



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online  
Magazine of  
Literary  
Adventure  
Fantasy

Issue #125 • July 11, 2013

[“Two Captains,” by Gemma Files](#)

[“Else This, Nothing Ever Grows,” by Sylvia  
Linsteadt](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit  
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## TWO CAPTAINS

by Gemma Files

“One captain to a ship, always, or that ship flounders.” It was good advice... most especially so, in hindsight.

\* \* \*

“Found somethin’ for ye below-decks, Cap’n,” the bo’sun told him, with a wink. And thus, with little warning, Solomon Rusk’s last great set of troubles began.

“Something” soon proved a man in rags, enchained, with a possessed saint’s face and a cough that racked him stem to stern, shaking him like a high wind. He attempted to rise as Rusk pushed the door to, barely making his feet before falling back again, panting slightly. This creature’s feverish eyes were the same shade as silver pennies bleached almost to pale green by tarnish; they so well caught the light that Rusk all but thought he might be able to see himself mirrored in them, if he only moved closer—and *wanted* to, the sudden impulse deep-set, like a bone in the throat.

“You put me at a... disadvantage, sir,” the man managed, after two attempts at speech, both equally exhausting.

To which Rusk replied: “You’d seem to’ve done that yourself, already, given where I find ye.” Continuing, as the man arched a fine-cut brow. “We’ve searched this whole brig and found nothing t’ warrant our investment, save for rats, rot—and one prisoner. Might such an estimation be correct?”

“Having not seen the rest of this ship since they... brought me aboard, I... couldn’t possibly say.”

“Well. And what am I t’do with *you*, then, exactly?”

The man snorted, setting himself off once more. Then snapped back, nonetheless, far too haughtily for any ordinary prisoner: “As you please, I’m sure! *I* obviously can’t prevent it.”

A bit too sharp to count as showing proper respect, though since Rusk could only assume the poor bastard was in pain, he forgave it. Yet here the Captain felt his own eyebrows hike, fast as sparks striking from cold flint, and peered closer, suddenly aware how that shadow the man was trying to hide beneath his close-held blanket was, in fact, the rim of a collar—cold iron over puffed scar, with portions of it adhering yet to the sadly tormented skin below.

*A wizard*, Rusk thought. They’d meant him for Admiralty justice, obviously—been taking him on to the next lawful port, where he’d be burnt or hanged, or both.

The man did not seem to notice; he was deep-engaged in trying not to cough again, pale face flush-blotched with sudden,

indignant scarlet. But looked up again nonetheless, when Rusk told him—"You interest me, 'sir'."

"I... do not mean to," the man replied, regaining some sense of caution.

"No, y'wouldn't, and yet—maybe I've not wasted my men's time entirely, in playing out this lark. For any prize comes wi' a man-witch already netted in its hold is one well worth the taking."

Quick-touched by Rusk's implication, the man perhaps wished to say more—opened his prim mouth to, at least, baring teeth like a cat, a harbinger of equal-sharp words to come. But even as passion undid his better judgment, sheer sickness overtook the rest; those pale eyes rolled up and he fell forwards, into Rusk's arms.

Frail, and slim, and steely. The man smelled ill after his captivity, but Rusk wondered what lay under that. His cabin had a tub, liberated from some Moghul vessel and sold in the market-place on Veritay Island, back near where his kin had slave-holdings; to fill it with hot water would take more effort than simply sluicing the man with a bucket of brine, but it wasn't as though Rusk had so much to do that he could entirely discard the notion of entertainment.

So: "Bo'sun," he called back, through the open door. "Them as takes the Articles may come along; kill the rest, then

scuttle her. And make ready t' cast off sharpish, in good time, that the *Bitch* not grow restless.”

“Yes, Cap'n.”

With that, Rusk hoisted his newest personal possession high, and left—a bad choice, as it turned out, but he wasn't to know. Not that such foreknowledge ever stopped him, anyhow.

*For we must do as our natures dictate, seeing we cannot do otherwise*, he would think, much later. And conjure up the bitter memory of a smile on lost lips, so ghostly now—so rendered down by time, along with various other complaints—that he found he only barely remembered just what such an expression should feel like.

\* \* \*

Rusk had seen sorcerers aplenty, in his time—they were in no short supply out here, on the very rim of all civilized things, where prejudices of both King and Church held so little popular account: not so much feared as coveted, though treated with the same caution one would accord any other exotic beast. Yet never before had he encountered one collared, which proclaimed that the main error of this man currently still insensibly a-toss in his bed had resided in trying to hide what he was in plain sight, by joining one of the primary institutions which hunted his kind out most effectively.

“Jerusalem Parry, that’s ‘is name,” one of the new recruits offered, when quizzed on particulars. “Ensign, ‘e was, mobbed in at Portsmouth. Comes from some bloody smuggler’s hole in Cornwall, set up smack in the middle of a marsh; well-learnt, too, in all manner of books and languages. ‘E’d’ve made a parson, if the local squire ‘adn’t ruled his mother be ‘ung for... you know.”

“Whoredom? Theft?”

A circumspect look, like the recruit expected to find Parry standing in the shadows, listening. “No, though there might’ve been some of that, too; the... same as ‘im, they do say.”

Rusk understood the man’s implication well enough, though from what-all he’d seen, blood seldom told quite as indubitably as most fools seemed to think, in *that* way. Christ knew, there’d been a scandal of the same sort ‘round old Judas Rusk, his clan’s progenitor, born fatherless in the Witch-House at Eye, in old Scotland, with his dam already Fire-bound. There were tales on how, in every generation since, some Rusk woman (or, far less frequently, man) would be able to raise storms or read minds, blast with a word and tame with a touch, dream the future—and he himself *had* seen it happen so, though never on the white-skinned side of things. Yet if such tricks truly lingered in his own veins, Rusk couldn’t claim a shred of proof for it; his primary skills lay in sailcraft and

slaughter, qualities which had gained him his ship *Bitch of Hell*, amongst other things... young Master Parry, most lately, very much included.

The man in question stayed insensible 'til a week on, however, when he puked blood, and the chirurgeon gave him up. "Iron-poisoned and sick with it, unto the very death: he'll not survive without help of a sort plain human men can't give. This wizard of yours is doomed, Captain."

Moments after, the drunken sawbones dispatched back to his own place, Rusk stood staring down at this fever-thrashing by-blow of uncanniness he'd thought to make a pet of, cursing himself a fool. Thinking: *Were this a woman, you'd've had her already five times over, consequences be damned; hell, put to port, nursed her healthy, and forced the bitch's hand in marriage if you wanted, or not...*

(The very idea of which, snake-striking him from the side—some neat spinster, hands folded prim over skirts, staring up at him under her lashes with Parry's same moon-eyes and finding him wanting, contempt immediate as lust—was enough to stick him in some vital point, and *twist*.)

All right, then.

Rusk put both hands on either side of Parry's throat, feeling for the collar's seam with his palms spanning jaw to collarbones, one rough thumb grazing the clavicle. Parry

strained that odd gaze of his open, squinted to focus, demanding: “What is’t you... do here, sir? What... are y’about?”

“Your freedom, man-witch. Now shut that pretty mouth, and let me t’my work.”

“I will *thank* you not to... use such terms with me—”

“Yes, yes. *Shush*, or I’ll clout ye back asleep.”

‘Round and ‘round, over and under, the metal warming beneath his touch. ‘Til at last, he felt some sort of spark prick all ten fingers at once, and knew where best to pull—the collar shivered itself apart, Parry gasping as strangulation’s threat went unfulfilled, and came away in sections, taking an uppermost rind of scar along with it. Thus revealed, the resultant inter-braiding of wounds was red, white and a sort of angry bluish-pink combined, a souvenir Parry might well never find himself rid of, no matter how long his recuperation; he put up his own hand as he fell back, reflexive, and spasmed at the feel, face disgust-contorted—the insult of owning such a Cain-mark far more immediate than any pain, at least for him.

Rusk shrugged, cracking his knuckles. “There—now cure yourself or die, for not one of us here can do it for ye.”

“I...” Parry turned his head for what must have been the first time in weeks, that handsome skull of his flopping ‘til his sweat-wet hair smeared the sheet, then found himself too weak to lift it back; the words came haltingly, at cost. “I am not...

trained, in such matters. Never knew, for sure... not 'til the finders called me out, and then..." He spat at the collar's two broken halves, carelessly dropped beside him. "Then, may all such bastards rot in Hell, I... spent every native jot of power I proved to have in keeping myself alive, while they put *that* on me—"

Rusk shook his head, unsympathetic. "Can't help ye there, what with *you* bein' the cunning one. So ye'll try and succeed, or try and fail; there'll be no man aboard my ship don't earn his keep, either way."

"God damn you, I don't know *how!*"

"An' you never will, ye don't damn well shift off your narrow arse and *try*, ye bloody lazy bugger! So *do*. See what happens."

Parry cursed, volubly, inventively, the words triply profane between those lips; Rusk leant forward and watched, fascinated, as he strained to summon magic from his pores, sweating it out like blood while continuing to damn Rusk at every turn. It crept along every limb, polishing his sickness away, burnishing him 'til he gleamed like metal heated too high to touch. His verminous prison-clothes crisped off and went floating away in a burnt husk that sprayed ash everywhere, peeling him dimly naked under a smeared coat of grey. Then cooled again to safe degrees, skin firming and paling slowly 'til

he lay there once more in need of a bath, but otherwise immaculate—breath slowing, fever gone. When he opened those eyes again, the tarnish-green tinge was cured at last, leaving nothing behind but silver.

*My mirror*, Rusk thought.

And: “Done,” Jerusalem Parry told him, only slightly hoarse, each drawling divine’s vowel a bared blade. “Are you satisfied?”

“Not entirely,” was Rusk’s answer. And before Parry could think to stop him, he’d already mashed their lips together, knocking mouths so hard he could fair feel their teeth grate.

Parry sprang as far back as the bed would allow for, slapping Rusk ‘cross the face with enough force it made the Captain laugh out loud; Rusk’d wear the mark some days, and gladly. Spitting, as he did: “Sir! I have not given you permission to use me thus, familiarly!”

“No more y’have. Still, ye do owe me somewhat, my Jerusha—for that’s how I’ll call you, seein’ ye owe me all for pullin’ ye from a straight-made path t’wards stake or gallows, and teachin’ you the use of your own skill, in the bargain.”

Parry gave his own laugh here, less pleased than bitter. “So, are you *God*, now, pirate?”

“I like that notion.”

“I’m sure. And me with no daughter to kill, on your altar.”

“Aye, well—there’s other payments might be negotiated, easily enough.”

Parry shook his head, abruptly sullen. Said, all unaware of his own ridiculousness: “I swore your Articles, Captain; my oath and my loyalty are yours already, as a Navy man. What right have you to demand more?”

“Oh, none, probably. But them as stay dumb don’t get their will, as you yourself may’ve had occasion t’note. And besides which...”

“Besides which?”

Rusk watched the man stare up at him, so innocent, in his odd way: This trick-box thing, crammed shut with impossible secrets, a puzzle ripe for forcible solution. It made him smile. Then lean in further—so close his breath might almost warm the man’s tongue—and add, his grin grown all the larger:

“...whoever said I was *askin’*?”

\* \* \*

Foolish as it might ring, given his looks, it soon ensued that Jerusalem Parry—so neat, finicky and otherwise over-learned—had been given pitiful little education, thus far, in fleshly matters; perhaps parsons kept their vows differently in Cornwall than they did in all the other places Rusk had made shore, in that they actually *kept* them. So Rusk delighted in taking his time with the man’s first few lessons, not least

because it so amused him to chart Parry's responses, those oh-so-winning little gasps and snarls, not to mention the blue- and green-flickering jolts of what he took to be power expelled along with 'em—magical might as purest product, undirected and aimless, unable to give itself substance as long as he carefully kept its master far too distracted to form spells, even in his own mind.

Licking down along the collar-scar, feeling the wizard's sex jump in his hand like a fish while he stirred him from inside out, puffed hard himself as any iron stew-ladle by the very feel of Parry's intactness giving way; Rusk pressed him back down even as Parry strained up, bruise-sudden, seeing him flush with an embarrassed admixture of pain and pleasure combined and thinking, happy: *If that's your poison, Master Parry, then I believe I can well-afford t'supply your needs... for I do like a bit of tussle myself, y'see, both in bed, and out of it.*

After, Parry huffed into the sheets' rucked nest, gave one long shudder, and made as if to laugh, before thinking better of it. "Do you treat all your guests thus?" he asked, at last.

"Only those as strike my fancy. Ye may call me shark, my Jerusha, with all manner of creatures my meat, once they've fallen into my grip."

"You mistake yourself, sir, as ever; there is no way in which I am *yours*."

“Certain parts of your corpus might argue the point, I think, if you’re honest.” Adding, as Parry hissed: “Yet let us not be cross wi’ each other, Hell-priest—I’ve done *you* some small service as well, after all, have I not?”

“Aye, and gotten full measure for it.”

“Oh, not quite yet—for there’s more than one reason I brought you out of bondage, and we’ve yet t’negotiate *those* terms. Now tell me: Can you raise storms?”

Parry sighed, turning over, and studied the cabin’s roof-beams awhile before answering. “Apparently yes,” he replied, at last, “since that’s what the finders charged me with, after those Navy sheep branded me a Jonah. It’s instinct—easy enough, even without ritual.”

“Hmm. And a ship—could you raise such as that?”

“One wrecked already, you mean? Perhaps, if you gave me her name, or something from a survivor—I haven’t tried, certainly. But—” He pondered, seemingly glad to have something to consider besides the ways in which he’d just been so thoroughly outraged. “—it seems likely, with preparation enough.”

“A man from the dead, then. Could ye raise *him*?”

“Not for long, for none can; never *permanently*, if that’s your aim. Death is the great leveler, the one boundary all magicals fear to cross.”

“Then I know aught you don’t, for I’ve seen whole factories full of men brought back upright and set t’work, mouths sewn shut lest they taste salt, and wake.”

“Yes, well: Those men aren’t actually *dead* to begin with, in the main...”

Rusk gave a wolf’s smile. “What a treasure y’are,” he said, “well worth the finding, and cheap at twice the price.”

Some more sport ensued, to which Parry—perhaps not seeing the point, given how intent Rusk was on ignoring his protests—raised little immediate objection. After, however, he demanded fresh raiment, then complained (once supplied with the only clothes available, scaled for Rusk’s own long body) that they didn’t fit.

But: “We’re aboard-ship,” Rusk pointed out, blithely, “and even I cannot conjure things entire from the air whilst in transit—not like some.”

It was enough. The next time he saw him, Parry was making ginger little steps ‘cross-deck, arrayed head-to-toe in the neat, well-tailored black he’d once aspired to wear for slightly less nefarious purposes. The breeze lifted his brown hair, untied and disordered; his eyes, narrowed against the horizon, cast back its light like a cat’s. Rusk all but wanted to take him again there and then, right on the fo’c’sle, in full view

of any who might aspire to liberate him from their current arrangement.

Yet when he hove in for only the briefest embrace, Parry showed himself unamused.

“No.”

“Come, don’t be foolish: You liked it well enough last night, same as I.”

“Convinced yourself, have you? And still I say *no*, nevertheless: you’ve had all you will from me, in that respect—consider my price of passage paid. So I’ll keep my own place from now on, if you’ll be so good as to allow me the privilege.”

“Ship-mates only, eh? And that’ll last, ye reckon? Very well, then, Jerusha, don’t take on so. I’ll require no more... liberties, not without invitation.”

“Which you will not gain, sir, know that now.”

“Ah, brave words. For all things change at sea, Master Parry, as She herself be wont to; the sea is deep, after all, and little-known. You’ll learn.”

\* \* \*

*Bitch of Hell* put in at Porte Macoute, to re-stock and recreate. Parry would have refused to go ashore entirely, but that Rusk promised to introduce him to a practicing sorceress of his acquaintance. This was his “cousin”, Tante Ankolee, who’d helped her Maman nurse Rusk up along with his elder

siblings, before eventually buying her way free of the whole familial mess; she and Parry sat and talked, quietly, Parry minding his manners far more with her than he'd ever bothered to with Rusk, regardless of the bone through her blue-lined lower lip and the bells in her stiff-locked hair.

When they were done, she sent Parry off with a serving-wench to pick and choose amongst her wide collection of fetish-objects for seeds to grow his own personal hex-bag from, then poured Rusk a shot of rum, lit it, and watched him sip it down, tenting her clawed fingers. "What-all you know of that man in there, Solomon Rusk, save for he make your trousers tight? That's some trouble you done brung on, little half-me-blood; may have saved him the rope, sure, but I bet he ain't thank you for it."

Rusk shrugged. "There you'd be wrong, big sis—for 'tis my experience thus far Jerusalem Parry always recalls his courtesies, whether he means 'em or no."

"Oh, eh? Well, he a pure devil in the makin', set t'grow up tree-high once he come into his full power, no mistake—but better yet, he hate you bad, now an' forever. You show him what him nah want t'know, an' he don't find you charmin' for it."

"Ah, he'll forgive me soon enough, once he finds there's no other way; poor creature *was* raised Christian, after all."

“You think?”

“’Tis a certainty.”

“Nah, I don’t believe ‘tis. ‘Cause that a man of *pride* you got yourself there, chuck—the sort holds grudges and plots on ‘em too, remorseless, no matter what the way him feel in your bed make you want t’believe.”

“Let him plot! ‘Tis my ship we sail on, no way ‘round that.”

“And what you think he care?” She gave a snap, contemptuous. “*This* much, like any other cunning-folk. ‘Sides which, ‘twasn’t always so. Was it?”

True enough. So instead of bothering trying to deny it, Rusk merely demanded—“Tell me how best t’protect myself, then, witch. Or leave me t’my fate.”

“Chain him up an’ sink him deep, that the *best* way. But you won’t do that.” Sighing, as he shook his head: “Well, then... give me that eye o’yours and I work me will on’t, rub it wi’ the blood we share on me mirror, an’ see what rise up in the reflection. For we do be the same line, after all, wi’ that one ancestress of yours puissant as any ten o’mine; should help, to a point.”

Given how little its loss troubled him, these days, Rusk felt an almost foolish stab of surprise to hear her even mention the gewgaw’s mere existence. But he popped it free nonetheless, and handed it over—ivory inlaid with jet, the skull and crossed

bones winking back up at him from his own salt-rough palm. “I’ll wait on the beach, shall I?”

“As ya please,” Tante Ankolee replied, all blissful-unaware how she parroted the same man whose ill-wishes she sought to keep her roguish “little” half-brother safe from.

Rusk lay on the sand, stretched out and warming himself, ‘til the sun dipped low enough to turn everything behind his lids deep red. At which point he heard crunching to his right hand and knew without even looking how Parry drew near, his booted steps sure and light as any other stalking thing.

“She has your looks, on close examination,” Parry said, settling himself beside with arms wrapped ‘round his knees, “for which, one can only assume, she is hardly to be blamed.”

“A misfortune most Rusks share,” the Captain agreed, still not opening his eyes. “Her dam and mine were bed-mates, of a sort, though seldom sharing the same one at the same time.”

“Ah, so your father kept slaves; well, then. Perhaps that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“How you have no qualm treating others thus, free *or* slave. But then again—if that was truly what you wanted, in my case, you would have done better to leave the collar on.”

At this, Rusk did rise up, casting both his remaining eye and the empty socket a Frenchman’s sword had made of the

other down Parry's way. He saw the man's fine, lean face even more set than usual, his shoulders stiff, ever-so-slightly a-tremble in the dimming light, and felt something soften in himself, if only for a moment.

"Nay, Jerusha—much as I may covet t'see you on your knees, it's little use you'd be t'me that way. And while I run no charity, to work a ship, any ship—pirate, Navy, the most mundane-lawful tub ever sailed—is indenture, as all aboard her know, with me no exception, my Captain's colors aside. For so long as she's mine to command I'm owned just as sure, by the *Bitch of Hell* herself."

For a moment, Parry had nothing to offer by way of reply—and indeed, that moment stretched on so long, Rusk almost thought he had made him understand.

But then:

"This is easily said," Parry told him, coldly, making his own feet and meeting Rusk's half-gaze straight-on. And turned a black-clad back on him, spine no longer anything but ramrod-straight.

That night, when Tante Ankolee gave him back his eye, Rusk felt it sting slightly as it went in: her "protection", no doubt, and just as well. For from what he could see, he would probably need it.

\* \* \*

The bag Rusk's cousin had helped him start grew apace, along with Parry's powers, and he and the Captain settled into an uncomfortable sort of working partnership, accordingly. Since the wizard was learning on his feet, however, this arrangement did not come without dangers: when they ran into doldrums, Parry raised a wind to nudge them free that quickswelled into a full-blown storm and almost swamped them, whilst a glamour meant to slip them close enough to a prize to board her unawares lit them up with ghostly flame, which had the exact opposite effect, drawing cannonballs like hail.

Still, even Rusk had to own himself impressed when Parry split the ship they'd just been almost sunk by down its midsection like a hot knife with one wave and used the two halves to cobble a new hull from, shelling the *Bitch* in strange wood; the result dressed them permanently in false colors, making them seem no threat at all from a distance so they might make striking range at double-time, then run up the black flag.

At the revels, after, Parry sat alone and un-drinking, on the very edge of the crowd. When Rusk passed him the rum he refused it: No surprise, there. "I seldom imbibe," Parry told him, shortly.

"Seldom' still leaves me aught t'work with, ye realize."

Caught unawares, Parry had already half-started to laugh before he could quite stop himself but choked it off a second on, quick enough to rasp in the throat. “To proclaim oneself abstemious entire aboard a Navy vessel would have been foolish in the extreme,” he said, at last. “Assuming you care to know my logic, on the matter.”

“Ah, it always does me good t’hear ye use such large words in casual conversation, my Jerusha; broadens the mind, it does, and lifts me own vocabulary likewise.” Thus rebuffed, Rusk drank the dram down himself, and sighed. “Still, I cannot but think from your manner that ye have not yet forgiven me my trespasses, as that Book you once studied says ye should. What say you?”

“That you may count yourself entirely correct, in such a conclusion.”

“A pity. I’ll leave you to your brooding, then, shall I?”

“Please.”

Rusk sketched him a bow, received a haughty nod in return, and withdrew some few paces, taking up a watchful position. When the fires burnt low enough, his crew began to pair off—some with native girls, some with each other—and he returned, softly, to where Parry now dozed on one hand, his grim head nodding. Then waited ‘til even a sharp clap next to

one ear was no longer sufficient to rouse him and gathered him up, retiring to what he'd begun to think of as their cabin.

Morning found them both stripped down and well-ensnared, with one of Parry's fearsome cheekbones dug deep above where Rusk's black heart beat strongest through the fur of his chest. As far as Rusk could tell, the delights of the night had been entirely mutual, in their moment—but by the time Parry's eyes opened fully he was angry again, small hairs all over his body fair lifting with painful little blue-green sparks yet generally schooled to a cold stillness almost more frightening to witness than any full loss of control: as though he knew himself far too badly-enraged to give way to his passions, lest they stream from him so strongly they ripped the very ship 'round he and Rusk to shreds.

"I see you have broke your word to me, sir," he managed, at last, teeth so hard-set Rusk could hear their grind in every syllable. Determined to stay unaffected, however, he merely yawned and stretched himself before inquiring, all lazy charm

—

"What word would that be, exactly?"

"That you would trust I keep my oaths and let me do as I list, so long as I bend my skills to support your ventures. That you would *not* require—*this* of me, as a simple measure of respect."

“I required nothing: Showed my gratitude, only, for yesterday’s assistance. And from what-all I saw, ‘twas entirely your own idea t’accept the proof of it so... embracingly.”

Parry bared his teeth, silver-penny gaze now gone truly dangerous. “I’m sure! Yet enlighten me, nevertheless: What was it failed to convince you *I am no one to be thus trifled with*, Solomon Rusk? Surely even a barbarian idiot like you must grasp *that* small fact about me, if nothing else—”

“Aye, I grasp it, well enough!” Rusk snapped back, rolling them both in one quick twist, so he wound up once more most securely on top. Then added, right into Parry’s face, as the man all but bit at him like a trapped weasel: “Yet I can’t help but note, powerful as y’are, at no point in the preceding did I ever once see you try to *stop* me doin’ as I wished, not s’long as it was makin’ ye jump an’ sing! So don’t play the re-stitched virgin wi’ me, ‘sir’—’tis hardly my fault I choose not t’believe these lies ye tell yourself, ‘specially when I have such *hard evidence* t’the contrary—”

—and here he reached down between them, taking hold of the “evidence” he referenced with force enough to make Parry start back, as if scalded. Which Rusk was later forced to admit might *not*, in fact, have been the best possible way to calm the man’s ruffled dignity, rather than rouse his ire to its furthest possible pitch—

Still: “*You will let me GO!*” Jerusalem Parry roared at him, springing only momentarily naked from the bed, before a single gesture restored at least the illusion of clothing. “*You will leave me be from now on, you bloody-handed bastard, or I will stave this Bitch of yours in and go down along with her, gladly—this I so swear, by every star above and demon below! Do you hear me, Captain?*”

His pale face bright-flushed as it'd been during his first fever, lips near shaking, clerk's hands clawed like some fee-cheated Tortuga whore's. And how Rusk found himself driven to outright laughter at the sight, guffaws ringing both long and loud, hilariously unimpressed—which again, in retrospect, might well have been a certain grade of error, on his part.

“As ye say,” he replied, finally. “Or perhaps I'll just wait 'til you're next in need of a good, long swive and see what happens *then*, shall I? When ye shut your eyes and lay back, waitin' for me t'overbear ye—play devil t'your saint and give ye what ye really want, in a way that deeds me the lion's share of guilt whilst you stay safely clean, my sweet Jerusha, at any cost: all high and mighty, with your vicar's ways and your Hell-born powers. What a life it is ye've made for yourself, man... so sadly complicated, wi' mine th'exact opposite! Yet if that's what ye *require*, I s'pose, 'tis the very least I can do...”

Too much, too far; no time left for *any* sort of apology to mend the rift he'd just ripped wide with words between 'em, even had Rusk thought to make one. In the sudden silence, Parry simply widened those eyes at him and vanished, winked out, so fast Rusk thought it unlikely he'd meant to, beforehand.

Snorting at these dramatics, therefore, Rusk turned over into their shared warmth and drifted back asleep again, all blissfully unknowing of events to come, which he himself had already set in motion.

\* \* \*

Things did not play themselves out immediately, in terms of Parry's retribution for what he considered Rusk's many insults—but then again, they almost never do. In Rusk's sleep, the *Bitch* whispered warnings to its master that he did not care to hear and thus did not remember, upon waking; told him how he was trapped and where best to twist if he truly wished his freedom, only to find itself ignored. After which, having done all it could, it creaked a sad song to itself as it cut the water, knowing him fore-doomed.

Far behind, Tante Ankolee felt the *Bitch's* mournings nudge at the corner of her own dreams and stole a quick look through Rusk's witched eye, shaking her head at what she glimpsed there: Jerusalem Parry, back always kept carefully turned to the man who still thought them lovers, his neat mind

deep-engaged in plotting out the arcane mechanics of his revenge.

Hearing Rusk's voice in her own mind, bluff and hearty, so completely self-deluded: *He'll forgive me soon enough, once he finds there's no other way. 'Tis a certainty.*

And thinking, sadly, in her turn: *But here's ya worst mistake, little half-me-blood, for that man wasn't never no true Christian, ta begin wi'. What he knows best he learnt nah from the books he study, Good or no, but at his own witch-dam's knee, her he saw swung in the wind for wantin' freedom 'bove all from the same fat squire got 'im on her, in the first place. Him in he fancy coat, who sign her death-warrant whilst drunk then don't even stay ta see her neck snap.*

*And would I help ya, I only could? For you yourself, brother mine—aye, mayhap. But then I think of my Maman, an' yours. Of the man made us both, but let you run free soon's ya told him that was ya will, an' kept me chain at the neck to raise him other bastards, 'til at last I make enough ta pay him for me freedom....*

Between Rusk's narrowed lids, Tante Ankolee caught sight of Parry looking back over his shoulder, studying the small reflection that moved there with care. Felt Rusk notice and smile, all teeth, as though he truly believed such attentions

meant for him—and he did, of course. Of course. Since Solomon Rusk, like every other man of his line, had lived his life thus far in a world where *all* things bent to his desires, eventually.

Parry too, though—yes, even now, when he thought he'd been taught better. Which was, she supposed, just the sad damn pity of it.

*Whites like hiss'n' roaches, spreadin' out all 'cross this world wi' no regard for any dream but they own, an' always thinkin' they know best. Yet there be surprises ahead for both ya stubborn fools, in this bed ya make together.*

No help for it, on her end; those watery miles between would prevent any useful intervention even if she didn't have other business, which she very much did. So she sighed and withdrew, leaving them to it.

\* \* \*

Some days on—a period which had seen Jerusalem Parry shun Rusk's company almost entirely, except where simple lack of space made that option an impossibility—Rusk noticed a new recruit, close-wrapped in layers of rags, whose looks disturbed him on some level far beyond mere instinct: Squat but hunched, his eight grey-skinned fingers webbed and nailless, pallid skin visibly touched with chill. He did his work clumsily, forever turning a too-thick neck to train first one

wide-spaced, lidless-seeming flat black eye on the task to hand, then the other; even what little of the currently sinking sun was left appeared to pain him, making him bare a double-jawful of serrated teeth in an aggressive sort of wince, as though he wanted to take a bite out of it and bring on a far more comfortable flood of dark.

“That man suits me ill,” Rusk told the bo’sun. “Who is he?”

With a grimace of his own, equal-uncomfortable: “Mister... Dolomance, Master Parry says ‘is name is, Cap’n.”

“And is *Master Parry* engaging hands, now? We will have words, he and I, once he sees fit t’re-evince himself. Where’s this troll of his hail from, exactly?”

“Over the side, Cap’n.”

Now it was Rusk’s turn to frown. “Off another ship, ye mean? That last prize? What was the name—”

“*Jocasta’s Sin*, and nay, sir. ‘Twas *up*, he came, that one—from the water.”

Spurred by angry surprise, Rusk turned back to the rough semblance of a man in question, barking: “Aye? And what gave ye the notion you were wanted, fish-belly, t’scale my ship’s sides without due invitation?” No reply; the man barely seemed aware he was being spoke to, prompting Rusk to peer closer, checking whether his ears were over-muffled, slit—or even *there*, to begin with. “Are ye deaf?” he demanded, raising his

voice, with no visible effect. “*I am Captain, here: Answer, damn you!*”

But: “He cannot,” that same cold voice he’d so often hoped to hear told Rusk, from his elbow. “Nor would he if he could, seeing he works for *me*, not you—I, who made him thus.”

Rusk looked down on Parry, eyebrows quirking. “Mute, you mean?”

A small, grim smile. “Not as such. But then, his sort has very little use for speech, in the normal way; not here *above* the water, any road.”

The “recruit” made a creaky, squeaky noise deep in his throat, straightening to the extent his bent spine would let him—half a squeal, half a snarl, and nothing near to human. And suddenly, Rusk *knew* this thing’s profile, its silhouette, glimpsed often enough before, under very different circumstances; bent ever-so-slightly out of skew through the ocean’s lens, and deformed by threat and motion. How that groove between its shoulders marked where its fin should arch, whilst those awful teeth would fit key-into-lock neat with almost any shipwreck survivor’s wound Rusk had ever seen treated, those men crazed from time adrift and torn everywhere that flesh had touched water, worn down to raw flesh and exposed bone by what less predatory sailors were wont to name the Wolves of the Sea.

Parry crossed his arms and nodded, a satisfied schoolmaster. “Ah, I see you finally take my meaning, sir. Indeed, to quote you yourself, on another occasion—you may call him *shark*, Captain. With all creatures being his meat, that take his fancy.”

They stared at each other a long moment, during which Rusk could feel the bo’sun—along with every other man on deck, aside from Parry’s creation—cast eyes his way as well, waiting to see what might come of this confrontation. And though the wizard knew enough to school his face, Rusk nevertheless took due note of how his fingers flexed all unconscious, blue and green St. Elmo’s fire dancing between and similar-hued sparks set dancing ‘cross their knuckles as a clear demonstration of just how much they longed to form fists.

“Oh, Jerusha,” Rusk said, almost sadly, his own hand moving to caress his sword’s hilt. “What is’t you’ve done now, ye mad bitch?”

“Freed myself at last from *you*, I venture, albeit at Mister Dolomance here’s expense. Yes, I teased him up, bent him to my will, re-made him, as you see... slaved myself one of the sea’s fiercest monsters, and without even a collar. For the which he now hates me, true—but then, I require only his obedience, not his affections. He will do my bidding from now on, neat as any devil but without the contract, thus posing no

threat to my immortal soul beyond the immediate; guard my body in all matters, most particularly from those who lie, and cheat, and do not keep their promises.”

“By which you mean myself, I suppose.”

“Do you? Well. If the shoe fits.”

Such a wild tone, lurking at these last words’ very back, knit from equal parts despair and triumph; the bo’sun took a half-step back at their sound alone, though Rusk made himself stand fast. Telling Parry, as he did—

“So you’re angry wi’ me yet, as I knew already. But this is my ship, whose Articles you swore to on your honor, as a Navy man. Does none of that mean naught t’you, anymore? What’s your intent?”

“Can you not guess? Then I will be plain: Since you have had your way with *me*, sir—and on several different occasions, no less—now it is both turn-about and catch-who-can, as the old phrases go. And thus, while the play involved may not perhaps be entirely *fair*, by some standards, yet it is just enough, to my mind.”

“Mutiny, then. Ye seek the Captaincy, in my place.”  
“If the crew agree.”

“And ye think they *will*, between us—pick you over *me*, ye bedwarmer, who never went over-side or fought hand-to-hand

in your life? Ye sly jest of a jumped-up Cornish marsh-witch's get, wi' your fake-vicar's airs and graces?"

"They've little enough choice, considering. As little choice, almost, as you gave me."

At this last blatant ingratitude, however, Rusk drew himself up full height, unsheathing, while Parry reached for his hex-bag just as fast, whipping it free, aiming it like a pistol. "And who was it popped your lock, Hell-priest," Rusk heard himself declaim, "when you would've died like a sick bloody dog, iron-yoked still, had I not? For which reason alone ye'll do well t'keep a civil tongue in your head, damn your eyes!"

"*I have been civil with you throughout*, the more fool me! Would to God I had been *less* so, seeing all the good it did!"

A *man of pride*, Tante Ankolee had called Parry, once—and wasn't it so, Rusk only realized now; *wasn't* it, though, by Hell and blast. Pride poison-rich as any stingray's sac, the sort that'd make a man always more willing to break than bend, no matter what might be gained from doing the latter. Which meant, well though he suddenly understood the full range of his own mistakes, that there'd been no way for him to've ever had his will with Jerusalem Parry and walked away after with both 'em content, let alone *happy*....

*I did have ye, though, sure enough*, Rusk thought, meeting Parry's silver eyes, almost sure the man could hear him. *Made*

*ye like it too, in our congress's fullest bloom. And by the very way you behave, 'sir'—no matter all your most fervent protests t'the contrary—I'd say I have ye still.*

Once more, he watched Parry nod, slightly. Thinking, in return: *Perhaps. But where magic is concerned, things go both ways, or so that cousin of yours tutored me. So here is my curse, pirate, my gratitude made flesh for all you gave, and took....*

(What you put in me, I put in you; what we share I turn against us both, accounting my own pain of no moment, so long as *you* suffer. By the bond between us I bind you fast and draw you down. Draw out your life's root, and sever it.)

*So, you admit it: Ye'd have nothing at all, not even t'curse me with, were it not for me.*

Rusk felt the spell's price flare behind his eye, a split coal screwed deep in the empty socket, and knew exactly what it was costing Parry to work it, in that very moment—a sick joke, overall, spurring him to laugh yet one more time, full in the man's self-sorry face. Scoffing, as he did—

“An apology, then, for givin' ye what you weren't canny enough t'know ye wanted? Because I took *liberties*? Well, be that as it may: in this case, as in all others, I scorn t'defend my actions, except with steel!”

Here he lunged forward, sword's point aimed straight towards the pale shadow of Parry's neck-scar, where it peeked from his cravat's high twist. Only to meet something else halfway, come barreling into him sidelong like a leaping whale: "Dolomance", Parry's curst creation, its teeth suddenly all ablaze with sorcerous fire, snapping-to like a trap about his wrist and biting the bone of it through entirely, in one fell *chunk*.

The pain was so severe Rusk swooned, coming to again in his own vomit, his nauseate agony set to the cracking, snuffling sound of a shark-were at its repast. Spasming, he jack-knifed left and came nose-to-snout with the thing, its bloodstained mouth still unnaturally aflame, and managed, groaning: "Wh-what, wh—*why*—?"

Standing above, too damnably calm by far, Parry paused to order first one cuff, then the other. "The process," he said, at last, "Is called cauterization."

Rusk spit bile. "Because ye... want me t'live crippled, is... that it?"

"Because I want you alive, yes, for now. 'Til I say otherwise."

"And just how long will *that* be, I wonder?"

"A fair question. How long can you hold your breath?"

\* \* \*

“No ship can have two captains,” the *Bitch*’s former master used to claim, before Rusk overtook him. “‘Tis not natural, and the sea bears no unnaturalness.” Which was good advice, certainly, or always had been, before....

That man never had the ill-luck to meet with such as Jerusalem Parry, though, let alone make the supreme error of lying down with him, in both the phrase’s prime senses. And Rusk thought he might well’ve given thanks for avoiding that opportunity, had he only found himself still far enough above-waves to venture a verdict on the matter.

“Others might maroon you,” Parry had told him as the crew’s four strongest members bound Rusk’s pain-stiff carcass, all apologetic, to the *Bitch of Hell*’s anchor-chain. “But I am not over-merciful by nature, as you have no doubt noted, and have no interest in giving second chances. This ship is mine, from now on; your death will christen it with blood, as is only lore-ful.”

*Oh, aye*, Rusk thought, far too wearied by dolor to summon much of a struggle. Still, it would all be over soon enough, if not immediately....

(and there was that vaunted lack of mercy showing through, in the very proclaimed method of his demise—for keel-hauling was one of the illest deaths imaginable, a terror seldom more than threatened, combining as it did all the varied

and central terrors of drowning, great bodily suffering and utter humiliation)

Soon enough, yes. Or so he had believed.

“I *should* thank you, I suppose,” Parry said, while they hauled him up, “for this change my durance seems to’ve wrought in me, since truly—even at my lowest, in that gaolship’s brig—I never looked to be so powerful as I am now. Then again, my mother’s marsh *was* salten, so perhaps I was always destined to find my power’s depth at sea.”

Rusk touched a too-dry tongue to bleeding lips, and eked out: “Hmm, might... be. So... will ye?”

“Give thanks, to you?” Parry cast that cold metal stare his way, one last time, lips pursing in a way Rusk would once have found intolerable for very different reasons. Then, at last: “I think not.”

But this, too, was very little surprise.

“Stay... ever as y’are, my Jerusha,” Rusk croaked while the weeping sailors heaved to, swinging him over the side. “I’ll... miss ye.”

“I cannot say the same, sir,” was Parry’s reply.

Then Rusk closed his eye, and let the water take him. Only to learn that for some unlucky few—himself very much included, it turned out—death was not always as he’d been previously given to believe, prior to shedding his mortal coil.

Now that he was no longer encumbered by the flesh, Rusk could easily see everything he'd never been privy to: lines of power leaking from Parry to Mister Dolomance and back again, a double set of chains; from his own ruined wreck of a body to the *Bitch's* hull, in the brief instant Parry stooped to pluck Rusk's still-witched eyeball out and slip it in his bag, like spoils of war, before directing "his" crew to shove their former Captain's corpse off-deck through the scuppers same as so much other rubbish. Or the curse he'd never known he was capable of placing on sweet Master Jerusha bleeding out from that same bespelled item, tainting every other hex-ingredient and entering Parry's heart through the breast-pocket, where it soon commenced to circulate through his system like any other humor.

*Seem you the same sort'a Rusk as me after all, no matter the size o'that piece 'tween ya legs, or what-all it pull ya fiercest towards, Tante Ankolee might have said, had he ever thought to ask her. Born of bad angels on one side an' bad men on th'other, a ten-mile-long chain o' witches, pirates, and pirate-witches—an' just like that Master Parry o'yours know all too well, t'him an' your cost both, 'tis never no fit measure ta look only at what a man already done ta foresee what him yet may do, under th'exact right circumstance. Why is't ya*

*think y'have such a hunger for him, anyhow, but that ya finally recognize y'own kind?*

*(Which maybe explains it th'other way, too, Rusk's traitor thoughts would have chimed in, if so. Why he felt the same pull as regards to me, and just as strong, though Christ knows he'd do anything not t'admit it.)*

Anything and everything, yes. As current circumstances only went to prove.

When the *Bitch* returned to Porte Macoute, Rusk's ghost stood watching from her deck when Parry tried to come ashore, only to start bleeding out at every pore the second his boot-soles touched land. Saw Mister Dolomance drag him into the surf and swim back at double-time, inhumanly swift, that same passage rubbing Parry raw 'cross the chest and inner arms against the shark-were's sandpaper skin, even with two separate layers of clothing between.

Later, with Parry cocooned in healing power just like that first night they'd shared together, Rusk stretched himself invisibly alongside and passed a gelid ghost-hand down his beloved murderer's side, touching each of the wizard's organs in turn and saving that one he liked best for last. Stroked him once more from the inside out in an entirely different way, sowing gooseflesh over his blood-smeared new-grown hide, and whispered, in Parry's fever-bright ear:

*Shield yourself from me all ye please, in whichever ways ye choose, yet I am here always, nonetheless. The Bitch is my command as much as yours, forever, Master Parry. A sad truth, and one which must drag it down eventually, bringing you along with it....*

*How it comes I know not, but know this: I will be there that day, that hour, at the very striking of your doom; we will meet again beneath the water, where I will hold you tight, as your own flesh casts you free. I will never let you go.*

\* \* \*

And so it did come to pass, eventually, but not for years yet. The which is another tale completely, told by one who would never know—or care to know—what you now do: how two equal-obdurate men may always be the death of each other, fast or slow, especially when magic is involved.

Said Solomon Rusk to Jerusalem Parry, licking this last truth—with a wintry ghost-tongue—directly onto the drum: *shouldn't've killed me on me own ship, my Jerusha, ye really wished t'be rid of me.* And while Parry moaned and tossed in sorcerous sleep, all unknowing of why he felt so cold, the *Bitch of Hell* sailed on, secure in its two captains' care.

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the BCS Website

*Former film critic and teacher turned award-winning horror author Gemma Files is best-known for her Hexslinger novel series ([A Book of Tongues](#), [A Rope of Thorns](#), and [A Tree of Bones](#)). She has also published two collections of short fiction and two chapbooks of poetry, and she is currently hard at work on her fourth novel. The adventures of Jerusalem Parry and Solomon Rusk from “Two Captains” continue in “Trap-Weed” ([Clockwork Phoenix 4](#)) and “The Salt Wedding” ([Kaleidotrope](#), early 2015).*

Support BCS

BCS on 

BCS on 

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

## ELSE THIS, NOTHING EVER GROWS

by Sylvia Linsteadt

### **I. Long-Nose**

I only wanted him for his clean, warm blood, you know. And for the brightness of him. He was a normal man with smooth arms and legs, who ate gentle, ripe things like apricots and loaves of bread; like almonds and deer meat. Mine is the realm of decay, of rot and decomposition, the underbelly of every one of your wild poppies and love stories. I only wanted to hang on to something that still flourished, touch it before the rot set in. I wanted to know what that was like.

So did my mother. We liked having captive things, fresh and blood-beating creatures—men and women who worshipped their Christ faithfully and shone positively blue with all their yearning, all that repentance and prudence. We kept perfect chickadees who sang in cages and great broad grizzlies, like he was for all that time; golden-eyed, so strong they held off decay with their shoulders, the whole black weight of it.

We came here because you brought us along with your dreams for gold. You brought your monsters, your devils,

goblins, imps, gods. The figures you prayed to and cursed, blamed for your bad luck, for your or lust or your rage. Northern Europeans brought my kind, but our only purview is decay, not evil, like they think. Not deceit and trickery, only rot—the way worms take over a body and turn it back to earth; the purple fungi, the weathered world, all the places it releases itself back to the ground, crumbling and falling and getting consumed.

You brought us with you in your dreams and quiet longings, between your intolerant God and his merciful Son. You call us evil, but ours is only the profit of equilibrium, of right balance, the necessity of worms. You've carved the rivers to carcasses with your hoses, for that shining stuff, dense as stars. You've ripped the others here, the ones before you, who have no need for Gods and Devils, because theirs is a living land, flicker and cougar and oak the true deities. You've torn up their bodies for sport or a sack of gold-dust, their lands for your own breakfast table.

So do not call me evil for taking only one of you, a cursed boy. My mother did it to him anyway, the grizzly body, the curse, so I could have him. Do not hate me for wanting a little bit of what you want.

\* \* \*

## **II. Girl**

When the bear came, we were so poor that the towhees had stopped fearing us and would land casually on our shoulders, as if we were trees. We were saving up our energy, our hunger, slowly, as trees do. Not moving much. Trying to eat up the sun. We lived, my father and three sisters and I, in a hut, one room, in the foothills of those mountains that turn a savage blue and white at dusk, the Sierra Nevadas, where the gold flowed from. The Sierras threw down a blue shade when the grizzly bear came, granite dust and snow in his fur. Scars made bare patches on his shoulders. From the bullfights, he told me, those goring horns.

It was later on he told me that; later when I lived in his home of gold-hung tree roots and wildflowers in pewter vases, which he must have picked at night when his hands were human, for me to smell and to smile at. I liked sweet things then, silly things, because they were new to me. I ate bowls of sugarcubes he brought to me in sacks shipped from the Caribbean. He caught the most tender brush rabbits and quail for me in his merciful claws, killing them instantly. I didn't suck their marrow, like I used to, in that other life of the miner's shack and the endless dust, because I didn't need to. I wasn't starving. I wanted to be wasteful and to toss those bones still heavy with food into the fire, knowing there was more, always more.

Years of hunger will do this to you. I hoarded things in my stomach, my pockets, the brim of my sunhat: cheeses and pretty ribbons, Indian paintbrush flowers and gold flakes and wishbones, the bulbs of wild onions, and nails, because my father always made us collect them off the ground, rusty and misshapen. Nails were a luxury. I never could shake the habit, that smell of rust, like blood, on my fingers.

\* \* \*

### III. Long-Nose

I didn't get him in the end. You know this. It is always a girl, young and pure, who does. She was a miner's daughter, clean in heart somehow beneath the dirt of deceit and greed she grew up in.

They call us trolls, the Norwegians who dragged us along in their mildewed wagons, in the immaculate folds of their linens aired daily by their wives. Then they forgot us. The Irish forgot their banshees, the Portuguese their *mouras encantadas*, the Chinese their Ba Gu Jing. We all dwell in the forgotten places now, the barren, the desolate and windswept. We live in the abandoned barn, the site of an old village, perhaps the one we were first brought to, rolled up in their stockings and bedskirts, beside the canning jars and their single precious silk. We are bedded down in the roadside plants

you call weeds—the dandelions, wild onions, nettles. All nourishing; you've just forgotten.

We trolls, we've taken the Southeast Farallon. We like it for its winds, for the mildewed lighthouse keeper's attics, the ghosts of children killed by typhus and sailors killed by waves. For the paint of sea bird guano and sea lion afterbirth. We live in the granite caves, in tunnels carved deep into that ridge that was once mountainous, now surrounded by sea. The lighthouse keepers don't notice us, because they don't believe we are here. And the island is so torn with violent winds and strange bird-cries, with a frightening melancholy, that we are not out of place.

I knew he would not have loved me. My mother told me he would come to, one day, when he was old and ugly too. But I know that no one loves a troll. No one loves the rot and weather and disintegration of things. They don't remember that else this, nothing ever grows.

\* \* \*

#### **IV. Girl**

When the grizzly came to our door, my sisters and I were sewing up the holes in our clothes. It was the heart of winter. Snow dragged the base of our house deeper into the ground. My father was at his desk across the room, nearest the door. I call him a miner, but he hadn't stuck a pan in cold stream

water or blasted the riverbanks in three years. He wrote articles for a local newspaper, just enough to keep us alive.

He had a miner's broken heart, the grief of someone whose boyhood dreams, burnished with gold and hope, had been broken down by those years of frenzy. He couldn't have known that bringing his young family—wife and three little girls—would have destroyed his chances. You had to be mean, and solitary, to make it. No one to protect or love but yourself. He didn't realize what streams full of gold, wild country and native tribes who had little avarice and no steel or gunpowder, did to lawless men. What so many men together did to men.

Our mother died a year after she arrived, of tuberculosis, but now I think it was homesickness that killed her. Not for the flat green land of Muskego, Wisconsin, where we had come from, but Norway, where she was born. Where tradition was rooted like old linden trees and change came slowly, measured and even. In these Sierra Nevada foothills, the mountains themselves so harsh in their beauty, so unpredictable, change and chaos are constant. The world is being built up again from gold-dust and dirt and blood. Nothing is certain, nothing is set. The violent openness of it killed her.

When the grizzly bear came to our door, I was mending the holes in my father's shirt. When you have only a few things to wear, there's a constant battle against holes and weak places.

You are always up against the endless friction of life; its weathering.

My father opened the door from where he sat at his desk. A grizzly bear stood on the tiny porch in the winter night. He looked right at me, straight through. His winter coat was in, gloss and shag, and he was wider than two men. The musk of wilderness came through the door with him, halfway in. His whole body would have taken up all the space we had for standing. None of us started—the stillness of hunger made us slow as trees. But inside I went pale, I went cold, I smelled death and I shook.

“Good evening,” said the Bear, and his voice was deep and rough like dirt.

“The same to you, sir,” said my father, but his voice quivered.

“I am only a bear, old man, and you know what I want.” His eyes were caramel, his fur thick and rippled. I was looking at his paws, as big as my skull. “I can smell how soft and clean she is, through all this reek of threadbare human grief. I’ve come for your youngest daughter. Give her to me, and I will make you as rich as you now are poor.”

It was not an offer to be easily refused. He stood there in the door with the winter at his back, his thick fur and wide

shoulders holding it off. He stood there and filled up our little home with the smell of pine and wind.

I said “no,” a whisper, but I could see in his face that my father had already sold me. I was afraid, pale and cold and shaking underneath my skin. I was so used to my sisters, the small room and its close walls, the birds right outside that landed on my shoulders, my hard and hungry stomach. I did not want to be alone. I did not want to be somewhere big, and open, and solitary.

\* \* \*

The bear came back the next week. The winter snow had deepened. Even my sisters begged me to go—think of how all of our lives would be changed, they said. He seemed a gentle sort of bear anyway, they said, not so bad; surely you won’t be eaten, surely.

I packed one bag. I put on all of my socks. I left with him into the snow.

“Are you afraid?” he asked.

“No,” I lied.

“Then grab onto my fur and climb onto my back. It is wide and warm, and we have far to go.”

\* \* \*

## **V. Lady of Gold**

I knew her before she ever came running for help, before she lost him, stupid thing. I know the whole story; how he carried her tenderly against his back, like a groom carries his bride, up the granite mountains in the snow, to the great, fallen sequoia that was his home. Inside, he had carved and scrubbed it into a gnarled palace. Outside, it was only a fallen log, a bear's den.

I know this because I was there. I am the dust of ancient, imploding stars; that pressure and rift. I am the flakes, nuggets, powders and gems that men came for in the thousands. They reached their hands into the streams of my body and ripped up pieces of me. They took me into their little bags.

Anywhere they have taken part of me, I know about. I watch the insides of saloons and brothels where small sacks of gold are exchanged for sad, tired women and tumblers of whiskey: the things that men turn to when they begin to wonder if they are wrong. I know the fine restaurants of San Francisco where the rich come to eat oysters and drink champagne, gold as my blood. I know the insides of wooden trunks, the undersides of floorboards, where I am hidden away, for fear of deceit. And oh, I know the cold streams that flip and unfurl over granite. I know the blue quiet of riverbeds, occasionally the spindled feet of some heron or egret churning

the silt. I know the earth's insides, her dark hot chambers of pressure and stone; places humans will never touch me, places so dark and heavy, so full of that planetary force, they would combust your bones and heart in a second.

So of course, I saw her father pan desperately for pieces of my body, never greedy or cruel enough. Of course, I know the inside of that bear's home. I watched her in there before she ever tripped out into the wind to look for him, finding me along the way. He had covered the inside of that fallen sequoia with gold leaf so it shone from within like a wild, bark-rough star. Every burl, old owl burrow and crack he smoothed gold.

He panned it himself, at night, when he had his man's body back, when he wasn't in danger of being shot by the other miners camped by the San Joaquin River, that soft arm of water which held me to her bosomed banks for so long. The carcass of a grizzly shot dead always brought them to a frenzy of victory: man over wilderness, man over chaos, man over death. He was very careful, in that heavy gold body, with claws and teeth that tore and killed without effort, because he knew what men were like in their hearts. He had killed a grizzly too, before all this; knew the thrill, and the sorrow, of such mastery. The godliness and the terror to feel ursine blood all over your hands, warm and dark as earth.

He panned that gold for his den with the patience taught by hibernation. He slipped and coaxed my pieces from the riverbanks with seducing fingers, like a lover. I came to him in flakes and whole chunks, wriggled up through the silt to be near. He felt like a bear, quiet and strong and without malice; not a man. The grizzly had seeped far into him: a gentle love of thimbleberries and acorns, hibernation-dreams, irrevocable strength. He painted his den with my gold body. He painted each piece of furniture carved of wood, the bedposts, the plates. Then he went to look for her.

I liked him despite myself, and he did make a very handsome bear. I don't know much of curses, or of the strange beings who make them; all brought here with the gold-seeking men. But I do know that he wanted a human girl to love him. This was necessary. I do know that he wanted that girl to be held in starlight. He wanted her to be so dazzled she'd forget her horror at being married to a bear.

His part of the tree, where he kept to in the day, was only a tree—dank and piney, with bark-eating worms, loose roots, dirt. I forgot my hatred of men for him and for that girl, who as the months passed would rather curl up in his dirt-den than loll in the light of my body, mute with luxury. They both seemed to find peace when she came and pressed herself beside his bear-body in the humus-dark.

\* \* \*

**VI. Girl**

He always took me up on his back. I missed this when I lost him, more than the nights he would come into my gold room, right into my bed and into me, with the bare body of a man. Those were slick and tender nights, nights of human lust and comfort and skin. But when he let me up on his back and took me to the acorn groves, or to his berry patches—blackberry, thimbleberry, salmonberry, huckle and elder and mora—those afternoons I still long for. He let me lay down on his back as he walked, or sink my hands into his fur. He smelled of bear. It was a little bit like the wool of grass-eating animals, but with a sharp blood and musk-scent, like fresh meat. To be held by a bear—this made me feel as though I might belong.

At first I stayed in my golden chambers, eating everything rich, hoarding everything shiny or soft. The tree smelled like butterscotch and pitch inside. I fell into a sort of stupor. Winter turned into spring. It was dry and fresh outside. He picked me wildflowers by night. We lived high up in the Sierras, where the air was thin, close to where all the streams started. The lakes were perfect as ice and as cold, bluer than sky. They were full of frogs with lemon-yellow legs who didn't sing much but watched me with their uncanny round eyes. We lived just below the

place where the air got too thin for tall trees to grow, just below that harsh landscape with its desolate purple columbines.

Maybe it was the thin air, going to my head. Maybe it was the company of a bear throughout all my daylight hours; the gold-coated rooms grew too bright for me. My stomach started to turn at the little cardamom cakes and sapphires set in gold. I began to sleep in his end of the tree, the bear-end, through half the day, curled up in his paws like an unnatural cub. I wanted to be near that wildness; I wanted a coat of my own, and teeth, and claws.

At night when he was a man I wasn't allowed any light in the room. He never said why. What is a girl supposed to do but grow obsessed with candles? I knew it was wrong, some kind of betrayal. But I stole a tallow taper from the dining room. I stuck it under my pillow. He didn't speak much, as a man. It seemed like he was happier as a bear, more comfortable. Without human conversation, I didn't know him at all, those nights, except by touch. I wanted to see him. I thought this would make a difference. The curiosity of the eyes is insatiable, particularly in a young girl. You think you will know a person's heart if you can know his face. So I lit the taper one night, after he fell asleep.

You know this part. Everyone knows this part. The crane-woman knew it and the man with the winds tied into his hair,

he knew it too. The candle dripped hot tallow onto his nightshirt. I stared for too long, because he was beautiful, because I was looking and looking and couldn't find the bear in his face. He woke up into that traitor's flame.

"You've ruined it," was all he said. "You've ruined it. I'm gone from you forever."

\* \* \*

## **VII. Long-Nose**

Our curse—that string tied around his ankle—yanked him back. He came to us with his shoes torn open to his skin, having walked the stream and riverways that lead out of the Sierras, all the way down through the prairie and marsh of the Central Valley as it heated up with spring and burst out its orange poppies and checker-blooms. The water took him to the San Francisco Bay. He followed the same routes as the silt sloughed off the riverbanks by miner's hoses.

It's none of my business the reason things decay, what breaks them down and tears them open, only that they do. I should not be partial to wind and bacterial infestation over men's hands and desires, but I am. They did with their hoses what only centuries of proper disintegration, of the world's great weathering, should do. We trolls have never liked it when men take it upon themselves to guide the ways of destruction. We have always punished them for it. Lived in burrowed

palaces beneath stone footbridges and reached up our strong and clammy arms to pull them under, horse and all, maiden and all; it makes no difference to us. Sometimes we eat them ourselves. Sometimes we feed them to the worms and the black beetles, the small maggot, smaller bacteria, and the molds that are our pets. Now and then, if they are pleasant to look at, more pleasant than usual, we keep them until they are old, and we savor the process of shrivel and age.

I'm not sure how he made it over the ocean to our granite doorstep, but he made it all right, in the dead of night. The oiled lighthouse up on the Southeast Farallon peak must have helped him. The lighthouse keepers were asleep in their wind-thrashed white cottages. The auklets hunted insects on black wings. They filled the night with fey shrieks. He knew right where to come, how to get to the entrance of our tunnels in a sea cave that fills daily with tide. We put him in with the chickadees, next to the cage of perfect gray foxes with their red tails and kohl-dark eyes, next to the pleading virgins and a stray priest. Our tunnels were lit with sea lion oil.

“So you don't try running, before your wedding night,” my mother said to him when she locked him in.

“I thought I couldn't.” It was a growl, although he was a man now, at nighttime, a skinny one who almost made me sad.

“You’ve got me now, this old carcass. I couldn’t do it, run. No human can really love a bear, not all the way through.”

We put him in with the chickadees anyway, in locked a room with thick quartz walls, to save us the trouble of chasing him, to keep us from deciding to eat him after all, on a lazy evening. My mother and I began to prepare for the wedding. It hadn’t been done, a troll wedding with a man, not in centuries, not on this barren island where we ended up, forgotten and far from home. But we were bored, no longer necessary in nightmares or dark prayers.

We’d caught him early in the morning while he panned the San Joaquin River and smoked a cigarette, his hands rough and warm but his face almost too pretty for a man. We like to toy with pretty things. It amuses us. And we were angry that we’d been forgotten.

We wanted them to remember us and fear us again, to fill up the pantries and parlors of their nightmares with our bodies. So we went through all the accumulated curses of our people in our minds, catalogued there like so many mushrooms.

Mother came up with this one, and I sniffed him out. A typically blond Norwegian miner with blood still under his fingernails from the sport of killing a grizzly bear. Mostly they killed them and didn’t eat them; mutilated their bodies, like

men will do in the heat of their wars to the bodies of enemies. Their own blood gets in their eyes. The taste of bear meat was too strong for them. Sometimes they took the skin. They always took the head, the seat of power.

When I found him by the river, there was a grizzly head outside his tent. He'd left the body to rot. It wasn't hard to put them together, grizzly and man. The bear was only just dead. It was a good, wholesome curse—man by night, bear by day. Needing the love of a human girl to break the lock.

Anyway, I got a little giddy, preparing for that wedding, as bad as any human girl. I took to embroidering the outlines of the most delicate murre wing-bones on my dress made of cobweb and the mycelia of poisonous mushrooms. For a little while, I thought about love, the human kind. I got intoxicated by the idea of it, so fragile and strange and soft to me, like flowers just starting to grow or a smooth red plum, all juice, all sweet and flesh that hasn't yet fallen and begun to ferment.

His bear body began to fall away when we brought him to our caves. The curse lifted, because he had failed. A human woman had not fallen in love with him as he was by daylight. She had to go and peek at his human body at night, as all young girls will. He had failed, and that meant he was mine. The bear body died around him and it rotted, so he could know the wasting of flesh. It is an alchemical and nuanced process. It is

not to be taken lightly, bodies slaughtered and cast over the ground.

The man emerged from the rotting bear like the naked stone of a plum. That's when I could tell. It was in his eyes: if he'd had a choice, he would have chosen the bear instead of the man.

\* \* \*

### **VIII. Lady of Gold**

He left her that morning. He didn't explain. The gold-leaf fell off all the surfaces in the sequoia like tears. It's true: I liked them too much. I've always liked a good romance. My flakes and shards drift up through silt or pebble at the hint of love, the vibrations of passion. And in this new California of gun-point law, where the blood of everything here before ran across the ground—Maidu, Miwok, Wintun, snowy goose, tule elk, elephant seal, pussytoes, yarrow—in this new California, tenderness was hard to come by. A love story between a broke miner's daughter and a grizzly bear? I couldn't resist it. I like a good curse as much as any troll.

When he left her there in the tree den, I saw her cry. She kicked out at the furniture. She smashed the champagne glasses in the cupboard. She broke all the tallow candlesticks in her fists, like they were carrots. Snapped them, crying. She

went and lay in his end of the den for days. I don't know what she thought about.

\* \* \*

## **IX. Girl**

I wanted to be a bear too. I lay there and tried to grow claws. I tried to creep up and break the necks of birds. I couldn't. So I packed up my little bag, like I had those three years before. I wore all my socks at once, to save room in my pack. I started to walk down the mountain.

The air got thicker as I descended. It felt heavy and damp, after the alpine mountain passes and their strange blue lakes. There was a purity there, hitched into the alpenglow of dawn or dusk. There was a purity to our days that I had never known. A purity of spirit, like I had really found God, not just knelt down on my knees and prayed for things: my mother to get better or the cold to stop or a sack of anything, more parsnips, dried pinto beans, to drop on our house, bust through the ceiling and feed us.

I followed the tracks of bears. I avoided men. They seemed more dangerous now to me than the bears. Maybe that was stupid. Maybe I was almost eaten a hundred times. I don't know. Their tracks reminded me of the texture of his leathery cracked paws. Sometimes as I walked down the mountain, as I cut my shoes open on the sharpest granite, as I picked red

columbine and the purple and yellow blossoms of shooting stars, I wanted to be eaten. Carried in a strong thick body with dense gold-brown fur and an appetite for spawning salmon and dusky huckleberry skins. If I were eaten, I would become a bear.

At first, I thought about going home to my father and my sisters. But I'd gotten shy of that smell, and I didn't know what I would say. I couldn't sit by the fire and mend holes, now. I would only think of him and how in the daylight his eyes looked so completely different from human eyes. How they held another universe, black and gold. How his head swung back and forth when he walked, low to the ground, as if he were reading the brush and rabbit droppings. The twitches under granite and dust, where the earth was breathing. If I went to them, I would only think of the bear trails he took me on, sitting on his back through the quiet and ruthless wilderness of butterscotch-smelling pines.

I saw, from that broad back where I felt safe from all the world, a mother bear leave behind a cub whose back legs had been smashed by a fallen Jeffrey pine. He squealed for her like a piglet. He tried to walk. She moaned and howled for him to come along. She paced and nudged. Soon enough she knew he couldn't move. She knew she had to leave. I wanted to go to the little cub and take that broken body up in my arms, but he

wouldn't let me down. He batted me back with his teeth. He did it himself, the man in him did it, felt obliged. It only took one slice of claw to slit the cub's throat. I covered the body in orange poppies.

I saw my bear-husband sniff out newborn elk calves in the grasses and break their necks. He brought them home to share. I saw him dig young pocket gophers out of their tunnels and swallow them. Sometimes he plundered their stores of onion-grass bulbs too. He brought these to me in his teeth. I made thin soups with alpine water, and he drank them in the dark through human teeth. At first I hated him for those kills; even the cub whose suffering he ended. I hated him for the broken bodies of soft calves, downy and long-lashed. I cried in my room. I cried for my sisters, my mother, my father before the gold took his heart away. I cried for our faraway farm, which seemed from that vantage so peaceful to me. I could only remember it in two images: a sky blue and crisp and comforting as a sheet drying on a line; my mother's brown eyes full with a gentleness that cushioned me.

But there was a day I saw men—men like my father or the clerk at the grocer's, the man at the post office desk, the one who published the newspaper or delivered the sacks of oat grains; normal sorts of men who used to tousle my hair and bring me carved horses and dolls and other trinkets because

the sight of a child moved them so—I saw them chase down a group of Indian men. There was talk of cowhides stolen. The Indians had one gun between six of them. The men who all looked like my father killed the Indian men. They cut off scalps. They all raped the Indian woman who was with the men. One by one. Scalps piled on the ground. Laughing and talking the whole time as she screamed.

These men weren't so far from our den. I watched from a warm granite rock, and I couldn't move. I didn't know that this was truly how the world worked. My bear husband was watching from the trees, too. He stalked them all down. He was a strong bear and a ruthless man that day. He left their bodies in the dirt, and all he said that night, in the dark, was "they can't haunt a man who is also a bear."

I began to understand a few things then. Evil. Balance. Mercy. Necessity. A clean heart.

\* \* \*

So when he left me that morning, after I ruined everything and peeked at him in the night by the light of a tallow candle, I didn't know what else to do but follow. I knew places to find berries and sweet tubers, because he had shown me. I avoided human settlements. I didn't trust them. I wondered what they would make of a young woman alone. How many would really want to help me; how many would know exactly how to use me.

I followed the San Joaquin River, sneaking in the cover of alders, wild grape vines and cottonwoods.

It was on the bank one evening, as I washed, that I met the Lady of Gold. I couldn't help myself, faced with a creature part-sandhill crane and part-woman, tipped everywhere in gold. I had to ask.

“Can you help me, ma'am?”

“And a fine evening to you too, little one,” she said, and her neck quivered and her eyes gleamed. “You people never do know how to ask for anything politely. But at least you've stopped to ask, rather than try and knock me down into the mud and rifle through my skirts for gold.” Her voice felt sharp in my ears.

“It's just that I've lost something important, and I don't know where it's gone.”

“As a rule one generally doesn't, with lost things. Hence the definition, the state of lost-ness.” Her beak clicked. The place around her neck where feathers became flesh glowed in the sun. “Are you hungry? I was just about to fish up some dinner. Hard to talk over serious matters on an empty stomach.” She walked toward the river and bent her bird's head, breasts moving heavily under a strange, mineral-sharp dress.

\* \* \*

## **X. Lady of Gold**

I speared a spawning rainbow trout. I had the girl make a fire for me. I liked to play with her a bit, see what she was made of, treat this whole thing like a fairytale with tasks and old persnickety crones and blocks thrown up in the roads to make things more interesting. She made us a stingy fire, the product no doubt of a childhood in a mining town with a broken-down dad. I criticized it all I could, and snapped my beak at her, and caught her staring at my shadow. It moves independently of me. Sometimes it takes on the silhouettes of other creatures than the body it should be casting, because things are more fluid than you would think, particularly in the slow realm of minerals, waterways, tectonic pressure. At the moment, it was a bear. Her bear. It was playing with her.

I finished eating my fish slowly, before mentioning him. I washed the oil off my hands in the river. I reached into the silt bank and sifted out handfuls of gold pieces. They come up to me when I call for them. Slivers rained down between my fingers.

“Listen, I know everything about you,” I told her. “I know the pockmarks on your father’s hands and the faces of the Maidu men he’s killed.” I watched her sweet face go red. “Oh, don’t look so innocent and hurt, girl. It’s no surprise. He isn’t special. It’s what happens to the men of your kind when they

come to a place like this where something they call ‘money’ tumbles down the riverbeds. I know your husband is a bear. I know his curse. I know the scars on his shoulders between that huge ridge of a back.” I watched her face turn redder. “I know what his fingers tasted like in my rivers, when he was only a man. I know you’ve ruined the whole thing, silly pet, all because you were messy with a candle, and now you’re after him because you can’t think what else to do. You’re brave enough, I’ll give you that.”

She looked a little dazed, uneasy, as if my appearance wasn’t enough to begin with. But a good meal after weeks on roots will steel you, and she smiled, and then she laughed, and then continued to pick meat off the trout bones.

“I’ve been held on the back of a bear,” she said. “I can’t go back now. I want to be one too. I’d rather be one than a person.”

“A bear?”

“Yes.”

“It is peaceful, a bear’s world. It is. But there’s no coming back again. It’s not what you think. I can say that for certain.”

I gave her three things out of the river, then. Sluiced them up in my woman’s hands. A hard little apple, all of gold. A golden carding comb, for smoothing wool. A golden drop-spindle.

“An apple for changing, a carding comb for straightening and path-making, a spindle for twisting and for strengthening.” I said. “Such things are necessary, when dealing with trolls.”

I did it because I liked to watch a good story unfold. We are all weak to the appeal of a curse. I couldn't resist playing my part, pointing her in the right direction, filling up her gunnysack with talismans and charms. She put them in her bag, and they weighed it down to the ground like rocks.

“Don't sell those. Your bear, he's in the place East of the Sun, West of the Moon. A very ambiguous direction, I know. You'll have to ask the winds about it. I deal in mineral and stone, the earthen leaden things and the currents that carry fish through streams.”

She couldn't sit still after that. I caught and cooked her another fish, wrapped it up in dock leaves, slipped it into her pack now heavy with gold. She set off again, following the river. She hardly looked back to thank me.

\* \* \*

## **XI. Girl**

I walked away from her. I will never forget the way the sun caught in her neck feathers, right where she went from woman to bird. My back ached within minutes from the gold. I ate the fish the next morning, and was hungry. I'd forgotten how to

carry hunger in me, and it lashed around like a caught bird, all feathers and beak.

Whenever I felt a breeze touch my back, my cheek, ripple my hair, I talked to it. Hunger will do his. Desperation and the love of a bear will do this. It's alive, the world. I never did know it until I left my home, that clapboard town.

I asked the breezes about the North Wind, where he was. That I needed his help. That a crane-lady told me to look for him. I walked on and on, talking to the little gusts off the river, the unfurling breezes that leapt from the cottonwood leaves, that had touched the necks of coyotes in the thickets, goldfinches and marsh wrens in the tule grass.

Near towns, I slipped along in the vegetation on the river bank. I smudged my face in dirt and tried to look as orphaned and uninteresting as possible, then walked barefoot past the general stores and feedshops, the saloons and the houses. I didn't trust men when women were scarce; not anymore.

I met a young Indian woman digging in a sedge bed, making a basket. She had strong smooth hands. We were startled by each other, then calmed to see that we were both female. We didn't know how to speak to each other, but I sat in her company for a whole afternoon; I hadn't sat down next to a woman and felt that certain strong warmth in years. Since my mother. I didn't realize how much I'd missed it.

I saw riverbanks carved out and raw from the mining hoses. Tree roots exposed. I saw the levees built recently to keep the towns from flood. I saw the sluices and channels diverting streams for drinking water. I saw three men shoot an Indian boy in the head when they encountered him at the riverbank. They left him where he fell. I ran and ran, the bag of gold bruising my back.

When the Wind finally did come, I was so hungry I walked only a couple miles each day, then lay in the shade and slept.

“So you’re the little thing I’ve heard whining my name like a wasp to the breezes?” a voice said behind me, smooth as a bell wrapped in silk. “I wouldn’t have bothered if I’d known you were so small. Fit a lot of desperation into that little skeleton of yours, don’t you?” He looked at first just like a man to me, in a blue velvet coat, as traveling musicians wear. There was a harmonica attached to a cord around his neck. But it was hard to keep my eyes on him, as though the edges of his body weren’t clear, as though they leaked out breezes every direction. His face had the look of a skinny coyote, almost handsome, long.

“It was the Lady of Gold who told me you would help,” I said, trying to look him in the eye, but unable to find its center. “Clearly she had a different wind in mind. I’ll walk, sir. I’ve been walking, I’ll keep walking, I’ll find my way eventually.”

“Isn’t that what you all say to yourselves?” His voice seemed now to come from the harmonica, three-toned. “Let me just take a good look at you, see what I can do.” He leered at me like an old creep. He didn’t touch me with hands, but a breeze did; picked up my skirts, swept under my shirt, stroked my hair.

\* \* \*

## **XII. Wind**

I was only toying, playing with her. That’s all there is, in the end: playing, against the sea, down along the coast; playing the branches of cypress trees like a harmonica, playing with the warm inland airs until they bend under me or slip up over me.

“You feel well enough against my breezes,” I told her. “You smell about as bad as a young raccoon but your hair rustles like a varied thrush singing in the summer. Even I envy her that sound, and I’m the one who makes all the whistles and rustles and the moving of tree limbs. I’ll do it, I’ll buffet you over the sea.”

She stared at me with that look of a girl cornered, about to be ravished. I wanted to oblige her fears, really I did, but, well, a Wind must keep up a thin veneer of decency, after all.

“East of the Sun and West of the Moon, that’s where he is. It’s a very clever name. That’s just like them, to try at poetry and come up with something so completely useless. They’re

just playing, girl—if you really tried to get there I think you’d find yourself fallen straight into a crack in the earth, or on the ocean floor where the plates spread and magma leaks out.”

“The plates, sir? How do you know I’m going there? Who are they?”

“Eager questions!” She was as fresh as any schoolgirl; she made the breezes in all my veins rise up. “I pulled the name right out of your mouth, between your teeth and off your tongue, just now. It’s sitting with you like a tattoo, blue across your hands. Anyone who’s actually looking would see it. Let’s get moving, I can tell you about tectonic plates on the way. You’re going to come with me the way winds travel, not on foot like this, scraping through the alder trunks and the wild grapes, getting ourselves muddy. We’ve got to dye you first, so you match the sky, so she doesn’t notice you’re just a human girl with soft lungs and squash them like two pumpkins.” And without asking, I grabbed her in my arms that are also wide as skies, pressed her closer to me than was entirely necessary, and blew upward.

\* \* \*

### **XIII. Girl**

When he carried me, I was weightless. I didn’t want to be held like a baby or a sack of ryeberries but there isn’t really another way when travelling with the wind. It has to hold you,

buffet you. His arms felt like air currents buoying, not like arms, even though that's what they looked like. They didn't hold or clasp, just lofted me. The bag of gold clanked at my shoulders. We went up toward clouds that were wisps and strands. They looked thin from far away, but as we got closer, I saw that they were beams and footpaths, sturdy and silver. They made a vast landscape that was open and flat as a prairie. It shifted under our feet but never gave way.

Two women were there, although I don't know what to call anyone now, but they looked like women to me, older than anyone I'd ever seen; they were so wrinkled that the lines, stretched out, could have woven a blanket. Their skin was entirely blue, their hair black despite their age. They sat by a wide Vat and stirred it with two wooden ladles. Except at the mouth, they were identical—one had teeth, one didn't. Up close, I could see that the wrinkles weren't blue but skin-colored. Their bodies made blue and cream maps. I wondered what they led to.

“Home,” the two women called Chi Nu said at once.

“What?” I said.

“Home. They lead home.” Their voices were gummy and round.

“Dunk her in the Indigo, will you?” said the Wind who carried me, impatiently. They laughed. It was a terrible sound, crows and gunpowder and bones breaking.

”We’ll ruin her pretty soft skin! Take away that bloom of youth! Those days of frantic love. I used to skin my knees and blister my feet to get across the Big Star River to my lover, once a season when the light was right and open. Wasn’t allowed otherwise. The bans of the universe. I always made it rain for days after. Wove squares for this quilt that will never end, this net to hoist him up here with me.” They both gestured toward the cloud-plain around us. Up close, I could see it was like a great net, regular, geometric, streaked blue.

“It’s all very said, my loves,” said the North Wind, harmonica-voiced. “I know this, the woes of thwarted desire.” He threw me a leering look, then winked. “But madams, I need to get this girl over the sea without bursting her rosebud lungs, so if you don’t mind terribly, I’ll come up for a chat some other evening.”

“Oh yes, of course you’ll remember me, you hideous cold wind,” Chi Nu said, clasping together four hands in a blue tangle, one’s left to the other’s right. “You’re the only one who does. Everyone else down there has forgotten. Brought me here in their damp little dreams and cramped ship-bowels over the Pacific, saw gold in the rivers and let me fall out of their hearts

like bean husks. But why should I bother with her?" They paused, leaned in closer. "Why, by the way, are you?"

"I've nothing of the resentment you forgotten daemons possess, brought here and abandoned. I was always here. I'm only carrying her because it's not something I'm often asked to do, hoist a human girl over the sea in my arms. I like to do a new thing, to carry something so much heavier than birds, to break the rules of sky and ground. And, let me tell you, is she a hot bundle of flesh to hang on to—gets my cold limbs going, truly." Chi Nu cackled and licked their lips at me.

"But you might be interested," the Wind continued, "that she is going to where the trolls live, because they turned a man into a bear and she is his lover."

"Oh, the poor thing, I know all about thwarted love." They sighed, one sound. "I would have scorched my bare feet on all the stars for him, my cowherd, my Niu Lang. Come close, my dear, I'll have you blue and ready to follow his tracks in no time."

They grabbed me with their blue hands. It felt like being held by spiders. Their bones were thin and light through their skin but strong as steel rope. They wrapped me up in those weaving hands, suddenly big enough to twine me like a moth in a web. Their Indigo Vat smelled foul with a tinge of sweet. A blue crust, around the edges. They plunged me under with their

four spider's hands. They kept me there until I knew my lungs would burst, that this was murder, and then longer. Until it had seeped through my skin, all the way to my lungs. When they pulled me out, I was almost unconscious, with rot and leaves in my teeth and hair. I looked, and found myself entirely blue. Even my toenails.

“Well now, you look fine!” said the Wind in my ear, and his breath was cold. “You look like my kind of woman, blue as my vast home, my queen, my slave-mistress. I'll pay you, ladies, I'll pay you kindly for your service, in rare laces from the snows of the Sierras, in baskets made from Klamath River fog. I'll sweep them up here for you, one of these days.”

“Just whisper my name, down below; just whistle it into open doors and across kitchen counters, into the bedrooms where they sleep, so they don't forget me all the way. Just carry that girl over the ocean to her love. God knows there's not enough un-thwarted lovers around.”

\* \* \*

#### **XIV. Wind**

I took my little blue girl and was gone. I told her she looked like a daemon now, blue as the djinns. I told her she would never be able to go back to her kind, and she said she knew it; she already couldn't. I almost fell in love with her myself, that strange blue creature who clutched at the bear

claw on her neck like it was the only thing in the world worth holding onto, the only thing to believe in. The only reason she wasn't afraid was because of that bear. It is peaceful, their world. When humans get a good long look into ursine eyes, they never want to come back.

I flew her high up over the clouds, blue in my arms, with her bag of gold things clutched to her chest. We passed through the blue country in a cold whirl.

“What do the other winds call you, Sir?” she asked me.

“I couldn't say it in your language, my pretty blue djinn. It would fly right past your unrefined ears.”

“Say it anyway.” Demanding creature, how I wanted her.

“*Khkhsiyylashhiii.*” Like a breeze in alder trees, that's how it sounded to her, like air through the holes of a recorder, along the teeth of grasses.

\* \* \*

## XV. Girl

Sometimes I could see down through the clouds. The land looked very small, like something I could rip, something I could step on and break. I had to endure his somewhat consuming embrace. That Wind, I began to realize, thousands of feet in the air with him, was a consummate flirt, worse than any Byron. He warmed all the way up to me once I was blue, talking away, tightening his arms, letting his hands, soft air currents,

wander. I didn't have much of a choice. It wasn't as if I could twist free.

The air was very cold. It nipped at my blue body but didn't freeze me. My lungs took in the thin air and didn't pop. I liked to look down at the riverways. The delta where they met the San Francisco Bay was an unfurling plant, a nest of brown-green snakes. I had never been to San Francisco. I would never go to San Francisco. I was a little afraid of it, then, how fine the women would be, clean and broad, wearing egret feathers and red satin shoes; maybe prostitutes, maybe mistresses, probably not wives. So sure of their own bodies. Now, well, it's a matter of pride. Of disdain. Of immense solitude.

From above, the city was all straight lines and sand dunes as we passed over.

"Nothing like a good tumble through that soft sand. How it whirls up in waves around you. What do you say, my blue demonette, we make a brief detour down to those dunes and have a frolic ourselves?" His pale hands were on me.

"You forget, sir, that I'm not a Wind. You would certainly blast me to pieces by accident. And I don't want to be late."

"So stiff, you people, so very rigid and dull. And we already may be too late as it is. There's no way to know. What could we be late for, pray?"

When we passed over the Bay, out that opening where the fog comes in, and skimmed the open ocean, the Wind began to croon and sing. Like to a baby in a cradle, and like a dark incantation, at once.

“This is where I was born, you know, off these wavetops, right here, where the sky meets and touches the sea, saucy thing.” His voice was warm and sad. “I can go anywhere, following the map of her skin. See all of those ripples and wave crests and currents? Pathways each. I cruise those streets and comb across half the world with the pelicans and the gray whales under my hands. I like to eat up their shadows on the water, their exhalations.”

“That’s what you eat, shadows and breaths, like I eat bread or plums?” I felt ill.

“Why yes, girl, how do you think I stay immortal? I’ve been having yours this whole time. It’s part of the deal, the exchange. A toll, if you will. Your shadow isn’t nearly as mild mannered as yourself, I must say. Quite a vixen, really.”

“You mean, I have no shadow now? You mean you’ve sucked the air out of my lungs on top of turning me blue?”

“No, no my dear, you aren’t shadowless, what a thought! No, I only take small nibbles and licks, around the edges. The notches grow back in a matter of weeks, like a robust mint plant will, if watered well. Pick off the tips, it grows back

healthier. Indeed, you should be honored by attentions, since your corporeal form is so ungiving; you will have a very potent shadow by the end of all this. I'm doing you a favor, as it were. And my little djinn, did you think the air in your lungs was ever yours? No, I give it to you, and then I take it back again when you're through with it. Honestly, your kind thinks everything belongs to it by some sort of demented birthright..”

I shook as we gusted over the sea. I craned to see my shadow but couldn't find it anywhere. The ocean was gray-blue and it rocked and plunged like the skin of an animal. The Wind flew me on routes and paths, marked in those waves, that were invisible to my eyes. I watched the pelicans glide between the troughs, almost touching the water, never faltering. The Wind loved those shadows. He ate pieces of them like I would eat sun-hot blackberries. I could see the Farallon Islands, wrenching up out of the water, rough and lonely. The waves were deep blue around the granite peaks.

He dropped me down on the marine terrace. My bag of gold clattered. He nipped at my shadow, rustled my skirts, kissed me right on the mouth, pointed me toward a large sea-cavern, and left the ground. My lips felt like ice.

“I'm still blue!” I cried out to him, when I looked down at myself.

“You always will be, my little daemon. That was the tax, the other toll. And I can pick you up in my arms anytime I please, now, take you up over the clouds. So don’t relax too much into domestic bliss, once you win back your man and all that. I’m always near. One day you may be glad to know it.” Then he was gone, a flash of blue velvet and a strong breeze.

\* \* \*

So there I was, hands cut on that rough terrace of granite. It smelled like birdshit. The wind howled everywhere in my ears; a farewell. Waves made white troughs as they hit the abrupt rock of the shore. I felt I was at the top of a mountain, flooded to its neck. At the beginning of Creation.

I went toward a sea cave, had to climb over rocks and water to get inside. I found a tunnel, easy as that, open to the daylight. I crawled in. Within a few yards, it widened and widened, and I could stand. Lanterns hung on bone hooks that looked like the vertebrae of seals. The shadows they cast on the rough walls were animals I had never seen before, maybe heard of in storybooks—elephants covered in wool with tusks long as crescent moons, lions with teeth that curved out of their mouths and huge legs full of muscle, big broad wolves with short noses and tails, a creature like the camels of the Far East. It was a medieval bestiary, dancing along the walls, but the animals were new to me, not the unicorns and the dragons,

manticores, griffins, harpies, giraffes. Beasts that were big and unglamorous and full of power.

I walked in those tunnels lit with oil, dancing with beasts I couldn't name, for what felt like days. The gold pieces clanked against my back and made my shoulders ache. My shoes ripped to shreds on the sharp rocks. Sometimes I felt like one shadow animal followed me—a big bear with a short nose, or a creature more slender by far than a deer, with twisting horns. They leapt next to me; they seemed helpful, guiding me through bends and forks and crossroads. The air felt thin and damp below ground.

I came to a place where bones covered the walls in a mosaic, in patterns like you see in Persian rugs. I knew I was near. I heard a fox yap and howl. I heard the desperate alarm-songs of chickadees. As I continued, the tunnels opened out and were lined with fungi and molds that seemed planted, even painted, like garden patches of green, orange, white, purple, red.

“You're making this way too easy for us, girl.” The voice came from a shadow. “Walking right into the trap, without any complaints? You want to see your man? I'll throw you right in with him.” A creature shaped like a big woman walked toward me. In the light, she was not a woman. Her skin was blue mold and the greens of lichen, her nose long and knobbed as a

parsnip root. Her breath filled the cave with the smell of fresh dirt. Her shadow was furred. “We’ll just keep you there after the wedding and watch you grow old,” she continued, laughing. “What fun. You’re even more delicious to look at than him, with all that blue skin. Fetching color. Good thing you’re just in time for the festivities.”

\* \* \*

### **XVI. Bear**

It was never her fault that I realized I loved being a bear more than I wanted her. It was the offer of another world, a siren call I couldn’t resist. I don’t know many men who can, at least not in this place, where all men came following the song of gold in the water, unable to hold themselves back from the promise of a new world.

I held her, strange and blue as a fruit, when she showed up in the granite tunnels to save me. It made my heart split. Once, it was all I wanted, to have this body back, to have the love of a sweet woman. But when she dripped the tallow on me and sent me back here, and they took the bear out of me, I began to grieve. I began to long, not for her any more but for that other body. You always want what you don’t have.

I want the balance of four legs, all rooted; the mercy of claws; the colors, burnished and sanguine, through bear eyes. And the smells. The world is full of them, layered like muscles

against the skin of the air. I could walk the world on pathways of smell.

This is all I can think about anymore. It has become a worship, a trance, my only love. So when she came, I held her, I smoothed her hair, I kissed her cheeks, but I couldn't bring myself to say it: you should not have come. I'm nothing to you. It was all a mistake and I'm sorry.

Instead of crying in my arms, like she might have done once, she did something extraordinary. She opened up a beaten bag on her back and pulled out a spindle and carding comb made entirely of gold. She wouldn't tell me where they'd come from; only smiled around a secret and went to the corner, where my bearskin was. It had rotted off me, all the extra muscle and fat, but the skin was still intact, shed like a snake's. She began to pull and brush it with the golden comb. I tried to stop her—it was all I had left—but she wouldn't let me.

\* \* \*

## **XVII. Long-Nose**

I didn't pay much attention to all that carding and combing. I didn't either when she took out the spindle and starting spinning it all. I figured these were the domestic neuroses of a recent prisoner, trying to find something to do with her hands. We're not always the cleverest lot, not by your reckoning, your measure of wits. Our intelligence lies more in

the way of stones and roots. It's earthen, slower, dense as clay. So, I didn't think much of it. My wedding dress was almost done. I was growing a blue mold along the edges, like a fur trim. They have to be waited upon, these molds, given their proper time. I was distracted, thinking the trim would be pretty with my eyes. A vain thought, very human. They were rubbing off on me.

I suppose most curses don't go exactly as planned. This is what makes life unexpected, you might say. I wasn't expecting that blue waif of a girl to have the power to transform. It was the Lady of Gold, I'm sure, meddling as always with her pretty hands, seeing a curse laid, wanting to muddy the waters, to stamp down her own claw-prints. Beautiful females are like that, expecting everyone to look at them, craving the reflections. If I'd known the spindle, the comb, the apple, were hers, I'd have snatched them away in seconds. But I was distracted. And while I grew blue furs of mold, while I made a speckled bodice of orange spores, she'd spun and woven a huge cape with the bones of a grey fox that had died next door, whose rot we had been enjoying after dinner. Piece by damned piece she wove it, sewed the pieces together with sinew and bone sliver.

\* \* \*

## **XVIII. Girl**

On the morning of the wedding, I tucked the cape around him and gave him the apple. I took his hand, which was cold in mine. I threw the carding comb down, and it became a wet river of gold that shattered our glass cage and seeped down the stone tunnels. I held tight to the spindle and it clicked like the needle of a compass. We ran through that river of gold, and it stuck to our feet and the cape. The granite walls flickered around us. Chips of mineral glowed as we passed, giving us light, making my blue skin flash strange shades.

“This way,” the walls seemed to whisper. “That way,” wanting to keep us. The spindle felt like it was wound up with a long string attached far away, above ground, a string that pulled and pulled so I knew where to turn.

\* \* \*

### **XIX. Long-Nose**

I tore after them in my delicate dress. It rippled against the walls as I went. But the river of gold caught my feet like quicksand; not hardening, just a deep sludge. I called after them with the old songs of trolls, the ones that charm stones and tree burls into submission. None of them worked.

Nothing of ours does, in this new world.

\* \* \*

### **XX. Girl**

I knew when the tunnels passed under the ocean floor. The pressure in my ears felt like being far up in the sky. The weight of the water above us; the weight of air.

\* \* \*

### **XXI. Bear**

When the tunnels pushed up through the earth, out the entrance of an old badger den and into the air, I couldn't resist the apple any longer.

"Wait for me love," she said. "Let me under the cape, I'll be your bear wife. We can share it." She held out her blue hands.

I ate it whole, without thinking, without waiting, like the first time I saw the rivers here and the miners bending over them. Like the bear I killed long ago, in a perfect instant, without a thought. Pulled the trigger. I ate it all, because I couldn't wait, because I couldn't control my sudden desire, the soft luster of the apple like a star in my hand.

\* \* \*

### **XXII. Girl**

He became a bear again without me, so fast, a tempest of fur. I reached out for him, like I used to, when he let me climb on his back or curl against his chest. This time, he just looked at me. Blank, no recognition. Something different in his eyes, something I didn't know. He growled. Then he lunged and his teeth ripped my arm open as easily as a pair of scissors in cloth.

I screamed, it hurt so much. Everything hurt.

I ran. He followed for a few paces. When I turned my head to look back, he was walking away from me into the night, satisfied. The place where the cape had trailed in gold made the fur around his tail and his back legs blonde as dry grass. I wanted to lie down and bleed out my whole life onto that ground, to have lost him.

I never saw him again.

\* \* \*

### **XXIII. Lady of Gold**

I had the last say in this story. That's how I wanted it. I was tired of being used, and I liked the boy too, in the end. I gave him what he wanted. I couldn't do the same for her. And who would be left, among her kind, to tell that story, to keep us all in the air, if she were a bear too, cavorting through the acorn groves, nursing clumsy cubs?

No, you need one left behind, to grieve and to scream that sad story against the clouds, against the sky-wet stars. To shape her sadness, big as a bear, into a memory that stays rooted in the human world and keeps us in your dreams.

No one wanted her, with that blue skin. She had sacrificed everything for the dream of a bear who only loved her because he was also a man. Bears love, oh they do, don't get me wrong. But they don't love the way humans do. Their love is like the

long dark patience of winters, unflinching and slow. They don't need it, desperately, to be whole; they already are. A human's love and a bear's, well, they just don't fit. One needs to be transformed to match the other.

For a while I watched her dig and pan in the water. Not to get rich, but to find me. She demanded I come out. She whined and she cried and she yelled for me. I didn't feel like obliging. My finger had been in the pie long enough. And I only have so much patience to grant wishes and such things. I let her dig and call, and dig, until she gave up and went back to the mountains.

\* \* \*

#### **XXIV. Girl**

I stopped outside the door of my father's house one night. I stood by the window next to my sisters' bed. The room looked warm, the covers thick goose-down and silk. The luxuries my going had bought. One of them turned in her sleep toward me and opened her eyes. I started to smile, and wave, but she screamed and screamed. She woke up my other sister and they ran to the door with a cast iron pan. I fled into the woods, crying blue tears down my blue cheeks, drying them with blue hands.

I went straight east, then. Up the streams, along the river, to our den once covered in gold. I didn't go in. I barely looked

at it. I had to be disciplined, to keep from crying. I kept walking, up and up, until I reached the highest blue lakes of the Sierra Nevadas, the lakes surrounded by jagged snow peaks. The air was very thin but at least my lungs were good for this. My blue skin was happy and tough in cold places, dyed to withstand the regions above clouds.

There, I found myself a cavern. I taught my body to hibernate, blue and slow. There, I stayed. One summer, I saw a mother grizzly and two cubs dancing through the columbines around the lake. Both cubs looked like their back ends had been dipped in gold.

\* \* \*

## **XXV. Wind**

In the end, she took me as a lover, though it was only now and then. No one else would have her, and after years she became lonely. It's suitable, really. I doused her in sky. She was bound to me by a strange blue vein that bled. I taught her some of my songs, and we sang together in the cold crags of the mountain, while she drew bear after bear in the snow. They always melted in summer, ran down the rocks into the streams, down to the places where people lived.

They had stories about her, after a couple decades. The blue woman in the peaks of the Sierras. Once every few years, some foolish boy would climb near the top, wheezing on the

thin air, fingers purple. He would leave a pile of apricots. Or a long blue velvet ribbon, or a candle. Offerings, I think, for general good fortune or strength, for a girl's love. Something like that. He'd sit up there in the snow and talk for a little while to the air, thinking she cared.

"It was a dare," a boy might say. "For a kiss." I would gust, and he would tremble. "God, it's cold. I told her I'd find you, the blue woman up here. C'mon, where are you? I'm going to have to lie. I'd do anything to kiss her, really I would."

She always threw the candles down the cliffs and watched them break. Then she ate the apricots, tied up her blue, knotted hair with the blue velvet ribbon, and laughed at them all.

Copyright © 2013 Sylvia Linsteadt

[Read Comments on this Story](#) on the *BCS* Website

*Sylvia Victor Linsteadt is a writer, animal-tracker, and student of local ecology, myth, and folklore. Her short fiction has appeared in such publications as New California Writing 2013 and the Golden Key and is forthcoming with Deathless Press. She has written essays for Poecology, The Dark Mountain Project, and News from Native California. She runs*

a “wild tales by mail” project called *The Gray Fox Epistles* and shares her thoughts on wildness and myth regularly at *The Indigo Vat* weblog ([theindigovat.blogspot.com](http://theindigovat.blogspot.com)).

Support *BCS*

*BCS* on **facebook**

*BCS* on **twitter**

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

## COVER ART

“News from the Horizon,” by Tuomas Korpi



Tuomas Korpi is an illustrator, production designer, and matte painter from Finland. He has worked in the entertainment and advertising industry since 2005, including the last three years as an illustrator, designer, and visual director at Studio Piñata, a Helsinki-based animation and illustration studio. In his work he aims to combine the vivid impressionistic style and lighting with digital media and environment design. He likes to think of his personal works as frames from yet-to-be-made movies that leave the viewer space for their own imagination. See more of his work at [tuomaskorpi.com](http://tuomaskorpi.com).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

Copyright © 2013 Firkin Press



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.