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From the Train Going By

Joey Ashman

Oh, how he yearned for the window seat. It was the only solace of this hour-long commute to work every morning. Instead, that particular spot was occupied by a rogue briefcase; one presumably belonging to either of the men across from him. Our very own John Doe lifted his eyes, darting them back and forth between either man. Theirs did not rise to meet his. Both wore suits with the cuffs linked and the links cuffed. Their ties were immaculately straight. Suddenly, our protagonist became struck with the irresistible urge to straighten his own.

John gazed at what little the train window would frame from such a sad angle. The ocean stretched along the train tracks for miles. There it was, so close and yet so far. Deep, endless, and— not blue?

John jumped from his seat. He had seen something. Something pale, thrashing, human? He smooched his cheek to the window, lips at second base with the glass.

The left man barked, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?” John looked down to find his knees atop the briefcase. Whatever. His attention returned to the water. Whatever it had been was gone.

The man barked again, “Man, do you hear me!?”

John replied without looking, “I think someone was drowning.”

“I don’t give a shit, get off my stuff.”

Panic hadn’t quite set in yet. Unmoving, John grabbed the yellow emergency tape and tugged... but to no avail. The train marched on as ever.

“Well whoever it was is surely dead now,” the man hissed.

John tugged again; still nothing. “Do you have a problem?” the angry man said as he grabbed John by the collar, yanking him back down into a sprawl on his seat. John was flustered— both men now stared at him as if he was insane. An even louder voice boomed:

“TICKETS, PLEASE.”

Already startled, John looked up at the figure so large that it was

silhouetted by the light it blocked above. John warned, urgently, "There's an emergency, someone's drowning."

"I SAID TICKETS, PLEASE."

"There isn't time, we've gotta tell the conductor to stop the tr-"
John tried to rise from his seat and was just as quickly pressed back into it with just a hand on the shoulder. The silhouetted figure peered in closer, revealing every detail of what was a ticket lady's strong, rigid face.

For several seconds no one moved, not even the men sitting across. It must have appeared to others like a terribly one-sided stand-off. John's heartbeat was rising. The train chugged rhythmically ahead as if counting seconds on a clock. In what may have been a particularly rash moment of decision-making, John lunged at her from his sitting position -shoulder-first- and promptly bounced perfectly back into his seat. She hadn't even flinched. In an even rasher moment of decision-making, he clutched at the handle of the suitcase near his side and swung it around full force into the lady's chest. Paper fluttered everywhere as she recoiled and croaked for the wind to return to her lungs. She raised her arm to defend herself from a second strike that would never come. John was already halfway down the trolley. The angry man hadn't even had a chance to react. If he didn't have rage before, he was surely blistering with it now.

Every eye on the train was watching now as John zipped down the carriages, clipping his ribs on every seat corner and outstretched hand he wasn't nimble enough to avoid. This disruption paled in comparison, however, to that brought by the thunder of footsteps closing in on him like a missile from behind.

There was no time to turn. John snatched at what he could from the passengers he overtook and whipped it backward with reckless abandon. Phones, coffee, one of his own shoes; he had no time to examine the effect. In only a matter of time, a valiant hero rose from his seat to stop John's rampage. Sadly for John, this hero was frail and old.

What the fuck?

John body-checked the old man aside. Apologies would have to come later.

In just another moment, John reached the conductor's room and tugged at the handle, but to no avail. At eye height, the smudged window was accompanied only by a speaker, which itself was accompanied by a comically large red button. He slammed his fist into it and cried, "Hello! Hello! There's -

From the Train Going By // Joey Ashman

there's someone drowning! Stop the train! You have to stop the train!"

He waited for a response. The train chugged...

...and chugged.

... and chugged.

...and chugged.

...

The entire trolley vibrated, shaking him out of his disbelief. The ticket lady –smeared in coffee– was upon him, stepping over the old man in her pursuit. John was running out of options. In a moment of his rashest decision-making yet, he unclipped the nearest storage compartment above and pulled down a suitcase. Too late for second thoughts, he swung with all his might and smashed through the smudged glass, dispensing all of the adrenaline within him.

An alarm blared and the wheels screamed as the behemoth began to slow. The clock had been stopped. An automated voice overhead warned, **"A disruption has occurred on the vehicle. The vehicle will come to a complete stop and the police will be notified."**

Now the emergency service works? That couldn't be ri-

Cutting off John's time to ponder, a large hand grabbed him from behind, clutching his tie so hard it might've turned to dust. He had no choice but to meet his maker. Tickets be damned, It would appear pain was her new goal as she tried to throw him by the neck. She may have very well broken it with that force, had she not been holding onto a clip-on anyways.

The ticket lady tumbled backwards, not ready for the tie to give and send her body sprawling to the floor. This was the first miracle that John had been afforded. He reached through the broken window and unlocked the door from inside, not minding the cuts along the way. "Conductor!"

He barged in to find the chair empty. No one was there. In fact, no one ever was; it was automated. The ticket lady returned to her feet. The train hadn't reached a stop, but it was certainly slower than it had been moments ago. It couldn't be considered stupid anymore; he had no choice. John opened the next door and leapt from the moving train.

He hit the ground violently, tumbling far. He lifted his head to see the machine carry on with indifference as to whether he was aboard or not. His heart felt like it had broken through his ribs and pounded out of his chest. They might've really been broken, actually, but he wouldn't truly know until later. He was too close to care. He started walking.

From the Train Going By // Joey Ashman

Who knew how far the train had travelled in just a few pages. Maybe the man was right and the object had been nothing after all? What if there was someone there but another, much more suitable person had already scooped them up and saved the day? What if he passed the spot without realizing it and continued to walk along the shore for all eternity? Somewhere along the way, John had removed his suit jacket in the heat, revealing sweat stains stretching from armpit to trousers.

Sooner or later, his worries were relieved as he recognized an object bobbing in the water, barely a dot in his vision. Wait, no, that was stupid. His worries were drastically heightened. John began to jog. It wasn't a large piece of trash. He broke into a sprint. It wasn't an animal.

He took a stride into the water. With sand between the toes of his bare foot and water soaking his clothes up to the waist, he waded into the sea, heart in his throat. Eventually, he finally approached the small boy whose red eyes pointed up to the sky and bobbed ever-so-gently with the waves. John reached out to touch him as if doing so would change the fact of what was already apparent. It was too late. He touched the boy's hand and it was already stiff. It wasn't even close.

John carried the body back to land and kneeled over it in the hot sun. He reeked of ocean water and sweat. Tie-less and half barefoot, he couldn't help but laugh. Not because of the child, but because he realized he would be late for work.

Sun and Steel

koji

Atahualpa is burning.

In Kashamarka, in Tawantinsuyu, Atahualpa is burning.

Steel fills the plaza, statuesque in all of its vanity. Chiselled brows crack under the weight of surveillance, scanning for more deviants corrupting this fresh domain. A robed man with black silk pockets, shimmering and stuffed with gold, raises a crucifix to the pike and vomits words from his tongue with enough venom to paralyze history. The people watch in horror, anguishing at the edges of the young emperor blackening into flakes of ash and charcoal; his leather binding bubbles like pork skin roasting in the market sun, and his screams match that of the swine that offered it. This 'Hell' the steel men speak of is so cruel and unforgiving. How will they raise corn in such a cold and infertile land? How will they weave their ponchos in blazes of fire? Their only respite from this fateful place is that their gods will share it with them.

Tears kiss their cheeks, enough to flood a village. They taste lightly of salt.

...

In Cotacachi, Quispe has started south on foot to Huancabamba. It will be a long and treacherous journey. So long, in fact, that they insisted he was still too naive. On his back rests a straw basket of neverending essentials: a blanket itching of paqucha wool, and dried papa-like soil's own gemstones in some dozen different hues of life, and of course, some chicha for the road. At the very top rests the ch'arki that his wife, Cusi, packed neatly in her cloth—handwoven using a technique that her mother taught her, passed down by her mother's mother, and her mother's mother's grandmother. A leather pouch of cocoa is buried somewhere in between to help with his breath, some of which is already stuffed in his cheeks and in his blood. His children wave their farewells from the top of the fading hill, his daughter still young enough to sit on his Cusi's hips, whose eyes are the perfect amount of bright to glisten through the fog—for wherever she gazes, the stars follow.

He's visiting his mother in Huancabamba. Hidden at the very bottom of his basket is a golden truth wrapped in leaves and swaddled in the tender embrace of woven wool and leather. The faint aroma of choclo trails behind him along the dirt and stone—watching, waiting—and he feels safe knowing that his gold is safe with him.



Pythonis // Adrián Gaizka Guamán Vargas

Sun and Steel // koji

And so Quispe journeys from the mountains of Otavalo to the streets of Kitu where he offers his farewells to the regulars at the market, like the weavers who greet him just like they greeted his grandmother all those years ago—he looks just like her, they jest, corns on his toes and all—and the farmers who, like his grandfather, kept his home as fruitful as their fields. It was his turn now. It was his turn to prove to himself and to his mother that he was capable of carrying this rich history on his shoulders.

His father had died in battle too soon—civil wars tend to do that—and his mother fell ill shortly after hearing the news. He hears from the fleeing locals of Huancabamba, once promised to look after her bedridden body, about the recent arrival of steel strangers with their long twinkling blades and their mighty paquchakuna towering high enough to crush skulls. The news from Cajamarca has washed the land with dread, and the fate of his mother rests entirely on the word of the next wave of travellers.

Quispe is going to change that. He cannot change their fates, or their impending doom. But his mother will not die hungry.

They told him he was crazy—and perhaps they were correct. Quispe knew that the trip to Huancabamba was at least a two-week journey, and he knew that his mother didn't have that much time. But something in the air, the cold sigh of the apukuna and the hot breath of the choclo pull him towards her like a lead on a llama. Even as he exits Kitu during a chill and sudden patter of rain, the gold in his basket is still warm on his back. The wind—guiding him with its palm between his shoulders, firm but steady like his father's—feels soothing against his aching calves, his sore jaw, and his cramped feet. He didn't know why or how, for he had been on the path for at least a few days, but the sun was still shining. Not in the sky or behind the clouds, but with him, in his basket.

It is this heat that keeps him walking. He observes countless killakuna—both wide-eyed and blinking—who watch him cross fields of grazing choclo whispering about the smell of kin in his basket. He sees ponchos every so often, walking along the outline of the apu with newly traded foreign metals, and he refuses them trade when they ask about the glowing gold in his basket. It's for my mother, he says, it's for me.

He keeps walking, but his legs no longer ache, and the roars of thunder seem to snore for him, and the landslides make way, and the puma purrs in his presence.

And he keeps walking. Long, long, winding roads, and mountain peaks on the horizon longing for him to reach them, until a day becomes a week, and a week becomes two. It isn't until far earlier than he expected, that he begins to recognize the stones in the dirt: each and every pebble and dent

and scratchings from hooves. Every blade of grass greets him with excitement not unlike a celebratory audience, swishing in the wind with their ritual dance and gossip. Even the condors survey above him in disbelief that even in these dire times, he has finally returned.

The land that welcomes him with much generosity, its weeping chatters of wet leaves and bird songs guiding him along the path of his childhood as though he had never left it. As if asking him if he remembers this? Or that? If he remembers his grandmother walking him down this creek to collect medicine? If he remembers his grandfather harvesting choclo from here? Or Papa from there? If he remembers the smell of the dirt on his fingers, the tears in his hair, and the taste of morning apu sweat. It is the same path he and his forefathers had always walked, and it notices with great importance, the sun in his basket.

And so, while Atahualpa is burning, while the fire eating him is spitting out force-fed psalms and sorrows, while the hissing cinders are gasping for the mercy of air, Quispe opens his mother's door.

There she was, wrapped in seven layers of furs, sickly and melting into the cot. Her eyes like soil ripe for planting. Wrinkles like the towering folds of this land. He sits silently, and she can barely speak, he lays the basket out in front of him and begins to dig.

Past the leather bag of coca leaves the leftover charqui and dried potatoes, and the paqucha blanket woven by her own mother, is the swaddled gift still perfectly hot to the touch. He lays the sun atop her belly, warming her through the layers of fur and leather and cold sweat right into her belly and down to her core. Glassy-eyed, she looks at him and smiles.

He hovers his hand over the weaving, aching to unfold it for her. But she stops him, instead resting her own palm atop the wrapped sun, weakly unravelling its veiling. Quispe's handmade gold, like a fierce flame, bellows away the cold dampness in the room. The aroma of steamed choclo seeps from the husk wrapping, filling the room with spirits that dance and chatter around the fire, preparing for a celebratory feast. Quispe cannot see them, not yet, but his mother can. She sees them not only in the room around him, but in his eyes, and in his hands. He is ready.

Her own fire begins to dance again, and her bones are no longer aching, nor her spirit. It is right then, as a brush of wind whistles through the cracks of their home, that she decides to tell him a story. A story about them.

"The land has guided you here for a reason, Quispe," she begins, slowly and softly. "Stories must be told to remember them."

Scatter

Theresa Nyenhuis

For so long the ash I knew
Tumbled, serpentine
From the stubs of cigarettes
The scatter of burnt poems-
A tray tugged from the guts of the wood stove.
Cold, and blanched pale
Dispersed to the wind.
Dumped to sweet the compost.
Until,
A mother, that in blood
Borne and reared a ghost
28 years, 5 days and 1 hour.
I carried my son, one final time, in my arms, home.
The Vessel open,
Tipped to the great inland sea
Dust to wind
But fragments, fallen stars
A galaxy upon the turquoise waves.
My son's bones.

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MLC

Little square in Catalonia
Chirps softly like Autumn;
Girls sit alone on park benches
With sanded edges to their jaws,
Birch and church and pavement
Humming the same tune.
Wallet-handly, spending time
In the euphoric calm of morning
Before the little town yawns and
Brushes back the blinds,
Inviting in the morning light
To dim the din of last night's drink
And cool the fan-less flats.



NONTOUCHDIFISH // KARMA

Puss-essed

Naomi Duvall

Note: *Puss-essed* is the story of Bridgitte, a young woman whose estranged mother has died. She fears her grief is causing her to hear voices but it turns out her private parts have been possessed by the deceased parent's spirit, yikes! In this section she has just tried an online exorcist to remove the ghost, to no avail. The following is an excerpt.

*Blackout and strange noises/talking in tongues while the Skype sound plays. lights up on **Bridgitte** in the same position.*

- Bridgitte** Well that was a scam.
- MV** Damn, I was ready to blow this pop-stand.
- Bridgitte** (*bitterly*) Like always, and I would appreciate you not comparing my privates to a popsicle stand, thank you.
- MV** It's as cold as one, don't you ever get any action?
- Bridgitte** I thought it best to practise abstinence while I have a haunted vagina, Mom!
- MV** I wouldn't let that stop me.
- Bridgitte** I know you wouldn't, nothing EVER stops YOU from doing what you want.
- MV** Woah, what's with the tension, your anus is all clenched up.
- Bridgitte** Eeew, Mom!
- MV** What, it's right there, am I supposed to ignore it? Whatsa matter honey, you got beef-curtains with me?
- Bridgitte** Ugh, Forget it.
- MV** I'm sorry, I'm listening, really...I'm all vulv-ears!
- Bridgitte** That's it!(*goes to storm out then realises she can't*) Ugh!!
- MV** You've always had a problem with me, what's your deal?
- Bridgitte** What's my deal? Oh I don't know Mom, maybe it's because you were a terrible parent!

Puss-essed // Naomi Duvall

MV Bridgitte!

Bridgitte Wrapped up in your own drama, you never had time for us.

MV Bernie never...

Bridgitte Never complains, I know! You know what? Nevermind, I hope your afterlife is as good as all those trips to Mexico, bingo halls and casinos! Get out of my life for good, okay? I don't need you, I've NEVER needed you!... and I really fucking wish I could storm out on you right now! **(exits)**

blackout as she exits

*lights up on **Bridgitte** entering with an "Occult R Us" bag. She reveals and consults an antique book beginning some kegel style ab exercises while the song "tik tok" by Ke\$ha plays. Movement sequence ends with her furiously bicycle kicking until she collapses in exhaustion*

blackout

*lights up on **Bridgitte** making her bed and moving around with high energy.*

Bridgitte *(reveals a vulva inspired puppet with hair, eyes and arms)* Ta da! It holds your spirit until it's ready to ascend to another realm, I got a little carried away with the details but it's fun hey? Oh and I had to stuff it with some bloody tissues and my pubes, it's gross but it should work.

MV You do whatever you need to do.

Bridgitte No long winded story or telling me what I should do instead?

MV What good is it going to do? Listen, I'm sorry I hurt you, I hope you can forgive me.

Bridgitte Why the hell couldn't you say that when you were alive?

MV Good question! Okay, say the magic words get me outta your hair

Bridgitte Hey, I know I never really said that I loved you but I did, I do

MV I know, ditto baby girl. Hey! Maybe we can do a stand up act when I'm in the puppet, make some cash off this debacle!

- Bridgitte** Let's just get you out of me first and then we'll talk; I'm not confident that your style of comedy will "have 'em in stitches".
- MV** Like the ones I got when I squeezed you out! badum ching!
- Bridgitte** Point proven, and saying badum ching doesn't make it funny, you ready?
- MV** As I'll ever be.
- Bridgitte** *(opening book and reading)* Terris aqua aer per ignem audis.. *(lights flicker)* woah
- MV** *(next section is the overtop of the following incantation)* Ooh, tingly! Keep it up, it's working! *(orgasmic noises)* Here I come Elviiiiiiiiis!
- Bridgitte** *(lights flicker/thunder throughout incantation)* Terris aqua aer per ignem audis Huius diei vita procedit Lux Source terrarum, Terris aqua aer per ignem audis Huius diei vita procedit Lux Source terrarum! *(as incantation comes to a close lights return to normal)* Crazy. Was I talking in tongues? Speaking your language eh? ... Mum? *(short pause)* 5 seconds of quiet, new record, you okay? *(silence)* Are you messing with me? Look, I'm sorry for the killer kegels, they hurt me too ... Shave and a haircut ... shave and a haircut ... c'mon ... shave and a haircut ... two clits! ... badum ching? ... Huh, there's no way you would not respond to that. *(pause, realising)* You're really gone *(picks up puppet)* I didn't show you the best part *(she presses the squirting mechanism she built into the puppet, it sprays, making her smile. The smile turns to a small laugh and then tears)*

blackout

Teeth on a String

Theodore Schwartzenhauer (They/Fae)

My yellowed teeth and pomegranate
seeds on a cord around my
throat, and Mother of Pearl between my
cracking lips.
You can't tell
The difference between the two.

It's all the same
to you where my body parts go,
so long as I am delicate
enough.

You would offer me chapstick,
you noticed my lips were cracking.

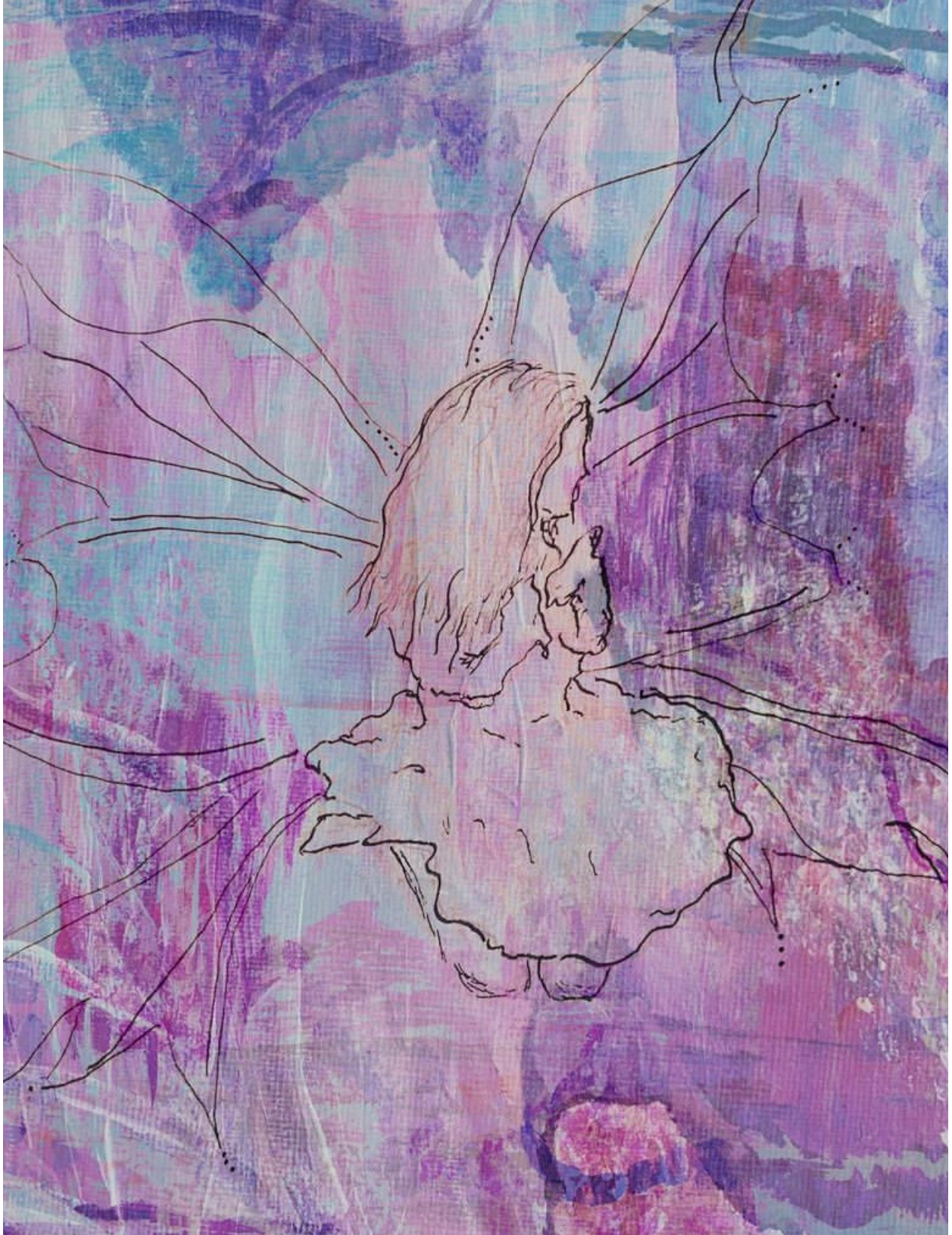
Send me to the funeral
pyre dressed in bridal silks
and play "here comes
the bride" while I stumble
over the too-long hem.
The pyre never lights,
it seems you've
decided on a better
use for me.

Later,
my mother will tell
me that people steal all the time.
There is nothing to be done about it,
and the way she calls
it theft will leave
me unmoored for years.
As if my heartstrings,
strewn about your home like
fucked-up fairy lights,
aren't essential to my
survival.

Persephone ate the pomegranate and
learned to love Hades, but the myth
is still called her rape,
the Underworld is still her
funeral pyre, and the oranges that
grow in the spring taste like
hunger and hope.

I don't have it in me to tell it all,
and the metaphors I choose
break down under scrutiny,
but this is still my victim
impact statement.
All of my evidence lives
in my bone marrow,
and when you ripped me open you
took that too.

The memories are far too delicate for you
to unwrap them from the
disintegrating lace they're preserved with.
Maybe, having them pickled
and jarred would have
made everything easier.
Maybe the vinegar would have
made me undesirable,
and you would've wound my
heartstrings back around my ribs.
But I know better
than to wish for anything but the
bone-bleached death shroud I've been
wrapped in since
I stumbled toward my funeral
pyre and you
played "here comes the
bride" knowing full well
the truth about the pomegranates.



Sharp // Kiki Wilmott

Inheritance

Vincent West

Deep in the shadow of the woods, cloaked in a spiral of creeping ivy, a sword lay under the protection of a dryad.

Unable to speak a dryad's proper name in human tongue, its wielder called her Willow: a namesake granted from the long, hanging leaves that fell from the crown of her head like a mane of silvery hair. He befriended Willow early on, before his swordsmanship was renowned; before his armour gleamed with finery; before he wore a lady's favour. He was a travelling knight, brave enough to risk the enchanted wood. Passing through this place could mean the difference between life and death, for it separated two great kingdoms on either side. However, the shortcut came with such dangers of its own that few even dared to consider it.

In Willow's unbiased opinion, dryads were the mildest of anyone's concerns. If visitors respected the wood, a dryad would let them be. However, when brash folk resorted to chopping their way through the maze, cutting down any obstacle in their path with the sharp blade of an axe or smouldering flame, they would soon find the trees coming to life in retaliation. This was only fair. The other dangers lurked that had little to do with self-defence: faeries who would lead poor travellers helplessly lost under the guise of guidance, living shadows that were eager to swallow men whole, predatory beasts in pursuit of a warm meal. These things would threaten even the meekest of travellers, no matter how courteous they may be.

The swordsman who named her Willow was not meek, but soft-spoken and kind, using the woods in a matter of urgency: a member of his family was ill and the medicine he required came from the kingdom on the opposite side. Willow, who generally paid humans little mind, came to notice him when he paused, so deliberately, to water a thinning plant from his sheepskin flask.

Such a precious resource, and he offered it like it was second nature. Willow showed herself to him then and—once his shock abated—she showed him the path to his destination. As they travelled, he told her where he journeyed to and why, speaking to her like he would a dear friend. In the aftermath, Willow realized that was what she had become to him in such a short time. She had never experienced anything quite like him.

Time passed differently between humans and dryads. She saw him often and realized after a time that his reputation was growing in part due to his ability to travel the woods without fear. Despite this, he never boasted or brought along other men, or tried to coax Willow to show him more than she offered. She guided him and he told her of all his adventures. While the

seasons left Willow unchanged, her companion could not say the same: his shoulders broadened, his scars increased like etching in old bark, and his hair began to thin and fade like leaves in autumn.

He wore a beard like winter snow when he saw her one last time, his blade held tight in his hand. It was a noble sword: a token of some king whose divine rule Willow was ignorant about. Humans often troubled themselves with a hierarchy that meant little when they all became the same dust and rot, but her friend called the blade an honour, and she would respect it.

"I cannot unseat a usurper from his throne," he explained, "but I can stop this steel from becoming a weapon of evil men."

He had unsheathed it for her once on a journey when he was first blessed with the right to wield its power. When drawn, the blade glowed like a golden star. Its radiance warmed Willow when she held her hand towards it, her body filled with a sense of both awe and serenity.

"You can defend it," Willow said, knowing her voice to be unpleasant to listen to. A dryad wasn't made to speak human tongue, or be heard with human ears. When she only practiced in his company, the sound did not become less grating, but he never made any indication that it bothered him.

"Dryads have such a flattering gaze," he replied with a fond sigh. "I'm too old, Willow. Humans grow more frail when they age; not like your strong old trees."

Willow looked at his creased skin, taking in the unavoidable slouch in his proud posture, and did not like to picture him as withering away. He always felt as solid to her as oak; deep-rooted and sturdy—but that was her affection, not reality. When he held the blade now, his arm carried a tremor, and his breath came with a rasp.

He was an old man; older than Willow had ever seen. Dying men didn't come into the woods.

The realization came and Willow felt desperate to fix him like she would one of her fading trees. She wanted to see him grow strong again. She wanted to put her hands on him, bathe him in fresh water and settle him down in rich soil.

It was a foolish impulse. When a human was buried, it was the end. They did not grow fresh roots.

"Please, Willow," he said softly. "I know it's no easy favour—more than a dryad has ever done for a human man."

Inheritance // Vincent West

Willow stayed silent for a moment, choosing words carefully from her limited vocabulary: unable to find words in the simple human language to express the depths of how much he meant to her.

“An easy favour,” she countered, her voice creaked like branches in the wind, “From one friend to another.”

He smiled sadly at her then and plunged his blade into the ground.

Men learned soon enough where the blade had been hidden. It followed a pattern simple enough for even the most foolish of them: Their honoured knight was famous for passing the enchanted woods; of course, he left his sword deep within it. A worthy successor to his name would have to prove that they too could navigate the woods and all its wonders.

No worthy inheritor came.

There were many attempts. While Willow knew this was an important task, it mostly left her untroubled. The woods did enough to ward off the imposing knights without needing her intervention. Her sister dryads disposed of many men due to simple disrespect, and even more became lost through their own naivety. Some fought amongst themselves too greedily to make any progress, ending each other’s pilgrimage without any help from the wood or its inhabitants.

It suited Willow fine, however it did leave her alone with the sword and her memories of its wielder. She asked her friend if she would need to tend it, polish its metal or keep it sharp, and he assured her that its magic would take care of all that; she simply had to guarantee the valour of its new owner. So, she let it be, enjoying how it looked with its new sheath of ivy. Until, one day, a knight approached the blade.

He was tall, clad in shimmering armour, and none of the wonders of the wood bested him. If he noticed Willow’s presence, he did not acknowledge it, and she almost made herself known—almost sought to banish him. Except he made it here, unstained by blood and humble in his footing, and that had to mean something. When he reached the sword, he dropped to one knee before it, and Willow did not stop him when his gauntlet closed around the hilt.

There was no need for her to interfere; the blade refused to budge. Others came after. They were few and far between, even by a dryad’s standards, but the result was always the same. It didn’t matter if their armour was fine or rusted if they carried a banner or an obvious blessing—none of them could free the sword from the forest floor. Some reacted with fury or despair, and others a surprising burst of laughter, and Willow found herself

baffled by the strange habits of human nature—both that of her friend and those who sought to claim his inheritance.

“What do you want from them?” she asked, her voice the crisp sound of dead leaves as she addressed the blade itself. She wished he would’ve let her bury him in the woods. She could not blame him for it; his world was as vast as her own, deep as the roots of her trees, and beyond her scope of understanding.

At the end of it all, at least she had something to remember him by. Unthinkingly, as she approached, she pressed her hand to the ivy-soaked hilt... —and felt the sword shift under her touch.

End

Mari-Mari

Shaun Phuah

the cicadas form a wall
of sound over at the island
their green bodies buzz,
attract the light of a city
Kinabalu, its glass and concrete
sit above the land
Borneo, the same car that
hit my friend will be
the same car that takes us
home, its front windshield
cracked, its wheels
barely hang on, and its
driver, smiling, and texting
letting everyone in the city know
that we are from the west—
that peninsula, drowning under
lard, under mud, under rice wine and
the black honey of stingless bees.
another mat rempit gets his brains
smeared across the highway, a pâté,
another body in another black
bag, that same gravel
taken from a landslide becomes
the same soil we use to bury
dad. the past arrives, its throat
sore, still in the jungle, still drinking.
it opens its mouth and speaks of oil,
those ancient bodies,
the violence in their
broken down fat.

The Survivor

Madeleine Fortin

Looking down the depths of the shower drain
I found a great big clump of long, long hair.
It's tangled and twisted and tumbled plain.
Gone forever is that sweet hair so fair.

I gagged out at my own cat-like shedding,
Leaving that old thick head of mine hairless
For weeks, the moment I had been dreading,
Turning into a Sphinx rather careless.

When the doctor said, "you'll lose all your locks,"
I wondered if she was a fat liar.
Her heart, beating health, mine a ticking clock.
Now, my name has become "the survivor".

But it doesn't leave the hair on my head,
A hero for my own deadly inconvenience,
Slowly wishing my nine lives wouldn't shed
the hair that once used to be on my head.

your father's laughter

lindsey n. woodward

after the eviction

you crashed in rubbish rooms
in the in-between times
of panhandling & church meals
crimping shadows with your body

the stench held you closer than anyone ever had.

the bag you cocooned in
stitched the twilight together
with threads of memory

like that late july night

you were 5 & you cried because
a Luna Moth was caught between window
glass & screen & you begged
your father to free her
so she could travel back
to the moon

but instead, he held a
flame beneath her
until the dust & starlight
merged &

your wails shuddered
out past the
zenith.



she loves me not // Amber Rose

When the Sky is Red

Kayleigh Mochan

I've never been one to romance her,
my words fall apart when I speak
but today King Charles has cancer
and my aunt found a mite in her tea.

So I called my mom, squinting up I told her
the sky is red on the day that I am one hundred days sober.
When the Wordle is a l i v e, and I've missed the past week—
e v e r y t h i n g, e m p t y, and all throughout the s e a m s,
I'd assume; if Wordle could live like me.

So when I write of solace; of my life in all its closure
when the bedside is neat
and the guard dogs curl up at our feet, asleep
of course, it's you on this page, one hundred times over.

It is you on this page,
one hundred times over.

Fight Test

Justin Million

Despite how deep the wires go
no longer
visible
in the mix

so our best minds go
active only in
picturing
ourselves

as bug-out bags
in brand
new
desert.

It's into the heat,
late
stage
now.

You need to know how
to fix yours
and your partner's
bicycle

for this
generation
might see the last human
night on Earth

when you
won't want
to be
found

between
machines—



So when you go solo you hold your own hand

The Bitches & Women // Elizabeth Corrigan

Two Unfaiths (Coin-faces)

Jordan Ona

I.

Nothing more to life than this:
the laboured race you almost win,
dull-grown drinks, the desperate limbs,
taken chances and un-got sums,
lovers' love and delirium.

II.

More, much more, abides in life,
than pride or pain or the passing height;
for I have dug and rolled in the worthless ditches,
been tossed in alleys, regretted wishes,
but I've seen stars and skies and sand,
beachlines forever, where the holiest men
believe no God, though gently lay
upon His hand, against His day
silence-struck, without demand.

The Ballad of John the Pirate

J.Q. Stanley

From what I have seen of his rhythms, John's one of the custodian guys;
A quiet old sot, with a grizzled face, and two wandering wall-eyes.

He tidies things up and drinks a few beers,
As he has, I believe, for a great many years.

We work under roof in one of those factories,
Where young men waste years in addiction to salaries.

Hired men, both John and I, have it each exceptionally rough;
But it seems he knows the ropes too well, so I'm mentally calling his bluff

See, I have a hunch, that our man John was a pirate in a long-ago life.
Replete with gold teeth, wormy peg leg, and a ghastly looking fish-wife.

He's swapped head wrap for a toque, and donned some different clothes;
Cavalier boots with buckles for his waterproof steel toes.

John's traded out the open sea for working those nine-to-fives.
It doesn't matter where or when, it's the scrubbin' where he thrives.

In place of swabbing briny decks on a glorious gallant galleon,
He mops our grimy hallways and is often cussed for dallying.

I once saw John at the pub, at the end of a long day's shift;
He was already four or so shots in and had slowly begun to list.
And while I watched him hunkered down, hugging the bar top so,
I envisioned him on shore leave in a tavern by the cove.

The barmaids were too sprightly, for this sea-slick salty dog,
He'd rather spy the bottom glass, on the off chance he'd find God.

My card declined, I looked to Fortune for a chance at another beer;
What better choice I got, I thought, than to ask a buccaneer?

Old pirates die hard, or so I have found, and dig their hooks in deep;
Clutching habits like jewels that were plundered, in the treasure chests they keep.

No matter the era, you always can tell, by the way he sways and speaks;
And of course, like me, all you have to do is mind him while he sweeps.

Bystander's Guilt

Ifrit Thoth

A whirlpool of salmon carcasses dance
in the frothy grey waters off Nanaimo.
The pygmy owl mocks me,
"What a pick-me."

Lumberjack hippies singing hymns about
Bobblylanism and mentally cosplaying
as Jon Snow, incest included but vegan by birth
(they're allergic to everything).

Wildfires licking
at the Sinixt blood-
soaked teak of
West Coast Modernism.

Your fake fireplace arouses
feelings of suspicion and
traitorous comfort. I freeze
because I am lonely.

My dog devours
a Fillet O' Fish he doesn't care
what Greta thinks about bycatch
it's not his fault
he's just a little baby boy.

I think about Maryam and her baby boys.
Did she know she was to mother
martyrs and how much she'd have to pay
for an immigration lawyer?

I go on Odyssey
for Home Depot Christmas trees
and giggleweep that I was not born
in Bethlehem.

The pygmy owl glares at me.
"Your Japanese lessons won't take themselves"
Duo, how do I say
"When will the Holy Land be Holy"
in Hebrew?

Pears of Apples

El Honey

apples for breakfast, with the turkey i dropped for you

under the seat of the picnic bench in the park
the grass underfoot, underbelly

the stones underfoot, underbelly,
between the figs who guard your comings and goings,

strawberry raspberries,
picked while you play,

you are going,
to lay in the sunshine under the pear tree

a fruit basket arrives, it's official.

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