

THE FUTURE FIRE
SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

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Poetry by:
Anna Sykora
Fiction by:
M. Bennardo
Michael Díaz Feito
A.J. Fitzwater
Christine Lucas

Cover art:
Pear Nuallak

The Future Fire 2016.36

“But when I woke up this morning, could've sworn it was judgment day.”

— ♀

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The Future Fire (<http://futurefire.net/>) is edited by Djibril al-Ayad, with associate editors Kathryn Allan and Regina de Búrca; assistant editors Serge Keller, Cécile Matthey, Valeria Vitale and Tracie Welser; occasional guest editors Fabio Fernandes and Lori Selke.

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Contact: editor@futurefire.net

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Editorial

Djibril al-Ayad



This is one of the darker issues of The Future Fire that we've seen in a while. It's not full of horror stories, but rather of tales of gritty determination, of dystopian resilience, of unfulfilled (but never hopeless) longing. We don't bring you happy endings—too few of those around these days—but we bring you noir heroes who survive, desperate rebels who haven't lost everything yet, and aliens who still have a head or two to regrow. Stories (or poems) with genderqueer, retro-cyberpunk social justice warriors; brightly lit skies that ask us what is the cost of the future; trippy twists on the memory loss narrative motif; postmodern, polyglot, alien futures; and brutal, classic, low-fantasy fairy tales.

In a similar vein, next month sees the release of *Fae Visions of the Mediterranean: An anthology of horrors and wonders of the sea* (e-book available for pre-order), co-edited by Valeria Vitale. This volume, whose title is in part a reference to the Fatamorgana, a mysterious and

magical mirage (itself named for Morgana Le Fay) well-known to seafarers and coastal residents alike, highlights through folklore, ghosts and sea monsters the fact that the Mediterranean is a world of its own. Since ancient times, and no less today, this sea has been a road for merchants, pirates, invaders, exiles, adventurers and storytellers; the peoples on the shores of this sea—artificially divided in modern thought between Southern Europe, North Africa and Near East—often have more in common with each other than they do with their hinterland neighbours. The stories capture the wonder of the Mediterranean and the many mythologies and beliefs that have sprung up around it, gods who live in it, and tales that couldn't take place anywhere else. They also respond to tragedy: a million ships have sunk since humans first launched boats into the blue. It feels like half of them were in the last twelve months.

It's been an amazing anthology to work on: some of the hardest and most thrilling content to read through, but also the easiest to buy for—we totally fell in love with every story and poem we included in the volume, thanks to all the wonderful authors and translators. Look out for more from them in the near future!

In the meantime, enjoy the weird and wonderful writing of A.J., Anna, M., Michael and Christine, and the beautiful artwork by Miranda, Carmen, Chris, Cécile and Pear, in the current issue. Tune back in June and July for the next installment. We're looking forward to it at least as much as you are!

Djibril al-Ayad, April 2016

Comment on the stories in this issue on the TFF blog:
press.futurefire.net/2016/04/new-issue-201636.html

Embedded

A.J. Fitzwater

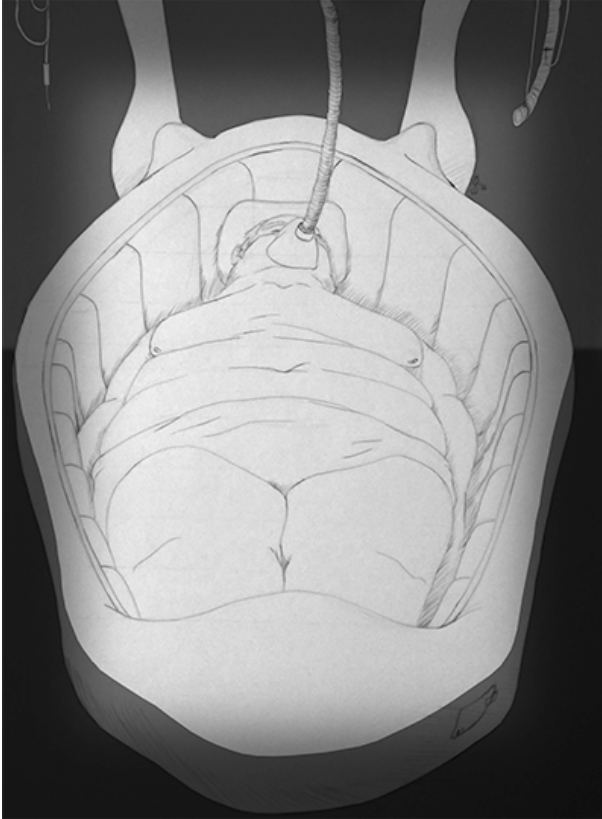


Illustration © 2016, Miranda Jean.

A sleeper roach chitters victory seconds before the tonal recognition program cuts in.

“Welcome to Reality. Whose life would you like to live today?”

Slicing through the three-sixty sensorium clutter of the cell, I beckon forward a view of the mark from the dot-cam secreted above Xan’s desk.

Score. The facial and credit recons match. Brandon Gaytes the Younger has earned a level up into a dose of true reality. International Net Neutrality Council—the INNC, or Ink to us black channellers—had sent us an empathy mark direct.

Objectively, only one minute forty seconds passes before Xan’s official ping flourishes in-ear, but by then I’m squirming in soda-stiff jeans against the rips in my coffin couch.

“Ugh, starving. What does a girl have to do to get fed around here?” comes Xan’s sub-vocalization disguising the intonation beneath. *Hey Click, this guy’s security pigs are legit unhealthy. Get Switch, we’re on.*

As per usual, the Ink’s watchdogs lag by fifteen seconds. If anyone is listening in, legit or black channel, they are seriously S.O.L.

I shuffle my in-views, peripherals, and stacks until I have the perfect balance that won’t dry out my eyeballs. *For someone who bleeds ones and zeroes, you sure do rely on the unreliable a lot.* Damn eidetic memory; Xan’s honey and whiskey voice is on me at a crucial moment. I scrabble the bio-wire into my neck, shuttling the sensorium somewhere useful. And quiet.

“Yo Xan, sup in the real world. Thought you were credit diving today.” *Click here. Don’t forget to cycle your tones like I taught you.*

“I am, but I just got a client for the tank so I’m set for the fourteen-forty. Could totally do Mexican.” *Look at this rich bastard’s bio. He’s a walking nightmare. He’s skeeving just looking at me. I say he’s waste material.*

“Bonus. I’m bored. Let me find out if our favourite delivery boy is up.” Slow my delivery, mimick a real

time parse of the infodump she's flashed me. Don't want her to know I had Gaytes pegged by my sleepers before he walked through Reality's back door. *Receiving loud and clear. Prepping all the pigs and whistles. Agreement on all fronts.*

I tongue open another audio channel, sweating the nano-seconds it takes to snake through redundancies. "Yo Switch, we're going for tacos. You up?" *Yo Switch. Operation Ink Burn is a One. Got squealers?*

Switch gives it just the right amount of nano-seconds of connection lag. "Fucking now? I'm totally not hungry." He doesn't hesitate with his intonations. *Right on. Security good to go.*

"Would you stop pwning those Battle Mage noobs and get yourself a whiff of true reality? Don't let your tax-payer funded air go to waste." *Checkit. A sitter for Soweto, Detroit, and Pyongyang. Let's see what he thinks of the Dispense of Information Act when it's happening to him.*

Switch's laughter is quite genuine. "What you talking about. You never leave that coffin unless your piss bag and tortilla wrappers are going sentient." *Security pigs are stacked to follow your roaches in. Ready to crack Ink wide open for all to see.*

It's not the first time I've felt compelled to flick a few cockroaches Switch's way. He's wetware'd but off the grid. Though we've dosey-dosed with the Ink and other black channellers wanting to clock us for bragging rights, I've never had a face to face with the guy. The dot-cams in the vicinity of his nodes never show me anything of worth. Trust him, sure, to a point. I have to take this situation as is. Paranoia, staying alive; both

part of the ones and zeroes. If all goes well, this'll be my first relocation in six months.

If all doesn't go well...

"There you go sir, you're all set to visit the true wonder of Reality. Marilyn Monroe is a fine choice. Just lie back, relax, and your tank will come online in just a few moments. Today's guide cat is calico." Xan's warmth throws a blanket over my mind, and I up the input on the vault. *Will you two losers quit with the love-in. Meat is about to go la-la in sixty secs. You better be riding the back of purgatory or we can pack up our toys for another six months. We've too much to lose.*

"C'mon Switch, you know you're always up for some Coyotes," I say. A test breadcrumb roach flicked at the hole in Reality's firewall slips through clean. *God, what is it about the tits with these jagoffs?*

"You sure do love them tacos," Switch complains. His calling card, a bright pink pig in a frilly skirt, nudges in-view and begins setting trip wires beyond the battalion of roaches poised on the peripheral of Reality's core. "You're always chowing down on 'em. Anyone would think you're addicted." *Ninety percent playing with themselves, the rest mugging that damn birthday song with whoever's riding shotgun as prez.*

"Mmm, fish tacos," Xan croons. *Hey! 30 secs!*

"Heading out," says Switch. *Time aplenty.*

He adds a background of street sounds to his audible so smoothly I can't ascertain the lack of authenticity on first pass. We've played this game for fifteen years chipping away at Ink, our reputations only as good as the last job. Other black channellers play too hard too fast, and end up on a comfortable coffin couch on the

inside. Not us. We're in it for the long haul. Martyrdom is never my style.

“Busy on the street, Switch? Don't have much time to waste on traffic,” I say. *Ink's recon patterns are slow. You getting any suspicious pokes from your end?*

The hesitation lasts barely a second but it's enough to throw me back into the stark consciousness of my cell. I nudge the audibles closed with my chin, and allow myself the luxury of closed eyes. The shunt in my neck rubs hot against a tear in the couch, and the dappled sound proofing covering every surface absorbs my breath. I count the steps once more to the prepped duffel by the emergency exit.

“Yeah, lunchtime crowd is on the up, but I can flash Coyotes the order once I'm in range,” Switch says, pulling me back into the cascade of information. *Yeah, they're dealing with a random treasury attack. Black channellers don't have a clue how to shoulder ride.*

Time crunch. I've catalogued every nuance of Switch's voice over the years. He should know the treasury attack was a unit of my suicide roaches.

Switch is obfuscating.

Seconds to spare. “Is the pulled pork back on the menu at Coyotes?” *I'm in the zone, but there's still time to pull out.*

Xan hums her favourite pop tune as the sounds of tubes suctioning into place come over her channel. The image of the client naked and slathered in conduction fluid is grainy but serviceable. *No fucking way, Xan's intonations say. This client is the perfect mark! I didn't hire you two to screw me over at the last second! I'm sick of Ink shitting on our civil liberties!*

Switch huffs like he's jogging through a crowd. "Nah, they only got tank pork that tastes like chicken." *Chill, we're on schedule. Click's got this, isn't that right, bro?*

Don't call me bro.

One second never feels so short. Why would Switch waste time and tones on useless pandering?

Fuck it. There's a reason why I'm the oldest black channeller still going hardcore. My roaches with their suicide redundancies have proved time and again to be better than people.

I throw extra roaches into the tunnels after Switch, and scoop Reality intel into my face. I can get out of this if it all turns to shit. I can.

"Fish tacos, then," I say, infusing decisiveness into my tones. Let them read what they will; my voice is the only part of my personality I dare show. *I'm going in.*



Riding roaches on the shoulder of a human suit is never as immersive as a deep Reality, but they're enough to approximate the sensorium. Wetware is too much of a risk—most fibre tattoo artists are too easy to bribe. I've spent too long fighting against full immersion as a way out. Dying people don't have the luxury of lying to themselves about receding coastlines and water wars.

I stretch Reality's purgatory around my senses as far as I dare. It helps the Monroe skin sags from overuse. A roach scuttles away with incriminating photos to share on the Undermere. That should keep the Monroe estate's lawyer busy enough during the fourteen-forty I have at my disposal to work over Gaytes. Rewire your

chemistry in anticipation of any temporary insanity charges will you, rich fucker? You think you're fast, but I'm faster.

The client hovers, Marilyn face frozen in red-lipped ecstasy as he loads into the skin. Switch's pig stalks the perimeter throwing up an efficient picture of respectability. It helps Reality's security protocols are old and clunky—huzzah for employing ex-black channel narcissists.

Gaytes-Monroe opens his eyes and stretches the red lips wider. The first syllable of the damnable bad singing peters out like they've been punched in the gut. Which, in effect, they have; the client would have been expecting to open with a fake audience, not an overview of the walls of Detroit.

“You're not the Reality guide cat,” Gaytes whines.

I'm barely aware of my body as I tongue open a new tight audible and take over puppetry of the cat's avatar. “Your usual guide is unavoidably detained, Mister Gaytes. Please make yourself comfortable. We have a long journey ahead. I assure you, you will not be harmed in any way if you co-operate fully.”

Gaytes thrashes and whines causing the skin to cycle through the five standard poses of the tutorial. He makes grandiose claims about his personal security.

Nudge him to mute, run a tongue over the feedback from the roaches tunnelling through Switch's nodes. Still nothing. Still just as legit. Still doesn't feel right. Even the coldest black channeller gives off some heat. I sacrifice another roach to the tapestry of dot-cams and tone recognition programs I've left dormant in certain halls of power.

Xan checks in. “Can I bum a feed off you Switch? I’m short on credit.” *Heart rate and delta waves elevated. Tweaking the jagoffs public feed.*

“Don’t be such a stinge, Xan. This is the second time this week. You can go without real lobster for once,” says Switch. *Pigs are relaxed and your mask is running smooth this end. Might wanna tweak output for the client’s fan club.*

Curiouser and curiouser. Switch never reminds me how to do my job, it’s a waste of a good tone cycle. There are *always* Rule Thirty-Fours clumsily plugged into the system and Ink keeping an eye on their members’ sexual fetishes. No one has died while in a deep Reality. Not officially, anyway.

Lying AND nervous.

I’m halfway out my coffin couch before the sensation cuts through the bio-wire numbness; a trickle of sweat down the side of my face. I take a deep breath and shuffle the system kill within easier reach. It pulses a gentle red counterpoint.

“Changed my mind. Want a beef and bean burrito,” I say. *Reading you loud and clear. All systems are in-view.* Committed and non-committal at the same time, just how Switch would expect me to use my tones.

The Monroe skin ceases thrashing.

“So, Mr Gaytes. I have absorbed your attachment to the outside world.” I choose strange phrasing to keep enemy pattern recognition crawlers at bay. “You’re locked in to this Reality and your check-ins with your personal security are set at random intervals. I can assure you your bank accounts are quite safe, that’s not what I’m interested in. Are we ready to talk?”

The red lips pout, but Gaytes-Monroe manages a stiff nod.

“Good. Now, no protests about how Reality or Ink are the most impenetrable systems on-world and off, or your inalienable net neutral rights. I know the holes you built into your wall for you and your friends. Hell, I built them for you. Your house is made out of sticks and sand, and it only takes a small trickle of water to undermine it. That trickle has been a torrent for a very long time. I am everywhere.”

Gaytes-Marilyn folds his arms. “You can’t fool me with this lone wolf language. It would take far more than one person to hack Reality.”

I make the cat roll its eyes and the Marilyn skin shudders. “I do not do something so last century as ‘hack’, Mr Gaytes. I simply curate.”

“What, chaos? I bet you’re one of *those*, with your freakish body mods, wasting away in coffin couches in desperate attempts to pretend the Undermere belongs to you. You need me, to make the net a safe place for everyone.”

Back in my cell, my body winces, but I force the cat avatar to laugh. “Would you like a moustache to twirl Mr Gaytes? Do you actually listen to the things coming out of your mouth? Sounds to me like you’re parroting your daddy in a desperate attempt to keep your family’s seat on the council.”

The Marilyn skin finally glances around at their tenuous perch atop the spiked Detroit walls. “What are you? A Green? Ink Blotters? Killroy Mashram?”

Xan chokes on her pop tune. At least the shunt is doing its job; I’d forgotten she was there.

“At the front of the Coyotes line,” Switch says, voice steady. *Christ these jagoffs are out of touch!*

I manip the cat into a head tilt. “I have no political affiliations, you misunderstand the intent of the Blotters, and Killroy was just rich kids thinking they could ante up to my table. I work for no one.” A slight lie, but Xan doesn’t need to know; like with all my marks, I’d been dropping breadcrumbs for her for months. “I’m certainly not interested in creating clickbait.”

“Then what are you interested in?” The vocal algorithm centred on Gaytes picks up his true desperation. He’s stalling. I have to give him credit for a few Reality smarts; once a skin takes their first step out of purgatory, it can be bounced anywhere.

But he wasn’t smart enough.

“The truth.”

With a nudge of a paw, the calico shoves the skin off the Detroit wall. Gaytes screams all the way down.



Switch is silent, ostensibly to let me do my part of the job without interruption. He’s always been good like that, but now I just don’t know.

Though I can read the client’s vitals, I have to allow Xan’s regular updates so she feels like she’s taking part. Shunt gain stays way up.

In Reality—True Reality, not that shit that passes for the rich playground—Gaytes-Marilyn slumps on a broken brick wall, the fresh white skirt unstained by the muck we’ve tracked through pulled up above wide spread knees, bleached hair clenched in delicate hands. Despite his obvious love of the skin, he doesn’t know how to operate her well.

“Would you please stop.” He exaggerates the sweet lisp in a bid for sympathy.

The calico rubs against the skin’s ankles. “But Mr Gaytes, we’ve barely begun.”

Gaytes-Monroe swipes at the cat, but the nails only find the stink-laden air. I’ve paid special attention to getting the overpowering funk of death exactly right. “You think I don’t know all this—” Gaytes-Monroe gestures at the bloated bellies, the flies collecting in the corners of eyes. “—doesn’t exist?”



Illustration © 2016, Miranda Jean.

The grinding boredom of Gaytes incessant whining gets shunted away too, so my replies are always smooth, calm, annoying. “Your tax deductible is put to the best

possible use by the charity corp it's stolen by. And the yearly photo op with plucky kids you're manipulated into is truly a work of genius."

"But it's real!"

"As real as you want it to be." The calico's tail lashes.

"As real as all this," Gaytes-Monroe sneers back.

"Oh, I forgot." I make the calico do an 'aww shoot' gesture, and the skin looks away. "You thought third world poverty and famine was eliminated by your daddy's generation."

"But it was! Africa is a great and thriving country now!" Gaytes-Monroe stretches out a hand towards the listless bloated people in the tent, as if trying to convey his helpless need to help.

"Uh huh. Dude, this is a real time eyes on—"

"Oh."

"—from the refugee camp outside what remains of the levees of Brisbane."

"Huh?"

I bounce him a few kays further towards the sagging levees and encroaching brackish swamp. The skin freezes, and back at the tank Xan reports in an undertone Gaytes had thrown up. Geezus. This skin is so old, making bounce lag all the much worse. I can almost see the pixels chipping off.

Gaytes comes back coughing and cursing. "Alright, I get it! Ugandan famine riots. The PNG wireless dead zone. Moscow plague centres. The Palestinian exodus. All very handsome Shakespearean tragedies, cooked up with a few tweaks of Reality. I don't know what line you're being fed, but I bet you're one of *those* who barely sets foot outside some roach hole to put actual

real eyes on a problem. You're more content just to sit there in your coffins and stretch the truth to suit your reality."

Reality, with a little r.

"With all respect, you wouldn't know true reality if it bit you on the arse," I say. "Why bother breathing taxpayer air when you can take a corporate shuttle down to the Reality tanks or some skin joint."

"Now look here, you little shit—"

"No, YOU look. Really look." An exhausted roach drops an alert across my tongue before dissolving to nothing. I section off more to run algorithms over the data packet while I put the calico up in Gaytes-Monroe's face. "I know, deep down, you're not stupid. You only put on that front for your daddy. Believe me, I know what it means to leave no footprint. But your credentials aren't some made up bullshit to get you on a convenient committee. I know a much younger you was on the way to being something very much like me, but you were scared straight by threats against your trust fund and your boyfriends. You have the tools to see the truth, to pick apart the programming. If you're just willing to maybe, *maybe*, admit there's a different truth to the one you've been fed, the one in service of the net neutrality—"

It's not a prepared speech. I didn't expect to get this far. But Gaytes looks like, for a moment, he is truly listening.

I pause long enough to ascertain the skin has frozen again. As I tongue open the audible, the deep thought roaches I'd set chewing over the suicide packet rumble against my tongue. "Xan?"

“Busy, yo.” Her spoken protocols are making me proud; she’s gotta be tired. *Running diagnostics.*

Pull back from the calico avatar, blink dry eyes over the three-sixty: the Thirty-Fours have grown bored by the mask broadcast and dropped off; Ink are still ten paces behind; Switch’s pig still flutters freshly pink.

That can’t be right. The pig should be showing signs of the planned obsolescent decay like I program into my roaches.

The tingle on my tongue turns from the of-interest soft caramel to the imperative of acidic lemon.

Never any face time to Switch. Nodes are squeaky, bouncing round the globe and orbit on a perfectly irregular timetable.

Too clean.

“Fuck!” Xan drops all pretence of tone. “Shit, fuck! He’s seizing.”

The kill switch throbs prettily.

“Xan?” *Protocols!*

“Shit! I’ve never had a seizure. What do I do!”

I have to make a decision. I shake clients down, but never deep-six them. Dropping my tones for one phrase is a risk, but I have to keep Xan on the level or we’re screwed. “It’s all there in your training. Blink it up on your visor.”

“He’s fucking dying. Brain waves all over the fucking show!”

A grainy picture: Xan hunches over the tank’s controls as the body slow-ejects from the tank. “Breathe. It’s going to be okay. I’m listening if you need help.” *The medicos are coming. I’m going to flash which button to press.*

“Don’t fucking tell me to breathe!”

Grabbing a simulacrum of the Reality tank screen, I tap in a variety of codes and flash them to Xan. I can't do this for her, can't put my fingerprints on the ware without a ready roach.

Xan groans, and her hands shake. "If he dies I'm gonna—"

If he dies, I'm gonna ... "Yo, Switch." Dammit, Switch!

Silence.

I throw everything away but the in-view of Xan working over Gaytes' body.

Rare green cockroach pinched in the fingers of my left hand, skull-and-crossbones flashing nebula hot beneath the right.

A deep thought roach completes flaying the data pack.

Ink aren't ten paces behind after all.

On the in-view, medicos rush the reality tank, shoving Xan aside. Gaytes splutters as he's pulled from the conductive gel.

Kicking off the coffin couch, I flick the green cockroach at an open portal. It shatters into thousands of tiny offspring, barrelling down any tunnel they can find from the rapidly narrowing choices, carrying the message to anyone black channel enough to read it and care:

Switch is radioactive.



Could be the hipster red-head surfer. No. The fibres in his precise shag are two generations old.

Definitely not the painfully obvious guy in the sunglasses to hide Ink quality retinas. Jagoff would

never spot a black channeller, even if I danced a jig and sang “Touch my pus filled shunt if you dare.”

The woman in the head scarf has possibilities. Her trceries show the inflammation of recently upgraded tattoos. I’d have to wait for her to subvocalize within ten metres. Battered handheld cobbled together from pawn shop parts is giving me lazy haptic. Without white noise filters or access to a vault, the night food market is a mess of stimuli, stinking of canned air and too many bodies in close proximity. Lucky I don’t have to live out my nightmares too often.

A tall Pakistani with a carefully curated beard and expensive denims blocks out the hazy Vitamin D lamp. He’s probably mid-forties, maybe early fifties; newer generation wetware tends to be infused with rejuv.

He holds out a hand tattooed with a fine tracery mimicking veins and freckles. “Hey, can I bum a charge?”

The handheld rumbles deep in my pocket. I squint up. Matching heights would qualify as a challenge.

“Sure.” I touch index fingertip to the prime spot between the bearded guy’s index and middle major knuckles. He pretends to flinch on receiving the flash charge, nodding thanks.

He closes the gap in height by taking a seat at my table. “You look nothing like how I imagined.” He switches dialect and tone to an innocuous surface level conversation.

“Who’d you expect? Thomas A freaking Anderson? Sorry to disappoint.” I grin and do opposites with body language for the benefit of anyone watching two friends sharing shawarma in real time.

Switch grunts a laugh. “So you’re a woman.”

“I’m not.”

He tilts his head, holding my gaze, not giving me the once over. Okay then. “Didn’t figure you for a guy.”

“Wrong again.”

“Huh.” He taps his fingers on the scarred plastic table top. Not even a code this time, just thoughtfulness. He clenches his hand to a stop. “You look good in Armani. Though I thought you’d have blue mod eyes, not real green.”

“I wasn’t shitting you when I said I don’t do wetware.” I allow a little humour to colour my tone. *Fuck you, you handsome bastard.*

With a chuckle, Switch pretends to look anywhere but at the Ink suit. He’s good. Not falling into the blank-eyed stare of someone registering multiple feeds and running a mask to keep the convo on the down low.

I thumb the handheld from running vocal reconns over to taser mode. It’ll waste the piece which cost me most of my broken horde, but it’ll buy me precious seconds.

Switch’s tired gaze finds me again. “How’d you know?”

“That Gaytes was implanted with mal to flush me out?” Puff of the chest, search for a good lie. “Come on. It’s my job to know these things.”

Switch actually drops his eyes in respect. My fingers itch. I imagine him pulling feeds; wet-ware dogs, a couple of handlers walking true reality skins, fibre-optic jugglers, Ink nodes keeping a close eye on their white knight he’s somehow blocking while we talk. “So how’s this going to happen?”

Blink. “How does Ink want this to happen?”

“I’m not here on Ink business.”

The pause of only a few seconds is a lifetime of processing time. My thumb wavers over the taser button.

“You wasted me, Switch,” I say, pretending to show off a tattooed hand. Only minute close inspection would discover the raised tracery as fake. “That’s not cool. I’ve already been off grid for a forty-three-twenty. People will notice the Jack of All Trades has gone dark. My roaches are chewing Reality right out, and making good in-roads on Ink. Any kid with their first shunt is joy-riding that shit. I can guarantee your fingerprints are over everything whether you like it or not.”

Switch examines his well-kept fingernails. He wants me to see the single-use EM pulser disguised as an embedded jewel. I crack my knuckles in my pocket. He looks up and nods once in understanding. He could take me out and maybe a few others, but I’d take him with me. I’d be stunned long enough for the Ink suits to grab me, but his wet-ware would be fried for life.

A cool, tall, obsidian woman walks out from behind an old-school fibre-optic fountain, licking taco sauce off her fingers. A bodyguard dogs her heels, and I have to imagine the Reality logo flashing over her head like a beacon for everyone to see in the enclosed market.

Switch can’t contain his gaze. It’ll be the first time he’s seen Xan in the flesh too. His smile slashes a grim line, and he flexes the hand with the pulser. I knew him too well for his own good, and I’d gambled right; he won’t risk taking out Xan too.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” he says. “It was strictly business.”

“For almost fifteen years? Watching people suffer under the yoke of Ink’s ‘truth’? What’s that quote? ‘If

you are neutral in situations of injustice,’ and all that. Shit. Double agents. Can never get your priorities square.”

I watch as his eyes drink Xan all in. I came for her, and only her. Making sure no one dies on my watch is a promise I see through to the very end. I can’t afford to be sentimental, not any more. Huh, that’s something I might have said twenty years ago. Glad to know I’m not entirely roached out inside.

Small twitches of the lapels and hem of my silver suit jacket soothe the suffering of my busy hands. “If you try to touch Xan, I’ll fucking burn you.”

“More than you already have?” Switch’s eyes drop. It hurts me, it truly does to see someone I thought as my equal so humbled. I must have something on him deep in my hibernating roaches that Ink doesn’t. The promise tickles me.

“You have no idea.”

“What are you gonna do? Your system was slag once we traced your real node.” Switch’s free hand wafts to indicate thousands of miles away and forever ago.

Xan swipes her ebony hand across a soda dispenser screen three times before it drops a bottle for her. Frustration angles her mouth at the lock out from even the most basic of amenities. Damn it. I’ll get you your life back, I promise, Xan. It might take a while, and you won’t know who or how, but I will.

Click is a person of their promise.

“Click is dead,” I say. “But Click is a survivor. Don’t come looking. You won’t find them. The Undermere doesn’t belong to you anymore. I’ve made damn sure of it.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Switch sighs.

With one hand on the handheld and the other on an already too hot passport, I take the risk of turning my back on Switch. Passing within metres of Xan and her shadow—she doesn't even blink at me—I saunter out the market gate without a backward glance.

Keeping the Stars

Anna Sykora

after we marred the night
with arrays of light
gas incandescent
mercury vapor
or cooler LEDs

after we chased away
dark's last lovely
lingerings
for the sake of
efficiency gains

we felt so lonely
without the stars
ancestors wished on
or dreamed to conquer

we project them
onto the dome
of a special purpose
chamber

we call our children
Orion or Andromeda
to never forget

what shines
beyond the perimeter
of the permalight

Keeping the Stars

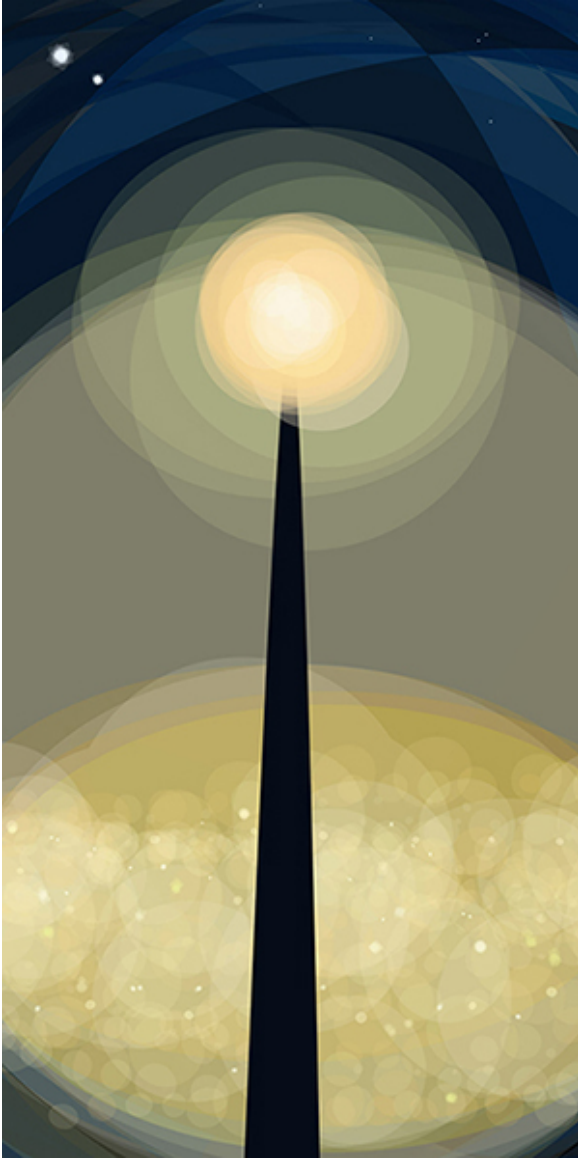


Illustration © 2016, Carmen Moran.

The Orchids of Lethe

M. Bennardo



Illustration © 2016, Chris Cartwright.

They come for me at my mother's house.

It's Rosa Marquez and a man in an expensive white suit, all led by the boy Julio. I'm in Mama's garden, in my chair in the green shade of the sycamore. Julio waves to me from the other side of the garden gate, and I motion silently to him. He presses the latch above the old iron lock, smiling shyly as he leads the others inside.

I breathe deep, filling my lungs with the heavy scent of the magnolia blooms, the beetles crawling in and out among the pale peach petals. A hummingbird flashes amid the bright orange trumpets of a creeping vine. And

I wonder if this is the last time I shall see and smell and be among them like this.

As Julio and the others cross the garden towards me, the lizards flatten themselves nervously against the adobe walls. Ramon, in the village, says there are a dozen different species of lizard, and that once I had known how to tell each of them apart. Now, they all look the same to me. I can't remember the differences, and I can't remember the names.

Mama just calls them los pequeños, the little ones. That's enough for me.

"Welcome," I say. I stand up, looking from Rosa to the man in the expensive suit. I know why they've come. Long ago, they told me what to expect. Long ago, they told me who I was. "I'm sorry I don't have enough chairs."

Rosa translates into English, and the man shrugs.

"We're not here to sit," says Rosa. As always, she seems impossibly young—but then, I've forgotten how old I am. Thirty-five? Forty? Probably older than I think, or so it seems every time someone tells me. Mama knows the number, of course, but it would only upset her to ask.

"I'm looking for someone on Señor Castle's behalf," continues Rosa. That's the man in the suit, it seems. Castle. "A man whom he wants to find. He followed him as far as the village, where he was seen to buy a canoe and set off east." Rosa makes a motion with her hand, strangely formal, like somebody giving a speech. "He must be somewhere in the swamp now. Lost."

"Why come to me?" I reach out and grip Rosa's left forearm in my hand, turning it over so I can see the tattoo of her name stenciled there. *Rosa Marquez, Santa*

Matrona, Florida. Her tattoo is much nicer than mine—more artistic, carefully drawn, free from scars. Not scratched and inked in haste. Planned. “That’s an old tattoo. Two, three years. You’ve been wanting my job for a long time now, eh? Aren’t you ready yet?”

She pulls back her arm, twisting to break my grip. The man in the suit looks on in bewilderment, not understanding. “*It’s okay,*” Rosa says to him in English. “*It’s cool.*” Then she turns back to me, her dark eyes furious. “Don’t waste my time. If you’re too afraid, I’ll do it instead.”

I shake my head. I know why they’ve come. I know it in the fog and darkness of my own mind. I know it in the spaces of all the things I’ve forgotten. There is already one like me. So long as I can remember how to put my paddle in water, why should there be another? That is what they are thinking.

I suppose I should say no. If I think of myself or of Mama, I suppose I should send them away again with a sad shake of my head. But then what? I’m tired of sitting all day in someone else’s garden, watching the lizards and the hummingbirds. How long has it been since I last worked? I can’t remember—the days all run together. There never seems any point to counting them.

I pick up my straw hat from the garden table and put it on. I look right at the man, Castle. I don’t remember much English anymore, but sometimes the words come to me just when I need them.

“*I’ll do it,*” I say.



That should be it—the clean little ending of my desultory existence. But, like a clumsy transition in a

bad farce, there is more to the scene. For it's that moment when Mama chooses to come out of the house, carrying a bundle of wet sheets, hand-washed in the tub and ready for the clothesline. Seeing the others, she drops the wet sheets on the ground, her mouth opening in a short scream. The lizards on the walls scatter for the bushes.

"Esteban, no." My mother is crying, her voice ragged as she leans against the wall for support, her hands over her heart. "Do you want to kill me?"

"Mama."

"Every time," she says, tears in her eyes, "you come back less my son."

I shake my head. She doesn't know—I haven't told her. But I haven't been her son for as long as I can remember. Not since my last trip into the swamp at least, and maybe longer. "I'm sorry, Mama," I say. "But a man must do something. And this is what I do."

The commonplace words turn to clay in my mouth, and I am ashamed when Mama throws up her hands and turns muttering back into the house. She'll pray there the rest of the day, I know. She'll pray until I've forgotten every last thing about her.



Ramon makes up the contract for me. So much writing would make my head swim even if I could remember the right words and legal niceties. Instead, I sit and look at the photo of the man that Castle wants to find. I haven't asked his name, and I won't. Names are no good in the swamp.

The man in the photo is also wearing an expensive suit, or at least an expensive jacket. Underneath, there's

a gold chain against his shirt. A beautiful woman is on his arm.

“Who is the woman?” I ask.

Rosa just shakes her head, so I point the photo at Castle and tap my finger on the woman. “Who is she?” I speak slowly, so he can hear the Spanish words and the question in my voice.

Castle says an English word, and Rosa translates. The woman is Castle’s wife.

I nod and think a moment longer. “Finding this man won’t get him his wife back,” I say. Rosa doesn’t translate, so I push her shoulder. “Tell him.”

When he answers, she shrugs. “He says he already has his wife back.”

This is not seeking for the lost, then. This is revenge.

I don’t say anything, but I’m thinking as quickly as I can. I don’t think this is the usual way. To go into the swamp intentionally is serious enough, and revenge seems such a petty motive. I try to catch Castle’s eyes, but he turns them away. I cannot see how black they burn. I cannot see if this is real to him, or a game.

Long ago, Mama told me about the first time I went into the swamp. My father had been paddling along the canal to another village, and a sudden storm had blown through. The water rose, the dykes burst. His canoe was swept by the stormwater deep among the cypresses and orchids.

I was young then, Mama said, not much older than twenty. I begged Ramon until he carved the tattoos on my forearms, hastily scratched with the needle from my mother’s sewing machine. *Esteban Yaha, Santa Matrona, Florida* on the left arm, and *Home is west* on the right arm. They were my idea, those tattoos. They

were why she let me go, that first time. That is the story she tells me anyway.

That was the kind of thing I thought I was for. To find lost relatives and straying children. To bring back those who have wandered accidentally into the swamp. Those who are loved and missed.

Revenge, on the other hand, doesn't sit easy. Can I even bring back a man who wanted to lose himself? I wonder if I have ever tried before.

But there is Rosa, who brought Castle to me. And there is Ramon, making out the contract. Somehow, it must sit easy enough with them. Perhaps all the other times it wasn't really like the time with my father. Perhaps the other times it was like this. Mama only told me about the first time, so I don't know about the others.

Perhaps it is always revenge. Even though the man I bring back won't be the same as the one who sinned. It doesn't make sense, not really—but then, the lost wouldn't be the same either. Perhaps none of it makes sense. Perhaps none of it matters. But still—here we are. And here I am.

“Does he speak Spanish?” I ask.

“Yes,” says Rosa. “I think so.” She nods at Castle. “He thinks so, I mean.”

“What will he do when he finds this man?” I ask. Rosa looks away. Julio makes a gun with his fingers and pantomimes shooting. I look back to the others. “Is that true?”

Rosa glares at me, her eyes flashing. “I said I would do it if you didn't want to.” But her voice is not defiant or contemptuous. Her voice is round and sad.

Would it be better if the man wasn't to die? Would it be better if he were only to get his hand slapped? Death is at least serious. And I had wanted this man to be serious.

So I think about my mother on her knees. I think about my father lost in the swamp—out there, still lost to this day, for I never did bring him back. I think about the tattoos on Rosa's arms, inked against the day when I can no longer do this job and she will do it in my place. Then I see Ramon and Castle, the signed and countersigned contracts folded into envelopes, shaking hands with each other solemnly. I see another envelope full of money. I see this other man in the photo with Castle's wife.

"I'll do it," I say again. I don't want to anymore, but neither will I let Rosa do it instead. Not for something like this. Not for money and revenge and murder.

"Ready now?" asks Ramon.

"Yes," I say. "But first..."



Time slows as I take the notebook from my pocket. I feel as though I am moving like an old man, slow and methodical. I feel as though everyone else wants me to get on with it. But they will begrudge me this at least. They will let me have this moment.

My heart thumps heavily as I open the creased green cover of the notebook and page through it carefully, turning leaf after leaf of my own writing. It's the book I always write in before I go into the swamp, the book of my life. All that is left of my memories.

The notebook is divided into five sections, for five trips that I've completed. The first section is the longest

and most detailed, pages and pages of close writing made in a firm and sure hand. A young hand. So many words, so much writing—I have difficulty even reading those pages now. They make me uneasy. I turn quickly past them.

The writing in the second section is almost as firm, but it doesn't go on nearly as long. It gets shorter and weaker still in the third, fourth, and fifth sections. Then, with quivering fingers, I turn over to a new blank page and take out my pencil. The sixth section.

I suck on the end of the pencil as I try to think what to write. What to save? What to write down? I look around again—the little village, the people around me. All of this will still be here when I return. Where are my loose ends? I don't even owe money to anybody. I don't have any appointments to keep.

Then I see the photograph of the man that Castle wants to find. The man that Castle wants to kill. I look from the woman to the man in the photograph, then up at Castle. I know then that the lie would be the easiest thing to write. *You didn't know what would happen.*

But how could I make myself believe it? Day after day, with nothing to do but think alone in that garden chair under the sycamore tree. Day after day, with nothing else to think about. The truth would be clear sooner or later, and I would know both that I had been a willing accessory to murder and that I lied to myself.

So instead I write a different sentence in the notebook, quickly, my hand shaking. One sentence only. That's all I have to say to the future man who comes back out of the swamp in my body, hauling a prisoner along for his execution.

Then I give the notebook and my key to Mama's garden gate to Ramon. He'll hold them for me until I return.

Finally, I flip over the photo and I write *Bring him back* on the back of it. I put the pencil and the photograph in a plastic Ziplock baggie and stuff it in my pocket.

"Okay," I say. "Let's go."



There's a problem at the canoe. After a few minutes, I realize that Castle wants to come too. He wants to be there when I find the man, somewhere in the swamp so he can pull his gun out of his waistband right then and there. He still doesn't understand—doesn't understand why I am needed and what my job is. While the others talk, I walk to a nearby cypress tree and pluck an orchid clinging to one of the branches.

Castle looks up as I approach. I can see his eyes now, black and bright, the shadow of death lurking behind them.

"Breathe," I say. I crush the orchid in my hand and hold it up to Castle's nose. I pantomime breathing in. Castle breathes.

His eyes flare open as the pollen enters his nose and he looks around dazed, bewildered. "*What happened?*" he asks. "*What was that?*" He talks in English, but I know exactly what he says. I know exactly what he is feeling—the momentary break, the popping of his memory, the wash of nothing across his mind like the tide smoothing the beach.

For a moment I wish I could feed him enough of the pollen to blot out everything, to make him forget his

wife and his anger and this other man. I wish I could blot out the signatures on the contracts, and instead go back to Mama's garden. But it would take a thousand flowers to do that, and there aren't a thousand flowers here.

In the swamp, yes. A thousand flowers and more. A thousand million. But not here.

"*The flower,*" I say in English. Then I tap my forehead. "*Makes you forget.*" I motion out to the swamp. "*Flowers everywhere. Wind blows—you forget everything.*" I wipe my hand across my brow, then clap my hands together, cleaning them of crushed petals and pollen. "*Everything gone.*"

Castle looks at me, nodding, a quiet look in his eyes. Rosa and Ramon are explaining again, in better English, but I can tell that Castle already understands. He asks me something, but I don't know the words. Probably he wants to know how I will remember to find my way back. How I will remember to find the man at all.

But I am already kneeling in the canoe, checking the bags of beef jerky and dried apricots, the plastic gallon jugs of clean drinking water. Already, I am shoving off with my hand, trailing my paddle in the water. The sun reflects off the rippling surface and makes patterns on the tattoos on my forearms. The left one with my name and village, the right one with the direction home.

They have always guided me right, five times before this. I kiss the San Cristóbal medallion hanging around my neck. God willing, they will guide me right again.



I pin the plastic baggie with the photograph to the canoe's frame in front of my knees. The sun is hot, and

the black waters of the swamp sparkle with sharp reflections on a million tiny waves.

Three miles in now, I'm paddling through an open space, a shallow space. Tips of green grass break through the water's surface and then bend over lazily. On either side of this avenue, great cypresses rise, knobbed knees breaking the water, upper branches dotted with resting cormorants. The birds look prehistoric, their wings spread crookedly to dry in the air. Now and then, one dives from its perch and skims the water clumsily before taking off for better fishing grounds.

There's no wind yet, so I can still remember Castle and Rosa and Ramon and Mama. If I want to, for now. But if I look closely at the black surface of the tannic water, I can already see tiny specks of yellow dust, whirling in eddies as my paddle dips down—first on one side of the canoe, and then on the other.

The pollen is everywhere, on everything. The orchids are like a weed here, almost as bad as the spanish moss. But more beautiful. More treacherous.

Ahead, in the shadow of a cypress, something big and black slips into the water from the bank. A powerful kick of its scaly tail sends it cruising into deeper water until nothing is visible except the tip of its nose and the dark green bump above its eye. It could be a waterlogged branch, but it's not.

I grin over the water, watching the hidden thing as my canoe glides on. "Ahoy, pequeño," I whisper. He's far away, that alligator. He will not bother me. He's waiting for some stupid cormorant to paddle across his nose. "Good luck with the hunting."

Then I turn my face back down the long open avenue, and a cold breeze fans my brow. As the sun sinks lower, the wind rises higher.



I don't forget everything in the swamp. No one does. But I forget a lot, and the longer I stay the more I forget.

What I don't forget is how to survive. My muscles remember how to move and steer the canoe. Some untouched part of my brain remembers the danger posed by alligators and how to spot them even when submerged. I remember to drink from my water jugs rather than from the swamp, and to cook the fish I catch rather than tearing into them raw.

I don't forget that I'm a human. I don't forget the things that have seen me through the swamp five times before, the legacy of ten thousand years of human survival here. But as for everything else—it melts away. It all melts away, and I have nothing beyond what is tattooed on my arms.

Yet somehow it is enough for now. In the swamp, new memories are wiped clean almost as soon as they are formed. There is space for a thought, for two, for three—then, like in a dream, the chain breaks and it all falls away.

Each time I lift my paddle, I wonder again who Esteban Yaha is. What is his home like, back in the west? Who loves him? Who waits for him? Then I forget the questions as soon as I drop my arm.

There will be time enough to find the answers once I have done what I have come to do. The photo, the man, the single command. *Bring him back*, says the writing on the back.

I will. It's why I have come.



Suddenly, out of the swamp, an island looms. The mist parts and I glide through a floating green carpet of lilies, leaving a trail of open water in my wake.

How long have I been paddling? How did I get here? The questions disappear almost as soon as they form.

Ahead, trees cluster thickly together, their wide trunks planted not in water but on piles of sand, branches overhead festooned with the cool tumbling curls of spanish moss, but plucked clear of orchids. Sawgrass fills in the empty spaces, and a steep sandy beach protrudes from the swamp.

As I push through the lilies, I see another trail parallel with mine—another path of clear black water through the green, where another boat has passed before mine. Then I see a canoe lying turned over on the beach. Then the tip of my canoe strikes heavily against the sandy bank and climbs a few inches up. Then someone is helping to drag me ashore, and someone is helping me stand. I snatch the photo from the canoe and stuff it in my pocket.

“Welcome,” says a voice.

“Are you surprised?” asks another.

I look around, the firm ground under my feet. Something is fading from behind me, and something is opening in front. The two voices belong to a man and a woman. I seem to be expecting them to vanish, but they don't. Instead, they grow more and more solid, more and more real. They are full of a million little details, and it hurts my head to look at them.

“No,” I say. “I'm not surprised.”

The man and the woman laugh and take me by the arms.



There's a village on the island, footpaths winding between old adobe houses, most of them crumbling, poorly built from too-sandy clay. A small grove of orange trees sits between the village clearing and a dark patch of hot jungle. The air grows heavy and dead there, at the back of the grove, great flies buzzing horribly and the stink of living and dying things rising up out of the tangle of trees and ferns.

Elsewhere, there are goats, climbing unconcerned through the cypress knees that crowd the beach. There's a church too, on a dry prominence with a field of maize growing knee-high in a field behind it. The church itself is old with a cracked roof, shafts of sunlight falling across the chancel and nave, creepers climbing the pillars, stains showing where old wooden stations and apostles rotted off the sandstone walls.

Here and there, I see others. Other people, carrying wood or sacks, talking and laughing as they walk about the village. The man and woman with me point to them one at a time. "There's Orange. There's Orchid. That's Lizard."

I nod, numb and half overcome. The hand of the man bites into my arm as he leads me, and it feels good. Cypress. The woman is Bell. Earlier, the man and woman had told me their names. Even when I look away, I still remember them.

"We must find a name for you, as well," says the man. Somehow, I know the answer is to show my right arm to him. He studies the writing on my tattoo

carefully. After a moment, he says, “That means ‘wolf’.” He points to the word “yaha” on my arm.

“Does it?” I ask. The idea does not surprise me. Why shouldn’t it mean wolf? Why shouldn’t this man know better even than I do? “In what language?”

The man shrugs. “I forget the name.” Then he closes his eyes and breathes deep. Suddenly, he is reciting something that sounds like a poem. Like something I heard long ago.

“Creek,” I say. I don’t know why. But the man smiles and nods.

“Yes,” he says, slowly. “I think that was the name.”



By evening, my mind is mostly settled. I sit happily in the center of the village with the others, watching the bonfire grow hotter and higher.

The people laugh and talk, and sing sometimes in short scraps of almost-familiar song. They ladle crushed soaked maize into pots of boiling water, and I suddenly recognize the sour smell of sofkee—a tremor running through my body as some old memory flares up inside me like a struck match and then sputters away again without lighting any bigger fire...

Later, when the sofkee is served, we share boiled swamp cabbage and roasted birds as well. The plucked wings are long and delicate, the bones easily broken. As I eat, Bell begins telling me a story about cranes, and it’s a long while before I realize these cranes are the ones that we are eating.

She leans close, frizzled yellow hair falling on either side of her tanned face, her skin cracked with laugh lines and her teeth grey and soft-looking. But she has a

shine about her, a radiance that pours out of her. As she talks, I notice Cypress watching contentedly nearby, stretched out with his feet pointed at the fire, his belly round under dark skin and a tattered shirt, grease glistening in the patches of black and white hair on his cheeks.

I barely follow the story Bell is telling. She tells me that the cranes came three or four days before in a great flock, settling onto a stand of water-bound cypresses, squabbling and bickering over their roosting order in the branches. They stayed for the night, as other flocks of birds often did, but then something happened. Morning came, and they didn't fly away. Another night and another day passed. Somehow, through some special potency of the orchids, the birds had forgotten to leave.

It was on the third day when some of the villagers went out in canoes and rafts. By then, the birds had long forgotten all fear of humans, and soon Bell and the others were plucking cranes off the low branches of the cypresses and wringing their necks. It was on the way back from this expedition, their boats heaped with this miraculous bounty, the mere edges of their memories beginning to evaporate under the influence of the pollen, that they encountered a wanderer—a stranger lost in the swamp.

“We named him Crane.” Bell grins, pointing around the circle that crowds the fire. I see a thin young man leaning back on a fallen log—one of the youngest people in the village it seems, a gold chain around his neck.

I nod, not really understanding, but happy to listen to the flow of Bell's words. Happy to be following the flow of anything, of cause and effect, of the progression

of time—happy even to notice the darkening of the sky, the cooling of the night, and the rising of the moon.

It is only later, as the fire is dying, that I think about the gold chain again. Then I remember the photo I found in my pocket, and I take it out. The chain is the same, and the man is the same. As far as I can tell in the red glow of fading embers, I have been carrying a photo of the man that they call Crane.

I flip the photo over, and I read what it says on the back.



That night, I piece it together. It happens almost against my own will, as if part of my mind is fighting to not understand. But as I lie on the floor in Bell and Cypress's house, my head and body pillowed on a springy mattress of new-cut palm leaves, it all falls into place too easily.

My arrival, and Crane's arrival the day before me. He had been lost, dehydrated, almost delirious, Bell had said. He had wept and clung to the villagers. While I had come confidently and calmly, provisioned with food and water, as if prepared for a long journey.

And the photo. The photo of Crane, and the words written on the other side. The words, too, written on my arms. My identity and my home, as if I had known that I would lose my way in the swamp. As if I knew I would forget, as if I knew I would need a map back to where I belong.

By morning, I understand it all—or enough. It doesn't help me sleep.



I spend the next day clearing out a house of my own. The village is larger than the villagers need, and the jungle has intruded on its edges. There are several old unused houses, wreathed in generations of creepers, dead leaves and twigs caked into dried mud on the floor.

The roof has fallen in partly on the house I have chosen, but I patch it well enough with palm fronds. Then I scrub and scrape at the floor, washing out rivers of mud with black swamp water, then rinsing it all down again with clear water from the spring on the hill behind the church. I'm not sure why I do any of it. I shouldn't be planning to stay. I should be convincing Crane to leave with me—to go back west, to whatever we left behind there.

Were we friends, I wonder, or strangers?

Friends, surely. The greatest of friends. Who else would come looking for another in this treacherous swamp? Who else would throw away his memories to bring another back?

I pull down a mat of dead creepers from the wall of my house, the muscles in my arms flexing, my tattoos grimy with dirt and sweat. I don't know why, but whenever I see those tattoos now there is sadness on my shoulders, coldness in my heart.

Perhaps there is a home for me already, somewhere else. Perhaps someone is there now, missing me.

A lizard scurries out from underneath the dead creepers and pauses in the open sunlight, as if turned suddenly to a statue and unable to move from his exposed location. "What is the matter with me, pequeño?" I ask.

Even the word is strange. It's not the right word, I know, but it tugs at my heart, weakly, like the echo of

something. Yesterday, it would have tugged more. Tomorrow, it will tug less. I know the way of these things well enough already.

Pet names, scraps of songs, the memory of words in forgotten languages—they are all always bubbling up among the villagers. Unconnected, free-floating half-memories, unpredictable and insubstantial. They excite curiosity, like artifacts unearthed in an archaeological dig, the tantalizing remnants of some vanished civilization. But scraps only. Slender shadows.

There was a past once, they say. But as to what it was like—they are silent.

So why, I wonder, should the photo in my pocket be any different? Why should it be any more convincing to Crane than any of these other remnants? It's an artifact, a remnant—not a story. He will look at it and shrug. *She's beautiful*, he might say, *but who is she?*

I'm supposed to bring him back somehow, but I have nothing to tell him to make him want to go. I throw some of the palm fronds onto the roof, and pull them into place. I hear Cypress and Bell walking up the path to my house, more fresh-cut fronds heaped in their arms, laughing and talking and joking with me. Cypress calls me Wolf, and Bell smiles shyly as she looks at us.

But all the while, my tattoos stand out on my arms. All the while, a shadow is over my heart.



I wake in the middle of the night. I've been dreaming of—something. I'm not sure what. Some story, some part of the past. Crane and the woman in the photo with him. And me.

Why did I come into the swamp to bring Crane back? Why did I sacrifice my own memories to the task? Surely not on my own behalf—was our friendship truly that great? Or was it rather for her? Surely I did it out of my love for their love. Her love.

I reach into my pocket and take out the photo. It's hard to see, even in the moonlight that pours through the window. Crane looks different now, not at all like how I saw him in my dream. The woman too. But I have my story now, and my motive.

I flip the photo over and take out my pencil. Underneath where it says *Bring him back* I write another line. It says *She misses us both*.

I stop and stare at the words I have written. Somehow, it seems true, even though I know it is a lie. But one thing I know certainly: it will work.

Then I put the photo away and lie down to sleep again. I try to will the guilty feeling in my breast away. *It could be the truth*, I tell myself. *It must be the truth*.

I sigh in the darkness. Tomorrow I will decide whether to show the picture to Crane or throw it away.



I wake in the morning to a still-dark sky, but this one rolling with black clouds. I shiver as the temperature drops. The wind blows, and water birds fly ahead of it—cormorants and cranes and pelicans, swept before the gale, up and out, away from the coming storm. An eagle clutches the top of a cypress, defiant and hard.

The church bell rings, clanging back and forth on its ancient fulcrum, the clapper ringing dully with every collision. At first I think it's blowing free in the wind, clanging uncontrollably. But soon I realize that someone

is ringing it, heaving on the rope, calling everyone in the village to the relative security of the church.

Even there, the wind tears through the old walls. There is no hope of keeping a fire lit. We can barely keep dry. We stay to the corners, huddling under piled palm fronds, as thunder booms and wind roars around us. As the water pours in cataracts down the cracked tile channel of the nave.

Cypress and Bell are there, and I squat next to them as a pool of dark and cold water starts to collect at our feet. Lightning flashes illuminate our corner through the broken windows of the church. And in those sudden flashes, I see our faces all reflected back in the water. How alike Cypress is to me, I suddenly think. How similar our eyes and nose and jaw—

That is the last thing I think about before I realize there is pollen in the air. Suddenly I know that everything is about to slip away, and I want to hold tight to it all. Even though my friendships are all new friendships, even though I have no long history behind me. I am not leaving anything that I worked a long time to build, but still I want to fight for it.

I watch Cypress and Bell cling to each other for perhaps the last time. Their eyes fighting to stay bright, fighting to keep from clouding over. They know, as I do, that they will both still be here in the morning. But separate, no longer together, their shared foundation washed away in the flood.

Then a long night becomes a million moments. A million moments of thunder rolling into the roar of wind and rain. A million moments of instinctive survival as my ego is battered back into a void...

When morning comes, I find the tattoos on my arms and the photo in my pocket. I find too the man in the photo, but not the woman. Together, we flip the photo over.

Bring him back, it says. She misses us both.

It is like a lance through both of our hearts, pinning us fast together. What is this church to us? These ruined houses full of mud and leaves? Who are these people and why are we with them?

Near the water, we find a canoe. There is room for two inside it.



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We drift through the swamp, the other man and I. Carefully, deliberately, I paddle west. I forget, I awaken. I forget, I awaken. I discover the world anew. And I

paddle west because that's what the tattoo on my arm tells me to do. Perhaps somewhere in that direction there is an end to all of this—all of this forgetting and waking, this endless moment of no past and no future.

I only notice my mind is clearing when I wonder how long I have been paddling. I was born this way, it seems. Born in motion, traveling toward an unknown destination.

But my thoughts hold together. Two, three, four thoughts in a row. I don't forget, not as much. As we go west, I stay awake for longer and longer.

I don't talk to the other man and he doesn't talk to me. What can we say? We have no shared history to reminisce about, no separate histories to compare. Neither of us knows the answer to any question we might ask.

My arms ache, and so I rest a while. There is fresh water in the canoe, and so I drink it. The cypresses stand around us, spanish moss blowing fitfully in the wind. Turtles cluster on half-submerged logs, baking in the hot afternoon sun. A blue heron wades out into the water, hip deep, its great eye trained downward.

"I found this," I say. It's the photo of the other man with a woman. He takes it from my hand and looks at it, then flips it over.

"Is that me?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "That's you."

I paddle on, moving west again. Whatever has brought us here is not important. All that matters is that we keep going. Keep going until we reach the end. By the time we do—by the time we see a man and a boy on the shore up ahead—I'm exhausted and almost ready to fall asleep sitting up.

“I’m Ramon,” says the man as he pulls me ashore. “And this is Julio.” The man claps me on the back and grins. I stumble into his arms, my legs like water. “Welcome home, Esteban. Good job, my friend.”



Julio is still there when I wake. Ramon and the other man are gone. They left in a car, says Julio, hours earlier, while I slept heavily. They were headed south, perhaps to a place that Julio calls Miami.

“Ramon says you can drink anything you want,” adds the boy with a grin.

I smile grimly. I have a bad headache. Ramon has rum in his kitchen. After that, I try water, then more water, then Coca-Cola. My brain seems to set, like liquid turning to gelatin. It’s solid now, but it’s as smooth and blank as gelatin too. What do I know now? What do I know?

Julio tells me that this is Santa Matrona, the same name as on my tattoo. But somehow I wonder if that is really true. Somehow I can’t help but think I have come back to the wrong place.

Julio gives me a notebook and a key that Ramon had been holding for me. I open the book, but my headache returns at the first glimpse of the pages full of writing. I decide to look at it later, or maybe find someone to read it to me. But the key is cool and heavy. It has a string I can slip around my neck, alongside the San Cristóbal medallion.

I hold the key up. “What door is this for?”



I go to my mother's house, carefully following the directions that Julio gave me. I walk slowly down a shaded lane of basswood trees, the eager wind pushing leaves and garbage up the lane behind me, rattling the branches over my head, sending iridescent beetles careening as they try to fly from leaf to leaf.

Then I turn a corner and the stillness is suddenly oppressive, the wind gone and the air hot, the sweet odor of the basswood flowers now suffocating and heavy. Pink stucco walls line either side of the street, covered by creepers and broken by old iron gates. A radio blares from a garden nearby, a preacher hundreds of miles away exhorting the faithful through a thin invisible thread. I see the radio suddenly in my mind, a small transistor radio. So easy to turn the dial and cut the power. So easy to snap that thread and send the preacher away.

But no, he drones on, always talking, always finding a new word to put after the last one. Soon, the radio grows faint again. As the sound fades, I count one, two, three, four houses from the corner, and I take out the key from around my neck.

But immediately I see that it will never fit. The garden gate is old, but the lock is new, shiny and freshly oiled. The key in my hand is old and black, its blocky teeth projecting from a thick cylinder. They are from two different worlds—one medieval and one modern.

I stand for a moment staring through the gate into the garden. I can see a chair set up under a sycamore tree, with magnolias and trumpet creepers, and a small house beyond. It looks inviting, but nobody comes to let me in.

“Hello?” I call. Something rustles in the ivy on the garden wall. A lizard or a snake, most likely. “Is anybody there?”

Nobody answers. Perhaps I have the directions wrong. Perhaps something has changed. I take out the notebook that Julio gave me and I lean against the wall, slowly turning the pages with heavy hands. Somehow I think the answer will be in there, and I turn past the early pages, past the middle, on and on without reading the masses of writing. I’m looking for the last page. When I find it, I realize that it is old. It’s the fifth section, months old or years old, the pencil marks faded and smudged. And the next page beyond, where the sixth section should begin, has been ripped out, only a ragged edge remaining to show where it had been.

Perhaps I wrote nothing before this last trip into the swamp. Perhaps I wrote something and ripped it out again.

I start back toward town. Perhaps, perhaps. Or perhaps somebody else ripped it out. Perhaps Ramon. I turn the corner into the windy basswood alley again and shield my eyes and face. I’m walking face first into the wind now, leaves sticking to my legs and grit making my eyes water.

The key won’t fit. The last page is missing. But why should I be suspicious of Ramon? Why should I be suspicious of anybody? As I walk, my whole body starts to tremble. Somebody must know the answers.



I see Julio first, on the street that leads to Ramon’s place. I’ve been wandering back that way for lack of anywhere else to go.

Julio, yes. The boy. He has tried to help me. Hasn't he?

I'm not sure, but I don't like the sour feeling I have. It's a kind of loneliness, a kind of emptiness. I feel like I shouldn't trust anybody, but there is nothing else for me to do. If I don't trust anybody, I will only be more alone.

"Did you find it?" asks Julio. "Do you need me to take you?"

"Yes," I say. Then: "I don't know. Not yet. Wait." I try to think what I want. I don't want Julio. I don't want Ramon. I think of the other man—the other one who came out of the swamp with me. I don't know his name. I don't know who he is. But there was the photo. A photo of him and a woman. Who is the woman?

Then: who was she to him? To me? To us? Why did Ramon take only the other man and leave me here?

"Do you know where she is?" I finally ask. "Can you take me to her?"

"Who?" asks Julio. "You mean your mother?"

"No, not Mama. I don't know her name. The—the other woman."

"Not Rosa?" There is doubt in the boy's eyes.

"Yes," I say, agreeing because that doubt looks like a clue. "Take me to Rosa."

Julio hesitates. Perhaps there is some reason that I shouldn't see her. But what could any reason matter to me, with my mind almost a perfect blank? What could it even matter to her anymore? *She misses us both.* Besides, she is the only other one here that I know anything about. She is the only one who can tell me anything at all.

"Please," I say. "It's very important. Can you help me?"

“Okay,” says Julio. “Okay.”



But Rosa is not the woman from the photo. She is too young, too skinny. She knows Julio when he pushes open her door, and she knows me too. I can tell from how white her face gets. How she screams. Suddenly she is throwing her open suitcase at me and I am wading through shirts and sandals and summer dresses, all of them seeming to float in the air before me. She retreats into her house, trying to run away.

“It’s not my fault,” she says. “It’s not my fault! I didn’t know, I swear to you, Esteban!”

I don’t know what she means, but as she tries to slam a bathroom door, I see that she has tattoos like mine. I look down involuntarily at my own arms, muscles tense under my skin as I struggle to hold the door open against the weight of her body, and then I look at her arms again. She falls back and her shoulder hits the bathtub. She cries out. Then she curls up on the floor, her arms folded sullenly, her legs drawn up to her chest.

“I swear I didn’t know,” she says. “I didn’t know he’d just leave! He was supposed to wait for me—for us.” She sobs suddenly, her face pale and ashen. “I stayed until Julio told me you woke up. That you were okay. That was all I was waiting for. I couldn’t leave until you woke up...”

“Wait,” I say. I push the bathroom door open and sit down on the toilet. I don’t understand any of this. I wanted to know about the key that didn’t fit and the page that was ripped out of my book, but suddenly there is so much more that I don’t understand.

“Wait,” I say again. “Start from the beginning. Please tell me everything.”



My arms and shoulders ache, and my knees are sore from kneeling. But as I assume the familiar place in my old canoe, I welcome the pain. It's like an echo, a ghost from my past. The protests of my body are a reminder of things I have done that I cannot now remember.

This is not the first time I have kneeled here. This is not the first time I have taken this paddle in my hands. Each ache and blister tells me that. All I have done, all I have been—it is all written somewhere in the knots of my muscles and the cords of my ligaments and the burned brown leather of my skin.

It's all still there, even if it has been wiped from my memory. It's all there, even if it has been torn from my book.

The old tattoos are there too, faded and inartistic as they are. I could not bring myself to scratch them out, no more than I could bring myself to cut off my own nose. The left arm still reads *Esteban Yaha, Santa Matrona, Florida*. And the right arm reads *Home is west*.

But now there is more. There, scratched underneath in fresh cuts filled with new ink, still raw and pink around the edges, my right arm says *Don't go back*.

I still don't know why my mother changed the lock on her gate, or if she even lives in that house anymore. I still don't know if Ramon really did rip out a page from my book, or what that page may have said. I don't even know why I ever went into the swamp at all.

Maybe I didn't know what it would mean. Maybe I had no choice. Maybe they threatened me or my mother. Maybe I wanted the money. Maybe I hated that other man too. Without knowing the truth, without being able to trust anybody to tell me what happened, I can make up any comforting lie that I want. Or I can heap enough blame on my own head to justify my blackest moods.

Ramon is gone, along with whatever money there was or would be. That was what Rosa was sorry about. When Ramon left by himself for Miami, she knew he was never coming back. It must have been a lot of money he had coming. Enough for a life.

The blade of my paddle dips into the water and my canoe surges forward. The sun is setting. It's dark and warm, the canal full of the songs of frogs. From behind a screen of trees, a night heron stirs at its roost.

As I glide along, my new life unfolding in my brain like the first seedling on a barren volcanic island, I find myself trembling. In the first sting of Ramon's betrayal, I had carved the new tattoo into my arm, intending to lose myself in the swamp again. *Don't go back.*

But then I thought: What is Ramon to me? Who am I to him? Every moment now in my new life is a moment without Ramon. He is not important anymore, and I'll never see him again. So I let him drift by, like a leaf in the canal. I let his betrayal float far behind me and disappear.

The man in this body was once a man who went into the swamp to find people. *I must have been good at it.*

The man in this body once had a mother who locked her gate against her son. *I must have hurt her.*

The man in this body once brought back a man to be killed over something that was surely of no importance. *I don't want to be like that man.*

There is not much to sink into the cool bosom of the swamp. The key to Mama's gate drops like a shot arrow, making no splash and leaving no ripple. The cord floats for a moment at the surface before the weight of the key drags it down into the black depths of the water.

The San Cristóbal medal is not so graceful. It enters with a round plop, and winks back and forth as it seesaws down to the bottom of the swamp, the yellow of the disc shining up for a long while until it finally disappears.

The notebook, I have to drown. And even then, it fights. It floats up to the surface again and again, as if gasping for life, its leaves spread, its spine poking above the surface. But at last the pages are so waterlogged that the pencil marks fade and the paper shreds in my hands. Fragments float here and there, scattered in a line, bobbing along with the canal's slow current.

I've read it all, once. Whatever it has to tell me, I already know. But I won't keep it to write in again.

No more either will I sit in garden chairs, waiting to be called. No more will I rise and take off my hat for strangers. No more will I venture into the swamp, to find what others say they want to find.

Others may go yet, if they judge the sacrifice is worth the chance. If they judge the payment worth the cost. But I, at last, have turned my canoe around. I, at last, am headed now for home.

I am Esteban Yaha, Santa Matrona, Florida. And for now, that is enough.

Holy Many-Minds Home

Michael Díaz Feito

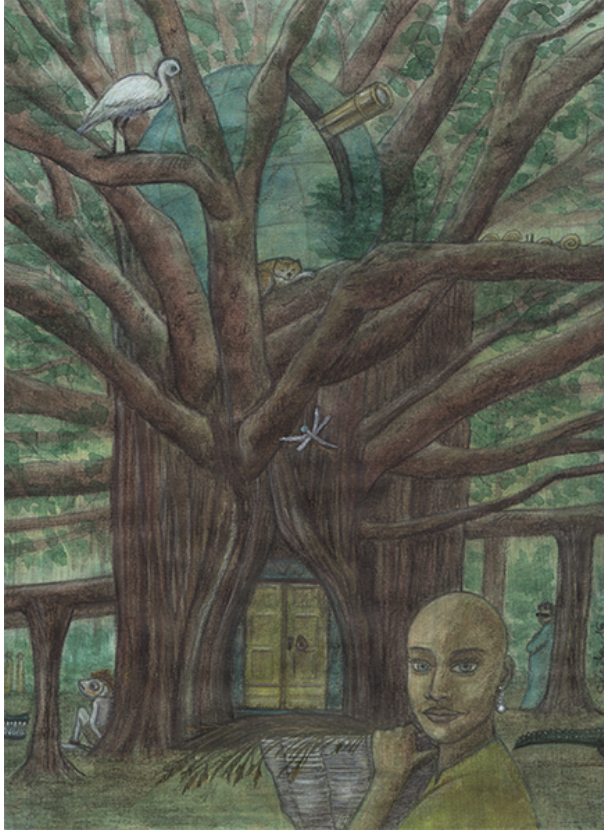


Illustration © 2016, Cécile Matthey.

1.

It still is, despite the flood. A flotilla of fiberglass condos now, throbbing megacasinos, teleports, and neon stadiums, all magnetically suspended over superconducting piles plunged into the sea—the city of Miami levitates. Night clings damply to the Boliche Club’s psilocybin platform, where Iván Po refreshes his self after losing much of it to the neuroslots. And an old

woman, Mónica Fort, sways by Iván. Her hair is deep red, a soporific hue in the moonlight. It sways, too, her hair. It rubs against her rough, tight dress. She returns Iván's gaze. She recognizes him. *¿Y ahora qué rayos quiere la puñetera monja?* she says. *¿Todavía no está contenta?* Mónica's hair is brighter and wet red when finally, inhaling the platform's bitter mist, Iván responds. (His daughter provokes this scrutiny.)

2.

In tempore sum et de tempore loquor, Saint Augustine said, adding, *nescio quid sit tempus*. In the same spirit of perplexity, I can say that I exist at home, and I speak about home—but what home is I do not know. I do know, however, that home is not space-time itself. Yet it is spatial and temporal, still and changing, space-bound and infinitely ranging, never stable in one state. When I look away from it, I know it. When I look at it again, I find nothing of what I knew there. I am become a stranger to it, and it to me. Memory can't box things. In his fifty-second year, Iván Po doesn't know this yet.

3.

"She wants us to swim," Iván said. Mónica hissed and waved away his words. Iván caught her skinny fingers, bejeweled with antique microchips, and clasped her waist. She sniggered, and they mamboed. Mónica whistled "La Múcura." It was orchestral. Tucking his nose into her neck's wrinkled ebony, Iván touched the cleanly stink of lavender oil, and he forgot his daughter's agitations. Mónica spun and dipped him. She pulled egrets' feathers from his many shirt pockets. His limbs shivered, reveling. Then the Boliche Club's bass

pumps died. The psilocybin platform loosed a few terminal beats and fell limp. In this power blackout even the night sky's electric tarpaulin sloughed off, because the energy shield had evaporated. Iván shrieked in the new silence. Shoving him away, Mónica said, *Cálmate, chico. ¿Oyes las olas espumando entre las ruinas de la Ciudad Vieja?* And Iván saw that the oily sea below softened for the first time.

4.

The cupola salvaged from the drowned Freedom Tower of Old Miami hung at the center of the Armando “Pitbull” Pérez Memorial Hall’s ceiling. A pink beacon within the cupola lit the dais where six councilmen sluggishly took seats. A whirring indicated that the chamber’s air had been adjusted to amplify sound. Chairman Rodolfo Po, Iván’s older brother, cleared his throat, shaking the room with amplified hawking. Iván stood at a podium facing the council. A cone of pink light strobed around him. Still stupefied by the psilocybin mist, he babbled scared whispers. Rodolfo read from a prepared statement projected inside his retinas: “One hour after the blackout, the following communiqué from the left-wing terrorist organization known as the Sisters of the Swamping (TSOTS)—a group led by Eva Po, aka Sor Po, or La Monja, daughter of City Attorney Iván Po—was delivered on paper to the Presidential Palace.”

5.

The rare paper on which TSOTS’s communiqué is written is handmade from the yellow pulp of sedges that grow along the western archipelago. Eva Po wrote her

message in an ink rendered from soot and fish glue, and it reads:

*we hacked off our breasts with stern machetes
threw the eye-stolen flesh into the sea below
to descend into the silty womb. scraped off
your shield because the waves of new sun are
harsh outside so we should be harshly eroded
to a core of coquina. your androcidity by law
either sleeps/wakes but we the swamping souls
as sisters elide binaries sleepwaking with sex
slaves to fast our gynobrain from gluttonous
memory on the shifting archipelagos westerly
where the everglades were us hermaphroditic
sawgrass stalks to infinitude of this place
between us no humans only unhappier animals
swimming and watching and soon s(l)aving you.*

6.

Because of their ability to disrupt the Big Storm and Solar Raditation Shield (BSASRS), Chairman Rodolfo Po described TSOTS as an existential threat to the state. After two histrionic breaths of exasperation, Rodolfo also announced that TSOTS had escaped the city with twenty-three male hostages, whom intelligence reports indicated the group would subject to illegal deviance, including coerced cunnilingus and anal penetration. “This council,” Rodolfo said, “has therefore approved a covert action plan (CAP) to recover the hostages and neutralize TSOTS with minimal disturbance to the state’s tourist industry and related markets. This CAP is also initiated to honor the state’s settlement with the Heat Org, whose lawsuit stems from the blackout’s delay of last night’s basketball game.”

7.

Rodolfo Po sentenced Iván Po to serve as exploratory envoy to TSOTS and to subdue the group's leader, Eva Po. He did not clarify how. He concluded his remarks like this: *Ahora, hermano, vete y toma a tu hija única, la que tanto amas, a Eva, y ofrécela en holocausto sobre los pantanos de mierda para limpiar nuestro nombre. Ya no puedes ser un cero a la izquierda, chico.* This private session of the council was then closed, and everyone present recited the state motto: "Not happy, not human!"

8.

In his top house Iván sees through the other fiberglass houses stacked to form Cube H. Between his feet a pale neighbor reclines in a leatherette hammock. Retinal TV lights her skull like a lantern. Her ear-eggs are implanted, and a subwoofer suppository is implanted, too. It ripples her thighs. Over Iván's shoulder a family crowds around a greasy carton of jumbo *croquetas*. As always this family bickers about the history of their family while they eat. They lob competing quotes from the databases. Nothing is settled. Iván says, No more nice diversions now. He waves to the neighbors below and beside. He taps the shared walls and floor, lowering the interdomicile amplifiers. "Evo!" he calls. A shaved Samoyed soon sits at his feet. "I'm leaving," Iván says. "I might not. No, I'll try. I'll come home." The dog sighs. He angles his chalky head. With probing black eyes, he stares into Iván. Evo knows precisely what he needs to know.

9.

Soon after his wife Yrela's death, Iván further endured a series of pet dogs' deaths, like a lahar of grief trapping him and his daughter. Eva always remarked on the simple dissipation of the dogs' being, how casually living things transmute into hollow dolls. She's a smart girl. Iván now hopes that this dog Evo will contemplate death, too, like his "older sister" Eva, the dog's namesake, because Iván does not expect to survive the archipelago to which his poor daughter drags him unwilling—and the reversal, a dog mourning a human, is somehow solace.

10.

Ygriega 7 is an orb of lab-grown pigs' skin sculpted to evoke the human face. It has a nanotech brain and blind LED eyes (in concession to ours). Its facial expressions are constantly shifting. This bot head Ygriega 7 is mounted on a Heat Org body module of skeletal steel, sharp blades accessorized with costume jewelry—particolored torcs and chains, rings and vestigial antennas—strung like baubles on a santero's figurine Orisha. Iván hasn't felt this dizzying level of droid shock in years. He says, "¿Y el muequero ese?" His police escort says, "That's your navigator."

11.

My little brother's green Shaker chair is a network of mortise and tenon joints, and this assemblage was invisible to him, because the chair worked. It sat him. But when he moved to a new city and donated the chair to my home, it stopped working. The chair is now hobbled. Its green joints are loose and often pop

unstuck. It sways when I sit. So I can't avoid seeing the thing, its anatomy and its will. It confronts me. Like a toady, I over-thank this chair when it doesn't collapse under my weight. Perching cautiously, I've felt my posture evolve, my spine mutate, to suit this chair's whims. Before bedtime I check on this chair. I could fix it. I won't. When Iván Po is handed a matte remote control, which can at any time switch Ygriega 7 into a manual mode of easy operation, does he still see the automaton steering the *Cagafuegos*?

12.

They launched after midnight. The populace would be protected from undue knowledge of the shield's tunneling port. Lowered into the again roiling sea by steel lines, the *Cagafuegos* jounced awkwardly in the dark, a shadow puppet manipulated by the levitating city. It dropped into the oily water. Iván, preparing for his first q-tunneling, injected oxycodone into his anterior jugular vein. He shivered. He slumped onto the deck. He curled up. Ygriega 7 laughed. "Bro," it said, "you scared?" Rushing through the Old City's ruins, the small boat tilted toward Government Center, a building designed as if its architects foresaw that it would someday be the drowned city's tombstone. Just another algal menhir now, overgrown with a death's head of bromeliads, climbing ferns, orchids, and ivy, colored blue under the restored shield at night. The tunneling started.

13.

The tunneling stopped. It had stopped. Iván had expected the typical sensations of teleporting but

intensified—turbulence, then pain, and maybe a mystic vision, or an orgasm. Instead, he was and already had been there, outside the shield on a calmed Biscayne Lagoon, waiting to be. Inhaling again a dry breeze that lifted his body lightly in the dark. Waiting. They had never moved. “That’s it?” Iván said. “This is it? Or not yet?” “Like everything,” Ygriega 7 said, “it’s nothing. Let’s try this a second time. Has been, is, will be—you know? You know. Ha sido, es, será. Ti je, je, yoo je...”

14.

“You a Catholic?” Ygriega 7 asked. Iván did not respond. High wind had deformed the lagoon. Waves of refracted moonlight battered the boat. “Because I’ve got an audiobook,” Ygriega 7 said, “for my stereo-tongue. If you don’t mind.” The boat was pitched against an island of mangroves. Branches rattled and hissed, hooking the hull, as a swarm of lightning bugs swept into the open boat. The lightning bugs shivered electric green spasms. They splattered luminescent guts like constellations along the deck. The boat finally jerked free of the mangroves when thick rain blotted out the moon. It crashed into a twelve-foot chop. Ygriega 7’s jewelry jangled. Limp and still dazed by oxycodone, Iván was hurled overboard.

15.

Waves funnel in Iván’s skull. He wakes at dawn to a salty film sealing his lips. A taste of the lagoon, of the outside. But then the deck’s textured finish scrapes his spine, and by the helm he sees Ygriega 7’s gaping mouth, which blares a recorded voice (basso profundo) intoning: “Est igitur natura generale nomen, ut diximus,

omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt...” Iván’s been saved. He has no memory of the water. He, like most shield-era Miamians, has only swum in swimming pools. “What?” Iván says. With a flick of its dry tongue, Ygriega 7 pauses the audiobook and says, “Put on that Pedialyte suit. You’re soaked, bro. But you have to stay hydrated, too.” As he carefully stands to strip, Iván says, “I’m depressed. My first real swim, and I can’t remember it.” “I’ve never been, like, depressed,” Ygriega 7 says, “except for maybe once during 9/11. I’m just human like that, I guess.” Iván says, “You weren’t built then.” “True,” it responds, “but it’s super hard to tell with no set temporality in our info networks.” Iván sighs. He reaches for the remote control. He mutes Ygriega 7.

16.

The *Cagafuegos* approached the first unincorporated settlement. A hive of stilted towers of stacked housing units, pink and hollow plastic, the old neighborhood of Monmouth—or now, Monmao—rose from the lagoon. Sunlight reflected off the glossy towers and shattered Iván’s sight. He blinked away ballooning motes of spectral color. Heat and humidity had tightly hugged his body since sunrise, so this exhausting activity of hard blinking nearly toppled him. He suckled at the Pedialyte suit’s drinking tube. It produced a blueberry-flavored distillation of his sweat. An amplified female voice, startling Iván, suddenly said, “Byenveni nan Vil Pwason! Deklare biznis ou a ak baylegen zam ou yo, silvouple.” The voice cracked from a Transit Authority Bot (TAB), a rusted box clinging to a wooden pole patched with rot and bird shit. “¿Qué?” Iván said.

“Olvídate,” the TAB said. “Your navigator is synced to my network and it is pissed off. Did you mute it for spitting commercials?” “No,” Iván said. “Have you recently detected other Miamian citizens in this area?” “Yes. Other women.” Like herself. “Where’d they go?” “Sir,” the TAB said, “for data beyond this unit’s purview—that is, in the wilderness—I suggest you cautiously contact the local Fish lord.”

17.

A small, thumbless hand slid over Iván’s wrist, steadily tugging him down to the jetty. This hand was translucent and wet, like the rest of the nude dwarf’s body, and surprisingly strong. Fifty years earlier, when the alien species first materialized around Port-au-Prince, scientists speculated that the Fish had originated on Kepler-62e, but once each postdiluvial state in the New Caribbean had removed the Fish to reservations outside the respective storm and radiation shields, further research was universally prohibited. Burying disgust under a friendly, gap-toothed rictus, Iván said, “Gracias.” He was careful to enunciate the final S and avoid the possibility of reverse prejudice. The nominal title of envoy suited Iván’s embarrassed pride. When the sexless Fish did not respond, Iván mumbled, “Mèsi”—with less confidence. This also got no response. The Fish, still gripping Iván’s wrist, led him across the jetty to a boardwalk, where another Fish, identical to the first, waited to grip his wrist and lead him, and he was soon traded to another at a tower’s entrance, and to another at the tower’s stairwell. The plastic stairs squeaked at each step, and at every new floor another Fish waited to lead Iván by the wrist. This being traded, he said to himself,

feels like being just a dumb thing, smaller than them, even. Fear filled Iván's belly.

18.

Mamey: a sandpaper skin peels back at the pointed tip to show pink flesh, which paints the air with almonds' smell and is creamy, embracing the fruit's stone, which is hard like a stone crab's claw. My favorite fruit, the mamey. Although, its preparation does evoke for me a bad dream of bodily mutilation. This big fruit, flayed and pitted, is pushed into the headless Fish lord's neck cavity. It disappears with a pulpy slap, and is followed by another mamey in the hole. The small, thumbless hands of lesser Fish keep these mameys going. The same hands finally signal for Iván to sit on the plastic floor, beside the headless Fish lord sitting upright, and also roll him a blunt, which he happily smokes while waiting for some explanation. As his fear subsides, Iván tries to recall the sensation of really swimming, or nearly drowning, during the storm. Instead, he again pictures his wife Yrela diving off the city, cracking down in the sea, disappearing like the Fish lord's mameys. He sees Eva silently crying and says, But why no memory of her youthful screams?

19.

Within one hazy hour the Fish lord's new head had crowned. The mamey-pushing attendants genuflected at the sight of this tiny scalp, translucent and patched with ginger hair, which was stuck in the neck's opening. Then a rip and a pop. The new head passed, and mamey pulp splattered the plastic walls. Iván crawled to a corner. He cowered from the shower of pulp and fleshy

sound. “¡Coño!” Iván said. “It’s a trap!” The Fish lord reared its new head and regarded Iván coolly. Its cheeks were freckled with orange dots, as were its ears, and together with the ginger hair, these markings distinguished it from the other Fish, signaling its authority. Fingertips tingling, Iván then felt seized by the room itself, like the plastic walls squeezed his chest. He was overwhelmed by the sudden immanence of this Fish lord’s authority, sensed its speckled ears tracking his pulse. Tears soon swelled Iván’s eyes, because a mass of panic and grief had gathered in him and it warped the room’s space. But the Fish lord spoke softly: “Don’t overreact to rezirèksyon. It’s just, a naïve pirate blasted our previous keph. For selling to her good oregano instead of pure manteca.” It licked thin lips. “So. Apologies for your waiting. Heads do rise slowly. How can we help ourselves, please?”

20.

“She visited us,” the Fish lord said. “Sor Po, your daughter? Yes. And she deposited with us a tweet. For followers only. It reveals the church’s location. We will recite it. In exchange for an entrance visa, notarized. Which, of course, authorizes our indefinite residence in the city. Miami. ¿Ombbligo del mundo, no? At last. This plastic housing holds but does not home us in the hurricanes. Y ven acá, tell the truth. In the shield are you all so deliciously ugly? Gray-mulleted? Green-skinned?” “No,” Iván said. “We’re each uniquely ugly, gray-mulleted, and green-skinned. Along a short spectrum of shades.” “Yes,” the Fish lord said. “Yes, that’s right.” “Visas for the whole family, then?” Iván gestured at the other Fish, who kept their big eyes tilted

to the Fish lord without really seeing it, or seeing it while asleep. “No,” the Fish lord said. “We’re a plural, entangled entity. No. Don’t you study us? Only one visa is required. For this prime vessel talking. The others here are *zánganos*. Silent. Tools. Superficial. Like skin, or scales. Or toenails, teeth. Easily shed for the next mode of plurally singular urbanitatis. That is your custom... corporeally? We can collapse ourselves into one *civem miamiensem*, too. One corpus!” It yipped for joy.

21.

Iván is encompassed by Fish on the jetty. His thumb touch-types on a Heat Org tablet held in the same hand. The squat Fish lord grips Iván’s other wrist. Many tumid seagulls perch along the docked boat’s canopy, and Ygriega 7 watches from the helm. Afternoon heat fires off a gray sky, but the crowd of Fish emits a chilly vapor, which soothes Iván’s braising mind. Finalizing an ad hoc visa, Iván asks, “Name?” The Fish lord says, “Call us Jill.” “Me,” Iván says. “Call *me* Jill.” Jill nods. It says, “We’re surprised you talk *inglés* yet. Can’t you speak your city’s Spanish?” “Sí,” Iván says. But it’s an anemic *sí*, creaky, and when Iván adds, “Claro que sí,” he becomes fully annoyed. “Your fucking tone,” Iván says, “offends me, Jill. I’ve sent the visa—notarized by my bot Ygriega 7—to Immigration. So?” Jill smiles. Its features hardly shift. An unhappy smile, Iván says. He recalls an Icelandic diplomat, Snorri, from the lunar emirate, who jumped every *jinetera* in Miami and still confided a rapacious loneliness. His memory of this long friendship fizzles. Jill releases Iván’s wrist. It rocks

back its new head. It adeptly chants Eva Po's message along a Phrygian air:

*Mia irmana fremosa, treides comigo
a la igreja de Figo u é o mar salido
e miraremos las ondas.*

*A la igreja de Figo u é o mar salido
e verrá i mia madre e o meu amigo
e miraremos las ondas.*

22.

Iván's breathing heaved sharply, because against his will, he knew this melody: from a monophonic piece for voice and viola. Yrela's electric viola, fulminant, feeding back. She had privately practiced it often. She had publicly performed it once (as a prelude to suicide). Jill then lifted its thumbless hands to the hot sky. When its hands dropped, the other Fish died. Some flopped against the jetty's planks; some plopped into the black water. "One corpus!" Jill said. "Now, to and up the river. We may be going. We will show." It clambered aboard the *Cagafuegos*. As Iván tried to vocalize his horror at Jill's filicide, Ygriega 7 detached from the helm and spun toward the Fish lord. With a hydraulic *whoosh*, the bot's raised arm launched a retractable bolt, briefly sparked steel, and Jill's new head exploded. Seagulls fled the boat's canopy. From its post on the lagoon, the TAB cheered, "Mouri! Mouri!" "What the fuck," Iván said, "did you do?" Ygriega 7 gawked. Iván unmuted it. "Bro," Ygriega 7 said, "you got your intel, so I just deleted the, uh, CI. Just in case." Iván groaned. He climbed aboard. Sitting up Jill's sticky body, he examined the new neck cavity. "Bueno," he said, "Jill comes with us, then. Ojalá que recrezca la cabecita."

23.

In deeper water another storm slaps the boat. Ygriega 7 injects “vitaminitas” into Jill’s belly and Iván’s throat. Then Iván, puking overboard, lowers his face to thrashing waves full of spiky sargassum, e-pipes, plastic bottles, periphyton, cell phones, palm fronds, little TVs, man o’ wars, condoms, PVC, mangrove propagules, fidios, wristwatches, dead turtles, plastic bags, ear-eggs, and coconuts, sunglasses. Far under the foamy troughs, shadows of expressways furtively glide. *Miraremos las ondas*, Iván says. She’s altered it. But I forget the original—How? *Miraremos las ondas*. Can I forget? Instead of Yrela’s viola, vibrato keening, or even Jill’s weird voice, Iván just hears the present waves. Listening, he suddenly remembers something else: silt scours, waters punch, the tugging current’s taste, algal touch, rainy weight, greenness, salt sounds, his eyelids—real swimming. Iván dives into the water.

24.

Crickets grind furiously while sunset pokes a filmy hole in the cloud cover. The *Cagafuegos* burrs past humped islands of mangroves and silt toward plain silt islands, silvering in the little light. “Hey,” Ygriega 7 says, “I escorted your brother Rodolfo to Al-Qamar II once, you know? Buena gente, your brother. Upbeat. Very human.” “Yes,” Iván says. “He’s never struggled at that.” The water is flat outside the boat’s wake. It glistens. Iván sips from his P-suit’s tube. His dark face aches, muscles sapped by the day’s febrile sun. He yawns. He wonders if the chairman Po watches his dog Evo at least amicably. He worries. Can Rodolfo, such a secretive person, tolerate the dog’s probing stares,

which know so precisely? Iván says, “A friend of mine lived there, the lunar emirate. A diplomat. What’s-his-name... He died. Can’t remember the name.” Ygriega 7 laughs. It says, “That’s not, like, very diplomatic of you.”

25.

“Why’d you attack Jill?” “Already told you,” Ygriega 7 said. “But honestly, I don’t know.” “You don’t know?” “Exactly! Must be an encrypted script. From my OS update.” “When were you updated?” “Night we left Miami.” Afraid to ask, Iván’s voice cracked: “And when we find Eva?” Ygriega 7’s twitching face finally stopped. The bot’s jewelry jangled to the boat’s rhythm. Then it rebooted.

26.

Silt banks hugged the boat when the lagoon became a river in the morning. It was the river that Jill had mentioned. The peaks of buried cypress trees poked from the silt, and at each meander the boat’s hull slowly snapped through chain-link-like fences of dead branches. Bleeding-heart vines wreathed many of these bald treetops. Stretching off grogginess and a migraine, Iván stood from the sleeping mat. Jill’s body, propped against a big cooler, farted turpentine. “She lives,” Iván said. Ygriega 7 swiveled from the helm. It approached Iván to scan his vitals. It said, “You need your vitaminitas.” Iván hesitated, then nodded in consent. Pissing overboard, he said, “Weird, watery dreams last night. In sunlight I dissolved into the lagoon, or I already was the lagoon in sunlight. Watching us, you and another of me, swimming in the distance. You

swim, right? Of course, of course. Oye, let's leave out the oxy, ok? Just for now... And all we've got to eat is that dietary jelly?" But before Iván could zip his P-suit's fly, Ygriega 7 injected the daily dose. Oxycodone bathed and massaged Iván's brain. He imagined a very kind woman's warm, nimble hands. "Bro," Ygriega 7 said. "Your cochleae picking up that music?" It pointed at bleeding-hearts ahead. Hummingbirds, iridescent flashes like spinning electrons, swarmed the tubular flowers. The birds' hovering smeared the muggy air. "No," Iván said. "What music?" "The flapping frequencies," Ygriega 7 said. "Hear? Their little wings are whistling your daughter's song."

27.

Dropping into shallow water, Iván waded through sedge toward the hummingbirds. His toed boots sunk into silt. In overtones rising from the wingbeats, Yrela's final song faintly diffused among the vines. He tried to quiet the migraine, but his body ached, drowning out the spectral music. He could only catch cut-up measures. Then, without anticipating it, Iván wept. His weeping confused grief and awe. He'd finally forgotten the sad song. Hadn't he? But confronted by it again, that forgetting turned toxic, a side effect of eating shit, of irresponsibility, of reckless swimming. The radiating cloud of hummingbirds intensified. Their refracted shards of light lanced black spots in Iván's vision. He fell to his knees and closed his eyes. The wingbeats became frothy breakers against his brain. "Ask where she is!" Ygriega 7 said from the boat. Iván wiped his wet face. Still weeping, he sucked at the P-suit's tube. *La memoria*, he said, *se caría. Perdida pa' los pajaritos*

pasajeros. Y las olas. When he looked up, the hummingbirds fled. He whispered to the buried treetops. “What?” Ygriega 7 said. Iván nodded. He said, “I’m following them.” Ygriega 7 said, “¡Dale!”

28.

“You are not human,” Jill said. “Huh?” Ygriega 7 said. “Oh, your head’s back!” Jill said, “We nonhumans—” “I’m rational,” Ygriega 7 said. “So, human-ish.” Jill continued, “We should not behead...” “Bro, I know. Sorry.” “Mornings you recite their motto?” Jill said. “Human equals happy, Fish-friend.” “That’s simple.” “Right?” Ygriega 7 said. “Vice versa, too.” “Yes?” “If happy, then I’m human-ish.” “Yes.” “Like, I got an eternal soul. Quod vere homo est. I got this audiobook—” “Is that why, then?” Jill said. “Huh?” Ygriega 7 said. “Five days here we’ve dawdled. For a soul?” “The honorable Mr. Po will return.” “He’s likely dead,” Jill said. “*That’s* human-ish.” “The Creator demotes pessimists, Fish-fuck.” “Ok. Suspend this talking. Feed us, please.”

29.

It’s hard to write accurately about things. Like John Ruskin argues in *The Stones of Venice*, if even zoologists “disagree in their descriptions of the curve of a shell, or the plumage of a bird, though they may lay their specimen on the table, and examine it at their leisure,” then how can a critic make an honest account of a whole city, a chimerical, watery one especially? To capture my present home by historicizing its future, I’ve proceeded cautiously. I acknowledge, as Ruskin does, “the strange way in which separate observations will

sometimes falsify each other, incapable of reconciliation, owing to some imperceptible inadvertency.” The separation of observations in time, however, leads me to divergences in mood and aspect, so here I’ll probably neglect limpkins for bridges, or local economies for ibises, and then there cabbage palms for plastic walls and doors, or levees for apple snails... (They, the apple snails, glue their eggs to steel gates and sawgrass stalks, leaving chalky clutches like rock candy, crystalline and pink.)

30.

Sawgrass prairie flickered in the harshest sunlight. A line of loinclotted men, winding from a hammock of mahoganies and gumbo-limbos, reached the prairie’s center. The stalks there faded.

A field of bent light parted to show the Sisters of the Swamping’s cloaked community. Wearing zap collars and carrying baskets of wild rice, the enslaved men were driven into the circular enclosure by a naked nun on Heat Org steel stilts. She shouted, “¡Adelante, coño! Que el tiempo huye.” A narrow lane, crowded with shouting nuns and slithering pythons, spiraled past crates of tamarinds, guavas, and mangos, and vanilla-scented smudge pots, fruit jars of pickled pythons and hearts of palm, cauldrons of boiling rice, coconuts, coal-hot *cajas chinas*, chickee huts for eating and for sleeping, two sets of Taliban monkey bars, a coquina-walled bathhouse, a plastic-sealed tent library of printed books, video projectors, limestone mosaics of open vulvas, white figurines of aningas and herons, four pet crocodiles, and a chickee hut for the orgies. The spiraling lane ended at the nuns’ holy shrine, La Iglesia

de Figo. It was housed in the hollowed-out trunk of a banyan tree. Eva Po's hut—a blue-plastic room littered with old circuit boards, batteries, and loose wires—sat high in this big tree's boughs at the top of a staircase binding the boles.

31.

At dusk colossal mosquitos sweep into the orgy hut, which Eva, squatted in her treehouse, spies through a telescope. Eva's telescope hoards electromagnetic pulses off slaves' tongues and nuns' clitorises. She rubs circles on herself. Yowling decays above the banyan's canopy, and Eva sees welts rise around proboscides and abdomens flush with purple blood. She moans. The eyes of her dog Alfonso, a half-asleep brindle Akita, settle on her big, bare thighs, and shame inflames her. She sighs. Enlightened or not, she says, remembered difference—humanness, or womanity, really—directs my senses. But sometimes Alfonso dreams. Maybe he understands, then. A red orb flashes alarm. The orgy stops. Bodies divide. Nuns, loading shotguns and tying on robes, sprint to the gates, where Eva's telescope now captures her father floating in marsh water.

32.

Anonymous slaves carried Iván Po on their shoulders. But among the muttering crowd of wide-eyed nuns that watched this procession, Iván recognized many faces. They were the daughters (and transitioning sons) of prominent Miamians, representing every ethnic neighborhood in the city with an outdated name and ossified identity, like Free Caracas, Little Haiti, Vietnamville, Next Lagos, Jamaicatown, and New Little

Havana. Here, though, all the women had shaved heads and only wore knee-length linen robes, yellow. Iván no longer knew any of their own names. His head fell back. He saw the rest of the camp upside down. The ground churned, a swelling dirt-sky. Dragonflies droned in puddle-clouds and dropped into the flashlights around Iván's body. Laura Llull, a nun dignified by deep crow's-feet, lunged for Iván's sunburned face. The crowd restrained her. Years earlier she'd endured a romantic fling with Iván. Now Sor Llull cried. She pointed at the melanoma that had hatched in pus on Iván's brown cheek. She said, "¡...se cambian!" He didn't understand. She pleaded. He didn't know her.

33.

"Papi," Eva says, "when you're better, we'll talk terms. It's good to see—Don't make me laugh. Even así, hecho tierra, it's good to see you. After seven years. Are you comfortable? Real sun has finally cut away your carapachón. Real water has nourished your noumenon. Unmediated, complementarity is—Pero you're thinking... que todavía te chotee como siempre. Maybe a little. Or I've just got a lot to say. Visions—Alfonso, ¡ya! Stop licking. Let's discuss the swimming, what it's done to you. Water everywhere is polluted, right? But here it's uniquely polluted. An amnesiac soup of parasites and pharmaceuticals. Sor Nadine, my friend the chemist—remember her, Dad? She died. But she detected—¡No, chico! Don't lick Papi's face. Nadine detected toxic quantities of benzodiazepines, fluvastatin, diphenhydramine, uh, sucralose, SSRIs, codeine, MSG... shit like that. And the parasites, right, they're truly sacred microbes. Mutant *Wolbachia*! Stop it. He

likes you, Dad. Aw. Among other adverse effects, exposure to this water causes moderate amnesia. In women. For men, it's much worse. Only here, then, in the glades and the lagoon, the archipelago, can present moments of gynovision supplant an eradicated past of patriarchy. Historical amnesia, this fem-awakening, is achieved here through ritual swimming. But as a spiritual and political leader, it'd be irresponsible if I enjoyed the swimming in excess. So I sacrifice, keeping dry up in this ugly treehouse. That licking's annoying, right? The quality of this place bridges the phenomenal and the—Stop tonguing your asshole, Alfonso! Ah, fuck it. We'll talk terms when you're better, Papi. I know why you're here. It's good to see you."

34.

Like her peers, she hated all of it, and the violin, too. When Sra. Fort arrived for their weekly lesson, eleven-year-old Eva Po hid outside. She climbed into a concrete planter, one of many lining the open-air, brutalist stairs that descended between Cube H and Cube G. Balled up in hibiscus, Eva waited for the hour to end. A smiling security bot rolled past. Its blue and red lights colored the nearby bronze statue of a stripper mid-assclap which commemorated the public service of Luther "Uncle Luke" Campbell. The echoing slaps of the security bot's rubber belts faded downstairs. A red fox slunk from Cube G. It soon climbed into the planter, too, leaving a red line speckled on the concrete landing, and it crouched at Eva's small feet, panting. The fox's black-slicked belly convulsed. Its ears darted at different angles, then stopped. Eva was afraid. Tío Rodolfo had told her about the unhappy, jealous people who brought

wild animals into the clean city and set them free to bite little girls. Surprising herself, she jumped over the sleeping fox, hit the landing, and ran home. The fox didn't stir. Her bedroom's fiberglass walls were dimmed. She opened the door, and Sra. Fort was kneeling there—one bare breast sagging, her mouth filled—and her head bobbed against Iván's hairy pelvis. "Sra. Fort," Iván mumbled. Eva's violin lay on the bed. Later, while eating tuna out of the can, Eva's mother laughed musically. "It's a silly image," she said. "So what?" Eva said, "Don't you hate him?" With unexpected warmth, Yrela said, "Cada loco con su tema."

35.

Iván's teeth clasped a crispy, honeyed python, tearing hot fat from the spit. It was his third helping that hour. After a four-day recovery in Eva's hut, Iván had woken up taciturn and gluttonous, spiraling daily along the lane to visit every food stall, nodding thanks to nuns and wearing blisters on his bare feet, while each day the stalls multiplied as the camp uncannily expanded into a village, then a town, and impossibly, a small city, palm-and sedge-thatched. He'd only been there a week. But he accepted that no one else, nuns or slaves, agreed about time. A mix of sweat, honey, and sunscreen clotted Iván's new beard. He wiped it and the melanoma throbbed. The pain twitched his hands and they knocked off his sunglasses. As he stooped over his own swelling gut to get them, a team of slaves pushed past, stomping the sunglasses. A turpentine stink swept into Iván's nostrils. Jill marched among those slaves. "Wait," Iván said. "How the hell..." Jill had already stopped to stare

at him, too. Iván reflexively offered Jill the remainder of his roasted python. “No,” Jill said. “Thank you.” “Sorry.” “What?” “That you’re a slave.” “Oh, yes,” Jill said. “And a delicacy at orgies.” “Ah.” “Discuss our deal?” Jill said. “To your daughter, please. Now. We must go.” “Sorry. It’s good to see—” “Or else we’ll again be hit.”

36.

“You spoke to another slave,” Eva said. “Yes,” Iván said. “And I wanted to ask if—” “No, remember: that robe doesn’t give *you* privileges.” Iván held his gut and sighed. “Hazme caso, Papi. You’ve got one try.” “But—” “Because for you I’m risking—” “¡Déjame hablar, coño!” Iván said. Eva slapped his mouth. He flushed. “Watch your tone,” she said. “Motherfucker.” Iván said, “We will talk.” “I said we’d talk later. It’s not today.” She went to the treehouse’s staircase. Iván frowned, then smirked. He said, “Oye, hija. Oye.” Eva turned. She bit her lip in exasperation. “And your boobs?” Iván said. That shocked her. She laughed. “What?” “Your communiqué. It said you all hacked them off.” “Did it?” Iván nodded. He said, “With ‘stern’ machetes.” “You remember that, huh?” “Yes.” “Of course. Viejo verde.” Iván raised woolly eyebrows. “Like Tío Rodolfo says—” she said, “Hyperbole’s super fruitful.” “But why?” Iván said. “Why this? Any of it.” “Keep asking,” Eva said. “I do. Why’s good.” “Why enslave the males? How does that ‘elide binaries?’” “Baby steps,” she said. “First, we’re deprogramming.”

37.

La Igreja de Figo's holy of holies holds a mirrorball. It is attached to a brass rod that hangs from the white-lit shrine's ceiling, a pendulum that Eva now sets swinging. The crowd outside the shrine hushes. Eva taps her wristwatch to amplify the night air, and suddenly the subtle gestures of nearby insects erupt into a ticking cacophony. Fastening a black, glossy raincoat, Eva reminds herself, Merciless piety. And mercy. Then she adjusts a fiberglass collar. When she bows seven times, the collar powers up. It projects a hologram that hides Eva's head. There is, instead, a horned cow's head, and between the tall horns floats a full moon. A garland of orange blossoms and green corn wraps this cow's head, as do coils of coral snakes, rearing their black, yellow, and red bands, which glow and reflect off the swinging mirrorball. Eva turns to face the crowd of prostrate slaves and kneeling nuns. She exhales, further distorting the amplified air. She's ready. The other nuns recite from LED-lit tablets:

And eager to purify myself, I surrender to the lavatory sea, dunking my head in the dirty waves seven times—because that number is particularly fit for sacred things—and then I pray to the most powerful goddess while hysterically weeping my pleasure.

38.

After the sermon—a dizzying invective against the looting of Europa's life forms, carnophallogocentrism in the divorced states of America, Bohmian mechanics, and the banking policies of Al-Qamar II—Sor Po (thinking, *Qué payasa soy*) pointed a pregnant finger at Iván Po. He stood by the kneeling congregants. His eyes

were closed. “Sisters,” Eva said, “seeing my father free in our robes, you’ve probably asked, How the fuck, and why the fuck, is he here?” The cow’s head blinked as she chortled. “I can now explain.” She waved to a nun, Sor Tiger, who had appeared outside the crowd. With a sweetgrass basket raised by both hands, Sor Tiger brushed past Iván and approached the shrine. His eyes opened. Eva said, “I had a vision of my father’s pilgrimage to us, and so I have accepted his arrival and atonement. You accept him, too. But it was not revealed to me”—her distorted voice boomed—“that his guide would be programmed to assassinate me!” Sor Tiger removed Ygriega 7 from the sweetgrass basket, holding the bot over the congregation, which gasped at the bodiless, pigskin bust. Ygriega 7, muted, could only blink frantically. Eva said, “Now, as a former roboticist, I could reprogram this thing. But it begs for humane treatment. So, Sor Tiger—whose kinswomen, by the way, were removed by this exact model—is going to fucking execute it.” Even the slaves, Eva noted, cheered at that. Ten slaps of a fire-hot machete along Ygriega 7’s scalp opened the bot head like a coconut. Nuns vied for chips flung off the blade. Ygriega 7’s twitching face accelerated, and an anisic odor fizzled from its new orifice when Sor Tiger’s machete plunged and whisked. The blade’s wobbling echoed, a chorus of jaw harps in the amplified air. Fevered whooping overwhelmed a few nuns, and they soon ran off, dragging slaves to the dark orgy hut. Eyes tearing, Iván held himself, arms crossed, fingers squeezing his shoulders. He shuddered. He was afraid. But that fear surged into the muddy ground and through the other present bodies, and loneliness, subsumed by this fear, changed into an

immanent comfort, uneasily yoking him to the drugged and microbe-infected congregation, to the marshy archipelago itself. Sor Llull shoved Iván hard. “Joputa,” she said. Then she hugged him, and kissed him, and led him to the orgy hut.

39.

There is, according to Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels*, an island in the Indian Ocean where “wicked and cruel women... have precious stones growing in their eyes.” Like basilisks, if any of these women even frowns at a man, then her jewel eyes instantly kill him. Nearby islands are inhabited by women whose vaginas contain venomous snakes that kill new husbands, stinging their penises on the wedding night. Mandeville reports that “cockodrills” swim along this archipelago of violent women, too. Like the women, these crocodiles kill. But the difference is that if these “long-bodied serpent[s]” eat men, they always weep afterward, mourning their rational prey. I’ve only heard them grunt and hiss in Miami. Naked, Iván Po, sinking in the flooded sedge between some huts, wakes among ripples of scalding water that flow from a wallowing pet crocodile. More water seems to ooze from the bloated sun itself, which also wallows nearby. Iván swims toward the crocodile. He says, “We’re friends. Aren’t we? And it’s too hot. Even for you.”

40.

“What’s up?” Eva said, mounting the treehouse’s staircase. “This a hunger strike?” Lying by Alfonso, Iván hid in the dog’s brindle fur. “Ah,” Eva said. “Didn’t enjoy the service, Papi?” “Ygriega,” Iván said.

“It was a Catholic.” “He was a bot, a thug.” “And my friend.” “He would’ve killed *me*, your daughter. I can’t die yet.” Alfonso licked Iván’s ear. “You’re fasting for grief?” Eva said. “It needs a real funeral.” “No.” “Why *no*?” “No body,” she said. “Melted for materials.” “There wasn’t a body at your mother’s mass.” Eva crouched by Iván and squinted. “Didn’t stop us then,” Iván said. “What is or isn’t, you can bury it and mourn.” “This is it?” Eva said. “What?” “This gets you to talk about that?” Alfonso licked Iván’s other ear. “In-fucking-credible,” Eva said. She pinched Alfonso’s coat. He growled. “No!” she said. “No.” She pinched again, pulling the dog from her father. Alfonso suddenly snapped at Eva. A roaring blur of black and orange grown twofold in size, the dog flung saliva-shining cuspids. Eva dropped backward. Her face, unscathed, unfurled an epiphanic fear. But she knew nothing. She cowered. She teared up. She retched. She said, “No.” She retched again. Alfonso had calmly returned to Iván’s ear. “He’s never...” Eva said. “I’m sorry.” “What?” Iván said. Eva wiped her tears, burped. She said, “I’m sorry.”

41.

My great-grandfather José Feito, a thinly mustached Asturian who unhappily fought in the Second Moroccan War, was gifted a hunting dog in Cuba. But José never hunted the countryside. Maybe memories of the chopped-off heads that he’d found piled in Riffian town squares kept him from enjoying the hunt, or maybe it was his stint in the seminary. He didn’t talk much. The dog Fulanito, a black Cocker Spaniel, had been highly trained by an English expat. Fulanito only responded to

English, RP. José learned just enough of the language to chat with Fulanito during slow, tonic walks around La Habana Vieja. As meek as my Spanish is now, I would've related more easily with Fulanito than with my great-grandfather. After the revolution of 1959, José fled Cuba. He left Fulanito to his son José, my grandfather. Abuelo worried about the show trials and firing squads, about apolitical friends jailed in La Cabaña for grousing too loudly, and mostly about his architectural drawings, while Fulanito howled every night, recalling his past life of urban prowling, crying out for his friend exiled across the ocean. Or more confoundingly, maybe the dog cried for an unknown.

42.

Today we were manumitted, Jill says. Yellow-robed like the nuns, we strolled around, unsure. Retired from thatching the new multistories. From hammering higher boardwalks. From gutting pythons and swiving bitches. From picking wild rice for this little village that the slaves now call Labiana. Or La Vana. At last Iván Po had interceded for us. To give our thanks for the *bèl jès*, we found Iván Po. He kneeled in a puddle. He lapped puddle-water from cupped hands. His eyes were elongated. Like one of the bot's—*nkan láìlóríre*, Ygriega!—shitty saints. Lázaro or Lazarillo, is how he looked. We talked our thankful words. He didn't respond. Or even recognize. And then (why we do not know) we said, "Join us. Come back to the City of Man." His reply was a nasal grunt. But when we turned away, Iván Po grabbed our wrist. He said, "Me." He added—just before our briefly puzzled expression could pass!—"Join *me*." He smiled. Then he shrugged,

speaking unto us, “Anyway, Miami’ll soon be swamped—again? Drowned, of course. That’s the plan, her way. No, I don’t like it, Jill. But Eva does her best and I’m proud. Oye, that’s it. Miraremos las ondas. ¡Miraremos! We swim, Jill. To see, just swim.” Iván Po lapped up more puddle-water. *Quasi ferus*. Waving wet paws, he shoed us away and said, “Entonces tú... ¡Dale!”

43.

Clouds like curlicue viaducts connected the condos, staircases, megacasinos, airboats, teleports, and stadiums levitating inside the shield of Miami. The state-supplied *Cagafuegos*, generously returned by the Sisters of the Swamping, rocked Jill toward the city. Jill was happy. It said, Residents if not citizens finally of the nubilest city of the Americas! We’ll seduce other minds. As one unique mixing among the plural unique. Impregnating. Lost in *rem publicam*! It yipped for joy. Combat drones zipped overhead. Throughout the afternoon Jill had spotted them migrating westerly across the lagoon. The city, Jill said, will sacrifice its sons, the hostages, to preserve. Wouldn’t we? We tried to help. As the boat automatically navigated itself into the shield’s tunneling port, Jill witnessed the Heat Org’s hologram: its corporate logo twinkled above the Old City’s ruins, the burning basketball jumping its hoop, fizzling into embers, porphyry, and reforming while reversing through the hoop to self-immolate again and again inside.

- 13.

The tunneling stopped. It had stopped. Iván Po had expected the typical sensations of teleporting but intensified—turbulence, then pain, and maybe a mystic vision, or an orgasm. Instead, he was and already had been there, outside the shield on a choppy Biscayne Lagoon, waiting to be. Inhaling again a muggy wind that shoved his body roughly in the light. Waiting. They had never moved. “That’s it?” Iván said. “This is it? Or not yet?” “Like everything,” Ygriega 6 said, “it’s nothing. Let’s try this a third time. Has been, is, will be—you know?”

Vengeance Sewn with Fey Cord Christine Lucas



Illustration © 2016, Pear Nuallak.

They bring the boy to Saysa just after nightfall. His father kicks her door open and places him on the mat, bleeding and breathless—a little sacrificial lamb before her seamstress’ tools.

“Cast your magic. Stitch him up.” Not a request, but a command.

“My Lord Commander, I—”

“I said, *stitch him up.*”

His voice hasn't changed, nor has his tone, since she first saw him—almost twenty years ago. Now his hair is gray and his face wrinkled, but he still barks orders around. This war-hound's bites are worse than his bark. Saysa learned that lesson well, in another lifetime, one he has clearly forgotten but she has not; *she will not.* Lord Commander Jehran won't take no for an answer, nor will he accept failure. If the boy dies, so will she. The queen's favor won't save her from the commander's wrath and his many thugs.

“I'll do my best.” She puts Queen Thelda's white silken vest aside—away from the blood—and reaches into her workstation's drawer for another set of tools: thin bone needles, threads of purified silk, pairs of gold-plated scissors—her tools for flesh.

The boy's left side is badly mauled, the flesh torn open and the bone exposed in his forearm, and so are several of his ribs. He doesn't scream or cry, only looks up at her in silence, with eyes huge and unblinking.

She threads the smallest of the bone needles with triple silk. “What did this? My stitching won't be enough.”

“Does it matter?” He towers over her, his hands balled to fists at his sides. “A mountain lion, if you should know. Its head will make a fine wedding gift for the queen.”

Saysa kneels by the boy, her left hand brushing his intact skin, her right holding the needle tight. Mountain lions rarely come so south, so close to the marshes and human settlements; has famine plagued their territory too?

Or is it a sign from the blind fate-shepherd god?

“Hold him.” Before he can bark at her, she adds, “Please, my Lord Commander. All stitches need to be where they must for the spell to work.”

Jehran scoffs. “He won’t move. He knows better than that.”

And the boy doesn’t move, only trembles. Saysa presses the edges of the torn flesh together and starts her stitching, weaving in with every cycle of her needle secrets of herbs and flowers to numb the wound.

“Lavender, mimosa, pennyroyal, thyme, make your roots a shield for this child of mine...”

Muscle and sinew tremble under her touch, the skin welcoming the needle, rejoicing at every stitch. Silver silk on pale flesh, patterns within patterns, long threaded chains stronger than any steel the commander keeps in his dungeons. With every word, she breathes down the blessings of the forest and the moon upon the unfortunate boy. It’s not his fault his father is a black-hearted murderer.

“... Morning dew and summer breeze, weave a rainbow path through these...”

The boy loses consciousness halfway through the stitching of his forearm. Better this way. Those huge eyes burned holes through Saysa’s face, almost melting the serene façade, and she feared that her work would be faulty. But it’s not; it never is. Once she cuts off the final thread, the boy shudders, and his eyes move behind closed lids. He’s dreaming.

Good.

She sits up, wiping blood and sweat on her apron. “I’ve done everything within my power. He needs a healer’s skills now.”

“He’ll have the best.” Jehran kneels beside her, their shoulders almost touching, to pick his son up.

At this moment of leveling, Saysa dares the unthinkable: she lightly touches his forearm. “My lord...”

His hand jerks up as if to slap her, but stops mid-air when the boy whimpers in his sleep. He glances askance at her. “What?”

She bows her head and crosses bloody hands on her chest; his son’s blood, a reminder of debt to deter his anger. “Forgive my insolence, my Lord Commander... but that lion’s corpse?”

“What of it?”

“Could I have its forepaws?”

“Its forepaws?” Not a glance this time, but a glare, like those the rich reserve for muck-covered beggars. “What on earth for?”

“I can use its claws and fur to embroider an enchanted handkerchief, to keep the fever away.” A good lie—but is it a perfect lie?

“I’ll see that you get them.” He picks up his son and leaves, without one glance back, without one word of gratitude.

Once alone, Saysa can weep. She can curse. She can scream out the rage that has been choking her since that accursed night when, hidden in the forest, she watched Jehran and his thugs ride away with her twin brother’s head. But she’s not twelve anymore. So she cleans her hands and picks up the unfinished silk vest. Every stitch becomes a silent scream, every thread a curse that will undo Queen Thelda’s bloodthirsty hide at the seams.



“You’re ripping me off, Mistress Saysa. I can’t give you this—” the tanner holds up the crocodile’s hide “—for less than ten silvers.”

Saysa doesn’t lose her smile. Perhaps it’s the desperation lingering beneath the tanner’s bombastic haggle, or the *nine* silvers in her pouch that keep her voice controlled and soft.

“Come now, Master Tanner. I only want the tail. Surely you can do better than that?”

Or perhaps it’s the shadows of the hanged men on the gallows outside. What did those poor slobs do? Whisper the queen’s name in an unfavorable tone? The tanner behaves casually, but avoids stepping too close to the spots where the dead men’s shadows dance.

“Fine! You can have it for nine.”

“I’ll give you seven.” She silently counts her savings in her head. If only she could get it for that price, she’d have enough for sewing supplies *and* food for the next week. But she needs the hide more than food. She’s already acquired a wolf’s head, a stag’s antlers and a bear’s skin. Without the crocodile’s tail and the lion’s forepaws the mantle will be incomplete. It’s been a week since the commander told her she’ll get the forepaws; hopefully, he’ll keep his word.

He’s a sadistic bastard, but a straightforward one. He wouldn’t lie.

She gets the tail for eight and a spelled undershirt for his wife. The tanner won’t go any lower, and she doesn’t press him further. She’s used to sleeping on an empty stomach, but his scrawny child of a wife, barely over sixteen, expects her first child. Perhaps those silver coins and her craft will help the poor lass survive winter and childbirth.

Saysa doubts that, but she can do nothing more—no one can, when crops rot at the roots, livestock drop dead in their pens and children are born with pus-crusts on their eyes and covered in boils. With her shawl tight around her face, she steps out into the chilly morning, her valuable parcel clutched at her chest, keeping her eyes low. She has shoes and a sturdy shack and an old stove to keep warm. People get killed for less.

The river spat silt and corpses during the night; Saysa takes the dry main street home, where the poor don't fight over bloated carcasses of mountain goats. Her face remains blank outside the temple of the priests that preach justice but practice deceit. So easily have they spewed ill-conceived prophecies to deranged monarchs...

A band of five, they told her, will join and rise against you, each born under a different celestial sign: Wolf and Bear, Stag and Crocodile, and the Great Lioness that prowls the winter skies. Kill them now, and save your rule.

Their soft hands wield no blades, but their poison-dripping tongues made headless corpses out of boys and prostitutes out of girls. They didn't tell the queen how the blood of the innocent would plague the land, nor how the untimely dead would curse her.

The palace stands adjoined to the temple, and Saysa pulls her shawl tighter, covering as much of her face as possible. She doesn't trust herself to keep the hatred from slithering through every wrinkle on her face, through every hair turned grey early. Not now that the mantle is close to completion. Queen Thelda murdered Saysa's brother in his bed. She killed the lion, but

missed the lioness. And now, the time of reckoning is at hand.

Once safely home, with her door locked and bolted, she places the crocodile tail alongside the rest in her back room. Upon a wooden skeleton big as a bull, her chimeral mantle awaits: the head of a wolf, the antlers of a great stag and the body and hind legs of a black bear. From racks around the walls hang the threads she'll use to sew her vengeance: silk, linen and her own hair, thrice-braided, thrice-anointed with her urine, tears and blood.

If only she had fey hair to strengthen her threads... but, if spells to summon those pesky fates exist, she never learned them.

Queen Thelda is far from defenseless, even from magic; her chief adviser and court sorcerer is a powerful man. But he's not a *smart* man; he looks down on women's magic, and knows little about a seamstress' arts. He can conjure up the spirits of the dead, but he won't be able to undo *this* spellwork. He won't *know* how.

A kick on her front door and Saisa shoves everything aside before securing her back room. The chain that keeps it locked is threaded with enchanted cord; lockpicks, hammers, even axes are useless here. She hurries to her doorstep, and finds Jehran there.

He barges in, almost knocking her down. "A locked door? Only people with secrets lock their doors."

"And people with valuables in these difficult times, my lord. I use pearls and gold leaves for the queen's vest, may the gods keep her safe." *Until my mantle is done. Just until then.* She dares a glance and he shows no more suspicion, although he's inspecting her shack.

Has he believed her? He has to. It can't end now, when she's so close...

"Here." He shoves a long, narrow parcel in her hands. He won't look *at* her, only past her and around her, at the ragged mat, her straw bed and her quilt riddled by mended moth holes.

She unwraps one end of the parcel: the lion's forepaws. She manages a mousy voice. "Thank you, my lord. I'll get to work right away. The handkerchief will be ready tomorrow. I hope that the boy is healing well?"

"He's running a fever the healers can't cure." One last look around, at her wicker baskets and clay mugs, and he turns to leave. Two steps before the threshold, he tosses a couple of silvers at her.

She doesn't move a muscle and they fall on the mat. His step slightly falters as he exits; did he expect her to scuttle down on all fours to get them? She leaves them there overnight, while she works on the handkerchief—a flimsy little thing of silk left from the queen's vest, embroidered with a simple charm of protection. Come dawn, she picks the coins up, barely touching them with her thumb and index finger, as though they're covered in manure, and wraps them in a rag. She slips them into the palm of the first beggar she meets.

She won't take Jehran's blood money, but people are starving. That one won't—not today.

The commander doesn't return for the handkerchief, but sends one of his thugs. Saysa rarely sleeps now, working on the queen's vest during the day and on her mantle at night. What the commander brought her are the forepaws of a lioness; they *have* to be. Male lions grow bigger than that. Is it another sign?

He returns three days later, two weeks before the night of the Union, when the stars of the Five Divines form a perfect circle in the night sky—two weeks before the queen’s wedding. This time, he doesn’t kick the door open, but simply knocks.

“My son is better. The handkerchief helped him.” He doesn’t wait for an invitation inside, but his steps are easier this time—almost normal. He shoves another parcel in her hands. “Thank you.”

How could those two words not choke him? Saysa gulps down her rage and checks the parcel: bread, and raisins, and dried figs from the coast. Her heart screams to throw them on the floor and stomp them to a pulp. But her mind is weary and her stomach aches, and she needs nourishment to stay alert and awake—to stay *alive* and cast her magic. So she keeps them and bows her head.

“Thank you, my lord. You’re too kind.” She’ll kill him anyway.

He nods and sits down on an old stool that creaks under his weight. She slides behind her seamstress’ workstation, and her heart rejoices in this small shift of balance. There lies her power, there stands her throne, and he knows it.

“The queen has expressed some concern whether her vest will be ready for the wedding.” He leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. “If there is anything you need to complete your task, I can get it.”

“The queen should not concern herself with such matters. The spells of youthful beauty and seduction need time to settle, but the vest will be ready on time.” She lies, and it tastes sweeter than any fruit he could gift

her. Such superficial spells settle overnight. The other—the darker, venomous magic of undoing at the seams... *that* needs careful placement where it won't be detected. She keeps her back straight and her hands at each side of her station. "And thank you, my lord, but I have everything I need."

He glances around, then straight at her. "You don't look like you do."

Doesn't he know that people are starving and have nothing to spare, even for her talents? Doesn't he know that the queen herself has never paid her one coin? The peasants always return with a few eggs or vegetables or even housework as payment—but not their queen, may her days be numbered and her death slow.

"I don't need much. The simpler my life, the more focused my spells."

"But someone born with your talents..."

"I wasn't born a seamstress. I was made one."



In the days that remain until the wedding, the commander visits her often, and he always brings her little gifts: fruits and nuts and colorful ribbons and threads for her craft. She accepts his tokens with cold graciousness and slips them to the beggars once he's well away.

Mistress Lalinda, her mentor and the city's previous seamstress, may her soul fly upon the winds, had warned her about those pesky seduction charms, like those she's stitched upon the queen's vest; whimsical little pests that won't stay threaded on their fabric. They grow vines and entangle anyone that comes close with a weak heart—like Jehran, who lost his wife years ago.

Rumor has it that she died by his hand. Now, caught in a spelled net of silk and ribbons, perhaps he's planning the same fate for Saysa: first a wedding, then a chokehold and a grave.

The final deadly stitches inside the queen's vest are hurried and uneven, not out of haste, but out of anguish. Saysa has been hungry and cold since her childhood died alongside her family, since that long march from her father's burned-down farm to the capital. She forgot how to walk straight; always hunched, clutching tightly upon her chest whatever she's carrying, so it won't be ripped away. That bastard was right; she *could* do better.

She cuts the last thread and holds up the vest. Knee-long, of the whitest silk, with embroidered patterns of leaves, life-like birds and flowers, it's spelled to bind the queen's new husband. Saysa knows little of him; some rich, spoiled princeling from the southern archipelago, whose family promised to bring the kingdom out of famine and debt.

A debt of blood cannot be paid with all of the world's gold. In Saysa's back room, vengeance awaits for every untimely death at the queen's command.

Jehran comes to escort her to the queen; he comes bearing no gifts but temptation, if only for a moment. Beside him, she wouldn't have to walk with her eyes low. Then a tiny creature darts before her, attempting to trip her in her moment of weakness. Small like a cat, agile like a squirrel, one of the trickster fates has escaped their blind guardian to test her resolve. Saysa clenches her fists and walks on. The fey snarls at her and runs off, unseen by those unfamiliar with the hidden lore of the land.

There's no turning back now.

Entering the queen's private chambers forces all other thoughts to the back of her mind. Suddenly self-conscious of her peasant clothes, she brushes back stray locks of hair and straightens her petticoat. Even the dark-skinned midget who lounges at the queen's feet, leashed like a lapdog, is better dressed than she. Saysa drops on one knee; her eyes count the knots on the carpet to keep her mind focused. Not now. Tomorrow. It will all end tomorrow, one way or another.

Queen Thelda sits on a recliner of polished wood, furnished with thick cushions, heavy drapes all around her to hide her thugs and assassins. She keeps her back straight, one arm resting on the recliner's back, the other absently waving a small fan. White powder covers her face, her lips a thin crimson line, her eyes kohl-traced slits under carefully plucked brows. Dark curls fall around an ascetic face, so angular it could belong to a corpse. She was a great ruler once, and the land prospered under her rule. Not any more.

All the perfumes, all the powder and kohl of the kingdom cannot mask the stench of lingering death. Queen Thelda is old, older than Saysa's mother would be today.

And she's cursed.

How can no one see the blood crusted upon those bony hands? They wave at Saysa, and her mind snaps back to reality.

"Have you brought it?" A bored, low voice. "Show me."

"Yes, your majesty." Saysa rises and unfolds the vest, holding it high, so the pearls and gold leaves reflect the candlelight.

Queen Thelda leans forward to feel the patterns. “I suppose it will do.” She snaps her fingers, and an old man steps forward from behind one of the heavy curtains at her right. “Ezana, what do you think of this?”

Ezana, the court sorcerer. With his simple grey robes, his white hair and goatee, he looks like an old shepherd. But this man knows the ways of the wyrms and has powers that come from a host of undead, their voices stolen and their wills chained—or so the rumors say. Saysa’s hands tremble as he approaches. He doesn’t even look twice at her; in his presence, everyone trembles.

He lifts the hem of the vest close to his face, examining every stitch inside and out. Saysa wishes she could still her heart and silence the throbbing in her ears. He finally lets go of the cloth and turns to the queen.

“A simple charm, your majesty, but an effective one. It will achieve its purpose.”

Ah, those whimsical, *obvious* charms of seduction! Saysa bites her tongue to stifle her grin. The court sorcerer, outwitted by a seamstress with holes in her shoes.

Queen Thelda dismisses her with a wave of her fan. “You can go now. Leave the vest with our maid.” A long sigh, a half-hearted glance. “We are pleased with your work, Seamstress. You may attend our wedding banquet tomorrow, if you can make yourself presentable.”

She bows her head. “As my queen commands.”

And she’ll bring a gift the kingdom will never forget.



After delivering the queen's vest, Saysa returns to a fate-infested home.

The damned tricksters are everywhere: perched upon the shelves, rolling on her straw mattress, messing up her workstation, picking threads off her worn mat. No bigger than alley cats, they have humanoid bodies with short torsos and long, spider-like limbs.

They wear their mousy-brown hair in a single braid that falls over their eyes down to their chests, an invitation and a challenge: *Catch me, if you can—if you dare!*

Their mouths are at the back of their heads, twisted in a permanent smirk to mock those who fail, as they're running away: *Hah! Missed me! So there!*

They giggle and cackle and chipper in their careless way. One hunches over her workstation's drawer and tosses around threads and ribbons. Saysa forces her breathing to remain slow and her eyes unblinking until. .

... any moment now. . .

Her hand darts out and grips its braid. A collective gasp and a long sigh, before the others resume their chirping of fey nonsense. They scatter out the door, through the window, through corners, shadows and angles only their kind can cross. The captured one settles in Saysa's arms, and doesn't try to escape; it has fulfilled its purpose. When Saysa curls up by her mantle to sleep, it curls up with her in silence, the burden of a promise that hangs loose.

Saysa doesn't understand the ways of the gods, nor of the dead. In her dreams, the dead and the divine stroll in like long-lost relatives. They come through the smell of cinnamon and apples in crisp winter mornings,

Mother combing her hair, her brother's incessant poking and teasing. Lost voices in time, forms with no faces, whispers without bodies, they swirl and spiral until a single scene settles.

Mistress Lalinda, her teacher and second mother, clad in her mantle of many feathers, feeds the pigeons at the temple steps. Seed by seed, crumb by crumb, they morph from feathered pests to trickster fates. Then those too shift and grow fur and antlers and scales: the Wolf and the Stag, the Bear and the Crocodile lounge at the feet of the long-dead seamstress. Mistress Lalinda changes too, her face more leonine than human now: the Lioness, her left forepaw Wrath and her right one Vengeance.

She roars and, in the midst of the five divines, something clings and rolls out of the dream until it stops at Saysa's feet: a long needle, as long as her forearm, made of bone—from a human thigh. Mistress Lalinda always kept it hidden, and never told her what it's for.

Saysa knows; she has known for some time now.

Shoved out of sleep and dream, she sits up and finds her captive dead, as it happens when they're caught. They leave no corpse behind, only their braids, ashes, and their essence in a message through dreams and visions.

She dusts off her clothes and weaves the fate's hair into a single thread that will complete the mantle.



“I come as ordered, Queen Thelda. Is my attire to your liking?”

An anguished susurrations fills the great hall that hosts the wedding banquet. Nobles and rich merchants,

emissaries and high ranking-clerics, they whisper and point and shake their heads at the oddity that just stepped in. Only the servants, pale and silent, slowly back away against the walls and close to the exits. *They* know their seamstress and her magic.



Illustration © 2016, Pear Nuallak.

Across the vast hall, upon the dais, the royals and their lackeys remain quiet behind their table overflowing with food and wine. At one end, Commander Jehran sits with his lips a bloodless line.

Ezana cocks his head, studying Saysa's chimeral mantle.

"What is... that?" A bored glance from the queen's new husband. "Is this part of the festivities?" He yawns, half-heartedly covering his mouth with a hand heavy with rings. He can't be older than twenty, with a clean-shaven head in the island fashion; they're crawling with lice over there. "About time. And what is it supposed to be?"

"I'm so glad it entertains you, your highness." Saysa curtsseys. "Since it's the night of the Union, I've put together this..." she waves up and down, showcasing her work "... little *demonstration* to introduce you to our history and lore."

She wears the mantle like a costume, the crocodile's tail heavy behind her. The antlers are her crown, the bear's hind legs her boots, the wolf's head her hood and the lion's forepaws are tied to her wrists with fey-woven cord, leaving her hands free. With the same cord she has sewn the bear's skin up to her chest. From the last loose thread hangs the great bone needle, awaiting the final stitch.

Queen Thelda, in her white vest over a flowing blue dress, waves at her sorcerer, who walks up behind her and leans in to hear her command. Her husband sits up, his eyes awake.

"Tonight we celebrate the Great Union." Blood thunders in her ears, but she keeps her voice controlled. "Tonight, the celestial manifestations of the Four Divines—Wolf and Stag, Bear and Crocodile—assemble in a perfect circle with the fifth, the Lioness. A night of great power." She raises her left hand—her forepaw, Wrath, and points right at the queen. "A night

of great grief and bloodshed.” She raises her right—Vengeance—and points at Jehran. “A night of murder.”

“Enough!” Queen Thelda slaps the table. “Seize her!”

“But I want to hear more,” whines the boy-husband.

“My queen, this poor woman is confused from exhaustion.” Jehran, his face drawn and pale, stands. The fool, still in the clutches of the seduction charms. “Let me try and reason with her.”

“Like you reasoned with my family, murderer?” Saysa’s right hand balls to a fist. “Twenty years ago, you burned down my home, slaughtered my parents, and rode away with my brother’s head, because *she* sent you to kill children in their beds! Because of prophecies about five heroes who’d end her reign! And behold, the Five stand before you. You killed the Lion, you bastard, but not the Lioness!”

“B-but...” Still enchanted, Jehran moves as if to draw his sword, but his hand stops in mid-air.

“Get her!” Queen Thelda screeches, abandoning all pretenses. “Kill her!”

The guards close in, spears extended and blades drawn, but no one charges at the monstrous form, confused and hesitant, awaiting Jehran to confirm the queen’s command; they fear him more than her. Saysa raises both arms, holding out an arm-long thread—the same thread she used for the spells in the vest, thrice-braided and thrice-anointed. With a single, steady move, she pulls it apart.

The sorcerer pales. Queen Thelda screams.

Her face twists and she tears at the vest, struggling to get it off. She cannot; silk and body merge. The seams tear open, one by one, and so does the queen. Her bones

snap, joints pop out of their sockets, her skull can't hold its shape. Its sutures open, her eyes fall out, her jaw dismantles and hangs loose. Ezana shouts spells in half a dozen tongues that fail one after another until the queen collapses on the floor, still screaming, still alive, a writhing mass of silk and flesh.

Saysa throws the thread aside; it has served its purpose—not to kill, but to torture.

Ezana's eyes burn, his brow furrowed. Jehran curses, the charms finally broken by the undoing of the vest. He draws his sword and waves at the guards. "Get her!"

The guards don't move; they just gawk at the thing that used to be their queen in horror. Saysa doesn't give Jehran the time to reach her from across the hall over the panicked guests who flee. She shoves the long bone needle into her chest, up to its eye, with a single push. Her vision blurs. Her pierced heart pumps faster and faster—or is it the fey thread that sucks out her blood and carries it throughout the mantle? Her body spasms, and she throws back her head and screams—no, she howls, wolf and woman becoming one. She no longer wears the beast.

She is the beast.

Kill. Avenge. Gnaw the bone. Slurp the marrow.

The guards flee with the guests. A stampede of shrieking bodies. Soiled silks. Sweat and urine. Delicious terror. Saysa charges. Her tail knocks over tables and seats, bear paws stomp on goblets and carafes.

Behind her. Clanking metal.

A swift turn. A swing of the great tail. The commander swept off his feet.

At her left, spellwork. Ezana mumbles in the wyrm-tongue. Dragonfire splinters against her fur and scales. As long as the seams hold, she cannot die. *So there*, the fey cord mocks him. *Undo the seams, if you can. If you dare.*

The writhing bundle that was the queen still screams. Saysa lowers her head and charges. One final high-pitched scream cut short. The weight of an empty husk upon her antlers. She doesn't shake the corpse off. Her pride. Her banner.

Her crown.

Spells of fire. Singed fur. Spells of ice. Dew on her antlers. *Hah! Missed me! Again!* A cry of rage. Jehran lunges at her, brandishing his longsword with both hands. A slice through the wolf's muzzle. It does not hurt. It does not bleed. It does not die. The fey cord holds. He hacks and slashes away fur and scales. The lioness's claws cut deeper.

Kill. Maim. Tear the muscle, chew on sinew.

A hex of weariness clouds her vision for one moment, then the cord pumps out more blood and her strength returns. One swift swing of her left forepaw severs the tendons of Jehran's left heel. He drops on his knees, sword still in hand. Her tail sends him on his back. The antlers pry the sword off his hands. She leaps on him, pins him on the floor and forces her jaws to stretch open wider than any normal wolf's. One mouthful, and he has no face—bitter blood, crunchy bones upon her tongue. She spits it out, but he still breathes and squirms under her weight, his cries gurgling rosy froth. A second mouthful tears the throat open and dyes the world red.

Avenged. The murderers now bloody carcasses no one will mourn.

Saysa rises on her hind legs, roaring her triumph. No more cold and hunger. Under her paws, the ground trembles, the land acknowledging the offering of blood. Fur and claws tingle, aware of the change below and beyond: seeds spurt life, buds blossom, hens settle in their nest to lay their eggs. Spring returns before the winter starts.

The curse has been lifted.

She looks around, sniffs the air. Is she done? Can she rest now?

Under the royal table, the boy-husband whimpers. She won't kill boys.

At the far end of the dais, Ezana stands rigid, staff in both hands. He keeps his face blank but every wrinkle screams for his inadequacy—his failure. She has no blood debt to settle there. He can go in peace, as long as he—

A fool can only choose foolishness.

He closes his eyes, lowers his head until his forehead touches his staff's figurehead. Green glow spreads around, tendrils of emerald that slither through cracks and crevices, reaching into the unseen and the hidden. He speaks in a low, guttural tongue words not meant for mortals' ears.

Saysa recoils. He's summoning the dead.

She cannot fight the dead. She doesn't know how.

Shadows float around, fragments of bone and dried skin, spirits tied upon the land: the drowned, the hanged, the starved and the murdered, those of untimely deaths and unfinished business. They gather beside and behind him, his own spectral army, mute and obedient, their

voices stolen so they cannot have any power of their own. He mumbles commands and spits out orders, his face drawn to a terrible grin.

The dead float in the air, fluid manifestations of former lives. She doesn't know of words to address them, but knows *them*: the beggars frozen at the temple steps, the women dead from childbirth, the children that starved and the men that died on the gallows. What if her murdered family doesn't stand beside them? Through every stitch of her needles, through every night in hunger and cold during twenty desolate years, they all became family and kin. They stand still, their gaze fixed at where a ghostly child's hand points: at the dangling remains of the queen upon Saysa's antlers.

And the dead laugh.

They reclaim their lost voices not with screams but with mirth: first smirks, then chuckles, then a choir of laughter, joy and relief. Against all the commands Ezana screams now, their earthly bindings are broken. With their deaths avenged they can depart, slowly dissolving in the celestial breeze that flows between and betwixt, whispering their gratitude. But not before they bid the sorcerer goodbye.

Countless kisses of ghostly lips, myriad caresses of ethereal fingers break Ezana apart. Not his body, but his magic; piece by piece, spell by spell, incantations and charms woven by the voices of the dead are torn away, until all that's left is the husk of an old man holding a useless staff.

Lightheaded and panting, Saysa turns to leave, but her knees bend. She hunches on her hind legs, in a pool of blood—her own blood. The fey cord keeps pumping more than the mantle can drink, draining her human

body within. Should she draw the needle out and pull the cord to undo the mantle, whatever little blood remains will spurt out.

Not yet. It's not time yet—not at this place of carnage and death. Not alongside murderers. Not there—at home, amidst the tools of her craft, her charms and her power. She struggles to pull her body forward, but her hind legs lay limp.

Footsteps. Yells. The clank of metal upon metal.

A crowd storms in. Peasants with torches and pitchforks. Words Saysa no longer understands. Is this how she'll die? Like a monster? Trapped inside her mantle, her corpse paraded through the streets? She whimpers; she has no voice to make them understand.

Silence.

A woman in a grey dress steps forth—one of the queen's maids—and kneels. A man beside her removes his hat and joins her. Clothes shuffle, tools are discarded. The townsfolk bow down before her. Through blurry eyes, Saysa watches.

Saysa understands. Here lies her power, here stands her throne, and her voice is the voice of her people who will sing of this night until the world's breaking.

She reaches down with her muzzle and pulls the needle out.

