Mr Mathis.' She grabs the little bell sitting by her forgotten martini and rings it to summon her butler. 'We're done here.'

'Tell me anything!' Mr Mathis begs. 'I need something! Anything! *Please!*'

She sighs the same way she did when she first saw Mr Mathis intruding upon her pool time.

'I know all about the rumours, so don't bother. Mr Glass is not the Devil or any foolishness like that. He's...' The image of a bright smile flashes in her mind's eye. It's all that comes to mind whenever she thinks of Mr Glass. Never his face.

'He's just a man, Mr Mathis. There's nothing else I can tell you about him.'

Her butler arrives to take her unwanted guest away, ending the interview on one last lie.

Whatever Mr Glass is, he's something that took her old name and gave her a new one, making her a star.

And she's felt empty ever since.

Part of a Woman's Life

by Camden Rose

Content Warnings: Implied sexism—doesn't pass the Bechdel Test.
Not your thing? Skip to page 18 for the next story.

'What do we do now?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, now that he's dead, what do we talk about?'

'...I'm not sure. What do two women normally talk about when they're together?'

'Other men, of course.'

'Right. But now with John being dead...'

'...'

'...'

'.....'

'.....'

'What if we go after him?'

'After him?'

'Yeah, you know, see where he's gone. It'll give us something to talk about at least.'

'But he's dead.'

'But remember how he died?'

'He was at that strip club. Or was it with another woman? No, I think he was making a business deal.'

'Oh yeah, the business deal. I was there, as his secretary, after all. That ceiling tile really came out of nowhere.'

'Did it, though?'

'You're right. It was right after we commented on the glass ceiling. He said there was no ceiling, then bam! Right on the head. There's still blood on my skirt from when I rushed in and tried to save him.'

'Oh, yeah. No wonder. That ceiling is pretty high up there. Would make quite the impact from that high up.'

'I wonder if... Yeah, with a ladder we could get up there. Do you have a ladder?'

'I think around here somewhere. Corporate dropped one off last week. Oh, right here.

Want to climb first?'

'No, I'm afraid of glass. Can you do it?'

'Sure.'

'I'll spot you. Once you figure it out, I can join.'

'Thanks.'

'...'

'Found anything?'

'Yes, there's a few loose tiles up here. We could probably break them.'

'Hold up, I'll stand out of the way. Don't want to die too.'

'Okay. Ready now?'

'Ready.'

'Here goes nothing.'

'That was loud!'

'Sorry.'

'It's okay.'

'Whoa, there's a whole world up here.'

'Yeah?'

'Yep, it has disco lights and everything. How could we not see it through the glass?'

'Maybe it's the same magic that made John believe there wasn't a ceiling in the first place.'

'Maybe so. Looks like there's a lot of men here. A lot of them look like John, ghosts and all, but not all of them. I wonder how they got through the ceiling. None of them look like they just climbed up the corporate ladder.'

'So... do you think we can save him? Can we bring him back?'

'I don't know. I haven't found him yet. I'm not even sure if he went here when he died.'

'What are we supposed to do without him, though? What are we supposed to talk about?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe our interests? Or we could become business partners and take over the company now that he's gone.'

'Are you crazy? Everyone knows women can't do that.'

‘I know, but up here, above the ceiling, I wonder if maybe... I think you should come up here.’

‘Are you sure? There’d be no one to spot you if you fell.’

‘I’ll climb through. This ceiling looks pretty sturdy. One sec.’

‘Okay.’

‘Ready.’

‘Okay, coming.’

‘Here, let me help you up.’

‘Thanks.’

‘So?’

‘You’re right. It’s beautiful.’

‘I know, right?’

‘It reminds me of my mom.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. She wanted to send me to college but couldn’t make enough to pay the bills. I feel like this is what she imagined my life would look like if she’d actually sent me.’

‘Hmm. It makes me think of music. The brightness of it.’

‘Do you play?’

‘Yeah, violin.’

‘I never knew that. That’s cool.’

‘Thanks. I’ve been wanting to get back into it. Maybe now that I’m not working such long hours scheduling John’s meetings, I’ll have the time.’

‘That sounds really nice, Carol.’

‘I agree, Jane.’

‘Oh, there’s John over there. Looks like he’s having fun. Shaking lots of hands. Want to go talk to him?’

‘Not really.’

‘Me either.’

The Evening Tide

by Nivara Lune

Content Warnings: Death (referenced, non-graphic); grief; loss of a family member; medical decision-making at end of life.

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

THE SOLSTICE REVELS: OFFICIAL ATTENDEE CODE OF CONDUCT

Issued by the Revels Permanent Committee | Summer Edition | V.7.2

1. Ticket Verification

All wristbands must be worn on the left wrist. If your wristband begins to pulse in rhythm with your heartbeat, please visit the Medical Tent. Do not attempt to cut the band off; the fabric is now integrated with your nervous system for 'Seamless Entry.'

The heat was a physical weight, pressing Ione's shirt against her back before she even reached the turnstiles. The air in the valley sat thick with the smell of trampled grass and expensive sunscreen. She stood in the admission line, watching a security guard in a neon vest check wristbands with the practiced apathy of a bored god.

When it was her turn, the guard didn't look at her face. He grabbed her left wrist, his fingers surprisingly cold despite the forty-degree sun, and tightened the fabric strip until it bit into her skin.

'Wait,' Ione said, wincing. 'It's a bit tight.'

'It needs a clear signal.' He tapped a tablet without looking up. 'Pulse sync confirmed. Welcome to the Revels, Ione.'

She hadn't told him her name. He was already reaching for the next person in line.

She pulled her hand away. Beneath the neon green fabric, she felt a tiny, insistent throb – not just her pulse but a counter-rhythm, a half-second behind her own heart. Like a small, trapped insect trying to find its way out of her veins. She looked back at the line behind her: hundreds of people, all clutching their left wrists, all walking into the valley with the same slightly off-beat gait.

She shifted her dead sister's watch to her right wrist and walked through the gate.

2. Hydration & Cooling

Temperatures are expected to exceed 40°C. Refillable bottles are encouraged. Please note that the 'Misting Stations' located near the Main Stage do not dispense water. They dispense a proprietary pheromone-blocker. If you feel the sudden, overwhelming urge to walk into the ocean and never return, you have missed a misting cycle.

By noon the valley was a shimmering kiln. The music from the distant stages felt less like art and more like a structural vibration, shaking the dust off the dying clover. Ione found a misting station near the merch tent – a silver archway hissing a fine, scentless cloud.

A group of teenagers were dancing through it, laughing as the vapour coated their glitter-covered skin. Ione stepped in, expecting the cool shock of water. Instead, the mist felt dry, almost oily. As it hit her face, a strange, hollow peace settled behind her eyes. The grief she'd been carrying since February didn't disappear; it just became quiet, like a stone dropped into deep water, still sinking.

She leaned against the silver pole and closed her eyes. From somewhere west, a pull – not a thought but a physical instruction, the kind that originates below the ribs. The deep, cold water felt more real than the ground beneath her boots. She stayed in the mist until her skin felt coated in a thin, invisible wax and the pull subsided.

3. Lost and Found

The Festival is not responsible for lost items, including phones, wallets or memories of the year 2024. If you find a child that claims to be yours but has eyes the colour of unpolished copper, please leave them at the Information Kiosk. They are likely a 'Legacy Guest' and will be collected by the Evening Tide.

Ione found herself standing before the Information Kiosk by 2.00 p.m., not because she had lost her phone but because she could no longer remember the colour of her front door. It was a small, nagging omission – a blank space where a detail should be.

The kiosk was a repurposed shipping container painted a cheerful, peeling yellow. Behind the counter sat a woman whose name tag read BETH, the letters scratched into the plastic as though with a fingernail.

On a milk crate next to the counter sat a boy. No more than six. He wore a faded Solstice 2019 t-shirt far too large for him, the hem trailing in the dust. When he looked up, the sun caught his eyes. They were the flat, metallic orange of an old penny.

'He says his name is Leo,' Beth said, her voice like dry leaves. She didn't look at the boy. She was logging a pair of designer sunglasses into a ledger. 'He says you're his mother.'

Ione felt a cold spike of adrenaline. ‘I’ve never seen him before. I don’t have children.’

‘They all say that at first,’ Beth muttered, looking up. Her own eyes were tired, deeply human, rimmed with red. ‘The Revels have a way of thinning the timeline. You lose a year of memories, and suddenly, there’s a six-year-old claiming a seat at your dinner table. It’s a displacement of debt.’

Leo reached out and caught a fold of Ione’s denim shorts. His grip was surprisingly strong. ‘You smelled like lavender this morning,’ he whispered. ‘Before the mist. You smelled like home.’

Ione stepped back. The wristband had begun to glow faintly, synchronising with the boy’s slow blinking. She felt the rage move through her like weather – not at the child but at the valley, at the forms, at every system that had ever taken something from her and called it procedure.

‘He isn’t mine,’ Ione said.

‘Then leave him,’ Beth said, returning to her ledger. ‘The Evening Tide comes in at six. Just don’t look back when the water starts rising in the tall grass.’

Ione walked away. The sensation of the boy’s small hand lingered on her skin like a burn.

4. Performance Etiquette

Crowd surfing is strictly prohibited. The air above the crowd is reserved for the headliners. If you are lifted higher than six feet, please tuck your chin and prepare for a transition into a different atmospheric pressure.

She lost herself in the crowd for a while. The Main Stage act was loud enough to replace thought, the bass frequency sitting in her sternum like a second heartbeat to compete with the wristband’s. Around her, bodies moved in the unselfconscious way of people who had temporarily misplaced themselves.

At one point, the crowd surged and lifted a man briefly above the mass of shoulders. He didn’t crowd surf so much as float – arms wide, face turned upward, expression not of joy but of extraordinary relief. Then the crowd shifted, and he was gone.

Ione watched the space where he’d been.

She wondered if Mina would have danced. She decided yes. She decided Mina would have been at the front.

5. The Quiet Hour

From 3.00 a.m. to 4.00 a.m., all sound systems will be cut. This is not for noise ordinances. This is so we can hear if the ground is still breathing. If you hear a rhythmic thumping from beneath the soil, please remain silent and still. Do not apologise to the earth. It does not want your words; it wants your weight.

The silence crashed. At exactly 3.00 a.m., the sub-bass that had been rattling Ione's marrow for fourteen hours vanished, leaving a vacuum that made her ears ring with a high, thin whine.

Twenty thousand people froze, standing perfectly still in a dark field, obeying a line of text on a screen.

Ione sat on the cooling earth near the perimeter fence. The grass was tall and dry, smelling of dust and crushed clover. She pressed her palms flat against the soil. At first, nothing. Then – a low, tectonic thrum. Not a heartbeat. Slower. The long, agonising inhalation of something the size of a mountain. Every time the earth breathed in, her own lungs tightened in sympathy.

A few yards away, a man hunched over the blue light of a smartphone. The glow made his face skeletal. He was punching digits into the screen, his thumb shaking.

He pressed the phone to his ear, head tilted back, eyes closed.

'Please,' he whispered. 'Just once. Just tell me where you put the—'

The earth gave a heavy heave beneath them, a subterranean sigh that swallowed the rest of his sentence. The man looked at the phone. Then at the dark tree line. Then at Ione.

His face was exhausted. The face of someone who had followed every rule, bought the Tier 2 ticket, stood in the mist and still found himself holding a cold piece of plastic that wouldn't ring. He didn't explain himself. He tucked the dead phone into his pocket and walked toward the exit gates with the stiff, void gait of the defeated.

Ione watched him go. She looked at her own hands, still pressed against the breathing dirt. Then she stood, turned her back on the exit and walked toward the centre of the valley. Toward the one stage that hadn't been listed on the main map.

She wasn't wandering anymore. She was choosing.

6. The Remembrance Stage

This stage features no live performers. It is a designated space for guests to sit with the versions of themselves that didn't make it to this summer. If you see your younger self in the

front row, do not offer them advice. They cannot hear you over the sound of the static, and besides, they have already made their choices. You are here to witness, not to edit.

The Remembrance Stage was not a stage at all. It was a natural amphitheatre – a bowl in the limestone where the heat of the day had pooled like liquid lead. There were no lights. Only the pale bioluminescent glow of thousands of discarded wristbands tossed into the centre, a neon pyre, casting everything in cold green.

Ione didn't sit. She stood at the rim, her boots sinking into the loose scree.

Below her, in the flickering light, she saw them. Not ghosts – echoes with the weight of wet wool. There was a version of herself from three years ago, laughing with a drink in her hand, head thrown back. But Ione didn't look at her long.

She looked to the far left, where another version of herself stood in a fluorescent-lit hallway. This Ione held a pen. Her shoulders were hunched in a way that made her look seventy years old. In front of her was a bed made of nothing but shadow. And in that bed was the outline of where Mina used to be.

Ione watched herself press the pen to the paper.

The scratching sound of the nib was louder than the breathing of the earth.

She wanted to scream across the limestone. Drop the clipboard.

She stood at the rim until the green lights dimmed, one by one, and the dawn began pulling the dark out of the valley. She did not drop her wristband into the pyre. To leave it would be to let the festival archive her guilt alongside the thousands of other small, glowing deaths in the pit.

*

Rules 7 and 8 have been redacted at the request of the Permanent Committee.

*

The Festival ends promptly at dawn on Monday. Please do not linger in the parking lots. The transition back to your 'Primary Life' may feel thin, as if the colours of your office or apartment have been dialled down. This is normal. We recommend avoiding mirrors for the first forty-eight hours; your reflection needs time to catch up to the version of you that returned.

The walk to the car park was a pilgrimage of the exhausted. The sun came up bruised purple over the ridge, sharp and unwelcome, casting long, flat shadows across the dust. Ione found her sedan alone in Row M, looking like a discarded toy.

Inside, the air was stale. The old lavender sachet in the glove box – the scent the copper-eyed boy had recognised. She pressed her thumb once more against the wristband, feeling the counter-pulse for the last time. Then she put both hands on the wheel.

She looked in the rear-view mirror. She'd spent February obeying the experts, and she wasn't doing it again.

The woman in the glass had sunken eyes and skin coated in the fine, grey dust of the valley. But the reflection didn't lag. It stared back with immediate, terrible clarity.

She wasn't waiting for herself to catch up.

*

By crossing the perimeter fence, you acknowledge that the person who leaves the Solstice Revels is a derivative work of the person who entered. No refunds will be issued for lost time, lost sleep, or the sudden inability to feel at home in your own skin.

As she drove past the final security kiosk, the guard didn't look up from his phone. The neon vests were being folded into crates. The safety staff were just people again, tired and ready for breakfast.

Ione reached the highway. The noise of the tyres on asphalt was the first ordinary sound she'd heard in days – a boring, monotonous hum that felt like a language she'd half-forgotten.

She reached down and unclipped the wristband. It didn't tear. It simply gave way, the pulse snapping off with a dry, papery sound. Her wrist felt unnervingly light.

She rolled down the windows. The hot motorway wind screamed into the cabin.

Ione kept driving. She didn't look at the passenger seat. She didn't have to. She knew the weight was still there.

To See What We Cannot Unsee

by Mandira Pattnaik

Content Warnings: Mentions dying and “Honour” Killing.

Not your thing? Skip to page 31 for the next story.

That Casper William loathes her isn't unknown to Preeti Taneja, even though they have been together since they were at Beu University, attending the same class for Business Management. It's another matter that, five years later, Casper has climbed to senior manager at Stanley's Consultancy and Preeti is looking at a heap of laundry on a day their washing machine has broken down.

We don't mind these small distractions at Death Depot. When we receive a group text that a life-termination is imminent, we rush from our dormitories and keep watch through screens in our assigned Monitor Room. Part of our internship training at the Newly Dead Arrivals section.

Resignation writ large on her face, Preeti sits down, gazes at the Asheville skyline and begins to scroll her phone. Casper updated his profile picture sixteen minutes ago. He looks younger than her now. There's a saying that marriage makes the man younger and the woman sadder. Standing against the railing of a staircase, looking away, sunlight on his face – girls would seek Casper's number. Preeti clicks on another tab, a world news site. There's a flood in Buland Shahar, where her Dadda and Mai are, and where that boy died years ago, a boy who could have been her husband.

She calls her family in panic. They do not answer the call – of course, it is 2 a.m. there. If the flood did ravage their home, they are not carrying their phones anyway.

Preeti slaps her face involuntarily – she's becoming forgetful. Rising from the sofa, she walks to the kitchen and starts mixing. She loves mixing things.

Malti, Rani and myself are the ugly interns – ugly in the sense that our own ends weren't in our old-age sick-beds but rather via a series of unfortunate incidents that led all three of us teenagers to end up in the same train accident where tens of compartments and bodies piled up on top of each other. That's the reason why we were assigned to the rather

dull Unknown Circumstances Monitor Room, to spare us the trauma of further mass-scale gruesome sights.

I watch the events unfold at the tiny but well-decorated apartment in Asheville while keeping an eye on Malti and Rani, both less diligent than myself. Rani fiddles with the string of pearls around her neck. Another white boyfriend story, just like Preeti's, snapped off abruptly.

'Are you sure you want to keep that? Remember, we were told to get rid of everything. And everything meant *all* familial possessions. Even gifts from lovers,' Malti, also observing Rani, says with irritation.

'Dennis!' Rani begins to howl again.

Malti slides closer to me and whispers, 'Not again. I hate hearing that name.'

Malti and I peer into the screen with renewed attention, leaving Rani to grieve by herself. I wonder if Dennis knows the dead grieve for the living too.

What will you have for dinner? Preeti texts Casper, hoping he won't answer so she can make whatever is easy. Also hoping he can see that she *still* loves him, cares for her husband's appetite, although he loathes Indian food as much as he loathes her.

He *does* answer, unfortunately.

Not one of your curries please – they taste like gutter water.

His text is meant to start another argument. He wants an excuse. Instead, Preeti laughs, mutters to herself, *As if he's tasted gutter water*, and flings the phone onto the recliner by the TV.

She resumes mixing gulab jal with his finest wine, adding one spoonful at a time to the bottle and shaking it. She imagines his face when he pours himself a glass and tastes it. This concoction is harmless – but Preeti loves a good look of shock on her husband's face.

Preeti is careful to replace the bottle at the same place in the bar cabinet. The glass bottles with their coloured liquid look like they're from a different world. Reflective, ethereal and infinitely alluring.

The allure reminds Preeti of Dadda's fascination with death. (We interns know all this because there are transcriptions of thoughts at the bottom of the screen.) Preeti recollects Dadda's face, how Dadda used to collect dead people's used items. She notes this fact with a mix of confused admiration and disgust. A room full of discards in their Buland Shahar house. Clothes, books, CDs, even washcloths and toothbrushes. He even collected that boy's belongings – except Preeti had sneaked into the room one night not long after his cremation and, scavenging for his belongings, found a used condom in one of his trouser pockets. *He*

wasn't that faithful, then, she had thought at the unexpected discovery. Good thing my brothers killed that boy on discovering our affair – a low caste, beneath our family's honour. Good that they are packing me off to the States to study something, anything. Their real motive is for me to take a handsome, white husband instead.

Preeti thinks of *that* ambition and her successful conquest – Casper, a handsome, white husband. Preeti's never found something like a condom in her husband's pockets. She's unsure if that counts as a stamp of faithfulness.

Now, she sets up a conversation with that dead boyfriend, as per routine.

Preeti invites that boy onto the sofa beside her – as he would be today, even though he's exactly a decade dead. On other days, she sets up meetings at whatever hour pleases her, repeats nearly the same conversation. Some days, he might be bent over and mending her blocked kitchen sink or lying down on the same side of the bed as Casper or sitting on the passenger seat, relaxing and talking while she parks her car at Grocery Mart's free parking.

'Do they serve you meat at the Other Place?' she asks.

'Yes, giraffe.'

'Giraffe?' Preeti's shocked voice echoes in the apartment; she decides to drop this topic.

'Did you see *Yama*? Or was it just blinding light, and then nothing?'

Dadda would slap her across the face if she said such a thing in front of him. To Dadda, there's nothing called death. People only pass.

'Neither. I was too busy defending myself against your brothers' blows. Besides, I am not keen to attain Moksha like Nachiketa by pleasing *Yama*. All I have is my soul, inseparable and immortal. I *want to be enmeshed* in the cycle of rebirths – so I can meet you, in life or in death.'

Preeti looks at him with adoration, absorbs this new information – that the dead don't necessarily register *finality* and carry their deep-rooted beliefs in afterlife.

'Did you think of anything in particular when you knew it was going to be over soon?'

'No, nothing that I can remember.'

'Did you think of revenge?'

'It was the promise of a new chapter – and I'd prefer not to carry baggage.'

'Was it welcoming at the other side? Or like couldn't-care-less passenger count?'

'More like make-yourself-at-home.'

'Oh – that's interesting. Were there birds, the moon, love and yearning?'

‘I think it’s only fair that I keep that secret. For you, Preeti. Let those be a surprise when you arrive.’

‘What was it like on the first day?’

‘Thoroughly confusing. Like landing at an unknown location. Like the inside of a sewer I used to lower myself into regularly – because it *was* my day job – dark, but with the assurance of betterment very soon.’

‘Then, I’d assume, it’s more like the passing Dadda believes in. Tell me: did you love me, or did I misunderstand?’

‘You’ll always be the one.’

‘Is it terrible I ask you to come here so often?’

‘No. I’d come even if you didn’t.’

‘Did you miss me – um, initially, at least?’

‘What if I said no?’

Preeti thought she’d say, *I’d punch you in the face, low caste! That’s why my brothers killed you – your audacity! They set you and me free. We’d never have been a couple. I would never have been allowed to marry a low-caste fellow who gets dirty cleaning sewers for a living. Aaaaah – why did I ever fall in love?!*

Better sense prevails, and Preeti doesn’t speak up.

He almost seems to read her mind and laughs in contempt, so loud that the glass chandelier above the centre table shakes.

‘I know,’ the boy finally says.

‘Whatever.’

Preeti gets up and fastens the window on the right. It’s getting colder and windier. ‘Will you taste something I made this morning?’ she says, walking up to stand close to the boy.

‘I will, if it’s not poison.’

On the monitor screens, Preeti can be seen walking to the bar cabinet. Our morning assignment might be fun, but this is the most exciting part because we might be drawing to a close. We suspect a finality looming, except this boy is already dead. Tch, tch.

‘I’m going to the washroom – you keep watch,’ says Malti.

We turn our heads to see her bang the door closed behind us. Interns have six-hour shifts and two toilet breaks. Nothing to complain about as such, but Death Depot is overstaffed as it is, and we may be laid off if we slack too much. Being laid off is called ‘Off the Bench,’ and when one receives that dreaded text, one is supposed to just idle away every

day. New interns might assume this sounds exceptionally attractive, but for our batchmates Sone and Vadra, it turned out otherwise... Well, that's another story.

Rani and I resume our watch. Preeti gets the bottle from the cabinet. Pours the concoction she'd made earlier into two glasses. They both sip, as if immune to taste. Minutes later, the boy whispers something into her ear. We can't hear, and there are no transcripts for their thoughts either. Glitch, of course. An after-hours errand to register this glitch with admin, for sure. Extra work. Admin runs in the basement, and it's even gloomier than our room here.

If you wanted to trace Death Depot, you'd need a 4D map. You should know, by the way, that it's entirely staffed by women. We are considered more efficient and sincere. What about dead men? Not employable? I don't know. You'll need to find out yourself when you 'pass.'

Anyway, Preeti laughs heartily, and the boy whispers some more. Then the boy fishes into his pocket and puts something in Preeti's palm. Preeti cautiously transfers the powder, or whatever it was, into the bottle on the table, shakes it vigorously and walks away to replace it in the cabinet. Then they switch off the lights, clearly intending to move to the bed at the other end of the room.

Lights off means nothing to see. Our screens go blank.

By the time the light in the room gets turned on, clothing and underwear can be seen strewn across the room. Preeti is on the sofa, the solid mass of a living body, sitting upright with eyes closed. The boy is on the bed – the liminality of a soul, a translucent, pitiful mass. His back is to the wall, torso curled and facing Preeti, wide awake.

Mother said we wear bodies like clothes – our souls do; so the shadow of a boy we're seeing now is a soul. I guess if Malti, Rani and I had died *after* we aged, we'd know about these things more, souls and all. For us, being dead is more like 'passing' or like a light switch being flipped off. Being dead confuses us.

In the meantime, Malti has returned to her seat. We know not what to make of this scene before us. Was anyone killed?

Minutes later, the phone rings. Must be the parents from Buland Shahar, but Preeti ignores it, not even making the effort to open her eyelids. The boy smirks. Minutes pass in silence.

The sound of someone unlocking the door shatters the peace. Preeti opens her eyes but doesn't bother with dressing. Casper enters and lets out a gasp as he sees the two of them

– the boy still in the same position, now looking paler, but showing no more passion or colour than a trampled rose-bed.

Would someone die *now*?

We interns look at each other.

Mother said death is overrated. It was the day before she and I boarded that ill-fated train. She was going to the market. It was an ordinary day. In our country, people are too numerous to care about small inconveniences such as a finality in their miserable lives. People die while going about their ordinary drudgery, dying of snake bites, unnamed fevers and contaminated alcohol. Mother said we should not mind it. It is different in the country of white people, she said.

So that day, before going to the market, Mother repeated that statement without context and added, ‘Sometimes it helps if we try to visualise things.’

I thought about it long after she went away that day. I imagined slipping down the stairs and hitting my head on the concrete landing. Or being hit by a drunk truck driver on my way to meet friends.

Turned out, I wasn’t wholly accurate or completely inaccurate. Moreover, maybe I visualised more than Mother did, which is why I died and she survived.

Looking at the screens in our Monitoring Room now, I try visualising the imminency of an end we have been ordered to observe. Of these three characters at Asheville, only two *could* die – because one is already dead – but what difference does it make? Dead boy is still in Preeti’s thoughts, never quite gone. Expiration has a very bad reputation, actually.

Besides, to die is a perfectly *normal* thing to do. If they have a scuffle leading to an accident, the more physically powerful will win. In that case, the stronger Casper, an indignant, white husband, but not unfaithful, survives. If Casper drinks from the poison-laced bottle in his bar cabinet in a fit of anger at his wife’s betrayal, he’ll die of his unfaithful wife’s intent, she who could not get over a boy long dead, who, in turn, wasn’t entirely committed to Preeti.

There’s another picture: the body, made up of complex proteins, returns to soil and aids life again – plants, flowers, insects, earthworms. Either body would live again. Completely cyclical.

Like, millions of cells die every day, and does it matter?

Now imagine if both Preeti and Casper live, and we interns don’t see a quietus happen this morning? Would we lament it? There’d be no discontinuation except perhaps the end of a

relationship that was already dying. Perhaps they'd both be relieved the marriage got snuffed out.

Perhaps coping would involve memories, bitterness, saltiness, elegies, funerals.

In the end, Malti, Rani and I do not wait to watch the end. We shut down the monitor screens and go for a walk. Yes, we do slack sometimes. No ending is often just as good as an ending in death – no end nor death.

Madame Fern

by Lisa Cai

Content Warnings: Human trafficking, references to natural disasters, an invasion, forced breeding, including references to death by childbirth, arranged marriage, White Christofascism, guns, offscreen execution, suicide by poison.

Not your thing? Skip to page 43 for the next story.

ACT I

Sophia headed deeper into the forest, leaving the fires behind.

The van rocked up and down as it drove over another stone. A woman clutched and pulled Sophia's sleeve to anchor herself as she swayed. Sophia brushed off those hands to stand.

'Sit down.' The man in the passenger seat, frowning, faced the women behind him.

Sophia remained standing to look through the van's windows. The sky was shrouded in black smoke; only the reddened sun shone through.

When the natural disasters hit her province, she had called and texted loved ones from her hotel in Seattle but received no replies. At Vancouver Airport, people had rushed to gates without luggage, seeking to leave. Meanwhile, Sophia had paced back and forth, staring at her phone; still, no answers to her calls and messages. Was everyone, everything gone?

In Stanley Park, where she'd spent summers strolling and swimming with her sister and cousins, trees had collapsed over each other. Its aquarium was dark, out of power, and its floor scattered with shattered glass. Studying at the University of British Columbia, she had passed by its older buildings and clock tower every day. Now, they were toppled piles of rubble. She couldn't stay in Vancouver, but where could she go?

Among the encampments, people had mentioned small settlements up north, unaffected by catastrophes. Everyone was welcome to shelter there.

Sophia and others had accepted a car ride. They'd been driving for three hours straight. Along the roads they travelled, there were thick forests and dark, snowy mountains on either side. Where were they really headed?

A wooden picket fence with barbed wire was on the horizon. A mounted sheet of steel had 'Ananias' spraypainted on it. Two men in black tactical gear stood at the entrance.

'Where are we?' said Sophia.

The van drove past the fence. Stumps had been hacked, stacked. Their brown wood was split apart and exposed, as if a grand pyre was being prepared for a large creature. On a distant, cleared path, a tall white building atop a hill was pale against the black sky.

'Hey!' Sophia headed to the front of the van as it halted.

Men, all bald and wearing black, holding guns, emerged from some huts.

'Welcome to Ananias, God's last stronghold,' said the driver. 'We've saved you, and you must use your bodies for Him.'

'What're you going on about?' said Sophia.

'Stop talking!' One woman grabbed Sophia's pant leg, trying to hush her.

'We need you to populate our settlement. If you refuse...' The man in the passenger seat pointed his gun at Sophia. 'It's a bullet in your head.'

*

For this death, Fern spread her arms out. Her red robe sleeves stretched out and shimmered under the light. When she fell forward, red waves fluttered and followed by her side. She landed on green astroturf; it pricked her face as she lay dead.

Bows struck strings, percussions crashed against each other as they reached their crescendo. The lights dimmed, and the crowd filled the darkness with applause.

This was another end to *Madame Butterfly*. The titular Cio-Cio-san had killed herself to give her son away to her husband and his second wife. Everyone would live a better, uncomplicated life without her. What else could one do when they lost everything?

Actors lined up behind Fern, all the players revived to relive the story later. Fern arose to meet the gaze of the Canadian envoy.

When they had entered the settlement, armed Ananians lined up along the roads. Every resident had seen white, black and brown faces in the Canadian cars. The women wore pants. It had been over thirty years since this settlement declared independence from Canada. Could they rejoin the confederation after the Fall?

Despite uncertain relations, one of them had purchased Fern for their duration here.

A beam of light shone on Fern and followed her as she stepped towards Mrs Sui. She had faced freckled virgins whose fathers wanted deflowered sons, bachelors who wanted

children, and widowed men in women-less households. They wanted something exotic as a reward for all their work off the settlement. When approaching a new spouse, she always knelt before the customer's lap so they looked down on her.

‘Welcome, Mrs Sui, I am honoured to serve you.’

‘What’s all this? Raise your head.’ Mrs Sui snickered. She ran a hand through her short, dark hair, revealing some white ones by her ears. She wore black pants, a white dress shirt and a loose black tie for this occasion.

Did she have any concept of sin or fear of God? She doomed herself by living like this. Despite nearing the end of her childbearing years, someone might decide she was worth abducting and putting to work in a household. Who wouldn’t want a foreign pet to chirp at guests?

‘Thank you all for attending. We look forward to hosting you.’ Fern straightened and curtsied.

Did the Canadians know what *Madame Butterfly* was? Would their guests appreciate a story that had survived the end of the world?

*

The ladies of the Night Women’s quarters gathered in their prayer room, hands clasped together, kneeling before a small cross mounted on the wall. From a shelf, the radio spoke, and loudspeakers outside echoed the king’s preaching.

‘Because they regard not the works of the Lord, nor the operation of his hands, he shall destroy them and not build them up. Do not forget our sons and brothers who left our home for glory.’ He named three sons of Ananias who had perished and one girl who had passed during childbirth this year. Some of the women and girls mumbled prayers and sniffles when their relatives were mentioned. Fern’s sons were still in training and too young to leave the settlement. She never knew her older brothers. Those Canadians were always hostile to Ananias’s missionary work.

She bit her tongue to suppress a yawn. One shouldn’t lie with someone of the same sex, but since Mrs Sui had paid for it, the broker had agreed to a contract. If anyone asked, she’d tell them Mrs Sui was the worst customer ever.

In their bedroom, she had opened her wardrobe. There were various outfits to choose from: kimonos, qipaos, hanboks. Fern would dress and act as her patron desired. She had brought some outfits to Mrs Sui and asked, did she want her to be a demure maiden or an

experienced temptress? Her wife had laughed at the clothes. It was inappropriate to wear those costumes right now, she said. How did she know that? No customer had ever said something so glib before. Though Fern's mother, Madame Jasmine, used to frown at those clothes, mumbling something about how they weren't of her culture. Why did it matter? Ananians were one race.

Fern had endured long and tiring nights, nights with pain and no pleasure that lasted for hours, but not ones filled with chatter. That night, she had lain with Mrs Sui on her bed, speaking about Ananias. Fern's story was the same as everyone else's: God had sent a vision to the king to establish this settlement before the fires, earthquakes and American invasion hit Canada. Ananias was a haven for the survivors; Fern's mother was among them. The older generation had lived through the end of the world and re-built their lives here. They were all blessed by the king's charity, and in return, their lives belonged to him and Him.

'Madame Fern!' Mrs Sui swung the door to the Night Women's quarters open; the knob banged against the wall. 'Can we go for a walk?'

Some of the women side-eyed Mrs Sui while others continued praying, eyes squeezed shut. One made a sign of the cross at the heathen.

Fern's hands fell to her sides. It was time to play her wifely role. She stood, shuffling her skirts. She stepped towards her wife.

'Good morning, Mrs Sui. Of course we can go outside. Please let me get my umbrella.'

They strolled along a paved path in the quarter's garden. Flowers bloomed in plots, and bushes were covered in green leaves. Butterflies slowly opened and closed their wings while climbing bulbs.

'Isn't it lonely walking without a hand to hold?' Mrs Sui extended her palm to Fern. The ring on her finger was a simple silver band. What man let their wife travel on diplomatic missions? Shouldn't Mrs Sui be at the king's white mansion with the rest of the Canadian envoy? Did she intend to fail at her duties outside the house too? She must've spent minimal time studying saintly women and scriptures. If she had studied more, she would've learned the best wives stayed by their husbands' sides.

'Don't worry about my official spouse; he likes men, and I like women. We wedded to silence his parents and so that I could access his extensive library resources.'

Fern was unmoved, despite what Mrs Sui had said. Clients always had their little tricks; some were kind outside and cruel in private, others were cold and refused to hold hands, yet in bed, they gripped her shoulders, palms warm and sweaty. Fern wouldn't falter.

She wrapped her arms around Mrs Sui's sleeve, her umbrella casting a shadow beneath them. They strolled about like a couple, as Fern had been hired to do.

Passersby glanced at Mrs Sui. This foreigner, in her dark suit among women in pale dresses, was allowed to enjoy one of its residents. They recognised Fern with her umbrella; she tanned quicker than others in the sunlight.

'What's your favourite part of the garden?' Mrs Sui asked, gazing at the small greenhouse up ahead.

'The blueberry bushes.' They bore fruit every year. When she was younger, she picked berries with the other girls and planted seedlings, creating a trail of bushes. One of the women had made jam, which was jarred and spread over bread.

Mrs Sui snapped pictures of the foliage with her smartphone. Was she going to send this as intel to Canada?

'I'm impressed *Madame Butterfly* found its way to Ananias. Did you know it's based on a fictionalised autobiography called *Madame Chrysanthème*?'

'Was Cio-Cio-san real?' Fern asked. 'What was her fate?' Had she, too, ended her life after losing everything? What was her story?

'I'll explain it later,' said Mrs Sui. 'I want to see the rest of the greenery.'

Act II

Sophia wrapped her hand around Abigail's as they walked in the garden. The sun dimmed, colouring the sky purple. The small blueberry bushes were surrounded by unearthed dirt Sophia and Abigail had dug up. Next year, residents could pick berries from the branches.

Abigail's hand slipped out of her mother's and flipped through her book. During Christmas celebrations at the king's mansion, kneeling at his wooden throne, Abigail had been gifted this script His Highness had salvaged before the Fall. She'd read all of *Madame Butterfly* that evening by lamplight; in time, she'd memorise it to perform the tale. She'd be Cio-Cio-san on stage and live through her eyes and life.

Her formal education, studying the Bible and learning the domestic arts, had ended last year at fourteen. The boys had years of military school ahead while the girls graduated into their households. Some female classmates were betrothed to men who had returned from many missions, while, as a Night Woman's daughter, Abigail had no prospects. Instead, since her first menses had started, she'd soon take the name Fern and learn to service customers.

If only her hair and eyes were lighter, no one would tease her about not having the blood of Cain and being damned like everyone else outside Ananias. But she'd prove her worth. She'd do as the king desired and act and birth many soldiers and mothers for the settlement.

'There are other stories you can read.' Sophia placed her hand on Abigail's shoulder.

Abigail brushed her mother's arm away. The king had saved the most valuable works for Ananias. Didn't Sophia have other things to do, like entertain a customer?

'I'm going to study in my room.'

*

As her daughter stamped off, Sophia turned to the rising moon, a white crescent in the sky. Later, when the sky turned dark, it'd be clear and bright with moonlight. She'd leave her last child for a world she didn't know what was left of. But what was out there had to be better than her life here.

Sophia headed to the greenhouse to retrieve her bag of supplies.

*

Fern was Cio-Cio-san again. Her crown of branches had been woven to form the outline of wings. Her cream bell dress was topped with a layer of stitched yellow butterflies. Ananias had to make the Canadian envoy's last viewing a special one.

Fern, kneeling, held a knife to her chest as she finished singing farewell to her son, Sorrow. She had been forever spurned by her American husband's love of another woman. For her child to live a better life in another land, he had to forget her; she'd died a hundred deaths before and would continue to do so for the one she loved.

Fern plunged the rubber knife into her chest and collapsed forward.

As drums and string instruments hit waves of final notes, the stage rumbled. As Cio-Cio-san lay still, the audience stood in ovation.

When *Madame Butterfly's* actors lined up on stage, Fern breathed and stood in the middle. Holding hands with her castmates, she bowed with them, her dress sparkling gold under the light.

The Canadians and Mrs Sui left the auditorium first – they had another late meeting with the king and his advisors. Rather than lounge backstage among props and actors, Fern

lifted her skirts and hurried to her wife's bedroom. Ananias needed to know what was really happening. Since when was Canada a nice negotiator?

Fern opened the closet and rummaged through Mrs Sui's luggage. Her pocket journal had doodles of a church and administrative buildings. Within a wallet were plastic cards; on each of them, 'Sui Sin Far' was printed. Was this her real name? Why did her surname appear first? This identification must be fake. What was she hiding?

'What're you doing?' Mrs Sui stood in the centre of the room, staring at Fern.

Fern was still. What would happen now?

'Oh.' Mrs Sui put a hand on her hip. 'You're trying to figure out what I'm up to.'

'No!' Fern dropped Mrs Sui's cards across the floor. She clasped her hands and knelt on the floor, her skirts circling around her. 'I swear, I was just curious, concerned for you.'

'I'm worried about you too.'

What did Mrs Sui say? She didn't seem angry, but her dark eyes flickered in the moonlight.

'Go ahead and search my belongings.' Mrs Sui sat on a chair and crossed her arms and legs. 'You won't learn anything about me. Sui Sin Far isn't my real name.'

While the rest of the Canadians were spending their time at the king's residence, Mrs Sui had remained in the Night Women's quarters. For someone to possess fake identification while working for the government wasn't an accident. What was she doing here?

Mrs Sui leaned back against her chair and closed her eyes.

'Sui Sin Far was North America's first known author of Asian descent, and I picked her name as an alias.'

What did those words mean? All Fern knew was Ananias. This was land designated by God to survive after the end of the world.

Fern glowed with the moonlight reflecting off her white-and-yellow dress. She was like a fairy ornament, one among several decorations hung on a pine tree.

'Your king rescued certain stories for a reason.' Mrs Sui knelt in front of Fern.

'*Madame Butterfly* was based on *Madame Chrysanthème*. Its sequel was *Madame Prune*, set over ten years later. Chrysanthème was alive, wedded to another man and with child. She didn't recognise her previous groom when she spotted him, or didn't care to address him.'

In that version, Cio-Cio-san had been uninterested in the first man she wedded. She hadn't killed herself over her husband's rejection. Why did the opera conclude with her death, then, if it was untrue to real life?

'Why are you mentioning this now?'

‘Because you deserve the truth,’ said Mrs Sui. ‘My mission is separate from that of my colleagues. In the 2030s, during the Fall, suspicions of human trafficking to these communes were raised. Do you know anything about that?’

‘Of course not.’ She turned her head away. She hadn’t been born then. Her mother hadn’t confirmed how she ended up here, even on the day she’d died.

Mrs Sui slid her finger under Fern’s chin to tilt her head up; brown eyes met brown eyes.

‘Madame Fern, do you know who Sophia Wong is?’

Fern’s eyes widened. Her skin was cold with sweat. How had Mrs Sui learned of such a name?

Mrs Sui retrieved a pouch from the closet.

‘While investigating missing persons cases in Vancouver, I met some of Sophia’s friends over dim sum near Stanley Park. Right by the water, blue herons were flying about.’

Kneeling in front of Fern, she displayed photographs. It was Sophia. She was dressed in a suit, like a man. In another picture, she wore a dark robe, holding a long piece of paper. She smiled and tilted her head up with an air of confidence. What was all this?

‘Before Sophia went missing, she graduated from university – that’s advanced education people can pursue. Later, she got a job at a big business, travelled the world at her employer’s expense and was paid well enough to own property. Her hobbies included fine dining and sailing.’

Fern snapped her face away from those pictures. If she learned more, it’d make her dream of too many possibilities. That had been Sophia’s life, the one Fern could’ve lived. Night Women were meant to couple with those who risked their lives for God’s missions and bear sons to fight and daughters to birth future generations. If they died fulfilling their duties, they’d go straight to heaven.

‘What do you think the men on missions are dying for? Your king needs to keep all those boys away from his dozens of wives and concubines,’ Mrs Sui said. ‘They’ve been terrorising Canada with other white Christofascists for far too long, and my government finally decided to do something after the assassination attempt on the prime minister last year. The resolution won’t be peaceful for Ananias.’

Fern covered her ears. Every year, men and women saluted while watching their sons and brothers march, clad in black uniforms and with newly shaven heads, graduating to leave Ananias on missions. In that crowd, over the years, had been some of Fern’s brothers. Had they already been shot or imprisoned in Canada? Were their bodies left to rot on the

roadside? People had become expendable since the settlement started. It was God's will, wasn't it? Otherwise, what was all this for?

Mrs Sui stood. Her face was neutral as she looked down at Fern. She'd found her answer. Sophia was long gone. Her friends and family would be informed that her daughter wasn't going to give them details. There'd be no reunion or rejoicing, as with many cases in these settlements. There'd be no tears of joy, only sorrow.

Fern bent forward, face in her hands. In her dress, she lay pale across the floor.

Act III

Alarm bells clanged across the Night Women's quarters. Women, girls and their customers switched lights and lamps on as they staggered in their nightrobes towards the garden and the officer's flashlight.

'You're a traitor, Madame Jasmine!' The officer poked the back of Sophia's head with a gun barrel.

Abigail pushed and squeezed between people to reach the front of the crowd. Two patrollers stood on each side of Sophia, pointing their firearms at her. She, covered in dirt, grass and blood, had been shoved onto her knees, encircled by trees and bushes she'd planted.

The officer read off his smartphone.

'Madame Jasmine, by decree of our king, you have been damned to death. You attempted to leave this haven, betraying His intentions. Do you have anything to say?'

Sophia glanced at Abigail. If she had any regret, it was leaving her children behind. Her sons had been taken away after birthing and given to men who saw her as an exotic womb. Her daughter had stayed with her because she'd follow a Night Woman's fate.

When she'd climbed the settlement's brick walls and patrollers chased, she'd dashed through the trees. Some decades-old crucified corpses still lay by the dirt road as a warning to trespassers and defectors. Further down this path was Vancouver; she'd rather return to its ruins than stay here 'til someone decided she was too old to work or breed.

Forced to lie with Ananians, she'd embraced them as they confessed to witnessing and committing crimes in Canada: smuggling goods for profits, abducting people for nearby settlements. One had delivered a bomb to a government office. As workers burned inside, he'd spraypainted its walls with 'Helter Skelter.' She'd gritted her teeth as she patted their heads and imagined smashing their faces in with a chair. If she wanted to live, she'd had to fake sympathy for them.

‘Mother?’ Abigail’s eyes were wide as she gripped her blue blanket.

‘Speak now, Madame Jasmine, or be silent as you enter hell.’ The cold steel of the officer’s gun burrowed against Sophia’s skull.

Before she’d been tricked, she had planned a vacation in Asia and ordered birthday and housewarming gifts. She had planned more boating lessons with her instructor.

She could wear the facade all the women and girls donned in these quarters. If she begged for forgiveness, she might be tortured and allowed to live. Maybe she’d be assigned manual labour, like making bricks or farming. That had happened to some of the other attempted runaways.

But she wouldn’t choose that life. If her life was going to end, she’d make that decision; it was the last bit of control she had.

‘My name is Sophia Wong!’ Her voice rattled the branches and windows; the glass reflected moonlight.

Something louder had to stamp out her voice. The officer pulled the trigger.

*

Fern wore a black veil, dress and gloves to mourn her wife’s departure; all Night Women did this to prepare for their next arrangement. She was the first to grieve the loss of a wife. She did as she was supposed to do, but she did something different this time.

Somewhere, Sophia’s blood, brains and bones ran deep in the dirt. A small tombstone in the gardens had been set up for her years ago. Among the blueberry bushes, a short, polished rock with her name and birth and death years rested. The berries were growing in blue and green bunches. The leaves rustled with the breeze. Fern had visited the grave every day since Mrs Sui left. That was a week ago.

Her nights were silent and cold in her bedroom. She had no resources to learn about the outside world. The Canadians had left without an agreement, so Ananias was left to align itself with other communes.

For daily prayer, the king’s voice cracked through speakers.

‘He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.’

Today, Fern would leave this quarter. The king had paid to make her his latest concubine. She’d live with him in his household and resume warming a powerful, godly man’s bed. If the king told her to dance and sing for him, she would. She had to do this if she wanted to live. She had to continue acting.

*

In a few hours, Ananias would fall. The smoke was thick and black as it rose from Ananias's burning walls. In the dark sky, the red sun peeked through. On one side of the settlement, trucks rolled through the streets and rundown huts. The Night Women's quarters were ablaze; whatever was left of the abandoned garden would be ash by tomorrow.

Was it the Canadians, neighbouring settlements or natives that got to them first? Whoever it was, they were going to take this land and do whatever they willed with it. They'd blasted through the last Ananian soldiers to get here. If Fern's brothers or sons had still been alive and they hadn't abandoned the army, they would have been gone now, shot down like their mother and grandmother, Sophia.

The king, atop the highest hill, watched from his white mansion's balcony. He turned to his last followers; they were his descendants, servants, and wives and concubines.

Tears welled up in Fern's eyes as she clutched her two-year-old daughter, Lily. The land he built was collapsing. What was he going to do now?

The king stepped towards them with his cane.

'Grandfather, don't leave us!' a boy blurted, clutching his mother's skirts.

'I am going to bed. Come with me, Fern, Lily.'

In his bedchambers, he lay on a pillowy mattress, his form sinking into it. The bed's curtains fell and draped around it, casting the three of them in shadows and obscuring the outside world. The smell of burning wood from the forest was ever-present.

'Papa.' Lily climbed onto a blanket and crawled across the bed.

He cradled the girl in his arms.

The building rumbled. The invaders would be here soon. The king had already ingested his poison; he wouldn't be alive when they found his body.

'Madame Fern.' His milky eyes were on her. 'You know what to do.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.' Fern withdrew a small vial of poison from her pocket. Residents had been given these when they were alerted about this incoming invasion. As Ananias was ending, all settlers should be reunited with each other in heaven. This was the last chapter, the final role she was assigned to play. She'd die like Madame Butterfly.

She unscrewed the glass vial.

Four years in this mansion; she'd poured drinks for Ananias's most powerful men during meetings and overheard their plans. She'd read documents left on a night table while in bed with the sleeping king. Sons of Ananias had killed and self-detonated for the white

race. One had rammed his car into a crowd in Ottawa, blaring ‘We will not be replaced’ from a speaker.

She pressed the vial to her lips and kept it there as the king’s eyes closed.

Minutes later, Fern hovered her hand over the king’s mouth and nose. No breath teased her skin. Lily closed her eyes and sucked her thumb. Neither wanted to see the end of the king’s commune.

Some of the wives and concubines had agreed to flee with their children when the time came. An underground escape route was beneath the mansion. Fern didn’t know what was out there in the world, but it was her only path to survival. Though her story was supposed to end in this dying world, she wanted to live. She’d go downstairs and run down the roads her mother had travelled on to wherever her mother came from. There was something for her, regardless of whether it was better or worse than what was there before or after the Fall.

Once the ashes settled, surviving seedlings could sprout. After a fire, foliage returned, so long as time was given.

Fern tossed away the poison and picked up Lily.

‘M-Mama?’ The girl rubbed her eyes.

Mrs Sui had mentioned she was from a place called Toronto. Fern had distant relatives there. How far was Vancouver from Toronto? What communes and countries did she have to traverse to get there? Those cities were on opposite sides of the continent. How wide was such a landmass? She’d find out soon.

‘We’re going home.’

Good as Gold

by Kelly Murashige

Content Warnings: Religious trauma.

Not your thing? Skip to page 49 for the next story.

She awakens to the sound of her mother's elated shouts.

'IT'S HAPPENING! IT'S HAPPENING!' is what her mother shrieks.

The girl rubs her eyes, still caught up in wispy dreams. When she pushes herself up, one hand grasping the chain around her neck, she finds her mother hurrying from one room to another.

She hates when her mother does this. Runs around so frantically. It reminds the girl of a chicken with its head freshly cut off.

Her grandfather kept chickens. He had to kill a few, she knows. He never made her watch. For this, and for countless other reasons, she loved him very much.

'What's happening?' the girl asks.

'The Rapture,' her mother replies.

The girl frowns. 'What?'

She thinks she has misheard.

'The Rapture!' her mother repeats. 'Jesus, our Lord, is coming for us!'

The girl, like any true believer, knows all about the Rapture – or, at least, as much about the Rapture as anyone ever can. The confusing part, however, is that she thought there was no way for any human to know when it would happen. In church, upon first learning of it, she kept thinking, *Maybe now. Or now. Or now.* It took her until the end of the sermon to realise anticipating the Rapture was like watching a boiling pot.

She therefore stopped thinking about all of that. It would happen when it happened.

She just didn't think it would be now.

Sliding off her bed, she folds her arms around herself. The chain around her neck hangs like a loosened noose. The next time her mother passes, transporting an empty vase from under the sink to the hall, the girl asks, 'What are you doing?'

‘Looking for flowers,’ her mother replies. ‘We need flowers. *Flowers*. Flowers for the Lord. Oh, Lord. My Lord!’

The girl shifts her feet. Does Jesus really like flowers? On Valentine’s Day, it’s the boys who give girls flowers. Never once has a boy been the recipient.

Does God count as a boy? Is He really male? Is it blasphemy to wonder? Does God hate her now?

Her mother mumbles something. The girl strains to hear.

‘Deception. Disputes. Devastation. Deliverance,’ her mother whispers. She then repeats the words.

The girl knows what she’s saying. The signs of the End Times.

Her mother, now grasping some wildflowers the girl brought in the other day, clutches the weeds to her chest. After repeating the four words, she starts weeping bitterly.

No, the girl realises after a moment. This crying isn’t bitter. It’s weary. Almost relieved.

Her mother has been through more than the girl could ever know. The girl has heard many stories but surely not every one. The ones with which she is familiar are supposed to be heartbreaking. Every time her mother gives her testimony at church, all the women in the room break down.

Sometimes, the girl worries she isn’t heartbroken enough.

The girl is not a monster. She cries rather often. When her grandfather died, for instance. People told her there was no use. He had not believed in Jesus. Had not been properly redeemed. She cried because she missed him and because she’s not sure where he is now.

She still cries for him sometimes, especially at night. He gifted her his gold chain, and she’d had to fight to keep it.

It’s a MAN’S accessory, her mother said. *You can’t wear it. It’s unbecoming.*

It may have been a man’s, but the girl wears it anyhow. The day she gets married – because of course she must get married, even if she finds it hard to picture – she will wear her grandfather’s necklace. It isn’t unbecoming; it’s honouring someone she loves. Who cares if, even in the end, he didn’t quite believe? She believes in him and his goodness. She has to think that is enough.

Sometimes, she worries she believes more in him than she does in Him.

Time and time again, she has asked her mother how one can know they are redeemed.

We all are, her mother replies, *as long as we know God.*

What if she doesn't? What if she can't? What if God still feels like a stranger? What if, when she thinks she's hearing God, she's just talking to herself? What if, when the church leaders attempt to matchmake her with one of the boys at church, one with a stiff collar and an even stiffer smile, she instead finds herself staring at the raven-haired girl who plays the drums? What if, when she sees that girl, she isn't sure if she wants to be her or be *with* her?

Is that wrong? Is that bad? Is this what will bar her from Heaven?

The church people told her they all shall be changed. This means, in all likelihood, their earthly possessions will remain behind.

Even your clothes? one of the boys in her youth group asked.

His friend whapped him on the shoulder, hard enough to make her wince, but the boy, intent on securing an answer, hardly even blinked.

Yes, one of the elders said after a moment. *Even your clothes.*

What about jewellery? someone else asked, one hand wrapped around her charm bracelet.

No, the church elder said. *You shall keep nothing and want nothing. You will have no need for useless things. Just think of the discarded linens the disciples saw upon entering the tomb of Jesus.*

Does that mean Jesus was butt-naked? another boy asked.

THAT'S BLASPHEMY, a third boy shouted.

NUH-UH, the boy yelled back.

Then, before the elders could opine on whether discussions of Jesus's butt-nakedness were indeed blasphemous, the offending boy let out a battle cry and launched himself at his accuser.

All the girls screamed at once, then promptly scattered. Some went running to their parents, the ruffles of their frilly dresses bouncing like the tentacles of jellyfish.

The girl could not determine what to do or where to go, what with her mother teaching Sunday School. When the dark-haired drummer ushered her over to the folding chairs, instructing her to duck behind them like they were in the middle of a war, she thought to herself, *I could die right now, and I would be okay.*

One of the fleeing girls had been in such a rush, she dropped her handheld cross. The whole time the adults were attempting to calm everyone down, the girl stared at those intersecting lines of polished wood, wondering if there was something symbolic about forgetting Jesus on the floor.

What if that happens today? Not to Jesus but to them? What if, while her mother is racing around the house, Jesus comes for the others and accidentally leaves them behind?

What if it's not an accident?

What if it's just her?

What if Jesus appears before her, in all His glory, and says, *I don't want you. There's something wrong with you?*

She opens her eyes. The skin of her arms stings. She has been squeezing her bicep so tightly, her skin is pocked by angry white marks.

Kiyomi. *Ki-yo-mi*. That's the drummer girl's name. She's sixteen, old enough to drive, but her mother only has one car. She never lets Kiyomi take it out, especially not to see her friends. This is what the girl has learned from listening to Kiyomi.

She also knows Kiyomi is a lot like her. The two may not look much alike on the outside – Kiyomi has dark hair and eyes and heavy makeup that the girl's mother says makes her look like a raccoon – but she too is fatherless. She too remembers very little of him. She too thinks it would be nice if God could be her Father instead.

I'm just not sure He would want me, she once said, her words so sad, so true, so much like what the girl has been thinking all her life, she wanted to grab Kiyomi by the shoulders and...

And...

Well, she doesn't know. She doesn't *know* what she wanted to do. She just...

Wanted.

Wanted badly.

Would have given anything.

Last June, she told her mother – stupidly; why did she do that? – she thought it would be nice if she and Kiyomi could get closer.

Why? her mother asked, the distaste in her voice as clear as Kiyomi's eyes. As obvious as the fact that something was very, very wrong.

Why not? the girl asked, hating the panic that dripped from that word, poison from forbidden fruit.

I don't trust her, her mother replied. *There are rumours about that girl. Unsavoury ones.*

Because of her dad? the girl guessed.

Her mother gave her a look. *Not just that.*

The girl's fingers twitched. She raised one hand to her necklace, a poor attempt at obscuring the involuntary spasm, but that only drew her mother's attention back to the chain she had never wanted her daughter to wear in the first place.

What else is there? the girl asked.

Her mother shook her head, her painted-pink lips pulling themselves into a tight bud. *Let's not discuss such detestable things.*

WHAT detestable things? the girl wanted to scream.

She wonders if God would tell her. If, supposing she somehow managed to make it to Heaven, she would know instantly.

Really? she imagines God saying. *I can give you all the knowledge in the world, and the only thing you want to do is find out someone's secrets?*

Yes. She'll admit it. She is desperate to know just how similar they are.

By the time she manages to extract herself from her thoughts, her mother has set the wildflowers in the vase. They list to one side, their stems limp and fraying, but her mother clasps her hands together, tears in her eyes.

'It's perfect,' she says. 'Those flowers are us. Don't you see?'

The girl slides her eyes back over to the weeds. The vase isn't theirs; it came from the church. One of the women gifted them cut flowers on Mother's Day, the soft pink roses the same colour as her mother's favourite lipstick. They had never returned the vase. Perhaps they should have.

It is far too large to hold the skinny wildflowers. Their stems barely even reach the water, hovering a good two inches from the plastic bottom.

'How?' the girl asks her mother at last.

'These are us,' her mother says, gesturing to the weeds. 'We are sad, and we are broken, but Jesus will fix us soon.'

What does it mean for them to be fixed? If Jesus fixes everything wrong with her, will she still be anything like her real self?

Last week, after Kiyomi appeared at church in a shirt with a line of Japanese characters on the front, the girl looked up the word *Japanese*, hoping, somewhat naïvely, she would locate the matching characters immediately.

Yet instead of discovering what the characters meant, she came across an article about something called *kintsugi*: the art of repairing broken things by filling the cracks with gold.

She imagines herself broken. Imagines herself gold. Imagines every part of her filled with something better.

‘Hurry,’ her mother says.

The girl frowns. ‘Hurry?’

‘Brush your hair. Brush your teeth. Don’t you want to look your best?’

Does it matter? she wants to ask. *Hasn’t Jesus seen us when we’re at our worst? Isn’t that why I’m so afraid to face Him?*

‘Get your comb,’ her mother says. ‘I’ll brush your hair for you. You know you’re no good at getting the tangles in the back.’

It doesn’t matter. Doesn’t *matter*. Not her hair. Her clothes. Her face. Nothing will change all the brokenness inside.

Will it be enough? All the gold. All the good. Can it possibly keep her from shattering in His hands?

She winces as her mother tries to comb out all the knots. Instead of apologising, as she rarely does, her mother only says, ‘There’ll be no pain in Heaven.’

There’ll be no pain, but will there be a girl?

She closes her eyes. Lowers her head. Prays for a miracle.

Accretion Disk

by Meagan Kane

Content Warnings: None.

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

Planets glistened like wet jewels in her cupped hands; nearby, a star sparkled, a mirror of herself before the change.

Her body lacked, now, felt cold. She thought, *I shall make myself a magnificent robe*, and set each gleaming planetary bead whirling about its axis, peeling away atmosphere to spin into gossamer thread.

Weaving sent her drifting in a lazy spiral, scooping up plasma and spooling it out, tying orbits into knots, winding them into patterns. Herself bereft of light, she longed to wrap the endless train about her, pulling the cloth tight, until no heat might escape.