

Short Stories, Essays and Videos from
Levitation 2024's Guests of Honour

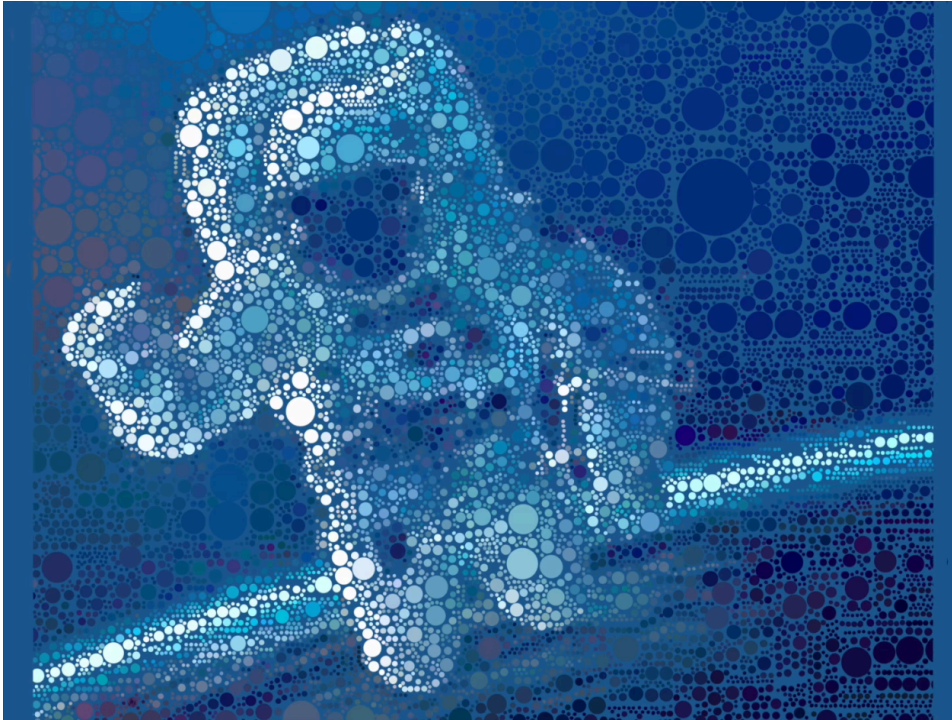
VIDEOS OF THE CREATION OF ARTWORKS By Jackie Burns	3
TERMS OF SERVICE by Genevieve Cogman	4
INDIAN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES by Srinarahari Hanumanthan Mysore	11
THE GARDEN OF SILENCE by Michelle Sagara	16
THIRTY-THREE by Tade Thompson	75

VIDEOS OF THE CREATION OF ARTWORKS

By Jackie Burns

Astronaut Floating Above Earth

A timelapse of the process used in the creation of the digital artwork *Astronaut Floating Above Earth* using Adobe Fresco.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhEIJW6giUiE>

Torchworking a Glass Bead Using Stringers

A demonstration of using torchwork to create glass beads out of stringers.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eumfyND05uA>

TERMS OF SERVICE

by Genevieve Cogman

Abigail had taken care to put her headphones on before they left the station. That way she wouldn't hear the screams.

Still, curiosity impelled her to look up from the screen of her laptop at the seat opposite; it had been reserved since Southampton and unoccupied till Winchester, at which point a succession of footsore passengers had taken advantage of the empty space. With every new station, she could see a blurred image through the current occupant. She couldn't make out whether they were male or female, but she could tell that they were writhing in agony.

*It's entirely reasonable for the penalty to scale with the number of stops for which it's unoccupied, her new employers had said. When you consider the cumulative inconvenience to the rail company – and after all, the customer **has** signed a binding contract...*

Abigail couldn't argue with that. She glanced down the length of the carriage, but nobody else was reacting. They couldn't see or hear the disturbance shimmering around every prebooked seat which wasn't occupied by its designated purchaser.

I'm wasting time, she decided, and turned back to the spreadsheets on her laptop. She did, after all, have a meeting to attend this morning with her employers – and she already knew just how they reacted to even the faintest breach of contract. And failing to have all work materials available on schedule could be considered a breach of contract...

#

It had started like so many other interviews, with the ghost of failure already hovering at her shoulder. Her suit was neat and tidy, but proclaimed its chain store origins to anyone who looked at it; her laptop was generic rather than the latest Apple model; and the other interviewees sharing the waiting room with her had been content to chat with her rather than each other because they'd assessed her as not being a threat to their ambitions. Probably accurately.

After the aptitude test, however, she'd been the only one who was called back, and she was still wondering why.

The interviewer – Mr Bayle – had her neatly written sheaves of paper stacked in front of him. He was the one doing the talking. The two men sitting on either side of him – the one on the right with somewhat goggling eyes and a mouth which hung open on occasion till he remembered to shut it, and the one on the left with much sharper features and with nails that left scored lines on the surface of the table – were silent, leaving Mr Bayle as their spokesman.

“Please, sit down,” he said. “You’ve been a pleasant surprise, Ms Abigail Senters.”

Abigail did as she was told, facing the three men across the table. Her mouth was dry with nerves, but she forced herself to speak. “If that means you’re interested in employing me, then I’m only too pleased.”

“Are you aware of what we’re looking for?”

Another trick question. There had been *so many* in the aptitude test. It had been presented as a contract which required review and corrections from both a financial and legal perspective, but there had been so many little errors and alterations that Abigail had almost doubted her ability to finish in time. “The job offer only said that your firm was looking for up-and-coming young professionals with an interest in advancing their career prospects, Mr Bayle. It gives the impression that anyone interested in working for you must be prepared to take any necessary work in the firm – to do absolutely anything.”

It was also the sort of job advertisement which only attracted the truly desperate, given how little it revealed or promised. But Abigail was desperate. Nobody was hiring, nobody wanted someone without experience, and her university loans were fastened onto her bank account like a leech. She had to find a place and start paying them back before the last of her money ran out and she didn’t even have enough to present herself like a professional, let alone live like one.

“Quite. Our perspective, you see, is that we’re willing to train promising candidates inside the firm, just so long as we feel they have potential and they share our values.” He tapped her written test. “Such as precision. It may interest you to know that two of your competitors managed to edit this text with almost the same degree of accuracy as you.”

Abigail controlled her breathing. He’d said *almost*, after all. That meant they’d made mistakes. She forced her mouth into a cheerful, friendly smile – hopefully one that spoke of her innate superiority and how he didn’t actually need to *tell* her that she’d done better, because she already knew.

Mr Bayle nodded as though he could read her mind – just as any competent interviewer would do. “Now. Let us, as the saying is, get down to brass tacks. We have a very specific service to offer – the provision of well-defined, carefully drawn up, absolutely airtight contracts. But we need a local representative to act for us. You see, Ms Senters, we are familiar with all the ways in which international and other boundaries can be used against us. It’s been agreed at the highest levels in our firm that this can best be resolved by bringing in someone like yourself. Someone local to the situation. Someone...”

Abigail could read all the possible adjectives in his eyes as he chose between them, in the same way that a man might pick his favourite specimen from a box of chocolates. She resolved to pre-empt him. “Someone extremely precise?” she offered.

“I was going to say *hungry*, or ambitious, or simply desperate,” Mr Bayle said, “but that will do too.”

#

The queue for taxis outside the railway station was, as usual, too long. Abigail stared into the middle distance and daydreamed about selling daily reservations in it as she waited for her turn. There would, of course, be a *sizeable* penalty in the contract for queue-jumping.

The driver whom she eventually ended up with was one of the chatty sort. Normally she would have ignored him and stared at rain-soaked buildings and pedestrians during the journey. However, Mr Bayle had suggested in their latest meeting that he would be looking for suggestions from her about future productive ways to expand their franchise. She needed ideas.

“Everything seems to need to be queued for these days,” she said, dropping the statement like a baited hook into one of the gaps in the driver’s monologue. “Railways, airports, getting a driving test...” That was a good one, she’d need to remember that. “It’s all so badly organised. I’m sure you’ve ended up standing round waiting for things where you could have been doing something more *useful*.”

“So very true,” he agreed, nodding vigorously. The little swinging air freshener attached to the mirror seemed to bob in sympathy. “Why, just last night...”

#

She looked up from the figures on the tablet which Mr Bayle had passed her. “May I be honest, sir?”

“On this occasion, yes,” Mr Bayle said, smiling – and were there too many teeth? No, she was imagining things. “What point do you wish to raise?”

“I honestly don’t see how we can run this particular operation at a profit. At least, not from the figures you’ve shown me so far. Am I missing something?”

He nodded. “You are. This particular contract has a small expansion on the one you reviewed earlier. Kindly check subsection eight, part seven, note D, on page five – the exemption clause dealing with intangibles.”

Abigail read it. Then she read it again, her brow creasing as she weighed each word carefully. “Among the intangibles which shall be considered as possible penalties for failure to abide by previous clauses in this contract shall be that item which is referred to as the *soul*...”

“Being neither the body, so in no way corporeal, nor any part of the mind, that being restricted to the functioning of the brain, but in all ways immaterial and intangible, and therefore not measurable by any physical process,” Mr Bayle quoted from the lines of print in front of her. “We do not, of course, attempt to specify by *religion*, as we consider ourselves to be totally free from prejudice on that point. Why, we even provide in-firm courses on unconscious bias! Our share of the emolument – if you like, our little *slice off the top* – is entirely fractional, deduced from the individual’s original quota, and *extremely* minor. Why, I understand it grows back over time, like a transplanted kidney! Isn’t that a nice thought. I do love renewable resources.”

“A tenth of a percentage point, assessed at the first station when a seat which is reserved is not occupied,” Abigail read on, hoping that the words would somehow become more reasonable if she spoke them out loud, “and accumulating from then, at a given rate (see note 5b) not to exceed complete reduction of the soul in question.”

My Bayle nodded paternally. “I must confess there’s something very satisfying about hearing those words read out loud by a person who understands them. The railway company gets the money, the passenger gets the reserved seat, and if the passenger chooses *not* to occupy it, then this very minor penalty charge helps provide the profit for *our* organisation. Everyone gets what they want. The contract is signed willingly and freely. I’m not actually going to use the wording *full knowledge, full*

consent, that's far too old-fashioned, but if anyone chooses to sign a contract without reading it through in full – well, that's their decision. And our profit.”

This was nonsense. This was garbage. This was rubbish. If Mr Bayle believed in all this sort of stuff, then he was certifiably insane. But, on the other hand, it was *employment*.

Yet one obvious issue still presented itself. “I can believe that a passenger would purchase a ticket reservation without bothering to read the full details,” Abigail said tentatively. “But would the railway company let this paragraph go through?”

Mr Bayle smiled, and again there were too many teeth in his smile. “Railway companies are composed of *people*, Ms Senters. We're sure that someone inside their contracts department will be willing to certify the utility of this contract. After that, if a representative of the company signs...well, that's their problem, isn't it?”

It was their problem, and Abigail's opportunity. *If your enemy makes a mistake, exploit it*, all the business courses said, and that went double when it came to employers with too much money and too little sense of reality. “I'll want to review my own contract very carefully before I sign it,” she said boldly.

All three men smiled. “But of course,” Mr Bayle said. “We'd expect nothing less.”

#

My Bayle was waiting for her alone this time, one man in a glossy office halfway up a glossy skyscraper in the centre of London. He stood with his hands folded behind his back, watching the pouring rain outside. The rest of the floor was empty of inhabitants, although it was furnished with enough desks and computers to handle dozens of employees.

“The numbers are looking good,” Abigail said, having learned that he appreciated proactive communication from her. “Both theirs, and ours – at least, extrapolated from the figures they're providing us with. Though in the long term...”

“Yes?” A pair of reflected images seemed to flank him in the window, staring back at her.

“Well,” Abigail said with a shrug, “it's ultimately dependent on railway use and development. The HS2 news is quite a downer, and in general it doesn't speak well for government encouragement of the railways. Though government contracts in general are a major avenue for future opportunity. We're too late on the Post Office, I'm afraid, unless there's something you know that you're not telling me, sir...”

“Sadly not.” Mr Bayle heaved what looked like an entirely genuine sigh. “When I think about what we missed there, it truly depresses me. The only saving grace, much as I dislike the term, is looking at the performance of the Post Office in general and appreciating what it says about humanity. A number of my fellow directors are looking forward to interactions with the relevant staff at some future point.”

“Right,” Abigail said, resolving not to feel envious at this display of personal interest. She’d just have to work on her own place in the firm. “In that case, sir, have you considered the upcoming General Election? Postal and online voting?”

He turned around and positively *beamed* at her. Curiously, through some trick of refraction, his reflections in the window turned and smiled as well. “What excellent, ardent enthusiasm! We used to negotiate with, shall we say, arts and philosophy graduates, but these days it’s quite clear that business specialists like yourself are *much* more suited to our line of work. Ms Senters, you’re demonstrating precisely the sort of rapacious hunger that we look for in an up-and-coming colleague.”

Always agree with your boss. “Why, thank you, sir,” Abigail said. She would have dimpled if she’d had the face for it. Instead she settled for looking as smug as the chosen winner on a reality tv show. “I’m planning to make a success of this job.”

And if there were other firms out there with the same delusions – no, she couldn’t call them delusions now, she’d seen they were real in some sense – and attempting to run the same scam, then she’d eventually be making a success of *other* jobs as well. There had to be openings for her there as well. There was nowhere to go but up.

“I can ask for no better. Just one thing...”

“Sir?”

“You do recall that fanfiction site you used to write for? The one with the extremely long disclaimer policy which all writers were required to sign? Alpha and omega, ah, that does take me back.”

Abigail could feel the blood draining from her face. “I was seventeen,” she said, desperately revolving a dozen strategies from lying to his face to somehow – she didn’t know how, she’d find a way – hiring a hacker to DDOS it off the net.

“Of course!” His smile grew even wider. “Quite old enough to know what you were doing. And I’m sure that we won’t have any reason to revisit this, will we? I’m quietly confident that you’ll be doing your best to give us long and valuable service,

Ms Seters. I have faith in you – and in your freely given consent and signature. There’s nothing more elegant than a little box with a tick in it, is there?”

Abigail could only swallow dryly as she stood there, looking at his smile. Looking at his teeth.

INDIAN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES

by Srinarahari Hanumanthan Mysore

In the West, science fiction has been shaped by magazines like *Astounding*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Locus*, *Galaxy*, *Amazing Stories*, *Analog*, *Lightning Speed*, *Destiny*, *Galileo*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *New Worlds*, *Vertex*, and others. Editors like Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell took a keen interest in directing the respective authors to write stories as the days demanded. Unlike in the West, India has had no history of science fiction magazine in general and editors in particular.

Likewise, there were no critical journals in India like *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, *A Speculative Literature*, *Journal of Fantastic in Literature*, and others which could generate criticism and book reviews.

Individual authors wrote SF stories and sent them for publication to general fiction magazines, where they appeared if publishers thought they might boost sales and popularity. Most of the stories were written by authors without a science fiction background, had no science basis, and were anti-science. Some of them had thin layers of scientific principles without proper authentication, or were contemporary fiction projected to future centuries or set on other planets. Many stories were translations of Western SF stories, often localized with Indian names and locations.

Root Causes

First, out of the known 1,635 Indian languages spoken in India, the constitution of India has recognized 22 as official languages. Among these Indian languages, only Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Marathi have published stories in magazine form. Second, the impact of industrialization was felt late in this country. Due to the population explosion, people felt that machines might steal their jobs and human beings might lose their livelihood. As a result, science fiction stories did not find a welcome in many of the magazines. The third factor might be that the people hesitated to cross the threshold from religious to scientific belief. People found solace in performing religious rituals and wanted to revive myth rather than recognize science and technology. Fourth, readers thought "science fiction" was oxymoronic; science and fiction didn't go together. Scientists believed in science, and not in the positive effects of narration. The nonscience readers found thrills in plot, characterization, themes, and punch lines, rather than recognizing the importance of scientific and technological points of view. Fifth, few of the authors knew the rudimentary rules of science fiction stories and the basic differences between realistic fiction and SF.

The Beginning

A notable Bengali science fiction story, Jagadananda Roy's "Shukra Bhraman" (Travel to Venus), was published in 1879. The first Indian science fiction story in Hindi was a serial written during 1884-88 by Ambika Dutt Vyas entitled "Aaschary Vrittant" (The Strange Tale) which was published in *Peeyush Pravah*, a magazine from Madhya Pradesh. Influenced perhaps by the adventure stories of Jules Verne, "Aaschary Vrittant" presented the captivating saga of one Mr. Gopinath, the protagonist who took a breathtaking adventurous journey underneath the Earth.

In the Hindi language, Jules Verne's **Chandra Lok Ki Yatra** (Journey to the Moon), translated by Keshav Prasad Babu Singh, appeared in *Saraswathi* on November 6, 1900. "Ashcharya ki Ghanti" (A Wonderful Bell) by Sathya Dev Parivarjak was published in 1908. During those years Kishorilal Goswamy, Lala Shivnivas Das, Gopal Babu, Ram Gahwari and others also contributed stories which combined science elements with fairy tale themes. In Malayalam, SF writing started late around 1910 with the publication of a translation of Jules Verne's **Journey to the Moon**, serialized in a magazine named *Kerala Kokila* printed and published in Cochin, Kerala state.

The Second Wave

Probably due to the negative impact of WWII, the development of SF in India suffered a hitch, but the movement gained momentum in the '60s as science and technology progressed. Indian SF was impacted by the success of humans landing on the Moon, the discovery of quarks, the advent of TV, computers and the internet, deciphering the human genome, and cloning. With these elements in the background, people in the scientific world began writing science fiction in journals with the aim of popularizing science.

Indian Languages

"Mini Noise" (1966) by Saurabh Kumar Chaliha, published in the magazine *Asom Batori*, is the first story in the Assamese language which has all the attributes of SF. It deals with controlling noise pollution.

SF progress has been remarkable over the past four decades as special editions of *Bihu* and *Durga Puja* paved the way for the publication of SF stories in some of the Bengali and Assamese magazines.

In the Tamil language, *Kumudam* and *Ananda Vikatan* were the two popular magazines which brought out SF stories. Mr. S. Rangarajan (Pen name: Sujatha), an electronic engineer by profession, served as the editor of *Kumudam* for some time.

During his tenure, he contributed a number of SF stories and serialized them in the said.

In Telugu language, *Chakumakhi* is a science magazine for children which has been publishing SF stories. Online magazine *Sanchika* has published SF, with SF writer Kasturi Muralikrishna as its chief editor. Dr. Madhu Chittavru and Salim IRS have contributed regularly to the magazine since its founding three years ago: sanchika.com.

In the Kannada language, *Mayura*, *Sudha Taranga*, *Tushara*, *Prabudha Karnataka*, *Koravanji*, *Bala Vigyan*, and other popular magazines publish SF occasionally. Special issues of SF stories have appeared from *Tushara* and *Mayura* in the past. *Kutuhali* is an online science journal in Kannada edited by Kollegala Sharma. Since the postpandemic period, it has been publishing SF stories, and brought out a special SF issue in 2022.

Kalpabishwa is the biggest online Bengali-language SF magazine, founded January 2016. Dip Ghosh is chief editor, with an editorial board consisting of prominent SF writers Santu Bag, Goutam Mandal, Pramit Nandi, and Supriyo Da. They publish original SF, translated works, and articles at www.kalpabiswa.com.

Kalpabishwa was generous enough to share with this author a few more names of Bengali science fiction magazines, including *Aschorjyo* (1963-'70s), followed by *Bismoy* (early '70s). *Fantastic* ran from the early '70s to 2000, and was followed by *Anandamela*, *Shuktara*, *Kishor Varati*, *Sandesh*, and *Kishor Gyan Bigyan*. Some Bengali general fiction magazines also occasionally published SF.

Vigyan Katha is the first prominent Hindi SF quarterly, published in print from Uttara Pradesh. Though globally many magazines have shut down for various reasons, chief editor Rajeev Ranjan Upadhyaya has produced his magazine with zeal, publishing it for 22 years without interruption. The 80th issue was released for October-December 2023 with guest editor Harish Goyal, the Hindi science fiction Badshaw (King). The issue featured works by established writers Rajeev Ranjan Upadhyaya, Arvind Dubey, Zeashan Haider Zaidi, and Harish Goyal. In addition, there are two more popular Hindi magazines, *Vigyan Pragati* and *Electroiky Aapke Liye*, which include at least one SF story each month.

SF in the Marathi language has a long history, since the '70s. Among several print and online magazines, the most prominent are *Srushtidnyan*, *Marathi Vidnyan Parishad Patrika*, and *Vidnyandhara*, recently started by Grantali publisher. In

addition, the science-based *Marathi Vidnyan Vishwa* often publishes SF stories in a number of special issues during the Diwali festival period.

Journals in English

Arya Madan Mohan came from London to settle in New Delhi and created the website www.indianscifi.com, and served as webmaster and chief editor for a year or two. He was the first publisher who offered payment of INR 2000 per story.

The Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies was established for the promotion and development of research in the field of SF, and was formerly located at Vellore, Tamil Nadu. The publication division of the association published SF stories, scholarly articles, letters to the editor, guest columns, and the reports of the conferences held during those years in its quarterly print magazine, *Indian Journal of Science Fiction Studies*, from January 2000 to December 2005. Dr. Purushothaman, the first among the scholars to obtain a doctoral degree in science fiction in India, was the founder-president of the association and chief editor of the scholarly journal.

Mithila Review, an online quarterly magazine in English, was founded by Salik Shah, with its inaugural issue launched in March 2016. It became a paying market in 2016. The magazine relies primarily on donations and subscriptions as sources of funding through.

Online magazines *Kalkion* and *Muktware* published Indian SF stories in English, but both shut down around 15 years ago.

Adbhut.in is the only English-language online magazine consistently publishing a variety of Indian SF works, including original stories, articles, interviews, panel discussions, and book reviews. It was founded at the turn of the century. Each item in every issue has catchy images and sketches. The webzine has found success because of the persistent effort of its chief editor, the prolific writer and scholar Dinker Charak.

Science Reporter is an English-language print magazine that publishes reports of SF conferences in India. It conducted a science-fiction story writing competition during the year 2023, publishing the winners.

Indian Literature is a renowned bimonthly print journal published by Kendra Sahitya Academy, and brought out a special SF issue in January-February 2024. The issue has several sections, including graphic narratives and Bengali, English, Dogri,

Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu, Punjabi, and Kannada language representations, as well as several essays, poetry, and extracts showing the breadth of Indian SF.

Conclusion

Publication of SF stories in Indian magazines can be traced back to *Amazing Stories* in 1926. But the Indian SF magazines are quite different from those produced in other countries in the world. The author of this article is quite ignorant to read, write, and converse in most of the Indian languages, with the exception of Hindi, Kannada, and Marathi. Thus, it is difficult to go deeply into the print media of other Indian languages for a comprehensive scholarly study.

However, as James Gunn wrote, stories about “the fear of the machine, fear of the creature rebelling against his creator... people without depth of thought, religious fanatics, short-sighted unions” were common among Indian SF work published in previous centuries. Most of the common people believed in the unbelievable. Some of them were on the threshold of skepticism and rationality. Most of the Indian SF works in the last century show the impact of Mary Shelley’s **Frankenstein, R.U.R.** by Karl Capek, the novels of H.G. Wells, “The Machine Stops” by E.M. Forster, and others.

But year by year, the stories have progressed toward skepticism and rationalism, and there’s a strong tendency toward more positive works. Hope and optimism, the “mantra” of science fiction philosophy, are more noticeable in the content and form of Indian SF stories lately. From the turn of the present century until today, the stories which find publication reflect human-machine symbiosis and deal with the contemporary problems like climate change, alien encounters, terraforming, colonizing alternate worlds, the search for alternative energy sources, artificial intelligence, the positive and negative impact of ChatGPT, and other topics.

There was a survival problem for print magazines during the past century, as the sales were poor in the local market. The present-day journals, especially the online ones, have overcome such difficulties. But there are other problems which have to be addressed, including technological and financial resources, dedicated staff, and the impact of AI submissions.

THE GARDEN OF SILENCE

by Michelle Sagara

There are stories.

There are always stories. Some are told loudly, in front of an audience—as large an audience as one might gather, who is a teller of wonder tales. Some incorporate colorful raiment, costumes, even swords; some have painted displays and the story unfolds in the hands—and the voices—of many.

Some are written by lamplight, in the hours when the day's duties are done.

Some are never told.

But there are stories in everything, in every manner of telling; in words of different languages, and in the silences that grow between words, between sentences, the hesitations louder than words might be, should the speaker utter them at all.

There are stories in the web of a spider, scenes in the way the wind blows through that web, or the victim shudders in it, although perhaps one might consider each a separate story: the building of a home, the strength of a home, the use of a home.

There are stories to be found where people gather, each person a sentence, a convergence of different contexts; in a crowd there are stories created by those who gleam brightly in their center, and stories to be found in those who desperately yearn to stand there, but who cannot even approach.

All of life is a story.

All of death is a story.

They overlap, they combine, they pull apart, but they are never truly separate.

#

A child comes to the garden. She does not speak. She is bruised; her left arm is covered in pale purple and yellow marks, but her left eye is dark and swollen. Her hair is what catches the attention; it is not a uniform length, and dead strands imply proximity to fire.

Her clothing is far too large, but tattered and old; stains mark its front and back. She wears one sandal in weather too cold for it; her right foot is bare, red, chapped, her toenails split and yellowed.

All the signs of age are there, but she is young; she has lived a life that would prematurely age anyone.

She did not expect a visitor today. Ah, no. She did not expect this visitor. She received no warning; no appointment, no matter how subtle, was made. Not all of the visitors make appointments in the traditional way—in fact very few do. Were the child older, were she less obviously injured, she might send her on her way.

There is no place in this garden for one such as she.

She means to send her away, but something in her eyes reminds her of her own distant youth. She cannot say for certain what it is; she cannot say why she feel a strange sense of resonance, of kinship. We do not remember our childhoods clearly, except in glimpses of memory—and memory shifts and changes as we age. Things that were not significant to our younger selves become significant as we examine them; questions we had not thought to ask at that time are answered by things we cannot clearly revisit except in those shifting memories.

Perhaps it is her anger. She once had anger such as that; she remembers it clearly. She can almost touch it, although it has been many years since she has tried. This unarmed child is dangerous.

But she knows well that anything can become a weapon in the hands of such a child. Anything at all.

The child stares; the wind touches what will move of her matted, dirty hair. Her eyes seem brown in the bright light; in the dim, they will look black, as if her pupils are all that remain.

There are always stories. The sun tells a story. The shadows cast by the sun tell a different one; they add urgency to the unfolding tale of this normal, quiet day. The stories are not the same, but she knows, now, the way one can seep into another if care is not practiced. Things unexpected grow, like weeds in a garden, or like flowers themselves; some are desired, and some are not.

She is not the arbiter of what is weed, or what is flower.

But she has time before her expected guest arrives. “Come,” she tells the child. “You are filthy. You cannot remain here in that state.”

#

She is filthy. It is true. But filth has never made her life any worse. At least she's clothed. She lost a shoe. She'll have to find another. The sandals were too large to run in. Sometimes, you don't have a choice.

This is the first time she's run this far.

This is the first time she's entered this forest. Even the cold, starving children know better than that. But death is death. Death here. Death in the streets. Corpses don't care. She left signs. He'll know where she ran. Or maybe he'll think that the lost shoe was a trick, a trap. Maybe he'll finally be happy because she's gone.

Gone, like her mother is gone.

This stranger, this home, she didn't expect it. Maybe stories about the forest were a lie. Or maybe the stranger is the forest's death. Maybe she's come here, and she'll be cooked and eaten. But she's filthy, too filthy, for that. She's almost grateful to be dirty. But she's not strong enough to refuse to be clean; the woman's hand, when it touches—and flinches at contact—is strong.

Strong.

The grip doesn't add new bruises, but it presses down on ones that aren't old enough not to hurt. Still, the child says nothing. It's best, with strangers, not to show pain unless it's pain they want.

There are always stories.

No law says that all stories must be true.

#

It has been years since she has had an assistant, and in truth, she misses him dearly. She could have left the child to his care. She has no one else, now, and she therefore marches the child to the room in which the tallest and largest of the tubs resides.

She does not want to touch what remains of the child's clothing. She is almost certain the child does not want to be relieved of it, either. But the shoe she willingly surrenders, even if it, like the clothing, is too large. People expect shoes to be dirty.

How long as it been since she was forced, by circumstance, to bathe another? How much longer has it been since she bathed a child? She has never bathed a child as filthy as this one; she is uncertain she can get the accumulated dirt out of the child's hair on a first attempt, but has no time for more than one.

The child does not fight. The water is hot; she flinches as she tips a toe—and then a foot—in. But after that, she takes a steadying breath and full enters the bath. This is a bath for those who are clean, but no one else will be using it after she’s finished; it will need almost as much cleaning as the child herself.

#

The woman has scrubbed so hard and so long the girl’s skin is both red and clean. The bruises did not wash away with the dirt; they remain, more vivid in color. She has added no new bruises.

She could do nothing with the hair; she did try. It was matted, filthy; insects might have grown there as easily as any other patch of earth. Try as she might, she could not clean it, could not even begin to untangle it so that it could be cleaned.

She therefore cuts the child’s hair, removing all the wild tangles, the things that cannot be properly tended.

“I do not wish to cut it, either,” she tells the child; the child does not want to lose the hair. “If you wish clean, healthy hair, you will have to grow it again. At your age, hair grows quickly.”

The child does not fight, although it comes close. Cutting hair feels far more natural than washing dirt from skin. Far more like the work she does in the garden.

#

The child’s clothing is, of course, filthy; perhaps it is more filthy than the child was when she arrived. It is over-sized, and it is poorly made. But finding clothing in this house that will fit the child might be problematic.

Visitors come—but they do not simply stumble into the garden as the child did. She does not have clothing that will fit the girl—but she must find something.

She does not go to her own room; it is small, its contents known and modest. If she is not large herself, she is no longer a child, and if she is honest, she owns little and does not wish to surrender the few things she does have.

She does not recall clothing a visitor before, although she has offered them tea or food; she has gifted them umbrellas, although they left before rain fell. She cannot remember the how or why, and it seems like the kitchen is not the correct place to find clothing.

Perhaps she should take the filthy clothing and wash it. But the child would have to wait. She cannot have the child wash her own clothes while naked. Perhaps that is why the child never did.

The kitchen, however, has food for the visitor she is expecting; there is no food for the child. No clothing for the child. Nothing that implies the child was expected. This has not happened before.

She therefore returns to her own room, and she begins a more careful search. The child is accustomed to clothing that does not fit—anything is better than nothing. She feels a ripple of discomfort, of something that is close to memory. Perhaps she should listen to it—but it is not to listen to herself that she is here; it is to listen to the stories the garden slowly reveals.

But there are stories here, in the clothing she carefully handles. There are firsts, there are lasts, there is pure white and pure black, two sides of grief; there are birthing colors and colors—brilliant, untouched by time—that were worn at the first coming of age, and the second, each bitter in their own fashion.

There is one dress that she cannot bring herself to touch. She wore it once. It was meant to be worn only once, and it was created in such a fashion that that once was its entire reason for being. It would not fit the child, but even if it would, she will not surrender it.

And why? Why, in the end? Why hold on to something that had value only for a day? She turns away from the question; she turns away from the dress.

She continues to look through her clothing; she realizes that there is more here than she thought; more than she consciously remembered. Or perhaps her memories are correct. She is a resident of this strange house, and the house has its own priorities, its own reason for being.

She does not know what it is, but she has always done her best to fit in, in any situation. To be part of the flow of the place in which she stands. Today, it is frustrating, because today, she doesn't understand where she stands. She doesn't understand what the house needs, what the garden desires.

It occurs to her that she has never understood it. When she first arrived, she found no people. The house existed, dusty perhaps, but in good condition; if it had been abandoned, it had not been abandoned for long. She was afraid to touch anything, to

make use of anything: the bath, the bed, the kitchen; she was afraid to leave traces of herself and her intrusion where they might easily be found.

She was a trespasser, and knew it.

But like the child, she had come across the house, stumbling into it through the garden. She did not know that the house was, in some fashion, almost sentient. Not then.

She did what she could to minimize her presence there. She cleaned. She made the house better, so that its owners might feel a touch of gratitude for the care she had shown when she had arrived, desperate and uninvited.

But she had not arrived in the state the child had.

Perhaps, in the early years of isolation, she had talked to the house; she had asked questions. She had hoped for answers. But answers were not offered. And in her more reflective moments, she realized that asking questions aloud might be a way of hearing a voice—any voice, even her own. The house, of course, did not speak.

Not in words, which she wanted. Words could be transformed into rules. Words could give her certainty.

“What,” she asks, for the first time in decades, “do you want me to do?”

Her voice does not echo. The lack of answer is almost a comfort. But in its own fashion, the house does answer.

Among her personal belongings, she finds a robe. It is faded; it was once orange and pink, a girl’s bold colors; it is pale now, the pink so light it looks white, the orange so muted it seems an echo of the color it once was. There are patches along the elbows and cuffs created over the original sleeves, where the fabric had become threadbare.

Why is this here?

Had she more time, she would think. She would listen. She would construct answers. But she has no time. This is not something she remembers bringing with her; it is not something she would have kept. It is a reminder of a childhood she was glad to leave behind.

She shouldn’t have let the child stay.

She should have turned the child away.

But the house has given her what she needs, and if it is bitter, she should be accustomed to that.

#

The worn, childhood clothing fits the girl. Of course it does. And perhaps the reason for that robe is its obvious age. It is not new. It is not particularly fancy. She can see the patches, delicate and subtle, that were made to repair it. Something bright, beautiful, and new would have justifiably aroused suspicion in a way a castoff does not.

Not that the child is not suspicious; of course she is. It would be almost disappointing were she otherwise. But it is the right level of suspicion; it does not cross the line.

She is not given new sandals, but the mats on the floor are soft enough she doesn't need them. The girl's feet are tough.

The child is hungry, but she is tired. She will sleep now, in this oddly clean, empty space. She will hear no words. She will hear no insects, no animal noises, no birds. The silence will be a cocoon; it implies safety.

It promises nothing.

#

Appointments that are made are meant to be kept. In the tranquil space of the garden, it is seldom that she must worry about making those appointments on time; time is a conceit that she barely acknowledges on most of her days here.

She should have chased the child off, sent the child back to the forest. Had she, the almost unfamiliar anxiety would not trouble her now. It has been a long time since she carried something as simple as a watch; even the clocks that once made unpleasant noise in her home have long fallen silent.

Today, they are not silent.

It is the child. She must send the child away. But she cannot do it now, or she will be late. Time in the garden is endless. Time in the garden is unforgiving. Both of these things exist in an uneasy, bitter alliance that is nonetheless true.

The clocks tick their warning, slowly, steadily, as if they are heartbeats. But heartbeats are not static; they speed up, slow down, speed up in response to the emotions of those within whom they reside.

She yearned, once, for a heart that beat like clockwork. She had almost forgotten. But that is the nature of yearning: if one achieves one's desire, the desire cannot sustain itself. She desired that heart, she received it.

Nothing lasts forever.

The clocks are the loudest sign of that all but forgotten truth. They have been irrelevant until this moment; she will make certain they are irrelevant hereafter. She reaches the door, pauses to take deeper breaths, to position herself correctly. Only then does she open it.

There is no one standing directly in front of it, hesitating; there is no obvious way to knock this door, no chimes to set ringing. She is meant to be standing, framed perfectly by it, part of its symmetry, as the guest approaches the house.

Stand. Wait. The moment will come when words are natural and necessary. But while she stands, she looks down the path that leads to the house. To either side of it are flowers, and those differ by season. She frowns; the season has not changed, but to the right of the path, the small, blue flowers seem almost wilting.

It is cold—it has been cold—but it is not winter, not fall; the flowers should not bow in such a fashion.

Gardens require care.

She is frustrated for a moment. She has done nothing but care for the garden. Yesterday, the garden did not look like this. Her hands almost become fists. She wonders if the child caused this damage, but it is subtle damage, and the child is not a subtle presence.

Perhaps her presence is too strong for something as delicate as these plants. If the woman were prone to headaches in this place, she would have one now. She can remember the shape and condition of those flowers clearly. No. It is not at the flowers she must look; having recognized their condition, she will tend to them later.

For now, the visitor approaches.

The visitor is not always the same; sometimes he is young—as young as the girl who came unannounced and uninvited to break her peace. Sometimes he is older, bright with youth and the certainty of youth: a young man who believes that he has reached the pinnacle of life, and intends to hunker there. Sometimes he is older still, middle-aged, heavier with care and food, proudly adorned with weighty, valuable symbols. He will have his power, and if youth cannot be that power, he will substitute it for other things: experience. Authority. Wealth.

And sometimes he is old enough that the fires that drove him are all but spent. Were his age predictable, he might seem a normal guest, a man who has visited a regular, if isolated home, over the course of his life.

The fact that his visits do not coincide with a neat progression of age makes him unusual. Were she a different person, she might never have known that all of these visitors were the same man.

But he is not the only visitor to come to this place. He is not the only visitor to leave. Perhaps he, like the others, will never return after today. She cannot tell; she cannot predict. She once tried, but that was long ago.

Today, however, as if to cast a shadow of guilt beneath which she must stand, he is young. Almost the age of the child who was so in need of a bath in which she could not be cleaned; not with the time given. It is easier to gauge his age than the girl's. He has lacked neither food nor shelter—not in the severe way the girl has.

This boy has caused her the most ambivalence. She might freely despise the men, older or younger, but the child? She has met him only in this place. Clearly he existed when she did not live here, but she did not encounter him before her arrival in the gardens.

She does not smile at the boy. She has never smiled at him. He approaches as if she does and has, his smile shadowed and echoed by the smile that might touch his older face in its many incarnations. Only when he is old does that smile vanish completely, never to return.

Never to return save for here.

The boy is not interested in the garden. He is interested in the house, the woman who dwells within it, the secret of the forest. He is enchanted by such mysteries, because to his young mind mysteries are akin to magic. He believes. He is not yet of

an age where belief will be too heavy a burden, where it will die under the weight of the stares of older people, and the mockery that accompanies them.

He enters the house as if invited—but of course he does. If he can find this house at all, he has been invited. She does not choose her visitors, and she does not extend invitations; nor is she asked for permission. She is always given warning. She always has time to prepare.

But not with the girl.

#

The girl, hair clean but shorn, soft the way down is which is hidden by feathers, is standing at the end of the hall, her hands—chipped nails less visible now that the dirt beneath them has been largely removed—clasped as she frowns.

The boy is standing in the entrance. His gaze has fallen on the girl, and it is welded there. “Who are you?” he asks, his tone one of wounded suspicion.

“Who are you?” she snaps back, her hands becoming fists.

“I asked first.” His hands ball into fists to mirror hers.

“Yeah? Well I asked second.”

His jaw drops. “That means you have to answer first!”

“Why?”

He turns immediately to the woman, as if she is the authority in this place—this place that should be empty, that should be silent. “Who is she?”

“I do not know. She arrived today before you did.”

He blinks, his eyes shifting in puzzlement. “She can’t.”

This is why children are exhausting. “Clearly,” she says, attempting—and failing—to gentle her voice, “She can.”

“What is she?” It is a question he has asked before, but only of her. What are you? Are you a ghost? Are you dead?

“Child, I cannot tell you what I am. I would, if I could. And If I cannot even speak for myself, who am I to speak for another person? Perhaps, if you speak with her, you will receive an answer.”

“I don’t want to!”

“Good!” the girl shouts back. “I don’t care if you try—I won’t talk to you!” She turns on bare heel; the doors slide open—silently, always silently—and she storms off in the opposite direction, her steps loud enough to belong to a small herd of noisy children as she stomps down the gleaming wood.

The woman wonders if the girl will be lost forever in the house; she would not be the first. The house wants peace, it wants silence, it wants grace and the subtle scent of growing life that disturbs none of these things.

But the girl’s booming steps are not silenced; the doors do not slide shut at her back.

It is all the invitation the boy needs; he is shocked and angry. The anger stems, no doubt, from humiliation. This is not how he is accustomed to being treated by someone as ragged as the girl.

“Come back here!” he shouts.

That, at least, is familiar. The shouting. The command. For reasons that are not yet clear to her, the house—which rejects such commands—accepts them today. Perhaps it is because the girl does not belong here.

#

She does not know what the two speak about, if they speak at all. She is not certain if blows are exchanged. Probably they are—and the girl is undernourished and far weaker than the boy. Perhaps he will beat her in his rage.

Perhaps. But she has learned not to interfere in the lives of others, even when they briefly overlap her own; it leads to pain. Sometimes the pain is slight, and sometimes it is severe. In neither case does she deserve it. She has avoided pain, in this place. The garden does not hurt her.

Nor does the weather, bright or dark. The earth that she turns, when she is called to work might demand a subsequent a bath, but even that feels earned. There is no pain where there are no people.

Remember that.

She leaves the house and enters the garden. She has gardening tools, although they are seldom necessary. As she works to unearth the small blue flowers, she places them in small pots; the soil there is different, and perhaps they will recover. Perhaps

not. The ground from which they are taken is not dry; it is not hard. She cannot see any reason why these flowers have taken ill.

But they have; she knows it. She can almost hear their voices. She wants to listen. But when she does other voices intrude. Childish voices. Voices inflected with emotion, even if the syllables are too distant to cohere. It is not their story she wants—it is this story, these suddenly fading flowers.

When has she ever gotten what she wants?

#

When she first came to the garden, she could hear the screams of the plants; she could hear the creaking rage of the trees that girded the garden's edge. The sun scorched when the sky was cloudless, and the rain, when it fell, turned earth to mud. It was a wonder to her that anything had survived in the garden itself.

She was bleeding when she arrived; her forehead and her arms bore cuts. The nails on her right hand had snapped; her clothing was drenched, her hair flattened by the water that cascaded down her face. She had lost a shoe, but her feet weren't so rough and callused that small branches and thorns didn't pierce her sole.

The girl—she let the girl stay. There was no one here to greet her when she approached the house. No one here to explain what she must do, where she must go, or if she was allowed to be here at all.

Is the girl meant to replace her? Is that why she has come?

Ah, the flowers. It is not raining now, and the ground is not slippery mud; water doesn't bow the small blossoms with its weight. And yet, in the small pots into which she has transferred them, she feels water. She does not understand.

Will she lose the story that these fading flowers have to tell? Will she lose them to the noise of a visitor and an unexpected guest?

She is angry. She is angry enough to weep, although tears feel foreign.

She is surprised. Anger dissipates. Weeping stops. How long has it been since she has felt—truly felt—either? That is not why she lives in this house, in this forest, in this garden. That is not what she wants.

Once, it was all she had. She could not take a step forward, bowed by their weight. That she did is perhaps the only miracle life has granted her: she walked, unseeing,

until she reached the fence that marked this garden. She did not realize that this was the forest; she saw nothing.

Had the stories about monsters in the forest been true, it would have come as a merciful relief if the death were swift. It was not death she found, when she took a moment to catch her breath.

It was the garden, wild and untended, and beyond its dry, weedy stalks and plants, the house. She had not expected the house, but perhaps she should have; the outline of the garden was clear enough that even untended it implied a home was nearby.

Perhaps not. What did she know of homes? Phantasms. Daydreams. Brief shelters that weren't worth the stay. Places that vanished beneath her feet, slowly but certainly, until she could no longer see what had once existed. She had not known.

She pauses. The sounds of her own anger are unpleasant. They are too loud, too entangling. If she is to lose these small blue flowers she must listen. It is their story, not her own, that she must hear.

Stories exist everywhere, and anywhere one looks. Even the stories that no one hears are told. She wishes to hear; it is why she stayed.

#

It is difficult to keep old anger at bay.

She can hear the children. She had not meant to listen to their distant voices; theirs is not the story she wishes to hear. What they make of the garden and the house as visitors is of little concern to her; they will go when their time here is done, and she will remain.

But the flowers, wilting, will not. She does not have time to let children wander this garden with their heavy feet and their carelessness; they do not listen. They will not hear. The final story of a garden's inhabitant will pass beneath them, as if it were of no consequence.

But they will shout. They will argue.

And apparently they will fall into the fountain in the garden at the back of the house. The fountain is not usually deep enough that it threatens the lives of children, unless perhaps one is deliberately trying to drown the other.

It is not her concern.

It is not.

Their bodies will not be the only bodies she has had to drag out of the house and out of the garden. She does not even bury them; the forest takes the remains. She does not wish to handle the corpses of children, else why did she scrub and clean for so long? To make their corpses more appetizing for creatures who might gain sustenance from eating them?

They are shouting; their hands or bodies are slapping against the water.

She hears an eerie, unexpected sound as she rises; it is enough to destroy the small stories that the flowers are struggling to tell their only audience.

It is laughter.

#

How did they find the fountain? How did they move from arrogance and judgement and rage to laughter? Is it because they're children? Because they don't know any better?

Better than what?

She moves toward the back of the house and the fountain itself. Splashing. Laughter. Shouting. This shouting is different. Voices raised in such a fashion cause her to stumble. She is not certain why. She was angry at the children. She intended to march them—quickly—out of the garden and back into the house, demanding their silence.

Demanding that they be good, appreciative children.

Words that come to her lips, but do not leave them. She does not know why. No, perhaps she does. She can hear echoes of a different voice uttering those words.

It is the tree whose long branches hang over the fountain. It is the shadow of the tree, so large and extensive, it, too has a voice and a story.

She has heard it before. It is the story of the ungrateful child. She does not need to hear it again—but perhaps these two do. She makes her way down the cobbled stones that lead to the fountain, spreading out to encompass it in a gentle circle.

She can see the shadows of the two. She can hear their excited babble. What she cannot hear clearly are their words. Those words are not of interest to her in any

case; it is the existence of their screeching delight that is causing the problems. The actual words are irrelevant.

The hedges are thicker here than they were; she can see the children, but she cannot pass through without effort; she does not wish to become entangled in branches she might break by carelessly, and angrily, passing between them. She'd done this once, the first time she arrived.

She spent years making up for it, and she does not wish to do so again.

But she stands, hedge too close to either side, as if they have suddenly grown wild, as if she never made amends and never tended them at all. She watches the two; they are now kneeling in the fountain, hands trailing in water, occasionally splashing that water up and toward each other, their heads in proximity as if everything they say—so loudly, so boisterously—is a secret that only they can share.

In her garden.

In this garden.

She stands, watching them, as if the slender branches of hedges form a window's frame, and she is, once again, on the wrong side of the window, staring in, unable to reach out, unable to step forward, unable to join them.

Ah. Even in the garden, she is always on the outside. She is always left behind. The flowers have wilted; it is to the flowers she must return. She cannot demand silence from people she cannot even reach. She is angry again. She knows she should not be. How can they be so loud, so inconsiderate, in another's home?

But she flinches from the emerging question before she can speak or shout. It is not as if the garden is her home, either. She stumbled across it, she entered it, and she began to tend to it after some days had passed. She was determined to leave if the owners ever returned; to make her apologies then. Perhaps they would appreciate the work she had done.

Perhaps they would eject her as an intruder.

Perhaps they would be as angry as she just was. She does not know. Cannot know.

Perhaps they would find the children at play delightful; perhaps they would value the loud and the exuberant. Those are things she cannot give; she has never been able to give them. But she does not understand how the girl can laugh; how the girl can somehow join that boy, and create this moment.

She wants them to leave.

She wants them to finish and leave.

She wants this joy to end, because joy always ends, and she cannot be part of it. Cannot join it. She is simply witness, mute, unnoticed.

#

Eventually, she leaves. She no longer attempts to walk forward; she knows she cannot interfere. If she could stand where they stand, she would break the moment. She knows how to shatter it, but even if she simply wished to be part of it, it would be impossible; if joy is contained, her presence cracks the container.

It has always been this way. She does not know why. She was not a cursed child; she was not a symbol of misfortune. She was a child, like other children, but somehow lesser: she was not pretty. She was not cute. She was not smart. But she was not ugly, she was not stupid; she was, in all ways, mediocre.

It is only in the garden, only in this house, that she found acceptance. She could imagine that the house could see and hear her; she could imagine that whatever sentience moved the house, subtle though it might be, had come to appreciate her. To rely on her.

Her hands, as she transplants small, blue flowers, are shaking. Her lips are compressed. She can feel her shoulders tense, not with the work, but with the things that have clouded her thoughts: herself, the past she has all but forgotten.

The past she arrived in this place to forget.

She cannot hear the garden, today. She cannot hear it at all. Just the noise that reminds her that the only thing in the world she has ever been good at are the quiet spaces.

#

Laughter ends, as it often does, but it does not end in tears.

The guest—her guest—departs. He spares a nod for the old woman who greeted him, but if his farewells take time, that time is spent on the girl. The girl hesitates only when she notices the older woman, but otherwise is just as effusive as the boy; for the moment, the sullen suspicion is absent.

“I’ll come back. I have other things I want to show you,” the boy says, almost shy. She did not know he had that in him.

“I’ll be here,” the girl says, a hint of eager curiosity in her eyes.

He raises a finger. A pinky. The girl stares at it, just as the older woman does.

“It’s a promise,” the more confident child says. “You have to do it too.”

“Why is a baby-finger a promise? I don’t have to cut mine off, do I?”

He laughs. “No—no, just... link them. The other hand.”

She lifts her hand hesitantly, and he catches the pinky with his own. A promise.

She does not know if the girl will wait. She does not know if the girl will be here, but she is uneasy, now.

The girl turns to her after the boy has left and the house has once again fallen silent. There is a sullen question in her expression, but she does not accompany it with words.

The woman even understands. If the girl asks a question, the woman might be free to say no. If no must be said, the beginning and end of it will come from the woman the child assumes owns this place.

She wants to say it. She cannot say it. The house, as always, is silent. Perhaps when she wakes in the morning, the child will be gone. Perhaps she will leave and return to the world outside of the garden.

This is what the woman now wants, but when the child turns away, the hall absorbs her; she is gone before the woman can find the words.

#

There is a small pond to the east. As evening falls, the woman leaves the house. She is restless. She has done what she can for the poor, drooping flowers; she has taken them into her room. Light falls in the room, when there is light; she has placed the repotted flowers across the floor in the hope that sunlight will do what water and potting soil has not.

While she does, she listens; the house has fallen silent enough that she can hear a thin, almost reedy voice. It is the wrong voice for the flowers.

She learned, when she had been here for months, that the flowers had voices. Some were loud, and some soft; some were almost musical. The trees had voices that were so low, she did not immediately recognize them as voices. In the silence of this empty place, she listened. She listened for any voice that was not her own.

She discovered, as she did, that there were stories here. With effort, she could hear them. They were quiet; some were short, and some very long. The longer stories have yet to end, but she can hear the shape of that ending in the continuation of the story itself. The trees. She might not know the end of their story before she succumbs to age, but they are an oddly comforting presence.

No, it was the flowers that first caught her attention.

It was the flowers that told her to listen to the story of spider's web; she does not listen to spiders anymore, although their stories, too, have endings. She likes the stories of butterflies, from their slow crawl as caterpillars to their silent, hushed sleep and their glorious awakening. Each story is the same, and each is unique; the leaves eaten, the branches chosen, the hunger and the satiation; the curiosity and the drive and the inevitable transformation for those that survive and prevail.

They will die.

She will die.

Every story has an ending.

#

The reedy voice draws her to the pond. By the pond she finds insects, made bold by the night and the absence of birds—and people. Her own presence is part of the garden; she has made it this way. If she had not, she would not hear the stories of mosquitoes and dragonflies, although she dislikes mosquitoes intensely.

They are the insects in the garden whose stories overlap too closely with her own; she is part of the tale they tell her as they buzz and feed, and she does not enjoy being part of their story. She has discovered, however, that she can bring their story to a brief and messy end. She can bring almost any story to a messy end. She can fail to water the plants and listen to the parched thirst as their stories end. She can uproot the weeds—the weeds have stories but she has never listened to them, even when their voices are loud.

They are weeds. They are alive, but they should not be in this garden. Even so, they persist.

But it is too dark to weed, now; the moon is bright, the sky is still. This is the time to listen, and she listens best when she does not even have to close her eyes to invoke the stillness.

#

The girl comes to the pond.

She comes quietly, now, her steps so light were it not for the silence, the woman would not have noticed her presence at all. But when she becomes aware of it, she wants to leave; the girl is like a heavy stone dropped into the stillness, and her presence creates ripples in everything.

Still, the girl is a guest. She must be a guest, or she would not have found this place at all. She carries no lamp, no candle, nothing to illuminate her face. The silver of moonlight robs her robe of color, shading everything to grey.

Once, long ago, she might have appreciated company, might have turned to it, attempted to pin it in place with awkward words. Her words have always been awkward; there is none of the grace or immediacy of the garden in them. They were not stories. Words strung together haphazardly are not stories.

“Why not?” the girl asks, as if the woman had spoken aloud.

Perhaps she had. She was not listening, although she came to listen; she was, once again, caught in things she had thought uprooted and gone. But her thoughts are like the weeds she removes, day after day; they will persist, even when she believes she has removed them all.

Perhaps living alone, with only a stray visitor, has caused her to speak out loud. She did not hear her own voice; did not feel the movement of her own lips.

“Why are words not stories?”

“Because they are not. Some words do not travel to a destination; they are pointless, irrelevant words. They are not meant to be heard. They are not heard.”

“What else do we have?” The girl doesn’t ask permission to join the woman; she simply walks and sits against the moss, beneath which stone waits, unmoved by any season.

“Silence,” the woman replies, wishing for it.

“Silence,” the girl agrees. But there is more beneath the two syllables, just as rock lies beneath moss. “You were always like this.”

The woman frowns. “What do you mean?”

“You were harsh and you wanted to be heard. You spoke and spoke and spoke, but your words were like silence; there was nothing of you in them.” She lifts her arm, lifts the cuffed sleeves, lifts her face to moonlight. Sitting thus, she is astonishingly beautiful, her severe hair framing a face that is pale, eyes that are dark; time does not touch her except in the yellow and purple bruises that fade to invisibility beneath the night sky.

She lifts a hand.

She crooks a finger.

If light existed, the woman might invoke it; it does not. What she sees of the girl is all she is given to see. Night, the pond, the mosquitoes, and in the distance, the crickets; those sounds move together, wordless, until they enwrap this intruder, until they grant her a grace the woman—who has labored here for so long—has never truly been granted.

Why?

“That’s the question, isn’t it? I’m sorry to disturb you. I’ll head back, now.”

#

Left alone, the eddies of the girl’s visit echo. There was anger, in the child’s words. Frustration. Was there contempt? Did she judge an old woman who lives alone?

Why did she lift her finger? Was it to recall the promise the boy demanded?

Why would she recall it? Why would she trust it? Perhaps today’s brief joy was bright enough to engender that terrible, terrible thing: hope. The woman knows what will follow, what must follow: the boy will not come. The promise he demanded, he will break. Life will break it. Other commitments. Perhaps his short attention. What meaning can a poor urchin have to one such as he?

She does not understand. She does not want to understand.

Does she feel sympathy for the child?

Does she feel resentment?

Ah. Yes. Yes, she does. But perhaps sympathy will follow when the child understands reality. She can offer empathy, then. She can offer something.

But the boy wanted the girl's promise, not hers. She was like furniture in his eyes: old, irrelevant, lacking anything of interest. Had he come later, had he come injured, as he once did, he would see her because he would need something from her; she would give it, and he would leave.

He did not promise to return.

He did not ask her promise to wait.

Why this child?

#

In the different darkness of her own room, she tells herself the story: the girl will be disappointed. The boy will not return. Perhaps that is the reason the girl arrived at all. She will need, or come to need, a sympathetic shoulder. She does not have one to lend now—she has no way of dealing with joy and hope. Only its absence, its emptiness.

No. No. No.

This is a trap. This is noise. This is not a story.

This is not a story that can be told, because it has no end. She seeks sleep instead. Sleep is like oblivion.

#

When she wakes in the morning, she hears the clock, but its beat seems erratic. Frowning, she rises, she dresses. The clock's voice implies a visitor. A visitor will come. There are seldom visitors two days in a row, but as she comes fully awake, she accepts that this time, there will be.

Still, she has time. She is not in a rush. There is no filthy child who demands her attention, even if she does not wish to give it.

No, there is a clean child. The child comes out of the room the house offered for her use. She is wearing different clothing, now. It feels familiar, although it does not belong to the woman. It is not the clothing she notices first, but the child's hair;

there is more of it. It is not filthy; it is healthy, dark; it reflects light. Her face no longer retains its bruised coloration.

Time has passed for the child, but the child is not the visitor.

She understands, then. She nods at the girl, and the girl returns her nod, her eyes bright, her lips upturned. When the woman goes to the door at which she must stand, the girl trails behind her, her steps light and bouncing.

When the door opens, she sees the boy.

He, too, is clothed differently; he seems taller to her eye. His eyes, like the girl's, are bright, but he is more nervous. His hands are behind his back; she cannot see them. Cannot see if there are signs of labor, now—or if that will come later.

But his smile, when his eyes move past her, is brilliant.

Almost, she is breathless as she stares at the contours of his face, the crinkling of the corners around eyes and lips. He has never, at any age, smiled like that for her. He lifts his pinky.

The girl steps forward, leaving the woman behind; she has already lifted her hand. Their two fingers lock, and then the girl laughs. She is not laughing at the boy, although he reddens regardless. Was laughter kind?

Was laughter ever kind?

No—it was something to be feared and avoided. It was never like this. She steps back. She is not wanted here, not needed here. Not yet.

#

She has lost the flowers that she transplanted. She cannot hear their voices at all. They will wither completely and she cannot prevent it. Distraught, she leaves the house, entering the gardens in which these flowers had persisted for so long.

She means to replace them, although she has not yet made the decision on which flowers will be here when visitors arrive. She has listened to most of the flowers in their growth from bulb or seed to blossom; she wishes to choose an appropriate flower.

She is unhappy to discover that over the course of one day, seedlings have sprouted. They will not grow flowers. They will not grow a hint of beauty, subtle or bold. If left,

they will entangle the other flowers, sucking nutrients out of the soil needed to sustain them.

Or so she thinks.

But today the children—if they can even be called that at their current age—are not in the back, near the fountain; they are here. They are in the garden at the front of the house, as if they own it.

And the sprouts of plants she did not choose are in front of their bent knees—knees that are now dirt stained and in need of cleaning. They did not bring appropriate mats on which to kneel; nor does the girl wear a hat to preserve her skin.

“Look, they’ve already sprouted!” the boy is excited.

“I have eyes, you know,” the girl replies, the words harsh on their surface, but warmed by her tone and the smile she shares with the boy. She has a watering jug beside her, and a spade that is no longer in use.

“Why do you think they grew so quickly?”

The girl shrugs. “Maybe the garden wants us to see them before we have to leave.”

Shadows cross the boy’s expression. “Maybe.”

The same shadow does not touch the girl. She is naive. She is foolish. She is telling herself a story. She does not see the truth.

The woman sees it.

Very well, she will accept this planting, this intrusion. The flowers, whatever they are, will wither on their own. Or perhaps the girl will tear them up, hating them on sight ever after. She enters the house. She brings snacks and water, and leaves them beside the two; the boy thanks her. The girl doesn’t even notice them.

#

Sunflowers greet her in the morning. Their growth is unnatural, and the girl is watering them as she stands, fully two feet shorter than the tallest of the stalks. Nothing in the garden matches the sunflowers for height, but the girl has affixed slender bamboo poles to the heaviest of the stalks.

They are the only thing the woman sees when she opens the door; the rest of the garden fades, briefly, into fog and grey.

The passage of time in this place is clearly off-kilter. It is morning, but only inside of her room; she did not notice the shift in hours outside of it, although she looks back the moment she opens the door.

The girl is no longer a girl; she is a young woman, and her hair falls down her back, although it's pulled into braids while she works. The gloves she wears are not the woman's gloves, but they are of a kind. It is not the sunflowers alone that have changed.

Her garden was muted, subtle, a delicate blend of small flowers and green plants with wide leaves; a place that suggested wilderness without descending into it. This garden is not that.

It is neither tidy enough to be a true garden, nor wild enough to have been reclaimed by the growth beyond the fences.

She turns to the intruder, she turns to the woman. "What have you done?"

"You left," the woman replies. "I waited two years."

"I was here. Did you even check my room?"

"I couldn't find your room," the woman answers, frowning. "I searched."

"You searched?"

"I searched. At the beginning of every day. And at the end."

Liar! She wants to shout. She wants to scream. Her hands become fists. She walks to the sunflowers, she reaches out—and she stops. But only barely. "Were there visitors?"

The young woman's smile is all of her answer. It is more than enough. No visitors. No visitor but one, and she knows who. She looks at the woman's hands—or tries; she cannot see beyond the gloves.

She does not understand.

She knows what happens. She knows this story. Why is the woman smiling? Why is the woman tending these plants? Who is the woman waiting for? It comes to her that she is waiting. She is waiting for someone.

"For you," the woman says. "I hoped you'd see them before we harvest them."

Harvest.

“You do not harvest a garden. You harvest a farm.”

“Soil is soil. You can’t eat the flowers in the garden. Well, not most of them. You can eat these seeds; you can press them for oil.”

She stares at the garden, at the ruins of a garden. But what she sees is not a ruin. It is bright in color, bolder than she would have ever been; it is lively. There are bees, which she had not expected. The garden had never had bees. She had chosen the flowers that girded the path, but none of them had been so loud.

All had been muted in color, all had been smaller in size. She would never have planted sunflowers. The very idea of it is wrong. She had chosen flowers whose stories she could hear, or flowers whose stories she wanted to hear.

There was no sign of those flowers in this place. All the years she had served as guardian, as gardener, had come to this. All sign of her, all sign of careful choice and deliberation, is gone. She doesn’t run to the back of the house; she doesn’t run to the east.

She has never run to the west.

She knows that here, too, she has lost her place. This bright young woman, this similarly bright, vibrant garden, has replaced all sign of her. This has always happened, in all of the shadows of her life: something comes to her, and it might stay. The wounded. The injured. The neglected.

And she cares for them. She tends them. She listens to them.

When they have recovered, it is never her to whom they look. It is never her with whom they wish to share. No, they are attracted by the bright, the young, the frivolous. They are attracted to youth and sunshine.

But even in her youth, this was true; perhaps she was never young enough, never vibrant enough. She tried. She tried. She wanted to be what they wanted. She wanted to be chosen.

Here, in the garden, she was.

The other woman sighs and removes her gloves. There, on her left hand, is the plain, unadorned gold of a wedding band. She is happy. She is happily married. Anyone can see that.

The house has chosen her. The house, the garden, the things she thought were hers, had never been hers. She had been good enough, but even the garden was waiting for someone better.

She turns. She does not flee. This is the truth she has always faced, and she has walked forward, bearing its burden. She had no hope. She told herself that hope was too terrible to carry.

But clearly, hope, like weeds, grows.

#

She is afraid, for a moment, that the house will have changed so much that she will no longer even have a room here. She doesn't doubt the words of her replacement: she slept, and the house hid her. The house hides many things. But her door is there, and her room, when she opens that door, is the same room it has always been.

Always, until that child arrived at her door. She enters her closet.

She enters her closet and finds many, many items of clothing she is certain she did not bring with her when she arrived. There is only one thing she is searching for. The dress. The dress she wore for one day only, because it was meant for just one day.

One day. That shining, beautiful day that caused so much stress, so much grief, so much anxiety because everything had to be perfect. And nothing was perfect. Of course it wasn't. But still, when anxiety faded, she had pictures. The pictures implied a perfect day. They were beautiful but alien. She could believe that things had worked out, in spite of everything that had gone before. She could look at those pictures, the people in the wedding party, their clothing, their faces.

She brought none of those pictures with her. She did not bring the wedding ring. She should not have brought the dress; she can't remember why she did.

But the dress, as she suspected, is not here. It is gone.

"It was never going to be worn a second time. Even if the marriage failed, as you feared it would, it was never going to be worn for a different marriage."

The young woman is at the door.

The older woman wants her to leave. But she turns to face her. "How could you take my dress?"

“Was it yours?” the young woman asks, eyes narrowed. “I found it in the house. It wasn’t in this room; it was in my room. We didn’t have much money, but we had daydreams. I wanted to look beautiful for one day.”

One day. One day that was supposed to be the start of forever.

The young woman is not particularly attractive, to the older woman’s eye. Her clothing doesn’t suit her. She doesn’t protect her skin from the sun; she will age. She will lose the luster of youth, and she will be abandoned. She, too, will be abandoned.

“Yes,” the woman says, her easy smile making light of future pain. She lifts a hand, and the wedding ring she wears catches light. “Yes. Because knowing the future doesn’t change the now enough.”

“Why are you here?”

“Why are you?” the young woman counters.

“He isn’t here anymore.”

“He is. He comes home to me. Do you know why I changed the garden?”

The older woman shakes her head. The question seems genuine.

“Because I could hear your plants. I didn’t cut down the tree, but I’d get rid of it in a heartbeat, had I the tools. But he likes the tree. He can’t hear it.”

The older woman freezes. She recognizes the wedding band now, although in appearance it is so much like any other ring. She assumed that this young woman had a happy life—a life she herself has never had.

The dress.

The ring.

Even the house.

When had she arrived at the garden? When? After. After everything had ended and ended and ended, and even her children had left her. After she had nothing.

No, she had never had anything. Not really, not truly. Nothing was hers. She had never been part of the story, never been good enough, beautiful enough, significant enough. She had tried.

“Your garden is the garden you chose. Had you come back, I would have left it, although it is dark and uncomfortable. But you didn’t. I waited two years, and then I just...wanted some sunshine. I wanted to hear different voices. All of your stories are elegiac. All of the stories you’ve chosen.

“They’re always about the end.”

“A story isn’t complete unless it’s finished.”

The young woman looks at her with pity. Behind that pity lurks frustration. “You won’t want to be here for the next little while.”

She doesn’t want to be here at all. She doesn’t want to share her life with this young woman, this woman who stole her dress and her wedding ring.

She doesn’t want to face her.

“I’m pregnant. It’s going to be louder here.”

#

Sleep comes so slowly, she wonders if it will reach her at all. Her room is dark; moonlight filters in through the window. She does not draw curtains at night, and never has. The natural dark, alleviated by pale glow, has often been a comfort to her.

She came to listen. She thought that was her purpose. To listen. To absorb. To hear the unheard.

But that girl—that woman—can hear as well. She can hear, she is younger, she is stronger.

She rises. She cannot sleep. Perhaps, at night, the garden will not look so jarring. She does not know what it sounds like. She has not listened.

She will go to the pond—if the pond remains. She dresses. Before, she would not have bothered to change into normal clothing; she would have slipped arms into a bathrobe and be done.

Now, there are strangers.

She opens her door; it slides silently toward the wall. But the silence of her room is broken instantly, as if by opening the door she has let the world in. She can hear crying. One voice. Two.

It is the second voice that reverberates. It is the exhaustion and the despair. They are old friends, comfortable friends, terrible friends. She forgets the pond for the moment and heads toward the young woman and her crying infant.

It is an infant's voice. She remembers it. She remembers the sudden realization that she is saddled with a burden that will never, ever end. She has lost control over her life, her time. She cannot sleep, cannot eat, cannot even take a shower.

The baby does not love her; the baby loves herself, if that.

This baby does not love her mother, and it is her mother who now carries her, gently bouncing the child while her own tears silently fall. Of the father, there is no sign.

"Oh, you're back," the young mother says, when their eyes meet.

She did not even sleep. A night has not passed. But the pregnancy that was invisible the last time they spoke has come—and gone—leaving an infant in its wake.

"She'll sleep better outside. You've fed her?"

"As much as she'll eat." For the first time, a different edge is in the young woman's voice. She looks up, almost wan. "It is easy to judge, isn't it?"

Not the words the older woman expects to hear. "Let me carry the baby."

"To where? You don't like children."

It is true. She has said this so many times in her life; there is a familiar feel, a texture in her mouth. "Children are not babies," she replies, holding out empty arms. "I will never harm her."

"You will," the woman replies, but she places the child into the older woman's arms. "You will hurt her, and you will resent her, and you will regret when you can finally see the scars you left."

"I do not know that she will ever feel you loved her."

"I loved her. I did not desert her. It was me who wasn't loved. Even at the end. Even then." She turned, the baby in her arms quietening as she approached the door. "You should sleep."

"In this house? If I sleep, I might abandon the child."

"I won't."

“Is that what you think?” The child’s mother accompanies her to the east of the house where the pond, at least, remains. The rock. The moss that covers it. The mosquitoes. She wants to listen to them, but she can’t. The baby murmurs.

The baby’s voice has no words.

The baby has no story. Not yet. But in this moment, it is the baby’s voice that stirs her. The baby is not the garden. She is not rooted; she is not planted in place, there to remain. Fences can be built around the infant—fences are necessary as she crawls and learns to walk. But she will climb that fence. She will find the world, and she, too, will leave.

This baby is not her child.

It is not her loss, not her loss in future. She does not have to struggle every passing day to be a good mother, until that’s all that remains.

The baby has no story to tell, not yet. Not yet. She doesn’t have to listen.

“It’s harder than I thought it would be,” the young mother says, her arms momentarily free as she stretches them. “Babies, I mean. I thought if I had a baby, I would have someone who would love me. I would be the most important person in their life.

“And,” she laughs ruefully, “I am.” She bows her head. “Learning to love another, helpless person is way more work than I ever thought it could be. I don’t know who she is, yet. I am trying very hard not to burden her with my failed dreams, my future.”

Again, the words feel almost familiar. “Babies don’t know how to love. That’s what I learned. You can pour all your time and hopes and dreams into babies, and none of it gets absorbed.”

“No. Because babies are their own people.”

“Only good children are loved,” the woman says.

“What is love, then? Is it simply transactional? You be a good girl, and you will get love?”

This is not the question she expected, but she did not expect the filthy, bruised child to become the young mother. She did not invite her to the house. She did not surrender the garden willingly.

“If babies don’t know how to love, will they learn?”

“Pardon?”

“Will they learn what love is and what it means?” The young mother, dark circles under her eyes, smiles. “Do you know what the hardest thing for me to learn was?”

The woman doesn’t. Nor does she want to.

“How to listen.”

“You could hear the garden. You said that.”

“I did. But that’s not what I mean by listening.” She leans back. “I changed the garden because I wanted something new, something bright. I have lived in the dark for most of my life.”

“He hasn’t left you yet.”

“No, not yet.”

“But you know he will?”

“I know he will, because you know he will.”

“Then how can you be like this? Why are you here? Do you even know where he is?”

“Sleeping. We’re both exhausted.”

“You’ll have to lose weight. You’ll have to lose all the weight you gained while pregnant.”

“Why?” Her smile is complicated. “It didn’t help you.”

“I didn’t know what he wanted.”

“No.”

“Do you? Do you know, now?”

“What we want changes. But maybe a little, now.”

“What was it?”

The young mother laughs. “Sleep.” She rises. “You’ve been here for so long you’ve forgotten how to listen to anything but grief and fear. You listen because those

stories come to an end. You search for meaning or purpose in them, but the only thing that matters is that they come to an end.”

“Everything dies.”

“Everything that dies lives first.”

#

She eventually returns to her room. She has not listened to the insects or the lilies; she has tried to listen to the baby, who has nothing—as expected—to tell her.

But it comes to her, as she once again lies abed, that although she heard the young mother, she did not attempt to listen to her. Not as she listened to flowers, trees, insects in the garden. She has resented her, yes. She has envied—and that is hard to swallow—her painful ignorance, her naivete.

She has waited for the moment when she herself realizes just how foolish she’s been.

Is that what she wants?

Is that what she truly wants?

She did not listen to the child. She did not listen to the young woman. She did not listen to the young mother—not as she did the garden. She came to the garden to listen. To learn how to listen. To hear the things that others didn’t, and couldn’t, hear.

She did not listen to the boy, either. She has not listened, when she had the chance. He spoke. She nodded. She heard his words, but... she did not listen.

She did not listen to the visitor who came at different ages. She would have, if he’d said any of the right words. The right words: the words she wanted to hear. Words of regret. Pleading. Tears. Apology.

Words of love.

None of those words were words he spoke. None of the words he did speak had any meaning. She learned not to be angry. She learned not to be disappointed. She learned to let go of all of those terrible, empty dreams. She learned not to see him at all, even when he visited, as he does.

She cannot sleep.

She cannot. She wants sleep to take her away from memory and pain. She wants to go back to the garden before that child arrived. Before either of them arrived. She wants to go back to a place she belonged.

#

If that woman weren't here, she would still have a place.

She should have thrown her out. She wasn't a visitor. There was no warning. She just walked in and took over everything, bit by bit. If she died here, no one would know. No one.

She rises. There is no sleep for her. She even walks toward the kitchen. Thinking of everything she might do in this house in a forest that no one enters. Thinking desperately about how to have everything return to her, as it was before.

She hears, of all things, laughter.

She should hate it. She should. It doesn't belong here. It has never belonged here. Nothing in this place has ever made her laugh. She has smiled, yes—but she has never laughed.

The kitchen is forgotten.

She is not angry; she is trembling because this sound, this laughter, is familiar. It is sweet, and loud, and ebullient. She recognizes it. But it is not the child's surprised, triumphant laughter that catches her, that stabs her so; it is the young mother's laughter.

There is delight in it.

She is frozen. She is voiceless. She stumbles forward now, toward those voices, toward a room that is not hers: a small, untidy space with a low table, corners rounded, over a rug and toys and board books and a discarded soother. She cannot remember her own house ever being this messy.

The young mother turns to her. "She's taken her first step!"

And her second. And her third, wobbling, arms flailing like little sausages as she whoops in triumph.

Before she can even think she reaches out with one hand, cupping the table's corner. The child is so unsteady, if she falls, she'll hit it. She does fall, toppling, although it is seconds before that outcome is certain.

“How are you?” she asks the young mother. This child grew from infancy to toddlerhood in the span of a few sleepless hours.

It feels like time—which has almost never been an issue in the house—is speeding up, as if it were sisyphus’s burden, and he is finally released from his hell.

She exhales. “You know when they laugh like this it’s going to end in tears.”

“Every time,” the child’s mother says, her voice both tired and fond. “But I love the sound of this laughter—it’s like a flood gate has opened into something both primal and precious.” She chuckles. “There are days I hate this so much I wish I could turn back time—just for a few hours. Just so I could breathe.”

She listens.

She hears the words, and they resonate. The mother is right: she did hear. She didn’t listen.

She listens now.

“Yes,” the woman says, as hysterical laughter does, indeed, transform into hysterical tears. “You think you know what the ending is. But this story was never just about the ending. It wasn’t the ending that we had to fear. It was missing every other scene along the way.

“There were days like this. Sometimes there were only minutes, but these existed, too.”

“But they lead to pain.”

“Do they?” She repeats the two words, her voice louder; it has to be, to be heard over the child.

#

Pain is truth, yes— but joy is also truth.

Each exists in a moment. Why is it only the pain that matters? Why is it the pain that we cling to?

She says this before she leaves, taking her sleeping child with her.

She says this. The questions were an accusation; she is almost certain of it. But still, she repeats them. Words echo; they have always echoed. In her youth, she could replay whole conversations, over and over again.

But she cannot recall the day her child took her first step.

Was it really something to be happy about? Every child has to take their first step. She did it, and she does not remember anyone being happy for her. Certainly her mother never was.

It is not her mother she thinks about, although those memories tug at her. It is the child. The child whose love she wanted. The child she wanted to love. She leaves her room. She meant to go back to the pond.

She finds the mother, older now, but less exhausted.

“I don’t suppose you want to hear about my children’s academic adventures?” the woman asks.

She tenses for a moment. She has heard mothers’ bragging about their children for all of her life, and she has never been a child to cause such pride. Never such a child. Never such a wife.

She wanted to be loved. As a child. As a wife. She wanted someone who would belong to her, and her alone.

“Why?”

“That’s what love means.”

The mother, older now, smiles; the smile is odd. There is pain in it. “Yes,” she finally says. “Yes, I think I once felt that way.”

“Once? And you don’t now?”

“How can I? There is no one whom I can love in that fashion. I love my children. I love my husband—even now, even after all this time. I love my work—and hate it, sometimes in equal measure. I love the very few friends I have. There is no person that I have loved before and above all others, forever and ever.”

“You loved your husband.”

“Did we?” She turns to the woman, and in the moonlight, her face is so familiar it is like looking in a mirror. She looked in mirrors too often, when she was that age. She knows where the deepening lines are. She knows where her hair has thinned. She understands what it means.

Now, she thinks. “I loved mine. I loved mine, and I did everything for him, and he left when he found someone better.”

“Better? Was she younger? Was she more beautiful?”

“Does it matter? She was what he wanted. I wasn’t. After everything I did. Everything I tried.” Her voice rises. Her hands clench in fists; she is shaking. She hears thunder. Distant thunder. It is a warning.

It is a warning she has all but forgotten. She cannot remain outside. Rain, the garden needs; she has been wet before. This is not simple rain.

She is already on her feet.

“Where are you going?”

“We can’t stay out here. Can’t you hear it? Can’t you hear the thunder?”

Clearly, the answer is no. She turns. Let her discover it for herself.

#

She turns back. She reaches out, angry now, and grabs the younger woman’s hand. She tries to speak, but the thunder is louder, and lightning—purple and white—splits the sky.

She cannot be outside. They cannot be outside. She has done it once before, and only once. It was the first time she had had to remove a body from the interior of the house. If the lightning had hit her, if it had destroyed her, if it had hit that damn tree with its constant story of the ungrateful child, she might have been relieved.

It did not.

She grabs the woman’s hand not because she wants to save her; it’s because she’s almost certain that if she doesn’t, the woman will die. The garden does not take care of the dead. The dead have no stories to tell. She runs, dragging the woman behind her; she reaches the doors and they slide open.

Swing open.

The door has changed.

It doesn’t matter. She will think about it later. Right now, she must beat the storm.

#

She takes the moment to catch her breath, and behind her, the woman who is more accustomed to running after young children does the same, although she does so more quickly.

“What was that about?” the younger woman demands, shaking her wrist—which will bruise.

“When there’s thunder, there’s lightning. But it doesn’t hit me. Someone dies. I don’t always recognize the corpse. I have to take the body out to the garden. I have to bury it.”

“You find bodies you don’t recognize?” The younger woman sounds almost horrified. It’s the first time she’s seemed truly unsettled.

“Yes.”

“Do you have any suspicions?”

“Does it matter? It’s not like I can just call the police.” Thunder rages beyond the door. The door is open. It should have closed on its own. It didn’t. It doesn’t.

Here, at a distance, the older mother by her side, she watches lightning bloom, following thunder or preceding it—it’s too noisy, too chaotic, to be certain which is which.

And this is the garden, where irrelevant rules don’t apply. “You can’t hear it?” she whispers.

“No.”

“You can’t see the lightning?”

“I’m sorry—no.”

No one else has ever been beside her when the thunder started. She is almost amazed that so much can be so loud, so angry, and so unseen and unheard. She turns to look down the hall.

The hall is different. The door is different. This is not her house. Beyond the door, the garden—the pond—exists. The house has changed.

“Don’t you remember this?” the younger woman asks.

For a moment, she doesn’t. “No.” When she speaks, it is a lie. “Who are you?”

“I’m as you see me.”

“What is your name?”

The woman’s smile becomes worn, and she discards it; it no longer fits her face.

“Don’t you remember?”

She doesn’t. She does not remember her own name. She has never tried to say it; she has never been asked before. She has been asked what she is; she has been asked who. But she has never been asked for her name.

“It must have been raining,” the younger woman says. “You’re wet. Your clothes are wet.”

She is the only one who is wet.

“Will you come in?”

She nods. She takes her shoes off out of habit, and almost regrets it; she steps on a marble. To her right is a familiar room: the room of the first step. No child is in it.

She is very surprised when the kitchen door—in need of painting or replacement—swings open. She expects to see a child.

A man is standing in the frame. His forehead is lined, his eyes ringed and dark. He is gaunt. Ah. He is still here. Still here, but he will not be here for long. She has seen this man before. She has seen him many times. Older, younger, and as he is now.

But he has never looked as he does now. Tired. Defeated.

“You’re back,” he says to the woman who is still his wife.

“I met a friend,” she replies.

“Was it raining?”

“She was caught in the rain. I just missed it.”

“Lucky you,” he replies. “I’m surprised the thunder doesn’t wake the dead.”

She freezes, and then she fully meets his gaze; his eyes are dark. He came from the kitchen—perhaps he came from the backyard—but he can hear the thunder, and he, too, is wet. Wetter than she is.

“I’m sorry,” she tells him, as if he’s a stranger. “I promise to leave the minute I’m not threatened with drowning.”

“You don’t have to.” He exhales. “I was about to make coffee.”

“At this time of night?” his wife asks.

“I just have to get through two more reports, and I’m not sure even coffee will guarantee I survive them.”

Why is work always more important to you than I am? You’ve been working for the last two weeks!

She turns, she listens; the wife, however, has not said these words. “I’ll make the coffee. Is there enough room on the table for cups, or should we head to the living room?”

“Living room would be better. Sorry.”

She realizes he’s working at home. He is doing work here. She does not remember that happening before. Why is he doing that now?

“He often did,” his wife replies. Coffee appears in both of her hands, although she has not moved. “He worked at home when he could, and when the kids were younger. But half the time he worked, you fought—and he couldn’t get the work done. He couldn’t finish the reports and the evaluations. His boss wasn’t sympathetic, and he’d been called into the office a few times. We needed his income.

“So he stopped working at home.” She exhales. She is tired. Her husband is tired. This is where it finally snaps; this is where it breaks. She has seen this before. She has done this before.

She doesn’t like this woman. She has never liked this woman—not from the first. But she doesn’t want this woman to lose her husband, her family, and even this wretched home.

“He’ll leave. He’ll find someone else—someone at work. Someone he actually sees.”

“I know.”

“You have to stop him. You have to change things. He’ll leave.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know what it’s like. You’re tired. You think you do. You don’t.” Why doesn’t she go to him? Why doesn’t she listen to him?

Oh, but even thinking this, she knows.

“I can’t stay for coffee,” she says. “I think the thunder has stopped.”

She is lying. But she cannot stay in his house. This house is not her house. It was sold years ago; it is gone. The familiar is terrifying because this is so close to the moment it crumbles.

#

She leaves the house, with its swinging doors, its foreign, painfully cramped hall, its small rooms. It is over. It is done. Let the storm strike it, splinter it, shatter it—let it go away.

Rain drops in buckets, now. She doesn’t listen. She can only hear storm. She speaks, she shouts, she screams—she did that once before. It changed nothing, but left her throat raw. The children were sleeping. She wouldn’t have done it if the children were awake.

Would she?

Would she have?

Did she?

Every word that woman has said since the start is judgmental. Every word. Her sentences are like splinters, and every additional word pushes the splinter farther and farther from the surface of skin, where it might be safely removed.

Yes, he had work. Yes, it was hard. But she’d had a hard time, too. Her own work had hit a wall, the children were not doing well in school, and the son, the younger son, was having difficulties that the school felt were possibly neurological. She was tired. She wanted some support—and all of his time and attention was work, work, work.

And it wasn’t just the work. It was the after-work. It was the dinners out with coworkers. And the drinks. And the down-time which she herself did not have.

So why? Why is it her fault? Why?

Lightning breaks the sky, leaving aftershocks in her vision. She stands in the rain and the wind and she makes demands of the angry sky because she cannot make the storm any worse.

But when she turns back to the house it is the familiar house. She approaches and the door slides open. She is drenched, and puddles gather on the mats beneath her

feet, and she wonders whose body she will find in the house itself, when she has the strength to go looking.

Maybe she won't go looking. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Maybe the other wife, the other mother, can trip over a corpse instead—the house has chosen her, after all; she should do some of the work.

#

She does sleep.

She finally finds sleep to a background of thunder and lightning. Her room brightens and darkens, and the rain batters the windows. She has never slept through a storm like this one.

When she lived here alone, the garden was peaceful. The house was peaceful. The clocks, when they ran, were dependable.

But she sleeps, at last. Sometimes in the before, she was so tired she couldn't sleep. She would push herself because if she couldn't sleep, she should do something. What she called sleep then might better be called collapse; she would eventually fall over.

But when she wakes, the storm has passed. The sunlight slants in through her windows. The room is tidy. There are no toys, no small piles of dirty laundry discarded on the floor. She has time, now. Even after things broke, she had no time to herself; she did not have enough time to do everything that needed to be done.

She prioritized, then. Or she tried. But everything was a priority. Everything.

Your husband would never have left if you'd been a good wife.

Your children would still speak to you if you'd been a good mother.

Your mother would have loved you if you'd been a good daughter.

Yes. Yes, if she'd been good enough. But what, exactly, is good enough? Why are some wives good enough? Why are some mothers good enough? Why are some children treasured and valued, and not others?

Even her friends were like this.

She did everything she could. She lost pregnancy weight. She did not let herself go. She made herself as pretty as possible whenever they went out. She dressed well,

even when money was tight. She tried so hard to fit in, to be seen. So that people would know that she was there.

Why is the damn clock ticking?

Today she does not want visitors. Her voice is so loud, she knows the garden will not speak to her, but even if it would, the visitors have always come first. And why? Why even that? Why not leave the visitors to the other woman?

Still, thinking it, she rises, she dresses. She has no mirror in this room. There are no scales. She has no way of checking herself, her appearance, before she leaves the room.

She hopes, if a body has been left in the house, she will find it after the visitor has left. Or, alternately, never find one at all. She should not have left in the storm. There was a reason she'd grabbed the hand of that woman and forced her to run.

The clock does not speed up. It does not slow down. She grasps normalcy with figurative hands and clings to it.

#

The woman is not in the hall. No voice of childish tantrum or delight drowns out the sound of the clock. She heads to the door, and waits. She does not count. She tries not to think; she has been caught in that web for too long, and there is no peace in it.

She hopes she never sees that woman again.

When the door slides open, as it inevitably must, she sees her visitor.

He is not a boy. He is not a young man. He is the man she saw during the storm, in a small house with failing finances and children and too much exhaustion. She recognizes the look on his face, and wonders if she is the person who is meant to greet him.

Outside, the garden is wild and the sunflowers are mostly gone, the patch of land in which they grew unoccupied. And the riot of color has greyed; the other woman's flowers no longer consume the garden in the front of the house. She did not like those flowers at all, when she first saw them.

She didn't like what they represented.

But now that they are gone, she misses them. She should have looked at them more carefully. She should have tried to listen to their stories. If she knew they would suddenly vanish, she would have. But no, she assumed they had come to replace what she'd built, it had happened so often before. She does not think about how to rebuild the garden.

The visitor does not reach the door immediately. He pauses in front of the patch that once contained sunflowers, and she remembers: he planted these. He and the girl. They laughed together, heads close, crouched in the dirt when the first sprouts emerged.

That moment, she now remembers. It is gone. It is gone, and the boy is gone, and the girl is gone. What is left is ruin, always ruin.

He is crouched, alone, the same way he once crouched, but his expression is different; his face is lined—as hers is lined—and to her surprise, he begins to cry. She does not notice it at first, and when she does, she freezes in the doorway. She has never been good with tears, although she has cried so many of them.

She does not know what to do. In all of the time they spent together in the past that has grown so distant, she has not seen him cry. He was dry-eyed and distant on the day he came to tell her that it was over.

She was not. She looks down at her hands. She does not have the ring. She remembers now why. She took it off. She threw it at him. Words were said, by him, by her. His words remained with her for years, echoing, repeated and repeated.

Her words do not.

In her mind, in her memory, in the reconstruction of that final discussion, she said different words: some were far, far harsher, some kinder, as if in reiterating that night she might effect some change. She was hurt. She wanted to hurt him, too; she wanted to prove that she still could.

Or that she could at all.

Why?

He is crying.

It comes to her, as she watches this private, terrible moment, that pain was proof of love. If she could hurt him it meant he still loved her in some fashion. People who

don't care at all can't be hurt. She knows. She has been the person who no longer cares.

She has been that person, has tried to be that person. It is better not to care, because all love ends this way. It is better not to love. It is better not to hope. He does not look at her. Perhaps he cannot see her.

Perhaps he never did.

If he had cared at all, they would never have broken. If he had seen the burdens she carried, if he had understood just how tired she was, he would have helped her. He would have lifted that burden; they could have carried it together.

He composes himself, composes his expression, and turns toward the house, where she waits.

"Come in," she says, as she always does when he visits at any age.

He meets her gaze, holds it; his expression is complicated. It is different than she remembers. "Come out," he says, surprising her. "Come out. You've been in the house all morning."

He has never said this before.

She frowns, and then she nods. He is a visitor. The house has accepted him.

#

She is not sure where to go. She doesn't want to take him to the fountain, although there is a table and two chairs near it. She doesn't want to wander the garden, either front or back; she has seen it, and it is not a place to take visitors. There are only two other directions she can walk, and she chooses the pond.

The pond, she visits at night; she does not visit during the day. It is day, now. But she resents the fountain and the front garden, and she knows why: they are her spaces. The other woman shared them with him. She did not.

But she never saw them near the pond; the pond is not theirs. She has no other option. She leads and he follows. She almost offers him a hand, but forces her arm to remain at her side.

When he has visited before, he asked questions. He talked about the weather. He sometimes mentioned things his children had done. The children who do not speak

to her much anymore. Everything he has said in the past is inconsequential. He never speaks of anything important.

Today, he does not ask about the weather. Of course he doesn't. If he did, she could talk about the storm. The storm he heard. The storm she heard. The storm his then-wife did not. Today, if he asked, she might have something to say, something to add.

If conversation is to be started, she must start it. She means to ask him about work, how his work is going. Anything else seems too personal.

What she says, instead, is "Why do you come here?"

She recognizes the expression that passes over his face. He doesn't want to talk about it. He never wants to talk.

He counters with a question of his own. "Why do you stay here?"

It is not a question she has asked herself. She has no answer prepared. But she must answer, if he asks, because he asks as if the answer actually matters to him. She has never been good at finding the right words for anything. Her words don't cause laughter or smiles. Other people's do. But they are two people, alone, sitting on a rock in front of a small pond.

She finds that she wants the right words now. She wants to be clever. She wants to remember saying the right thing. Why is there no right thing?

He waits. She forgets the question she asked. But the right words won't come, and the silence stretches; she will answer late, she will lose the chance to answer at all. Conversation moves, constantly, in directions she cannot follow; she can struggle to catch up to its edge, but she will never be at its center.

"Because it's safe. It's safe here." Thinking of storms and bodies, she adds, "for me."

"Are you happy here?"

"Why do you care?" These words, on the other hand, emerge instantly, without thought. She has said them before. She did not mean to say them now. What point is there?

He exhales. If she has said them, he has heard them. To her surprise, he remains seated. He does not stand up and walk away.

"Do you think I never loved you?"

She does. “If you had ever loved me—” she stops. Swallows. “No. No I don’t believe that.” Because the children had been together in the garden. The youths. The young mothers.

He clasps hands loosely; he bows head. If he had keys in his hands he would fidget with them; she always hated that. “I used to think it was my fault,” he says.

So did she.

“I wasn’t a good enough husband. I wasn’t a good enough father. I didn’t have a job that made enough money. I never cared enough to notice things. I didn’t see you clearly. Maybe I should never have started a family.” His smile is raw. “You’ve told me all of those things.”

She does not deny it. She wants to deny it. Those are words she has heard so often she barely notices saying them; they’re so natural they are like exhalation. Her throat thick, she says, “You don’t think that anymore.” It’s a question.

“No. Not most of the time. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I look back and I wonder what I could have done differently. Today I am seriously considering cutting down that damn tree.”

She blinks. “You can hear the tree?”

“I can hear the tree. It never stops.”

She is shocked.

“I don’t suppose you have an axe in the shed?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I think we should check.” He rises, then. “I would like to do something for you.”

“It’s not necessary.” She stiffens, as if his offer is a criticism. As if what he means is why have you never cut down that tree? You should have.

“I’ve never been good with words. Not when speaking with you. My words don’t convey what I mean, but you hear meaning in them, regardless. And you remember every word I say.”

Because she listened to him.

“But you don’t remember every word you say. I always thought that was strange: you know the importance of words, but you don’t remember any of your own.”

This is unfair. She does. But now, she listens. Now she evaluates. She wonders if he is like the tree; if his words and his story persist in the same way. If they will continue when she is dead.

But she has never liked the story the tree tells. She has learned to ignore its voice, but it is always there. Why has she never looked for an axe before? Or a saw?

She swallows all the words, compressing them at a safe remove from her mouth. He hasn't asked a question, not exactly; she doesn't have to answer. "My words never meant anything to anyone."

"Why do you believe that?"

"Because if they ever had, things would be different." Her hands are fists, but they are steady, they remain by her side. "If you had listened back then, everything would be different now."

"I did listen," he replies, leading the way. She hesitates. The shed is in the west. She keeps the tools she uses in the mud room in the house. She has never liked the west. "I listened for a long time. Not as long as you've listened to the tree." He exhales. "You think I never tried. I never tried to make you happy. I never tried to be happy when I was with you."

"What did you say? Ah, yes. I just wanted things to be easy. I never wanted to do the work. But you never explained what the work was. I didn't understand what it was you wanted of me."

"I wanted to be loved," she says. She can see the fountain as they approach it; they must walk past that fountain toward the shed, if they do not pass through the house.

"You wanted to feel loved."

"How is that different?"

He shakes his head. "I thought I loved you. You did not feel loved. Both of these things can be true." His smile is bitter; there is no joy in it. "You stopped being happy. I stopped trying when I realized I could never make you happy. I found a better job. I earned enough. We bought a better house. We bought better clothing, better furniture."

"That isn't what I wanted."

"But you said I should be better, and I tried. I tried to be what you wanted."

“I told you what I wanted.”

“Yes. But it never stayed the same. I chased after your happiness, so I know. It was like chasing a mirage.”

What is he saying to her now? Why is he saying this? Why does everything he say remind her of things she must have said? She knows how he feels—it’s a mirror. It’s how she felt. Nothing I ever do is enough.

Oh. She knows because he is in pain. She understands pain very well. She knows its contours, its shape. She hates pain, but that’s what’s been given to her. That is the life she knows.

#

The shed is smaller than the house; it is not small, otherwise. He opens the shed door, and she stands back, wondering if there will be a corpse in the shed. Thinking about his words. Thinking about the story—his story, her story, the way the two overlapped for a time. Thinking about the way his words mirror hers. Thinking about how her words—the words that didn’t reach him—did reach him.

But if it’s true, if what he says is true, does that make a lie of her grief?

Was it all her fault, again? Was it because she wasn’t good enough, again?

“It’s no one’s fault, or everyone’s,” he says. “Why does it always have to be someone’s fault?”

She spoke out loud. She must have.

“Fault, between us, didn’t matter. My fault. Your fault. The minute it broke along those lines, it defaulted to my side and your side. We were never struggling on the same side.”

She doesn’t even understand what he means. How can you fight with each other and be on the same side? So many of his words never made sense to her.

He comes out of the shed she won’t enter; he is carrying two axes. One is enormous. One is small. She expects he will hand her the small axe; he’s taller, he’s broader, he’s always been physically stronger.

He hands her the bigger axe. When she stares at him, he smiles, and this smile is easier. “It’s your tree. I’m going to help.”

“You said you would cut it down.”

“I did, didn’t I? But I can’t do it alone.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll help. But the axe—”

“It’s lighter than it looks.”

“Liar.” It is far, far heavier than it looks—and it looks heavy. She has to practically drag it across the ground to move it at all.

“Fine. It didn’t seem all that heavy to me.”

“Then you carry it!”

He laughs. She freezes. She never liked his laughter, not at times like this. It always stung. But this—this is like the laughter of the boy in the garden. She does not remember this man’s laughter. He stopped laughing when he was with her. She doesn’t remember her own laughter.

She has never been a happy person. Not even as a child.

Maybe some people are born to be happy. Some people achieve happiness because everything is given to them. Nothing was given to her. Did she resent them? Did she resent them because they didn’t even appreciate what they had? What she would have done anything to have?

“Did I have everything?” he asks. “You resented me.”

She cannot answer. The question makes no sense. She did resent him, but not because he was happy. She resented him because she was unhappy. She wanted him to be happy to be with her. To be happy because he was with her. She would have been happy, then.

“I was happy,” he says. She knows she has not spoken aloud, but she is no longer surprised. “When we first met, I was happy. When we started dating, I was happy. Stressed, insecure, but happy. Do you remember the first time we kissed?”

She looks at him. She can only see his back. The axe holds her back; she can’t even jog to catch up. He was always like this. He left her to carry the heavy burden. He carried the lesser one, never understanding what she had to endure.

She doesn't remember the first time they kissed. She doesn't remember the first time she told him that she loved him. She doesn't remember loving words at all. But she doesn't believe he is lying.

This is the garden. Things don't have to make sense here. It's just that she wants them to make sense today. Were they happy? Was she? She must have been. She married him. She had his children.

Will you be happy if we get married? Will you trust me, then?

She said yes.

#

She drags the axe.

She drags the axe to the tree, the tree that is so large, the tree that is rooted in the west, but whose branches shadow everything. She has no idea what kind of tree it is; she knows it's not pine or spruce, because those trees adorned her home once a year.

The roots are enormous; it is hard to even approach the trunk of the tree. She doesn't believe that axes will do the job. At the moment, she doesn't believe anything will. Maybe poison.

"Poison?" His smile is careworn but genuine. "That's the last thing that will work on this tree."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because this tree is poison itself. Poison it and it will grow faster, larger; it won't die."

"You realize that makes no sense?" She has managed to stand on the roots, to navigate them while dragging the axe.

"You live in this garden, and you expect sense?" A different voice joins them. The younger wife's voice. She is carrying an axe as well. Larger than her ex-husband's. Smaller than hers.

"The garden has its own rules."

"I didn't say there weren't rules—I just implied they made no sense. Because they really don't."

“Why are you here?” the older woman asks the younger one, although she is no longer young, objectively speaking.

“Because you are.”

“And him?”

“Because he’s a stubborn— because he’s really stubborn. You were his only failure.” She grimaces. “I don’t believe that; he does. But you must know by now: it’s hard to change people’s beliefs. Let’s start. The daylight won’t last forever.”

#

She can’t lift the axe to strike the trunk. She tries three times, and overbalances once. The man can hit the trunk; the younger woman can hit the trunk. She’s certain of it—neither carry axes that are so heavy. But they seem to be waiting for her to strike first, as if her axe is a ceremonial shovel, spade, champagne bottle.

Maybe it’s because she’s hesitant. The tree was here before she arrived. It will be here after she is carried out—if she is carried out at all. It is alive. Except for mosquitoes, she’s never deliberately killed anything in the garden.

“Weeds,” the other woman says.

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because weeds shouldn’t be here. Weeds don’t belong in the garden.”

“So you choose what lives and what dies here.” The woman turns to the tree. “This is the biggest weed of all, and it’s still here.”

“It was already here. I didn’t plant it.”

“No. No, you didn’t. You didn’t even think it didn’t belong here because its voice harmonizes with all the other flowers you’ve chosen.”

She lifts the axe for a fourth time.

You ungrateful brat!

She freezes.

You are a terrible, terrible child. You are a terrible person! After all I did for you?

After all she did for her? She is angry; she lifts the axe again. It is even heavier, now. She resents it. She would turn to shout at him, but she sees that he is waiting. She has to land the first blow. He will not start without her.

“What did you do for me?” She shouts. She has never shouted at the things that grow in the garden. She listened to them. She heard their stories. She did not speak to them; she did not speak with them. She simply listened.

Why?

I created this garden for you. If it weren't for me, you could never live here at all.

She hesitates, although that makes no difference; she can't lift the axe.

This is your home. This is the home I made for you. This is the home you chose.

The voice of the tree is not a story; it is a storm. It is a dagger. It is the truth. She understands that, now. She did not build the house. She did not build the garden. She chose the plants that informed the garden, but they were waiting to be planted, and they were the only flowers she knew.

She did not plant sunflowers, but they appeared, as if they were weeds.

She did not listen to the story the sunflowers told. Why would she? Sunflowers were daydreams, not reality. It was in reality she had to live. She came to this house because she knew it so well. She came to this place because it was home.

She listened to the grief and the grievance of the small, delicate plants that bloomed under her care.

She accepted visitors, because the house accepted visitors—but those visitors did not come at her invitation, and they did not leave at her demand. She recognized only one of them—but is that true? Were the other visitors people she should have recognized?

Did she recognize the boy, and the man at different ages, because he hurt her? If the others didn't hurt her, why were they here at all?

She doesn't understand. No—she doesn't want to understand. She is always afraid to be blamed. She is always afraid to be wrong. If she were right, she couldn't be abused. She couldn't be hit. It wouldn't happen.

And it has happened. So she must be wrong. There is something wrong with her. She has hidden it all of her life, but it always shows through. Everything wrong with her world: it's her. It's always her.

Why? What has she done to deserve it? Her mother would have been happy if she had never been born. That's the truth. Her mother said it often. Her very existence was wrong. No amount of good could change her existence. Some children should never be born.

But it isn't as if she had a choice. It's not as if she, disembodied, said, yes, I'll make that woman bear me. It's not as if she, as a small child could just escape and go on to lead a happy life.

What is a happy life, anyway? She doesn't know. She's tried to build it. She's tried to understand it. Get married. Buy a house. Find a job. Have children. Be perfect. Be unassailable.

And the underside of that: if she can't, make certain the faults of others are more obvious, louder; make certain their mistakes draw all the attention, so people can't point fingers at her. It's safety. It's the only safety she knows.

If she deserves it, surely they deserve it? If they've been bad, shouldn't they also be hated? Shouldn't they also suffer? Shouldn't they lose love? Why should she be the only one?

Why should I be the only one? Even the child I had was defective.

She lifts the axe. She can barely see the tree. It is dark, now; perhaps it has always been dark; the crown of the tree is so wide it obscures moonlight. He is gone. The other woman is gone. She is alone. She is always alone.

She has always been alone.

She has always protected herself. She had to learn to protect herself. She had to build walls that were strong enough they couldn't be pierced or broken.

She understands, as she lifts the axe, that she is not hitting a tree; she is hitting a wall. Axes weren't made to break walls; they were made to break living things—and things that had once been alive; trunks of trees, branches, logs.

But the axe is all she has in her hands. Maybe it's all she ever had in her hands. Maybe that's why people left her, left her alone: it was never safe for them. She

didn't mean to hurt them—not at the beginning. She didn't hurt them until they hurt her first. Someone else always started it.

Someone else. Always. Not her. Never her.

She lifts the axe, finally. She lifts it, arms straining, tears warming her face; she hears the tree drone on and on and on, but she has always heard that. She captured that story first, she learned it well. It is the story she knows best. She has lived it and lived it and lived it.

She was never loved because she was never worth love. She has hidden it. She has disguised it. She has wept and raged at the injustice of the universe. The universe doesn't care about her—why should she care about anything else?

She has found glimmers of joy in her life. In her work. In random, tiny whispers of praise—but they have amounted to nothing. Everything breaks. Everyone leaves.

The tree howls its rage. She howls hers. Their voices join and clash; they are a discordance, a terrible echo enwrapping every syllable. Even in rage they cannot be in harmony. Even when the pain is the same.

You never loved me!

You never loved me or you could never do this!

Speaking to the tree. Speaking to all those who disappointed her—who promised her love, who said they loved her, and who she loved.

“Did you?”

She did everything she was supposed to do. Everything.

“Was it what they wanted?”

It was what they should have wanted. It was what she was told, over and over again, a good child, a child deserving of love—that cursed word, that bane—should do. All her life. All her life she has done this.

You don't love me. If you loved me, I would be happy.

The axe strikes the wall. It falters.

If you loved me, I would be happy.

The axe strikes the wall again. And again.

If I was happy, it was because you loved me.

And again. She can see the scars the blade leaves in the wall, but the wall remains.

If you love me, I will be happy.

One last blow.

If I am unhappy, it is because you don't love me. It is therefore your fault I am unhappy.

The axe falls from her hands then, but it's done its work. She no longer sees the tree. Its roots are beneath her feet, the ground is so uneven; if she takes a step forward she's likely to fall because she can't see the ground at all.

The tree is gone.

A mirror remains. She is annoyed. If the universe is attempting to tell her something through metaphor, it is clumsy and over-the-top. But as she glares at the mirror she realizes that it isn't a mirror. It's an oval window, glass slightly smoky. The woman she looks at is not her reflection.

There are familiar, faded scars—across the forehead, across the arm; the woman's arms are bare. They are not her scars. They are visible. Her mother hated them. This woman loomed so large in her life. She was a giant.

She is not a giant, now. She is old, and bent. She is frail. Her eyes are narrowed, but stare as she might, they see nothing. Her mother is not alive. Her mother's story came to an end decades ago.

Even in death, she left no comfort.

Her lips move. She is reciting the story of the ungrateful child. The bad child. The cruel child. She recognizes the movement of her mother's lips, but she can no longer hear her voice. She cannot hear the garden at all.

In its place, silence, broken only by her breath.

"Good job," he says.

He is sweating. He is sweating, his hands look almost sunburned, as if he has been working with axe all day. She didn't see him at all. She didn't hear him. She almost can't believe he was here.

"I was always on the other side," he says. "We all were."

“She wasn’t.”

His smile is odd, lopsided. “No. She was on the inside. I don’t think she always enjoyed it. But she was always here.”

“In my house?”

“In every house, yes.”

She turns to the woman, then. “Is she me?”

He doesn’t answer. The other woman doesn’t answer, either. She can’t be, can she? She is too young. Although she wears no wedding ring, she can speak with this man as if—as if they are friends. As if there is some history between them that she herself has never shared.

“Where is this?”

“This is west of your house. This is the place you never entered.”

“Why?”

“Because this is the only way you can leave it.”

She nods, but her gaze once again returns to the oval window, the window that looks like a mirror; she can see her reflection in it, faint and ghostly, slightly taller than this bent, fragile version of her mother; slightly wider, but not by much. Her mother hated fat people. Gaining weight was a sin.

#

She never wanted to be seen.

She never wanted anyone to see her, because anyone who could would stop loving her. She wanted to be loved. To be loved is to be unseen. It’s a paradox. She can’t feel loved because they can’t see what she’s hidden.

She hated her mother.

She never ever meant to become her mother.

“Will you?” he asks.

“Will I?”

“Leave.” He does not hold out a hand.

Her younger self does. She is afraid to take it.

“I know. But if you can’t, this is where you will live. It’s a choice. That’s what I didn’t understand. I felt like I had no choices. I wanted to give up. I did, for a while. You don’t have to come with me.

“But there’s not very much of me left here, you’ve killed me so often.”

“I didn’t—” Oh. The storms. The bodies. “I don’t know how to be happy.”

“No. It’s not like a dance or a game. But it’s time to stop being a child. It’s time. There are so many things about myself I hate—but they’re part of what we are. They’re not the only part.” Her hand remains steady.

Behind her, her husband is almost holding his breath.

“He won’t come back,” the younger woman says. “He can’t. What he said was true. You can’t be happy with him.”

“I was.”

“You weren’t. You were less unhappy, some of the time. You came to the garden to listen,” she added, her voice softening. “You learned to listen. It took a long time. But now, you need to listen to yourself. You need to listen to your story, not your mother’s story.”

“I don’t know what my story is. I thought all these stories were mine.”

“Then come. Write it. It’s what you do.”

“I don’t know the end.”

She smiles. “You know you can’t be loved if you can’t love, right?”

“I did—”

She shakes her head. “You needed and wanted and followed the rules. But those rules were made by your mother. This garden, everything in it. They were never just yours. Your fear. Her fear. They were so similar because fear is makes us all similar.

“You accepted her rules because you wanted to be her ideal good child—and you know just how impossible that was.”

It is true. “Why do you know this? How can you, if you’re me?”

“I’m the part of you you tried to become, and you didn’t listen often. But I’m here, so you must have understood some of it. Come. The gate is closing. We have to leave.”

She thinks, if the woman leaves, there will be no more visitors. She thinks there might be no house, no garden. She was safest when she was alone.

She doesn’t want to be alone. Can she even discard herself or parts of herself?

The younger woman laughs. “Of course. You do it all the time. You tell yourself a story and you edit out the parts that don’t fit your narrative at the time.”

She takes the hand. It is surprisingly strong. “How did I get here at all?”

“I don’t know. We probably have to figure it out so we don’t wind up here again.”

The hand in hers is her hand, and it is stronger than she remembers. She looks, once, at their ex-husband. He is smiling, and the smile is complicated; she remembers his laughter and his joy and his tears. Truly remembers them.

The window remains in place; beside it, there is a door, a frame that is not attached to wall. She looks at her mother and bows her head. And then she opens the door, and she steps beyond the garden.

#

There are stories in the garden. Ruined stories, now. Unfinished stories. Unheard stories. I did not tell you only the story of the ungrateful child, but perhaps that was my loudest story, my longest story; it is certainly the only story you remembered.

I could not speak with you, and I regret it; I tried. Perhaps I was too defensive. Perhaps guilt made me too sensitive. All of my attempts to reach you ended in accusation and anger and pain, both yours and mine: We were not loved. Not by each other, oh my darling daughter. In absence, grief grew stronger, and anger festered, as if that were all that had to offer.

I did not desire that you live the life I lived. I think I was far better to you than my parents were to me; you did not bear the public, humiliating scars that were mine for almost all of my life. I did not break your arm. I did not blacken your eye so badly you had to stay home.

But it doesn’t matter, does it? The wounds I left on you were scars all the same—but at least they could be hidden. By you. By me.

I could see the path your life would take, because you walked the path I walked, dressed in different clothing, living in different houses. You had two children; I had only you. Your husband left you, too; my husbands left me. I know you cannot believe that I wanted better for you. I did. I tried to tell you not to make the mistakes I made. You made them just the same, rushing towards despair.

Rushing towards the end, and as we know, the end is death. All stories end. Even this one. It is not the ending I wanted, but it was not my story.

What I made for you was this last home, the only home I could offer. I made a place that was familiar to you, and to me; it was a place of childhood. It was a place to belong. I hoped that you, too, could make it yours.

It was the only place I could build for you. It was the only thing, in the end, I could offer.

And so, you choose to leave the garden of grief. Grief was the only thing we shared.

I remember the day you were born. I remember the pain and the blood and the cries. I remember the lights that were too bright, and the men with gloved hands and the nurses.

I remember weeping, in the moment you were placed into my arms, your eyes barely open, your head so soft beneath downy hair. I remember your tiny fingers, your tiny toes; you were so light, so fragile, I was afraid that you would break, that I would break you. You were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I wanted to look at you forever.

I loved you in that moment.

THIRTY-THREE

by Tade Thompson

I turned right instead of left. That's how it happened.

#

I waded through plasma. This must have been what swimming in solar wind felt like. Not that anyone had done that. Yet.

My skin melted at a constant rate. I knew I would not make it, but I continued to see how far I could get. I felt my insides cooking, superheated, and reduced to goo, perhaps leaving puddles in my wake. I kept moving, watching the meters. Something critical melted and I came to a halt. My ears stopped sending sound, clogged. A pop, and I went blind. It hurt while I burned, and it took forever to lose signal.

Yep, I screamed.

#

Heathrow Airport.

Left would take me to my terminal and ultimately to a plane and Ottawa.

Right was for Arrivals and exit to trains buses and taxis.

Left meant Nadia, a funny, smart physiotherapist I had been dating for three months during her time in London. She invited me to Ottawa, where she lives and grew up. She had brown eyes and a fringe of black hair. She knew how to skewer me with four words or fewer, incisive, but kind. This was a person with whom one falls in love, given time.

Then there was Trish, my wife of ten years. Nope, it's not what you think. We had been separated for a year. It was her choice, not mine, and while it would be a stretch to say I still loved her, I wasn't willing to throw away ten years of marriage.

I received her text in the airport, just as I was about to turn left.

Maybe we should try marriage counselling?

One simple line, but powerful, bringing with it a perturbation that rippled through my entire being.

Right meant Trish, Arrivals, Exits, no refunds on my ticket, and, as life would have it, a foray into a static, potentially world-ending plasma field.

I went right.

#

I hadn't even unpacked my bags when the doorbell went. Two young men in crew cuts stood there, in mufti, but bearing screaming military.

"Dr Bari?"

"My friends call me Will," I said.

"Dr Bari, you need to come with us."

They shoved paperwork in my face, so I examined it and went with them.

#

Their coffee was instant and unimpressive, plus the mug had only a cursory relationship with cleanliness. I figured it would work better as a prop than an actual beverage. I warmed my hands on it.

"Dr Bari, you wrote a paper five years ago," says Warwick. He told me his role and rank, but I wasn't listening and felt too ashamed to ask again.

"You'll have to be more specific," I said.

"Remote Cybernetics and the Value of Pain," said Warwick.

"Ahh, yep. I apologise. It was boring even by my standards. I don't think it's ever been cited. I'm not sure anybody read it. Or understood it"

"I did."

"Oh. Okay. I thought you were military."

"I am. We don't only shoot things."

"But you also shoot things."

"Me, personally?"

"Yep."

"I also shoot things."

I took a swallow of the bilge water. I had to do something to deal with the discomfort.

“Dr Bari, we’d like your help in a project. I can’t tell you what it is until you agree to do it. Once you start, you have to finish, or be sequestered until your replacement finishes it.” Warwick drank coffee in a precise way and I idly wondered if his mouthfuls were the same volume each sip.

“Will I have to shoot things?”

“No.”

“Will I have to kill or harm anybody?”

“No.”

“Will the project be used for killing or harming people in any way?”

“No.”

“But you know my work and think I’m qualified to help with this project.”

“We do.”

I was curious.

After reams of non-disclosure documents they revealed it.

#

I couldn’t usually fly, but this time they attached an apparatus that allowed ballistic launch. They shot me out, Polaris Missile style. Once I broke the surface of the Baltic I felt the shock as the rockets blasted me upwards, against gravity, wind punching me in the face, the sky approaching faster than I was used to.

I lost the first stage, and the second stage kicked in, harsher than the first, pushing me closer to the blue. I was sure the view would be incredible, but I could only look ahead. My neck was fixed in place in case the Gs broke it.

The third stage took me to the edge of space and broke off. Overwhelming sight of the Earth’s curvature, blue atmospheric shield, the blackness beyond. In the thermosphere for sure, but not crossing the Kármán line. Engines fired, correcting my course, fuel pods dropped off so that I didn’t become a fireball once over the target site.

I fell.

Nope, it wasn't like Icarus at all.

Actually, it was. As soon as I got into the ionized zone the flight gear stopped working and I fell like a rock.

This didn't hurt at all. I wonder if the impact was instantaneous or if the ionized air destroyed the signal before I made impact with the ground.

Oh, well.

#

"So, it's a robot," I said.

"It's not a robot," said Warwick.

The notarobot stood at six-five on a low dais. That first time it was...unimpressive. Looked like a moulded plastic life-size version of a children's toy. It was black, no light escaping from its surfaces like those new pigment discoveries we're always being told about. Silly with antennae and sensors.

"Either kill me with suspense or tell me what it is and what it's got to do with my study. I have marriage counselling to attend," I said. Strictly speaking, this was untrue. After the initial text in Heathrow Trish had not answered any of my messages or phone calls.

"It's a remote unit. At least, that's what it will be when we get it to work," says Warwick with a sigh.

"What's a remote unit?"

"A human pilots it from a remove."

"A drone, then. That doesn't sound difficult." I moved closer to the remote. "And you don't have wee humans in it."

"Not a drone, not funny, and it's not working like we want it to. Your paper suggested something that I think the unit lacks."

I examined the hands of the...notarobot. Not a pincer like many I had seen. Four fingers, one thumb. The joints seemed to support opposition. Nice.

“You said pain-analogues should be used in feedback loops for machinery to prevent wear and tear,” said Warwick.

“Didn’t say ‘should’. I said ‘could’. I was specific.”

“You want machines to have pain receptors and nerves, and to send feedback into the controlling software.” Warwick looked to me for confirmation.

“You simulate pain, and you want an AI that adapts to the pain by withdrawing. Borrow it from the biological model. When our pain receptors stop working like in diabetic neuropathy, we are unaware of small damage that can turn into ulcers, the first step in a path that leads to amputation.” I examined the lower limbs of the...thing. Worn. I pointed. “This is why you thought of me.”

“Affirmative. Your long digression into the pathology of diabetic ulcers was...impressive. What if we send pain signals to the operators?” said Warwick. “That’s the question I want you to help us with.”

“Who would you get to volunteer for such a job?”

“You’d be surprised,” he said. “Let me show you to your temporary office. By the way, your wife is seeing someone.”

#

We tried a cocoon. Some device like a horizontal pile-driver cannon thrust me rapidly into the plasma.

Lasted longer than any previous attempt, but never reached the end of the plasma field.

#

I worked with the team, at first designing the concepts, basic systems, if A then B, and growing in complexity from there.

As soon as I stopped messaging her, dozens of texts from Trish. I didn’t answer any of them. If I had any feelings left for her, they had turned to rage. I could have had something lasting with Nadia. Why would Trish bring up counselling if she was already with someone else?

She was seeing an orthodontist. Ever since I found out I had been obsessing over my teeth.

#

Drilling underground presented its own challenges. The plasma field didn't extend into the earth beneath it, but even after breaking through the foundation, a titanium plate three feet thick lay between me and the target.

The drilling vehicle, the mole, worked well until we got to the titanium. The diamond drillbits failed, the mechanics of the mole failed, and I had to leave its protective embrace. I broke through the titanium, but the cost in wear and tear was too high, and when I encountered the plasma I failed within minutes.

This made us think the problem was one of durability. We tried the underground approach six more times before abandoning it.

#

Warwick took me to the cafeteria where he bought me processed food. I moved it around on the plate, but I don't know if he noticed or not.

"Have you heard of Aleister Andover?" he asked.

"Should I have?" I sipped water. Water was safe.

"He was working on a new energy source for us. He did things with plasma fields that are still thought of as theoretical in many disciplines."

"All right. Yay for Andover?"

"I'm going to show you something."

On his phone, a satellite photo showed a large opaque spot that looked like an artefact, a defect in the process.

"That's the Sahara," said Warwick. "19.82 degrees North, 3.61 degrees East."

"What's the spot?"

"That is where Andover was last seen. As far as we can tell, what you're looking at is a plasma field. The little bastard succeeded, we think. That area is like an atmospheric sun. And it's warming the Earth, as you can imagine."

"It's not been in the news," I said.

“Of course not. It’s a doomsday scenario. There’s no place to run if people start to panic. All I can tell you is that whatever he’s done is stable, but horrifying. It’s not growing, but it’s not shrinking either. I don’t know what it uses for fuel.”

“Radiation?”

“Nothing. At least it’s clean fuel.”

“All right. What do you want from me? I can’t help you here. It’s not my area.”

Warwick raised one finger in the space between us and changed the photo on his phone. “Do you know Stacked?”

His phone shows a graphic of blocks arranged in a single vertical structure without plaster.

“I take it Stacked is a game?”

“It’s the most successful game in financial terms. Simple and addictive. Everybody plays it. Well, they have the most advanced comms.”

“So.”

“We can’t get any communications from the black spot, but last week a tiny information packet came out of there and updated a Stacked game.”

“Someone’s playing Stacked in there?”

“Negative, doctor. A phone in there on which someone may have been playing stacked at some point sent out an update. It may just be a phone in a protected pocket. Stranger things have happened.”

“This is all interesting,” I said. “By which I mean, not interesting at all.”

“We think someone’s still alive in there, and I want you to go into Andover’s Spot to find them.”

We both knew Warwick meant Andover might still be alive, and that this knowledge was too valuable to lose if he was still alive. But we both pretended that when he said ‘someone’ he meant ‘anybody’.

#

For some reason Warwick thought it would be a good idea to bring Trish just before my first mission in the unit. I couldn't believe she deigned to come. Problems in the land of oral hygiene? Was that what orthodontists did?

I had plenty of faults, but I wasn't petty. I offered her the base coffee. Okay, so maybe a little petty.

"What are you doing with these people?" she asked. Trish had freckles everywhere, and since it was summer, she looked like she had been struck with an exotic pox. I loved her skin. She'd been teased at school, so she hated it.

"Not allowed to say," I said.

"Are you in danger?"

"Nope. Absolutely not. Why would I be in danger?"

"It was...there was something about how that Warwick guy talked to me. It had that 'shipping out to Normandy' feel."

"It's routine research." I swallowed the brown liquid. "I hear you've been doing some research too. Into...teeth?"

She pursed her lips and looked into her coffee like she could divine the future from it. Finally, she said, "It's not serious. I'm just dabbling...in teeth."

Time passed, excruciatingly slow. I got up and left her there, in the canteen.

In hindsight, not a good exit.

#

It was only uncomfortable for five or six minutes. After that it felt...snug, and when movement began, I soon felt nothing.

You piloted the unit from the Cradle. Whole body enmeshed, although free-floating. Venous access in saphenous and cephalic veins. Central line in place. Urinary catheter. Tubes in every orifice. Laser projection directly onto the eyes. Head phones cancelling all local noise and introducing input via mastoid process bone conduction. Cage to fix the neck and jaw in place. Sensors up the waazoo.

I knew in my mind I was in the Cradle, but after fifteen minutes I felt disembodied. Twenty minutes and the unit and I were one. The calibration was exquisite because I could even feel a breeze on my face.

The unit melted to slag in minutes the first time I was dropped into Andover's Spot.

#

"We have to change our thinking," I said, showering.

Warwick was outside, leaning on a tiled wall. "What do you have in mind?"

"Right now, the unit is primed to receive signals from the Cradle. What if we made it able to send as well? And make it promiscuous, to be able to send and receive to any unit." I opened my mouth to the stream of water, gargled then spat. The Cradle made your mouth dry. In fact, it made the whole body dry.

"I don't see how that would be bet—oh."

It took many sleepless nights to implement.

#

This time around they cocooned me in a block of alloy and air dropped me. I felt the belly sink of freefall and the abrupt bone-crushing stop which would have killed me in my own body or an earlier iteration of the unit.

I waited until the shell softened, and I broke out. No time to smell the flowers, I took off running. I had a timer counting down in my visual field, the amount of time the unit survives within Andover's Spot. As it raced to zero, I saw the next unit. I transferred, broke out, and didn't look at the old one. I raced on and was already melting when I found the third unit.

The thirty-third time, I broke into the eye of the plasma storm. I expected it to follow me, but a tongue just licked me, before withdrawing. I paused in disbelief while the sensors adjusted to the new conditions.

"In case you can hear me, Base, unit 33 made it," I said. Of course they could hear me. And they could see what I saw: 33 wouldn't work if the transmission wasn't right. Quick systems check told me everything was nominal.

I was in a vaulted area, a bubble really, conflagration all around me, but temperature in here was thirty Celsius. It was the desert, after all. Unit 33 scanned for phone signals. One. I aimed for that.

The oasis looked like an abandoned work yard, vehicles and machinery discarded and dusty. On closer look, it wasn't dust, it was ash. I cringed at the carbonized bodies I passed. Very Pompeii.

I made my way through damaged living quarters, feeling embarrassed, voyeuristic even. Something ticked and creaked in my body as it cooled, like the settling of a house at night. I came to an area that was surely a laboratory of some kind. Here, as everywhere else, was desolation. A single corpse, unburnt but dessicated, flung back over a control panel. I checked his ID: Andover.

A voice piped up behind me. “And so, with greater urgency I begged that soul that he should tell me who was with him there.”

I turned and confronted a heat-retardant suit, black visor, bulky, shiny material, shapeless.

“What are you?” the voice asked. It sounded dead and mechanical.

“A friend. I have an authentication code: PAG dash 24 underscore 1842.”

“How nice for you. I don’t know any authentication codes.”

I raised my hands, palms out. “I am not a danger to you.”

The figure wrested off the helmet. A woman with short, efficient brown hair and eyes shining with concentration. “I’m Dr Andover.”

“Then who’s that?” I motioned behind me.

“Him? That’s my uncle.”

“Did he leave any notes, any instructions as to how to shut the plasma field down?”

“No, because he didn’t build the power source; I did. I know exactly how to shut it down. I just...I don’t have the components I need.” She took off the suit, slowly because it was cumbersome.

“So you’re the Stacked fan.”

“Did you just comment on my body?”

“I’m talking about the game. Stacked. That’s how we knew someone was alive. It sent a message out.”

“Might be one of the kids.”

“There are other survivors?”

She had gone quiet, staring at 33, at the chassis. “Yes...there are.”

“Can you take me to them? Obviously, they are the priority.”

“No.”

“What?”

“They aren’t the obvious priority.” She gazed at me with what would be a lover’s intensity under any other circumstances. “Can I look under the hood?”

“I don’t know what you—”

“I’d like to see what you’re made of.”

“Who are you?”

“Alesha Andover. You’re wasting time. Here’s the thing: I think under all that armour and melted shit, I’m willing to bet you have what I need to shut this power down. I just need to build a switch, that’s all. I think I’ll have to take you apart to get what I want. What are you? A kind of drone?”

“Yep. No. Balls!”

“Stay right there. I have tools.”

“I can’t authorise—”

“Don’t move.”

#

I was the one who asked for pain to be a part of cybernetic systems.

Turned out I was a fucking idiot.

Andover started ripping bits off me, and it hurt like I was living through an autopsy: 33’s skin was my skin, its guts were my guts. We had designed it to relay pain when there was any damage.

Warwick’s team tried to disconnect me from the Cradle, Separation they call it, but each time I went into v-tach. They had to shock me four times before they gave up and told me to grit my teeth. They flooded my biological body with anaesthesia, but it wouldn’t switch off the connection.

Andover kept on, implacable. Unit 33 screamed, but she ignored it.

I don’t know how long it took.

I had no happy place to distract myself with. Nadia had disappeared with her potential love. Trish had lost interest in me, something to do with teeth. I tried to focus on Dr Andover, which worked until she tore my eyes out with pliers.

Pain is worse when you're in the dark.

Grit your teeth.

#

The Venetian blinds made stripes of light and shadow on the wall as the sunlight streamed through. I was photophobic by then, but they told me it would pass in a few weeks. The paralysis, too.

It seemed I could not psychologically separate from 33, and the consequence was my brain thought all the damage done to the unit was done to my body. My mind took damage just like 33's chassis.

I was getting therapy and physiotherapy, fixing my psyche and my body at the same time. *Mens sana in corpore sano*.

Warwick said we saved the world, first from Andover's Spot, and from the clean energy crisis. Alesha Andover was sequestered. Aleisha who? Aleister Andover was dead, according to the media. Nobody knew about his niece and after a while, even I thought I might have imagined her.

The door opened, and a nurse popped his head in. "Do you feel up to visitors?"

I tried to shrug, but the muscles would not cooperate. "Yep," I said.

Nadia came in, bringing a second chance at happiness with her.

#

We lived happily ever after.

Well, no, we didn't, but that's no way to end a story, is it?