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ABSYNTHE

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

OUR CENTER FOLD,

// POETRY BY REMI AKERS //

STORIES,

08 // BLUE PIGS, AND PLAID

18 // SHAMANKA

POETRY,

24 // EROSION

& MORE ...



CONTENTS

04 // YOUR APOCALYPSE
SPENCER WELLS

08 // BLUE PIGS, AND PLAID
SHAUN PHUAH

11 // THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF YEAR
JAIME BOYD-ROBINSON

14 // THE DRAWING ROOM
ZACK WEAVER

16 // HOLLOW REFUGE & STOP-MOTION
REMI AKERS

18 // SHAMANKA
ZACHARY BARMANIA

24 // EROSION
KAVYA CHANDRA

26 // A KNIGHT'S TALE
MELCHIOR DUDLEY

31 // OUR TEAM

YOUR APOCALYPSE

Spencer Wells

"In underground conventions, the children will rise up to create an order unseen and unheard of from the elders – whom were once the kings and queens of the world. No, hell no..."

Robin found his way into one of the only empty chairs in the house, just as the poet was finishing his piece. A little bit of his drink spilled on his cuff as he sat down, but he didn't seem to notice as it was a martini – no visible stain on a white suit. Not until later, at least. He paid too much money for it; though he wasn't a connoisseur by any means, he felt that something wasn't right forking over twelve dollars for a half-assed stirred cocktail. That first sip was the first hint. Oh well, this dive wasn't known for its bar service so much as the experience of seeing the best underground poets the city had to offer.

"...There will be no monarchs in this age of perpetual darkness. No amount of hate will divide us, just as the fragments of love – an abstract – will no longer have the power to bind us."

The lady beside him was significantly older but offered a fresh and youthful gaze in her eyes as she saw the next performer walk onto the tiny, candlelit stage. She took a drag out of her slim cigarette and smiled as the crowd began to clap. As she exhaled, she turned to Robin, still settling into his chair.

"You must be new around here. Usually this table is reserved."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry. Is this seat taken?"

She laughed heartily as she flicked her ashes in the tray. Robin shuffled over carefully – he suspected she may have had one too many to drink.

"Well it is now. By you. I jest, there are no names at these seats, and I came alone."

Robin felt relieved, but still antsy. Perhaps the drinks he had at the bar before coming through the basement entrance hadn't kicked in yet. Though he was certainly in the right company.

"Well... thanks. Name's Robin. What's yours?"

"Dolores. Aren't you a bit young to be drinking something like that?"

Your Apocalypse

He wasn't sure to take that as a compliment to his youthful appearance or an insult to his masculinity.

"I just shaved, and to tell you the truth, this is actually rather weak."

Another hearty laugh followed with an ugly-sounding smokers cough. Robin drew an expression of concern as the lady's face turned red.

"Are you okay? Do you want some water?"

"I'm... fine, thanks dear. Just a dry throat, that's all."

Robin didn't really know what to say beyond that. He mistakenly handed his martini over (given that it was served in a whiskey glass, like the water) before realizing the cocktail would do her no good in treating her cracked throat. Under the table, she reached for another cigarette from her purse, then hesitantly put it back in the pack.



Your Apocalypse

Meanwhile, the conversation distracted most of the performance. Robin decided to diffuse the awkward situation by focusing on the poet.

"...with her arms heavy and eyes sullen of the light that the midday sun would give. In the northernmost camps and villages, the days were short, and tempers were thin – life was so much different in the dirty streets outside. She knew, and her family knew, this was for the best."

Another round of applause. The two of them spoke lightly, both regretting the forgotten details. After a bit of awkward silence, she left her seat and walked out of the room, not bothering to make any kind of remark about it. One of the performers walked by Robin, and he stood up to beg a question:

"Excuse me, sir. Where do I sign up for something like this?"

He paused for a moment, as if the answer wasn't straightforward. Robin look puzzled at his hesitation.

"Well... you can talk to one of the announcers after the show and see if they're looking for any more people. Though, it's a fat chance they'll be letting anyone else in – we usually have full nights with the regular guys that come in, and because these shows run late, most people get tired and leave by the time guests come up and do their skits. Overall, its not up to me dude."

As the performer (Robin forgot to ask his name) walked away to talk to guests at the other table, Robin endeavoured to find a way to get his act in the next show, in a way that wouldn't cost him his audience. So he waited at his table, sipping more and more poorly made martinis until he was drunk enough to summon his bravado. He wasn't a fan of the boujee craft beers they offered on tap. Something about charging eight bucks for a pint didn't resonate with him.

The show ended just after midnight. As the guests found their way out of the basement club, Robin shuffled his way over to one of the announcers, still putting on her jacket. Under the spell of a paychecks worth of liquor, he struggled to focus on her eyes, as well as standing up straight.

"Hey, excuse me! My name is Robin and I would like to know how to get on the next show!"

His drunken enthusiasm was convincing, just enough to capture her attention.

"You're in luck, then. The bill is nearly full, and I might be able to fit you in for the second last show. Another gentleman expressed interest in speaking as a guest, so if you want to be considered a main act, I'll need to schedule an audition. Are you free this weekend?"

Your Apocalypse

“Yeah, is Saturday at noon good?”

Robin didn't even care to remember he was scheduled to work a double shift that day. He saw the opportunity as something that would most likely pass if he didn't take it now, and so he had all the chips on the table.

“I'll book you in. We run them here, so be sure to come around ten minutes early in case we need more time setting up.”

Her other friend at the table motioned her that they needed to leave, and so she grabbed her bag and headed out the door. Robin was still stunned at the possibility of him becoming a recognized spoken-word artist. He was also stunned at realizing how drunk he was, and that there was no chance in hell he'd be able to drive home. He quickly ordered two glasses of water, hoping that would sober him up in time before the doors closed. It wasn't enough, as one of the bouncers ushered him to leave with the glass of water still in hand. Odd bit of business, but Robin was too drunk to notice.

After a long walk home, Robin settled in his room and began to furiously scribble down stories on his notepad. He thought of many different tales in his head and was eager to pen them before he could forget. Stories of tragedy, romance, alcohol, and adventures through the night. Essentially, a dramatization of the past five hours.

A few days past, and Robin was waiting in the garbage-lined alleyway rehearsing his que-cards to an audience of a dumpster and a couple rats scurrying by. The bouncer opened the door and told him to come in. At the end of the stage stood a committee of finely dressed people, who made the ordeal look like an interview for a Fortune 500 executive position.

“Good afternoon Robin. You may begin whenever you are ready.”

Robin began to shake. It wasn't the cold air blowing on him from the stage fan, or the pint of ale he had with lunch on the way to the club. He took out the cards and tried not to make a noticeable gesture looking at them as he began.

“Last night, and the night before, I saw your apocalypse creeping through like vines on a fence. I wonder if you see it coming at night, when the corners of your room seem to blur, and the shadows coming through your window don't seem to resemble anything other than the spirits conjured in ones head. Your apocalypse starts in your mind and expels itself through cold, merciless breaths. You cannot subjugate these feelings, they are inevitable...”

As Robin flipped the next page, the same lady stood up and made an interrupting gesture.

“My god, I love it! Its hilarious! Were all fans of ironic comedy, and we'd like to have you in!”

BLUE PIGS, AND PLAID

Shaun Phauh



Blue Pigs, and Plaid

Another cop, another bad day.

This one's harassing some sucker going too fast down the road, man must've been going five or ten over, and still this pig's gonna come in with his schlong all full of blue and red lights like some clown's popsicle dick, and he's writing this guy up a ticket.

Dude's sweating like crazy too, I can see him from this porch, and it's the middle of fucking winter. Makes you think he's probably got some sorta paraphernalia up in the back or something, and all you can do is hope the pig doesn't catch on and bring a dog out to catch whatever baggie of drugs this sweating dude has.

Or maybe he's just got a sweat gland issue, who knows with people these days, but from the look of anxiety on his face, it looks like he's got something in the car he ought not to have. The cop gives him a ticket and lets him go.

Winter afternoon and the sun's coming down like a white-yellow laser beaming straight into the eyes, and everyone's all squinting. Snow's all over the road too so all you get is just these giant rays of sunlight shooting up all over the place, gonna give a man sunburn.

Some dude comes walking up to me on my porch. Wearing a full outfit of plaid. Red and black for his shirt, and black and white for his pants. He's got short hair, cut unevenly. Looks kinda dopey.

"You Macon Norm?" He asks.

I look at him for a bit, "Nope."

"I think you're lying."

"What?"

"You're Macon Norm."

"I look like Macon Norm to you?"

"Yeah."

"What's Macon Norm supposed to look like?" I ask.

"I dunno, never seen him."

"And you know I'm Macon Norm?"

"You have a Macon Norm vibe."

"I'm not Macon Norm."

He nods, and inches closer to where I'm sitting out here on the porch, "Sure. Sure... Macon."

"Macon Norm sounds like a white name," I say, "Do I look white to you?"

"Don't be fucking racist, anyone can have any name," the guy says.

"Well, I'm not Macon Norm."

"What's your name then?"

"I'm supposed to tell you? Just came up here outta nowhere and you want me to tell you my real name?"

"Well if you're not gonna tell me a name, you sure as hell sound like Macon to me."

"Fuck you here for anyway?" I ask.

He comes up close to me, "to kill

Blue Pigs, and Plaid

Macon Norm.”

“What?”

He pulls out a long chef’s knife, a little dinked up and slightly rusty.

“You plan on stabbing me with that or something?” I ask.

“Hell yeah, after what you did to lil’ Ginger Tom, I’m gonna kill you ‘till you’re dead.”

“Well, you better get the fuck off this por-”

He lunges at me with the knife, and I fall back in my wood porch chair and crash behind me. This plaid man is on me in a moment and is bringing the knife down on my body, and I can feel it stab into my chest and belly a total of three times before I push him off, and bring my fist down on the right side of his face in a neat right hook.

He gets back up dazed, but the knife is still in his hand.

I look down and see my shirt’s overflowing with blood, and I’ve been stabbed bad. There’s red all over the snow, and this sunlight’s bleached everything white, and is making that blade of his gleam like some sort of sacred object from God.

The police from across the road must’ve seen the commotion and all this bleeding, ‘cause he’s come over now, and he’s got his gun out, and he’s pointing it at plaid man, and he’s yelling all his pig words, “PUT THE KNIFE DOWN AND GET DOWN ON THE GROUND.”

“Get the fuck outta here!” I yell back, “this shit’s between me and this guy over here.”

“We’re gonna get you to a hospital soon as possible sir, don’t worry, just put pressure on those wounds.”

“Fuck you!” Plaid man yells back, “you know how long it’s taken me to *find* Macon Norm?!”

“I’m not fucking Macon Norm, asshole!”

“PUT THE KNIFE DOWN!” The police officer yells.

I run up to this here police officer and sock him right in the nose so hard I can feel something cracking and crunching on my knuckles, and I see a walnut cracking and breaking up in his sinuses, and he falls down face scrunched up and full of pain and red running outta his nostrils, a big river of iron.

“This shit is *our* business, asshole,” I say kicking the cop in the side.

“Yeah, asshole.” Plaid man says and kicks the cop in the other side.

The plaid man looks at me, and he says, “You’re not so bad Macon. Used to be that I thought you were some fucked up douchebag.”

“I’m seriously not Macon.”

I must be bleeding bad, cos my clothes are all soaked in blood and twice as heavy, but something about punching that pig in the nose has got me feeling like I’ve just taken a hot shower.

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF YEAR

Jaime Boyd-Robinson

Parties aren't exactly Sasha's thing. The people are always so loud and brash, the party house usually smells like too much cologne, and she always ends up alone in a dark corner while her best friend makes out with some guy. Like right now. She suddenly finds what's in her cup to be very interesting as Bethany sucks face with her new crush.

Sasha wasn't going to come but *please, Sash. Andy's going to be there and if this doesn't work out I'll need a shoulder to cry on and you've got the best shoulders for that.* At the time, Sasha only rolled her eyes. Bethany sure knows how to compliment her. And it's not like Bethany's flings ever work out. The girl is too beautiful for her own good. Too bad she's straight.

Sasha takes a sip from her cup and almost gags. *What's in this? Cat piss?*

It's not like her and Beth have never talked about the crush Sasha so blatantly has on her. Their friendship just happens to be more important. Unfortunately her best friend has never tried to set her up with anyone. Sometimes she wonders if Beth is just using her as a bodyguard.

The song changes from a "Jingle

Bell Rock" remix to Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas" and the crowd goes wild. Sasha smiles into her drink, remembering too late that it tastes like cat piss. Thankfully everyone is too involved in themselves to notice her gag.

Well...almost everyone.

As she contemplates whether or not to dump her drink into a nearby plant, someone taps her on the shoulder. She looks over and—whoa. Ok. Breathe, Sasha. Remember what breathing is? That thing you do to survive? Do it before you make a fool out of yourself. She inhales quickly, eyes wide. And she thought Beth was gorgeous. The girl's brown curls caress her ears as if whispering the secrets of each passing person. Her eyes are a bright startling blue. And she's chest-height, the perfect height for cuddling.

The girl smirks as if she knows exactly what Sasha's thinking. Or maybe she's smirking because Sasha hasn't said anything. She should probably say something.

"Hi," she says. Except it's more of a croak. Heat races up her neck and into her cheeks.

The Most Wonderful Time of Year

“Hi, I’m Layla.” She puts out a hand to shake. Sasha stares at it before realizing she’s supposed to shake it. She clasps Layla’s hand in hers, smiling as she does so.

Layla raises an eyebrow. Why is she raising an eyebrow? Why is she looking at Sasha as if Sasha’s supposed to be doing something?

“And what’s your name?” Layla asks.

Oh. Right. Her name. She quickly retracts her hand.

“I’m sorry. I’m not usually this awkward,” she says. She suddenly finds her feet very interesting. *A pretty girl who’s most likely straight finally talks to you and you’re acting like an imbecile.* “I’m Sasha.”

Layla peers at her until she looks back up. “Well, Sasha, it’s nice to meet you. Mind if stand with you?”

Sasha blanks. This gorgeous girl whose beauty rivals that of her best friend’s wants to stand with her. To spend time with her. The thought sends a cozy feeling zinging through her stomach.

Then again, the girl probably just wants to stand with someone so she doesn’t look like a loser. Like Sasha did—does.

And she’s probably straight.

The cozy feeling turns to itchy wool.

“Yeah. Sure. Sounds good.” Sasha places an arm across her stomach as she clutches her cup like a lifeline. She’s suddenly thankful she didn’t give it up.

Her eyes find Beth who has finally come up for air. Beth grins at her, lipstick smudged. Sasha rolls her eyes. Classic Beth. Beth’s eyes cut over to Layla and she raises an eyebrow. Sasha shrugs. Beth waggles her eyebrows. Sasha glances over at Layla, hoping that she didn’t just see that. The last thing Sasha needs is another straight girl knowing she has a crush on her. When Layla gives no sign of noticing, Sasha sticks her tongue out at her best friend.

“This isn’t really my scene.”

Sasha jumps at the sound of Layla’s voice over Justin Bieber’s “Under the Mistletoe.” Not her scene? Everything about her screams party girl. She’s wearing a sexy elf costume for crying out loud.

“Really?”

Layla looks up at her. “Yeah. I’m more of a stay at home and watch Christmas movies kind of person.”

Sasha smiles at her, her heart skipping a beat. They’re practically soulmates. But she is curious.

“Why are you here then?” She inwardly cringes at her bluntness. She hopes she didn’t come off as rude.

Layla sighs, overly dramatic. “I came with a date but she seems to have found someone more interesting.”

Sasha blinks. Layla’s words don’t want to settle. She came with a date. Who has female pronouns. Her heart lurches. But she can’t be too sure. Straight girls sometimes call their friends ‘dates.’ Sasha’s made that mis-

The Most Wonderful Time of Year

take before.

“My best friend dragged me here in case things went south with her crush. That’s her over there.” She points in the direction of Bethany who is, once again, making out with her crush as if they’re both about to die. Sasha suddenly feels embarrassed to be her best friend.

Layla watches the two, mildly disgusted.

“What is a gorgeous girl like her doing with the likes of him?” she asks.

Sasha snorts. Those were her exact thoughts when she found out who Beth was here for. She gives Layla a what-can-you-do look. All she cares about is that Beth doesn’t get her heart broken.

Layla shakes her head. “Straight people.”

Sasha chokes out a laugh, almost dropping her drink. She stares at Layla, at the way her eyes twinkle with mirth. And in that moment she knows she wants to spend the rest of her life with her...or at least the rest of the night. The thought scares her. She’s never wanted to take a risk like the one she’s about to take.

“Hey do you maybe wanna get out of here?”

Layla looks at her, a smile that takes over her face placed on her lips. She looks at Sasha as if she’s been waiting all night to hear that. She nods.

Layla takes Sasha’s hand and drags her toward the door. Before they get to the door, something catches

Sasha’s eye. She pulls Layla to a stop in the doorway to the lobby. Butterflies flutter in her stomach. She can’t believe she’s about to do this. Layla glances back at her, does a double-take when she notices the mistletoe hanging above Sasha. A smirk replaces her smile. Pink tinges her cheeks. Sasha exhales, glad that she isn’t the only nervous one.

She pulls Layla toward her, arms wrapping around the shorter girl’s waist. Layla’s hands settle on Sasha’s face, and oh so gently pulls her down until finally, their lips meet. *If Beth’s crush doesn’t work out tonight, at least mine will*, Sasha thinks as she tugs Layla out into the winter night.



THE DRAWING ROOM

Zack Weaver

Neatly, neatly- oh how neatly she kept the dim room from outside specks and mites. For she knew how they protruded sharply from dusty surfaces. The others, she called them- how terrible they smelled, she could smell them as they encroached the windows or a nearest wall. Never would she allow a window to be open more than a crack. The house had become accustomed to the staunchly rigid airs. The couches, wrapped in synthetic film, often bounced from this wall to that throughout the day- but only on the outermost walls shared by the natural world. These were approached, then assailed by unseen others upon the other side. They often straggled to follow her to the next wall, as she quickly scraped the couch to the next. As such, the floors bore grinded scars and resembled an archaic stripped pattern to the polished textile, naturally this reminded her of the cats she once had- which were dead somewhere in the house. Often she would grow comfortable, almost succumbing to sleep, when the scuttling would begin again, approaching the wall she faced- always the wall in front between her and the other, naturally making the whispers from the others creep around from the back of her flaking scalp and into her ears. She was never too fond of her ears- and with a slam the glass pane restored silence by condemning glinted natural spaces into an encasement of wood. A latch quickly buckles and she finds the nearest silent wall- any walls beyond the outside limits of the drawing room were strictly off-limits, this rule implemented after Ben had stepped out the front door and never returned. The drawing room was the barrier between her and sure dreaded agony- or that was what they called such a room back when rooms had names, before her mind jumbled them with the whispers- back when Ben was still around to distill the innermost rooms of the house. They had hardly given her enough time to collect the vast amount of canned goods that she had Ben purchase before the inevitable collapse happened (and oh so suddenly mind you), before the others began scuttling the outside barriers, and they began their manifested whispers from the dark innards of her once homely structure.

Yes, dark and dusty- the house groaned with displeasure at such reasonless maltreatment. Her cans were consumed, now, by cracked and scraped hands scooping kidney beans and schoolchild marketed wheat pastas- but the room had to be cleanly, it had to remain in the pleasant state it was currently in- and for this reason, the woman would shy toward the front-foyer, toward that damned doorway; her breath would become as starched linen, and perspiring, her chest would pulse as the ants who

The Drawing Room

resided inside would be stirred by her sudden excitement and attempt to escape. But oh no, they could not escape, they were as trapped as her, yet she knew they were who was carving out her sternum, more and more every hour. And this was the reason why her cans were discarded toward the front door- presently, a pleasantly satisfactory barricade had erected against all that wanted to harm her inside this neatly, neatly house.

Her tin stalwart was a double-entendre and it gave her an inner sense that she might just be a strategist if feudal tides had long since bellowed their final bellow, and the modern days no fallen so suddenly- leaving her alone with the other, them and her ants, who now mind you had settled down by this time. Each groan of the house she knew to be them scurrying about on upper floors and perhaps just around the corner. Oh yes the barricade provided her drawing room with the only possible entrance to be through the kitchen doorway- Perhaps the architect of this very house had been a strategist too, leaving her drawing room with only two doorways, this new thought comforted her soundly as an opal beacon amongst the enclosing dread. And naturally she knew that the things with which she shared the house would not be so brash to enter from the kitchen! Though they often whispered intently to slit her wrists and tear her veins from subsided tendon- thankfully she had a remedy to their haunting hisses; the sound could easily be blocked out by clawing at the walls- dimly she thought of apples raining from the sky and blotting out lives as they easily fragmented skulls into a pulp. The price of diminished whispering was her fingers quickly wore out bare, after a few bouts of such behaviour and she figured they had an awful distaste for the smell of blood; as they often would stop shortly after her fingers began to bleed- trailing red back to the couch





HOLLOW REFUGE

Remi Akers

What I am doesn't exist.
My voice gets dismissed.
The world declares me loveless—
Forces me to repress
What I want to spare them the effort of
Redefining "love."
I dissolve in their pool of venom,
Until I'm the thrum
Behind my ears that propels me through
A cloud with no hue.

But I don't want people to perceive
Me as broken or naïve.

I want to pretend they don't matter—
To quiet the chatter.
But there is static in the silence.
I am without recompense,
A ghost drifting across
Paths concealed by moss.
If I could, I'd create a world where
No one must ever bear
The contempt that made me feel empty
When I was twenty.



STOP-MOTION

Remi Akers

Everyone around me is above when I'm below.
I feel hollow—
Emptied of sound—though I bellow,
Shouting “hello.”
See a murder of crows; I'll try again tomorrow
To damn the sorrow,
As my shoes imprint fresh sparkling snow
And streetlights glow.
Nowhere else to go once my headphones lost audio.
We fall in a row,
A sequence of dominoes toppling like stocks in a meadow—
A steady tempo.
If I allow myself to get dizzy in the memory of long ago,
I'll never outgrow
The anguish that follows 'til there's nothing left to show.
I disrupt the flow.
Wish I could veto the horrors that didn't stop when I said “no”
And sever the woe
That keeps me locked inside without a window.
I try to let go;
Was there a rainbow dancing on a canvas of indigo?
I'll never know.

SHAMANKA

Zachary Barmania

'Shamanka! Shamanka! Where do you lead? Shamanka! Shamanka! Lead me astray.' Prayers of Tzalka.

The column of fire was silver against the glowing sky, the frosty breath of a newborn God. Across the Sea, the treetops, many of the refugees thought they heard screaming, or chanting. The death throws of heathens.

Tzalka walked on.

Her feet ached, so did her head and back. She had taken to talking and singing to herself.

"Is that why mother chose to keep Kova with her, and not me? Is it because I am weak?"

The caravan had been moving ever since the Pontifex commanded them to leave his monastery. Even as that same monastery rose to the Heavens as smoke, Tzalka walked with the others. She had enough moons to walk on her own now, unlike those smaller youth who needed to be carried. At the same time, her legs were too short to keep pace with the grown. She resolved to make the best of this middle ground. Daybreak had come, and nobody seemed to notice. Her feet blistered and bled.

Tzalka walked on.

There came a time when there was no smoke on the horizon, and her home was truly gone. Beside her slouched a boy, Bari, older than her yet with the bearing of a child. His eyes darted to Tzalka, then away when she stared back. The girl never stopped looking at the boy once she noticed him.

"Who are you?" She asked, but the boy made no reply. "I saw you talking to the Pontifex, what's he like?" The boy stole another tremulous look and said nothing. That night, even the stars gave her strange looks.

Tzalka walked on.

Elders started collapsing when the sun crested

it's zenith. They stopped and argued that they must turn back.

"Our Pontifex! The Gods of Sun and Moon and Star will never forgive us if we abandon him!" One said, though his eyes betrayed the lie. He knew, the same as everyone else knew, that the Pontifex was dead. He knew, the same as everyone else knew, that the Gods were dead. Tzalka hadn't known them that long anyway. It was her Mom she missed. Dusk fell as Tzalka kicked a pebble.

Tzalka walked on.

Finally, she stopped, and she was all alone, and the forest was alive with hissing serpents. The pure terror of a child cannot be described. It coursed through her essence. She was taught not to cry beneath the stars, who missed nothing in their sight. This training kneaded the terror deeper into her mind. Could they see into her very heart, where there was no obstacle to hide behind?

'The Pontifex would know. Mom would know. Where were they?'

She sobbed into a tree trunk.

Ancient Birch.

All thought and feeling flashed before her eyes, and Tzalka couldn't tell if it was as brief as lightning or constant as the sun. Her breath steadied, moved with the wind. The leaves and branches tossed like mother's hair. Leaves and branches.

'Mom? Come to me! I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone.'

Had she dreamt it, or said it?

The night had come alive with fireflies, who warmed her.

Tzalka had a healing vision, a peaceful sleep.

She stretched, stood, and felt the sun on her skin.

Shamanka

Her hair had become tangled with twigs, dirt and birch seeds, like cocoons nestled safely in a bird's nest. A few others were visible to her, some lay still in the morning dew.

'Frost'. The inner voice told her, and Tzalka understood with a grown-up's grace. She walked South, away from the sound of an approaching storm. It was still miles away, with seconds between flash and thunder. She felt this, through the touch of her feet on the forest floor, through the taste of rain on her forked tongue.

And where she led, others followed.

'Forest gave way to lapsing shade. The tall grass of the South.' Prayers of Tzalka.

Tzalka's followers orbited her, celestial bodies bound to each other in the void. They plodded behind her as she followed game trails towards the thinning of the trees. Pines dominated this part of the forest, filling the air with acrid stillness. Night fell, and her followers stopped to rest their heads on the needled ground.

Tzalka walked on.

on.

on.

on.

To the edge of the world.
Her soul steamed in such a place.
Hot iron in November air.
The doe came to her from the abyss.

"Are you my mother?"

"..."

"Are you me?"

"..."

Tzalka awoke, facing away from the fire. She had stopped that night after all, and seen a path move past in her dreams. The others were talking in whispers about her, wondering after her dream. She let them talk. All she could do was look into the forest, into the teeming darkness. It gave her comfort to know that such darkness wasn't empty. It gave her comfort to know that she was filled by such darkness. The sun rose, and she heard the whispers of the roots beneath the loam. Their language changed as they moved

south, from the stern croaks of sentinel pine to the breathy gossip of grass. Eager to join them, she stood, and stretched.

Tzalka walked on.

'She is death without violence! She is love without pain! She is life without end!' Prayers of Tzalka.

The air, once clear with pine, now held traces of something else.

'Smoke.'

Had the caravan become lost, and gone in some great circle back towards the monastery? The thought passed quickly, for it was impossible. This was some new danger.

Tzalka stopped.

In time, Bari reached her.

"You've stopped." He said, panting as he always did on these journeys.

Tzalka said nothing to him. She communed now with her senses, with her mind which stretched outward from her body. Bari took this silence for a rebuke. How strange, she thought, that it was her rebukes, real or imagined, that drew his respect, that commanded his fear. It revealed a lack of perspective.

"It's just... people follow *you* now. We don't know what's happening to you, but you've been a comfort somehow. They call you Shamanka, it's an ancient title, like a Pontifex. You give people hope. I never told anyone this, but the Pontifex gave me an order before... before..." He paused. Bari had never been allowed to speak so long at once before, and he took some time to consider his words. "People need to live; they need to survive these times and remember the old ways. We need people who remember the past when we build something new."

Tzalka tasted blood in the air, heard the chatter of grown-ups, the language of hunter to hunted. Other hunters entered the forest now, headed towards her and her people.

"Nobody *needs* to survive. Nothing *needs* to be rebuilt. We carry no weapons, we have no warriors among us, and hunters come."

Shamanka

At that, Bari stiffened and paled. Tzalka took his hand in her own.

"You are ruled by fear, Bari. You have died countless times already; I pity it in one so young."

That left the boy truly shaken. After a few moments, though, he ran off to warn the others of the danger. She hoped some of them escaped, but to run was not her fate. Tzalka had stopped, and so she would remain until the hunters took her away. Bari scuttled away between the trees.

'Only a boy.' The voice said, mournfully.

Tzalka looked inward for the source of the voice. Inward where her soul was quiet as a winter forest. The place was old, and familiar. At her back was something cold and absolute, the trunk of the ancient birch. The voice had come from the wood in a whisper, only for her to hear.

"They call me a Shamanka, what do I call you?" Tzalka asked aloud, and the voice never answered. The forest was quiet, but for the crisp *ring* coming off the cold.

"Druim." Tzalka said, after a long time in that inner place.

Danger clattered towards her body in metal clothes, clumsy and imposing. As her awareness rose again, the passage of time reasserted itself in her mind. Mere moments had passed, so Bari was not far at all from this danger. Her choices fell away to a single option, which broke the still forest as a scream, a sustained note that drew the crows overhead from their perches. Moments later, clattering footsteps approached her.

"Found another one!" The soldier said, and he slung Tzalka over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing at all. Druim spoke to her again.

'You're so young.'

"Acorn is oak, oak is acorn." Tzalka said, and the soldier pretended he hadn't heard.

'And the Shamanka turned to the onlookers and spoke unto them: I have brought balance to their souls, which had never known it before. You wanted a leader, a God? Now you have her.'
Prayers of Tzalka.

When they finally removed the bag from her head after several hours, she was in another darkened room. A thin column of sun crept its way into the room and exposed some details. It was a shallow cave, and the air was damp and heavy with breath. Slowly, voices rose from the dark.

"Gods, no. They got her, Alimaya's girl, our Shamanka."

Then she was approached from all sides by other prisoners, and they tried to coax some words from her, to no avail. They asked questions of Tzalka, they shook her shoulders and sobbed. Eventually, they covered her in a scratchy blanket, and left her be. Tzalka learned much from listening to their hushed conversation. These were the same soldiers who attacked the monastery days before, who now scoured the countryside looking for refugees to capture and eventually sell. At least everyone thought they were being sold, for that explained the steady trickle of prisoners who were led out of the cave every morning. Tzalka resolved to end that, and so that night when the others slept, she rose and crept around the cave. Placing her palm flat against the wall, she reached out to the rock, to the mountain itself. Between the silent, oppressing chaos, she could still feel the memory of life. This memory was old, stretching back before the land crept above the sea.

'Limestone.'

From Tzalka's fingertip sprouted glowing moss and lichen, luminescent growth of corals and sponge. Runes appeared and exhaled their spores in golden flakes. She drew creatures and people and scenes. She drew the great birch which loomed in her mind, at her back. She drew her mother, who she longed to see. Soon, the cave was covered, at least as high as she could reach.

"Girl," A woman's voice called from the dark. The grown-up tip-toed towards the wall and put Tzalka up on her shoulders.

"Draw, magic girl." The woman said, and Tzalka obeyed, smiling.

Others began to wake as they reached the Zenith of their orbit around the cave. She drew symbols in forgotten languages, creatures of the air and land, creatures long extinct. When she pressed her finger in a dot, a flower would bloom, or an

Shamanka



ample head of ivy would erupt from the spot. Behind her, some of the people whispered in hushed voices, or gently sobbed at the light and beauty.

"It's Alimaya, the girl's drawn her mother here, look."

A loud child's whisper came, followed swiftly by a mother's hush.

"They're coming, hide the girl!" Someone hissed, giving mere moments to react. Others tried hopelessly to cover her glowing work, to no avail. Tzalka held up a hand to the old man who had tried to step in front of her.

"No, let them come. Let them take me." And before anyone could respond, a guard clamoured into the cave. He looked around, his eyes slowly adjusting to the light and taking in the view around him.

"What's happened here?" He managed after a while. The crowd parted to reveal Tzalka, their Shamanka. Warily, the soldier approached. He tied a long chain around her small wrists, looping it over again and again.

"Come." He said, tugging the line and making her stumble forth. The crowd made angry noises and was ready to surge to her defense.

"Be still!" Tzalka yelled over the growing tumult, and there was no bloodshed. They led her from the cave, from her garden of living symbols. Druim whispered:

'How warm it is in the breath of others.'

Though muffled by the bag, Tzalka was still able to understand conversation between her guards.

"This is the girl? Scrawny little thing, Metsu is scared of her? Maybe we should be following someone a little bolder."

"Who else is there to follow? Myrtis is dead, the whole coup is dead, we're just carrion crows picking for scraps between the ribs. Although I don't know what kind of scraps she expects to find on these refugees; what would a bunch of monks and nuns have on them?"

"I say if things don't get better in a fortnight, we hit the road, fend for ourselves. We're doing robber work anyway, we might as well see some of the profits."

Shamanka

"Enough of that talk, she might hear."

A third voice emerged after the creaking of door hinges. It was husky and low, a woman's toe of command.

"Prepare the crow cage."

They shoved Tzalka through the door. For a while, she simply stood with the bag over her head as the woman, Metsu the guards had said, considered the girl. Tzalka used her other senses to consider in retaliation. She smelt wine on breath, only thinly coating the metallic taste of blood. In time, the bag was lifted gently from her head, sending her hair into a frizzy maelstrom across her face. From between the knots and mats, Tzalka looked up at her captor.

Metsu was just a grown up, aging and bitter. Her armor was intricate but worn out, no doubt matching her mind. The life of a soldier had clearly taken its toll, leaving deep wrinkles in its wake, and wisps of grey in her brown curls. Tears welled in her eyes, something which Tzalka had neither smelt nor expected.

"Did they hurt you at all, child?" Metsu asked, her voice softening. Tzalka said nothing. "You know, my men heard stories about you. The prisoners said they followed a Shamanka, an agent of the oldest magic. Now I see these whisperings for what they are, and the truth saddens me. The soldier in me wanted to believe in an enemy, to justify... well, I see now that desperate people will find a hero, or else conjure one from thin air. I'm sorry for what they did to you, and what I must do to you in response."

'*She delays.*' Druim whispered. Still, Tzalka said nothing.

"I'm not a slaver," Metsu continued, "I was just doing as instructed. Now my general is dead, our enemy is dead, and I'm in command. What am I to do? I must prevent the bloodshed that would come from them rallying behind you. If order is to be maintained, if we're to survive this great dying that lies ahead, you must be made an example of. I'm sorry, girl."

One of the guards re-entered, letting Tzalka see the cool sky of the early morning outside, still without sun.

"The cage is ready." He said, eying Tzalka warily.

'*He nurtures doubts.*' Druim said.

The guards moved to take Tzalka, who finally spoke.

"Who is more desperate: those who follow a child, or those who fear one?"

Metsu was visibly alarmed to hear such words from a child and had no response as the guard took the girl away.

'She spoke in the tongues of the creatures and birds! We could only hear and watch as nature unfolds from her saintly lungs!' -Prayers of Tzalka

The rolled steel bars of her cage were still dewy from the pre-dawn chill. Before shoving her securely into captivity, the guard grabbed fistfuls of her hair, and cut it roughly with his knife. The tangled masses of hair, sap and seeds fell like autumn leaves from her head, until all that remained was a mangey plain of brown tufts. Tzalka clambered into her cage, and by the might of pulley and chain, she slowly rose into the air. From her perch, she could see everything in the fort, but not beyond the walls. It was a shabby wooden wall built with its back to the mountain. Whatever Metsu said, it sure looked like a slaver's outpost. Cages lined the walls, filled with people. Now they lay on the ground, huddled together for whatever warmth they could share. As dawn came, people began to rouse, and eventually they noticed Tzalka high above them. She could have screamed and drawn all of their gazes, but stoking their fear and rage was sure to provoke rash action. Even without her help, though, the captives grew unruly.

"It's a girl up there, just a little girl."

A skinny man threw all of this weight against the bars.

"Why? Why would they do that?"

Hands reached out and grabbed at whatever guard they could reach.

"Animals!"

Had a guard said that, or a prisoner?

Shamanka

Tzalka knew that she could die, and up here, in time, she would. Yet those who were made to watch couldn't bear it. The stoic acceptance which she displayed drove them further into fury. Before midday, they were rioting together against the bars, crying her name out to her.

"Shamanka! Shamanka!"

As the crowd grew more unruly, so to did their captors. Fear drove the guards to their weapons, into their armor, and soon there was an anti-crowd waiting outside the cage. Tzalka could smell the pheromones of human struggle rising through the air like smoke from a raging fire, and it came from the cave too. Her symbols had restored their hope and memory of life, and they heard the violence from without.

Even Metsu was drawn into the brewing chaos, emerging from her wooden shelter fully armed and occupied by her officers. There was another among them, a hunched creature which tripped along with the party. As they climbed a raised playform, Tzalka saw clearly that it was Bari with her, but why?

'It's always the weakest who are hurt.' Druim whispered. Tzalka understood the meaning when Bari turned his head up, revealing black eyes and a bleeding mouth. Metsu rose her voice to address the captive mob.

"You will remain orderly or die. Your Pontifex died, along with your Gods. You bring forth a new leader, new Gods, and they will die too. Death is a fact of life, for you and for your Shamanka."

'And for you.' Druim hissed. The voice within was growing wild like the rest of the crowd. Wildness in something as old as Druim was something to be feared, Tzalka knew instinctually.

Metsu's words only drove the prisoners further into fury's arms. As one, they shook the bars, until they began to creak and bend from the strain. Metsu raised her hand, inhaled to issue the kill order. Tzalka opened her mouth, inhaled the same air as her enemy, as sang.

Her voice froze the air it touched, howling like a finger drawn over the rim of wet glass. Druim spoke through Tzalka, recalling from her earliest memories, letting the truth flow in all its mutability. Of course, nobody understood. Many raised

their hands over their ears to blot out the painful, shrieking note. Others looked up and gaped with awe.

And the metal of their swords sprung with lichen, the cage bars bloomed into bamboo or vines, then wilted away. From the tangles of her hair rose a young birch tree, surrounded by supplicant ferns and leafy flowers. Up and up it grew, until it was as ancient as the tree where she'd first met Druim. The stone bloomed, the walls bloomed, and the people too. Tzalka watched, aware of what she was doing, and curiously apathetic.

'They were already dead.' Druim screamed through Tzalka's mouth, and nobody understood.

Below her, Metsu fell to the ground. From her open mouth, where a scream should have come, flowed flowers of all kinds: purple hide-eaters, a sprig of lover's hand. Her eyes blossomed into devil's paintbrush, from her nose came delicate sheaves of grass. Tzalka felt Druim's empathy for the woman.

'It is a sweet sort of agony.'

Even as she sang, Tzalka watched the same fate befall Bari, who had died so many deaths before. Now, he died once more, but this time through life. His skin grew soft and damp green: moss. His hair fell away and became algae, or dandelion seeds. His skull became the dark, brittle wood of a pinecone. His skin turned thin and white as birch bark.

Once her song ended, it had been many years for their spirits. Tzalka was lowered from her cage, yet even then she stood above the others, who knelt before her.

"Shamanka." They would say, and now they truly meant it.

The fortress looked like it had been empty for decades, reclaimed in totality by nature. Was this the old way, or the new? Life spread from that point in all directions, emerging from the womb of inner darkness and stepping cautiously into the cold.

'Matter, Beast, Human, God. No longer are they separate. This truth, in time, shall pass into death, and smoke.'

EROSION

Kavya Chandra

I.

when winter's away, we always dreamed of
snow, watching the green unfold, we always found comfort
in the air conditioned verandas, back home-

I'm privileged in my country, I have words
to assign to that privilege, I have words to call my mother
names foreign to her tongue-
in the snark of the summer,

I never wished to see the river, the mountains, or the laughter
that we never shared each april may june september
like a sly man's gamble, we parted as I never looked onto
what I learnt from you and I never came home and I never want to:
this far away love we have, never taught to tell us of the tie we forgave
in between me leaving you and moving across the sea
and you never wanting me to stay, and the winter
still splashes its unforgiving cold on our attempts of comfort,
still asking us to bundle into nothing.

and when my grandfather died, I didn't even look away
from the seams of the Otonabee as I watched
myself drown in the jealousy of not being the ever flowing ever running
river, but only a song of misery like you have been.
my grandfather died and we patched it up in a jar
as if storing condiments and spices for
the pickles none of us like to eat,
waiting patiently for winter to deny
any chance at welcoming the warmth
that filled us all when he could no longer shame us
or pick us apart when we washed his feet
after he got home from a long walk, or cleaned
his mouthful of tobacco on the dining sofas
as a marker of authority and claim that was never given to him,
but never taken away either.

II.

screaming is the preferred mode of communication in my house:
if the loudest voice does not override the sharpest, then this will
not be a reunion we want to be a part of-

Erosion

my sister used to conform to quiet spaces, crying
to chalk her disgust with the hardened shells you and I
constantly wore on our shoulders, begging no one to say
the words of peace, too afraid of quiet because we could easily
disperse the shambles that kept the walls of our house standing
and my father watched us all become leeches to each other's
bruises, painting them back to pretend they'd never existed,
like a connoisseur of empty, he never asked anything of us
and never demanded any fidelity to love or affection
he craved in between breaks from the television screen.

III.

THE WHITE FLAG IN MY HOUSE IS RED.

my mother once told me to kill myself in her womb,
she said she never wished to have me birthed
and wondered if I will cause her death,
but even then, in those years, she forgave my mistakes.
only two nights ago (one if we're not going to count the divide
of time and comfort that keeps tightening its noose
around our necks, asking to put the shambles back in place)
only two nights ago, she said she loved me deeply
so deep that my spine ached of the abuse she'd laden onto my back
and at night I wonder if love looks like poking holes in your back,
if love has forms that not even the Gods forbade
on us to encapsulate. my mother, she
will never learn the parts of me she's broken.
my mother, she'll always see the shell of me
as a person: a confidante, a war hero she's conditioned onto my back,
she'll never see the holes of this metallic suit of insignificance that
digs into my skin, that buries me down a little heavier,
sinking a little more into unknown grounds where
she tells me that I am the cause of the quick sand that keeps
trying to drown us both- surely, so much pain would come to remove
these grounds in my back sustaining me onto this path where
my reflection is not mine but a cloud of lies I draw around,
colouring outside the lines that we marked but never filled in,
never talked about, so much death if removed from their parts-
mother, I am no longer a sum of your parts and yet still my sister
sees the eyes of rage in my teaching her of love and yet still
I hate my reflection, threatened by the disguise of how I wish
I had never been born, how I wish I wasn't still a child,
still staring at you when I look in the mirrors of my past,
wasn't still hanging onto your remorse of me to keep me warm.

A KNIGHT'S TALE

OR "WHY IT IS OKAY TO CRY OVER SPILT MILK IN THE MIDDLE AGES"

Melchior Dudley

The weather was fair, the air was clear, and the humble squire Jonathan Percy scraped Cheerios and goat's milk out of his grey iron helmet. He sat up high upon the Withershire Castle's Eastern curtain wall, and as he ate, his gaze drifted leisurely to and fro separate scenes taking place nearby him.

Upon the wall with him was his mentor, Sir Billy Broadsword, who at that moment was engaged in the task of cleaning his fingernails with a dagger. Sir Broadsword's feet dangled over the castle walls, and his naked toes wiggled unconsciously in the perfect blue sky. Percy smiled to see his mentor so relaxed. Usually, Sir Broadsword would be engaged in more strenuous activities, like beating the tar out of a peasant or fighting his bowels after another one of the King's notoriously low-fiber feasts. A quaint hum filled the air, courtesy of an archer by the name of Toby McGuire, who produced the sound by whistling on a blade of grass. Meanwhile, Sir Jacoby Locksmith chewed on the last of his trencher bread, and Sir John — the inventor of the modern flush toilet — was taking a forceful dump by hanging one over the castle wall. Behind him, Percy watched a skinny old peasant's goat clomp on the stone walkway, led by a promise of oats held in its master's hand. The whole scene was rather pleasant, and for once, Percy could simply breathe without liquid adrenaline motivating his every action.

Life in the medieval age was a hard, daily five-to-nine grind, and this afternoon had finally given him some relief. No disease, dysentery, domestic violence, dwindling food supplies, dentists, children, priests, religious persecution, bad weather, black death, boars, bears, blindings, or barbarians, which was certainly better than the rest of his week filled with all of those things.

Even as high up as he was, Jonathan Percy could easily smell the labor of the bakers in the wind. Today, he detected the greasy meaty scent of a smoky roasting pig over an open fire

and occasional wafts of bitter burnt rye bread baking in the ovens. He drew a deeper inhale but the wind went limp and his nose was instead rewarded with an updraft of foulness from the fecal-filled swamp known as Derkinagan's Moat.

It was so called after the seamstress's son, Derkinagan, fell into it and drowned after failing to correctly perform a cartwheel for Sir Broadsword. A more honest tale would note that poor young Derkinagan was thrown off the wall — by Sir Broadsword himself, no less — but this tale I am telling you is not the most honest tale, and not even the most informed. This is simply a story to account for a morning in the life of Jonathan Percy.

It is simply a coincidence that this morning was the one in which humble Jonathan Percy committed accidental murder.

...

Percy watched the peasant with the goat return along the stony pathway. They were a skinny couple, and covered in so much dirt that you could probably carbon date the day they were each born.

The animal looked about a hundred years old. What was left of its once-thick fur was thin and patchy, and cancer spots and other ghastly blemishes detailing a nigh end popped through like pimples on flaky, barren skin. Cracked, yellow teeth protruded from an extreme overbite. If meth had been invented yet, the poor animal would have been the poster child.

The goat, on the other hand, looked about two hundred years old. Small, cataract-filled eyes gazed at nothing, and the few hairs it had left on its body stuck out from its chin like that befitting a witch in a Disney movie.

The peasant grabbed Percy's arm as he passed, and breathed a stench in Percy's face

A Knight's Tale

worse than the smell of Derkinagan's Moat. He tried to pull away, but the tweaker had the strength of meth in him.

"Fear ye!" The tweaker exclaimed.

"Fear ye!" he shouted again. "Man is changing— Prepare! Man will sit amid a machine with artificial wings that beat the air like a flying bird, and he too shall fly with it! ... Cars will move without animals, at unbelievable rapidity! Fear these, but fear not, for there is some beauty coming, too..."

The peasant trailed off, and his face relaxed some.

Only his brow remained scrunched as if he was working on a difficult puzzle. Without

much energy, and somewhat confusedly, he mumbled the rest of his rant: "A pipe of glass will give me and ye eyes into the heavens, and we can watch the slow-turning cosmos expand and solidify like milk curdling in tea... A barrel with fins will give us the chance to explore the dark depths of our oceans, where prehistoric creatures slumber, waiting to be studied... It is an amazing thing, this future of ours, and I only regret I won't be here for it..."

The man trailed off for good, released Percy's arm, and peered at him as if seeing him for the first time. Percy in turn, said nothing. He simply waited for the man to walk away. It was best not to react to people with brain worms. His only thought was that the whole thing peevd him, because of course, it had to be him that the idiot picked from all the others lounging about.



A Knight's Tale

Sir Broadsword and Percy watched the peasant leave, his docile goat following clomp clomp clomp.

"Just another guy with Saint Anthony's fire," Percy said, and turned back to his Cheerios.

...

At that moment, a long ghostly blast through an oxen horn made Percy startle and nearly drop his spoon. The blast was cut abruptly by an arrow that flew straight and true into the trumpeter's throat.

Chaos. A captain screamed to rally the disorganized men, and they stumbled over one another like sewer rats. One had been sleeping nude and ran along the wall with nothing on, only carrying his pants, shirt, sword, and shield in his arms and blinking furiously against the bright sun. Percy watched, fascinated — the man's rear jiggled like the box of a truck with fucked suspension. Another had startled at his captain's call and dropped his dagger on his foot. He came hopping like a hare, tight-lipped in great restraint, the dagger still protruding from his foot and his hands white-knuckling and denting his helmet so his head would no longer fit in it. Most of the "soldiers" were missing their weapons. Many were missing sleep. All were missing their mamas.

Sir Billy Broadsword, though, slipped into his boots and sheathed his dagger with the firmness and precision of a United States Marine. As his head bobbed with his actions, his long golden hair fanned like a mane, shining bright against the sun. He was ready.

After a second, the muscle-bound knight turned to his squire, and disdain took over his face.

"That was a trumpet against impending invaders, and you're eating grits out of your helmet! Are you ill?"

Sir Broadsword's scorn hit Percy hard. He wanted to serve his master but had been overwhelmed by the trumpet's baritone warning. He was afraid to ask any questions, however, fearing that he would be seen as useless.

As he started away, Sir Broadsword called him.

"Where are you going?"

"To the stable, sir, to ready your horse."

"Why would I need my horse?"

"To ride into battle, sir."

"I'm not going out there on my horse, you frog-faced scum! Help me put on my armor, then get yourself a spear and take your spot in the barbican."

The barbican! Why, that meant Percy would likely kill many people today! Giddier than Smeagol with a fish, Percy picked up Sir Broadsword's body armor and began helping him into it. The weight of it was substantial — about as heavy as a pig fat for slaughter — and it glimmered impressively in the sun.

"And should I get myself some armor as well, sir?" Percy inquired.

"Absolutely not. A flea like yourself will be the last target in our enemies' minds. If you play your hand correctly, you might even survive the capture of the fort. Though this castle will not be an easy one for those barbarians to take, certainly not while I'm here," Sir Broadsword added, chuckling confidently.

"Yes sir," Percy said, embarrassed for his own lowliness. He snapped in the last leather strap of Sir Broadsword's armor.

"Alright, Pimply Percy, time to become a man. Go get a spear. We've got a battle to win. And if you do very well today, you might even be knighted."

"You really think so?" Percy asked, hopeful once again.

"It's not impossible," Sir Broadsword answered.

...

Jonathan Percy ran down the steps towards the gatehouse, still carrying his helmet filled with breakfast. The gatehouse, typical of most castles, was the only entrance in — and even though it was heavily fortified, it was still the weakest point in the manor's defence.

A Knight's Tale

To make the gatehouse less appealing to attackers, the curtain walls which surrounded the castle left only a singular, narrow pathway to the gatehouse door (which itself was fortified). This meant that attackers had to pass single-file through the barbican pathway, break down the barbican door, and then reach the even-more fortified gatehouse entrance — which they would then also have to breach. Meanwhile, the ceiling of the barbican was speckled with holes which would rain with hot oil and arrows and spears on any attackers trying to bash down the barbican door towards the gatehouse. Percy himself would take a spot along the curtain wall above the barbican, and, armed with a long spear, would stab downwards on intruders. He had high hopes to slaughter many men and be knighted by the end of the day.

This thought was the freshest in his mind when he came upon the gatehouse. Tragically, the porters were just about to close the massive iron door when he reached it, and Percy's opportunity for knighthood was closing with it.

"Wait!" Percy called, frantic to join the soldiers he could see through the door's opening. He looked up and saw archers on their perches training their bows on the barbican doorway. Such preparation only happened when the enemy was about to break down the barbican barriers.

"Hurry your skinny arse!" The porter shouted, continuing to heave the gatehouse door shut.

Percy jumped and twisted and barely managed to squeeze through the door. As it closed behind him, he was now past the point of no return. He would either kill or be killed. Or maybe both.

A loud crash shattered his contemplation.

...

The enemies had smashed a battering ram into the barbican doors. It wasn't quite clear how they did this, since the barbican was narrow enough to prevent such things from happening, but a battering ram is what made the crashing sound and a battering ram was what was slamming on the door.

A metallic man on a horse reached down

and gripped Percy's arm, and Percy screamed. The knight lifted his visor.

It was Sir Broadsword, looking rather angry.

Percy, too, became angry — Sir Broadsword said he wasn't going out on his horse!

"Are you going to fight them with your bare hands? Grab a spear and get on top of the barbican as I told you!"

Percy scurried away and hoped he would no longer be judged.

He ran towards the gate and grabbed a spear from a stack leaning against the wall. It felt light and good in his hand. He felt like he could kill many with it.

With renewed vigor, he slammed his helmet on his head.

He had forgotten that he was using it as a bowl for his Cheerios and goat's milk, but was swiftly reminded. Blinded by the milk and rings of cereal, he staggered and stumbled, with only his spear to use as a guide. He tried to wipe his eyes, but the milkiness was like glue and the grains of wheat like gritty sand. It hurt worse than swimming in a chlorine pool with your eyes open, grinding salt and lemon juice in them, and then touching an open flame to your eyeballs. It hurt like hell, to say the least.

A crash startled Percy. The gatehouse door had crashed down with a definitive thud, and a flood of barbarians streamed into the castle like particles from a violent sneeze. Sir Broadsword carried the counterattack, taking on two, five, then ten men at once. He slaughtered them all one-by-one with a combat genius that can only be compared to Keanu Reeves in the third Matrix movie that nobody ever watched. He repelled the whole army back to the gatehouse door, with ease and almost-single-handedly, and for a moment, it looked as though the castle would not be lost that day. From up on the castle walls, archers whooped, and below, soldiers cheered and joined the attack.

Somebody shouted, "Fuckin' barbarians!" and it was very unfortunate that Percy only heard the latter word. His delayed — though accurate

A Knight's Tale

— association of the crashing of the gatehouse door with the onslaught of the barbarians led him to make a significant mental error.

Still 100 percent blinded by Cheerios, he heaved his spear towards the gatehouse door with every ounce of strength in his body. As the spear flew through the air, he imagined it striking the biggest barbarian right between the eyeballs, and shisk-kabobbing that barbarian into the next two behind him.

As his vision cleared, Percy saw why the castle had fallen silent, and why the archers and soldiers no longer whooped and cheered.

The arrogant but alpha-of-the-castle Sir Billy Broadsword dropped heavily to his knees.

Percy's spear was plunged through his back, and Sir Broadsword could see the point sticking straight out of his chest. He swiveled his head slowly and saw through his helmet-holes that Percy was staring at him guiltily.

"Good throw, you dolt," Sir Broadsword finally said, and then died.

...

Without their Spartan warrior, the castle fell quickly. Many civilians were slaughtered that day, though Percy survived for months by hiding in a sewer and eating rats.

It seemed as though Percy's wish did come true — he killed many on that day.



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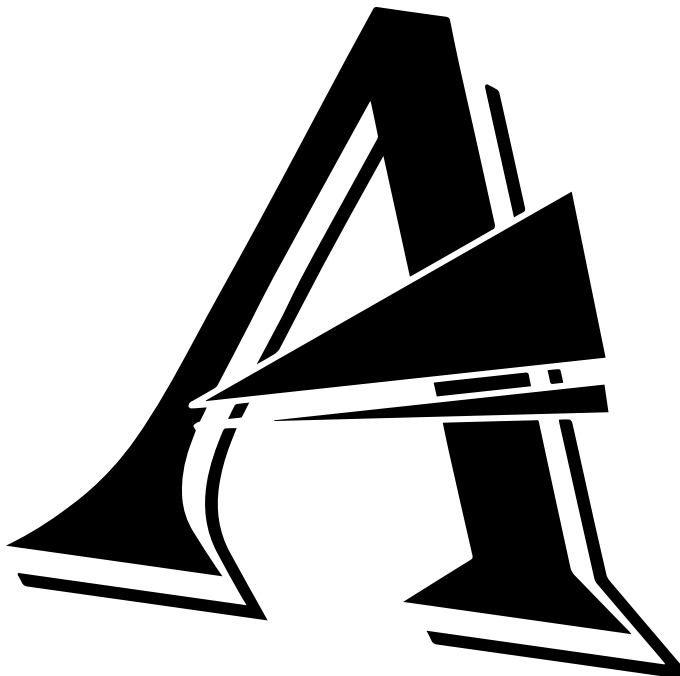
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