

GOOEY magazine

self-absorbed and deeply meaningless



#03

The Examination

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GOOEY is published annually by a growing body of authors, editors and visionaries. The editorial team for this issue, fondly referred to as “The Overlords,” are Jack Corfield, Whitley Dunn, Lee Groen, Taylor Fleming, Francesca Pacchiano, and Sophia Wasylinko.

Issue 3

The Examination

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Respectfully, we recognize the traditional and unceded territory of the Snuneymuxw, Quw’utsun, and Tla’amin peoples on whose land we have the privilege of living, working, and creating this magazine. We want to honour the sovereignty, histories, languages, knowledge systems, lands and cultures of the Coast Salish Peoples; and we offer this place of storytelling in service to the process of reconciliation and healing from the harms of colonialism.

GOOEY magazine is an online publication that can be viewed globally, and we reflect on where these stories come from. Many of the contributors are students at Vancouver Island University and have written these stories first for classes held there. Our stories, whether consciously or not, are shaped by where we live and we are privileged to be here.

Special thanks to the VIU Creative Writing Club for championing writers, encouraging them to submit to literary magazines, and always being willing to help.

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Midnight Snail by Tianna Vertigan
2019; digital photo

“Midnight Snail” was photographed in 2019 on a dreadful Fujifilm FinePix S2950 at midnight in a desperate attempt to meet the deadline on my first ARTS 244 project in my very first semester at VIU. I chose this photo to demonstrate diagonals and triangles for our assignment on exposure and composition. As you can see, the snail’s eye stalks form a triangular blank space while the yellow car it sits upon kind-of-sort-of forms a diagonal line. The vehicle was one of probably twenty belonging to my then-landlord who was not happy about my Tercel taking up one of “his” parking spaces, and I’d hoped the snail would leave a great big trail of goo all over his precious automobile.

From the Desk of the Overlords

You sit alone in the waiting room. You're seventh in the line. You're not sure how you know this, but it brings you comfort. Fluorescent lights hum above your head. You feel the vibration in your scalp, burrowing under your skin.

Across the room, a spider slowly descends from the ceiling, an inch or two at a time. The web shimmers in the light. It's no bigger than a quarter, harmless, and yet you feel afraid. You watch as it takes the first few steps across the floor, unable to look away.

It stops, sensing your presence, smelling the perspiration under your arms. You curse yourself for using all-natural deodorant and hold your breath, hoping it will find a fruit fly to hunt. It watches you. It knows the power it has over you. Your lungs burn, tears blur your vision and then, it scurries under a chair and out of sight.

You remember then why you've come. It's time for your examination. This issue of GOOEY will make demands of you. Here you will find stories that make you laugh, stories that make you cry, and stories that make you question your very existence. You will cut your own heart from your chest and explain why it beats. We cannot guarantee your survival.

The Lords of GOOEY have worked tirelessly to prepare the way but we cannot walk this path for you. Look now, the door to your left has opened. Are you ready?

GOOEY

Don't You Like It?

Daxton Comba

My first thought after I woke up was that I was swimming. I opened my eyes to a panorama of stars dotting the impenetrable darkness. I think it was the low oxygen alarm that woke me. I switched the atmosphere control system to recycling mode, and the beeping finally subsided, leaving an uncomfortable ringing in my ears as the sensory deprivation of space closed in on me. I kicked my feet, trying to shake off the overwhelming vertigo, and took stock of my situation.

Stranded in deep space, intact but low on oxygen with only one pair of CO2 filters. I had just about twelve hours of life-giving air left. So basically, I was totally fucked. I wasn't even sure what kind of EVA suit I was wearing. Based on the pneumatic-buckle wrist joints, braided gas exchange tube, and absolutely shit visor visibility, I decided it was probably an Oscillator-9. My absolute least favourite, though still it saved my life. I'd expect to freeze to death briskly in deep space, but I'm sweating like a wet pig because of the excellent heat insulation.

After many minutes of scanning the distance for any sign of human activity, I was quickly losing all hope. I realized even if the shift manager did note my absence, the cargo had a strict deadline, and they had neither time nor resources to backtrack for a single crewman. Just when I'd settled into an ultimate despair, I saw a small object of mass catching the dim light from the red dwarf at the centre of this barren solar system.

I assumed it was just a far-off asteroid, but then I realized it was getting bigger, bit by bit. At first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, but eventually, I couldn't deny the object was getting closer. Then I noticed the flashing lights and instantly knew I was *fucked*. It was definitely not an asteroid, but a large spacecraft, not of human construction. Irregularly shaped observation decks, fore and aft thrusters, backlit windows, and synchronized flashing lights on each side—the universal sign of “*Hey! I’m flyin’ over here.*”

It was difficult to gauge the size versus distance with so little visual reference. As it got closer, I kept thinking it was about to be right on top of me, only to realize I had yet again misjudged its true scale. Watching for too long had me going cross-eyed. The slow approach gave me way too much time to think. I wondered what kind of alien species had constructed this vessel, and what type of temperament they had.

Humanity's other encounters with extraterrestrial species had often been short and gruesome; I was hoping to meet a yet undiscovered species, and that they'd be kind and gentle. I begged God for them to please breathe oxygen and to please not be too interested in science.

The alien ship idly collected me on its way through, as a blue whale eats an unfortunate krill in its pathway. The porous burgundy exterior filled my entire view by the time the ship finally came near, and great hangar doors at least a half mile wide cracked open, revealing pitch darkness inside as the entrance approached me. While passing through the maw, I had the impression of being consumed by a titanic beast with vast horizontal jaws. When the hangar doors closed behind me, I was swallowed into total darkness.

I felt the tug of gravity beginning to take hold, and then suddenly, solid ground came up hard against my knees and hands. I would have thought the sudden return to gravity would've provided the relief my inner ears so desperately craved, but it only worsened. All I could see under the dim helmet light was the patch of floor beneath me, and it didn't look metallic or concrete... more reminiscent of bone. I assumed some sort of calcium-based construction material. Smooth but porous, it scratched the aromatic-nylon of my gloves like cotton on sandpaper.

Then, bright white lights flashed on, and the reality of my situation finally set in. I was, in fact, in the presence of a scientific species. Eight of them stood tall above me, holding clipboards and unrecognizable tools, each wearing their species' version of a lab coat. Their heads had no recognizable features, but a complex series of folded overlapping tissue. Their pale pink skin was more opaque than human skin and wet—gooey even, and the fabrics they wore looked unabsorbent.

The room was octagonal, about 10 meters across at the widest, domed with a glass hemisphere, and furnished with foreign medical implements. No matter what species or place in the galaxy, there's no mistaking the visual language of a surgical table with an observation deck. It was an operating theatre. After stripping me down, ripping my Oscillator-9 apart without difficulty, each took extraordinary interest in my hair after finding it was fused to my body.

My protests were hardly recognized as they grabbed me by the wrists, neck, torso, and ankles to strap me down to the operating table. Taking turns ripping chunks of hair out to examine closely, they eventually decided to shave me from head to toe. They stole every strand of hair from every part of my body. I was shivering cold as they raised the operating table to a 45-degree angle.

One of the aliens approached me carrying a clipboard and pen, and spoke to me in my own language, albeit in an alien accent.

"Do you have knowledge of your physiology?" The low-toned voice ruffled through the folds of its pseudo-face as it spoke.

I was so stunned that I just answered honestly. "Uh, yeah."

"How complete is your understanding?"

I didn't quite know how to quantify that. "Medium?" I said.

The alien turned away to speak with another. “It may have relevant knowledge; it should remain conscious.”

I was glad it trusted me to stay awake but started second guessing myself when they wheeled a large container into the room and cautiously removed the lid. One of them reached in with tongs and withdrew a literal nightmare. Hanging from the tongs was a foot-long, writhing creature with hundreds of knobby legs, producing copious amounts of goop. Like a hagfish crossed with a millipede, I found it fascinating. I didn’t notice another alien had snuck up on me until I felt a metal clamp forced in between my teeth.

Before I knew it, my jaw was locked at maximum spread, and the lead alien had brought the writhing creature to my face. I gagged as it hit the back of my throat with force and choked on the flailing thing as it fought its way further inside me. I tried with all my strength to bite down, straining against the spreader. I felt hot tears streaming down my face as I fought against the many restraints holding me still. The creature’s tail whipped side to side, hitting me in the neck before curling back around and hitting the opposite cheek, the tail getting shorter as it inched its way toward my stomach. Then the creature was gone, disappeared down my throat—travelling around inside of me.

I barely noticed as they removed the jaw spreader, only feeling the thing writhing inside of me, squirming past my stomach sphincter and forcing its way into my small intestine. I wondered, in some small part of my brain, if it would lay thousands of parasitic eggs that would eventually hatch inside me until I was bursting at the seams with larvae, little baby parasites eating me from the inside. But the larger part of me was more concerned about where the creature was going. Which neighbourhoods of my body would it explore? And more importantly, would it appreciate the exquisite views?

The aliens left me alone for a few minutes, maybe a half hour, but eventually began to crowd around me again. If I hadn’t already reached maximum nausea, I did then. I was going to puke, but then I realized it was just the gastric explorer on its way back up. I dry heaved once, twice, and then I was puking a strangely delicious slime, the sludgy monster amongst it. One of the aliens caught it with a net, retrieving the creature and letting the slime fall through the grated floor beneath the operating table. The alien smacked the creature on the head, then jammed a spike into it. The spike was cable-bound, with the other end plugged into what I could only assume was an alien computer. Other aliens crowded around the viewing screen, and from what I could tell were quite impressed. Their heads bobbed side to side jubilantly as the lead of them pointed to the little marks on the display. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with pride. Why shouldn’t they be impressed? The human gastronomic system is one of the most efficient in the galaxy. If they didn’t already know, they would soon learn.

The alien that spoke earlier approached me again, this time with a scalpel, and I knew it was finally about to happen—and I was so ready for it. Another alien stepped over and fixed an intravenous tube straight into my carotid artery. Alien drugs fast-tracked to the brain. It was like nothing I’ve ever tried before. I was so incredibly numb, yet surprisingly lucid and present in the moment. Then came more tubes, a second one to my carotid artery and one to my jugular vein. The tubes sucked and pushed blood through a mechanical system at a regulated pace before returning it to my neck.

I felt the faint tickle of an incision through the haze, from shoulder to shoulder and top of sternum to mid pelvis. I hardly felt the first layer come off; it tickled, and even though I was already nude, when the alien scientists peeled the

skin back it made me feel double naked. They rolled the flaps over and pinned them down at the edges. I didn't feel the second layer at all. They delicately peeled back the interwoven muscles of my torso layer after layer, like unlacing a corset, until my gaping chest cavity was exposed for all to see. I felt so extremely underdressed, so many of them staring down inside me, it was making me blush. I hoped they liked what they saw.

Secondary surgeon aliens stood by with clipboards; some took notes and some sketched images. I think one was trying to draw a map of the human physiology. I heard an electric saw and felt vibrations rattling through my chest. More layers were coming off; it felt so incredibly immodest. The lead surgeon was so quiet and focused, it made me feel as I did at the dentist, and then I remembered how much I missed going to the dentist. How long it'd been since he'd grabbed me by the face. It was times like this that made me resent ever leaving the warm, comfortable, and sturdy curves of the earth.

They removed my sternum and front rib sections and passed them off to secondaries without any examination at all. I was slightly offended they didn't take the time to look at my bones. It's not the most interesting part, I recognized that, but it wasn't just garbage either. I was fully embarrassed then, it made me feel like squirming but the restraints were too effective, and I couldn't move.

Then they really dug into my meat and potatoes. After removing my left lung, the secondaries neatly placed it on a tray. They began examination as the lead surgeon alien asked me what the organ was called and the function it performed. I said I needed it to breathe nitrogen and oxygen.

"This much surface area for gas exchange? And you have two of them?" it said.

"Hell yeah, I do... Or did." I didn't really understand its body language, but I understood the apparent shock as envy, and suddenly I was a little less embarrassed, though I still wanted some privacy.

"Does there have to be so many people in here?" I asked.

The lead surgeon stopped momentarily and responded, "What?"

"This room is so crowded. Can we do this just you and me?"

"No."

The rejection stung, but on some level, I understood it had to say no. Then they removed my heart, quickly rushing to attach clamps to the loose arteries. The lead surgeon held my heart for a moment, turned it over, and handed it off to a secondary.

"Very impressive. What is that called?" It asked, turning back to me.

It was my moment to shine. "That's uh... my heart," I said.

The lead surgeon jotted that down, then asked, "What purpose does it serve?"

“Uh, circulation? It pumps the blood.” Another great answer. I was so happy with myself.

“Blood is what you call this red coagulating fluid?”

“Yeah.”

“What purpose does it serve?”

“It carries oxygen,” I said, proud of my own basic knowledge of human anatomy.

The team of aliens continue removing organs, carefully jotting notes and asking me questions. The longer it went the less awkward I felt, and with each organ catalogued my delight grew more palpable. I asked myself why I’d even felt so anxious, there was no reason to be ashamed. I think it was just nerves, after all, it was my first time.

“What’s this one do?” asked the lead surgeon.

Though my voice was weak, carried on the breath of a single lung, I answered firmly. “Liver. It cleans the blood... and kills toxins. I think.”

“And this one?”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure about that one. Small, tear shaped, and grey. Even if I wasn’t sure, I still knew more than they did. “Gallbladder, I think. Makes bile, or maybe just stores it.”

“What is bile?” It asked, facial folds pulling tight for a moment.

“Digestive fluid. Very alkaline.”

“How about this one?”

“Pancreas, I think... I don’t really know what it’s for.”

“And this?” It asked.

“Kidneys... uh, something to do with waste removal,” I answered.

They wanted so badly to learn all about me, their intensity made my cheeks hot, and I could tell I was blushing. It went on like this for quite a while, and by the time we finished I could see so many pieces of myself laid out neatly on trollies, organized on trays. A secondary surgeon inspected each one, noting weight, shape, and size. Hypothesizing how each function fit together. The sight reminded me of mechanics in an auto-shop doing an engine block teardown. The secondaries wheeled my organs out of the room, and I watched them go longingly. I felt so remarkably empty—an interesting sensation. I tried to peer into the gaping hole that had been my torso and saw that I’d been fully gutted,

nothing but an empty cavity. Clamps tying off the exposed parts of my organs. Staring at the front of my spinal column, I felt a phantom clenching in my stomach as my brain tried desperately to vomit. My insides wanted to contract and heave, but they weren't presently even attached. My mouth was so dry.

The lead surgeon stepped back out in front of me, this time with a sheepish demeanour; facial folds loose and looking toward the ground.

"Uh, so... I want to thank you for being so helpful."

I was so shocked to hear words of appreciation that all I said was, "You bet."

"Can I ask what you call your species?"

"Uh... Human. Or, homo sapiens."

The secondaries continued wheeling my organs out. "Where are you taking those?" I asked.

"The imaging room. Don't worry; they'll bring them back soon."

I didn't really understand but acknowledged the answer anyway. "Oh... Okay."

The alien continued, "Umm, okay, I've got a proposition for you..." and I realized this was my moment. The moment I'd been waiting for, perhaps the moment I'd been born for. I knew then I'd been embarrassed for no reason earlier; I had to prove how beautiful it was inside me.

I tried to play it cool. "Mhm?" I said.

"Listen, you've been an absolute champ about all of this, and um, I don't know... You just seem like a really smart guy. I almost feel bad, but you know, it's my job."

I tried to seem stoic. "It's cool. Don't worry about it."

"This has all been really great, but it's all just.... surface level. You know? We want to go deeper into your biology, and you're so knowledgeable of your physiology, would you consider staying on to help me with further experiments? I'd appreciate it very much."

I wasn't quite sure what I was expecting. I thought the alien would come to praise the beauty and flawlessness of my human physiology. I wanted to hear from the alien's own folds about how perfectly all the systems of my body networked together, how efficient the design of my digestive system is, and how little energy it needs to power such a variety of systems and chemical reactions. The prime example of a flawless super-organism. But instead, the alien was more interested in pushing me even further rather than giving me praise.

Before I properly thought of what to say, I blurted out, "Can I have my organs back?"

“Oh yeah, definitely. We’ll get your organs all back mostly where they go. I was paying close attention during the removal process. But it’s a wild and intense puzzle in there so, no promises.”

I was taken quite aback by this. Clearly, the aliens did not yet understand the value of the specimen they’d obtained. I bit my tongue, frustrated with how little appreciation I’d been shown. Surely if we went deeper into my physiology, I could show them how effortlessly gorgeous my design was.

“Yeah absolutely. That sounds great,” I said.

“Perfect! I’ll have a lab coat made to fit your weird, gross body.”



Panic at the Disco by Mickyrose

2024; digital photo

Often, artists say that creating is a cathartic and enjoyable experience. Sure, I enjoy my fingers going numb and the rest of my body following suit as the rain pelts down, but I just need to get that perfect shot. Preferably, before my neighbour comes out and asks why I've been standing in their yard for the last thirty minutes. Or maybe they've grown used to it, being the best Christmas light display in the neighbourhood. Or maybe not, when their yard goes dark, and I scurry back home with my newfound art.

Breakfast by the Vending Machines

Lee Groen

Under and in-between rows of rusted vending machines that stretched along filthy and crumbling metropolitan streets, critters—hiding in plain sight—scurried from shadow to shade at the sound of human voices and approaching feet.

“Whose turn is it?” Greg asked.

“I think you bought last time,” Linden said.

“Ah, screw it. Breakfast is on me.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one by now.”

Linden knew that was more than true. Greg had been a good friend to him for a long while, and he didn’t tell him enough. Just in the past few months alone, Greg had done more for Linden than Linden had done for himself. It had been a rough stretch since They got Triffany.

Looking for some Bucks, Greg reached into the front pocket of his coveralls and rattled around. Linden watched him struggling and wondered why Greg’s job gave everyone blue coveralls if they were going to be stained green from all the slime anyways. Why not just give them green ones? He considered asking Greg about it, but he figured he already must have at some point and just forgot the reason. If there even was one at all.

Linden was stuck wearing an ugly grey suit to work. For a moment, he wished he could stain it with slime and viscera instead of having to iron it flat each morning. Then he reminded himself how hard Greg worked, travelling from site to site, dealing with the metropolitan council or with private contractors, tired and sore every night from hacking and processing the meat that bloomed all across the city. Linden realized he didn’t have it so bad after all. He didn’t even have to pay for breakfast today.

Greg found two shiny square coins deep inside his pocket and jingled them around in his hand, walking back and forth, scanning the contents of the various machines.

“You know you’re just going to get us the same thing you always do,” Linden said. “Why pretend?”

“You got me,” Greg said, walking over to a pastel pink vending machine with *Homunculus* written in bold white letters across the side. “I just can’t resist these little fuckers.”

The square coins disappeared into the vending machine, it gently rumbled, and two plastic packages fell out the bottom with a sound like a wet rag hitting a concrete floor. Greg grabbed both and tossed one to Linden. He caught it and felt the blissful warmth of the package against his cold hands. That was his favourite thing about having a homunculus for breakfast—holding the living warmth in your hands. He didn’t even particularly love the taste or texture. The warmth was what made it comfort food.

Linden pulled the package apart, inhaling the stale sourness that was released.

A small pink mass speckled with black imperfections writhed inside the plastic wrapper. It looked like a wad of chewed bubblegum that had been kicked around in the street. What looked like nail clippings protruded from four points—vestigial limbs, to be sure. Its head, the only truly discernable feature, was like a smaller wad of bubble gum, with two unblinking, milky black marbles sitting off to each side, a gaping mouth filled with soft, underdeveloped teeth, and two pin-prick nostrils in place of a nose.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m fucking starving,” Greg said, licking his lips as he struggled to rip open his package.

Linden’s breakfast made a sound—something like a gasp for fresh air—subtle enough that Greg didn’t hear it. But Linden heard. He dumped his breakfast out into the palm of his hand, dropped the wrapper to the ground, and held his ear closer. The living meal mumbled something so faint Linden couldn’t quite make it out. Leaning even closer, Linden felt the emanating warmth against his icy cheek. The homunculi’s mumbling sounds slowly faded, then ceased altogether. Linden then felt a sharp pinch on his finger—like the sting of a needle drawing blood.

Linden drew his hand up with a sharp inhale, dropping the homunculus onto the sidewalk. The steaming pink mass squirmed wildly against the cold pavement.

Greg had finally managed to open his package. He held the wrapper up and huffed in the steam.

Linden sucked blood from the missing chunk on his middle finger. “Little bastard bit me.”

“I had a lively one the other week, too,” Greg said, cracking up. “Had to stomp on the motherfucker to get him to stop spitting at me.”

Linden looked down at his dropped breakfast. The critter clearly didn’t like being on the ground, exposed to the unforgiving cold. But Linden knew he didn’t have the heart to stomp on the poor thing either. It hadn’t even spit at him like Greg’s breakfast had—it only nipped him. He probably didn’t mean anything by it.

Linden gently swept the homunculus towards the vending machines with his foot.

“Here, take half of mine,” Greg said. “You want the ass or the head?”

“Ass. I don’t like all the extra bones.”

“Your loss. I love a good crunch.”

Greg bit into his breakfast. With a slurp, a few crunching bites, and a swipe of the tongue to catch the drippings, Greg’s half was devoured. He handed the dripping half-wad, still in the plastic wrapper, to Linden, who ate his breakfast in one bite, even though he immediately knew he should have done it in two.

The meal was warm and a little salty, not dissimilar to nearly every other homunculus he’d had, though this one was a lot juicier than normal. He crunched through the bones and they melted into a slurry in his mouth. Linden swallowed the mouthful with a cartoonish gulp.

The meal didn’t just taste good, it energized Linden, lifted his spirits. For just a moment, in this early morning bliss, Linden had forgotten all about poor Triffany, and about his dropped breakfast—still squirming on the ground, though no longer steaming—and about his now throbbing finger, of which he was missing a non-insignificant chunk. Blood dripped steadily down his hand and onto the pavement.

“Ready to get going?” Greg asked.

Linden shook off his bleeding hand and dropped the plastic wrapper on the ground with all the rest of the litter. His stomach twitched, then it growled like it’d just met something it didn’t agree with. Linden ignored the warning and gestured for Greg to lead the way.

From under the vending machines a dozen critters scuttled out and surrounded the fallen and discarded homunculus. Their murmuring was sharp and ephemeral, like the whistling of wind. They walked upright, though awkwardly. Uneven patches of dark fuzz covered their otherwise naked and malformed, pale pink bodies. Many carried toothpicks or sharpened soda tabs and almost all of them wore bottle caps on the top of their flat, misshapen little heads.

Linden and Greg paid them little mind and left long before they saw what the mob of matured homunculi did with their wayward kin.

The pair followed the sidewalk until they rounded the corner onto 16th Street. From there, it was a straight shot to Greg’s job site. The cross section of 16th and Rosebush Ave, informally known as the Gardens, was normally a very busy neighbourhood. But ever since the latest bloom sprung forth in the basement of a condemned commercial building, anyone who didn’t live or work in the area stayed away.

Linden and Greg both worked in the Gardens, with its uneven concrete towers and iconic faux rosebushes. Each day the pair walked as far as they could together before they had to part ways—Linden to the Office, and Greg to the pop-up slaughterhouse.

Believe it or not, two months prior there had been no slaughterhouse on 16th Street. But three months earlier there hadn't been any fleshy mass growing out of the walls either.

Linden's finger throbbed, pulsing in rhythm with his uneven heartbeat. A wave of lightheadedness washed over him, and he walked unevenly for a few steps until it passed.

They arrived in front of the slaughterhouse—a massive makeshift tent built awkwardly around a building that was at least ten stories tall.

"Well, another day, another Buck," Greg said.

The pair hugged, halfway too long before separating.

"Take care of yourself," Linden said.

"I should be telling you the same thing." Greg turned back to Linden before going inside. "Breakfast is on you tomorrow—don't forget."

And with that, Greg pulled his ventilator over his face and disappeared inside the flap of the slaughterhouse tent.

In the cold, metropolitan air, Linden sweated through his suit on the short walk to work. On the seventh floor of the otherwise empty building were the offices of Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons. Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons dealt in the business of crunching numbers. Linden worked for Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons as a number cruncher.

The numbers he crunched were numbers like three-hundred-and-forty-four plus one-hundred-and-fifty-nine, and six-hundred-and-three plus two-hundred-and-thirty-seven, and so on. Linden spent eleven hours a day, seven days a week, adding numbers like these together—and on exciting days, even multiplying the occasional number. But *never* subtracting.

Once, or so the story goes, a temp employee had erroneously subtracted some of his numbers. He alleged that he had forgotten his number crunching glasses at home and misread the plus signs for minus signs. This excuse was, of course, rejected by upper management, and he was swiftly fired and fed into the machine.

Linden did not want to end up in the machine, so he diligently crunched his numbers and always double checked his work. According to his bi-weekly performance reviews, he was a perfectly sufficient worker.

Linden worked in one of nearly five-hundred cubicles in what was just one of thirty-six Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons company offices. His cubicle was comfortable, but plain, with no special adornment save for a few photographs of himself with Greg and Triffany. A week prior, he had noticed the pictures of her were starting to affect his productivity. He just didn't quite think it was fair what had happened to her, even if she hadn't wanted to be with him anymore. It just wasn't fair. Linden burped, and a rancid taste touched the back of his tongue.

An hour into his shift, a door somewhere in the office cracked open and a voice carried across the room.

“Linden Lindgren, in my office—*now*.”

Linden’s boss was a man named Scrott Jaymeson Johnson. He was the sixth grandson of Jason Jackson Johnson of Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons fame. By early in the second generation of the family, most of the sons—and they *only* had sons, Jason Jackson Johnson Sr. had made sure of that—had gluttoned themselves on wealth and excess right into early graves. Scrott was seemingly the black sheep of the family, in that instead of gorging himself on food or synthetic drugs, he gorged himself on work. He was a company man through and through.

Scrott’s office was a padded white room with no chairs and a single grey desk in the centre. Linden stood stiffly in front of his boss.

“You finished crunching those numbers yet? *Hm?*” Scrott asked.

“Working on it, sir.”

“You’re working on it, yeah?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s right, is it?”

“I was just working on it when you called me.”

“Oh, you were just working on it, were you? Do you even have any idea why I called you in here? *Hmm?*”

“No, sir, I was hoping you could tell me that.”

“Do I have to spell everything out for you, Lindengren?”

Scrott often mashed names together. Though, Linden thought this was a good thing—you had to know a name to be able to screw it up. Some small part of his boss’ brain at least knew who he was.

“No, sir. You do not,” Linden said.

“Well, I will anyways—are you gonna have those numbers done by the end of today or not? *Hm?*”

“I always do, sir.”

“Those numbers are going to be on my desk by the end of today then? *Hmmm?*”

“If that’s where you want them, sir. I normally just put them in the sorter with the rest of the numbers from the day.”

“You do what you feel is right, Lingren. I can’t hold your hand through everything.”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Listen, I’m going to be straight with you, Lidgran. You haven’t been half right since all that bad business with your sister. People are noticing. I’m noticing.”

“She...” Linden swallowed hard. His stomach flipped upside down at the thought of saying her name. “Triffany was my girlfriend, sir.”

“Whatever she was, you need to pull yourself together, son. You lost a screw, so what? The Machine keeps turning. Do you have the faintest idea what would happen if I stopped crunching these numbers for even just a day? *Hmm?*”

“No, sir. I have no clue.”

“Neither do I. But I won’t be the one finding out. Not on my watch.”

“Of course not, sir.” The feat of standing for an extended period on the uneven padded flooring was starting to get to him. His stomach flipped again, then started to vibrate. Linden could feel beads of what he hoped was sweat running down his stiff, aching legs. “Is there anything else you needed, sir?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. Are you aware you’re dripping pus and blood all over my floor? *Hmm?*”

Linden looked at his hand, which was now badly swollen and dripping with at least three different viscosities of liquid.

“Yes, sir, I am very aware.”

“Right. So, are you planning on getting back to work anytime soon, *hm?* Or are you just going to drip your bodily fluids all over my floor for the rest of the day?”

“I’ll get back to it right away, sir.”

“And Lingdern?”

“Yes, sir?”

Smiling, Scrott held up his coffee mug and winked at Linden. “The coffee tastes great today.”

Linden left the office, closing the door behind him. In the breakroom he made himself another cup of coffee with extra sugar and a dash of Malk™ instead of his usual half-and-half. He had nothing to do with brewing the breakroom coffee, but he couldn’t help but agree with Scrott. It tasted great. His meeting with Scrott had gone so well, and the coffee was so tasty, that Linden felt a westerly wind pick him up and tug on his sails. Though, this high was short-lived, as the sails tugged a little too hard, causing Linden to nearly shit himself.

He considered using the bathroom, but his burbling fecal incontinence had left as fast as it came, and Linden still had lots of numbers to crunch.

Linden finished his remaining nine and a half hours of crunching numbers in nine hours and twenty minutes, only slowing for the occasional stomach grumble, bead of sweat dripping from his face, overflow of fluid from his rotting hand, or random blackout—which usually lasted no more than thirty to forty seconds.

After every eleven-hour shift of crunching numbers, Jason Jackson Johnson & Sons employees were to spend the next several unpaid hours filling out the appropriate paperwork to verify each individual equation calculated was done correctly. Linden was down to the last two forms when a courier arrived and marched right up to him.

“Linden Lindgren?”

“That’s me.”

“Telegram for you, sir.”

Linden took the paper in his swollen hand, smudging it with the pungent, off-white substance that was leaking from under his nails. A bubble had formed somewhere in his stomach that made him squirm as he read.

EMERGENCY CONTACT FOR GREG O. OOSTIDIAN. Stop.
ACCIDENT ON SITE. Stop.
SUDDEN BLOOM OF MASS. Stop.
BLUNT FORCE TRAUMA. Stop.
POSSIBLE ASPHYXIATION BY WAY OF DISCHARGE. Stop.
GREG DEAD. CONDOLENCES. Stop.
NOTHING RECOVERED. NOTHING LEFT. Stop.
END OF MESSAGE. Stop.

“Who’s this from?” Linden asked.

“The slaughterhouse, sir,” the courier said.

“Of course,” Linden said. “Thank you.”

The bubble inside Linden’s stomach suddenly burst, sending a gurgle in both directions. He stood and rushed to the bathroom, pushing past the courier and knocking over an empty water cooler.

He made it only a few steps inside when he started to heave. Linden could feel something slowly coming up, blocking all the bile trying to force its way out. The pressure made him shit himself. Then, with three cat-like heaves, the thing worked its way to the back of his throat. One final hack and a pellet pushed past Linden’s tongue and fell to the tiled floor, followed by a release of vomit, black bile, and blood.

Laying in the puddle of his juices was a hairball. Tangled within it was the complete skeleton of a homunculus. The skeletal structure was a lot more sophisticated than Linden had thought it would be, with more definable features than the pink packaged snack had shown. Linden thought it looked a lot like what he might look like, under all his meat and circuitry. He was impressed.

Linden wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his suit and left the bathroom. He finished filling out and signing his final forms, then filed them with the rest of his paperwork. The workday was finally over. He tidied his desk and took the elevator down to the ground floor.

Outside of the stale office, the cold air hit Linden like a mugging. He was dampened with over fourteen hours of shit and sweat, and he shivered uncontrollably as he walked down Rosebush Ave. The cold crept inside, reminding Linden how empty he was feeling after expunging the contents of his stomach. It had been a tough day, and Linden decided he needed a sweet treat to warm him up and lift his spirits.

The vending machines had been stocked since the morning. The homunculi all looked fresh and piping hot. Linden patted his pockets, then checked his jacket. Finally, he felt around his socks. Not a single Buck to be found.

In his frustration, Linden started to pommel the vending machine—not so hard as to do harm, but hard enough to upset all the little packaged critters in their little plastic wrappings. The wrapped homunculi grew upset and started crying and hissing, almost in harmony. With a final frustrated punch, Linden felt several bones in his swollen hand dislodge and melt away. He then felt another bubble build and suddenly burst in his stomach, this time violently enough that something—though he didn't know what—tore inside of him.

Linden wondered how quickly Greg had gone. He hoped it was over in an instant. He was such a good friend. Linden knew he was nothing like Greg. He wished he had never reported Triffany to Them. She hadn't deserved that.

The tear within Linden climbed his insides until it was in the back of his throat. He felt the dry scrape of something coming up, forcing its way out. The pressure was overwhelming until, in an instant, it wasn't. The lights went out and Linden hit the pavement, steam rising off his motionless body.

From under the vending machines, a dozen homunculi rushed out and surrounded the fallen man. Using toothpicks and sharpened soda tabs, the creatures began to poke and prod, then in time, cut and slice. More scurried out from nearby piles of trash and refuse, and up from sewer grates and drainpipes, and down from scaffolding and pipes. The procession of them hummed a whistling chorus together as they worked. With their makeshift tools and soft, malformed teeth, the homunculi greedily feasted on an evening breakfast by the vending machines.



Cabira by Mickyrose
2024; digital photo

If movement is magical, why can it only be captured standing still? My friends add sound effects, disturbing the stillness as my body shakes with laughter in response. I'll admit, capturing wonder is all the more entertaining with thoughts, opinions and inside jokes. *crash* *zap* *bang* *boom*

Spores

Kacey Willow

April 8th – Tired. Drank stale coffee. Got to work late. Sat in my own bad breath for eight hours. Smoked in the rain. Took a forest detour on my way home. Picked some mushrooms from the trail. Ordered takeout. Watched TV. Bed.

April 9th – Struggled to get up. Stale coffee. Late to the office. Work keeps me normal. Argued with Mark about fiscal reports. Smoked. Ordered takeout. TV. Went to bed early.

April 12th – Slept well! Coffee tasted sour. Not too late to work. Mark tried to bring up reports again. Smoked. Takeout. TV. Bed.

April 19th – Hardly slept. Skipped coffee. Late. Water from work cooler tasted like dirt. Smoking hurt my throat. Took another forest detour. Ate some mushrooms. TV. Bed.

April 22nd – Couldn't sleep. Coffee burned my mouth. Not late. Work keeps me normal. The office lights are starting to hurt my head. The air smells bitter. Went to the forest after work. Wandered off the path to pick more mushrooms. Hard to find my way home after dark. Bed.

April 27th – No sleep. No coffee. Early. Have to squint at my desk. My body feels like sludge with a network of threads keeping it all together. Work keeps me normal. The buzz of the electrical circuits around my head have grown loud. Sounds like people are mumbling when I hold my breath. Back to the forest. Ate more mushrooms. Bed.

Avril 33rd – Woke up in the forest. The sunlight stings my eyes. Hurts trying to adjust to the morning glow of moss around my body. Waited for the janitor to open the building so I could go into work early. The office lights are blinding. I turn over the staff room looking for a pair of sunglasses just to bear with it. My head throbs. Grunt and wheeze my way through the day. Mark doesn't talk to me anymore. I'm parched, but can't drink the water from the cooler. Rancid breath. Work keeps me normal. My teeth feel soft. The office smells pungent and damp, like an earthy hollow. Keep hearing whispers. The forest is a welcome sight. I stray off the trail and begin shoveling mushrooms in my mouth. The round caps crumble into dust on my tongue. I cannot stop.

Avrh 44nd – Fog. The forest grows denser each day. I can no longer speak. Everyone avoids me. Everyone talks about me. My body feels like dense mud oozing into the office. I cannot tolerate the light. Force my way to my desk with my eyes closed, relying purely on a fading memory. Haven't seen my reflection in weeks. Work keeps me craving the damp

soil again. I return to the forest and lie among the roots, sucking water from the dirt beneath me and grazing on the fungi scattered throughout the mossy bed. I feel a tremendous weight in my chest. My mouth feels like bristles. My bones have begun to soften and bend when I walk. The floor has warmed up, and I have grown comfortable with the plants and insects that weave their way around my sedentary body. My mind has cleansed itself of abstract thoughts and matters, replaced with cravings and tunneled thoughts of sustenance.

A 7rd – My mouth no longer exists, sealed beneath a layer of dense mildew. My head has begun to warp, molding itself against the forest floor I rest upon. I feel my skin melting into a rotten gel, eating at my bones and organs. My heart has stopped beating, and since filled with a thick foam. Beneath me, the corpses of plants and animals in the ground speak in foreign tongues I cannot yet understand. My blood has congealed into paste. Thick, white pus oozes from every crevice of my body. My thoughts are blurred into sensation, and all I can concentrate on is electricity pulsing through the core of my being. My limbs pool in the mud of a nearby puddle. I have irreversibly receded from humanity.

0 – They sing to me.

Scowl of a Sourdough

Tara Wohlleben

(Content warning for: OSHA and FoodSafe violations)

Samantha McGee worked in the bakery department at a grocery store. It was an hour into her shift, and she was scoring the sourdough buns with a small knife to prepare them to spend the next hour rising in the damp, warm room of the proofer so that they would rise before she had to put them in the oven. She had just finished the second tray and was starting the third when a loud bang sounded in the department.

“Sorry I’m late!”

The knife went through the skin of Sam’s first knuckle on her left hand as her coworker, Capella, burst through the doors at the back of the department.

“Fuck!” She held up her hand, trying to see how bad it was. She felt her throat constrict in revulsion at the exposed flesh in the deep cut. Pain bloomed as her blood rushed to fill the space. She hurried to the sink to wash off the blood.

“What’s— Oh no, are you okay?” Capella asked, rushing over to look.

“I would be if you had paid attention for once before bursting into the department. Idiot,” Sam said. She finished rinsing the blood off and dabbed at the cut with a paper towel. Blood gently rose to the surface and pooled along the break in her skin. She wiped it off and it pooled up again, slower than the first time. It didn’t look too bad to her; a Band-Aid would probably be able to handle it.

“Do you want me to—”

“I don’t want you to do anything but start your shift. You’re already behind and if you keep bothering me then *I’m* going to be behind.”

Sam walked into the office and started opening drawers and cupboards. She was sure she had seen a box of Band-Aids in here somewhere. She rummaged around until she found a single Band-Aid at the bottom of a drawer and slapped it

on her finger and returned to the buns. She hadn't gotten any blood on them thankfully; her manager had threatened to write her up if she was the cause of more lost product.

She wiped down her knife and finished the tray before placing it on a rig with all the other buns that had been prepped before wheeling the whole thing into the proofer. She shuffled the racks around inside the proofer so that they were in proper order and then closed it up. Now that she was finished with the thawed dough, she would start on the dough she had to mix. Hopefully Cap would take the hint and actually focus on setting up the department for the day.

Sam had been happy to get the baking shift, initially. Eight hours where she just had to mix some dough and put it in an oven. Eight hours where she didn't have to worry about talking to anyone. That was before her first shift.

While she didn't have the time to talk, that didn't apply to her coworkers. Cap was the worst of them. Always finding some news article, blog post, or new video game to talk about, she would come stand by Sam as she worked and launch into facts and repeated research, no matter how many times Sam told her to shove it or ignored her.

Sam stared down at the numbers she had written down for current stock and furrowed her brow, trying to figure out the number of mixes she needed to make to hit the numbers that her manager Robert wanted her to. She hated that baking required so much math. She was in the middle of converting pounds of dough to number of baking trays to number of packages when Cap started droning on about the 1896 Klondike Goldrush.

"Because they needed to take a whole year's worth of food, their equipment weighed close to a ton *each* and they had to carry it all themselves, so they would have had to do multiple trips!"

The numbers disappearing from her mind, she turned to Cap.

"Could you actually shut up?"

Cap stopped talking and stared, apparently shocked. Sam scoffed and turned back to her bakery math, saying the steps out loud to keep Cap from starting back up. Once she was done, she knew exactly how many of each product she needed to make. She would need one bag of mix for the bread and two more bags to make all the different kinds of buns. As she found the bags of mix that she needed Cap spoke up again.

"A lot of people quit their jobs to join the goldrush. Even the *Mayor* of Seattle did it!"

Sam allowed Cap's explanation to fall into the background as she got started. She was done with the math so it didn't matter if Cap's monologue broke through occasionally. What she had now was a simple job: throw the dry mix in the bowl, add as much yeast as the recipe stated, toss in the water and hit the start button on the mixer. Eight minutes later she'd have dough to work on the table.

"Dawson City went from 500 people in 1896 to *seventeen THOUSAND* in 1898!"

Sam was enrobing the yeast, mixing it into the flour so that it didn't get stuck to the sides of the bowl, when Cap's tone changed.

“Shouldn’t you have a glove on over your Band-aid?”

“Shouldn’t you have done your temp checks by now?” Sam shot back. She was going to ask Robert if he could schedule them separately going forward. She was done trying to open the department with Cap. She was sure anyone else would be better to open with than Cap.

“Oh shit!” Cap’s eyes went wide and she ran to grab the clipboard and temp gun, and hurried away.

Pulling her hand out of the mixture, Sam noticed her Band-Aid had fallen off. The cut was covered in the mixture of flour and yeast and wasn’t bleeding anymore. She looked into the bowl, at twenty-two pounds of flour, and shrugged to herself. If she wasn’t bleeding, then it was probably fine. And she’d find the Band-Aid in the dough, or not. What was one loaf with a Band-Aid in it? So long as her manager didn’t find out, who cared? She grabbed the two pitchers of water, poured them in, hit the start button on the mixer, and walked away to check how things were proofing.

Sam’s hand had started out fine but throughout the day her knuckle had gotten larger and larger. The flour and yeast on her hand had been washed off at some point when she had filled the pitchers for one of the mixes and she had thought that would be the last of it. On her lunch break she probed the swollen knuckle gently, but despite its swollen state it still bent, and it didn’t hurt.

“Hey, do you think you should get that checked out? Or report it to First Aid?”

Sam groaned as Cap came up to the break room table. “No.” She covered her swollen knuckle with her other hand.

“But if it gets worse...”

“It doesn’t fucking matter! It’ll be fine,” Sam snapped.

Cap stood there for a moment, then sighed and walked away.

Sam wasn’t going to make this a bigger deal than it was. She was going to finish her shift and sleep it off like she did with every injury she’d ever had. Sam let out a breath and relaxed, stretching her arms out, looking at how her one knuckle stuck out like a sore... knuckle? She laughed and pulled out her phone to kill the rest of her break. Her knuckle would be fine.

As Sam pulled into her parking space, she heaved a sigh of relief. Finally, home after a day of Hell. Grabbing the ibuprofen, Benadryl, gauze, and the Band-Aids she had bought, Sam quickly made her way to her apartment. She struggled a bit with the door handle, her whole hand now swollen and getting a little stiff, but she eventually managed to open the door.

Inside was dark and cool and she shivered as she entered. How had it gotten so cold in her place? She quickly flicked the lights on and checked the temperature control. It was the same as always, but maybe it just needed a bump up to kick-start it. She turned it up a couple degrees and put her groceries away. Her hand was bothering her but only a little bit.

She took a swig of the Benadryl and an ibuprofen for good measure and laid down in bed, scrolling on her phone before passing out.

Sam woke up a few hours later. She grimaced at the difference in how her hands looked. The swollen, puffy skin of her left hand stood out against her normal right hand. She flexed her left hand, testing to see how stiff it was. Bile rose in her throat as she felt something inside her hand squish between the bones and skin. She took a shaky breath and tested it again, turning her hand over and watching. When she curled her hand into a fist, it seemed like whatever was in her was pushed around and the back of her hand swelled up larger; but when she opened her hand again it shifted back. She swallowed to try to calm her nausea and went to the bathroom.

Getting out a needle and a lighter, she heated the metal so that it was clean before she poked at the initial wound with it. As the needle split the skin, the cut ripped open, white pus ballooning out like a can of Pilsbury dough. Relief flooded her briefly as the pressure she hadn't noticed in her finger was released. Already feeling a little better, she put the needle down and braced herself as she gently squeezed the area around the cut. The pus continued to balloon out, not weeping like she'd expected but solid, seemingly stretching as she pushed on the flesh around the wound. As she went to wipe it off it squished as she touched it; so she squeezed the cut again and this time pinched at the white substance and pulled. It stretched out of her hand, and she felt her stomach lurch as the pus dragged against her skin. She kept pulling until it broke off. More remained inside the wound. She realized what it reminded her of: dough. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head before looking at it again. Her eyes hadn't betrayed her—her finger was filled with dough.

She threw the piece she had pulled out in the garbage and squeezed her cut again. Her stomach twisted as she dug more dough out of her finger. Her breaths were shaky as she squeezed it out—it didn't seem to end.

She shook as she looked around her bathroom before her eyes found the Polysporin and gauze she had bought earlier. She squeezed out too much ointment and smeared it over her finger before wrapping up the cut tightly, covering her finger and entire hand with gauze, hoping that the combination of ointment and pressure would help.

Taking several deep breaths she thought about what she had seen as she sat on the edge of her bathtub. Her body was covered in sweat and she felt colder than ever. She had no idea what to do. Was she really, seriously, sick? She must have a fever if she thought she was seeing dough in her cut. She downed three more ibuprofen and a Tylenol with a dinner of toast before heading to bed.

Sam bolted up and out of bed. She was breathing heavily and her head felt like it was full of cotton. A dream had woken her up suddenly, but she couldn't remember what had happened other than that she had been cold. And she *was* cold.

She shivered and yawned and rubbed her eyes as she tried to recall what had happened in the dream, but the feeling of her left hand touching her face startled her. She had forgotten that she had wrapped her hand with gauze and the texture was unexpected, but it seemed like her plan had worked. Her hand seemed normal, other than the gauze. As she stretched her hand in front of her, though, she felt something shift in her elbow, and up the back of her shoulder. Past the edge of the gauze, her whole arm had swelled up and the swelling was spreading over her chest and back. She poked it gently, but she still felt no pain and no itchiness. Same as before. She stumbled her way to the bathroom, still feeling

the disorientation of just waking up. She shook her head to try to clear the sleep from it. As she looked at herself in the mirror she squinted, not sure if what she was seeing was right. Her skin was soft and pale like always, but half of her skin was raised and squishy to the touch. She prodded herself, and it gave way easily under her finger, bouncing back into shape after a second. It still didn't hurt. She felt a little of the pressure that she had felt in her finger, but it was nicer now, spread out over more of her.

A pleasant weight spread across her chest, reminding her of hugs she no longer got. She turned and looked in the mirror, seeing just how swollen it looked. It probably wasn't that bad. She barely noticed it when she moved. What she did notice was just how cold she was. She left her bathroom to get changed, putting on her warmest socks and an undershirt for under her uniform. With what she had seen last night, a hallucination, and the shivering, she probably had a fever of some kind. She dry-swallowed a couple more ibuprofen. She would go to work and get the baking done and then ask for the rest of the day off. She didn't want to get written up for not coming in again.

At work Sam found herself pausing in front of the oven often, happy for the heat, as she shivered violently whenever she went into the cooler or freezer and couldn't seem to warm up. Her neck was getting stiff and her head felt like it was full of cotton, which helped to drown out Cap's monologuing.

She had unwrapped her hand so that she could work the dough, not wanting Cap to comment on the injury or make it into a big deal, and got to work on mixing. She was kneading the dough on the table when she noticed it sticking to her hand more than normal. She pulled her hand off it, the dough stretching a bit before snapping, and picked the pieces of it sticking to her off, pressing them back into the dough on the table. She grabbed a piece from her knuckle, and as she pulled she felt the dough inside her stretch out, mixing with her fresh dough. She shuddered at the feeling and grabbed some disposable gloves. She put them on, hoping that they would keep it at bay. As she worked, she was glad to find that not only did they stop the hallucinations, but the gloves also felt really good on her hands. She usually didn't like how damp and warm they made her hands, but it felt like exactly what she needed.

Her hands were swollen, pressing at the bounds of the gloves by the time she was done with the dough. She pulled the gloves off of her hands and winced as the air touched them. They seemed misshapen and sticky. Now that she was done with the mixes, she didn't need to care about anything but getting home and getting warm. She smiled as she thought about tucking herself into bed, all snug. Cap called after her as she left the department, but she didn't look back.

Once she was home, she got a sweater to put on to help warm her up. Robert, as she left work, had told her to go to the hospital if she was feeling that bad, but she was sure it was just a fever. She dug out some cold medicine from the back of her bathroom cabinet and took a double dose. That would show whatever was making her body react this way.

She climbed into bed and yawned. All she had to do was set the alarm for an hour or so and she'd be able to rest. She pulled the covers up to her chin and thought about setting the alarm as she drifted off to sleep.

Sam woke up to her morning alarm, and for a moment everything seemed okay. She relaxed into the bed under her. She felt good. Clear-headed compared to yesterday. Yesterday. Panic seized her and she jumped out of bed and checked her phone. She hadn't set an alarm for her nap, and she had slept through the rest of the day. She'd obviously needed the rest. All that mattered was that she was up in time for her shift.

She went to the bathroom and undressed, shivering as the air touched her bare skin, and looked at herself. Her skin seemed to be so dry that it was cracking. The dryness was making her feel stiff, the pressure in her body becoming uncomfortable. She hurried to turn on the shower. Soon she felt her skin moisten in the steaming shower and she gave a sigh of relief as the stiffness dissolved and the pressure lessened. The warm water soaked into her delicate skin. She ran her hands down her arms; the cracks smeared and smoothed into nothing. She gently rinsed herself and then stood in the warm steam of the room. She was feeling a lot better than before so work wouldn't be a problem. With her skin the way it was, she might stop by the pharmacy and see if there was some kind of deep moisturizing lotion she could get. That would probably help.

When she arrived at the bakery, her skin was showing cracks again. She hurriedly turned on the proofer. She figured she'd just spend most of her time in that warm and damp room if she could get away with it. Or at least step inside for a little refresher. When her skin was sufficiently moist, she left the proofer, set the oven to the temperature for the muffins, and removed the rigs from the cooler to prepare the buns. She arranged them on the racks and then ran back to the proofer to warm up and moisten her skin. The air was cold on her skin as she left the proofer, but she had a job to do.

She opened the oven. The blast of hot air hit her and it felt so good and warm. She stood at the entrance to the oven for a minute, basking in the warmth, but her back now felt so cold without any heat. She turned but frowned as her face cooled off. She looked back to the oven. She knew that Robert had gone in to clean it once before while it was still warm and he had been fine. She was sure it would be okay for a minute. She stepped inside, her hand catching on the latch of the door absentmindedly, swinging it closed behind her.

Cap walked up to the doors into the bakery and paused, looking into the department to make sure Sam wasn't using a knife before she made her entrance.

"Sam? I'm sorry I'm late again, my car's still having problems."

Sam wasn't there, though. No one was. Cap walked in slowly and checked in the office. Maybe there was a note, explaining that Sam was sick. She had left early the previous day, after all. But there was no note and she couldn't see the baker anywhere. The rigs holding all the buns were still out on the floor. All of them. They should be put away by now. Maybe Sam had been late, so she hadn't been able to put anything away yet. She was probably just in the bathroom.

Cap started her opening duties, maneuvering around the rigs on the floor. She wasn't sure what to do with them. She would wait for Sam to come back. Maybe she would even let her help catch up.

After she had finished her temp checks and pulled the expired product, Sam still wasn't around, and Cap was getting nervous. What would Robert say if he walked into the department in the state it was in? She had to do something.

Cap walked over to the oven and proofer. The proofer had been turned on, but there was nothing inside other than warm, damp air. Cap closed the door and noticed that the muffins were right outside of the oven. Maybe they were supposed to go in now. Looking at the oven she saw that it was on and the timer was ticking down on the control

panel, but through the small window in the door, she could see that there wasn't a rig inside. Not knowing what else to do, she looked up the time for the muffins and moved the muffin rig close, prepared to put it in the oven.

She grabbed the handle and yanked hard, the door sticking for a second before swinging open. The heat hit her face like a slap, and she flinched, closing her eyes. As soon as the first wave of heat was gone, she looked in the oven.

In the center of the floor sat a single sourdough round.

"Could you close the door? I'm just about done."



Arcane by Mickyrose
2024; digital photo

Ever-present and ever unknown, the arcane is always moving, pulling in the unexpected. Red and blue.

*“Denham’s Dentifrice. One two, one two three, one two, one two three. No place to run. Denham’s. The people started.
“Call the guard.”
“The man’s off—”*

Excerpt from *Fahrenheit 451*.

Birds of Pray

E. B. Sorensen

A pair of pale hands linked together by hooked thumbs circles the sky. Not a cloud in sight. Fingers flap like feathered wings. They wane in and out of view. Turn from airplane-sized to a speck in the sky and back again.

The parking lot spans what seems like miles. No cars. Only white lines. The hands fly closer. The waft of air blows my jacket open.

There are vultures where I'm from. Sat up in treetops, rearing heads bright red like the blood in their gizzards. They ride the breeze and survey the landscape for dead and dying things.

I wrap my coat around me and turn away. Head towards home. The concrete keeps mixing with heat and turning to water. Great gusts of wind behind me blow my hair into my face.

When I was a child I wandered the dikes with my dogs. *Keep them on a tight leash*, my mother warned, *or else the birds of prey will swoop down and take them away*. Once, I heard of a baby that had been found on the side of a farm road. Mangled up and with eight holes on its shoulders where the talons clenched.

Hot air on concrete makes me thirsty. A mirage. I stop and shrug off my pack, pull out my bottle. I'm crouched down and drinking when the hands pinch the nape of my neck. They have short fingernails with a line of black dirt under each. I wore my heavy shoes today, so they couldn't lift me, but now my heels are dragging on the ground.

I thrash around and bash at their knuckles with my fist. My feet lift off the ground. My pack's still around one shoulder, so I swing it off and hit the hands with it. They do not flinch. All my things fall out to the ground and I'm too high up now to hear the impact.

The white-hot sun heats my back. It's hard to breathe. I see the shadow of us on the concrete below. The parking lot is a lot smaller from up here. There's not much else beyond it: just trees and black-roofed buildings on spans of grey.

If an animal attacks you, go for its eyeballs. Scratch and jab with all your might, my mother would say. But hands don't have eyes, so what must I jab at?

The treetops get closer. We are lowering. A nest of white bones seems to be the target. The hands use their pinkies to perch on the edge and drop me inside. I land on my back. Thorns cover the bottom. They pierce my skin through my jeans.

The hands flap their fingers a few times before stretching them out and flying back to where we came. I peer over the edge of the nest. I know what to expect. But my heart still knocks. The thorns scrape my knees.

On the forest floor, barren and brown, lay the bodies before me. I see at least twenty bright white skulls and countless ribs. They come from those who have jumped, because death is better than suffering. Hands don't have mouths after all.

The Centre of Decay

Ann Hoffmann

(Content warning for: decomposing animal corpses)

Jenny was ready. She'd read every adventure book she could get her hands on. Her plan was foolproof. And it began with peanut butter and maple syrup, the perfect ingredients for an effective distraction. The peanut butter would catch her parents' attention. Then, once they'd begun to clean up the mess, they'd notice the stickiness of the maple syrup. They wouldn't leave the old man like that, not even to lecture her. She'd have as long as the sponge bath took, and if she was *really* thorough, she'd have ages.

"Don't want you getting messy, Buster," Jenny said. She tossed her satchel onto the kitchen table, and a half-bald creature tumbled out. He was an ugly little thing, beady glass eyes and uneven patches of brown fur scattered across his body, but he was the most loyal companion a girl could have. She often reassured him that his rat-like tail, long ago stripped of its marvellous fur, didn't make him any less of a squirrel. And yet, she'd never once had to encourage him to stand his ground. Only a brave adventurer could have such a brave sidekick.

Jenny stepped towards the old man, a jar of peanut butter in one hand and a spoon in the other. If it wasn't for the subtlest movement of his chest as he breathed in and out, he would seem no different than Buster, dead and stuffed. His skin was deathly grey and his wrinkles so deep and numerous that he looked like a shrivelled-up apple. His eyes, as colourless as his skin, were always fixed straight ahead and never closed.

She climbed onto the old man, her knees digging into his sagging flesh. Still, he looked straight ahead, his expression flat and unchanged. Jenny spread the peanut butter across the old man's face, pushing it into the creases in his skin. Yet, they were more like crevices, and as she pushed in more and more peanut butter, none of them could be filled. She wondered how deep his wrinkles were, how long it would take to remove all the peanut butter, if it could even be done.

With stage one of her distraction complete, Jenny turned her attention to the maple syrup. She'd managed to unscrew the peanut butter's lid without issue, but she knew the syrup would be a different story. She blamed the stickiness. But Jenny was prepared. She figured that if garden shears could cut through a branch, they could surely cut some plastic.

Jenny set the syrup jug on the kitchen floor and sat crisscross in front of it. The shears were heavier than she expected, an oversized extension to her small body. She yanked them open, lined them up with the neck of the jug, and then,

with all of her strength, slammed them shut. The lid went flying and ricocheted off of the cabinets. The jug fell over. Maple syrup oozed out, coating the kitchen tiles. She hurriedly grabbed the jug, the stickiness covering her fingers.

“Something always goes wrong when adventuring,” she reassured herself and Buster. To continue on was what made a true adventurer, that and going places long forbidden.

This time, Jenny tried to balance on the old man’s boney knees. After the spill, she didn’t much care to end up stickier. She poured the maple syrup over his head and watched it seep through his scraggly white hair, run down his peanut butter-smearred face, and drip down the collar of his shirt. He smelt sickly sweet, a strange contrast to his usual absence of a smell.

Having finished with the distraction, Jenny tossed the peanut butter jar and maple syrup jug into the sink and ran some water over her sticky hands. While she dried them, she admired her work. There was something about what she’d done that felt powerful, like pouring cranberry juice on a white couch. Often, regardless of where she was in the house, Jenny felt as though the old man was looming over her, observing. And yet, he never moved, like some piece of furniture shoved to one side of the kitchen, ignored but not forgotten. Her parents didn’t much care for him, but he’d been part of the house as far back as Jenny remembered, and it wasn’t like they could get rid of him. So, they dusted him every so often.

Jenny had been careful not to get peanut butter in his eyes, but she couldn’t say the same for the maple syrup. He was absolutely coated with the stuff, droplets decorating his eyes like morning dew on unwanted weeds. He didn’t seem bothered, hadn’t so much as moved. He was still watching, always watching.

She shoved Buster back into her satchel and started towards her bedroom. She paused at the door to the study. It would have been so much simpler to enter that way, if it weren’t for the rusty chains.

“I guess that wouldn’t be much of an adventure,” Jenny said. “Huh, Buster?”

She’d tried to get into the study before, but she was littler then, and not particularly sneaky. After that, her mother had started buying chains, and she never let them rust so badly they could be broken. Jenny kicked the pile of older chains next to the door, and the metal crumbled. It was always odd when her mother replaced the chain with a new one, so shiny and out of place in the house.

Jenny hurried the rest of the way to her room. Even with the distraction in place, she still needed to think about timing. She’d never had a good sense for how long her father’s appointments would be. Fortunately, she’d done the rest of her preparations earlier. She tugged on a pair of swimming goggles and tied her scarf so that her mouth and nose were protected. Lastly, she put on her bicycle helmet, modified with a flashlight and a lot of duct tape.

Ready to properly begin the adventure, Jenny turned to face her mural. Really, it was just a white tarp, a makeshift wall, but she’d convinced her father to paint their family on it. Her mother stood off to the side, radiant as ever. And her father, he looked younger. His hair was still brown and his skin less wrinkled. He had his wooden cane with that delicately carved lion’s head. It looked strange to her now, seeing him like that. She’d gotten used to his wheelchair in the last few months.

Her parents had knocked down her wall a few times because of the mold. Eventually, they'd suggested the tarp as an alternative to rebuilding it. It didn't get moldy the way her wall used to, but when she lay in her bed in the dark, she didn't like thinking about the thin layer of plastic between her and the house's insides. Today, though, she was a brave adventurer.

Jenny removed the tacks one by one and let the mural fall to the floor. There was a dark, square opening about the size of an end table cut into the wall. The darkness was bordered by a white fuzz. It was growing again, breaking down the wall. The musty smell permeated her scarf. Her father had suggested moving her to another room, but her mother had insisted that everything was fine, that all they needed was a tarp. Besides, it wasn't like the rest of the house was much better.

Jenny got on her hands and knees. She'd been making maps of the house for weeks, so she had a pretty good idea of the direction she needed to go. The distance was more of an unknown. There were no rooms between the study and her bedroom, but the doors were far apart. She wasn't sure if this meant the study was enormous, or if the house had just been built funny. She wasn't afraid of getting lost, or at least, she knew that her location wouldn't be a complete unknown. She'd never been in the house's insides, but she figured the old man's gaze would follow her just as it always did. However the house had been built, she was pretty sure that like her bedroom and many of the other rooms in the house, the study had to have places where the wall was damaged, hopefully enough for her to get through it.

She clicked the flashlight on. She could only just fit through the gap, even though she was small for her age.

All Jenny could see was white fuzz, like she was crawling through the inside of a pillow or cloud. It was soft under her fingers but also sticky. She'd half expected it to melt away when her skin touched it, but when she pressed her fingers into the fuzz, it just seemed to get harder, while still sticky. She was starting to wish she'd brought a pair of gloves, but at least she had a sweater on. She wiped some of the fuzz from one of the wooden beams with her sleeve. The wood was spongy and crumbled away as she poked at it. Her parents had replaced the beams the last time they opened the wall, and yet the new wood already looked like it had been rotting in a forest for years. It smelled like it, too.

The further Jenny went, the less the light seemed to carry. It gave the white fuzz a yellow tint, but she couldn't see more than an arm's length in front of her. Fortunately, she'd not run into any turns, as though the house was leading her directly where she wanted to go. Except the further she crawled, the stranger it seemed that she was still crawling. She should have reached the study by now.

The fuzz was increasingly taller and more varied in colour: greens, oranges, and blacks. Some of it was so tall that it almost seemed like she was crawling through a jungle, like she was a proper adventurer. She couldn't even see the shapes of the wooden beams anymore. Her flashlight began to flicker.

"This is fine," she told Buster. "Everything is fine."

She knew he didn't need reassurance. He didn't have anything to be afraid of, one of the few benefits of being dead. She'd had a cat once, a live one, and it had been frightened of everything. When it wasn't sickly, it spent its days cowering and hissing, mostly at the old man, sometimes at Jenny's mother. But occasionally, it had seemed like the cat

was hissing at the house itself, that watchful gaze that invaded each and every room. When her mum had said no to replacing the cat, she'd gotten Jenny a doll, but Buster was a much better adventurer.

Jenny heard the long, muffled creak of the front door opening. Even with the thick layer of fuzz, she could hear that her parents were talking, but she couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

"Jennifer!" her mother shouted.

For just a second, Jenny thought about backing out of the tunnel, but no, she had to see this adventure through. She had to see the study. No true adventurer would call it all off because their mother shouted for them.

Her flashlight flickered again and then went dark. She hit it. And when that didn't work, she shook her helmeted head around, expecting to hit a wooden beam or something that would knock some life into the flashlight. But nothing felt quite solid anymore. Even the fuzz below her fingers continued on, semi-soft, as far as she could feel. The light flickered for a moment, and she saw how the fluff swirled around her, covered her. Then, she was plunged back into darkness.

"I'm not scared of the dark," Jenny told Buster, holding her satchel close.

Despite the darkness, she'd have sworn she could see his beady glass eyes. And she could tell from the way he was looking at her that he didn't buy it.

"I'm not."

She reminded herself that Buster wasn't worth arguing with. Besides, his judgemental eyes were negligible in comparison to the unending gaze she felt. And as she crawled through the tunnel, that feeling had not changed. As unsettling as she usually found it, the familiarity was a twisted comfort while enclosed in the fuzz-coated tunnels.

Jenny continued to crawl, seeing nothing, feeling only the awful stickiness under her fingers and smelling the rot that had consumed the wooden beams.

"You're not allowed to be afraid of the dark either, Buster. You'll make me afraid." Her heart was pounding in her ears like a storm hammering a tin roof. "Fear's contagious."

It couldn't be much further. It just couldn't. So, she kept crawling, even when she began to smell a different rot, something stronger than that of the beams, something putrefied.

Jenny had grown accustomed to how her fingers sank into the thick layer of fuzz coating her path. Each time she crawled forward, she expected that awful sensation. But this time, her hand sank into something else. Fur brushed against her fingers as they descended through a thin layer of skin into mush and liquid. The feeling and smell made her gag.

"I think my hand's in your cousin, Buster."

She'd travelled so far already. She couldn't turn around, regardless of how disgusted and exhausted she was. And while she wouldn't admit it, she was awfully afraid as well.

The further Jenny went, the more dead things she came across, bats and rodents far bigger than Buster. She didn't understand how her mother could spend all of her time in the study, how she could stand the smell. Jenny had never gotten a clear answer on what her mother did in there, only being told how important it was. But surely it wasn't the ideal place for doing anything important. At this rate, it had to be full of fuzz and dead things. Or rather, it ought to have crumbled away entirely. After all, it seemed to be the centre of decay.

Suddenly, the tunnel of fuzz seemed to open up, and light, which was as dim as the early evening but bright in contrast to the tunnel, blinded her. Without hesitation, she tumbled through the opening. She'd expected to roll onto a wooden floor, but rock after rock dug into her as she rolled, and wall after wall crumbled when she hit them. And even when she was still, the world kept spinning.

Jenny lay like that for a long moment, rocks pressed into her back, as she waited for the dimly lit room to steady. And when it did, she was puzzled. There was no fuzz, apart from what clung to her. And there was no hint of anything dead, besides the brownish red that painted her hands. There was no smell of rot, no smell at all. It was quiet and cold and empty of anything that was *anything*.

A series of walls surrounded the room, the inner walls having nearly entirely crumbled away and the outer ones staying mostly intact. The floor was the remains of eroded concrete. And that was all there was. She'd imagined her mother spending her days and nights hard at work in the study, seated at a fancy desk, doing whatever it was that was so important. There was no desk. There was no chair. There was nothing.



Energy Drained by Bea Waines
2025; Ice cream on metal
Kmart Te Rapa, Kirikiriroa

“Energy Drained” is a depiction of the zero fucks we all have left to give in this circus called Life. Found in the wild, just outside of Kmart in Kirikiriroa, Aotearoa (colonially known as Hamilton, New Zealand). I like to imagine this fuel source was abandoned with a bit of spite at the end of a minimum-wage employee’s too-short break. An ironic depiction of the unnaturally rapid pace we so desperately try to maintain.

The Sea Turtle Curse

Emerald Ayres

Coming to the beach had been Mary's idea, not his. Rodney hated the ocean. He hated the way the water was always cold. He hated the smell of rotting ocean flesh—the carcasses of marine life left to decompose under the sun—that wafted off the beach. Most of all, he hated the things that came crawling up out of the water. Rodney went along with his girlfriend in the hopes it might improve his chances of getting laid. They had been dating for almost a month, and the waiting was starting to test his patience.

“Look!” Mary said, pointing farther down the beach.

“What?”

Pulling Rodney by the hand, Mary led him along the shore. She steered them around the rotting carcass of a small dogfish. Rodney wrinkled his nose at it as they passed. They approached a writhing mass on the edge of the shore.

It was a sea turtle. The fishy smell of it was potent, having likely roasted under the sun all day. Rodney could see a series of fishing nets wrapped around it. One of the nets entangling the turtle was caught on a rock higher up the shore, keeping it trapped above the waterline. No matter how hard the turtle thrashed, it couldn't free itself.

Idiot, Rodney thought.

The sea turtle turned its head and stared at Rodney. In the light of the early evening, its green eyes almost glowed. The sight unnerved him.

“We should cut it free,” Mary said. “Give me your pocketknife.”

Reluctantly, Rodney pulled it out. He crouched beside the sea turtle, thinking.

He grinned. “Or,” opening the blade, he tapped the flat of it against the turtle's shell, eyeing Mary, “we could turn this guy into a toboggan. I need a new one anyway.”

“Rodney!”

The expression on Mary's face made Rodney laugh. She was cute.

He pulled the knife away. “Alright, alright.” When he grasped one of the nets, the sea turtle thrashed violently. Rodney was knocked onto his ass in the wet sand. He stood up, furious. “Maybe I *should* turn you into a toboggan.”

Mary grabbed his arm. "He's just scared. Let me." She took the pocketknife from him and started cutting away the nets. Rodney let her. If she wanted to suck up to a fucking turtle, fine.

Once free, the sea turtle hurried its way into the surf.

Swimming a few yards out, the sea turtle lifted its head from the water and stared at Rodney once more.

If he were crazy, he'd have sworn its eyes *really did* glow.

But Rodney wasn't crazy. He threw a rock into the water a few feet from the sea turtle, and it finally disappeared under the surface.

* * *

Rodney never dreamed. But that night, he did.

He was underwater, floating in the dimly illuminated depths. The water was a deep blue like the ocean. He swivelled his head, but couldn't make out where the source of the light was—just that it was there.

Emerging from the depths beneath him, a massive form drifted into view.

It was the largest sea turtle Rodney had ever seen.

It dwarfed him in size, stopping just short of him. A pair of glowing eyes the size of hubcaps bore holes into Rodney. He sensed judgment.

The sea turtle opened its mouth and swallowed Rodney whole.

* * *

Rodney handed Mary the caramel-macchiato-whatever-the-fuck-it-was he'd picked up from Starbucks earlier that morning and sat at the desk beside hers. A vaguely lurking fear churned nauseatingly in his stomach.

That dream had freaked him out.

"Thanks, babe," Mary said. She removed the lid and took a small sip.

Over the high school's intercom, a reminder about the upcoming dance blared. It was 'Under the Sea' themed, and only one week away.

Mary leaned over the gap between their desks, speaking quietly as the intercom continued the morning announcements. "Hey Rod," she said.

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking," Mary looked away, then looked back at him, smiling shyly, "maybe after the dance, we could, you know."

Rodney stared at her.

“A dance feels kinda special, and I want my first time with you to be special.”

Oh. Rodney sat up straighter in his chair. “Yeah?” Excitement leapt in his stomach. *Finally!*

A wave of nausea chased away his excitement. He clutched the side of his desk.

Mary frowned at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I—” he fought off a gag. Pressure built in his stomach, quickly crawling into his throat. He swallowed, very deliberately, in the hopes the sensation would go away.

It did not.

Rodney dry retched. Several heads in the classroom turned to look at him. Panicking, Rodney left as quickly and coolly as he could and locked himself inside a stall in the boys’ bathroom. He hunched over the toilet, retching again. The toilet smelled like shit and ass and made his nausea ten times worse.

Pressure continued to build in his throat. It crawled higher, writhing inside of him.

Rodney couldn’t breathe.

He heaved desperately, black spots dancing in front of his vision. Tears stung in his eyes, and he squeezed them shut. Whatever was stuck in Rodney’s throat came free in a rush, and he finally vomited into the toilet. Coughing and gasping, Rodney fought to catch his breath.

He opened his eyes and looked into the toilet. Floating in the bowl was not the oatmeal he’d eaten for breakfast.

It was a turtle.

A baby sea turtle, by the look of its size and flippers. Rodney stared at it. He rubbed his eyes, blinked a few times. But the turtle remained, splashing as it tried to climb up the side of the toilet bowl.

“What the fuck?”

He flushed the toilet. It took four tries for the high-powered flush to whisk the turtle away, and by the time it was gone, Rodney had convinced himself he’d imagined the whole thing.

Unfortunately, no amount of convincing could stop Rodney as, throughout the rest of the day, he vomited up a dozen more baby sea turtles. He hurried out of a math test in second period—against his teacher’s protests—and couldn’t

make it to the bathroom in time. He retched into a water fountain in the hallway until a turtle *plonked* into the water basin.

The turtle stared up at him. The smell of the ocean and something vaguely rotten wafted towards him. Rodney could taste it in his mouth.

Fear, confusion, and... something else he was too overwhelmed to think about, writhed in his stomach.

He dumped the sea turtle in the nearest trash can.

By the time lunch came around, Rodney couldn't stomach his food.

During P.E., Rodney found himself hiding behind the bleachers, vomiting not one, but two baby sea turtles. His gym teacher found him there.

"You alright, son?" his gym teacher asked.

Rodney hid the turtles behind his back. "I'm not feeling well."

He let Rodney leave early.

The smell of rotting ocean flesh followed him home.

* * *

Rodney dreamed of the sea turtle again. It appeared in front of him in the water, and he cringed, flapping his arms and legs in an attempt to swim away.

It didn't work.

Glowing eyes surveyed his futile attempts. He soon gave up.

"What did you do to me?" Rodney asked. "What do you want?"

The water churned behind the sea turtle. A swarm of baby sea turtles rocketed around the large one and swept past Rodney. He swivelled his body around to watch them disappear deeper into the open ocean.

A voice behind him rumbled through his chest, ancient and commanding.

Repent.

* * *

The next day, Rodney brought a small trash bag to school in his backpack. Every newly vomited turtle went into the bag. He quickly ran out of space. By the end of the day, Rodney had resorted to vomiting into his hands and stuffing the new sea turtles into his jacket pockets.

What else was he supposed to do? Rodney had no idea what the turtle meant by ‘repent’. He guessed not throwing away new turtles was the best place to start.

His thoughts flickered to Mary almost constantly. Usually, he’d be with her, but he was too freaked out, too scared that Mary would see him vomit up a baby fucking sea turtle and risk it ruining his chances of getting laid. So, he kept his distance.

After school, Mary cornered him.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “I’ve hardly seen you all day.”

“I’m fine.”

Mary frowned at him. “You look sick.”

“I—” Rodney stopped. He couldn’t tell the truth. Telling the truth would make him sound crazy. Maybe he *was* crazy. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Rodney turned to leave, but Mary grabbed his arm.

“You know you can talk to me, right?” She looked up at him earnestly.

The look Mary gave him softened something inside of Rodney. He really missed her. Rodney leaned down and kissed her. “I know.”

Her nose wrinkled when he pulled away. “You smell really weird.”

A familiar nausea returned, signaling an incoming turtle. Rodney excused himself and hurried to his car, vomiting another sea turtle into his lap. It stared up at him. He rolled down his window and grasped the turtle’s shell. A moment passed. His grip tightened. There was something pleading in the sea turtle’s eyes. Rodney wanted to chuck it out the window. To make it pay for making his life a living hell and keeping him from his girlfriend.

But he couldn’t do it.

Rodney slammed his head against the steering wheel.

* * *

As the week passed, the giant sea turtle continued to visit Rodney’s dreams, and he continued to vomit baby ones. He’d lost count of the oldest turtles, the ones he vomited up earlier that week. By now, they had started dying.

Rodney began to despair.

His teachers had started asking questions. *Was everything okay at home?*

Rodney could’ve laughed. No, everything was not okay at home. He had dozens of dead turtles stuffed into a laundry bag under his bed, and his mother wouldn’t stop demanding he take a shower, which he had, so many times, but the

smell of rotting ocean flesh would never leave. It stuck to his skin. Sometimes he could taste it. The death of each baby sea turtle clung to him like a punishing odour.

A few of his friends started asking questions, too. *You okay, man? You don't look so hot.* Which was code for: *You look like shit. What gives?* He did his best to avoid them.

He avoided Mary, too. Not because he wanted to, but because he'd convinced himself he needed to. But she was persistent.

The day before the Under the Sea Dance—a name Rodney found entirely unfunny—she hopped into his car after school. She pressed the car lock and turned to stare at him. “Rodney Jones.”

Rodney blinked. Only his mother called him that. And only when he was in trouble.

“I am not leaving this car until you tell me what’s going on,” Mary said. She jabbed a finger at him. “And don’t you *dare* lie to me.”

Rodney gripped the steering wheel and stared at it. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

Rodney looked at her, surprised. Mary never cursed.

Her face was tense with concern and anger. “You—your car—smells like something rotten. You look sick almost *all the time*. You won’t spend more than a few minutes with me. Do you even care about me anymore? About us? About taking care of yourself? Because it feels like you don’t.” Mary paused. Her words hung heavy in the air between them. “If you can’t sort out whatever crap is going on, or at least start being honest with me, then we’re done, Rodney.”

Her words felt like a punch to the stomach.

He couldn’t let that happen.

Rodney released his grip on the steering wheel. Slowly, he pulled a baby sea turtle from one of his jacket pockets. He held it out to Mary like a peace offering. “I found this recently.” It wasn’t a lie. Technically. “The day after we freed that turtle. There were more of them, but they died. Taking care of them is stressing me out.” His voice grew quieter. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The hard edges of Mary’s expression softened. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I could’ve helped.” Something warm bloomed in Rodney’s chest at the tenderness in Mary’s voice. It reminded him why he liked her. She was hot, yeah, but she was nice too. Gentle.

Rodney tried to seem unaffected by her softness and shrugged.

“Can I hold him?” Mary asked.

Rodney let her take the turtle. Mary lifted the turtle into the palm of her hand and held it against her chest. She delicately stroked the top of its head and down to its shell.

“He feels dry,” Mary said. “He needs water.”

Rodney blinked. Why hadn’t he thought of that before?

Guilt crept into him, sharp and insistent.

He *should* have thought of that.

After promising to get his shit together, Rodney said goodbye to Mary and went home. He found a five-gallon bucket in his dad’s garage. Filling it with water, Rodney placed the remaining living sea turtles inside.

* * *

That night, the giant sea turtle seemed particularly agitated. Its front flippers swept the water around Rodney into a roiling frenzy.

“What do you want me to do?” Rodney asked desperately. “Just tell me!”

Again, a tidal wave of baby sea turtles swept past Rodney, circling around him several times before disappearing into the depths.

REPENT.

* * *

The day of the dance, Rodney kept the bucket of turtles in the backseat of his car—with the windows down so they wouldn’t fry—and as he vomited more sea turtles throughout the day, Rodney hurried back to the parking lot to add them to the growing group. Each time he came into their view, the little sea turtles clambered against the side of the bucket. Reaching for him.

As much as the sight unnerved him, Rodney wondered if this was how mothers felt.

* * *

Music played in the high school’s gym, and Rodney and Mary danced in a sea of swaying couples. Ocean-themed decorations—fish, starfish, and sea turtles—were everywhere. They hung from the ceiling and were taped flat against the walls. It made Rodney feel like he was being watched.

“This is really nice,” she said in his ear. “You smell great.”

“Thanks.” He had showered three separate times that morning and doused himself in more cologne than he cared to admit. Anything to mask the lingering ocean-rot smell.

Mary pressed herself closer to him. “I’m ready for tonight.”

Rodney should have felt more excited. He wasn't. All Rodney could think about was his fucking turtles. It was getting late. Would a raccoon climb through the window of his car and eat them?

His mind wandered back to that day at the beach. The image of the sea turtle hurrying into the water replayed over and over again in his mind. Then he thought of his dreams—floating, suspended in the ocean, the wave of sea turtles shooting by him in the water.

Something Mary said jolted to mind.

He needs water.

Rodney shook with excitement.

He gently pulled away from Mary. "I'll be right back. I promise."

Mary's hand latched onto the arm of his suit jacket, not letting him go. She frowned. "Where are you going?"

Taking Mary's face in his hands, Rodney kissed her. Then he looked at her. "I have to take care of something. It's important."

Mary studied his face for a long moment. Then she nodded and let go of his suit jacket.

* * *

The bucket was heavy and hard to carry. Rodney grunted at the weight, and the sea turtles sloshed around as he staggered to the edge of the shore, the light of a full moon casting strange shadows around him. He plopped the bucket down and tipped it over, spilling dozens of sea turtles onto the sand. They righted themselves and turned to look at him.

Rodney remembered the way Mary had held one of the turtles so gently before. A small swell of emotion washed over him. He reached out a hand to them, and the nearest turtle nuzzled its head against his fingers.

He pulled his hand away. "Go," Rodney said, pointing towards the ocean.

Together, they turned and hurried into the water. Rodney watched them begin to swim away in the light of the moon. Relief hit him like a truck. He sank to his knees in the wet sand and held his face in his hands.

If only he'd realized what he needed to do sooner. If only he'd told Mary about the turtles sooner. If only he'd taken his head out of his ass and thought of someone other than himself. If only—

But I did what I did, he thought. And it's finally over. I can go back to her.

Something splashed in the water, and Rodney lifted his head to look.

One splash turned into two. Then the water began to churn.

He heard a loud crunch, followed by another. His body jerked at the sounds.

Something was eating his turtles.

“No.”

Staggering to his feet, Rodney charged waist-deep into the water. It was freezing, a cold vice around his midsection, soaking his suit. A dark form, no more than a few feet long, whipped around him in the water. He grabbed for it. The skin under his fingers felt like sandpaper.

A dogfish.

Startled, Rodney let go of it. The shark bit down hard on his thigh, tearing away a piece of his suit along with a chunk of flesh. Rodney screamed. He lost his balance and fell backwards into the water. The ocean muffled everything except the ringing in his ears, which grew in intensity. He splashed wildly, half-blinded by pain. Around him, the shark whipped back and forth, snatching panicked sea turtles like a bat eating flies in the night.

His turtles didn't stand a chance.

The thought forced him to his feet.

Rodney surfaced for air, then threw himself back into the water. Blood from his leg and blood from his turtles turned the ocean a darker shade. Lunging for the shark, Rodney caught its tail. It thrashed. Rodney kept his grip on it. He held on for dear life, pulling it closer to his body.

With all the energy he had left, Rodney slammed his elbow into the tender flesh of the shark's nose. It recoiled. Rodney released it, and the dogfish raced away.

Rodney frantically searched the water around him, balancing on his good leg. His hands came out of the water with bits of shell and a few pieces of sea turtle flippers.

“No.” Rodney clutched them in his hands. He wanted to cry but felt only numb. It had all been for nothing.

Rodney heard a splash behind him and turned to face it, fearing the dogfish had returned.

A single baby sea turtle lifted its head from the water to look at him. Its eyes glowed. Splashing its front flippers on the surface of the water, the little sea turtle paddled closer and clambered against the front of his suit jacket.

Carefully, Rodney lifted the turtle into the palms of his hands, held it against his chest, and wept. “I'm so sorry.”

A Welcome Infestation

Cynthia deConinckSmith

We all leave fruit out sometimes; it can't be helped. Sometimes it's the recipes that never come to fruition, even when the bananas have turned the right shade of brown. Other times, it's the apples you forgot you bought entirely—such a small thing to overlook with an equally small consequence.

Fruit flies.

I'm no stranger to those small burgundy insects. I work in a lab with them eight hours a day, five days a week, studying their genes, their mutations, and what diseases they pass on. All in a fleeting attempt to better understand our DNA.

Or I used to.

When COVID-19 became rampant, our lab was deemed unnecessary. We were sent home until further notice. Some of my colleagues were able to jump into different fields, working on cures, on things that were deemed to be of *greater importance*. I would argue that if our lab had been left open, we could have worked out our own way to stop the virus, but I was left to rot and suffer at home instead of attending to the mini gods and goddesses of our lab. So few of us were selected to come back; I was one they cast aside in favour of others.

The others at that facility didn't give a damn about those flies. They said I put too much effort into something that dies so quickly.

Too much effort.

When is there ever too much effort?

It was four days into my workless week when I noticed the flies popping up around my fruit bowl. The fruit had become brown and soft and had started to leak juices. Some peaches were the culprit. The odd, cold blue colours of the mould were a contrast to the once joyful orange and pink. Bananas sat next to them, their brown spots almost entirely encompassing the fruit. The apples had also fallen victim to this but were faring slightly better; only small spots of decay were visible.

A tangy-sweet scent clung to the air around the bowl. I took a deep inhale as I entered the kitchen, inviting the tangy sweetness to burn my nostrils. Even though I had smelt that particular scent many times before, it didn't cease making my stomach a tad queasy. I still loved it. The fruit itself had started to develop small holes as it rotted, and the

inhabitants took advantage of this marsh of fruit. It brought to my mind the condition of trypophobia, the fear of holes. Many, many small holes.

Seeing these fruit flies in their small colony filled me with the joy I had been missing for the past few days. It was like being back at work. I could create my own lab and do my own experiments. I could have a reason to get up again.

This time, I wouldn't just follow along with what my team was doing. I could be the leader of my own division of studies, and what a wonderful thought that was.

Since the fruit flies were breeding in my kitchen, I was determined to leave them undisturbed. This involved me taking whatever food didn't need to be cooked or prepared and setting up a small food storage in my bedroom so I wouldn't have to enter the kitchen for sustenance.

My bedroom was located down a long hallway, it at one end and the kitchen at the other. Keeping my rations away from the kitchen would allow for the food items to stay clean and uncontaminated, as well as give me a break room, a spot away from my subjects that was not my office and would not be associated with work.

I did some digging in my linen closet until I found some old bedsheets. Two hung up next to each other would be big enough to cover the entrance to the kitchen from the hallway, and another two sheets would be enough to cover the access to the dining room.

They were too heavy for the fruit flies to push, and any gaps were taken care of as the bedsheets hung nicely with an extra bit of overlap on the walls and the floor. It was the closest thing to a perfect environment I could create for those beauties, but I will admit, not being able to get a hold of clear plastic sheets was a bit of an upset. I missed seeing them fly around without them knowing I was there. Though, there was only so much I could get my hands on while being stuck at home.

After I set up the bedsheets, I pushed them aside to look at the kitchen. The flies had settled back onto the fruit and the counters. Perfect. For the time being, I would leave the colony alone. I planned to track its growth twice a day. While I was keeping track of the egg-laying, I would also keep track of what fruit they seemed to prefer, and whether the fruit had any effect on how quickly they grew or reproduced.

I could use that information to kickstart the colonies when we got back to work. We had some of that type of information at work, but so many people had added to it over time. It wasn't pure. It was no longer from the source. They would thank me later for putting in the time and effort.

Two weeks passed, and I knew that I was on the cusp of something great. The news had just announced that the lockdown would be continuing, and my boss had phoned to say that he wasn't sure when we would be given the go-ahead to start our research again, but none of that mattered. My kitchen colony was blossoming.

My kitchen was full of them. Every surface, every little piece of fruit. It was just flies; was just little gods. It was amazing to be able to witness their life cycle and functions every hour of every day. Sometimes, I would even sit on the kitchen floor and watch them, enamoured by how quietly they moved and how quickly they would swarm to each new fruit I

brought them. I watched how they dealt with their dead, how they managed their food, how they congregated in certain spots. I'd seen this all before, but to get this *true* one-on-one? It felt completely different.

However, towards the end of the two-week mark, I noticed their repopulation had slowed. Even though I was providing them with the best I could, it wasn't enough. They needed a better home.

Through trial after trial, nothing worked. My children still continued to slow their population process, and more and more of them died. I was alarmed in the beginning, but then it hit me: Perhaps this wasn't suitable for them anymore. In the labs, when the colonies started to peter off and die, we would move on to a new one. Take the strong and start again. But what if their home just wasn't adequate for the long term? They needed something better. They needed somewhere more exciting to nest.

I already had the perfect idea as to where.

I pulled the bedsheets of my kitchen apart and watched the few odd ones that had landed on the sheets disperse. As I made my way to the fruit bowl in the corner of the overrun space, I made sure to be mindful of each step I took. The last thing I wanted to do was to murder the beings I shared my home with. Small masses of flies scattered as I drew closer to the fruit bowl until I was in front of it, looking upon the most beautiful thing imaginable.

They swarmed in masses in and around the fruit bowl, which now resembled a small marsh more than it did a bowl. I swept my hand through their swarm, displacing them and making them hover around my cabinets. Around my hair. I wanted to give them a better home.

They *needed* a better home.

I hadn't washed my hair for a day or two. It had started to feel greasy, feel perfect.

It was perfect.

I did not hesitate as I reached toward the marsh bowl, nor did I hesitate as I scooped up the mush that was once fruit. I did not hesitate as I began to intertwine my hair with the fruit guts.

The cool stickiness of the juices felt right. My body, my being, felt whole as I lathered this juice, this syrup, this *life* into my hair. I could feel the small larva that inhabited the chunks of un-liquified fruit begin to writhe among my roots. I was giving these children a proper home. A life where they could grow to be the perfect test subjects.

Massaging the bits of fruit into my hair felt otherworldly. I could feel the juice coat my skin and absorb into my scalp. The chill of it sent shivers down my spine. The juice slowly dripped its way down my head and to my ears, to my chin. I took a hand and smeared it over my cheeks. The stickiness of it felt like it could meld my hand to my face, but I managed to pull it away with minimal effort.

Some of the tangy liquid dripped down my nose and onto my lip. I stuck out my tongue to taste it and revelled in the fermented flavour, in the bitterness, and in how the fruit seemed to have aged like a fine wine within my kitchen. Oh,

how wonderful this was. I understood why my little creatures flocked to this syrup as they did. Perhaps this was the true nectar of the gods.

After I was sure my hair and scalp had been coated, I turned my attention back to the swarm. Their little wings usually don't make much noise, but at this amount, they did. Their wings became a dull roar in my ears. I was in love.

I could already feel the babies if I focused. I could feel the larva beginning to wiggle against my scalp. Every movement, every pulse, every breath they took. I had never been able to be so close to them. I closed my eyes, trying to understand these secret missing links better.

Thousands of small feet began to adorn my scalp. So many flies. So, so, so many flies. I opened my mouth to let out a shaky breath and felt a few enter and go down my throat. I felt awful for the fact that I had just consumed some of God's greatest creations, but sacrifices must be made.

And in the end, I had done it.

I had become their home. Their breeding ground. Their future.

When this was all over, I would emerge with a new understanding of both the human genome and the importance of this little fly. All that was left for me to do was to wait for them to reveal their secrets. Until they did that, I would sit here. I would be patient.

I would be their host.

I would be their everything.



Urban Farming by Francesca Pacchiano
2024; digital photo

Last year on a trip to New Zealand, I came across this cow. The town was full of similar statues themed after a multitude of things. This one caught my attention with its penetrating gaze. It has a message to tell. In a town known for painted cow statues, this one was alive.

Matrescence

Taylor Fleming

Todd's home had a spider problem.

Or at least that's what his wife said. In reality, they had a very normal number of spiders. Todd didn't really mind the things, but Maia was terrified of them. Big or small, poisonous or not, she couldn't stand them.

If she saw one, even if it came nowhere near her, she'd feel phantom limbs crawling on her for the rest of the day. She'd dream of eight-eyed ambushes and rushed rides to the hospital after poisonous bites.

"I've been this way ever since I was little," she'd told him once. She was vigorously shaking out her shoes as she said it.

For the first month after the birth, it had gotten much worse. Maia would often wake up screaming, frantically brushing imagined arachnid assailants off her body.

Every piece of clothing she put on was shaken out beforehand and inspected before being worn, and their sheets were examined closely every night before bed. Every dark crevice in their home hosted a spider trap, and Maia kept a giant diffuser spewing eucalyptus essential oils running in their bedroom at all times.

One day, Todd came home to find the vacuum angrily whirring on the porch, with Maia nowhere in sight. He found her pressed against the wall in the corner of their bedroom. Her eyes were wild, and the hiking boot she held in her hand was poised and ready to strike.

"Wolf spider." She gasped for air as she spoke. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "It's in the vacuum. But there's more. There's always more."

It took the rest of the day to calm her down.

About a month after the escalation, it suddenly subsided. Maia stopped running the diffuser, stopped asking Todd to pick up spider traps on his way home from work, and stopped waking up in the middle of the night. She stopped moving or doing much at all.

On Friday, Todd got out of his car and frowned. Maia was crouched on the front porch. “Babe?” he called.

She didn’t respond.

Todd walked up to Maia from behind. As he got close, he could see her hands cupped in front of her. Nestled in them was a black widow.

“Maia?”

She yelped and jumped to her feet. The spider dropped to the ground and took a small step backwards but didn’t move further. It was missing its two front legs.

Maia glared at Todd. “Why would you do that? She needs help.”

She crouched back down, reaching out for the spider. It took a wavering step towards her hand.

Todd was too dumbfounded to speak. Maia wouldn’t even go near a spider as harmless as a daddy longlegs, and here she sat, playing nurse to one of her worst fears.

Maia rested her right hand on the ground. To Todd’s horror, the spider slowly moved closer, wobbling a little on just six legs. It suddenly swooned forward, seeming to lose its balance, unable to recentre itself without the missing legs. Maia swooped in and caught it before it could tip over. It settled itself on her palm, tapping its feet in a strange little dance.

“See?” Maia said, lifting her palm and showing off her new friend. Her voice, usually mellow and smooth, sounded different. It was high-pitched, like the voice Todd’s mother used to speak to their family dog, like the way people spoke to babies. “It just needs a mother.”

Todd recoiled as if he’d been slapped. “Maia, put it down.”

Maia said nothing. She pulled the spider closer to her face, admiring it. She looked at Todd, stretching her hand out towards him, but her gaze was unfocused, like she was looking straight through him.

“Put it down!”

Todd swept his hand along Maia’s palm, trying to push the spider off. He felt the weight of it against his fingers as he swept it out into the open air, but when he took his hand away, the spider still clung to Maia’s thumb, hanging on by a single leg. Its other legs spun in the air, looking for traction. In one swift movement, it reached up and sank its fangs into Maia’s skin.

Maia screamed and flicked her hand, sending the spider flying. Todd ran after it and found it a few feet away. Its body snapped loudly against the wood when he brought his foot down. The only other sound was Maia’s sobs. He stomped again, and then a third time, until the spider was nothing but guts smeared into the deck.

In the hospital, Maia went completely mute, even when the doctor injected her with the antivenom. Todd couldn't say he was surprised. They hadn't been to the hospital since the night the baby was born. It had been less than two months since then, and neither of them was happy to be back there.

The drive home was just as quiet. Todd pulled into the driveway and parked. When he pulled the key out of the ignition, he noticed dents in the metal circle around where the key fit in. He'd missed the hole multiple times in his panic to start the car.

He leaned back into his seat and looked at Maia. "Babe, what was that?"

She stared straight ahead and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Why would you pick it up?"

"I picked it up?" She took her brown hair out of its bun, and it came tumbling down on her shoulders.

"You were holding it."

She began dragging her fingers through her hair, carefully brushing it. It was a nervous habit of hers.

"Maia?"

She looked him in the eyes for the first time since the bite. She looked like herself again. "I don't remember that."

After he got Maia into bed, Todd went to the kitchen to make tea. He opened the cupboard and froze. Inside was the dinner bell. It had a long silver handle and a classic bell-shaped bottom. It looked like something out of an old movie.

It had been a misguided baby shower gift from his brother. It was a giant, ugly, gimmicky thing. His brother's version of being funny was getting them a gift that would sit unused for years, if it was ever used at all. They'd moved all the other gifts into the nursery, but this one had been left behind, a cast-iron reminder.

Todd hated it. He picked it up and walked down the hall, but stopped in front of the nursery door. He hadn't been inside since that night.

The labour had been long, almost twenty-four hours. Todd had never seen Maia look so worn out, so weak. Her normally tanned skin looked almost see-through under the bright lights. The sclera in her eyes were more red than white, and she was unresponsive to everyone except the doctor.

Everything got loud for a moment: Maia straining and gasping, the doctor coaxing her, the buzz of the machines. It had seemed like it might go on forever, but it ended in an instant.

There she was, in the doctor's arms. Their daughter. She was right there, right in front of him, just a couple of feet away. She looked perfect. Todd was overwhelmed with pride and love. All his hopes and wishes, the life he had imagined for himself, were within an arm's reach. He took a step forward but stopped when he noticed how quiet the doctor had become.

He looked to Maia, his wide smile frozen on his face. She just stared at the baby.

"She's not crying," she said.

As quietly as possible, Todd opened the nursery door. It looked the same, of course. He didn't know why he was expecting some great difference. He ignored the light switch. To see it all in full light would've been too much. They'd painted the room sage green, a colour that Maia thought was soothing. Ever the artist, she had painted ducklings on the wall opposite the crib.

Beside the crib hung a multicoloured netting of sorts, some Pinterest-inspired crochet project Maia had fallen in love with. Todd didn't exactly get it, but he had been happy enough to let her fill the space. Making things warm and welcoming was her forte. Supposedly, it was going to look like a garden when it was done. As of then, it was a mess of criss-crossing strings. Maia had said she would finish it after the baby was born.

"It's fine," she'd said. "We've got a few years before she'll notice."

Todd turned away, tears forming in his eyes. He opened the closet and shoved the bell on the top shelf. As he closed the closet door, he heard a strange sound. A soft tapping of sorts, like raindrops on a glass pane. He turned. On the dresser beside the closet sat a mason jar. He was sure it hadn't been in the room previously. Inside was a small, dark mass. He stepped closer. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to make out details. Multiple eyes, string-thin legs.

He stumbled backwards and ran from the room. He slammed the door and leaned against it. She hadn't been alone, the spider.

She was a mother.

Maia was asleep by the time he'd gone to bed, and she was already up when he woke in the morning. He stalled for time in bed but couldn't think of a gentle way to confront her.

He found her in the kitchen, humming to herself as she made coffee. Multiple pans sat on the burners. The room smelled of breakfast, overwhelmingly so. She heard him coming and turned, a bright smile on her face.

"Good morning!" Maia threw her arms around Todd and kissed him on the cheek. "How did you sleep?" she asked, turning back to the coffee pot. "I made you tea. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

She produced his favourite mug, filled to the brim. The scent of orange pekoe assaulted his nose. He took the mug and sat down at the kitchen table. The heat of the cup instantly made his hands sweat, or maybe they were already sweating. The house felt stuffy and warm.

“You seem cheery.” He tried to take a sip and scorched the end of his tongue. “Did you turn the heat up?”

She fiddled with one of the pans on the stove. “I did. I was just freezing this morning. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” he replied. “Babe?”

“What’s up?” Maia turned to him, picking up her coffee. She smiled, seeming more like herself than she had in months.

Todd swallowed the question on the tip of his burnt tongue. He could bring up the nursery spiders later. “I was thinking we could go for a walk today. Maybe down by the water?”

He took a more successful sip of his tea but quickly put it back down; he was boiling.

She grinned over the rim of her cup. “I’d like that. I do have some plans today, but we’ll see.”

“Plans?” he asked, but he was interrupted by her placing his breakfast in front of him: a mound of sausages, eggs, and hashbrowns, steam wafting off them. She didn’t fix a plate for herself. “Where’s yours?”

She shrugged. “I’m not super hungry right now. I’ll eat later.”

Hesitant to break her mood, Todd forced himself to drink the tea and eat the food, despite the sweat beads beginning to form on his back.

As he ate, Maia spoke again. “I know I haven’t been myself recently. These past few months have been hard for both of us, and I know how excited you were to be a father. But I’ve been feeling a lot better lately.” She brushed through her hair with her fingers.

He paused between bites. This was the first time she’d acknowledged their loss. “I’m really glad to hear that. I know this might be somewhat soon, but we can wait a bit, and when you’re ready, we can try again.”

Maia’s mouth formed a hard line. He’d pushed too far. After a moment, the frown melted. She shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I’m going to be too busy now.”

Todd frowned, or tried to. He felt slow, sluggish. The heat was getting to him. “Busy?” It was a battle getting the word out. His mouth wasn’t obeying him.

She walked around him and hugged him from behind. Her breath crawled into his ear, hot and dank. He tried to flinch away.

“Busy with the kids!” she said like it was obvious.

Todd felt as if he were drowning. Maia's body heat was overwhelming and suffocating. The smell of the food and the tea still hung in the air like fog.

Strangely, he thought of the spider in the nursery, tapping away in her jar. She'd drummed through his dreams all night. As the room got dark and he felt his limbs go limp, he could've sworn he still heard her.

Todd came to. His eyes stung like he'd been holding them open for far too long, but when he tried to close them, he found he couldn't blink. In fact, he couldn't move at all. The sluggish feeling from breakfast had expanded tenfold.

Breakfast. How long had it been? The lights in the room were off, but some illumination came from his left. A window. It wasn't quite bright enough to be full daylight. It must've been around dinnertime.

Todd's eyes focused on the room—sage green walls, duckling illustration. His efforts to turn his head and look were fruitless, but he had a faint sense of his arms being spread at his sides. There was a slight pulling sensation, as though he were hanging. A drop of sweat fell into his right eye and blurred his vision further.

With the greatest force, he managed to tilt his head downwards. He was suspended above the ground, but that wasn't what caught his attention. The rope holding his legs to the wall wasn't rope at all, but yarn. Multicoloured yarn. It ran in knots and tangles all over his legs, crisscrossing shades of green, yellow, blue, purple, and more.

Maia stood in the doorway. Her smile was so wide Todd was sure it would split her cheeks open, but it wasn't directed at him. She looked around the corner and out into the hallway like she was expecting someone.

He could see the mason jar on the dresser in the corner of his eye. It was empty.

His gaze moved to Maia's hands. Grasped in them was the dinner bell. He watched in silent terror as she lifted and shook it: once, twice, three times. The resounding chimes sounded both directly in his ear and a million miles away.

Todd's eyes travelled downwards as multiple dark dots came around the corner from the hallway. More followed, and more after that. With the haze over his vision, it was impossible to make out details. They just kept coming, and he couldn't see the end of the line. Some were bigger than others. Soon, there were so many that they trampled over one another, resembling a tide coming into a shore. They all moved in the same direction: his.

It took everything in him to shift his gaze back to Maia. He felt half-awake, as though he were stuck in sleep paralysis, unable to snap out of it. She watched the procession silently, never dropping her smile.

Something else caught Todd's attention. In his sluggish and repressed state, it was so slight he nearly missed it: the lifting of fabric at the bottom of his jeans, the material shifting as the arachnids pushed their way inside. They climbed up, up, spreading to his knees and then his thighs. There was something so focused and planned, so rhythmic about the movement; it was almost soothing.

His gaze wandered to the ducks on the wall. There were three of them, two larger ones and a third, much smaller one.

The day Maia painted the ducks, she'd led Todd into the room with strict instructions to keep his eyes closed. When she finally let him open them, he'd burst into tears. He'd spent so much time obsessing over strollers, baby carriers, car seats, making a mess of their kitchen table with various catalogues and the like. He was so desperate to make things perfect, but Maia did just that in all the ways he'd never even considered. She was always so calm, so level-headed. She decorated the nursery, knew just what needed to be done to make the house safer, and expertly assembled the crib when it arrived.

Todd had always known she would make a wonderful mother. It was part of why he'd fallen in love with her.

They were past his waist now. The soft poking of a thousand legs under his clothing continued to travel upwards. There was this light pulling and tugging, gentle pricks and pins upon his skin. It reminded him of when he got stitches after cutting his hand while chopping vegetables. Maia had stayed with him the whole time, holding his other hand, refusing to leave him alone.

Out of the corner of his eye, Todd could see Maia making her way to him. She moved slowly, careful not to step on the little ones. When she reached Todd, she stood so close to him that she left his field of sight. He felt the slight sensation of her taking his hand. She lifted it so he could see it.

The metallic scent of blood struck him hard, thick and hot in the boiling nursery air. They were inside now. The pricking and pulling were getting stronger. With great effort, he forced his head downwards. At first, he couldn't see them, hidden under the cover of his shirt, but as more and more of them made their way in, the ones who had reached him first dug their way out through the cotton until his shirt had more holes than not. His collarbone, neck, and hair all began to quietly tickle with an abundance of touch.

He felt far away. He was watching from a distance, above and away from it all. In the back of his mind, there were the inklings of pain, the sense of important things being taken away from him, and a nudging feeling of fear, but it was all subdued. The heat and the blurry, fuzzy edge around everything were a weight, holding him down—or holding him steady.

Maia was squeezing Todd's hand hard. The sense of wrongness drifted further and further away from him. He began to realize they weren't just feasting, but playing, dancing. He watched the clambering of wire-thin limbs, swaying and moving with slight stumbles here and there. They filled him up, entering through his ears and the other openings they had made. It was a give-and-take, a silent agreement, a fulfillment of a need.

Todd strained hard to speak. He wanted to tell Maia, to make sure she knew. All that came out was a croak, but it was enough. Maia's face crawled into his sightline. Her smile had not dulled in the slightest. Her eyes met his. His vision multiplied. Maia had four, eight, twelve eyes. The longer he looked, the more she had. She blinked, and her many lashes fluttered and crawled towards him.

The look on her face was full of love and pride.

A Mouth to Feed

Evan Shumka

The pond dried up in the summertime. Skunk cabbages sprouted from the smooth dirt that was just beginning to crack from the heat of the days. This is where the children found the mouth.

Angus and his little sister, Violet, were out in the woods beyond the backyard, wandering around the area that had until recently been underwater. Angus was nine and Violet was six and a half. It was only a week into July. They still had the whole summer ahead of them.

They wove their way between the skunk cabbages on the lookout for frogs. The ground still had some give. Their shoe treads made imprints in the dirt.

Violet spotted it first. She called out to her brother and pointed. Angus came to see what she'd found.

The mouth was at their feet, just big enough to snatch one of their shoes if they got too close. The rest of it—whatever it was—was buried. Only the mouth lay exposed. The children crouched for a better look. Angus had never seen anything like it before, even in the previous years of drought when the pond had dried up.

The mouth moved. It opened wider and closed slightly—never closing completely. Its teeth were thornlike, and curved inward. Its lips—yes, it had lips; they were like black slugs. For a few minutes, all the children could do was stare at the mouth in the ground as it bit the air. They could hear the faint panting of its breath.

The children glanced up at each other and quickly looked down again, not wanting to take their eyes off the mouth. They wanted to see what it would do. There were flies buzzing around, but they never came to land on the mouth's soft, black lips. The children became impatient, and Angus got up to find something to feed it.

"Don't put your hand near it," he said.

"I won't," said Violet with a huff.

Angus hesitated to leave his little sister alone with the mouth, but he'd be quick.

He ran to the front yard where a cherry tree stood beside the house. He had to stretch to pick the cherries and even then he could only reach the low-hanging ones. They weren't ripe yet, but that hardly mattered.

“Angus!” his sister called.

He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach and ran back to the woods, images of Violet’s bloody hand and missing fingers flashing in his mind. He’d have to explain to Mom what had happened, that he’d left her alone.

But when he got to the dried-up pond, he saw Violet’s excited face among the green leaves of the skunk cabbages. He ran up to her.

“Don’t yell like that—you scared me,” he said.

“Look.”

Angus lowered his gaze. Violet had stuck a skunk cabbage leaf into the mouth, which was now attempting to chew. Violet burst into giggles. The poor mouth wasn’t getting anywhere. Its teeth poked straight through the leaf, skewering it. The leaf wouldn’t budge, no matter how much the jaws gnashed at it. Angus started laughing too, but soon felt bad for the mouth.

He passed Violet the cherries in order to free his hands, and—carefully so he wouldn’t get bitten—pinched the edge of the leaf and tore it free. Then he took one of the cherries from Violet and dropped it into the mouth.

The jaws clamped shut. The children jumped back. They watched its lips close over the teeth, two textured slugs pressed tight against each other, moving up and down while the mouth chewed the cherry.

One time on a school trip, a girl in Angus’s class named Ivy had licked a slug and said it made her tongue numb. She’d offered the slug to Angus, but he’d been too squeamish to try, even though he thought Ivy was pretty and wanted to impress her.

Angus heard the crunch of the pit, and was afraid the mouth might choke. But the thought had barely crossed his mind when the mouth spat the cherry pit high into the air. The children yelped and ducked for cover, laughing uncontrollably. They rolled around on the ground, getting dirt all over their clothes, then quickly sat up for another go.

This time Violet dropped a cherry into the mouth. The same thing happened. The mouth chewed up its treat and spat out the pit, even higher this time, to the immense delight of the children. They kept feeding it until they ran out of cherries.

Angus looked around for something else it might eat. Meanwhile, Violet grabbed a clump of dirt and dropped that into the mouth.

“Don’t do that,” said Angus.

The mouth didn’t spit out the dirt. It gobbled it all down, but Angus had a sick feeling in his stomach, and he felt that the mouth hadn’t enjoyed this treat.

“Don’t feed it dirt.”

Violet grabbed another clump of dirt, suppressing a laugh.

“Stop,” said Angus, and something in his tone was enough to hold his sister back. Maybe deep down, she had the same feeling Angus did, that they should be careful what they fed to the mouth.

They spent all afternoon foraging through the woods for anything that the mouth might like. Angus found some blackberries, still red on the vine, but the mouth had seemed to like the unripe cherries just fine. Violet, meanwhile, dug up some worms to feed the mouth, like it was a baby bird. All of these delectable treats were gobbled up quickly, and the children never got tired of watching the food they brought disappear. They kept at it until they were called in for dinner.

Angus had trouble sleeping that night. His thoughts wouldn’t quiet down. Not thoughts of the mouth, oddly enough, but of the girl in his class, Ivy. The one who’d licked the slug. He couldn’t stop thinking about her lips. It scared him that he couldn’t ignore these thoughts, couldn’t push them away and get to sleep. He tried doing jumping jacks to tire himself out, but the thoughts kept coming: Ivy held the slug out to him, slimy side up, strings of mucous on her fingers. Whether his eyes were open or shut, it was all Angus saw.

His door creaked open and Angus froze. Violet stood silhouetted in the dark.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing. Go back to bed.”

“I heard something.”

“Jumping jacks. Go to sleep.”

He couldn’t see her face, but felt her suspicion—like she could read his slimy thoughts. She left, and Angus crawled back into bed. His mind still wouldn’t settle down. He pressed his fingers gently against his lips, trying to imagine what kissing felt like. What if Ivy had kissed him that day? Would the slug slime have made his lips go numb?

Angus got up early the next morning, before his parents or Violet were awake. He got dressed and went straight outside, shutting the door quietly behind him. The air was cool and fresh, the sky clear. It would be a hot one today, but right now it was the perfect temperature. He climbed the tree to pick some more cherries and brought them down to the dried-up pond. The mouth was still there, damp with dew, teeth bared, waiting for its next morsel.

Any hint of caution that Angus might have had the day before was gone. Maybe it was the drowsy state he was in. He stretched out on his side, next to the mouth, and dangled a cherry by the stalk, just above the teeth. Slowly, he lowered it, so it brushed against the sluglike lips. Instead of snatching it up like a mouse trap, the mouth’s lips protruded and

gently picked the cherry free, eating it up. Then of course, it spat out the pit, which came back down and landed on Angus's cheek.

Angus fed the mouth more cherries, getting more comfortable with the gnashing teeth. Soon he was holding the cherries between his fingers and popping them straight into the mouth. The moist lips brushed against his fingertips, soft and warm to the touch.

He wondered what the buried part of it looked like. The flesh around the mouth, peeking above the dirt, was dark green and translucent, like the body of a grub. Maybe the mouth belonged to some kind of larva, or maybe it was a plant, and all that lay beneath the cracked earth were roots.

Curiosity urged him to dig it up, find out what it was, but a stronger instinct told him to let it be. The mouth trusted him. Angus could feel that. And he liked having it all to himself, without Violet around. He rolled onto his belly and gazed down at the mouth, observing the texture of its lips. Tiny ridges and valleys stretched along them. Light reflected off the moisture. He thought of Ivy. He prodded his own lips with his fingers.

The mouth's black slug lips came together and puckered up towards him. Angus froze. This was new. The lips parted slightly and held still. Something stirred inside of Angus.

Before he could think better of it, he bent down, closed his eyes, and touched his lips to the mouth. His whole body fired up with electric sensation. The lips stuck to his, tickling as they moved. The kiss stretched out the seconds, and Angus's lips really did go numb.

"What are you *doing*?"

Angus sat up and saw Violet standing there, her face all twisted up in shock and disgust. She'd caught him.

He wiped his mouth, feeling slimy with shame.

"Nothing!" he said.

His insides writhed grotesquely in his body. He couldn't hide from Violet. She'd seen what he'd done. She knew.

"You kissed the mouth," Violet said.

"No, I didn't."

"I'm telling Mom."

"Don't!"

Violet ran towards the house. Angus tried to chase after her but his legs wouldn't hold him up. He fell forward. There were pins and needles in his hands and feet. His head swam. He couldn't breathe or speak—his lips were numb. He

was disgusting and perverted. He knew it, his sister knew it, soon his mom would know and then the whole world would know too. Angus screamed through clenched teeth. His life was over.

The mouth was biting the air again, hungry for more. Its sharp teeth glinted. In the haze of panic, Angus could only see one way out. Nobody could be mad at him if he was hurt. And if he was hurt bad enough, they'd forget all about the kiss.

He plunged his hand into the mouth, bracing for the jaws to clamp shut. He deserved to lose his hand. He needed to scrub away the pleasure he'd felt with pain. The mouth closed over his wrist. Angus flinched—but the teeth didn't sink in. They only poked him, gently, making little indents in his skin.

"Come on!" he screamed, shaking with desperation.

He thrust his arm deeper, until the jaws were up to his elbow. Still the mouth didn't bite him. Angus's arm stretched down into its throat. He couldn't feel the bottom. It just kept going, deep into the ground.

Someone grabbed him by the shoulders and tore him free. His arm scraped against the teeth on the way out. He fell back. Violet stood over him. Just Violet. And it wasn't disgust on her face anymore, but worry. Angus looked down at his arm and the shallow scratches left by the teeth. The mouth had refused to bite him. Even it knew he was disgusting. All his shame welled up within and Angus sobbed.

Violet crouched beside her brother and patted him on the back. He wanted to tell her to get away—he was dirty and shouldn't be touched—but he couldn't stop crying long enough to speak.

When the crying was done, Angus and Violet sat in silence. The morning breeze carried the stink of skunk cabbages. It was sheltered under the trees, hidden in the bright green undergrowth. Angus could barely see the house. He sniffed back the snot running down his nose and wiped away his tears.

"Did you tell Mom?" he asked.

Violet shrugged. "She didn't listen."

Angus let out a sigh of relief.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

Angus shook his head. Violet sat with her hands in her lap.

"So, what did it feel like?"

Angus hugged his knees to his chest. He could still taste cherry on his lips.

"It felt good."

Violet cracked a smile. Angus hid his smile behind his knees. Violet started laughing, a loud, snorting laugh that Angus couldn't resist joining in on. He was gross. He was so gross. He and his sister laughed and laughed at how gross he was, and from the way the mouth was moving, it looked like it was laughing too.



Anteayer by Mickyrose
2024; digital photo

The day before yesterday is incomplete and blurry at best. At worst, it's obsidian and oblivion. Funny how we build our lives on faulty memories. Does one compose their identity by piecing together colourful memories, or immerse themselves in the endless spaces in between?

“Dead” Rabbit

Deanna Fleming

I often wonder whether or not I am real. If I’m just floating. A possibility among a population of positives. I feel the real trying to figure it out too; if I’m one of them or something different. Perhaps I’m something in-between.

The spider in my bathroom watches me when I shower. She inhales the steam from the hot water, a deep breath in as I turn the tap, a deep breath out as I attempt to hold the ocean in my cupped hands. There is no malice in any of her eight eyes, just curiosity. I’m sure I saw fear in at least one of them, and once, a hint of hope.

The spider is real. But when I ask her if I am, she says she doesn’t know.

Those from the unreality watch me too. I think they want me to be one of them. Or something close to what they are opposite to. The opposite of real is not fake. If you think that, you have never danced with the veil of unreality, never felt the silk curtains lick up your skin and send secretive shivers down your body. What secrets, you may wonder? The truth, of course. Truth that exists more tangibly than anything of the real. Only when you step to that dance will you understand that the unreal is the furthest from any falsehood. Only then, will you understand that the real is much closer to the fake.

But you know that.

I found one from the other side of that veil in my backyard. It appeared real. Well, it appeared dead. But death has always made me feel a little more real, and so I was drawn to it. A dead rabbit, covered by a thin sheet of spring snow. It seemed mostly intact until I lifted it from its damp and matted hind leg. The head was near severed and clung to the carcass by six inches of alabaster bone and pink muscle, laced by streaks of red too bright to feel like blood. The body dangled loosely from my grip, but the head spun lazily around, sinew twisting, as if to look for someone. For a moment I swore it looked right at me and winked. I did not wink back, or blush, or seethe, or respond in any of the ways acceptable of one who has just been the recipient of a suggestive wink. I had no desire to exchange frisky winks with dead animals. Instead, I shuddered and tossed the rabbit over the fence and into the brambles. It disappeared from my view before it ever hit the ground. I told myself it wasn’t real. It hadn’t happened.

I find the spider from my bathroom dead in a droplet of water by the shower drain. Her legs are curled in on themselves and there is nothing left in her eyes. No more curiosity. No more fear. No hint of hope.

I'm not surprised when the rabbit shows up again. I think part of me knew it was never really dead. It's fascinating. Fearfully so. Despite it moving around on its own, the head hangs dramatically from its body by stretched and knotted cords of meat.

It runs without stopping, feet never landing in a spot another has been before, colliding with trees and cinderblocks as it drags its head along on that cruel leash. Like a child lugging around a pet rock.

I find myself relating to it in some way. Perhaps you will too.

The rabbit is a constantly angry creature, although you'd never realize that just by watching it. Always knowing it wants to go somewhere but never knowing where. The head can't keep up with its heart, yet the head drags along, trying to keep up, only slowing it down. It gets caught on things as it moves: chain-linked fences, a knotted root, the claws of a cat. It would be easier for the rabbit to just remove its head, be free of it. But what would it then be without the head? So, it keeps it. Forever moving, forever slowed down.

It scares me, connecting with something not real. It's dangerous. At least that's what I tell myself. I should have ignored it. If I did it would've gone away. That's what happened with the man who lived in the shadows. There was a time when the man in the shadows comforted me, but then he fell in love with me. I was real, he was not. So, I ignored him, and he went away.

I can't bring myself to do that to the rabbit. Sometimes I feel I am more drawn to it than it is to me. We feel so similar; I don't want it to go away.

So, I watch it, and it watches me, its head draped across the ground and its ears tattered and bent, face full of splinters and smeared in mud.

Sometimes it comes close enough for me to touch. I never do. Touch it, that is. Because I am afraid if I do, touch something not real, it will prove to all of us that I am not real. I'm afraid that if I do reach out and feel nothing, I'll remember it isn't real. Once I know it's not real, I have to move on, like I did with the dead spider, like I did with the man in the shadows. All kids have to grow out of their imaginary friends. Didn't you?

I suppose the rabbit will stop showing up one day, and I'll move on. I'll grow out of it. Because I'm real, real as a rabbit, and the real aren't meant to brush shoulders with the unreal. I'm meant to be watched and followed and touched by the real, like you. You won't outgrow me, right?

Are you there?

Contributors

Emerald Ayres

Emerald happily resides in the land of mild weather (Vancouver Island), where she attends Vancouver Island University as a Creative Writing student. To make life more bearable, Emerald wears neon pink legwarmers, plays Dungeons & Dragons, and acts far weirder than need be. She has now been published twice with *GOOEY Magazine* and once with *The Navigator*. Her work also placed third in the Adult Category of the *Islands Short Fiction Review 2025*.

Daxton Comba

Daxton is a Creative Writing student and an indie filmmaker focused on weird and experimental projects. Born in Hamilton, Ontario, he migrated to Vancouver Island for school in 2018. He's very passionate about scriptwriting and film history, and he compulsively collects DVD's for an already-overflowing shelf. He tends to sleep all day and work through the night, and he enjoys a bit of midnight street photography now and then. His work was published in the 2025 issue of *Portal* magazine, and he was a recipient of the Meadowlarks award for fiction. But most importantly, he insists that he's definitely and absolutely not afraid of ghosts.

Cynthia deConinckSmith

Cynthia is someone who writes horror on a plethora of subjects, including fruit flies, the fear of having one's penis cut off (they do not possess any male anatomy) and haunted items that you may or may not be able to purchase online. When they are not busy writing in a frantic rush, they can be found petting stray cats, listening to Motley Crüe, and making ceramic art.

Deanna Fleming

Inside Deanna are two feral black cats: one spins on a swivel chair, poorly singing Broadway showtunes instead of going to work, and the other squats on a mountain of blankets, sipping licorice spice tea and stuffing its face with *Welches* fruit snacks. While at VIU for the Bachelor of Education program, she has been taking some Creative Writing classes on the side, bringing out her love for the weird and disturbing yet beautiful side of life and fiction. After spending the last year watching rabbits decompose on the path outside her house and recovering from an early quarter life crisis, getting published in *GOOEY Magazine* feels like the natural next step. When she's not caught up in her schoolwork, you can probably find her going for walks looking for more dead things to add to her camera roll.

Taylor Fleming

Taylor Fleming is a Creative Writing and Journalism student at VIU who wakes every morning to find herself in a vaguely cherry-scented puddle of her dreams from the night before. A mistake at the optometrist's office when she was

two and a half landed her with a pair of rose-tinted glasses which horribly distort and misinform the gaze with which she looks upon the world. Instead of dissolving into a deep, dread-filled existence, she now spends all nine days of the week trying to translate her perceptions into story and poetry. She received the Kevin Roberts Poetry Award in 2024 and the Meadowlarks Award for Fiction in 2025. Her work has appeared in *Portal Magazine* and in the 2024 anthology, *Winter's Melody*.

Lee Groen

Lee Groen is an author, poet, editor, and superorganism consisting of several various kinds of flora and fauna, including but not limited to: microscopic brain shrimp, a modest colony of Sitka trees, half-a-dozen domesticated foxes, an infestation of sewer rats, the eternal timeless serpent, two or three iced coffees, with a chest full of wildflowers, and arteries flowing with fresh wild salmon. In his free time, Lee enjoys reading and watching sports.

Ann Hoffmann

Ann Hoffmann is a writer and longtime student at VIU, a computer science major, a creative writing minor, and a frequent participant in English classes she doesn't need. Allegedly, she's also studying technical writing at BCIT. When she's not falling for the temptation of library books that she does not have the time to read, she seeks out quiet moments for her writing. And on occasion, that writing has happened to be published, twice by *In Our Own Teen Voice* and twice by *Portal Magazine*.

Francesca Pacchiano

Francesca Pacchiano works as a journalist for *TAKE 5 Newsmagazine* by day, and she's trying to recapture the magic of reading by night. At the very least, it's dropping her screen time and that's always a win. Small town journalism has taken over her writing in recent months but she's certain that she'll get back into the swing of fiction after one final, truly restful, nap.

Evan Shumka

Evan Shumka is a writer, actor, and artist from the Cowichan Valley. His short stories have been published in *Portal*, *The Navigator*, *GOOEY Magazine*, and *The Temz Review*. His poem "Skeletons Having Sex" won the Mary Garland Coleman Prize in Lyric Poetry in 2022. He won The Navigator's 2024 Prose Prize with his short story "Tiho and the Severed Head." His play "The Tiger Method" was produced as an audio drama, also with *The Nav*. Other plays of his have been performed by the *VIU Satyr Players* and *Magical Theatre* in Edmonton. He also directed his own play "Theoxenia" and brought it to the 2025 Nanaimo Fringe Festival. He has a BA in Creative Writing from Vancouver Island University. He's working on his first novel and intends to continue his studies in acting.

E. B. Sorensen

E. B. Sorensen is a weird fiction writer from Maple Ridge, British Columbia. Sorensen has one previous *GOOEY* publication, "God Spelled Backwards is Dog," and multiple non-fiction works in various publications. Sorensen grew up fascinated by creepy tales of cryptids, biblical parables that left her riddled with guilt, and extra-terrestrial explorations, which greatly informs her strange stories today.

Mickyrose

When not flinging around a \$600 piece of equipment for the perfect photograph, Micky can be found neck deep in the theocratics of communication, wondering if by the time she finishes her degree, AI will have taken her job. That is yet to be determined. Her hobbies (that AI can't do) include loudly expressing her opinions on graphic design found out in the wild, to all who can listen. Then there's finding out how many types of soup (two so far) can be incorporated into baking focaccia bread and being a true Canadian by regularly ~~engaging~~ freezing in polar bear swims among the beautiful nature of the Island. Of course, all these antics are tucked into a quiet human being.

Tiana Vertigan

Tianna Vertigan is an editor, designer, keycap enthusiast, and BA student on her third consecutive "final year" at Vancouver Island University. Having purposely flunked the last two semesters to care for her family, Tianna has sheepishly returned to VIU with a creeping imposter syndrome and a whole bunch of... craft supplies? While she has accrued achievements such as publication credits, internships, and scholarships, she will shush you like a librarian if you ask for specifics. Just take her word for it, okay?

Bea Waines

Bea Waines is a confused Canadian goose from Vancouver Island who flew a little too far south for the winter and wound up living in New Zealand. Aside from several overly ambitious crochet projects, she is less an artist and more a creative observer of the world around her.

Kacey Willow

Kacey Willow is a writer based on Vancouver Island. She is currently reading *No Longer Human* by Osamu Dazai.

Tara Wohlleben

Tara Wohlleben is a writer/editor living in the city of Nanaimo, BC. They are a fresh graduate with a BA in Creative Writing from VIU and a freshly picked editor at *The Raspberry magazine*. Their essay "Living the Dream" was

published in *The Navigator* in 2024. They were an acquisitions editor for *Portal* 2025, a poetry editor for *Portal* 2024, and also interned for *OnSpec magazine* in 2024. They have a love for the fantastical and weird. When they're not juggling too many hobbies along with the usual chainsaws, they enjoy writing genre fiction and experimenting with poetry.



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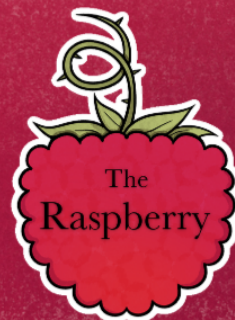
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