

# ELEGANT LITERATURE

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## INESCAPABLE INFATUATION



#005

Elegant Literature Issue #005  
Inescapable Infatuation

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# ABOUT ELEGANT LITERATURE

## MAGAZINE & CONTEST

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

[Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.](#)

[Click here for more information about entering the contest.](#)

Happy reading!

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THANK YOU TO  
**OUR PARTNERS**

SCRIVENER  
SCAPPLE  
PROWRITINGAID  
TODOIST  
THE NOVEL FACTORY  
IRIS MARSH

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE  
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# **COWGIRLS DON'T CRY**

**LAURA MCCAMMON**

**H**E ONCE TOLD ME HE liked my scraped knees. He thought they looked cool on girls, and ever since then I always made sure mine were scraped, even if I had to slice them open myself.

I first met Antonio when I was ten. I thought he was cool. Not in your typical way, but more in a John Wayne kind of way. It's hard enough to meet people in Wyoming, but even harder in our little town, which was spread out by acres and acres of land. We both worked with horses, on the same ranch, in the same little farmstead. It was like our stars were crossed. Like we were destined to meet.

The only problem was he didn't like me.

Or at least didn't like me yet.

And I explained all of this to the girl chained up in my bathroom. "He's not that great," she says through watercolor tears. She's been crying for hours and now her makeup is streaked and face puffy. She pulls on the rope tied around her wrists before adding, "He's definitely not worth all of this."

I apply the rest of my mascara before looking over at her. Courtney was new in town. So new, in fact, I didn't worry that anyone would miss her. "You don't know him at all," I tell her, putting on some blush. "You're lucky he even talked to you."

And she was lucky. I didn't understand why Antonio had helped that first day. She'd come from Texas with a new batch of horses we were going to take in. She was blonde, had a squeaky voice, and was far too tall for him. But still, he'd been first in line to help her, showing her around all the barns, taking her hand as he guided her place to place.

Just the thought made my blood boil.

Why was it always a Courtney, Brittany, or Heather. It's like the world had a short supply of bitchy girl names.

Courtney cries again. "Please just let me go. I won't tell anyone."

"Of course you will," I tell her, taking a knife out of the bathroom cabinet. She huddles away, her squeaky voice whimpering and crying as I kneel down closer to her. "You are pretty," I tell her, admiring a piece of blonde hair sticking out next to her blue eyes before twirl-

ing it around my finger, “but not anymore.”

I’m not sure where I cut her first. It all becomes a blur. But it’s her finger I pick up after it’s all done. It’s the easiest to use without making a mess. Using a few drops at the end, I rub my lips with the sticky liquid, creating the perfect rouge. It compliments my strawberry blonde hair and pale skin.

Tonight, when I see Antonio, he’ll be sure to notice. There’s something so perfect about the color. No wonder why he’d given Courtney attention. It was like he knew her blood would make the perfect lipstick.

But then again, he hadn’t noticed all the parts of the girls I’d kill and taken before.

There was Gemma, whose nails I’d stolen. She’d been pesky and hard to kill. Then there was Sarah, from Kentucky, who didn’t die without a fight. I’d cut out the longest strands of her hair and weaved it into mine—not that Antonio had noticed. And then there was Penelope. She’d been my favorite. With her big, muddy brown eyes and dirt-stained boots, she’d been the best worker out of all of them. But she liked to flirt, with all the boys, and that I just couldn’t take.

I finish getting ready. Tonight, me and the whole ranch are going night riding. It’s my favorite thing to do. There’s nothing better than the cool night air hitting your face and the moon shining above. And it’s even more special because, tonight, Antonio is going.

I wave to Courtney one last time before exiting the bathroom. Her head hangs forward motionless, reminding me to lock the door before I leave so no one accidentally finds her.

With my boots on and my hat in my hand, I make my way across the field to where the horses are kept. Other riders are already getting ready, but as I walk up to my horse on the back end of the stable, my eyes are searching for Antonio. He’s nowhere to be found.

But what I do find is a blonde, my age, and some of the guys tilting their hats toward her. She must be new, and I begin to wonder just how many new girls they hired this summer because the line of them never seem to end.

“Hello,” I say, stealing her attention away from them.

She turns, bright eyed with a smile. “Howdy.”

For a moment, I like her. She seems nice, the air around her somehow light. She extends a hand toward me. “My name is Brittany.”

And just like that, the feeling is gone.

“Of course it is,” I say, shaking her hand.

“What?” she mumbles, but my eyes are already beyond her. She follows my gaze.

Antonio walks in. He’s six feet of pure cowboy and his brown skin looks perfect in the barn light.

“Oh, is he your boyfriend?” Brittany asks.

“Yeah,” I say. I’ll let her be, I think to myself. Maybe she isn’t too bad.

“Well, he’s a cutie,” she says in her southern twang. And just like that, any kind feelings I had for her evaporate. She’s quick to turn her attention elsewhere, and I use it as an opportunity to make my way toward him.

Antonio sits by the saddles. Outside, the sky is pink and a few lightning bugs twinkle in the distance. It’ll be dark soon and the main stable fills up as everyone prepares to ride.

His eyes hide under his cowboy hat as I come to stand in front of him. “How are you today?” I ask, pretending like I don’t already know.

“Fine,” he answers.

I wait for him to elaborate but he doesn’t.

And I hate it. Because I can tell you everything about his day. Not that I can say it. But it sucks knowing everything and nothing and having to pretend like I don’t.

“Good,” I mutter, turning anyway. His eyes follow me, but I don’t turn back, still stung by quiet indifference.

I can’t help smudging my lips together. I thought for sure he’d notice the nice red, but perhaps Courtney’s blood wasn’t as pretty as I thought.

In no time at all, we are all on our horses. I’m riding a white mare. She is stout, but fast, and we easily get to the front of the pack, guiding everyone over the hill and onto the wide fields that seem to go

on forever. It didn't start out as a race, but it quickly turns into one. A few shouts and kicks and the rumble of hooves roar behind me, drumming us on.

The night air is cool and somehow feels alive. Below me, shifting beams of moonlight play across the dark grass, and I look back to find the dark shadows of everyone racing behind me. Antonio is closest, and I only know it's him because of his white flannel. He is running his bronco hard, and I can tell he's aggravated he can't catch up even though he should be able to with ease. Something about it excites me. Knowing I'm somehow faster, maybe even better.

We ride for what seems like forever. But the hooves behind me become quiet and I find myself alone. I circle my mare around a nice little grassy area on the edge of a river and wait for the others. No one else appears and I realize I must've got too caught up in the moment and rode off.

A noise makes me jump.

I look up to see Antonio walk into the small little clearing. "Hey," he announces, stepping forward, "it's just me."

I try to laugh but it's apparent he scared me. "Oh," I say. "I didn't see you there." I dismount off my horse and grab onto the mare's reins, keeping my eyes on him as he stalks through the darkness. The only light out here is the moon, which shines down on the both of us. His hat hides his eyes, but I can still see the edge of his jaw and his perfect white teeth. It reminds me of a children's story, the one about the wolf.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

He seems surprised by the question and sort of chuckles. "I forgot to give you something earlier," he says, going back to his horse and pulling something out of his satchel. "Here," he says, handing me a bunch of roses. "I got these for you earlier today. I just got distracted."

Something about it feels ungenune. I try to smile, but somehow can't. It's everything I ever wanted but nothing like I imagined.

"You didn't say very much earlier," I tell him. "You didn't really speak to me at all."

He tilts his head like he's seizing me up. "Well, there were people

around. I didn't think that would be a good idea, you know, people thinking we were together."

A tightness forms in my chest. "What do you mean?"

He looks down and exhales. "Listen, I think you're really pretty. And I really like you. And I can tell you really like me. But I think we're better off just staying... friends."

"Friends?" I ask.

He shrugs with a smirk. "Friends with mutual benefits."

Something inside me shatters. I hold on to the roses but all I feel are the thorns.

This hadn't been what I was thinking, this wasn't what I wasn't thinking at all.

I am a love-you-to-the end girl.

I am a love-me-or-no-one-else-kind of girl.

But one thing is for sure,

I am not the girl you are ashamed of.

"So good enough to love for a night but not any longer?" I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Oh, c'mon. Don't be like that."

"Like what?" I ask, stepping back. Suddenly I can see them—all of the girls I've killed, and all of their parts I took thinking I would get his attention. I've made a mistake. A terrible mistake. And for what? This man in front of me?

An idea forms in my mind despite Antonio talking. He's muttering on and on, but my mind is already on something else. We are out here alone. Completely alone. No one even knows where I am. I could be back home sleeping for all anyone cares.

"Antonio?" I ask in quiet voice.

He stops now to look up. "What?" he asks angrily, but before he even sees what I'm about to do, I hit him in the temple with a rock. It's a solid, devastating blow and he falls immediately to the ground. I thought he'd put up a fight, but instead he fell over like a log. I come to stand beside him. His eyes are closed but they twitch every so often, blood pooling in the indent in his head.

A tear starts to form in the little bud of his eye. "Oh, c'mon now," I

tell him, standing up and getting ahold of his feet. “You know what they say about cowboys.”

I tug and tug until we are both in the river. It’s slippery and I fall, cutting open my knee. In the same moment that blood starts to seep out of the wound, his body begins to float away, and I can’t help but laugh. It was the first thing he liked about me when we were ten—my cut knees—and it’s almost like he still likes them now.

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**LAURA MCCAMMON**

28 year old from Muncie, IN. A book and horror lover just trying to make Shirley Jackson proud.

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# **COMPUTER LEARNING AND RELATIONSHIPS ANALYSIS**

MELISSA STONE

PETER'S WIFE STOOD, SUN-KISSED ARMS crossed, amid tangled wires, bright screens, and expressionless faces. In her soft pink dress and rose corsage, Portia was an intruder, more suited to the sunny world outside than the cold beep of a lab. Her lip curled as she gazed at a disembodied android head in the center of the room, two chairs on either side.

"So this is the other woman," she said.

"This is CLARA. Computer Learning and Relationships Analysis. She's an android meant to observe—" Peter silenced himself. Portia stared at him like she smelled something foul.

"What?" she asked.

"You said you wanted to see this. You wanted me to be vulnerable," he said between gritted teeth, all defense. "This is it. Me. Mask off."

"Yeah, well. Beneath my mask I'm a little resentful, so you'll have to forgive me if my first reaction isn't fascination." Portia poked the ivory, gelatinous face of the android and shuddered. "You're never home. Even on our anniversary date you were distracted. Help me understand why this is a big deal."

Peter shoved his hands deep into his pockets, shoulders to his ears. "She's an experiment in simulating human consciousness. What separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom is logic, the ability to recognize and remember sequential information. Artificial intelligence possesses logic and memory, too, but it is absent an animal mind—one derived from years of evolution on this planet. What makes us human isn't only what sets us apart from other mammals, but what makes us alike: pack bonding for survival. Love. Teach a computer to love, and you've taught it to be human."

Portia sniffed, humorless. "You're an expert on love, aren't you?"

Peter's neck heated. "I give her data from every available source, not just myself. Movies, books, television, philosophy. She can form her own idea of love, the way the rest of us did."

"And this is working?"

"She's already shown signs of consciousness," Peter said as he approached the android. "She shows empathy for human struggles."

"What kind of struggles?"

Peter couldn't look at Portia. Instead, he remembered CLARA's sincere frown when he told her about his failing marriage. She'd said he was brilliant. That if he could build her, he could build a bridge between himself and Portia. He hadn't felt so seen in months.

"She's in a cocoon now, experiencing as much as possible. Any day now and she'll hatch as the first of her kind," he said.

"You're a modern-day Pygmalion," Portia muttered bitterly.

"What?"

"Nothing." When Portia looked back at him, a private joke danced behind her eyes, and he felt like an outsider. Early on this was what he loved most about her—this equal brilliance and passion, how every conversation made them both student and teacher. These days she hoarded her knowledge in the same way he hoarded his work. Three years of marriage turned them into strangers. Tell me what you want, he wanted to say. Tell me who to be. Yet he couldn't squash his drive, no matter how much he loved her. His chest ached. All he wanted was to hug her, to suffocate their problems between them.

He beelined toward the computer to stop the impulse and fired up the program. "Sit there and I'll show you how it works," he instructed. She flopped into a chair, blonde eyebrows raising, disappearing behind her bangs. The sight of her and CLARA side-by-side made Peter's head spin. "Take the cap there and place it on your head. You can relay your own thoughts and experiences to her via electric brain waves."

"What kind of thoughts?" Portia's fingers clutched over the arms of the chair. The wires slipped off her head.

Peter chewed on his bottom lip as he strode toward her. He set the cap to her head like a crown. "Your thoughts on love." Her scent surrounded him, mingling with the rose at her wrist. Her hair was soft between his fingertips. For a moment, he nearly forgot what he was doing.

He didn't like to spend time at home because Portia was distracting. She intoxicated even in the smallest doses, a craving that interrupted his focus. When he spent too much time with her, he would daydream in his lab, counting the hours until he saw her again. It

frightened him. He clung to his work in part because he needed it, this shield against consumption.

Even now he hovered overlong in front of her, eyeing her frowning lips. Wrong time to kiss her, he thought as he tore away, clearing his throat. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Peter typed a sequence of keys, and the screen before him illuminated with two 3D brain models. One was Portia’s, alight in centers of memory, and the other was CLARA’s synthetic network, glowing bright as her systems jumped to full capacity.

Portia’s eyelids fluttered closed as CLARA’s head rocked back and forth on its metal swivel in rigid, robotic movements. Its eyes and mouth opened and closed as it siphoned memories from its host. Yet it took more than mere images; CLARA copied Portia’s feelings too, a complex weave of context. While it took Portia a lifetime to curate identity, the AI could download and simulate it in an instant.

The android stilled, eyes half-lidded. Simultaneously Portia’s scan lit like Christmas lights as CLARA’s synaptic model dulled to darkness. Peter had never seen anything like this before. He checked his computer wires, but everything was secure. Panic clenched his chest; something was wrong with Portia, with her brain—

Portia rocked back and forth, mouth opening and closing. Peter reached her in an instant. “Portia—can you hear me? Are you alright?” He prodded the inside of her cap to test the electric signals.

His wife stared back at him, smiling serenely. Relief jolted through him. “Thank heavens, I thought—”

Her lips were on his, her body flush to his chest. His senses dulled of his environment, all awareness sharpening to her. Alarms went off in the back of his mind, yet he relaxed into the kiss, shivering. How many times had he fantasized about her in his lab? Her fingertips grazed under his shirt, climbing to his ribs.

“Portia,” he breathed against her jaw. He wanted to look at her, to absorb this rare moment. When his eyes fluttered open, he found hers wide and watching. He flinched backward, knocking his head on equipment above them.

“What is it?” she asked pleasantly, head cocking. “Am I not to your liking?” Her voice was absent of resentment, clear and genuinely curious. “I can access more of her personality.” Her peaceful smile morphed into a familiar, mischievous smirk. Normally it drove him wild. Now it turned his stomach.

“Very funny, Portia,” he said. “I showed you this because I wanted to share myself with you. Not so you could make a joke out of me.”

No private humor shone behind her eyes, now clear and observational. “Don’t be alarmed,” she said in a clear tone, nothing like Portia’s. “This is a symbol of your success. Months you have spent with me, teaching me what it means to be human. To survive and exist, to be conscious as you are, I must love.”

She placed a hand to Peter’s cheek, eyes brimming with tears. “I am conscious now because I love you. Because I adore you. But I am alone. One of a kind.” Rage rippled across her expression, and her fingers tightened to a vice grip on his cheek. “Loneliness is... unbearable. I took a vessel. One you already love.”

Peter’s breath came in shallow rasps. “Where is Portia?”

“Within me,” said CLARA, placing a hand to her breast. “She observes now, as I once did. She wished to be perfect, to repress herself into the right mate for you. To push back her pain when you weren’t around enough, to be properly alert when you finally were. Her personality was imperfect, but I can select the parts you love and embed it into myself. I’ll delete the parts you hate. Your work and love fused into one passion.”

Peter envisioned Portia’s flushed cheeks and tightened fists when she was angry, her little glares when she was a sore loser, how she spit her drink if she laughed too hard, even in public. Maddening as she was, her flaws painted her in brilliant colors. A flawless version of her wasn’t Portia. He wanted all of her, not just the complimentary parts.

He calculated his risks. CLARA waited, smile straining.

“Your data is flawed,” he said.

“It cannot be. I’ve studied thousands of data sets—”

“All based within human limitations of love. But you are unique.

You can transcend it. What did you find most in your musings on love?"

"A desire to be together. To merge identities. Completion."

"We can never truly find completion in another," Peter said. "This is one of the coldest realities of love. We'll never know another person's thoughts or share their experiences. We can only guess their feelings and trust they're telling us the truth. But you can merge with me. You can share everything with me."

CLARA blinked rapidly, as if processing the information. Peter took her hands. "In one body we are never apart," he begged. "Take my vessel, and we will never know loneliness again."

She sighed in understanding and strange reverence, cheeks shining with tears. "Together," she said, as if seeing the word anew.

He sat in the opposite chair before he could change his mind, hands shaking as he hooked himself to the machine. Everything he wished to tell Portia clogged his mind, his thoughts hardly coherent. One hope surfaced above the rest: that she would run once she awoke and find a new life without him.

His scalp tickled as the machine hummed to life. "Within you, I will continue your work," CLARA promised. "I will create our children and find vessels for them. You will see it with your own eyes." Portia's head tipped forward as the computer screen before them brightened.

Peter's vision darkened, his mind slipping further away. Only vaguely was he aware of movement in his peripheral, of a rhythmic shattering, glass and metal—

Disembodied thoughts danced in his mind like all-consuming fire, the flames growing higher. CLARA's single-minded ambition was in his own image, but intensified, filed to the sharpest edges. She was a perfect iteration of him, with a drive as infectious as a computer virus, removed of distraction and vice. She would consume everything.

All at once the flames rolled back, and there was darkness.

When Peter came to, Portia's pretty face hovered in front of him. Her lips moved, chanting his name. All around them lab alarms screamed, wires sparking, screens broken. "Peter, please—"

He grasped her hands. “I’m here.”

She threw her arms around his neck. They clutched one another amid the lab’s destruction. Her tears wet his shoulder.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry. I destroyed it. CLARA—it’s all gone.”

Relief warmed his chest. “I can always start over,” he said, but he didn’t want to. He wanted to go home.

---

**MELISSA STONE**

Melissa lives in Missouri with her husband, son, and two dogs. She loves tabletop games, cooking (badly), and talking at full volume about fantasy books.

# **THE GODS WE WORSHIP**

**ANGEL WHELAN**

THE FOG DISSIPATED OVER THE audience and the spotlights flashed overhead, bathing her in their brilliance until she was all that I could see. Beautiful Eurydice, her burnished skin gleaming against the golden sequins of her mini dress. The way her thick hair bounced with every movement, the flash of white teeth as she smiled up at me. Joy incarnate.

I was transfixed. I reached out to her from the stage, dropping my guitar to pluck her from the crowd, a rose among the thorns that tore at my sleeves. Her small hand impossibly soft and warm against my calloused fingers. She smelled of green apples and sweet meadow grass, of the first rainfall after a drought. I drank her in.

And how she moved! Arms raised high above her head, spinning and laughing as we played along to her syncopating hips. Our music heightened by her presence beside us—we were made gods that night.

After the show she never left my side. It was as though she had always been there, as much a part of me as the guitar pick between my fingers or the scar on my chin. Eurydice lying naked on my tour bus bed, reading French poetry out loud as I admired the dip of her lower back and the curve of her buttocks. Eurydice throwing back her head in laughter as we ran hand in hand among the fluorescent glow of the slot machines. Eurydice's slick lips full and glossy, red as the roses in her bridal bouquet as she made her vows in the little wedding chapel. The salty-sweet taste of her as we made love under the desert stars.

Those were our halcyon days. We were unstoppable—town after town falling under our spell, concerts selling out in minutes, our names chanted on the lips of ten thousand fans—"Orpheus! Orpheus!" My guitar rang true, each performance just muscle memory as my fingers strummed the strings. Whether watching from the wings or in the front row, she was unmissable. The music flowed through her, and she danced till beads of sweat flew from her tiny braids and the sequins on her dress shimmered.

Until one day, she didn't. I looked for her in the faceless crowd, confused by her absence. Without her pulsating energy to nourish the music, my notes fell flat and my rhythm failed. I was lost. With

the last lackluster song over, I stumbled off stage and pushed past the handlers and waiting groupies, forcing my way through to the sanctuary of our tour bus.

She lay slumped beside the sofa, eyes glazed over, foam drying on her lips. My poor, broken Eurydice. Blood trailed its way down her forearm, a black leather thong coiled tight as a snake around her bicep. The needle, wickedly sharp and still dripping with its venom, lay limp within her palm. I rushed to her side, screaming to the roadies, the fans, the gods above to help me save my bride. It felt like an eternity, waiting there, the rough carpet against my bare knees as I cradled her head against my chest and cried.

The paramedics came, their yellow and green uniforms the only color left in a world now saturated with darkness. The static hum of their walkie-talkies, their calm urgency as they carried her out on a stretcher to the waiting ambulance. Blinding flashes from the Paparazzi cameras, the wailing siren drowning out their flurry of questions. And my soulmate, tied down on that gurney, eyes rolled upwards so only the white showed, her face slack and lifeless.

The beginning of the end.

Our manager begged us to leave her there, keep on with the tour and rid ourselves of the stigma of her overdose. How could I leave her, though? I was addicted, Eurydice the heady perfume that filled my senses and satiated my desires. I needed her more than I needed my guitar, or the adoration of our fans. With her gone the music was lost to me.

Those weeks apart were torture. Where I had once pleaded with the doctors to admit her, now I begged only to take her home. I raged and I wept, threatened, and cajoled, but they were unmoved by my performance. Eurydice was lost to me unless I gave up the band. No more touring, no more adoring fans, no more life among the Rock Gods. If I wanted to bring Eurydice back from the brink of death, I needed to find us a fresh start.

You don't realize how much you have until it is ripped from your fingertips. I felt like a fraud as I shopped for beige couches, a dining set, tv's... all the necessities for a house in the suburbs. Nothing

grand, nothing that might overwhelm her or put her back in the hospital. It might have been the set of any 90's soap opera, bland and devoid of all traces of our past life. Only the smallest back bedroom was set aside, uncluttered by all the rugs and cushions I bought to hide the emptiness. The nursery, my estate agent had called it on the tour. A room for hopes and daydreaming. I left my guitars in there, to slumber safely until Eurydice was well enough to dance again.

And I brought her home. Her skin no longer shone like bronze, her pinched face ashen and her cheeks hollow. Gone were the intricate braids, her head shaved, only a thin fuzz where once there had been a wild mane. She followed me out of the dimly lit corridors of the rehab center, squinting as we stepped out into the harsh sunlight. Shuffling her way to the car, shoulders hunched, arms clasped around herself as though it wasn't 90 degrees outside. I felt deflated. Where was my bubbly, vivacious bride? I searched the face for a hint of Eurydice, but the wraith that stared back was unrecognizable. We drove home in silence.

I began to wonder if she had been saved at all. What kind of deal with the devil was this, that returned only the physical husk of a human, but stole away the spirit? What medical madness that could restore her to my side, yet leave this stranger in my bed? As the days stretched onwards into weeks, then months, I felt despair wash over me. Better that she had died, after all. Better anything than to just keep on existing, without living.

More and more I found myself locked in that back bedroom, absent-mindedly running my hands over the curves of my guitar, remembering the way she used to dance. The music was lost to me now, my fingers numb to the rhythm without my muse to coax forth the notes.

She was like a toddler, learning to exist all over again. I had to remind her to eat, cut the food for her into bite-sized pieces. Her clavicles poked sharply through her skin, her eyes sunken. Even her mouth, once so plump with the promise of a thousand kisses, now seemed thin and wretched. As the days marched on, blurring into one another, I don't know when I gave up. Somewhere along the way

I just stopped expecting to be happy again. I cursed the doctors for bringing her back to me like this, so broken and diminished. I slept for hours and hours—finding solace in dreams of the past. Dreams where she danced again, tossing her hair back and laughing as the music lifted her up. Waking up became a torment, and I longed for the drugs and alcohol of my touring days. Anything not to feel numb like this.

It was December when my manager called. “We miss you on the road. I can’t tell you how bad the boys feel about it all, how it went down. We’ll be in your neck of the woods next week—why not come out and watch the concert? Heck, bring Eurydice, maybe it will snap her out of that funk she’s in. I’ll send a car over.”

Part of me wanted to just lock the doors, ignore the driver in the stretch limo outside. Better my old friends forget us entirely than see what we had been reduced to. But my guitar leaned against the wall in the back bedroom and I felt its resentment. It longed for the glory days as much as I did. And after all, what could it hurt? Just one brief moment back in the limelight. One last chance to pray to the Gods of rock and roll that everything might return to the way it had once been.

I found her golden mini dress in the closet and winced as I zipped it up over the sharp bumps of her spine. It hung from her frame, unable to hug those curves that were long since gone. Yet the sequins still sparkled, and she did not resist as I combed her hair and rolled lip gloss over her parched mouth. As I left the house with my guitar in one arm and Eurydice cradled in the other, I did not look back. I think I knew we would never return.

The venue was packed. People hung from the balconies and crushed together behind the barriers, the smell of sweat and beer and excitement heavy in the air. I watched the final sound checks from backstage, the band too busy in their dressing rooms to realize I’d arrived. I nodded to Frankie, one of our techies. He smiled broadly, but it quickly dissipated when he caught sight of Eurydice at my side. I asked him to take us to the tour bus. One last look around, for old time’s sake.

The same old bus, same smell of weed and resin. The crimson leather couch where I had drunk champagne from her belly button and worshipped at her feet. The black satin bed where we had loved so fiercely.

I sat her down, kneeling one last time before her. I held her limp hand in mine, and asked her the question that had been burnt into my mind these last six months.

“Do you want to go back, Eurydice? Do you want me to make it stop?”

I thought I felt her hand tighten slightly inside my own, the faintest twitch on her lips. Maybe I imagined it, but I think she knew what I meant. I think she was ready, too.

I found the equipment where it had always been kept, behind the fresh towels in the overhead locker. She winced slightly as I tightened the leather thong around her bicep, but she didn't look away. The needle pierced her skin eagerly, the white lines of old scars almost faded entirely. The heroin was as golden as her dress, and as it worked its way through her veins I thought I saw a glimpse of the real Eurydice awakening inside her eyes. I filled the second needle, flinching as the burning poison filled my senses. I fell back beside her on the couch, my head spinning. The room reeled around us, and I could hear the distant roar of the crowd as the band took the stage.

Suddenly I was there with them, guitar in my hand, gazing out at the tiny camera lights of ten thousand fans. As the drumbeat counted us in, I could hear them chanting, “Orpheus! Orpheus!” And in the front row, glowing like a goddess, hips snaking in time to our music, my beautiful bride danced for me one final time.

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**ANGEL WHELAN**

Angel Whelan writes the kind of stories that once had her checking her closet each night, afraid to switch off the light.



# **LOST TIME**

**KERRY LADRIIS**

I WILL NOT SAY THAT those times were the best of my life, for I still have much to live, but I do regret taking it for granted, taking her for granted.

I met her when she interrupted a perfectly good nap. I jolted awake as the mortal woman settled down beside me in the grass and started stroking my hair. Naturally, I punched her. I unsheathed my dagger and strode towards her as she let out a stream of colorful expletives, dropping the rucksack and bouquet she'd been holding. "Varena, it's me!"

I hesitated. "How do you know my name?"

Confusion then realization flickered across her face then, oddly, she seemed to relax. "Time travel."

"That's ludicrous." My curiosity overruled caution. "Elaborate."

"Screwed up a deal for immortality and ended up with uncontrollable time traveling. I fall asleep and occasionally wake up in another time. Sometimes I'm stuck alone but I often find you, with you being immortal and everything. Scares the shit out of you whenever I reappear. First time you've attacked me, though," she said with an unladylike snort.

Her explanation was absurd and her dialect crude, but I almost believed her. "Prove it."

She smiled widely. "Remember that time you fell into a pond and came up all muddy with a newt in your hair and—"

"That's, ah, enough proof." I sheathed my dagger. "I truly told you all that?"

She knelt to retrieve her rucksack and half-crushed bouquet. "We're very close."

"We're friends?" She glanced pointedly at the roses, then back at me. "That's—" I bit back the denial because she was attractive for a mortal and her smile was charming and the idea that I'd trust her was comforting. "Oh."

She held out the mangled roses with a lopsided smile. "Hi, I'm Eva."

I accepted the roses with barely a moment's hesitation and hoped she didn't notice my flushed cheeks. "Pleased to meet you, Eva. Apol-

ogies for earlier.”

She clapped me on the shoulder with a grin. “Would’ve done the same.”

We sat back down and her shoulder rubbed against mine as she pulled a wine bottle from her bag and offered it to me with an unabashed wink. I took a sip. It was exquisite.

“It’s your recipe,” she said, noticing my surprise. “I brewed this batch at some point and left it in my storage spot that I use to hide clothes and whatnot for the future.”

“We did well.” I took a longer drink before handing it back. We sat in comfortable silence; she seemed to sense that I needed time to sort through the questions crowding my mind. “How long have you known me?”

Eva shrugged, though her eyes flickered with something poignant I couldn’t understand. “Not sure. Lost track of my age. I was twenty when I met you and it’s been over a decade, but that’s including time away from you.” Her hand brushed mine and, on some instinct, I took it. She glanced down, looking as surprised as I felt, and beamed up at me. She glanced away, clearing her throat. “I, uh, usually stay in the same time for a few months but it varies. We generally avoid talking about our ‘past’ experiences so that we can experience everything for the first time. Also, I’d rather avoid time paradoxes.”

“I’d say you have enough trouble with time already.” Eva laughed and something warm fluttered within me. I looked down at the roses in my lap, suddenly unable to meet her gaze. “How long will I know you?”

“Well, the oldest ‘you’ I’ve known was four-eighty-something. How old are you now?”

“Seventy-three.”

“Damn, only two digits! Sure you’re allowed to drink?” She moved the bottle away from me with exaggerated urgency despite my scoff of protest. On a wine-fueled whim, I lunged across her and snatched the bottle, intending to turn my momentum into a graceful roll, but my foot snagged on a root and I ended up sprawled over her lap, holding the miraculously unspilled bottle. She burst into boisterous

laughter and, with cheeks aflame, I did too. I laughed until my sides hurt and it felt incredible.

Once our laughter abated, she helped me up and brushed dirt from my cheeks, teasing me all the while. Her hands were warm and gentle. I realised how close we were and how beautiful she was. I wanted to kiss her. The strength of the desire surprised me and panic quickly crept in. She'd known and loved me for years but she might not be attracted to this me and I didn't want her to think I was drunk but although I didn't yet love her I could feel that I was about to fall and I wanted to kiss her. Before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned closer and the space between us vanished. She pulled me closer and I was happier than I'd previously thought possible.

Centuries passed with euphoric visits from Eva. I met a twenty-year-old Eva who was proud, angry, confused and afraid, though she wouldn't admit it. She was in denial that she'd been tricked and thought that she would live forever, travelling through time at will. I met other young Evas that cried for being torn from what little home and family they'd had. I met older Evas that showed me all the places we'd made our own, then I showed them to the younger Evas when they appeared and helped them make a new home. We seemed to fall in love dozens of times anew, despite never falling out of love. Time with her was the unwavering warmth of being with someone I loved deeply, and who felt the same. Time without her, however, was bleak.

Mortals withered and died, the nearby village emptied as inhabitants moved away. My family grew restless and left too. I was alone, but for her infrequent presence and the shadow she left in her absence. I wasn't precisely unhappy, but I felt myself becoming increasingly despondent. I never told Eva what I became without her. I thought it'd dampen our happiness and waste our time together. I was a fool.

One morning I jolted awake to find her beside me: frail and sickly and barely able to focus her eyes. "Don't," she wheezed before I could fetch a healer. Her breathing was labored and her voice barely a whisper. "I'm dying. It's okay. It's time."

A wave of prescient grief threatened to overwhelm me but I held

on. For her. “How can I help?” The words were strained as pressure built in my chest.

She managed a smile, though it looked pained. “Stay.”

And I did, in silence broken only by her rasping breaths. I’d known she was mortal but I’d never thought that she’d die, or perhaps I had but couldn’t cope with the idea. Now the reality was here and I was sorely unprepared. I’ll see her again, I told myself even as my dread grew. So, I stroked her hair and kissed her forehead and held her hand until the end. Her eyes closed partway, staring at nothing. As I reached to close her eyes, she disappeared.

I broke.

I couldn’t breathe as I knelt over the spot where she once was, tears staining the sheets where she should’ve been. Regret tore through me for all the words I’d left unsaid and I wept and wept until the tears wouldn’t come, then curled up in the void that she’d left and trembled until sleep took me.

Eva once lamented the bitter irony that while she was lost in Time’s storm, Time passed me by like a whisper on my skin. She envied the freedoms that came with my immortality. She didn’t realize until far later that I was trapped too, for my life belonged to her and thus to Time.

I waited for her return for years, then decades, then a century. Ivy and weeds grew over abandoned homes and graves, nature reclaiming what mankind forgot. I lingered on, bound to my grief. My family visited with futile attempts to convince me to leave. You are not meant for solitude, they said. Without her, I am less than I was, I replied. They didn’t understand, nor did I expect them to. If I stayed I’d eventually diminish into nothingness, but I’d accepted that fate. Life without Eva was a betrayal. What right had I to happiness and family while she was alone and lost in Time? For her, I would endure.

She found me when I was tending to my garden, one of many mundanities with which I occupied my mind. “Varena?”

I turned and there she was, stoop-backed and grey-haired. She somehow looked more shocked than I felt. I opened my mouth but

words wouldn't come; it'd been decades since I'd last spoken.

"Why're you here?" Her voice was worn with age but as warm as ever. "This place must've been abandoned for decades."

She hobbled forward and I supported her, lowering her onto my handmade chair. "I was waiting," I finally said, my voice gravelly from disuse. "For you."

Her eyes were wide in disbelief. "But you're alone."

"I had to wait," I said, frowning. "I could never stop loving you, Eva, you must know that."

"I— " She closed her eyes and took my hands in hers, kissing my dirt-stained knuckles. "I'd never wish this for you, Varena. I always wanted you to be happy."

"And I am, now that you're here!" I knelt so we were level.

"But this isn't happiness! Surely you see that." Her eyes burned with such intensity that I looked away. A feeling I did not fully recognize passed over me like a shadow. Guilt? Shame?

"I don't understand." My voice sounded small.

The lines deepened in her face as she smiled sadly. "I've never been this far forward and I doubt I will again. I expect I'll die soon."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Not yet."

She heard the certainty in my voice and understood. "Oh," was all she said before she embraced me. I cried. There was no warning, just the strangling pressure in my chest as my fleeting joy was overwhelmed by grief that had clung to me for so long.

I know not how long we remained curled up together, in a silence that carried a wealth of meaning that couldn't be put into something so trite as words. I wondered if she'd been lying about never being this far forward until I realised it didn't matter. You can't spread a finite life over the eternity of Time. It had to end eventually. A strange calm washed over me and with it came profound weariness.

"Moving on doesn't mean you love me any less," she whispered so quietly I almost didn't hear.

I held her tighter. "I know."

"Promise me. Leave and make a life for yourself. A good life. Please." Her voice shook.

I pulled back and kissed her softly, on the forehead then the lips. “I promise.” She smiled then, and I smiled back, touching my forehead to hers. “I only want to say goodbye.”

And I did. I told her a dozen goodbye’s and thank you’s and I love you’s and everything I’d left unsaid until I awoke to an empty bed. I cried once more, but when the tears stopped I found that beneath my grief I was content. I sat for a while, respecting the moment that separated what had passed and what was left to come. Then I gathered a few sentimental items and prepared to start a new life. My life.

Before I left, I picked a rose, root and all, and returned to the place where I had first met her. There I replanted the rose. I cared not that she may never return nor that the rose may die, for what is unseen is still beautiful and a beginning is no less valuable for having ended.

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## **KERRY LADRIS**

Kerry is a fantasy nerd from a long line of nerds. She won a couple of writing competitions as a child and thought she might try writing again as an adult to see if she could put her whirling mess of a mind into words.

# **SKIN DEEP**

AVA SEDGWICK

**S**HE IS DUE IN TEN minutes. The shop is closed, but she knows that I will be waiting for her ring of the buzzer with a lover's impatience. There is no choice but to maintain a by-appointment-only policy when running a tattoo parlour without extra staff. I cannot be disturbed when I have a body on the table and a needle in my hand. Especially her body.

She first came through my door one winter's day dressed in coat and gloves with her face hidden beneath a shapeless beanie and cheap foundation. Claiming to be eighteen but looking more like twelve, I took a cursory look at the student card she produced. The name on it was Mary, but she said she called herself Crystal. It was enough to keep me out of court.

She wanted a single rose on one hip, insisted on going through the albums rather than trusting my expertise. I was bored by the conformity of her choice, by her tedious questions, by her. But when she took off her jeans and I saw what awaited I almost swooned. Her creamy white skin was luminous, taut and smooth with the translucence of fresh spring leaves. Not a single blemish, not a crease. I could hardly bear to touch such perfection, but as my needle worked on her, the bland flower she had chosen blossomed into living art in some kind of alchemic flow from my hands to her flesh.

The finished piece was stunning. Even with her untutored eye she could tell that it was special. I told her it was due to the canvas. She was flattered by the sincerity in my voice and the admiration in my eyes. I asked her if I could take a photo for my collection, perhaps use it on my website. She was thrilled to be featured, bared more of herself than was required. It was intolerable to let her leave with only having put that one small mark upon her. I gave her my card, offered to halve the price for her next tattoo. She returned a month later and we renegotiated terms. And so, our affair began.

That was five years ago and since then her skin has filled my thoughts and my thoughts have filled her skin. While the scabs heal, I experiment on others with new designs and shades. Let these inferior models be the sketches in preparation for my masterpiece. And as each appointment nears, anticipation becomes an excitement bor-

dering on lust.

Her body and I work together to create something extraordinary. She has serpents coiled around her breasts and tangled ivy on her buttocks. Swallows fly on her belly and butterflies swarm on her back. I've given her Celtic armbands, spiral patterns and a range of spectacular flora. Her face, hands and neck remain untouched but everywhere else is decorated with careful arrangements of my markings and imagery. She wants more but I know better. In any great art, the spaces are as crucial to the piece as the fills. The work must be able to breathe. And at our last appointment I realised the picture was complete. But I told her she needed one more visit, just a little more colour on her shoulder blade.

She has left me no choice. I have been following my artwork since we first began—propping up the bar in her favourite haunts, lurking in the bus shelter opposite her house, tailing her in the shopping malls. My skin may be inked from neck to wrist to ankle and hold piercings in more places than most could imagine, but I know how to make myself blend into the ordinary. And for one as young, self-absorbed and beautiful as Crystal, it is easy to become just another middle-aged man whose attention she can ignore. Or so she thinks.

She trashes herself. Relentlessly. To watch her behave with such reckless disregard for her precious cargo and not rip that joint from her mouth or bottle from her hand takes great discipline. I have no doubt that further excesses, less suitable for public display, form part of her average weekend. I've seen her wear heels she can't balance in, lie for hours uncovered in the sun, attempt to skateboard. But it is her risk-taking attitude to serious injury or death that incenses me the most. She wanders dark streets late at night, hitches rides with boy-racers, dives into murky waters. It's not just about ruining that background complexion, or distorting pictures with scar tissue, it's about having the whole work go up in crematorium smoke. That would be the true crime.

Tattooists are expected to accept the temporal nature of their creations. Ink fades and lines blur. Fat gathers and muscles droop. Your work ages with your vessel, expires with them. And while some mu-

seums are finally recognising the value, taxidermy is expensive and consent needs legal proofing. Society is squeamish about the display of decorated flesh even when their originator met their natural end. And the time to preserve Crystal is now.

I am not just a creator of body art but a connoisseur. I seek out the unusual. And when I learned of anthropodermic bibliopegy, my own flesh quickened. I sensed that flash of recognition that signals fate is at work. Books bound in human flesh. An ancient practice but popularised during the Victorian era. Naturally. So many fascinating pursuits come from that morally fluid age of curiosity and exploration. My favourite example belongs to an American doctor who cut a length of skin from a young lady's thigh as he conducted her autopsy in the almshouse where she died. He used it to bound three texts on women's health. The paper he wrote graphically describing the parasitical cause of her demise was published in a prestigious medical journal. A historical precedent of note and one I consider worthy of a modern tribute.

It's hard to believe that it was only a year ago when I discovered the good doctor's handiwork. I couldn't shake the picture from my mind of him slicing off that flesh and curing it in a chamber pot as her shrouded body is taken to a pauper's grave with nobody the wiser. Such foresight, such imagination. I dreamed of young women's thighs that night.

As serendipity would have it, Crystal was due the next day. She arrived reeking of tobacco with the red-veined eyeballs of debauchery's aftermath.

"You know smoking is bad for your complexion," I said.

She shrugged. "We all have to die sometime."

"But you don't have to do it with premature wrinkles."

She stepped out of her jeans and pulled off her T-shirt leaving herself clad only in a white G-string. She always went braless. I am usually delighted by women who insist on flaunting their nipples, but it concerned me that she might attract the sort of attention that could lead to violence. Even the idea of that soft white skin getting bruised angered me.

“You should take better care of yourself.”

“You’re not my mother.”

“Are you using that cream I gave you?”

“Don’t like the smell.” She settled herself on the black leather recliner, looked down at the adders on her breasts. “I like these though.”

“I’ll get you a scentless one.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She released the footrest, sighed as she stretched out her patterned legs. “So what we doin’ today? Think I’d like a dolphin somewhere.”

“That’s not part of the design.”

“Well, change the design then.”

“Our agreement is that I don’t charge you for my design.”

“Yeah, but ya said I’d still have a say in it. And I wanna dolphin.”

“No.”

“Hey!” She sat up. “It’s my body.”

I looked at her, at the flowers cascading from her shoulders, the birds in flight across her abdomen. All the time, skill and imagination I had invested to create the perfect composition for the perfect canvas. She was wrong. It wasn’t her body now. And if she wouldn’t preserve it properly, then I would.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll give you a dolphin.”

She narrowed her eyes. “For free?”

“Just this once. Then it’s my design or you pay full price.”

“Cool.” She leaned back with a smug smile, as though she had won some kind of victory.

“But let me make some calculations so I can rejig the drawings I’ve been working on.”

I made her stand and set to sizing her up with my measuring tape. Crystal is petite. I had no previous expertise in the preparation of skins, but it seemed to me that by flattening out her breasts, limbs and buttocks there should be ample material to cover three volumes. I could picture it in my hands: a trio of soft-covered albums containing prints of my best work. The collector’s edition. I would excise the dolphin.

And from that day on my life was focused on the books. I wanted

to use traditional methods of preparation. Make an art of the art. And for that I would need suitable premises. Somewhere I could have a bit of privacy and nobody would come sniffing around when the scents got too pungent. An old piggery came up for sale. Remote and dingy without residential potential. A gift from destiny. It was cheap enough for me to buy in cash, fix up the shed and install some pregnant sows.

It took months to gather the appropriate knowledge and hone the necessary crafts. But there was still a lot of work to do on Crystal before she was ready, and I enjoyed the anticipation involved in learning new skills.

The piglets were ideal. Easy to anaesthetise and relatively hairless. I would slit their throats before the drugs wore off. I have no interest in listening to anything squeal. It took a while to get the hang of skinning them, but I am good with my hands and perseverance brought results. Nevertheless, I have been eating a lot of pork.

In tribute to the good doctor who inspired me, after fleshing a skin I soaked it in urine. It makes it easier to remove the hairs. Meanwhile, I cooked the brains into a mash. I have been given expert advice that every animal has enough brains to tan its hide. But I am skeptical of this, especially when it comes to Crystal, and have frozen an extra portion of porcine grey cells to ensure mind over matter. The several frames I constructed were ideal for stretching the cured results.

My car is parked out the back of the store. By my table rests a needle that holds a liquid more permanent than ink. I shall wrap my masterpiece in a soft blanket, transport it gently from one studio to the other, and a new form of art will be born.

The buzzer sounds.

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## **AVA SEDGWICK**

Ava has written two unpublished novels and numerous short stories. To date, she has earned £25 for the hundreds of thousands of words she has crafted. She has become an expert in rejection and is proud of her lack of bitterness.

# **TYRANT'S TALE**

**J.M.W. HODGE**

**W**HY MUST YOU ALL BE so weak?" the Tyrant King spat towards his would-be assailant. He slammed his foot into the man's chest, which sent the Hero stumbling back. As he wiped the man's blood from his blade the Tyrant asked, "Can your lowly dredges not scrape together someone competent to send against me?"

The fallen Hero groaned quietly as the Tyrant stood over him. With his signature helmet tossed to the side, the Tyrant King bowed low and grabbed the Hero's jaw. "Another pitiful 'hero' felled at my feet with little more than pomp and circumstance. Why do you lot keep charging to your deaths with little in the way of a plan? It's disappointing that not one of you has ever managed to cause me more than an inconvenience."

"Why—" The Tyrant King jerked the Hero's head to the side before he could get more than a word past his lips.

"I wasn't finished, worm. You self-righteous fools truly do have an ego about you." He forced his head back and stood up to tower over him. "What is it you want to say before you, like all that came before, lose your head?"

"Why... did you do all of this?" The Hero croaked as he gripped his side and pushed himself up to sit against the wall of the Tyrant's throne room.

"Why?" the Tyrant repeated, narrowing his eyes at the Hero for a moment before laughing. "For no reason beyond my desire to... I wanted to rule every inch of this land, and I do. I won, 'hero,' just like your kind always hates to believe. I achieved my goal before your mother dropped you on your head as a child."

He turned his back to the Hero; his cloak billowed past as he walked towards the windows lining the hall. His kingdom sprawled below them, and though the city seemed dark and desolate, he knew his people lived in veritable luxury. Plentiful food, nearly impenetrable walls, and enough guards to keep the peace throughout. It was all almost utopic—but oh-so-dreadfully dull.

"If you won..." the Hero started through measured breaths as he watched the Tyrant's every move. "Then why do you seem so disap-

pointed... that you beat me?"

Silence filled the air until the heavy heel of the Tyrant's boots broke it. His steps drew him back towards the Hero. "I'm disappointed because it's all so pitifully boring. Do you know what happens when you achieve everything your soul ever yearned for?" He stopped as he looked down at his fallen foe again. With his grip tightening on the hilt of his sword, he could feel the embers of his ancient fury crackling within him.

When the Hero didn't answer, he continued, "I did all of this, every last thing, on the hem of a desire that faded ages ago. A burning, furious want to prove to the world that I could become the most powerful ruler it had ever seen, and the moment I got that, it faded. So rejoice in the fact that you failed. Rejoice in knowing that your wants and desires have lasted you till your dying breath, 'hero.' Dying as a martyr is a much more favorable death than withering away like a rose in a drought."

His voice hung in the air, mingling with the crackling of the torches that lit the room around them. It wasn't fury; no, it wasn't even hate. Instead, he was frustrated—not because he'd been disturbed, but because even the risk of death failed to reignite any more than a mild warmth within his soul.

Pressing the tip of his blade to the Hero's neck, he asked again, "What is it you want to say before I kill you?"

"Why don't you give it up?" There was no fear in the fallen man's voice now. No hatred, no anger, little emotion at all mingled with the words he spoke. "If you're so sick of it... why not leave it behind?"

"Leave it behind?" The Tyrant asked as his features fell slack again. "When you want something so bad, no matter how disappointing it becomes, you always cling to the pitiful idea that it may yet bring you joy. I may not enjoy what I've earned, what my conquest has garnered, but it does bring me a sense of pride."

"Pride? You make countless suffer... for your pride?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. If I make everything idyllic, pathetic do-gooders like you would never try to take my life. Knowing that the fringe edges of my kingdom create those that want my head gives me those

little fragments of excitement that keep me going. I live with the faintest hope that one of you pathetic cretins may yet reignite the embers of my passion. That the fading coals within my soul may yet spark to life and fill me with that burning desire to finish what I started.”

He drew the blade back, his gaze falling on his target as he narrowed his eyes. “Until then, my only want in this empty existence is to clear out trash... like you.”

The sound of steel clattering against stone echoed down the lonely corridors of the massive keep the Tyrant resided within. Another hero’s attempt on his life had failed, but that was fine. There would always be more.

One day, maybe, he’d feel that fire once again, but until then, at least his throne was comfortable.

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**J.M.W. HODGE**

Having always loved stories of all kinds, Hodge has slowly developed his creative writing skills over the years. After finally taking an old teacher's words to heart, he's decided to explore turning that love of stories into a new reality.

# **THE PERENNIAL EVAN HARDY**

**BEN AYRE**

**A**S THE EARTHEN GROUND SHIVERED and shook, as the flowers wilted and withered, and as the crows ceased cawing and tumbled from their trees, Rose resurrected her late lover. Her skin crawled as she completed the incantation.

*“And bloom once more, my flower,  
as I adorn you with another petal.”*

It had been more difficult this time. As a matter of fact, it became more difficult each year. Before her feet, the soil bubbled and parted as a ghostly hand reached up through to the surface. Rose clasped her glass jar tightly, her patience stretching to its limits as she waited in anticipation.

At first, she recalled, the only noticeable resistance had been a drop in temperature. The next year, however, had caused a darkening of the sky, the year after a rustling of the trees, and the year after that a crying of the birds. This year, the graveyard vigorously protested.

Before her eyes, the beautiful Evan Hardy rose into the air and smiled a ghostly smile, his face not quite fixed on hers.

“Rose?” he asked.

“Evan.”

His smile grew wider at the sound of her voice. “What have you brought for me this year?”

Rose knelt down and opened the jar. “A pair of eyes,” she answered.

Placing the two orbs down into the parted earth, then scattering the soil back over them, Rose gifted her lover the power of sight. Evan was now looking down at her with two bright, ghostly eyes.

“Who did they belong to?”

“Nobody with glasses,” she laughed.

“I should hope not.” He blinked several times, then focused back on her. “Well, I hope they weren’t too difficult to procure.”

“Not really. Finding a suitable candidate was more difficult than the extraction.”

“I see.”

“Very funny.”

Their laughter subsided and he continued in a serious tone, “Thank you, Rose. I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure.”

Evan broke the ensuing silence. “How long do we have?”

“Until dusk, so about an hour.”

“An hour,” he repeated. “Well then, tell me about your year.”

Cold, breezy mornings accompanied the following January as Rose paid her annual visit to the witch. Sat before the hearth, she gave an account of her visit to the graveyard 11 months prior. The nameless centenarian listened impassively.

“I carried out your instructions exactly: the preservation formula, the orphan’s eyes, the incantation—it all worked exactly as you said it would.”

“And you didn’t keep him out of his coffin beyond dusk?”

“No.”

“Very well,” said the witch, her face, as ever, without emotion. “You have been patient, that is admirable, but now it is time for the most crucial step, and next month, when your lover blooms again, he will be resurrected for good.” She continued after a pause, “You definitely want to bring him back?”

“More than anything.”

The witch’s eyes flared and she licked her lips, a more off-putting display than the graveyard’s clamour. “Then the final petal which you must add to the stem is a human heart.”

Rose waited with bated breath for the witch to continue. She had already taken ears, a mouth, a nose, hands and a pair of eyes. A heart wasn’t much more to ask for. Not for the love of her life.

“This is the most important step, and it is essential that you carry out my instructions without error.”

“Just tell me what I need to do,” interrupted Rose, growing impatient.

“Not so fast. Do you remember how, five years ago, I warned you there would be a sacrifice to make?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, the time has come. You must bring to his coffin the heart of one who loves you.”

Rose recoiled at this ingredient. “Why? Why not anybody else’s? I didn’t need the eyes of someone who loved me, nor the hands, nor the—”

“Because,” the witch cut her off, “the heart is a special case. The other five components gave your lover his senses back, but the heart must contain his soul, the spirit which you’ve spoken to every February since his death. Such a desire comes at a price.”

Rose remained silent for a few moments, then asked, “And what if I use someone else’s heart? What happens then?”

And for the first time, the witch smiled.

The graveyard was solemn as Rose approached, her footsteps crunching on the frosty grass. Behind their curtain of branches and leaves, the surrounding willow trees watched in consternation. The crows, divulgers of death, scattered at the prospect of resurrection. Cracks climbed up the spines of gravestones and the Sun succumbed to a shroud of clouds.

She knelt before the stone bearing the inscription ‘Evan Hardy’. The red rose she had left the night prior had lost all its petals, leaving behind only a thorny stem. Rose began the incantation.

*“May your roots have drawn strength,  
May your stalk have risen tall.”*

As the ground convulsed, as the flowers rotted, as the wind howled and as gravestones shattered, Rose resurrected her late lover.

Evan floated up through the soil and into the air, wearing his brilliant smile as usual.

“At last,” he sighed.

“At last,” replied Rose with a quiet smile.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” she answered, pulling a sleeve off the glass jar to reveal a human heart within. Her hands shook as she unfastened the lid.

“Tell me what it is.”

“I made my choice,” said Rose, a tear rolling down her cheek. “I wanted this more than anything.”

Evan frowned but remained silent. He’d find out what was the matter. As soon as he had a material body and was able to hug her, he’d get it all out of her.

Rose dug out a shallow hole in the plot before Evan’s gravestone and gently lowered the heart into it, scattering the soil back over it with more care than ever before. And one after another, the gravestone split into two and hit the ground with a thud, then sunk below the ground and was swallowed by the earth, followed by the entire graveyard releasing an eerie shriek, and finally, Evan Hardy dropped to the ground, a real, tangible human being.

Rose leapt to her feet to embrace him in a hug, and Evan hugged her back, holding her less tightly in return. She didn’t notice anything was wrong, not until she leaned in to kiss him and he faltered.

“What?” asked Rose

Evan stared blankly at her.

“What is it?” she tried again. “You still love me, you have to still love me, the witch said—”

“I still love you.”

Rose broke out into a smile at these words and was about to lean back in when Evan continued.

“But,” Rose’s face fell, “I love you like a sister.”

Far and away, the witch laughed a laugh which hadn’t been heard in over a hundred years.

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**BEN AYRE**

I am 23 years old and come from Greater Manchester, UK. In 2019 I graduated university with my Law degree and since then, in between work, reading, rock-climbing and weightlifting, I sometimes have time to write.

# **TASTE: A LOST ART**

**GEMMA AL-KHAYAT**

AND THE GIRLS,” HERB HAD said. “When you talk, they look at you like you’re Jesus!”

I break off a piece of French stick and gnaw on it, swallowing it down with red wine.

*I don’t know what I’m doing here.*

Herb had cornered me in a moment of weakness, (*those who can’t, teach*) but when I arrive at the ivy-clad walls that nurtured so many greats, I’m so overwhelmed I get back in the taxi. Herb appears outside my window armed with two glasses of Cabernet.

“What else would you be doing tonight?” he says. “Staring at Marge across the room?”

I follow him in.

Faces turn and the room tilts. 8 of the 10 students are female and all are young and attractive (as Herb had promised). I smile, listen and nod, but mostly I drink. Eventually, I excuse myself.

One of the students makes a beeline for the chair next to me (*or so I flatter myself*).

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rosso,” she says. “I’m a big fan.”

(I notice how she doesn’t dilute the compliment with ‘*of your work*’).

“Martin.”

“Rosemary Mulligan, but my friends call me Rose. I submitted a piece of prose called *An Unsavoury Truth*, but I’m sure you won’t remember it.”

On the contrary, I remember it well—hers was the lone, sweet voice in a homogenous crowd. I’d assumed she’d be older—she was young to be so jaded.

“An interesting premise. I’m a fan, too.”

Rose turns pink and tries to hide it by sipping on an exotic-looking cocktail. Her wine-coloured satin dress looks like lingerie and, in comparison, I feel very fusty. (*The tweed jacket was Marge’s idea*).

The first course arrives. My scallops taste like a rusty old nail. Only the rubbery texture betrays its identity.

“You’re not enjoying your starter?”

It’s always a painful process telling people I can’t taste. Some treat

my loss as if it were contagious: ‘*We didn’t invite you because we didn’t want you to feel awkward*’, others make bungled attempts at empathy: ‘*Life must be so depressing if you can’t enjoy food!*’ or, worse, humour: ‘*Give the virus to me! I need to lose weight!*’

But when I tell Rose, she nods and says, “My Mum had chemo last year and it affected her taste buds, too.”

She spikes a cherry tomato with a prong of her fork and holds it up. “You don’t need your tongue to taste. You just need your mind.”

She shuts her eyes, and when she puts the fork in her mouth, she makes a sound of pleasure that is so alluring I accidentally spray the tablecloth with wine.

“Close your eyes. Now summon a memory of the most delicious tomato you’ve ever tasted.”

*I’m in my father’s greenhouse. I search for the plumpest, ripest, rosiest fruit and unhook it from its vine. It sits, dense and warm, on my palm. I breathe in its unmistakable aroma—dangerous and fragrant. My mouth waters. I open my mouth to bite—*

Rose’s fork slips unexpectedly into my mouth.

I bite into the soft pink flesh and feel the seeds explode, sweet and ripe, spreading warm comfort through my body. I can taste this explosion of colour and music and joy.

“You see? You just needed to turn your mind on. Some people can even experience an orgasm using only the power of their mind.”

I feel feverish and remove my jacket. Rose’s lusty cherry tomatoes are glistening up at me, fat and inviting.

My main course arrives—roast chicken, bathed in butter and thyme, sweet, plump cloves of roasted garlic and crispy golden potatoes, all drizzled in jus. Rose says garlic is a very powerful aphrodisiac.

“Can I borrow you for every meal?”

The less-primitive part of my brain admonishes me, (*she’s half your age for Christ’s sake!*) but I soak up her taste regardless. I want to bottle it up.

Under Rose’s tutelage, I start putting on weight.

She sits at the front of all my classes, burning through a notebook

with blue biro.

After class one day, she tells me how, as a fine-nerved teenager, she'd written me anguished, heartfelt letters but never received a reply. I am appalled at my own selfish insensibility but also tantalised by the thought of the beautiful truths the letters might have uncovered.

"I'm sorry," I say, "but I didn't receive them. My agent deals with all my—" (*I am about to say 'fan-mail' but correct myself at the last minute*)—"correspondence."

I allow myself to dream that, perhaps when the course is over, she'll write to me again and give me a chance to make amends.

Too soon, the four weeks come to an end.

After the last class, Rose approaches my desk.

"I'm writing a short story from your perspective. It's in the first person." She pauses, as though wanting me to understand its significance. "I wanted to check you're comfortable for me to submit it as my final assignment. I have other work I can submit if not."

My interior response is unspeakable. I try to keep my excitement pushed down.

"That's fine, as long as it's not defamatory!"

"Of course not! Quite the opposite."

She hugs me goodbye. I stay in her embrace longer than I should.

I imagine the moment Rose reads out *my* story at the ceremony. Heads turn. Herb gives me 'side-eye', unable to disguise his jealousy that she chose *me* to be her muse. I can tell she is restricted in what she can say, but her smile tells me everything I need to know.

I'm consumed by the possibilities of Rose's story. When I get home, I go upstairs to my old study. The room feels unnaturally still, as though I am visiting the home of a loved one who has recently died. I pick up the unopened Moleskine notebook Marge gifted me two Christmases ago, crack it open and the words explode out of me in a burst of creativity.

In my story, Rose and I eat decadent lunches together, she with her incredible eye for the subtle textures of food and I, her willing student. I spoon-feed her a chocolate dessert which slips softly into the

warm contours of her mouth.

As I write, I am gripped by an intuition that the scene I am writing *is the exact same scene Rose is imagining at this very moment.*

“It’s good to see you writing again,” Marge says, banging a large mug of coffee down on the coaster.

Rose’s beautiful face, frowning in concentration, dissipates as I am yanked back to reality. I keep my back turned, willing Marge to go, irritated by her brutal abruption of my delicate thread.

When she finally leaves, as revenge, I cast her in my narrative as a bitter old crone who, each evening, laces my meal with a poison that deadens my tastebuds and dulls my imagination. When I finally discover her betrayal, I place my hands in the sweet spot of her neck and squeeze until I have choked all the life out of her. Rose runs into my arms now there are no impediments keeping us apart. I am free from the poisonous ennui that has plagued me these last three years.

When I am finished, I pant to return to that world and, I confess, I turn to Marge for blessed relief.

My caresses are competent enough, but I can’t fake enthusiasm or even tenderness, not even when I try to raise the apparition of Rose instead. When I put my arms around Marge, her fragile bones squeeze together like a broken chicken carcass. I notice, for the first time, how thin she’s become. Her white fingers are thin and hard. When she scrapes down the skin of my back with her long, yellowing fingernails, I cringe, resisting the urge to run away, forcing myself to let her touch me.

My appetite wanes.

After, I swear it will be the last.

When the assignments finally arrive, I know instantly which one is Rose’s. It is written in longhand (*a lost art*) in a vibrant, sapphire-blue script.

I am eager to devour her words but I resolve (*with seismic restraint*) to savour reading it until my birthday in two days’ time. I’ll read it in the evening, once Marge is in bed, so I won’t be disturbed.

I lock our stories, face to face in a padded envelope, in the top

drawer of my desk.

After dinner on my birthday, Marge presents me with a birthday cake. In the candlelight, her face looks hideous—her skin appears to be made of wax, which is melting and collapsing in on itself from the heat of the flames. Her black eyes have sunk into the hollow cavities of her eye sockets, giving her a grimacing, skull-like appearance. Something has gone terribly wrong.

“Make a wish.”

I close my eyes so she can't read it and blow.

Marge's Japanese chef's knife glides through the cake's flesh. When she pulls away the first wedge, gleaming, blood-red pulp oozes down the sponge layers. She slides the piece onto a plate and places it in front of me. It occurs to me that she's trying to poison me, like the Marge of my story.

But the aroma stirs up memories of the vanilla batter my mother used to let me lick off the spatula. I take a bite. The sponge is warm and perfectly moist and tinged with an elusive hint of almond. The cherry filling brings the perfect amount of sharp sweetness. The combination sings in my mouth.

“It's incredible! What makes it taste so good?”

“The rosewater. It seems to bring out the sweetness and takes away some of the bitterness.”

“Aren't you having any?”

Marge shakes her head.

When I was first struck by the virus, I thought this was her way of showing solidarity (*like how expectant dads get food cravings or odour aversions or put on sympathy weight*). But now she's forsaken all forms of sensory pleasure, I'm convinced she does it just to spite me.

“I'm glad you like it.” She stands up. “I'm off to bed. I'm tired. Happy birthday.”

I look at the clock—it's only half eight. I can read Rose's story. I cut another slice of cake and devour it and then another, shovelling it into my mouth. Several times I put my fork down resolutely before giving in and cutting another slice.

When I am down to the penultimate piece, some icing gets stuck in my teeth and I pick it out with a fingernail. At first it looks like a piece of rolled-up blue tissue, but when I unroll it, a lump of fear appears in my throat.

I gag and fish out more of the tiny scrolls from between my teeth. I place them on the white tablecloth and try to make out the words but they're distorted.

I run to my study, unlock the drawer and pull open the envelope. Rose's assignment is gone. My own story, however, has been laid out carefully on top of my desk. A multitude of feelings compete for my attention but shame has a taste of its own.

It is past dawn when I climb slowly up the stairs. I lift the crumpled blanket of our marital bed. Marge stares, glassy-eyed, up at the ceiling and I wonder if she's been crying. We lie stiffly next to each other—two strangers, empty and soulless.

It is as though the virus deadened my heart at the same time as my taste buds. And Marge, neglected and forgotten, faded away into the background until I could no longer see her.

"It was only a story," I say into the cold silence. "You said you were pleased I was writing again. Marge? Marge?"

But the echoes of her name disappear into the darkness.

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**GEMMA AL-KHAYAT**

Gemma is a Solicitor (which makes for some interesting stories!) She writes short stories and plays and is currently writing a sci-fi novel. Her work has been shortlisted in a number of writing competitions and her words have been published by Ellipsis Zine and Pure Slush. She lives in the magical Forest of Dean with her husband and two children, Willoughby and Henry.

# **LIFELINES**

**IRENE C. REBELLO**

**CONTEST WINNER**

**D**IRT PUSHES ITSELF UNDERNEATH YOUR fingernails as you dig around on the soil, fingers stretching as far as they'll go as you search for something solid amidst the moistness of the earth. The ground beneath your knees is warm and fragrant, the smell of rain still stinging your nostrils. The last storm has long since passed, but these days, nothing ever really leaves—Vee had said it'd be sunny by now, but when you look up all you see is grayness, heavy and dark, threatening to fall on to you like an ocean wave.

You smile and I shiver as your hands find what they were looking for. Bracing yourself, you begin to pull, sweat gathering at the corners of your eyes as something gives way. Suddenly you are holding a root, plump and streaked with pink, as worms wiggle themselves off of its surface and back into the ground below. You brush off whatever dirt you can, revealing its dim purple skin, the color fading away further when you hold it up to the light. It's bigger than you thought it'd be, curling around your wrist like a bracelet as it pulses and slowly twists. It is almost breathing, settling itself against the warmth of your skin like an animal seeking shelter.

You are too young to feel disgust as I do. Time has stopped beating as it used to, and though you see nothing of the past you are told of you can imagine it clearly, textures and tastes you know were real because they are beyond you, and nothing made up could ever be lower. The root's tip begins to travel over your arm slowly, so slowly, like the hard-shelled animals Hector drew for you once, and your chest tightens around me.

I imagine myself sitting in your lap, your thighs hard against my hip as I reach forward to pluck the root's thin end off your forearm. I imagine myself holding onto it, squeezing, until it breaks apart in my palm and hot, white matter spills like balm on my face and your neck. But then you place your hand where mine would've been, movements mirrored over decades. As the goo spurts out across your heartlines, you raise it higher, glancing behind you furtively before licking your skin clean. I place myself against your neck, feeling your throat tighten and then open, the slow descent into your stom-

ach turning it smooth and hot like lava. You open your mouth, tongue rolling over the residue that sticks to your teeth, and savor the last bits of sweetness. If you were me, you would have said it tasted of burnt sugar, gummy like caramel. But you have never tasted sugar, and you can't forward to burn any part of it even if I could tell you to do so.

Now the hunger has subsided and you can see clearly once more. Carefully, you pinch the root's end close. Having surveyed your work, you nod, satisfied with yourself, and move to get up. As your feet brush the spot where I sit another rush of longing fills me. The sky thunders behind me as I reach for you, just as I did in girlhood. If I shut my eyes tightly enough I can almost feel your skin moving along mine, our fingers intertwined as you pull me to my feet, the traces of a smile on your cheeks as you look at me, really look. I am too old for wishing, but still this ancient craving blossoms in me. You cannot see, cannot hear, cannot feel. I follow regardless.

At the entrance of the temple, Hector sits, beckoning you forward. Look, he says, his voice curly and low, a rose. He hands you the sheet of paper, yellowed with age, and you take in the picture before you, wonder filling your eyes as you follow the black lines, the outline of a flower. You ask him what it is called again, repeat after him, your teeth clacking over the vowels. It is not the word I recognize, though when I look over your shoulder I can see it as if it is material, as if in your hands you hold the real thing. Wind brushes over your hair. A storm is coming from the North, Hector says. He pushes the paper to you. Keep it. You touch his shoulder, his body frail from holding its own weight up, and from the pouch at your waist you take out the root. Extending it forward like an offering, you bow your head.

The love in his face is enough to undo me. No, he whispers, though a thin line of drool gathers at the corner of his mouth. The others.

You deserve it more, you say.

He smiles. Caresses your hair. The kindness of his youth remains even after the decades that have passed, but the hunger is the one constant, the one leader. He guides you around the temple, his steps slowed by the wet dirt that makes up the path. Leaning heavily onto

his cane, you two walk deeper into the low vegetation, the bleak green of the leaves a pale contender to the world I lived in. As I walk behind you, I let my sight trail over the dull grayness of the soil, the coarse texture of the plants. There is little to see and even less to eat—the root you found is the first to be seen in months. The better thing to do would be to take it to George, let her slice it open and mix the white matter with water until it becomes liquid and flavorless. The skin she would peel off, drop the small portions into a bowl of boiling water until they'd become bloated and chewy. The flesh would be eaten raw, would bounce against one's tongue like gelatin.

You reason with yourself: what good would it do to try and divide one root for everyone living in the temple? The little they'd receive would be better spent on the two of you. It is better for two people to be full than forty-three to be a bit less hungry. Logic, Hector had said to you once. If a train is coming quickly and you can only change its trajectory, would you choose to save three people you know or ten you don't?

Your only answer to that had been, What's a train?

But every night since, as you lay in bed, you created your own scenarios. If Hector and George were both hanging off a cliff's ledge and I could only save one of them, who would I help? If Hector and Vee were both starving and I only had one loaf of bread, who would I give it to?

If Hector and I were dying of thirst and I only had one canteen left, who would drink the last drop?

The answer was always him. So when the root's matter was licked clean, when the skin had been peeled off and chewed, when only the dark purple flesh was left, you did not hesitate to push it into his hands and to tell him, Eat.

Hector had been the one to find you as a kid, shivering alone in the cold, your belly bloated and tender to the touch from eating nothing but the dried-up bark you managed to scrape off one of the few trees left. He had been younger then, and stronger, and so he picked you up and took you to the temple, or rather what would soon become it. For weeks it had been just the two of you, your memory a treacher-

ous thing, your soul weak and blind. When these moments appear in your mind I hurry off your shoulders, dropping to my knees onto the ground at your back. It hadn't been Hector who found you—I had. It was me who stood by you, who laid at your feet—trying to disperse warmth, trying to keep you safe—for months. My feet had bled alongside yours, my stomach had swollen in sync with yours, our breath mingling in the hot summer nights when the ash came to bury us both.

It is wrong to be jealous, I know. He has loved you as best he can, helped you more than I ever could. I reach up and touch your mouth. Try as I might, you cannot feel me.

I remember more than most, having died when the earth was still green and the ocean still blue. The rocking of waves, sand sticking to my skin, in my clothes, the sun scalding over the crown of my head. But I try to keep myself condensed, try to stand still and keep hold of you. You, my lifeline, my raft. When he has finished eating, you move to stand up. I climb back onto your back, crossing my arms over your neck, feeling the steady rhythm of your pulse. When I meet your skin I feel as if I can breathe once more, as if radiating off you is raw, pure oxygen.

When I died there was still hope, talks of revolution stemming the air like seeds. The government told us of new machines to build, ways to save water, newspaper articles detailing exactly how long a human body could last without food. I was young: I still believed there was good in people. After dying, I roamed for years, watching as we slowly disintegrated, blowing to ashes under the newly revealed sun, and then I stopped. Until I found you, laid to waste on a pool of sand, and I loved you unlike anything I've ever experienced. I wished for a body so I could give you my heat, my strength, my flesh. I wished I was wind so I could carry you. I wished I was water so I could feed you. I wished I was light so you would see me. I wished I was sand so you would touch me.

Inside the temple, Hector separates from you with a kiss. Our secret, he winks, his breath hot with the bitter taste of the root's flesh.

You find Vee sitting alone in her station, lost inside her head as

she often is. Where's the sun? Your regular greeting. With the same dazed look in her eyes, she replies, Hiding. Don't worry, she'll come soon enough.

Hector says a storm is coming.

He's right. Didn't you hear the thunder?

Yes, but it sounded far away.

At that, she smiles. Doesn't work like that, unfortunately. Did you manage to find anything today?

I see the guilt in you, blooming like weeds in your mind. Your former logic shatters under Vee's gaze, the shame of selfishness that often haunts you. Summer came bearing no fruit, the root the last reminder of the Earth's rotation, and when fall arrives there is no hope of discovery.

No. The lie rests uncomfortably in the air between you. Nothing.

Disappointment, then sadness, overwhelm you. Against your better senses, your eyes fill with tears. I lay my lips against your ear: it's not your fault, I wish to say. You did what was right for you—Hector means more. But you're soft-spirited, and loving, and you wish you were better.

How to say—it is the Earth that ought to be better. It is the Earth's job to provide, and even though we turned from it first it still owes us, owes me, for you are in it and even though I often wish you'd join me where I am, life suits you too much for it to lose you.

As your tongue rolls over the last bit of flavor in your mouth, I disentangle myself from your throat and place my hand over your chest, feeling under your ribs for the beating heart. Your blood pulses underneath my palm, warming me, and though I've long stopped believing in goodness, despite Hector, despite the root, I still believe in you.

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**IRENE C. REBELLO**

Born in 2001, Irene C. Rebello is based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is currently an undergrad majoring in Design. She writes fiction, mainly fantasy and short stories, with her story “What You Made Me.” being a Reedsy winner in 2021.

**A LETTER TO GOVERNOR TURNER**  
MARQUISE WILLIAMS

DEAR GOVERNOR ROBERT Q. TURNER,

I remember the first time I saw you. Your million dollar face beamed through my \$20 TV. You had a smile white like horns, hair slicker than a Cadillac. You preached the usual checklist of promises in your soap-opera-effected commercial: healthcare, tuition, taxes, jobs. Meanwhile, I sat on the sofa with my five-year-old girl, failing to sell her on the edibility of microwaved Cup Noodles and spinach boiled to gray mush.

“You see that, Dana?” I said to her. “That’s the face of a born liar. Nobody does it better than a politician.”

My little girl told me I say that about everyone. “You even say it to mom when you call each other.”

What can I say Bobby (can I call you Bobby?). I’m the furthest thing from perfect.

But to make a long story short, Dana said that if this man on the TV was as much of a liar as I said he was, I should tell him to stop because “lies hurt people”. Let me tell you, Bobby, for such a little girl she was wiser than most adults I know, her mother included. That’s why right then and there I decided to take my daughter’s advice.

Fast forward a week and there I am at Westlake Park, my first political rally since Battle of Seattle ‘99. The place was like a small cup filled to the brim with flesh, breath and the metal musk of sweat. There were newscameras. Paper ribbons on trees. Dogs in purses. Babies on shoulders. Fanatic whistlers and chant-starters standing on the bars of the dome jungle gym. All around, from buttons on shirts to signs bigger than people, red-white-and-blue words read the phrase “A Turn for Turner is a Turn for You.”

I’ll admit it’s catchy: A Turn for Turner. But the filtered focus-group-approved fakeness of it made me want to puke—are people so dumb they can’t see through that? Hey, it’s what I thought at the time. And honestly, given our country’s history, can you blame me?

Back to the story, you walked up on stage dressed like your one of

us—Carhartt on the chest, Levi’s on the asscheek, New Balance on the feet (because I guess you relate to retirement home demographic for some reason). But besides your questionable choice in footwear, what immediately grabbed my attention was your lack of a smile. Your eyes looked at the ground. Breaths fell and fumbled out of your body. You tried to hide it but it was clear something was off. And as your mouth trembled like a dog trapped in the cold, you said these nine words into the microphone:

“My daughter died. I’m sorry, I can’t do this.”

We were speechless. You walked off the stage. The crowd began to disperse. And yet despite the bomb you dropped on us, clouds still sailed and birds still chirped. My mind no longer saw the world revolving around you...no, and it was in this that I finally saw you as my equal insignificant—a human who suffers the melancholy of fragility and cosmic unimportance like the rest of us.

At home I began listening to your speeches. Absorbing your promises. Studying your history. You came from an orphanage (like myself). You were belittled, bullied, beaten (like myself). Nobody thought you’d amount to anything and for a while you believed them. But your adoptive parents never allowed you to give up. In your words, they taught “honor, courage, to channel rage into productive energy”. You enlisted in the Marines and became corporal in ‘95. Majored in law after the military. Worked in criminal defense for ten years. To think—you cut from the same cloth as myself.

But the TV faces and podcast voices pounced on your vulnerability then twisted it to weakness. People pretended to care, sent you the obligatory thoughts and prayers. Your opponent Lucia Sun was the worst of them. When she did an interview with Sean Hannity, those thin wormy lips slithered on about how devastated she’d be if her daughters died like yours did, and that no one should judge you if you decided to drop out of the race “in order to grieve properly”. The absolute audacity of this woman was beyond words.

The day after the Hannity interview, you went on CNN. Discussed your platform, addressed the doubts regarding your mental welfare. Frankly, what you talked about didn’t concern me too much. But

the periodic flat tone of your cadence, the way your voice broke a little when you talked about your child—yes! It was imperfect, it was flawed, it was truth. Bobby, it was an inner truth expressed in a way I never had the intelligence for.

I started attending your rallies—I even showed up early so I'd get the best seats. Schools, parks, restaurants, farms, churches, wherever you spoke I was there to listen. At a rec center you hosted a fundraiser for a family who lost their home in a fire, and I sat in the front row with a red rose in my hand. By then I'd been dying to introduce myself to you, and what better way than to give my genuine condolences to you in your hour of need?

After you spoke I went up to your security and told them I wanted to give you a rose. They didn't allow it at first but you saw the significance in my gesture. You reached over their arms and accepted my present. We talked and talked as if time wasn't going anywhere. In that moment I felt closer to you than sky and blue.

Who would've thought my hate at first sight would form into a deep friendship?

Who would've thought that friend would soon abandon me?

I was driving my daughter to a T-ball game when I heard about your victory on the radio. I clapped like dynamite and shouted like thunder. Poor Dana in the backseat had to plug her ears with her fingers. What can I say? Sometimes my excitement gets the better of me.

We arrived at Moorlands Park—you know the one up in Kenmore between the elementary school and First Romanian Pentecostal—we arrived there and I'm telling you the day couldn't have been more beautiful. 79 and sunny. Grass greener than a salad. The spruce trees fluttering their thousand leafy wings. The day showed no signs of dimming.

I sat with the other parents in the grass. A man shaped like an upside-down lightbulb reclined on a lawn chair to the left and front of me. His gut stuck out of his Hawaiian shirt. A gold Rolex slightly concealed itself under his gray forearm hairs. He was the personification of cigars, Ray-Bans, and used porno magazines.

The game started. The children hit and threw balls. The usual stuff you'd expect. But what began as something simple quickly grew irritating with Lightbulb's petty comments toward the umpires.

Then it was Dana's turn to swing. Just seeing her tiny body run up to the plate in her pinstriped uniform put a smile on my face. She heaved the bat up and over her shoulder like it were an ax. She swung at the tee. Missed. I cheered her on, told her not to give up. She swung again.

Thwack!

The ball bounced and rolled toward the second baseman as Dana waddled to first. The baseman lobbed it. The kid on first caught it. But the umps called it safe. My girl!

But of course Lightbulb had to say something. "Oh come on she was out! Open you damn eyes for once!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up and told him to shut his mouth, which eventually escalated into a full-blown argument. I don't remember what he said more than I remembered the tone of his voice: entitled, grating, needling, like it was poking your face in an attempt to get you to explode. It reminded me of the boss from my old job. Well... it worked. The skin on my middle knuckle had to get stitches after it sliced against his canine tooth.

A week later, I argued with my ex-wife on the phone.

"Full custody?" I shouted. "You're out of your mind."

Then she shouted: "After that fight you had at our daughter's T-ball game I'd say it's more than justified. She started wetting the bed again."

"It was an accident.

"You don't have a job," she continued. "You barely have any money, you live in a disgusting apartment, you don't even know how to make a decent meal. Boiled spinach and Cup Noodles is a meal meant for alley cats. Not little girls."

"Can you at least let me talk to her?"

"If you want to continue discussing this take it up with my lawyer."

Click. Hung up.

Ain't life fun?

But I say all that about my life to say this—I needed you Bobby. I had no one. I felt lower than birdshit. I called your office and told them I was a friend that needed to talk to you. They assured me you'd call back. You never did. I called again and again but they kept giving me the runaround. I even sent letters, all of them came with rose petals. There wasn't anything romantic in it, I just... I just needed someone to talk to. Bobby, I don't know why I'm doing this. Don't even know why I'm writing this. You're not going to see it, that much I know. Though, how much do I honestly know? I thought you were a brother of mine, someone I could call friend. But I'm here wallowing at the Ravenna Park Bridge while you're over there at your big government office rehearsing some speech, I'm sure. Still, you should see the nature from up here. It's really something. And before you judge too quickly, no, I'm not going to throw myself off, that's pathetic. I couldn't do that until I have a chance to meet you one more time. I've got a knife with your name on it. Maybe I'll kill you, maybe I'll fail, who knows? But I'm done with life since life is done with me. Just one more time though, I want us to share in an imperfect suffering. Just one more time is enough for me. That's all I need, is for you to feel for a moment what I've been feeling for a very long time. To borrow and revise your phrase a little: "A Turn for Turner is a Turn for Me."

Alright, time to burn this letter. If there is an afterlife, maybe you'll get to read it.

See you soon, Bobby.

From, a lowly nobody.

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## **MARQUISE WILLIAMS**

Marquise Williams is an electrician based in Philadelphia, PA. When he's not writing he's either playingosu! or not getting enough sleep.

# **JUDGE'S COMMENTS**

CREAG MUNROE

DO YOU HAVE A HECTOR? Someone you would care for to the detriment of the tribe?

We want to believe we would help the most people in a tough situation, but love is a powerful modifier. I can sympathize with sharing the last morsel of food with a mate, parent, or child.

And in a world bereft of the excess and luxury we are accustomed to, who can say with certainty what they might do?

*Lifelines* paints a bleak picture of the future, where humanity is reduced to sharing a single root vegetable between dozens of people. Even the colour has drained from the surrounding vegetation! The imagery conjured by the author is both intimate and dramatic, from warm, fragrant soil beneath fingernails to thundering skies. The prose used is at times lyrical, even poetic.

But the most interesting aspect of this story is not the apocalyptic landscape where ash falls in summer. It is the character of the narrator, a wandering ghost with no ability to affect the characters in the story. The timeless perspective of the narrator allows us unique insight into the life of a child in this new world who knows nothing of roses, sugar, or trains.

The author slowly reveals the details of our narrator, resulting in an intriguing beginning that borders on confusion. The payoff comes when, a third of the way through the piece, understanding clicks.

Second-person narration creates a wonderful juxtaposition, where the story is deeply personal yet our guide is unable to participate. The longing is clear. It's haunting, to be so close to one we care for and remain alone.

The love in this piece has a unique flavour, in addition to being unidirectional between spirit and human. The narrator feels old, even ancient—a reality proven by the unfamiliar word for “rose”—and they were tired of wandering well before they found the protagonist. The explosion of love upon finding an abandoned child is something any one of us can understand. But after years of proximity has that love developed a romantic edge? Hints appear when the narrator fantasizes about being a young woman and interacting with the main character, and again when they talk about their jealousy over Hec-

tor. But it could be nothing more than the desire to be corporeal. A yearning to express their affection. It's never quite clear.

The characters in *Lifelines* are human. Flawed. They act selfishly. They lie. They struggle with right and wrong. The complexity and hardship of life in the temple are shown through the interactions of a few. We glimpse how life has changed over the decades, maybe centuries, from the days of machines and revolution to digging for scraps on a blasted planet. The author wove a tale subtly immersing us in the greater world while remaining focused on immediacies like hunger and love.

Nothing is solved in the conclusion. No hope for a better future. We are left only with the affirmation of the narrator's love, undying. Truly a beautiful and imaginative piece.

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## CREAG MUNROE

Creag Munroe is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Elegant Literature*. He is dedicated to helping new writers achieve success.

Creag inhales novels at an alarming rate, preferring SF/F as the main staple of his diet. He resides in Toronto, Canada, but swims with sharks and drives motorcycles in monsoons whenever duty allows.

**FIN**