
“Cherry Blossoms on the River of Souls,” by Richard Parks

“Walls of Skin, Soft as Paper,” by Adam Callaway

“The Coffinmaker’s Love,” by Alberto Yáñez

“Blow ‘Em Down,” by Rebecca Gomez Farrell

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The tales varied as to why the well was outside the village rather than inside. Some say that an earthquake and rockfall destroyed the original town site and the survivors rebuilt the village at a safer distance, leaving the now-dry well where it was. Others say that a saké-addled farmer relieved himself in the well one night, so offending the spirit of the well that it had moved itself and had been dry ever since. Whichever version one believed, the well was where it was, and nearly every evening the boy called Hiroshi came to stare down into the darkness, and listen.

The well was full of music.

“Hello,” Hiroshi said to the unseen musician, as was his habit. There was no answer. Hiroshi was never quite sure what he would have done had the darkness answered him. There was a spirit in the well, of course. His uncle Saito, the priest, said there were living spirits in everything, and Hiroshi believed that. Still, the darkness did not answer him.
One fine spring evening his uncle Saito walked out of the village to where Hiroshi sat by the well. He had been a soldier and was now a priest, but it was as Hiroshi’s uncle that Saito came to speak with Hiroshi that evening. “Greetings, Nephew,” he said, and sat down beside the boy.

“Hello, Uncle. Is there something the matter?”

“I’m not certain. I would be grateful if you would help me decide, so I must ask: what is your fascination with this well?”

“Is Father worried? He’s raised no objections so long as I do not neglect my obligations.”

“My brother is a practical man, and you are a dutiful son to him. However, my question was not to my brother.”

Hiroshi blushed. “Forgive me, Uncle. I sit here because I like to listen. There is a sound coming from the well, from down in the darkness. It’s almost as if the music is being played just for me; almost as if I’ve heard it before. I don’t understand that, but that’s how it feels.”

Saito sat down beside him and leaned forward just a bit, listening. After a while he pulled back the sleeve of his robe and picked up a pebble. He dropped it over the side.

“What do you hear now, Hiroshi?”

“I hear the pebble rattling against stones... fading. Now I hear nothing.”

“No splash? Not even a small one?”
“No.”

Saito nodded. “Nor will you ever. This was a well. Now it is not. Now it is just a hole down deep into the underground. The underground is the province of dead things, and dead things should not concern the living. Look around you now. What do you see?”

Hiroshi did as his uncle directed. He saw children his age flying kites in the waning light, running along the ridges of the flooded rice fields, playing games with tops and hoops, laughing.

“It all seems childish,” Hiroshi said.

“Is it inappropriate for children to do childish things? Or the living to do what nature decrees that the living must? This is your world, Hiroshi. There is nothing in that well that should be of concern to you. Will you think about what I have said?”

“I will, Uncle,” Hiroshi said, and Saito left him there. His uncle glanced back once but not a second time as he walked away.

Hiroshi, being an honest boy, did what he had promised to do. He thought about what his uncle said, and he studied carefully, for a moment or two, the activity, now fading with the day, around him.
“I’ve played those games,” he said to himself. “Time and again. They do not change—the kites pull on the wind as they always have, as they will for anyone. This song is for me.”

All this was justification and pointless. The only justification Hiroshi needed was the song he still heard, coming from the depths of the well.

* * *

The next evening Hiroshi joined his playmates at their games for a time to appease his uncle, but when play time was over and all his friends had gone home, he returned to the well. He moved quickly, with furtive glances all about to see if anyone was there to see. He carried a long rope coiled over one shoulder and a small knife in his sash.

“The rope was a sensible idea, but that blade may not be enough,” his uncle said. He sounded sad.

Hiroshi froze as his Uncle Saito stood up from his hiding place behind the well.

“How did you know, Uncle?”

“It serves a priest well to know how to look into a person’s eyes and see clearly what plagues them. You are plagued by discontent, Nephew. Unfortunately, unlike other spirits and minor devils, this one bows to no spell of exorcism. You must cast it out yourself.”

Hiroshi hung his head. “How do I do this, Uncle?”
“Perhaps by doing what you want. I still advise against it, but this devil shows no sign of leaving you.” Saito took the rope from Hiroshi’s shoulder and made one end fast to a post beside the stone rail marking the well. He threw the other end down into the blackness. “Do you still hear music, Nephew?” Hiroshi listened for a moment. “Yes, Uncle. I do.”

“Then follow it down and satisfy your devil. Then perhaps he will leave and you will come back to us. I hope so, else I must explain your absence to your father, and I would rather avoid that duty.”

Hiroshi put his hand on the rope. He stared into the forbidding blackness as he often had, but he barely hesitated. “I will come back, Uncle. I promise.”

“Do not promise. I merely ask that you be careful. Powerful kami are drawn to such places, and most are not likely to be friendly to you. Take this.” Saito held up the shorter of the two swords he’d carried as a soldier. “Remember what little I taught you of the Way of the Gods. Most of all, remember who you are. I think that is the important thing, no matter where a person may go.”

Hiroshi took a deep breath and climbed over the side of the well. The last thing he saw before darkness closed in was his uncle peering sadly down at him from a circle of daylight.
That daylight quickly faded as the well shaft made an abrupt turn at the bottom into what looked like an ordinary cave.

Hiroshi listened very closely, but now he didn’t hear the music at all.

“That’s very strange. It was a most persistent sound when I heard it from the side of the well. Persuasive, I think,” he said, though Hiroshi still couldn’t fit words to what the argument was supposed to be.

Now all was silent except for a faint rush of air, as if the winds of the underground could not wait to escape past him and up the well to sunlight. Hiroshi’s hair blew about his face and tickled his forehead. The scent carried by the wind was of damp and mold, and a faint hint of a spice that Hiroshi could not identify at all.

There was darkness about, as he had expected. Indeed, he’d brought a small lantern along but found he didn’t actually need it. Once his eyes adjusted there was light there, of a sort. He could make out where to walk, where boulders lay in his path and where not. The only thing left to do was to choose which direction to go.

Where is the music?

He listened very intently, trying to hear around the moan of the wind in his ears. There had been a promise in that music,
something wonderful beyond Hiroshi’s imagining. Familiar, too, though he could not say how.

After a few moments he thought he heard it again. He wasn’t sure. He wondered if there had been a concentrating effect from the well itself, like wind through a reed flute; the music was much harder to hear this much closer, presumably, to the musician. Hiroshi finally took his best guess and started walking.

He soon came to what had clearly been part of the underground river, now dry and full of stones. An old woman was waiting for him there, looking impatient. At least, Hiroshi thought it was an old woman; that was what he told himself when he saw her. She was more a collection of rags and bones than anything, but there was a face, and wrinkles, and a thin toothless grin.

“Give me those!” she said. Her voice was like dead leaves blowing across stones and her eyes glittered like black pebbles.


“Clothes! Give them to me!”

Hiroshi thought this very rude, but he was more confused than offended. “Who are you and why do you want my clothes?”

She ignored that. “You must give your clothes to me before you cross this river. Now!”
Apparently, now meant *now*. She reached out with one clawed hand, snatching at his sleeve. She managed to tear off a strip of his sleeve and gouge a line of red across his wrist.

Hiroshi took a step back. “Here, now, Grandmother! Stop that!”

She stopped for a moment, but she was looking at the blood on Hiroshi’s wrist. “You’re alive!” It sounded like an accusation.

“Of course I’m alive! What did you think?”

“That you were not, of course. Now I think you’re a fool.” She blinked, and for a moment Hiroshi saw some kind of recognition there, something beyond the cold darkness he had seen before. It didn’t last. The cold, relentless stare returned. “Clothes. You don’t need them. Not where you are, not where you are going. *Mine!”*

The last came out in a shriek of rage and malice. For Hiroshi’s part he didn’t know what she was, but he knew she wasn’t human. A *kami*, or perhaps a demon in—somewhat—human form. When she came for him again he had his uncle’s *wakazashi* out and ready. “Stay back, monster!”

She hissed like a snake and struck at him. Hiroshi dodged and struck back. It was only the feel of the blade as it struck something solid that told him of the hit. The rag and bone
creature did not cry out. It merely stepped back, confused. “Mine!” she repeated.

Hiroshi took a deep breath and a firmer grip on his sword. “You’ve been in the dark too long, Grandmother. Don’t force me to strike you again!”

She looked at Hiroshi, or rather at his clothes, then looked at the sword again. “Mine,” she said again, “soon enough. I can wait.”

She cackled with laughter and then spread out her arms like a kite. In answer the breeze there swelled into her rags and she lifted off into the darkness. In a moment she was out of sight in the deeper black of the caves.

Hiroshi waited for a bit, sword at the ready, but she did not return. He finally put the blade away.

“Well,” he said. “That was very strange.”

He didn’t like to think of himself as a fool, despite what the creature had said. He had already met one monster on his short journey, and it seemed likely that there would be others. He wondered if the beautiful music was being played by another monster to lure him down.

“If so, it worked. But for what purpose? And why is the music fainter now than when I kneeled at the well?”

“Because it’s farther away, of course.”
Hiroshi’s previous encounter with the clothes thief must have left him more shaken than he’d thought, because he immediately reached for his sword. After a moment he took his hand off the hilt, feeling foolish. The speaker was a small man in the robes of a Buddhist monk. He sat cross-legged on the stones, tending a small fire upon which steamed a small kettle. Before him were cups and a ladle and a bamboo whisk for making tea. A traveler’s bundle served as a rest for his back.

Hiroshi bowed. “Gomen nasai, honored Sir. I did not see you there.”

“Obviously. I was about to have some tea, young man. Would you care to join me?”

The mention of tea made Hiroshi realize he was starting to get hungry. “Yes, thank you.”

The monk prepared their tea in silence, though perhaps introductions would have been more in order. Hiroshi shrugged and pulled out two of the rice cakes he’d brought with him and offered one to the monk, who politely declined. Hiroshi then ate both of them, though he remembered his manners enough to let the monk take the first sip of tea before he began.

He also studied the man as closely as manners would allow without staring. His initial impression of small stature was on the mark. The man was tiny, even shorter than Hiroshi himself,
though otherwise looked more or less human. Part of Hiroshi was wondering if the monk would suddenly grow fangs and attack him, but mostly he wondered what the man was doing there in that place, and what he knew about the music. He held off asking for as long as he could, but that wasn’t very long at all.

“Excuse me, but what did you mean about the music being farther away?”

“Just that it is. You’re much farther from it than you were.”

That wasn’t very helpful, though Hiroshi didn’t say so out loud. It was more than a little irritating.

“I don’t understand. Will you explain?”

The monk didn’t say anything for a while, merely sipping his tea. Hiroshi’s annoyance faded. The monk seemed very tired, and very sad, as if the whole subject was more painful than the man could say.

“When you dream, where do you go?” the monk asked finally.

Hiroshi frowned. “I-I don’t know. Some say the spirit wanders, aimless. Others say you don’t go anywhere, and dreams are just stories you tell yourself while you sleep.”

The monk nodded. “Men believe many things. Some of them are true. Now then, where do you go when you die?”

“The River of Souls. Perhaps to be reborn.”
The monk nodded. “Now, then—where are you now?”

Hiroshi looked around, but the scene had not changed. He was in a cave far underground. His reasons for being there were perhaps not as clear as they could be, but he did know that much, and said so.

“You know less than you think. Go home, Hiroshi.”

Hiroshi blinked. “How do you know my name?”

The monk sighed gustily. “How do you not know mine?”

Hiroshi just stood in silence. “I don’t understand. You haven’t told me your name. I should have asked, but I didn’t mean to offend you—”

“I am not offended. I do regret the time you’re going to make me waste.” The monk carefully packed away his tea supplies and hoisted his bundle. “Shall we go?”

“I can’t ask you to come with me.”

“You can’t ask for me not to come with you. I choose what I do, as do you. I hope in time you will choose better.”

Hiroshi had no answer to that, because he didn’t understand a word of it. He merely picked up his sword and set out once more in the direction of the music, or as close as he could discern. The monk walked a few feet ahead, his staff making a rhythmic jingling sound from the small bell attached to it. Hiroshi thought at first that the sound would interfere with the music, but the jingle of the bell was so steady and
constant that it was soon as lost as the sound of his own heartbeat.

*This is a very strange cave*, Hiroshi thought, even as he realized how foolish a thing it was to believe this place a simple cave. Hiroshi thought of stories he had heard about the Dragon Palace, where a simple fisherman once dallied with a princess in ageless luxury for centuries under the sea while his true home and all he knew turned to rot and dust. Except this was not under the sea, so far as Hiroshi knew, and the monk was certainly no princess.

The music was still faint, but by long practice at listening, Hiroshi was beginning to hear it better. “It’s a koto being played,” he said. “It’s lovely.”

The monk nodded, looking glum. “Yes. Akiko is very gifted.”

Hiroshi was so surprised he stopped walking. The monk merely glanced at him over his shoulder, waiting patiently for him to catch up.

“You know who’s playing the music?” Hiroshi asked.

“Of course. So do you.”

That was just more nonsense from his odd companion, so far as Hiroshi could see, and he didn’t dwell on it. Something he did dwell on was the simple fact that the music was getting louder. Another strange thing, since Hiroshi was certain they
hadn’t traveled more than a bowshot from where he and the monk had taken tea together. He mentioned it to the monk, who seemed even more dispirited.

“We’re much closer now.”

“How can that be? We haven’t walked very far.”

“It’s not in how far you travel. It’s in deciding to make the journey.”

“I’d decided that when I climbed down the well!”

“If you say so. I think rather that you were traveling away as much as toward. You didn’t know where you were going. Now you do.”

“Akiko? And you say I know her? How?”

“You grew up together.”

“But I haven’t grown up yet,” Hiroshi said, though the admission pained him a bit. “And, although there are several girls my age in the village, I don’t know anyone named Akiko.”

His companion merely grunted. “Nor did she know anyone named Hiroshi.”

“Sir, I don’t understand any of what you’re saying.”

“You certainly don’t. Else you wouldn’t be here.”

Hiroshi didn’t know if he’d been insulted or not, but he rather thought so. He gritted his teeth but kept his voice level.

“Then, Honored Sir, would you be so kind as to tell me where I should be?”
“Home, of course.”

“Very well—as soon as I find the music, I’ll go home. I have to know what it is and why it calls to me, else I’ll never be content.”

The monk nodded. “You’re not seeking music; you’re seeking an answer. I wondered if you understood that. Very well then, I will help you find Akiko. Yet whatever happens, afterwards you will leave this place. You don’t belong here. Do I have your word?”

Hiroshi hesitated, but he saw no good alternative. “Yes.”

“Well, then. You have mine. Only time will tell what either is worth.”

* * *

They walked for hours across what looked like the bones of a long-dead river. Hiroshi was amazed at how large the field of stones was and wondered if they would ever see the end. Now and then they came to a pile of white stones, standing alone in the flat rocky nothing of that place. He asked about them, but the monk merely said “stones” and nothing else.

Also, now and again, Hiroshi could have sworn that he heard the sound of children playing. He asked about that too, but the monk merely said that the children were always there. Hiroshi saw no children, but he let the matter drop. It was enough to know that what had appeared to be a cave was now a
vast empty riverbed of stones, and overhead was a darkness that might have been stone or might have been a night sky without stars.

In fact, neither said anything at all for the rest of their walk, until the monk pointed to something rising from the stone field in the distance.

“She’s there.”

Hiroshi looked closer. It was a hill by the riverbed. He hadn’t noticed it sooner because it didn’t rise very far from the rocks at all. That was because it began beneath it, at the bottom of a low, sloping valley. Hiroshi saw the way down marked by two stone lanterns. They cast a blue glow through the shadows of that place. Corpse lights drifted past on the wind.

He stopped for a moment, listening closely. The music was much clearer now, more than enough to discern the instrument. Almost enough to discern the song. Hiroshi listened as hard as he knew how.

“I-I know that song. It’s called.....” His voice trailed away. He couldn’t remember, but he knew that was the only reason. He knew the song’s name. He had known it long ago and now forgotten. And yet he was equally sure he had never heard that song anywhere but down the dry dead well. “Perhaps it doesn’t matter.” Hiroshi turned toward the entrance to the valley.

“It’s guarded, of course.”
“Guarded? By what?”

“Three monsters. You’ll have to face all three to reach Akiko. I’m not going with you.”

Hiroshi nodded. “That would be best. Still, do you know how can I defeat the guardians?”

“I didn’t say you could defeat them. I said you had to face them. You do have a knack for misunderstanding your situation, young man.”

“Honored Sir, with all respect, you have a knack for meaningless answers.”

The monk smiled again. “Pass the guardians first; then tell me what I have said is meaningless.”

Hiroshi considered. He did not want to fight the monsters. He was afraid, and he couldn’t pretend otherwise. He just knew that he had to go forward now. Not out of pride he didn’t have, or bravery he didn’t feel. It wasn’t even for the music anymore. Maybe the monk was right—he wanted an answer. Something that would fill the empty ache he felt every time he heard the music, that he knew he always would feel even if he never heard the music again.

*It’s not as if I can stop listening.*

Hiroshi unsheathed his sword and stepped past the stone lanterns alone. Their glow faded behind him much sooner than he had expected. As in the first part of the cave the light was
very faint but he still could see—barely. He moved slowly, carefully, trying to step quietly over the smooth gray stones.

It didn’t help. The first guardian was waiting for him before he had gone a dozen steps.

“Go home, boy.”

Hiroshi stood face to knee with a gigantic oni. It towered over him, a good eight feet tall. Its skin was redder than blood, its teeth like tusks, its hair like a lion’s mane. It carried in its right hand a gigantic iron club.

For several long moments Hiroshi just stared. He couldn’t raise his sword, he couldn’t run, he couldn’t do anything.

“I asked politely enough,” grunted the oni. “Now it is too late.”

The creature swung its club. Too late, Hiroshi tried to dodge. He didn’t get the full force of the blow, but he got more than enough. His vision exploded like a Chinese rocket, and for a moment all he could see was white drifting stars. The first thing to come back to him, even before his vision, was his name, and it wasn’t Hiroshi.

*My name is Yojiro....*

The rest of his former life came back to him then. Part of him remained Hiroshi and did not forget. Yet now he remembered being Yojiro too. Growing up in the shadow of Fuji-san, and the people he had known there. He remembered
being a young samurai, full of life and promise. He remembered the lesson he’d been taught in both humility and the transience of a life, the day he had died in battle. All this was known to him in the instant before he opened his eyes again, knowing himself to be Hiroshi, and knowing that he, once, was Yojiro.

The oni was nowhere to be seen.

Hiroshi sat up, gingerly feeling the lump on the side of his head. “I think I am still alive, yet I don’t understand how that can be. Why didn’t the ogre finish me off? I was no match for him!”

Hiroshi didn’t question the new memories that had come to him on the oni’s club; he knew they had come to him for a reason. He didn’t know what that reason was, but he was certain he wouldn’t find out sitting there on the stones. He got to his feet, slowly, and looked around for his sword. It was lying some distance away. There was a nick on the blade where it struck a stone on landing.

*That will take some time to polish out. Uncle will be cross.*

No help for it now. Hiroshi carefully sheathed the sword, then remembered to examine himself for any other injuries he might have missed, but there didn’t seem to be any. That seemed strangely fortunate, but Hiroshi wasn’t sure if it was anything of the sort. The other young man’s memories were
still strong in him, and he still didn’t know what they might mean. There was also a curious gap in those memories, curious because of the vividness of all the others. Someone he could almost but not quite remember.

*Akiko?*

Perhaps, but knowing the name did not help. He couldn’t picture her at all, nor name the song he still heard being played on the distant *koto*. He could picture the instrument itself, see delicate hands at its silk strings, but that was all. Hiroshi took a deep breath and, when he felt he was able, he followed the music one more time.

The valley narrowed soon after, but the hill where Akiko waited was getting much closer, and the music, while distant, was very easy to hear. The same song, beautiful and melancholy. Hiroshi saw bleak earth rise on either side of him, as if he was walking into a grave.

*At least the monster can’t sneak up on me from the sides....*

The monster didn’t bother. It waited, serene, in his path right in front of him. A coiled dragon with scales so smooth and black they glistened. Its talons dripped venom, and it looked at him with unblinking red eyes. “Go home, Hiroshi,” it said.

After the *oni*, the sight of a dragon was not so startling, for all that Hiroshi could see death in its eyes.
“If I could go back, I would have. Please let me pass.”

“That isn’t the way of this place,” the dragon said, and Hiroshi was almost certain that, when it bared its fangs at him, the thing was coming as close to a smile as its appearance allowed. Hiroshi, terrified and yet unable to retreat, did the only thing he could think to do and drew his sword.

Now I am sure it is smiling at me.

Whether it was or not, the thing struck almost too fast for Hiroshi to see. It didn’t bother to bite him; its talons closed tightly on his right arm, and Hiroshi felt them piercing his flesh, sending their venom into his blood. A wave of agony washed over him, far worse than when the oni had struck him down, far worse than anything he could have imagined. For a moment he knew nothing, could know nothing through the haze of pain.

He did not wake, exactly. He heard a woman’s voice, speaking to him. He knew it for a dream, a memory, but real just the same. Akiko was speaking to him, somewhere, sometime... him? No. Yojiro. It was Yojiro who heard, and Yojiro who answered.

“You will return, Yojiro. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Hiroshi heard himself answer, in Yojiro’s voice. It was a promise he had failed to keep, on the day he died.
Hiroshi opened his eyes. The dragon was gone. Hiroshi was not surprised this time; he had begun to understand, perhaps a little. He had two sets of memories now. First Yojiro, now Akiko. He remembered her, her glossy black hair and sweet face—remembered their love and the promises they had made to each other. He remembered dying.

*And she followed me. I’m sorry, Akiko.*

There would be a third guardian, but Hiroshi put his sword away; he did not think he would be needing it again. He followed the music, remembering the words, remembering who had played that song with so much joy before and so much sadness now.

Cherry Blossoms on the Water.

The song was a promise of spring. A promise of many things. Hiroshi looked up at the hilltop. He could see the lone figure sitting there, bowed over the *koto*, playing the song that had called him down the well and away from his life. He was neither angry nor sad about that, but he was left with the problem of what to do. He did not try to climb the hill just yet. He waited for the guardian to appear, and soon he did, the rhythmic jingle of his staff serving counter point to the mournful *koto*.

“Greetings, Honored Sir,” Hiroshi said to the monk. Hiroshi was a little surprised, but not very much.
“Why wait for me? The way to the hill was clear.”

Hiroshi shook his head. “Obvious, perhaps. But not clear. Nor do I think you intend to stop me directly. Either of the other two could have done that.”

The monk nodded. “You’re perhaps less of a fool than I thought. How much less, though? That is not certain.”

“The first two guardians gave me Yojiro and then Akiko,” Hiroshi said. “What will the third guardian do?”

“Perhaps he will take them away again. Perhaps that is up to you.”

“What should I do?”

“I told you before—go home.”

“I will go home, for that was my promise. Yet I have another promise that I must keep first. One even longer delayed.”

The monk frowned but stood aside. “I will wait here. If you return....”

Hiroshi didn’t like the way the monk said ‘if,’ but he understood. He slowly walked up the hill.

Akiko sat with her back to him, her long white fingers on the strings of the koto. Too long. Too white. Her kimono too was white, and it sagged back upon her bony shoulders. Hiroshi remembered those shoulders, that neck whiter than snow. Grayish now. He could not see her face. Her back was
turned and she could not see him, but she obviously knew he was there.

“Yojiro, you’ve come back to me.”

She started to rise, but Hiroshi stepped forward and took her shoulders in a gentle but firm grip. He tried not to think of the scent that rose from her now, so different from long ago.

“Do not look at me, Akiko.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m dead. I was... I mean. Yojiro—I, remember. I waved my sword about quite bravely, then I was shot full of arrows and they cut off my head. My ankles were spiked.”

“You’ve returned,” she insisted.

“You called me from another place, with your music and my promise. I kept my promise, but I don’t belong here. Now I must go.”

She shook her head, slowly. “Let me look at you.”

“What will you see, Akiko? What will I see when I look at you now? We are not what we were. I’ve traveled the River of Souls before and returned to the living world. You must do the same.”

“Stay?” She sounded confused. “You must stay!”

“No,” he said.

“You promised!”
“I promised to return, and I have. To love you, and I did. I remember. I... Yojiro, loved you. Let that be enough.”

“No!”

“What will I see when you look at me? I remember your beauty. Do you want me to see what you are now?”

“I am Akiko!”

“Yes. You are also dead and your flesh has gone to corruption. As long as you remain on this hilltop down in the darkness, playing that song for me, you will remain dead. I don’t want that, and neither should you.”

“Please...,” she said, and reached up to touch his hand. Her fingers were cold, and there was no living flesh to them.

Hiroshi took a deep breath. He knew what he must do, but it wasn’t his decision. It was Yojiro’s, for the woman who died out of love for him. *Forgive me, Akiko, but I believe I will need Hiroshi’s sword one last time.*

“Please play for me,” he said. “‘Cherry Blossoms on the Water.’”

“Always,” she said, and her fingers caressed the strings as they had his face and body, once long ago.

In one smooth movement, with less thought than a breath, Hiroshi drew his sword and brought it down on the strings just to the side of Akiko’s fingers. The taut silk strings parted with a high screeching sound like a wail of despair, fading, only to be
echoed by Akiko. She twisted suddenly in his arms, fingers reaching to claw, not caress, but Hiroshi held firm and looked full into her ruined face, painting over the horror he saw there with one last strong memory of beauty.

“Good-bye,” he said.

His memory clothed her in full life for just a moment, then it began to fade, as did Akiko. In a moment, both were gone, leaving only a trace of sadness and a faint ghostly memory that was more like a dream.

Hiroshi was left alone on the hill with the shattered instrument. After a bit, he made his way back down to the valley again where the monk was waiting for him.

“She can move on now,” the monk said. “As you must. That was well done.”

Hiroshi just said, “I would like to go home now.”

They made their way out of the valley and back across the dry streambed of stones. Hiroshi looked at the piles of stones again, and again he listened. There was no music, but he did hear the sound of children playing. He was sure of it this time, but he said nothing until they were past the stones and walking through the cave back to the well. He looked at his companion.

“I thought you were a simple monk, but I also thought this a simple cave.”

“Who do you think I am?”
“If this is the River of Souls, then there are many powerful *kami* in this place, but I think you are the one called The God of Children,” Hiroshi said. “Yet I also think what you did, you did for Yojiro and Akiko. Not for me. They were young, but they were not children. Why?”

“We are all children, Hiroshi,” the monk said, and that was all.

It wasn’t an answer, but then Hiroshi no longer remembered asking a question of the little monk or, for that matter, remembered the little monk himself. Even the names Akiko and Yojiro were fading from his memory now, and then they were gone completely. Hiroshi was alone. He knew only that he was in a deep dark place where he did not belong, and the way out was clear.

Hiroshi saw blue sky far above and let it guide him as he climbed back up into the living world.

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*Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife and a varying number of cats. His fiction has appeared in Asimov’s, Realms.*
of Fantasy, Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet, Fantasy Magazine, Weird Tales, multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and in numerous anthologies including Year’s Best Fantasy and Fantasy: The Best of the Year. His fourth story collection, Yamada Monogatari: Demon Hunter, was released in February of 2013 by Prime Books.

Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies
Tomai walked home from the lampblack mines. His skin was dark as the night sky seen through closed eyes. Premorning mist began to rise from the River Ars, settling Lacuna’s preternatural dust.

Bugspit district dominated the skyline: a construct of wood pulp and secretions. Termites the size of prams scuttled over the facade of the rough structure. They didn’t notice or didn’t care that they were moving on a vertical surface a hundred feet above the cobbled streets. Tomai envied their heart.

Between Tomai and his home, his wife, and a cold bowl of lamb stew was a gang of urchins beating up a dwarf. Tomai wasn’t much of one to step into these situations, but this route did happen to be the quickest to his home and breakfast.

“Go away,” Tomai said, hoisting his pick to his shoulder. The kids took one look at the dusty ax and scurried into the night. All fled except one.

“Toss off, old man,” the kid said, stepping up to Tomai. “This is between me and that onion-skin loving dwarf.” Tomai
wasn’t a small man, but this kid was a good head taller. He couldn’t afford to let this get out of hand.

“Nah,” Tomai said. “Can’t do that.” He let the pick fall, burying it into the cobbles. The kid screamed and tried to yank the tip of the pick out of his foot, but Tomai had his weight on it.

“You gonna leave if I let you up?” Tomai asked, wiggling the pick back and forth. The kid nodded, tears coloring his dirty face.

Tomai pried back on the handle. The kid screamed again as the point came loose. Tomai took a somewhat clean bandana from his pocket and cinched it tight around the hole in the kid’s foot.

“That’ll heal up in a week if you keep off of it,” Tomai said, but the kid had already hobbled into the morning fog.

He shook his head and went to look on the dwarf. A small trickle of blood led away from the little man.

“You okay?” Tomai asked, knees popping as he squatted near the dwarf.

“Yeah,” the dwarf said, unrolling himself. A cut seeped above his eye, and he held a hand over his lower ribs. “Broke a couple of my soup bones though.”
“Here,” Tomai said, lifting the dwarf to his feet. The dwarf let out a string of curses as his broken ribs twisted. He held one hand to his breast.

“Something with your heart?” Tomai asked, brushing dust off the man’s shoulders.

“Nah. And the name’s Kork, by way of asking.”

“Tomai. Why were they kicking you?”

Kork’s eyes were small and black, like obsidian beads. “Protecting my little ‘onion-skinned’ buddy here,” he said, showing Tomai what he cradled: a squirrel no bigger than an acorn, made of paper. The squirrel’s tail smoldered from where it had caught fire. It licked the burnt stump, leaving trails of glistening ink through the soot.

“That’s a paper-thing,” Tomai said standing up. Something in his tone made Kork’s eyes narrow.

“It is. You got an issue with that, brother?”

Tomai shook his head. “I don’t, but you might want to let your little friend go before you meet anyone else in Bugspit.”

Kork wheezed through his smashed nose. “I gathered that.”

Tomai left the dwarf and made his way to one of the hundred entrances to Bugspit. He felt like it would be one of those sorts of mornings.

* * *
Bugspit was just like another mine, and Tomai navigated it as such. Corridors wound around, up, and down, rearranging themselves by the day. It smelled of old newspaper and mildew.

Tomai found the narrow tunnel that led to his floor and belly-crawled up it. The dried pulp drank the mixture of sweat and coal dust from his skin. Tomai thought it felt like crawling across a cat’s tongue.

When he got to his apartment, he found the door unlocked and open.

_Shite_, he thought, hefting the pick and pushing in. His wife sat snoring in front of the oilpaper window: a skeletal woman draped in a long robe.

“Ah, there’s my rifle,” he said in a too-loud and too-deep voice, while searching the three-room apartment. He didn’t find anyone, but he noticed that their block of knives was missing.

“Meeranda?” he said after locking the door. “Are you okay?”

His wife stirred and stretched, yawning. A dry, rattling sound escape her throat, and she coughed once before nodding.

“You fell asleep with the door unlocked again, dear. Someone took our knives,” Tomai said, taking his wife’s fragile
hand in his own. He felt like if he held it even as if it were a child’s, the bones would snap like pine dowels.

She began to shake, and Tomai put an arm around her shoulders.

“I can get new knives. I just don’t want anyone to hurt you, Meera.”

She nodded and ran a sleeve across her eyes. It came away black.

“I’m going to wash up now,” Tomai said. Meera nodded again and went to the bedroom. She came back with a rough, gray towel and a change of his clothes. Tomai kissed her lightly on the forehead and went to the bath.

The bath was the smallest room of the house. Bugspit didn’t have any plumbing to speak of. The bathroom held three basins and a looking glass: the smallest basin sat under the cracked mirror and was used as a sink; the medium basin – and it was imperative this never became confused – was a chamber pot, emptied and scrubbed nightly; and the largest basin was used as a tub.

The tub was already half-filled with tepid water. Tomai threw two ever-glowing *feurglas* stones in the tub and watched as steam began rising into the air. He stripped down and lowered himself into the scalding water.
Tomai had lost most of his cartilage during his years in the mine; his nose was a formless lump, his shoulders wouldn’t rise above his head, his wrists were stiff planks, and his knees clicked with each step. His nightly bath was better than any lump of opium.

Tomai grabbed a hard sponge from the floor beside the tub and began to scrub the lampblack from his skin. Within moments, the water began bubbling tar-black. Tomai let his hand dangle from the tub, writing his name on the paper floor in thin ink; more like watercolor calligraphy than his proper signature: a night-black “X.”

Meera walked into the room – they had no doors – and let her cowl drop to the floor. Tomai heard the rustling and stepped out of the tub. Black rivulets became black rivers as the water flowed down his body and was absorbed by the floor.

“Here,” Tomai said, offering Meera his hand. She took it, and Tomai ran his thumb over her sandpaper fingers as she dipped a long, thin leg into the tub.

Meera disappeared under the surface. In moments the water level began to drop. Inch by inch, the ink left horizontal bands on the enameled basin. Bits of Meera became visible: the crown of her skull topped with thick lampblack hair; high forehead, upturned nose, full cheeks; swan’s neck, narrow shoulders, sharp collar bones; round stomach. Where once
seemed a marionette creature now stood a woman folded out of Tomai’s dreams.

Tomai reached into the tub and pulled out a cool shard of *feurglas*. It still glowed with an orange inner light. Smiling, he laced his fingers through hers and held the shard to her smooth, round stomach. Barely visible, a tiny ink-stained hand pressed against the layers of parchment and vellum.

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Adam Callaway’s Lacuna stories, which include “*Walls of Paper, Soft as Skin*” in BCS #73 and “*The Magic of Dark and Hollow Places*” in BCS #96, have been reprinted in The Year’s Best Dark Fantasy and Horror, nominated for the Million Writers Award, and named to the Locus Recommended Reading List. He lives in Superior, Wisconsin, with his wife and two dogs.
Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies
THE COFFINMAKER’S LOVE

by Alberto Yáñez

Miss Lavinia Parrish was a young woman when she chose to apprentice herself to Mr Harid de Borba, a coffinmaker of great skill but odd repute. Though the two were acquainted prior to her request, Miss Parrish had not laid bare her heart to her new master, nor had she otherwise explained her particular reasons for undertaking a trade. Although considered unconventional for a gentlewoman of quality, Miss Parrish’s family money and connections bought her a fair amount of discretion from Mr de Borba. Moreover, Miss Parrish, it turned out, had some natural skill with her hands. And Mr de Borba was, it was quietly said (by those who would say such things), mad—and in all honesty, Lavinia Parrish never saw him (de Borba) do anything to disprove that allegation—but his eccentricity worked in her favor. Besides, he seemed harmless enough.

Mr de Borba had a peculiar habit of talking to his materials that Miss Parrish found endearing: he exhorted the noble mahogany, the aromatic cedar, the simple pine, to plane straight and join true. Once, Miss Parrish had walked in on Mr
de Borba carrying on an animated conversation with a bolt of white Oriental silk, explaining to the fabric that it was destined to cushion the rest of a lady of quality and so should do its best not to discolor or stain—even though, he allowed, that was an unlikely prospect, given its future purpose. Miss Parrish had walked into the workshop silently, had gone unnoticed by her master, and so she had walked back out just as quietly. Miss Parrish privately opined that what Mr de Borba did in his own atelier was his own concern and none of hers, save it were a direct lesson to herself.

Such an understanding served both master and apprentice well.

Lavinia came from a good family, as such things were judged in the society of the Silvered Country; her uncle was a baronet and her mother was the youngest daughter of a Peninsular grandee viscount. (Sadly, there was no longer even a courtesy title for Mrs Parrish, as her eldest half-sister had since inherited the peerage and become Vizcondesa de Pablo.) Lavinia’s father was a gentleman whose forefathers, while not noble, had possessed significant means and had not worked in four generations. Miss Parrish’s hands were small and neat and, once taught, quick-fingered and clever with small chisel and mallet. She was not ruddy, like her father, nor olive, like her mother, but a mild pale color, which tanned nicely in
summer were she unwise with her parasols. Her hair was brown, and a touch too short.

As she had not confided in them her true reasons for doing so, her parents did not understand their youngest daughter’s desire to become a tradeswoman, but at least Lavinia was quiet about it, for which they were grateful. Moreover, as Lavinia insisting on a trade likely spared them a proper dowry, and having three other daughters and a son to inherit the rest, Mr Parrish was not prepared to complain about his daughter’s odd ambitions.

Mr and Mrs Parrish were disposed to feel a certain gratitude for (and hence, liberality with) Lavinia, most chiefly arising from the unusual circumstances of her birth. Lavinia had been born blue, unbreathing and already half-claimed by death. Only a clever nurse-midwife’s quick actions had saved the family from the heartbreak of stillborn happiness. As a result, Miss Lavinia Parrish was much indulged.

Yet despite the doting, Lavinia did not imagine that her family would understand if she confessed her motivations all a plan to court a wife.

* * *

When Lavinia was nearly six years old, her Welsh nanny, Miss Herriet ap Croutch, was very fond of taking her for air and exercise in the park at Plaza Grover, just two short and tony
blocks away from the Parrish manor on the more fashionable side of Marqués Street. The children’s yard in the park was fenced with tall filigreed iron spikes, and only the governesses of the families who sponsored the park where allowed a key.

Thus it came as a surprise to young Lavinia when early one morning when she had pestered Miss ap Croutch into taking her to the yard before any of the other governesses or the children would arrive (to see how high she could go on the swings), that she spied a young girl she did not recognize playing in the yard, no nanny in sight.

The girl was olive (darker than Lavinia’s mother and thus near to tea brown), with black hair that glowed nearly blue, a proud aquiline nose, and a blue and white pinafore dress. A red boater and matching gloves, fine Isthmian straw and dyed kid, lay abandoned on the grass next to the slide.

Lavinia noticed that the young girl attracted no one else’s attention, as Miss ap Croutch just smiled pleasantly in Lavinia’s direction and sat on one of the small curlicued iron benches on the far edge of the yard and pulled out one of the penny-books of sensational stories that she loved and never read to Lavinia. A pair of housemaids out on errands looked up from their gossip to smile at Lavinia as they passed by, but they did not acknowledge the strange girl who was skipping nearby, singing softly.
Young Lavinia, however, found that she could not help but notice her. Indeed, swings forgotten, the young girl occupied the whole of Lavinia’s attention. Never had Lavinia felt such fascination; she could feel her heart thumping in her chest like a New Year’s drum. She walked up to the tall slide where the brown girl in her pinafore dress stood on the platform at the top of the slide’s ladder, her hands grasping the fanciful spiral guard rails on either side of her. The girl was readying herself to step across the platform and begin her descent down the long and wickedly steep slope.

“You’re not scared, are you?” Lavinia asked from the ground, yelling politely.

The brown girl started the tiniest bit, as if she had not expected to be noticed by anyone. She turned to face Lavinia, her right eyebrow perfectly arched above her sparkling dark eyes. The look on her oval face was of surprised—albeit polite—superiority. “No! Of course not. I’m just deciding how I want to slide. My dress, you see... although I’m surprised that you can.”

Lavinia didn’t understand what the girl meant, but she nodded anyway. The girl was prettiest she had ever met, more than Lavinia’s sisters or even her mother. “If you’d like, I might slide down first to show you?”

“Thank you,” the girl said, “but no. I can decide on my own. I always decide on my own.”
“Are you certain?” Lavinia asked, wanting to keep the girl’s attention but not wanting to be obvious about it.

“Yes. I don’t persuade easily.”

“If you say so,” said Lavinia, affecting a sigh, “but please decide soon. I should like to slide, too.”

“All right,” the girl said and faced the slope again. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

In truth, Lavinia was prepared to wait as long as the girl liked if she could keep looking at her, but she thought it best not to say that.

As if the girl could guess her thoughts, she frowned at Lavinia. “You’re being silly,” she said. “Stop looking at me! You’re not even supposed to see me!”

Lavinia blushed a deep pink almost as ruddy as her father and sputtered, “I just want to see what you decide!”

The girl gave her a weighing look that she could not read. Then with a graceful flounce of her skirt, she returned to the matter at hand, sat, and launched herself down the slide faster than Lavinia had seen anyone go. The girl’s laughter sounded like Cousin Tansy playing handbells at the holiday romps at their grandmother’s town house.

Lavinia’s heart raced nearly as fast as the girl did down the steel slope of the slide. Lavinia ran to catch up as the girl sailed off the end of the slide and into the air, landing softly on her
feet a few yards away. Lavinia had never seen anyone fly so far off the slide before.

Being only nearly six years old, Lavinia Parrish didn’t know it then, but that was the moment when she first fell in love. Her small heart thumped faster as she approached the strange tea-brown girl in the blue and white pinafore dress.

Lavinia started to congratulate the girl on her flight, but the girl just walked off over to the swings. “You shouldn’t go next on the slide,” she called over her shoulder. “I shouldn’t like you to feel bad about it later, since it shan’t be anyone’s fault. Come play on the swings with me, instead.”

Puzzled, but happy to be invited, Lavinia skipped her way over.

On the swings, they pushed off the earth and pumped the air as they raced and arced like joyful pendulums across the sky.

In a moment of rest, collapsed on the soft grass next to the girl and looking only at the sky above, Lavinia quietly promised her that she would always be her friend. It was not quite what she meant, but she didn’t know how else to say what she was feeling. The girl sat up, her shadow falling across her face, silhouetted against the fathomless blue of the heavens. Giving Lavinia a look even more measuring than the one before, she replied that she would be Lavinia’s friend forever.
It was not long before the other nannies showed up with their charges and the children’s yard was full with playing boys and girls. Although Lavinia had a few friends amongst them, they didn’t seem to notice her this morning, and she was too caught up in the thrill of the unknown girl’s company to care. The pair of them played on the swings and chased each other, although Lavinia was never able to actually catch the girl, and she took care to not catch Lavinia.

Lavinia had forgotten the girl’s warning about the slide when she heard the scuffle across the yard. Pimm de Balsam-Merriweather had declared that none of the children were going to play on the slide that morning until he chose to let them. He often did such things, smiling charmingly to fool the governesses who all thought him darling and keep them to their gossip instead of wondering why their charges went silent when he approached. Pimm was capricious and mean and big for his age, and Lavinia did not much like him.

Although Pimm had forbidden anyone else to play on the slide, he did not use it, either. Instead of keeping the joy of sliding down it his own personal delight, Pimm sat at the end of the slide and glared at any of the children who approached.

But with the eventual defiance born of the knowledge that her much bigger and very protective brother was home on leave from his boarding school, Rose-Martha de Clare, a small but
brave blonde girl who lived in a house across the square, decided to scramble up the ladder before Pimm could stop her. Pimm started bellowing from the moment Rose-Martha’s black patent shoes rang on the ladder’s rungs. Pimm jumped off the end of the slide and ran to the ladder, all as Rose-Martha laughed and climbed in her lace-trimmed lemon-sherbet dress, nimble as the trained monkey the peanut vendor over on High Street kept to delight passersby.

From the safety of the top of the slide, Rose-Martha turned to jeer at red-faced Pimm below, knowing he could no longer stop her. All the children cheered her in excitement and hollered in dread as Pimm climbed the ladder after her.

Laughing, and meaning to sit in order to propel herself down the slide to escape him, Rose-Martha instead caught her skirt on the curling spiral of the guard rail, and the change that the black iron snare made in her momentum was enough to cause her to stumble.

Rose-Martha’s descent should have been a graceful thing, ending with the cheers of her friends and a triumph over Pimm. Instead, there was the sound of her yellow dress tearing as she fell headlong and angular down the steep slope; an abbreviated shriek of surprised terror as she fell, silenced with the first bounce against the steel; then a cruel thud as she struck the ground head-first, and a final soft wet snap that was
audible in the silence spilling across the play yard like a wave of horror. It was two heartbeats before the screams began and the governesses finally looked up from their gossip, crochet needles, and books.

Lavinia saw it happen, although she did not quite understand what it meant. She turned to the tea-brown girl in her pinafore dress to ask what they should do, but the girl was gone.

It was fortunate that at that point Miss ap Croutch, having dropped her penny-dreadful on her bench and run across the full length of the yard at the sound of the screams, swept Lavinia up in her arms and engulfed her in as maternal an embrace as she had known.

Quickly feeling to make sure that Lavinia was whole and unhurt, Miss ap Croutch took in the scene with a glance: all the children frightened and sobbing, including Pimm, Rose-Martha’s splayed body at the foot of the slide with her head and arms twisted in unnatural directions, and Miss Polly Waszko, the de Clare governess, walking with a bowed head and steps slow and reticent, as if by delaying she could avoid the reality of it. Miss ap Croutch shouted, “Get a doctor!” although she surely knew there would be no use.

Later, whilst standing in the viewing queue with her parents at the service for the young Miss de Clare, Lavinia
thought she caught a glimpse of the tea-brown girl. It seemed to her that the girl held out her red-gloved hand and trailed it along the small black lacquer coffin as she filed past the body. Sad and confused, Lavinia remembered then that the girl had shared something with her, some secret promise or clever thing that had made sense of the world, but she could not recall what it was. An enveloping sense of loss claimed her as her certainty fled, and, walking past the coffin, Lavinia cried.

* * *

One morning several years later when Lavinia was six days away from turning fourteen, she woke up earlier than usual and came down to the warmth of the Mrs Begas’s kitchen.

Lavinia was being sent to a new school—which was good, as she hadn’t liked her previous one. According to her father, it had been very well-regarded, but Lavinia found it dreary and the teachers cold. More importantly from Lavinia’s parents’ point of view, it was no longer the best place for the daughter of a good family due to a small scandal involving the headmistress and the mother of one of the students.

The excitement (and, were she honest, the nervousness) of knowing that she would be starting at a new school had brought Lavinia down to get a glass of milk and some warm bread and jam from Mrs Begas. The rotund cook had welcomed Lavinia into her vast and floury domain ever since she was
small, and so Lavinia sat in her usual spot out of the way. It was not something she could admit to her rank-conscious lady mother, but she enjoyed watching the way the staff brought the house to life. Lucy, the maid who tended the fireplaces and swept, sang quietly when she thought herself alone. Cervantes, the butler, was terribly serious upstairs in the presence of Mr and Mrs Parrish but had a silly sense of humor when downstairs or alone with Lavinia and her siblings.

Well before the family awoke, the kitchen bustled. Lavinia enjoyed watching the deliveries come to the service door: the butcher’s boy bringing plucked hens and eggs, the milk girls coming around with their enameled blue jugs, and the baker’s son dropping off the standing order of morning loaves.

Tick, the butcher’s boy, a tall freckled lad with light brown hair sticking out like straw around his ears from under his white cap, had put the brace of hens on the hook in the cold room and settled the bill with Mrs Begas, and now was quietly flirting with Lucy next to the hammered copper sink. It wasn’t a serious courtship yet, but last week Lavinia had overheard Lucy being teased by the staff for mooning over the boy.

Since Tick was on his slow way out, the service door was still open, and through it, Lavinia could see a girl about her own age step up to the threshold.
The girl was a dream, with cool-looking skin the color of Lavinia’s mother’s favorite porcelain cups and soot-black hair, with lips the pale pink of new summer roses, and a sharp up-turned nose like the illustrations of pixies in the storybooks Lavinia’s nanny had read her when she was ill. She was so striking that Lavinia sat up straight on her stool, bread and sweet quince jam forgotten. The stranger was the loveliest girl Lavinia had ever seen.

Sometimes, when she was ill or only half-awake and lingering on the borders of sleep, Lavinia thought she remembered—as if in a dream—a beautiful tea-brown girl on a slide, and fancied that the girl was possessed of a secret that would make Lavinia content or wise. Sometimes she would recall imagining that she’d seen the tea-brown girl walking on a crowded street or passing by on the city tram, the lovely girl’s appearance changing over the years as she grew up. Seeing this girl now, all that sharp memory and ache flooded back, and Lavinia half-smiled at the melancholy hurt; she weighed the beauty of it against this present moment. She could not decide if this girl was lovelier or not than those misty fancies. One of the two most lovely, then.

The girl did not knock or hesitate but stepped in with a confidence that denied the possibility of refusal, her bearing even more regal than that of Lavinia’s grandmother, the
Dowager Viscountess. Whether she was a shop girl sent on errand or a likely girl hoping for a maid’s position, Lavinia did not care. Seeing the girl standing there in her simple calico frock, Lavinia just wanted to watch her, and perhaps talk to her if she could summon courage enough.

No one else turned to look at the strange girl as she walked in, although the conversation and bustle faltered and then resumed with anxious strength. Yet no one said anything at all as she crossed the grey slate floor of the kitchen and approached the sink, where Tick and Lucy stood murmuring and blushing at one another.

Lavinia saw Mrs Begas look up as the girl walked past the great kitchen table where she sat planning the week’s menu. Mrs Begas frowned distractedly, as if merely remembering that the cheesemonger had forgotten to include the sharp bleu with her order and that she would need to send an errand boy to pick it up; she gave no sign that she saw the strange pale girl.

The girl stopped next to Tick, whose shy banter with Lucy had fallen silent. Lucy blushed furiously enough that it showed even with her copper-brown skin and didn’t look up from the pot she had been drying for the last five minutes. Thus Lucy missed it when the pale girl leaned forward and kissed Tick on the cheek gently, like a mother might kiss her babe. Tick gave no notice to the girl’s presence, but Lavinia saw him shudder as
if suddenly cold, and then Tick rubbed his chest and left arm absentmindedly, as if they ached like a trick knee in bad weather.

Kiss given, and still seeming invisible to everyone else in the kitchen, the girl turned around and glanced at Lavinia, who had not moved from her stool in the corner. The girl’s dark eyes were sad, and Lavinia could not tell what color they might be, but they reminded Lavinia of a sparkling-eyed girl in the pinafore dress. The girl gave Lavinia a half-smile that seemed both bitter and sweet, like almond honey and regret, and walked out of the kitchen without a word.

Lavinia rose from her seat but hadn’t taken more than one faltering step toward the door when she heard a clanging crash across the kitchen. She jumped and swiveled to see Tick clutching his chest on the slate floor with specks of foam on his lips. Lucy knelt next to him, the copper pot she been drying having bounced and landed behind her.

Lavinia could see that Tick wasn’t breathing; Lucy started to wail, a thin keening sound like all her new hopes boiling away in a kettle of despair.

Lavinia ran to the door, wanting to find the girl, to demand to know what she had done, to kiss her, to ask whom she was, to know what happened, to know her name.

She wasn’t there.
For a moment then Lavinia knew, knew it as well as she knew her own name and her own secrets, that the girl had been real, even if no one else had seen her.

Stepping back inside, that knowledge quietly dissipated like the truth of dreams lost in morning light, and Lavinia felt a sick pit of dread open up in her belly. Everything seemed flimsy around her. She struggled to take in the scene again, the loss making her uneasy and uncertain. She met Mrs Begas’s grim eyes from across the gulf that had opened up in her kitchen.

“I’ll go wake Father,” Lavinia said.

* * *

From where she stood, Lavinia could see that the coffin was simple but poorly-stained pine. Tick’s family didn’t have much money and probably saw no reason to waste the collection taken up for them on something that would moulder in the ground and bring no comfort to the living come winter.

It wouldn’t have been appropriate for a girl of Lavinia’s station to attend the funeral for a butcher’s boy (or so she knew her mother would have said, had she dared mention it to her), so she watched from across the street as the mourners walked in a solemn cortège out of the little stone chapel on St Thelmus Street.

At the end of the short stream of family, butchers, and shop folk, a pale girl walked in a calico dress, her dark hair
uncovered. She saw Lavinia and slowed her pace. Lavinia dashed over to walk beside her.

“It was a sad service,” the girl said as Lavinia joined her, before Lavinia could launch into her ten thousand questions. “Tick’s mother was so confused and crying, and his father was silent and hurt. Tick’s uncle died the same way, when Tick was a baby. A weak heart.”

Lavinia’s questions dried up, and so she just nodded and walked alongside the girl.

“There weren’t many flowers, and the coffin was just a simple box and not very well made.” The girl glanced at Lavinia then, sidewise and blue. “I would have thought that they’d use a little more care to see him off. It’s important to show respect.”

Lavinia nodded again. She still wasn’t sure what would be the right thing to say, to ask.

As they reached an intersection, the bells of the little church tolled behind them. Lavinia turned, surprised by the carillon. She was moved by the beautiful and unexpected tribute for the dead boy.

At her side, the porcelain-pale girl said, “I should go. I have other places I’m wanted. Goodbye for now, Miss Parrish.”

Startled, Lavinia whirled back to the girl, an arm flung out to hold her from leaving, but she was gone. Lavinia searched up
and down both streets for several blocks before she thought to wonder that the girl knew her name.

A little time after that, Lavinia forgot what she was looking for, and who it had been that had known her name. A trifle puzzled, she went home.

* * *

As a young woman, grown out of the awkwardness of adolescence and having filled out, Lavinia found her health, although mostly quite good, grow unexpectedly precarious. When she was seventeen, she contracted scarlet fever at boarding school in Brasyl, and she came closer to death than anyone truly realized. Delirious, she babbled to the physician and the matron that she had seen the pale girl many times in the edges of crowds and from across busy streets, but that the girl would never speak with Lavinia again and always disappeared before she could reach her. Believing Lavinia to be especially ill and in want of rest (as she remembered nothing of this confession once her fever broke), she was sent back to the family home.

It was then that Sister Marival del Kurosawa was hired to instruct her, since Lavinia had insisted on receiving as good an education as her brother, and she would need special tutoring in order to secure a place at the Royal University.
The scholar-nun was sharp, and brisk, and cold. She was never mean, and never treated Lavinia with anything less than a full measure of dignified seriousness and respect should Lavinia undertake the effort to learn, but she did not coddle her.

Being a gentlewoman of quality, and having been much accustomed to getting her way as the baby of the family, Lavinia found that she alternately loved and despaired of Sister Marival’s methods. Mrs Parrish, of course, felt that too much education was not quite the thing to do with a girl child, but Mr Parrish, ever-doting, was amused by Lavinia’s insistence, as was the rest of the family.

It was during this same time that Lavinia’s father’s father, old Reginaldo Lann Parrish, also came to stay with the his son’s family. Old Reginaldo had been the spoiled grandson of the self-made Juan Diego Dormouth Parrish, an unrepentant robber baron who had made the original Parrish wealth in coal and railroads crisscrossing the windswept pampas and investing in the new mechanical inventions coming out of the New Wales colony in Puerto Madryn. Although Reginaldo’s father had been embarrassed by the newness of the family money, Reginaldo Lann himself had never known anything else, and it showed.
Widowed for a second time recently, and willful forever, Reginaldo, upon learning that Lavinia would be at home for at least a term, declared that he was leaving his estate in the north to come to the capital and spend time with his favorite granddaughter. Besides, he had been ill, and his physician demanded that he see a specialist in the city.

Upon learning what her father-in-law intended, Mrs Parrish had informed her family that it was past time that she took Lavinia’s sisters on a grand tour of the great cities of the continent, and so with a farewell kiss on her forehead she had bade Lavinia goodbye, with plans to delay her return until Reginaldo Lann Parrish went back to his own estates.

Thus abandoned by her health and her mother, Lavinia learned to endure—and even like—both her lessons and her grandfather. (Truth to tell, Lavinia adored her grandfather and that he doted on her so outrageously. It drove her sisters batty, but they had their mother’s favor, so Lavinia felt it only fair.)

Later, when Lavinia’s health had improved sufficiently that she could go out on her own, Sister Marival assigned her work that required Lavinia to visit the city’s libraries, or on occasion, the Royal University, where her brother had studied and she aspired to as well.

Returning one late summer day from an excursion to the main library and wondering how she would adapt to pursuing
her studies at the University, Lavinia saw the woman that she knew she would marry. The woman had left the library about the same time as she had and was walking a few paces ahead, looking back occasionally. The woman was tall and looked to be exactly Lavinia’s own age, and she had dark skin the color of the fertile earth loved by the farmers in the river valleys in the northeast of the country. Her hair was a black nimbus of tight curls, and she had high cheekbones, a pointed chin, and a broad nose above wide, thick lips that made Lavinia blush to admit she wished to kiss. The young woman’s dark eyes sparkled whenever she glanced back, and Lavinia was certain that she was the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen. That thought made her pause for a moment, and consider. The memories of two other pairs of eyes flashed and then receded in a wave of earnest childhood longing, but she thought the woman most lovely.

The young woman was dressed in a University student’s robe, which gave Lavinia, as a prospective student, a plausible excuse to approach her. As they walked separately but on the same path, Lavinia noticed that other walkers on the banquettes and streets simply maneuvered around the space the ebon beauty inhabited without acknowledging her.

That bothered Lavinia, but she was not certain why, so she pushed the thought away without further examination. She
wanted to speak to the young woman, and if the woman spoke back to her, Lavinia felt, outrageous though it be, that she might even propose.

Lavinia quickened her step, but the young woman in the scholar’s gown remained ahead of her by the same margin as before. Running, Lavinia was sure, would help neither her nor her plight. The beautiful young woman tossed a look over her shoulder at Lavinia when she thought that, and winked. That was when Lavinia knew that the woman would not be caught unless she decided that she wanted to be.

Lavinia laughed out loud, and at the sound the dark woman paused her march and kindly stopped, waiting for Lavinia to catch up.

With a smile on her face, Lavinia said, “Hello, I’m Lavinia Parrish, and you are the most beautiful woman in the world.” Lavinia hadn’t quite meant to say that second part out loud, but the truth of it escaped past her lips, and she smiled as she found that she didn’t mind that it had done so.

The woman arched her right eyebrow at Lavinia, and a mostly-suppressed smirk of amusement quirked her lips.

“Yes, I know who you are,” she said. “We’ve met before.”

The beautiful young black woman started to walk forward again, while Lavinia puzzled over what she had said. Surely not—Lavinia would have remembered meeting such a beautiful
girl. Lavinia remembered every beautiful girl she had ever met: all the lovely lights of the capital society scene and the years of boarding school crushes.

Realizing that the young woman was going on without her, Lavinia bounded after. “But I would recall that!”

“If you say so, Miss Parrish.”

“I do! We haven’t met here or at the Museum of Natural Histories, have we, my lady? Seeing you now, I must admit that I was emboldened to approach because I saw your scholar’s robe... I wish to study at the University, too.”

“That’s a very noble thing, Miss Parrish. I commend you.” The strange woman smiled. It was a small, half-secret smile that hinted at private approval and a vast but encouraging amusement.

Lavinia flushed, and went on before she grew tongue-tied. “I insisted that my father allow me the same education that my brother received. My sisters think me silly, and my mother despairs of me ever making a match, but I insist upon it.”

“I can see that you are a very persistent woman, Miss Parrish. That’s a very fine quality.” The dark beauty paused her step and met Lavinia’s eyes for a dizzying moment. “I would never make a match with someone who wasn’t prepared to persist.”

“I...”
“Yes?” Another half-secret smile ghosted across the berry-dark lips.

Groaning inwardly but assailing another gambit, Lavinia said, “I persist, then, in ignorance, my lady—for I cannot say that I recall our prior acquaintance.”

“‘Tis great pity, then, Miss Parrish, for I recall it vividly.” The strange woman went onward, leaving Lavinia a small, awkward craft in her magnificent wake.

Stunned again but determined, Lavinia embraced the challenge presented by this beautiful stranger who claimed to know her, and caught up with her. “Surely, my lady, I should then be able to recall it as vividly? Have you changed your fine attire so very much since first we met?”

“Is not a lady permitted to change her style to keep with fashion?” the woman asked as they walked. “Do you not do so yourself?” Giving Lavinia a sidelong look that gleamed with open humor, she added, “Just so, me.”

“My lady, I am certain I would recognize you in whatever style you adopted. Your beauty and your intelligence,” she said, sweeping a hand to gesture at the woman’s University robe, “would shine forth no matter what.”

“I would certainly like to believe that, Miss Parrish, but I do not. You have not recognized me, and I would hazard that
you do not even know my name despite our meeting twice before.”

Not daring to let herself be flummoxed by the young woman’s continued claim of prior acquaintance, Lavinia imitated her brother Miguel at his most rakish and retorted, “Oh, indeed, my lady? Then let us put that to the hazard. I will tell you your name…”

“I suspect a ploy, Miss Parrish.”

“…provided that there is a forfeit when I do, for your lack of faith in me.”

“And what forfeit might you claim, miss?”

“A kiss, of course, my lady,” Lavinia said before a lifetime of propriety and deportment lessons could naysay her. “I believe that is the forfeit currently in fashion. And must not a lady keep with fashion?”

With a laugh of genuine delight, the dark woman nodded her assent.

“And you say we have met twice before today?”

“Yes, Miss Parrish, we have.”

“But you kept a different style then.”

“Oh, yes. Radically.”

“Radically?”

“Quite.”

“Hm. Might I have a hint?”
“I suppose that you might. Very well: each time we have met, it might have felt to you as if it were the first time you saw me,” said the beautiful woman. And then, softly, as if murmuring to herself in curious wonder, she added, “To tell you truly, I don’t understand how you saw me to begin with.”

Entranced by the woman’s graceful profile, Lavinia caught only the first statement. “My lady, every time I look at you, I feel it is the first I see you.”

“Flatterer.”

Lavinia smiled, and sallied another question. “Might we have met at a ball? Perhaps when my cousin, Tansy, had her debut last year?”

“No, not then.”

“Would it be unfair to know when we might have met, my lady?”

“Yes, Miss Parrish, it would be. But you do have such a charming smile that I shall tell you regardless: we met when you were a little girl, and then again before you went off to school.”

Lavinia could not imagine that the young woman walking next to her would have made a less striking or lovely figure at any other age, and although there were quite a few girls of her complexion among their social class, Lavinia recognized none of their faces in the young woman’s. The woman’s beauty was
on a level beyond most mortals, but in addition to her looks, the sense of her amusement was singular. It felt worldly but not unkind, and Lavinia felt herself both newborn and a woman-grown in the strange beauty’s presence.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” she said, “but regardless of the style you might have kept before, I know that I do not recognize your face.”

“Ah. I suppose that I must tell you, Miss Parrish, that perhaps you might not recognize my face, but rather my office. We met whilst I was in the course of my duties.”

Lavinia grew more puzzled; had this beautiful creature just admitted to working?

The young woman stopped walking and faced Lavinia directly with a look of annoyed amusement. “It’s honest work, Miss Parrish, and important, and I am remarkably good at it.”

Lavinia had the grace to blush.

“But you were at work when we were children?” Lavinia asked, concerned for the young woman’s sake (and, although she didn’t like to admit it, her own station).

“I said when you were a little girl, Miss Parrish. I never said anything about me,” came the woman’s arch reply.

“But my lady! We’re the same age! Aren’t we?”

“Oh, Miss Parrish,” the woman sighed. “I thought you knew better than to ask on another lady’s age.”
Confused and with a little regard for them both, Lavinia exclaimed, “You will be the death of me!”

“Brava, Miss Parrish!” the strange woman said, eyes sparkling with real pleasure. “That’s exactly right.”

It was then that Lavinia Parrish understood what the woman meant and realized that she had met her before, a teabrown girl in a pinafore dress and a pale girl with rose-pink lips, and when. Her health still delicate, Lavinia did the only thing she could do, and swooned.

Surprised, Death caught Lavinia in her arms.

* * *

When she came to, awoken by the sound of pained coughing, Lavinia was lying on the violet leather chaise longue in her father’s study. Her grandfather sat next to the window in the club chair opposite her, reading a book of natural philosophy entitled “Sobre la muerte y otros misterios” in the late afternoon light, with a glass of fine Mendoza red in one hand. A blood-spotted handkerchief lay in his lap.

It was not the most auspicious awakening.

“How do you feel? Gave the cook a hot buggery shock when that girl of yours showed up at the service door, carrying you like a sack of potatoes.” Reginaldo Lann paused, taking a sip of his wine, then added approvingly, “Sturdy lass, that one. Good hips.”
“Grandfather... I—”

“Oh, no need to be coy about it. Your Great-aunt Virginia was the same way, and she was my favorite sister. She had herself a lady from Santiago, Susana; they were together until Virginia died. If I’ve learned anything from my sister about loving women, it’s that you should seize joy with both hands, and if she lets you get a leg over, so much the better.” Reginaldo Lann coughed and took another sip of wine. “Your miss is a beauty, and a University girl, at that. You could do worse.”

Lavinia still felt muzzy from swooning like an idiot, but the sense of her grandfather’s words penetrated the fog like sunshine. “You saw her?”

“Of course I did. Who wouldn’t notice a fine girl like that?” His Northern accent made two syllables of girl:  

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but the glint of frank admiration in his blue eyes made Lavinia blush. “Huh. Now I think on it, Mrs Begas was rather shocked when I pointed her out. I don’t know why she’d be upset, seeing such a fine girl. Ye’d think that Mrs Begas wasn’t just as black as she is, the way she blanched.”

Lavinia didn’t know what to make of it. She was certain that the young woman was Death. She thought she should have been afraid; she wasn’t, she was sure of it.

She was also certain that she still felt like marrying her.
Her mother would not approve of Lavinia marrying another girl (such things were not unheard of, but were only done quietly, as they still could be a nine-days scandal if not done right), much less marrying someone who worked for a living. Lavinia guessed that Death’s actual rank would please her mother. How would the precedence work out, anyway?

Lavinia realized that her grandfather was still talking and focused her attention back on the conversation at hand.

“—and she said that she’d call this evening. Something about unfinished business.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t look so glum, granddaughter, she said she was sorry that she couldn’t stay to see you awake.”

“I... did she say anything else, sir?”

“Aye. She mentioned that she owes you a forfeit.”

* * *

Later that evening, Lavinia waited in the garden for Death to arrive. After the sun set, she did not keep Lavinia waiting long.

This time, Death kept the lovely dark face Lavinia had last seen her wear, but she had donned a rosy evening dress that any woman of Lavinia’s class with good taste might choose. Lavinia’s sisters would have approved and discreetly inquired after her dressmaker.
Lavinia went to the wrought iron gate herself to let Death in and then sat with her on the new small bench (a love seat, the gardener called it) by the rose arbor.

“You promised to be my friend,” Lavinia started.

“I did. I am. Forever.”

“But you killed Rose-Martha de Clare, and that boy that Lucy liked, what was his name—”

“Tick.”

“Yes, that’s right. And Grandfather said you had unfinished business tonight, so I suppose that now you’re here to kill me.” Lavinia was proud that she sounded so calm. Her hands were cold and she could feel sweat beading on the small of her back.

“No, Miss Parrish, I am not here for you tonight, and I do not kill anyone. I am simply there when they must die. I’m there for everyone, whether they go in glory, or alone. I am always there, and like a dear but difficult friend, I might not always be welcome, but I am always dependable. And,” she added with the sly look a person might give a longtime companion whose foibles amused, “it’s a living.”

Lavinia winced.

“Too sharp, Miss Parrish?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” Lavinia admitted.
There was a long moment of quiet where all Lavinia did was look at her hands. She had questions, but she knew that the answers didn’t matter. She realized she had already made the decision a long time ago when she was a little girl. That child’s foolish fancies seemed so bright and small to her now, with her heart beating staccato rhythms in her chest and passion running in her veins. She had thought herself unafraid before, but now she understood that she had been mistaken. Lavinia took a breath and screwed her courage up.

“Being who you are,” Lavinia said, “I think it likely that you know my heart.”

“Being who you are,” Death said, “the contents of your heart are written on your face. But yes, I do.”

“And if I were to ask the question?”

“I should prefer that you not.”

“Oh.”

“A lady must be wooed, miss.”

“Oh!”

“Also, I must inform you, Miss Parrish, that I am here for duty tonight, as well as this conversation.”

Lavinia grew still. “If not for me, then who?”

Death gave Lavinia a steady look, not unlike the one Sister Marival gave her when she was being dense about an obvious subject.
“Grandfather,” Lavinia said in one exhaled rush. The old man had done his best to ignore it, but he hadn’t been well since his wife had died. “No.”

“There is no question,” Death said. “Nor am I asking for permission. This is my office, Miss Parrish, and if you would be my suitor, you should know that one day I will be there for everyone you have ever known and everyone you have ever loved. Everyone, my dear friend.”

“Can you give him more time? He liked you.”

A pained expression flickered across Death’s dark face. “No, I don’t have that power. I am Death, Miss Parrish, not Fate, and not God.”

“Can’t you ask them? For me?”

“Oh, my dear Lavinia, I’ve never met either. In all honesty, I am not sure I believe in them.”

To this, then, Lavinia had no reply.

Death took her hand then and held it until the sky turned black and starry. Then she stood and walked toward the manor. Lavinia stayed in the garden. No door could deny Death, and the scent of late-blooming roses was a comfort.

* * *

The mortuary instructions left by Mr Reginald Lann Parrish were precise and detailed, and they most prominently involved securing a coffin from a certain Mr de Borba that had
been made to particular and exacting specifications, setting the old man adrift in said coffin on a funeral boat on his favorite lake on his summer estate in Patagonia, and then having his favorite grandchild set it ablaze with a flaming arrow shot from the shore. Lavinia had less than a week to practice her archery.

It was during that week that Lavinia met Mr de Borba, as Lavinia’s father being overcome by grief, her brother Miguel in London on business, and her mother and sisters still abroad and only arriving back from Bogotá in time for the funeral, it fell to Lavinia to attend to the few details that required the family touch.

Seeing how comfortable Mr de Borba was with death, Lavinia felt an odd kinship with him, and in the month after the funeral (where Lavinia had caught sight of Death, in solemn mourning dress standing quietly amongst villagers from her grandfather’s estate, and been so startled that her bowshot had almost gone wide, but the pyre had been well-doused with kerosene and caught easily despite the arrow striking near the edge of the boat), Lavinia approached him about apprenticing.

Thankfully, any lingering effects from the scarlet fever had vanished following the conversation with Death in the garden, so Lavinia was able to start learning her new craft soon after.
It took years, of course, to not only simply acquire the skills but to improve beyond the point of common mastery and into true artistry. Meanwhile, Lavinia saw her beloved as she always had: on the periphery of her life, and occasionally in person. She kept each and every memory of her, vouchsafed against loss now that she had her own understanding with Death.

Meanwhile, each coffin that she helped to make taught Lavinia a bit more about her craft, and just as surely, a bit more about people. Each taught her about herself, and what it meant to be mortal and to love.

Two years into her courtship and her apprenticeship, Mr de Borba allowed Lavinia to design a coffin and make it completely on her own. It was a simple affair: stained ash heartwood, copper nails, and demure muslin linings. It was ordered for a young girl of the petite bourgeoisie who had drowned in the Plata, whose family had the taste to avoid parvenu ostentation and choose instead elegant and affordable simplicity.

It was a lullaby set in a minor key, dressed in wood and mourning.

When Lavinia proudly mentioned the accomplishment to her mother, Mrs Parrish (who by then had grown somewhat accustomed to the eccentricities of her youngest daughter) had
pursed her lips in thought as she imagined the coffin and then complimented Lavinia’s taste.

Lavinia knew that Death went to every funeral, touched every casket or urn, stood by every pyre or shallow grave. She visited each person who would die, and paid her respects after. So Lavinia knew that Death would see her work, and Lavinia knew in her heart that Death would know that it was hers.

And so the coffin was a love letter to her beloved.

Soon after that burial, gowned in funeral black, Death paid Lavinia a visit, and they made love for the first time.

* * *

More years passed, and the coffin love letters grew more elaborate and accomplished. Each one occasioned a visit from Death, which made Lavinia happy.

Each time, they had the same conversation, which made Lavinia sad:

“Being who you are, my love,” she said, “I know that you know my heart.”

“Being who you are, my dear,” Death replied, “you know that I do.”

“And if I were to ask the question?”

“I should prefer that you not.”

“Oh.”

“A lady must be wooed, my love.”
This went on for many more long years, and never did Lavinia point out that she, too, was a lady. When Lavinia made the coffin for her father, and later, for her mother, Death came, wordless and gentle, and they did not speak, but instead Death held her in her arms as she cried.

Years passed, and slowly everyone Lavinia had known, and everyone she had loved, died. Lavinia’s hands grew rough from work and her face soft from age. Her hair greyed and, as a courtesy, so did Death’s. Each time a loved one died, they had the same conversation, and Lavinia’s questions did not change, and neither did Death’s replies.

Then it came time to make her own coffin: her marriage bed, she still hoped.

Lavinia Parrish chose mountain walnut for the wood, out of love of its color and the feel of it under her crooked fingers. She planed and sanded it right; it would require no varnish at all for the wood to shine.

She thought her beloved would like that.

She used no nails, either. Instead, Lavinia used full-blind dovetails to join the planks. She wanted a simple coffin; the frame one theme, one long conversation in the intimate night. As she worked, back bent, she remembered her master and whispered love songs and poetry to the wood. She was sure that it listened attentively.
For the lining she chose bleached raw silk, backed with cotton batting imported from plantations across the sea. Lavinia told it good-humored bawdy stories that she had read from books with falsely modest covers and thought that her beloved would appreciate the laughter.

Lavinia used small, sharp, aged bronze tacks to attach the upholstery inside. She thought that Death would like their quiet elegance more than the bright shine of brass. To them she murmured simple accounts of the pain of love and distance, and the mixed joy of wanting. She pricked her fingers with each one, the red tears of life welling up and staining each with her bittersweet memories.

Death would appreciate the truth of such things, and more: Lavinia did.

The hinges were bronze, too. Lavinia had them made especial for the coffin-bed. Stories of marital joy were what she shared with them, of couples who loved each other more after lifetimes spent together, couples that partnered and danced in their happiness even if their mortal frames no longer held them up quite straight because of palsy and quake.

When it was complete, Lavinia’s coffin was beautiful, and she was glad, as she knew that her time was very short.

She waited patiently for Death in the gathered dusk of her last evening, a lifetime of memories and hopes held softly in
her heart, like soft hands holding a newborn, or cradling a moribund lover.

* * *

When Death arrived, Lavinia knew that she had finally come for her. She had always claimed to read the contents of Lavinia’s heart on her face, but after a lifetime, Lavinia could read hers, too.

Death opened her mouth to speak, but Lavinia raised a hand to forestall her, and spoke the words:

“Being who you are, my love,” she said, “I know that you know my heart.”

“Being who you are, my dear,” Death replied, tears falling, “you know that I do.”

“And if I were to ask the question?”

“I would answer ‘yes’.”

“Oh!”

“A lady must be wooed, my love, and you have.”

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Alberto Yáñez is a writer and photographer. A native
Californian, he now lives in Portland, OR and tells himself that he really likes the rain. His stories have appeared in Strange Horizons, PodCastle, and Toasted Cake, and his photos in The WisCon Chronicles, Volume Five. When he’s ordering coffee, Alberto sometimes goes by his middle name of Max, and you can find him on Twitter @freelance_max and visit him at albertoyanez.com.
BLOW ‘EM DOWN
by Rebecca Gomez Farrell

From our brass band’s vantage point at the Gilgal plains, the glass dome was impenetrable. An immense central copper tube supported it, using a full city block for its foundation and generating energy for the whole town by absorbing the sun rays trapped within the glass. One skygate operated through the top of the dome, opening only to let merchant airships and their escorts in and out. The ships floated by so high, we could barely make out what was seared into their taut material: giant brands bearing profiles of the cityscape. The same image, embossed in a black pattern, circumnavigated the dome’s bottom edge. A single word in bold typeset appeared above each repetition: Jericho.

They never sent so much as a volley our way. Who could blame them? We looked a sorry mess after forty years spent crossing the desert, but we were many. *Forty days* our parents had been told, but as it turned out, solar-powered chariots don’t work so well in the desert. The salt from the Red Sea air had rusted most of their steel frames within days of the crossing, leaving us with only a handful, and those were barely
powerful enough to raise one person off the sand at a time. Then there was the pillar of smoke blocking out half the sky. Little sun meant less energy for our solar cells to regenerate. When the pillar lit up like a fireball that forgot to fly at night, we tried to mine the heat, but we never could get the calibrations right.

“The pillar will lead us into the Promised Land. It is Yahweh’s own guide.” That’s how Moses had explained it when it first appeared, before I was ever born. The old geezer had keeled over about a month ago. Paps laughed out loud when he heard, but his heart burst mid-guffaw, and he keeled over, too. Three days later, we crossed the Jordan.

“Our own Red Sea!” Lizbet had proclaimed as we walked over to dry land, the river water withdrawing as our sandals smacked the muddy ground. That girl was a looker, ample breasts hiding behind a lacy chemise, a thin vest draping over it. The Promised Land was meant for us young folks, she told me that night, resting her blonde hair against my shoulder, goggles shucked up on her head. Goggles were one of the few things we’d carried out of Egypt that had proven useful on the march. We didn’t need them to block out wind when we had no airships to ride, but it turned out they work just as well for keeping eyes safe in a sandstorm. Not that I’d have known the difference. Sitting outside Jericho’s dome was the closest I’d
ever been to an airship. In the wilderness, they were mere specks passing us way up high, distant and pale fireflies at night. The airships couldn’t get closer with that pillar of fire smoking. Everything I knew about them, I had learned from our parents’ and grandparents’ stories. They were all gone by then, the people and the stories.

I supposed Lizbet was right, it was our time, but I still missed Paps. On a leather strap around my neck, I kept two sets of gears that had been embedded into my parents’ upper arms when they were slaves. All the old folks had them. The gears latched into their skin with fine teeth except for an exposed raised keyhole. If they misbehaved, an Egyptian overseer inserted a key into the hole and gave those gears a sharp twist, stretching the skin tighter. One of the first things Moses did was tell our parents how to dig the gears out and disinfect the cavities left behind using water we had sanctified. I couldn’t imagine living like that. The only thing that got under my skin was all the rules old Moses, and now Joshua, inflicted on us.

I had my doubts Joshua knew where we were going at all. The Promised Land would have felt a lot more promising if it hadn’t taken forty years to get there. Or if the first city we encountered hadn’t been locked up tighter than the Ark of the Covenant. That was near the center of camp, floating on a
flatbed chariot that hovered lower and lower over the sand each day—like I said, it was hard to keep those solar cells full.

Despite Moses’s claim that Canaan was overflowing with milk and honey, our scanners hadn’t registered a blip of either, according to the Dans. Those guys were our tech specialists, or at least they would have been if we had more than a dozen sun cells left, enough to run the scanners and those few chariots that hadn’t rusted away to nothing. Most of the machinery that we’d dragged out of Egypt, I’d never seen run. No doubt those airship merchants laughed when flying over our abandoned, half-buried-in-sand gadgets, an endless trail of hermit crab shells leading all the way back to Thebes. We didn’t bother with much but our sandals, clothes, and goggles anymore, though we all had a few things we carried anyhow. I had my horn, Lizbet had her grand mam’s cameo brooch, and probably a thousand of us had our parents’ slave gears stashed somewhere.

It was Joshua who called our band, the Parched Priests, together for a meeting. There were seven of us, mostly Levites: two horns, one sax, two trumpets, one drum, and that triangle player from the Ashers—I don’t think I ever heard her speak in anything but chimes. We had practiced nearly every night for a decade. The band used to be bigger, but taking care of instruments in the desert is only a task for the devoted.
Joshua blathered on again about needing to give Yahweh the glory before Yahweh gave us Jericho, but I’d had about enough of that talk in my lifetime. Watching the electricity spark up the copper rod through the glass was driving me crazy. All my life, I’d wanted to see an icebox, have one drink that quenched my thirst, and I was certain that in that town, I’d find it.

“Look, I can blow Hot ‘N Horny here all day,” I said, rolling her mouthpiece between my fingers, “but she ain’t cracking that dome. Only weakness I can see is the gate, and I don’t think they’ll let us just roar up seven of our little scooters and invite us in to play a concert, you catch?”

Back in Thebes, my old man had played that same French horn in one of a chain of nightspots downtown. Rockin’ Ra’s, they’d been called. Mama had been a cocktail waitress there serving only Thebes’s finest clientele. She rolled around the joint on wooden skates with ribbons laced like a cobra around her calves. On bad days’ marching, she would draw wide stripes on her legs with kohl, claiming she needed the reminder to keep walking.

“Oh, I catch,” Joshua answered, and he was holding back from yelling. You could always tell by the way his cheeks sucked in. “But if we don’t do what He tells us, then we won’t get very far.”
Jehos, the saxophonist, laughed. “Now that’s rich. Tell me, boss, how far is it from Thebes to Jericho?”

Joshua reddened. His next words came out through gritted teeth. “The people always make it longer than it needs to be.” Lifting his hands toward the heavens, he closed his eyes and moved his lips without talking. A few minutes later, he shrugged and turned back to us. “Tomorrow morning, meet me by the Ark. We’re having a parade with you and the Naptali soldiers—they’ve been itching for something to do since Heshbon. I can’t make you go, but I don’t see how it’s too much to ask.” Then he hopped up on a chariot and floated off, probably so the Dans could give it a tune-up. That thing barely moved ten yards a minute, and it’d seen a lot of use inspecting the dome.

“What do you think?” Lizbet shifted her vest this way and that, trying to get at an itch.

Our drummer, Sammy, piped up. “Seems like a waste of a day I could spend conditioning my drum skins.”

Jehos and the other horn player concurred. The gal from the Ashers beat her wand violently against the triangle.

“I don’t see the harm in considering it.” Zeke, our first trumpeter, shrugged. “I know you cats pretend you don’t care about Yahweh and all that, but I do. Why not go along with Joshua on this?” He grinned while he spoke, which is how I
knew he was serious. Zeke always looked the opposite of how he felt.

“Let’s all consider it overnight, okay? Whoever shows in the morning, shows.”

I stopped by one of the Gads’ campfires on the way back to my tent. When the manna had stopped falling, we learned fast they were the best cooks. Who knew roasted goat could taste so good coated in caraway seeds and honey? My plate piled high, I changed direction and made my way through a mile of pavilions. I’d never had a good look at the town at night. About all I could make out above the row of Jericho brands were hundreds of chimneys with saucer-shaped toppers that flickered orange-gold. Electricity zapped out of them in a continuous chain, reaching for that copper coil. They licked up and down the tube from all sorts of heights. I wondered how hot the chimney toppers had to get to liquefy. If we ever did move forward, we’d probably melt them in a worship fire and make new temple candlesticks or something twice as useless. Maybe a few could be converted into solder for new sun cells, if Joshua weren’t looking.

But that was the kicker. We weren’t going anywhere with Jericho in our way. And if we weren’t moving, why not join a caravan of madmen and parade around the city? The townspeople had shown no sign of coming out, so they
probably wouldn’t attack us for what appeared to be a celebration. It was bound to be more exciting than picking manna crumbs out of my hair. Heck, I couldn’t even do that anymore. The manna had stopped falling.

I thought it over while I cleaned my horn. I had to do it weekly; you know how sand gets in all sorts of crevices. Imagine that with a horn. Paps used to oil it daily when he was working at Ra’s, but every few months, he’d give it a vinegar-water soak in his wash tub, a luxury I didn’t have. I needed to make sure that grit got out or the valves would get gunked up. After we played, I’d head over to the water stores with some soap shavings. The Issachars were in charge of that. They had designed a rig that produced pressure without sun cells. The water was stored in these pretty metal boxes we made after the golden calf incident. Little jars on top collected any evaporation, and valves were attached to the end of narrow tubes. Whoever minded the water built up pressure with a foot pump and expelled it out real fast, which did wonders for blasting sand from horn valves. Those Issachars sure were smart. Us Parched Priests made them a lot of extra work with our instrument cleaning, but they never complained. Wasn’t much else to do in the encampment at night but watch us play.

Back in my tent, it was time to give that horn a good once-over and lube it up. Paps had a store of rotor oil when they left,
but like I said, *forty years*. I’d been using rendered fat from the sacrifices for ages. Got one of the holy Levites to bring me a cup of it every few weeks. I’d dilute it until it reached an oily consistency, drip it into the slide tubes, and work it in with the valves. Then I’d use undiluted fat for the valve springs and caps. Everything went back in the case once I’d wiped it with a polishing cloth to remove my fingerprints. By the time I finished, I was so tired my cot stuffed with disintegrating manna felt like Pharaoh’s own bed.

* * *

Next morning, it turned out the whole band came to the same conclusion. Parading around the city just sounded more fun than counting its chimneys. We weren’t the only ones huddling up near the Ark, either. Joshua had been busy.

“Soldiers, you’ll lead the group out. I want you to march in circles around the dome, but don’t draw your weapons. Just march.” A group of probably a hundred Naptalis, all men, nodded their heads in unison. They wore leather sword belts branded with a blazing bush.

Joshua next addressed a group of dour Levites the rest of us called the High Holies. They were in charge of leading temple services, washing the Ark down from a safe distance with the water pumps, and maintaining its circuitry. “Priests, you’ll walk with the Ark, praying over it and us. One of you
needs to keep an eye on its propulsion, though.” Joshua leaned in conspiratorially. “Don’t let the Ark levitate too low or the parade will have to stop to get it back in the air, and that’s bad news. Elam, you can slip a charged cell in and out while you’re walking, right? In case the Ark noses down toward the sand?”

A teenager with choppy brown hair that fell past his chin nodded yes. He practically glowed being given the responsibility of the task, though his hands trembled a little.

“Good,” said Joshua. “Now except for a pair of you who’ll hold the net to make sure the Ark doesn’t move forward too fast, the rest of the priests should follow behind. I want you praying, but don’t be loud about it. Keep it to yourselves.”

The twenty or so High Holies agreed without complaint. Being quiet would be a challenge for them, though. Singing prayer chants was their bag. No matter how far away I staked my tent at night, I could hear their tuneless prayers rise up from the temple pavilion. I think that’s why Moses made us Levites priests in the first place—robust lungs. Us Parched Priests weren’t quite so sanctified; our repertoire cycled through the ditties Paps had taught me from his club days.

“Then line up!”

At Joshua’s command, the rest of the group shuffled to take their places, but we had no idea what was going on. Jehos
thought it was hilarious. Between guffaws, he said, “He forgot ... he asked ... us here!”

Had he? All I knew was I had less faith in him than in those milk and honey scanners. It was obvious Lizbet felt the same when bright streaks of red flared over her forehead and cheeks. That girl hated getting up early, and I knew from experience what would happen if her anger was allowed to fester.

“Joshua!” I yelled before our leader could get too far away. “Joshua!”

He had almost reached the nearest line of tents, but he turned on his heel and came back.

“What’re we supposed to do? The band?” I gestured to include my compatriots. We were scattered in the sand but united through our flummoxed expressions.

“Oh.” He furrowed his brow and thought for a minute. “Well, you’ve got to march with them. Take your instruments, but don’t use them, okay? Just hold them close and keep walking. Go in before the High Hol—the other priests—but after the soldiers.”

Well, that sounded less fun than it had the night before, but I figured we’d already said yes by showing up. So I opened my case and pulled out the horn, and my polishing cloth, too. I would need something to hold it with because that sun was
already burning, and nothing hurt Hot ‘N Horny worse than sweat.

We marched. And marched. The dome was big, but not until I’d circled around it could I call it colossal. The perimeter had to be at least two miles. It wasn’t so much the physical movement that bothered me—we had all been walking since we grew too big for the slings our mams had carried us in. Nor was it the heat bearing down on us, though I burned pretty quickly without the Lord’s cloud pillar filtering the sun. What got to me was all that time peering through the dome glass and the people staring right back. With how little they’d acknowledged our camp, I didn’t think they gave two figs for the children of Yahweh. But they stood on their wrap-around porches and in their streets observing us, and more came once they realized what we were doing. Their bulky clothes would have dragged them down into personal quicksand pools outside that dome, but I supposed the copper coil powered some sort of cooling device. *Ice.* Mama used to talk about it, how she would crush it up with a heated chisel when making cocktails for the Egyptian upper crust. It sounded so refreshing, probably more so than manna. On days the sun beat down so hard I was soaked with sweat before I’d so much as had a piss, I imagined sitting in a tub full of it. The day I sucked on ice was the day I’d be fulfilled... or maybe it’d just make me miss Mama more.
Sorry, sorry. Sometimes the memories are a bit much for this old shaker. There were plenty of parents inside the dome that first morning. Mothers, fathers, sons and daughters gathered together and gazing back out at us with scowls. The men wore top hats so tall, they toppled off their heads with the slightest movement. One gust of a desert breeze and those things would be lost in a haze of sand. The little girls were in bustles and fluted sleeves, and it made me laugh. We’d had clothes like that once, too, but Moses had ordered heavy moleskin and brocade shredded years ago, not long after Thebes and its giant spinning fans were left behind. Only lace was spared from our parents’ trunks, and the Reubens learned how to hand-stet it, separating the fibers of the other clothes and turning them into lace shirts, lace pants, lace undergarments. It was breathable, and most of us wore two or three layers, so you couldn’t see too much through them.

When we got back to where we started, I was ready for a break, but Joshua waved us on, and some of the kids ran up with ladles full of water. We had mastered the art of drinking while moving ages ago. Another wave of children pressed opened parasols into our hands. I didn’t care that mine was pink—that umbrella was a balm for my reddening burn. So we kept on.
After the first two laps, the folks in Jericho got bored. They trickled away, sometimes whole families or blocks at a time, but the kids mostly stayed. They were adorable despite being heathens. A curly, black-haired boy kept one eye on us as we passed and another on a stone he kept trying to skip across a puddle of water. I wanted to yell at him, “That’ll never work, kid. Your puddle’s too small,” but he wouldn’t have heard me. And I was in no place to talk, walking circles around a glass dome and hoping for a miracle of my own.

That kid made me think. I wasn’t an idiot; I remembered what happened at Heshbon, east of the Jordan. The Naptalis, eager for their first battle, had swept in, sabers slicing through whatever and whomever they encountered. We burnt the remains, leaving nothing but smoldering ashes and a horrendous smell. Camp was made upwind to avoid it. I wasn’t sure I could handle that happening to that kid. He didn’t seem like he’d give us any trouble, just playing in his hometown, having fun like I used to counting lizards scurrying in the sands.

When I passed him for the last time, it neared dusk and he had given up on his rock pile. Standing maybe a foot from the glass, he stared right through. Those eyes—I will never forget those glassy, green eyes. They were pale, two brimstone butterfly wings pounding against that cage. A child’s awe
flickered in them and pulled me in, but something else took its place as our eyes met. Something that made me clutch at the slave gears swinging ‘round my neck. Hatred. That kid didn’t know me, didn’t know anything about me except that my people were camped at his door, and he hated me for it. I realized then there was no way our people would ever coexist in peace, not when we knew what fear like that could lead to.

I held onto that feeling, kept it close as our parade continued over the next six days. Each morning, we renewed our circling, and each day, more and more of the people in Jericho mirrored his loathing. Look, six days is not that long when you’ve been wandering as many years as we had. But in another way, each second spent on the verge of something happening makes it that much harder to be patient. “Keep marching!” Joshua said again and again. The band would exchange glances and roll our eyes but we kept on. So on the seventh morning, we showed up as usual, and I tried not to think about another day of those angry Jericho eyes staring back. I’d made a habit of rubbing my parents’ gears with my free hand. Joshua started on again about Yahweh’s glory, but then that rascal, he changed it up.

“On the seventh lap—don’t worry, I’ll have the kids from Gad waving flags when you start it—I want the band to play their instruments loudly, all at once.”
I had to shake off my early-morning stupor at that. Jehos slapped his knee and said, “All right,” stretching out both syllables. Lizbet was taken up with the sudden attention and giggled.

I was just confused. “Hey, boss? Do you want us to play something special? Maybe a prayer chant with a flamenco downbeat, something like that?”

Joshua smiled real big and clapped me on the shoulder. “Naw, Abe. You just blow ‘em down, man. Show them Canaanites what you’ve got in that instrument.”

“All right, I can do that.” The others agreed, Jehos repeating, “Just play, just play.”

* * *

When the seventh lap came, I almost didn’t notice the group of kids waving flags. Lost in thought, my mind worked through chord progressions and key transpositions until Lizbet nudged me with the bell of her trumpet. *Oh!* A glance back at the others confirmed they were ready to blow: lips half-pursed, batons held high, triangle raised. So I pulled out my mouthpiece and nudged it into the rod, lifted Paps’ horn to my lips, and pressed the rotor to adjust my pitch. Tensing my lips harder than I ever had, I blew fast bursts to reach the highest G I could. I did it three times, barely registering the cacophony my bandmates made behind me. Two roars drowned us out fast.
after that. The first was the rest of the Israelites watching us. They yelled, screamed, pounded their feet on the ground, all but made an earthquake of human rumbling. The second was a hum.

It wasn’t just any hum. Maybe Joshua had planned it, I don’t know, but the skygate at the top of that dome opened at right that moment to let an airship rising inside pass through. The reverberation of our clamor went straight through the ground and up that copper tube smack dab in the middle of Jericho. We made the tube shake and tremble enough to knock it off-kilter. It shifted rotation slowly, rubbing against the glass edge of the opened gate, a giant mallet tracing the rim of a singing bowl. I could feel that hum in my body, making my breath catch as it tickled my ribs.

Then it cracked. Not my ribs, but the dome. It cracked, and all other sounds dropped for a heartbeat. The cracking grew louder, grew like an orchestra swelling as more spidery veins appeared on the glass, omens of the Canaanites’ doom. They rushed out of their homes and stores, shocked eyes trained upward, waiting. Our soldiers did the same after closing ranks and raising their weapons.

I don’t know what prompted him, but Sammy struck his marching bass drum and the dome shattered all at once. It got real noisy with wailing and screaming once the people of
Jericho wised up. Glass chunks speared some of them. Falling buildings trapped the others. I dropped my parasol once it had all fallen down and pulled my goggles over my eyes to block out the particles.

The sound of people dying sticks with you. Some gurgled when a shard sliced them in two. Others yelled angrily, holding on for a few seconds after the Naptalis’ sabers lanced through them. Which death call they made didn’t matter. Jericho fell, and we descended. The whole of Yahweh’s chosen people ran into that city, ransacking it like the mob we were. I rushed in after the Naptalis had advanced far enough I knew I’d be safe from the Jerichoans. Near the tube’s foundation was a street of three-story houses partially standing. Thousands of scalloped, painted wood tiles in bonito-flesh pink, acacia-leaf green, and indigo blue made up their sidings. In a word, they looked wealthy. Wealthy like the patrons at Rockin’ Ra’s.

I had only one thing on my mind then. A few bodies that had been crushed by a large chunk of dome blocked the door of the nearest house. They had puncture wounds from sabers, too, just the Naptalis making sure. I stepped around them gingerly. Inside, a man in a pristine five-piece suit slumped in a red-velvet armchair, still gripping his top hat. A spilled goblet on the floor smelled of wine and bitter almonds: cyanide. Something clear, solid, but melting rested above the carpet
where the liquid had soaked through. The cold shocked me when I touched it, but I knew better than to plop those cyanide-laced cubes in my mouth. I scanned the room. There! In the back corner, right under a half-collapsed stairwell, was a box carved of cedar set in an ornately filigreed black case. One tube ran inside the case’s metal beams, and another went into the box. Water would probably have been flowing through it if the energy was.

After lifting the handle, I felt giddy. A wave of frigid air hit me, and I grabbed at a chunk of ice almost too wide for my mouth. Cool luxury coated my inner cheeks and numbed my tongue.

Then something else caught my eye. A horn sat in a case on the window seat like someone was about to play it. It was bright gold, probably had never seen a scuff or known a lip. I had to have it. Hot ‘N Horny had treated me well, but it was Pap’s joy, Pap’s instrument. The feeling that I was just borrowing it had only grown in the days since his death.

“Israelites, head back to camp. It’s not safe for us yet in Jericho.” Joshua’s voice rang out loud and clear. The townsfolk must have had some means of amplification. “The Canaanites are a defiled people and their things, their buildings, their everything is impure. We’ll torch the city at nightfall as Yahweh has instructed.”
Well, crap. I spit the ice out of my mouth, and it hit the swanky blue carpet without a sound. But I couldn’t leave the horn. I just couldn’t. It was so shiny and perfect. I caressed its curves then pressed it into the case and clasped the buckles. If I could get it into my tent with no one noticing I had two, then I’d be in the clear. And besides, if Yahweh didn’t want me to have it, I wouldn’t have found it, right?

* * *

The horns and I made it back to my tent fine, and I spent half the evening staring at the new one. I didn’t even go outside to watch the city-wide bonfire. Eventually, some obnoxious Ephraim collectors made rounds. Their tinny voices raised a constant call of “Anything from Jericho? Need to burn or liquefy it, make an offering to the Lord.” Weren’t the last forty years an offering to the Lord, I wondered. Weren’t my parents—all our parents—dead and buried in the wilderness to appease Him? One horn wasn’t too much to ask in exchange for that. My chest constricted as I pulled it out of its case and hugged it close.

“Flammables for the fires, metals for the melt.”

My parents’ gears clinked against the horn’s bell, scuffing it a little. And I realized something. There was no judgment in the Ephraims’ call. Yahweh knew we’d take what we wanted from Jericho despite Joshua’s warnings, knew I’d be wiping
away salt tears before they could mar that horn’s brass while I weighed keeping it. And He sent the Ephraims around to give us—me—another crapshoot’s try at trusting Him and following His rules. This was our time, our chance to make good on what our parents had wanted, to obey where they had failed.

If I wanted those promises fulfilled, I needed to toss that horn.

The city was a wasteland of smoke and debris encircled by glowing embers. Not far from it, several vats had been lifted over fires, and some Simons stood over them on piled rugs, goggles on as they stirred with humungous paddles. I left mine off, wanting an unobstructed view of the horn melting down, one expanding pool in a molten mix. Its brass shone brighter than it ever would have under my polishing cloth.

Off to my right, the milk and honey scanners beeped in unison. A bunch of Dans clapped each other’s backs, laughing with relief. Later that night, I started the Parched Priests off with a melody I’d composed for one of the High Holies’ chants. As I blew Hot ‘N Horny, I swear I could feel Paps’ nimble fingers over mine, guiding the slides and valves into the right positions.

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Rebecca Gomez Farrell’s wanderlust affliction has moved her most recently to the Bay Area of California. She also suffers from genre confusion, having written fantasy, horror, romance, personal essay, television commentary, and food and drink reviews published by Bull Spec, WRAL, All My Writers, Astraea Press, and her website, rebeccagomezfarrell.com. She’s hopeful that both of her conditions remain incurable.
ON THE ORIGIN OF SONG
by Naim Kabir

Note: Doyen-Générale, enclosed is the full catalogue of documents pertaining to the individual known as Ciallah Daroun, as per your request. I only ask that you keep the card registries intact, so that they may again be archived in a timely manner.

—Commissaire de l'Académie, Aveline Duvachelle

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Envelope 32-R (Reichstagg’s Report):
Stamped with Gold wax and Phoenix of the Sunrook solarium.

1117th turn, 4th moon.

Chercheur-Commandant Dupont,
The Sunrook Conservatory had received reports of a large stranger harassing citizens for three weeks. This giant was dressed in grey-black rags, with his face covered in the way of highwaymen. He was estimated to stand at a height of twenty-one hands, with a wide frame, though other physical features were obscured by rough cloth. His voice was not of this world,
and was, as one report mentioned, like two fists of shale scraped against one another.

The individual was first confronted by Conservatory marshals outside the solarium, at which time Lecteur-Marèchale Ericcson charged him with the illegal hunting of solarium sunbirds. I commanded the stranger to identify himself, and he gave the name ‘Chala Darune’, then remarked that he was not a hunter but a naturalist. He cited the sixth and tenth Academy commandments before requesting that he be allowed to continue on his way. The marshals and I issued a warning but complied.

Later the Cartographer Brecker sent word of the individual Darune and further aberrant behavior. After observing the Cartographer’s griffins, Darune had asked to buy inks and vellum, paying with foreign iron ingots. Subsequently, without any use of Song, the stranger Darune swallowed the inks and stamped his foot upon the vellum. According to the esteemed Cartographer’s testimony, writing had filled the vellum in the colour of the imbibed inks, all while the stranger remained silent.

Though these actions were not illegal, they were deemed deviant, and so Lecteur-Marèchale Davisson, Chanteur-Marèchale Redwyn, and I set off in pursuit. Darune left the city of Sunrook by dusk and disappeared beyond the Shore into the
Desert. However, he left deep footprints in which we observed rich printed text. The marshals and I immediately made plaster casts rubbed with charcoal and copied in triplicate, all of which have been delivered to you with this letter.

Salut,

*Connaisseur-Captaine Reichstagg*

* * *

Charcoal scratching,

**Package 32-R (Reichstagg’s Plaster-Casts):**

Original plaster in Le Conservatoire de l’Académie.

Note: Observe how the letters are formed in such a way that it appears to have been printed from a Press. The font has not yet been identified.

—*Commissaire-Aspirant de l'Académie, Jean Lamarck*

though I have seen the phoenixes from my home on the mesa, they are quite something else when observed from close by. They seem to be wholly domesticated here in Sunrook, though this Mountain is their native, wild ground. I saw one hunt a small desert mouse outside of my home-tent on the mesa, though here in the city they are fed by the solarium’s keepers. It appears they are used for the delivery of messages. The ever-present constantly shifting lights in the night sky, I surmise, are
correspondence flown between all the solariums of the world. This phoenician Song seems to be composed of augmented chords in the high-to-mid octaves, and is associated with their sun-bright light. Jaanbab Al-Marack would have us believe that these traits are passed on in the blood, but I find it curious that the other wildlife on this Mountain is possessed of the same traits. The gryffones, both captive and wild, also Sing with augmented and major chords, though they are lower in octave, and they too spit hot, bright light. The peoples of Sunrook mirror these sounds with flutes and Woodwinds, and much of their Music is focused upon production of warmth and illumination. Even during nighttime, the Songs of the population keep the Mountain lit as if it were high noon. Behavior seems to be shared among the people and their Singing beasts, as well: all seem haughty and highbrowed, and lend themselves easily towards arrogance. I inquired as to whether much intermating occurs between the Men and Beasts of the region and was immediately reported to the Conservatory authorities for speaking deviant words and causing a disturbance. As it was taken as an insult, I believe it can be fairly inferred that no such
mating occurs, and that these Musical traits are not passed in blood lineage.

My hypothesis remains that an environmental factor inspires the abilities of Song, perhaps in the weather or geography. I am convinced that it must relate to sound: it cannot be sheer coincidence that the mesa of Benihajr is dry and in the still and silent doldrums, and that my people cannot Sing.

* * *

Testimony Thirty-Three:
Spoken by Seer Halldën.
Stamped in Court, with Ash wax and the Dragon of Gjallihöll.
Transcribed by Chasseur-Ècrivain Aimée.

1117th turn, 7th moon.

O, he came past the Cave-Gates in black robes and stood like a stormy mountain, but he told us he was a scholar. Though he didn’t have the look of you Academy men. Too humble. Too hushed. And you letters-men never feel the need to cover your face—but he did.

He paid Hunter Gudrun with gold bars he called dinars—and that was enough to buy old-fashioned Gjallihöll trust—and even though the stranger wasn’t man enough to show his head, he did give us his name: Çal Darwun. That was enough to
convince the hunter band to take him down past the Chamber-Gates and Smoke-Gates on their expedition to bring back a Dragon’s tooth.

When offered a lyre or horn, he held it like a leg of ham to be inspected and handed it back, saying he needed no such weapons. Though he did want the hunters to demonstrate its use, which they did, proudly Singing smoking fireballs and arrows of earth into the cave walls. During camp he would scribe some words with those feet hidden under his robes, using some strange Song that none of the hunters had heard of but assumed was some smart scholar-Music that could even be played silently. Whatever the Song was, he could write a page a second and make copies quicker than lightning. Most of the men couldn’t read, but he gave them some calfskin pages as a gift, which of course they took graciously.

It was four days until we reached the Hindrunlands, where the salamanders stop lighting the tunnels with their tails and where the shadow dances with the light. That’s where the Dragons live. But Çal told us that he’d continue on into the dark, if we wanted to join. We laughed, of course. Höllmen don’t go into the dark—that’s a place fit only for the skuggaver, crawling blind and praying to their slinking shadow gods. We would not go, we came for Dragons, not to visit the stinking Skuggstað. Skugg-sty, more like. He offered more dinars, but
we wouldn’t step a foot where the salamanders won’t light the way.
That’s when the big gaurrin pulled out a jar of salamanders and tickled them on their heads, shining light in twenty different directions. He’d been taming them while we were busy scouting tunnels for ash piles and claw sharps, the mad fool. Somehow, his hands never burned, and he never shouted when he poked their flaring little bellies.
But no. We had come for Dragons, not shadows. We would not go. So he disappeared into the dark alone. Half the men were mauled by a big brute Drake after the next sleep, and we ran back home. Some of the men blamed the stranger Darwun, said he was a bad Song and a bad omen; even went as far as to ask help from the Academy’s nearest Conservatory. The big man came up from the tunnels after some of the hunters had already sent a sunbird from the solarium, with more of that inked-up calfskin written so evenly with his feet. Me and a couple of the others who meant him no ill took the gifts and thanked him.
It was only ‘till after he left that I could read the words, and then I realized.
You know, most Höllmen don’t read, but I’m a Seer. I fill our Libraries with our Records, and I know ‘em all, too. We don’t let anyone take our Memories, even you schoolboys who
stooped so low as to come into our caves to take ‘em. They just get better hid.

In Gjallihöll, our books still remember the Slave-Men even when we don’t. Our books still know the man-mountains your stinking Academy sent to the Desert Table, and I know who this Darwun is. Should’ve known it the first time he talked in that cracklin’ brimstone voice.

The question is, what’ll you do to help me forget?

Note: Unfortunately, I could not conduct further interviews. Seer Halldën tragically succumbed to a lethal heart tremor a few days past. His family was generous enough to donate some of his belongings to the Academy, including several books and documents.

—Chasseur-Écrivain Aimée

* * *

Halldën’s vellum;

Printed by Ciallah Daroun.

in the magma vents located deeper down. I am familiar with desert monitors, but based on the bones I’ve glimpsed in the Gjallihöll long-halls, Dragons are of a completely different family. The legs are oriented underneath the body instead of splayed to the sides, and thus they walk in a manner closer to four-legged birds than to lizards.
However, there is nothing avian about their Song. It is a strong major chord that evokes an explosive flame, a kind of roaring trumpet that clearly inspired the Gjallihöll hunting horns. A similar mood is produced by the Salamanders I have used to light my path through the darkness and down into Skuggstað. Though they employ a different methodology: they pluck membranes on their skin to produce the Music. I believe the lyres and lutes endemic to the magma-city are inspired by this finger-plucked Songstyle, and all the sounds employed suggest power and confidence. Fitting, for a place as industrial as Gjallihöll.

As of yet, my voice is still unable to carry any of the chords or melodies I have learned of; nor are my hands delicate enough to handle any instrumentation. Al-Marack would say this is due to my inherent disability: a child of the Benihajr makes no Music. They may build material objects and more Benihajrin, but not Song.

But I am closer to gathering evidence for my hypothesis that Song is inspired in animals and Men by their environment. I have noted that the volcanic activity that surrounds the Höllmen produces, mostly, the same major chords (of all octaves) observed in the local wildlife.
The same is the case in the deep ice caverns of the Skuggstað. A phenomenon similar to Benihajr freeze-trays occurs in these caverns: deep ground water is heated to a boil in the upper rock strata by magma, and the thin water layer below is cooled and frozen by the quick evaporation. When this ice slips through the porous limestone of the Skuggstað, it appears as if it is snowing underground. The cool air causes a chill wind to stream through the stalactites, producing a very gloomy minor chord.

This is the same chord hummed and chanted by the skuggaveri peoples who reside here, as well as the whitebats and centipedes. Their Song seems to be able to sap vitality in the same way Sunrook Songs may restore it; for when I approached their village for the first time, their cantos drained the life from my Salamander lantern and left me in weary darkness.

Their language was similar enough to Gjallish that I could understand them, and I gathered that their existence was one of scavenging and worship. I asked them why they chant so much and so often, and they replied that it is in tribute to the Music that has always blessed the Skuggstað. Every moment of their day rests in somber prayer. To whom or what, I cannot say, though I did notice a curious phenomenon: the chants of the skuggaver are able to
freeze water. This suggests that the snow from the ceiling may be produced on the power of their Song alone, and not by my theorized evaporative cooling. The implication, then, is that the gloomy minor chord echoing through these halls may have been here long before there was any wind, or any deep village.
The source of this sound, I’ve not yet deduced.

* * *

Official Statement of Resignation,
Emissary-Chevalier Donall,
Dispatched by Runner from the Exile’s Plateau.
Delivered 1117th turn, 7th moon.
Doyen-Générale Lenoir,
I cannot in good conscience continue my tenure with the Academy.
We have imposed an immoral exile upon the Benihajrin for far too long. It is not permissible to punish an entire race of thinking creatures solely because they appear to defy one hundred years’ research. It would not be permissible even had we collected one thousand years of research.
The Plateau-Men are an honorable folk, with much industriousness, kindness, and genius. I have seen burn-engines rivaling those that bear the höllmark, created from scarce iron pulled from the mesa. I have seen reagents not
unlike linren medicines made from the lizards and shrubbery, and I’ve borne witness to their vast and rich Living Libraries. The lifetime of a Plateau-Man always goes recorded; for instead of some limbs, most have fashioned movable presses that work and create without the slightest use of Song.

They have advanced much since the days they were created. The old accounts describe dumb husks that followed Sung commands, but now they speak and write as well as any man in Voix Royaume. It is time to accept that the *Histoire Naturelle* is incomplete or incorrect: the Song of life is not reserved just for Man and Beast. It was not bestowed by a favoring Cosmic Composer. It *can* take form in sand. It can manifest upon the Silent Mesa. It can fill rock Plateau-Men with souls and much wisdom.

They are languishing in isolation, and the doldrums here doom them to perpetual quietude. Many are more frightened of Academy retribution than they are tired of the silence and loneliness, but there is one who is ready to defy you.

I have had no qualms helping him slip past the Banished Gates, and once he has seen the whole of the world, I will have no qualms welcoming him back to his people.

—Emissary-Chevalier Donall

* * *
Formal Complaints for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} week, 9\textsuperscript{th} moon, 1117\textsuperscript{th} turn.

Stamped in Verdant wax with the Mill of Port Falsa’s solarium,

Compiled and sent by sunbird by Connaisseur-Captaine Marethari.

Dawnday

Daly O’Shea: Today some more bhaidinmenn sailors came into my bar and caused a disturbance, damaging the property in an amount summed to more than 200 keys. It was again the Captain Oisin Niall and his first mate, Conor Darragh. I am calling upon the Falsa Conservatory marshals for their immediate arrest or fine.

Actions taken: Visit to the City Inn, issuing of debt papers to the Captain of Oileand’s Oar, Oisin Niall.

Mornday

Merrill O’Donnel: Bhaidinmenn have played violin and cello all night, bringing seawater and wind into the coastside tenements and flooding several rooms. I couldn’t see any of their faces, but they sounded like the seamen under the command of Captain Niall.

Conor Darragh: I’ve heard that some lily-livered cathairmenn have been filing complaints about us, so I’d like to complain a little, too. One, I’d like to complain about these cathairs being
gutless bastards who’ve settled on foreign coasts instead of keeping on the search for the homeland. Two, I’d like to complain that they seem to have replaced their bollocks with windmills and waterwheels. Three, I’d like to complain that they use the Menn Songs of the high seas for their bleeding farms and bakeries. Last, but most definitely not least, I’d like to complain that they’re all twats.

*Actions taken:* Attempted confiscation of bhaidin instruments, resulting in a small skirmish and stand off. Captain Oisin Niall has agreed to pay further damages as well as 100 extra silver keys in exchange for the right to keep all Musical tools, citing that they are necessary for sailing and thus the men’s livelihoods. The marshals accepted and the matter was closed.

**Noonday**

Cashel McBride: The fugitive of the Academy is being harbored by the bhaidinmenn on the docks. I and several other witnesses had seen him without his mask as he tried to board a ship out of the bay. The sailors would not allow us to collect him and our bounty, and hid him on their ship.

Captain Oison Niall: The unruly citizens of Falsa have attempted to illegally board my ship this morning, looking after some stone-armored giant they believe is on my boat. Three sons of the McConnels and one from the McBrides were caught trying to force open a porthole after midnight.
Conor Darragh: The cathairmenn are a bunch of bell-ends. *Actions taken:* Reminder delivered to both cathair houses and bhaidin boats that the complaint filing system is not to be abused.

**Duskday**

Kayla McKinley: *Oileand’s Oar* is housing the criminal posted on Academy bounty, and they won’t release him. He’s a wanted criminal, marshals. I don’t want him so close to my children.

Douglas O’Brien: Oisin Niall is protecting that stone-knight giant from the Plateau. The academy-men have done told us he’s some kind of dangerous monster, but the bhaidin are keeping him in their hold!

Conan McOrrin: I heard the bhaidin arguing yesterday morning with a giant stranger, and they made him show his face and tell them his name. He was clearly the rock-armored beast from the herald’s speeches, the one from the Desert Table. But after, they let him stay in the belly of their ship! I call for the immediate arrest of the captain of *Oileand’s Oar*, and any crew that are directly involved.

Conor Darragh: Yep, still twats.

Captain Oisin Niall: The cathairmenn will no doubt be coming to the Falsa Conservatory with more complaints about me and my ship, so I want to make a few things clear.
One: No, I don’t think that the citizens of Falsa are a bunch of coward-bred, artless swine that have given up on the search for Oileand and deserve to be scraped and stabbed upon the reefs; Two: I don’t want to wreck all the cathair farms and take their windmakers and seasingers before they can ever use them again for their safe and landlocked mills; Three: I’m not harboring Ciallah Daroun upon my ship and most certainly am not shielding him from prying Academy pig-dog jailors; and Four: *Oileand’s Oar* will definitely *not* set out across the Dividing Sea at eventide.

* * *

Poems From Across the Dividing Sea.
Delivered by Blue Bird of Paradise to Voix Royaume,
Stamped in Marine wax and Anchor of Port Hearn,
Attached to sunbird by Connaisseur-Captaine Jamaira.

1118th turn, 2nd moon.

1. Mottled green and rippled light
2. shine through the leaves of Lùguo
3. tonight, the giant
4. trees and cascade falls
5. make a man feel small when he
6. comes to the port across the Dividing Sea.
7. The poet’s breath fights the Forever Storm,
8. that rages and threatens to blow away
9. this page and its brothers
10. the fast wind it smothers and covers
11. his hands with flown leaves so his works
12. are slathered with lemon and lime.
13. Pink blossoms fly too and then comes
14. the rain, so he builds a red fire to
15. Heat up the words
16. that have frozen shivering in his throat
17. and by the light of that warmth, he leans
18. to see the truth hidden here
19. in the wind-whipped air.

Note: The meter and structure of the verse suggests that this letter was a cipher from an embedded agent across the Dividing Sea. The actual message lies in every third line.

—Commissaire-Aspirant de l'Académie, Triame Puissant

* * *

Copy of hidden text, from Poems Across the Dividing Sea.

Written in Lemonbleed ink, Uncovered by the heat of a flame,

Copied by Commissaire-Aspirant Triame Puissant.
1118th turn, 2nd moon.

The Benihajr fugitive came to the Linren port by way of a bhaidinmenn ship, and stayed for a period of weeks. He has now set off for the floodplain village of Shobdtho but has left several copied texts among the natives. Some are even in the local Linwen language. By my best estimation... this Ciallah Daroun is no threat. Your messages made me expect a violent revolutionary, but by all accounts he is just a researcher, like the Academy’s best. I suggest that you hold off on your invasion of the Exile Plateau—the escapee seems largely innocent. Here is a sample of his writing:

Time aboard the bhaidinmenn ship Oileand’s Oar has been educational, for the sailors themselves agree that the power of their Song comes from their surroundings: the Sea. The waves in calm and stormy conditions produce sustained chords, and the seamen add to the rhythms with cello and violin. The wind and waves shaped by this concerted Music propel the ship at remarkable speeds. This constant velocity is what allows the bhaidin to be such successful trawler fishermen and continue to search for their lost home island in such a systematic manner.

I would have enjoyed visiting Oileand, but the bhaidin say that it disappeared while the fleet had left to do battle with the armies of Voix Royaume in the 1000th turn, as though some
maelstrom had swallowed it up overnight. More likely, some of
the civilians on the island used the Sea Song to move it while it
came under a flanking invasion by the Royaume Navy.

After three moons of us combing the oceans, an attack by
roving Sea Serpents caused damage that could only be repaired
in dry-dock. The creatures were unlike anything I’ve ever seen:
slick skin that shone in the sun, and an attack with such
coordination that I’m almost certain they could speak to each
other. There were no visible heads, though the bellies of the
beasts were covered in sucking discs, and sometimes hook
teeth. They damaged the keel of the boat and punctured the
starboard side, forcing us to begin an immediate tacking course
towards the Linren port city of Lùguo.

The trees here are unlike any I have ever witnessed. Some
resemble giant 300-hand willows with leaves dangling down to
the ground, studded in pink blossoms and swaying in the
constant wind. There are many that are simple wooden spires
that spike into the sky, but closer inspection makes it evident
that these are man-carved constructions that make up the bulk
of the vertical Lùguo city.

The locals have learned to use Music to stitch skin and bind
flesh, using sustained chords of the latter octaves. Exploration
of the surrounding forest revealed the presence of a colossal
waterfall that they call Ryuzu, which produces the same chords
at a constant rate as the water thrums against the bottom rocks. Determined carp can be seen leaping in pools alongside the tributary cascades, splashing a rhythm to accompany the Music. Some of the local monks lead meditations among the boulders and add the power of their throats.

The same chords are apparent in the Mushigong tree-spider population, as they halt the dragonflies and giant wasps in the air with their sustained Song while on the otherwise silent hunt. A satellite village called Tiánzhong also uses the chords, but in a version much bassier and lower than that in Lùguo. Their Musics appear to condense water vapor and cause storming and lightning. According to the Tiánren who live in this cloud village, the Forever Storm in the northeast rainforest is caused by a giant black and white bear they call the Dai-de-Shiong, constantly Singing brontide beats into the earth with padded paws and clicking claws.

Though amazing, the peoples of this forest tell me far more spectacular creatures inhabit the border of the jungle and the floodplains. I hear tell of blazing jungle cats and perfectly beautiful Birds of Paradise, and wise elders of the Shobdtho village. At noon I will gather

* * *

**General Request regarding Ciallah Daroun.**
Drafted by Doyen-Générale Lenoir for the Esteemed Board,
Stamped in Murex wax and the Book of the Academy.
1118th turn, 4th moon.

I understand there is some talk that the Golem from the mesa is no danger, and I would like further your education. The Histoire Naturelle is quite clear in this matter:

“Hypothesis speaks of a heartbeat’s Song and the soul’s ringing Music that flows through the veins of all men and the beasts and the trees, though hard Theory from these hundred turns show the clear lack in the sand, rock, and earth; and so our Conclusion must focus on building histoire naturelle of the moving and breathing and all the combined Musics of the beauty we call Life.”

—Observations 1:11

We have built our entire natural history upon the breathing and dying, and would have continued at peace if not for the invention of the Stone Slaves. They produce the illusion that dead rock and ash can be as ensouled as a man and cause our libraries to crumble as the foundations are jerked from beneath.

Their very existence causes a questioning of the Academy’s teachings and thus our authority. If the public realizes even once that this Ciallah Daroun is not just some giant in stone
armor or black cloaks, but a seemingly thinking and feeling thing made from earth, where will we be?
The hunt for him must continue, and we must go forward in sending Orchestral Marches to invade and clear the Plateau. Without Music they will be an easy target and we will suffer minimal casualties.

By the power vested in me by the Convergence of Scholars, I ask as Doyen-Générale for full control of our Military Symphonies and the right to march North past the Shore into the Desert. It is a course as clear as physics and as simple as astronomy:

“For the path to the solution follows the star of Parsimony: it is the quick and easy, the simplest of all the choices that are set before you; and with this guide in the mind and eye, you may walk forward with palms raised and faith that the laws of nature will ease your way.”

–Recommendations 2:15

Salut,

Doyen-Générale Lenoir

* * *

Dialogue With A Boulder.

Written on Jungle Broadleaf,

Discovered during Royaume-Shobdho Exchange.

Found in the 1213th turn, 7th moon,
Estimated to be written in 1118th turn, 5th moon.

The elder stretches out, and the honor guards shift to allow entry to the guest.

The elder begins to speak in characteristic slow, creaking lilt.

Elder: You have been waiting to speak with us for several weeks, now.

Visitor strides to the center of our Orchard, just beyond the reach of our limbs.

Visitor: I have. I am a traveler, learning as much as I can about the world.

The elder considers this weightily.

Elder: We are of a kind, then. Though we cannot travel, we would always like to learn.

The others shift eagerly as if buffeted by the wind, leaning in to listen to the words.

Visitor: What would you like to know?

Elder: What is your name? What is your nature? Where do you hail from? What is it like? Why are you here?

The guest reels his head, overwhelmed, but begins speaking calmly.

Visitor: My name is Ciallah Daroun. I am a scholar and a traveler from the mesa of the Benihajr, a dry silent place far across the Dividing Sea, at the center of a distant
continent. I have come here to study. Animals and peoples, I wish to learn of them both.

The silence hangs heavy for some minutes.

Elder: Animals and peoples? Ah, but we are neither!

Visitor: Perhaps not animals, but you are surely peoples. You think. You speak. You are like me in many ways—I have even learned that you maintain libraries like that of my homeland, recording all that you speak and hear!

Visitor brandishes columns of steel and rock in the place of legs, showing the typed letters that shine there. A wooden groan escapes from the Orchard as we all shift to see.

Elder: Yes, our lives are writ upon our leaves, as yours are pressed upon your pages.

The elder’s branches curve and his bark softens, as he observes the strange guest.

Elder: Thank you, for this learning experience. What is it you wish to ask?

Visitor pauses.

Visitor: I want to know how you Sing.

The Orchard regards this silently.

Visitor: The venomous Jholbagh and fiery Rabikhan, you keep them at bay simply by Singing. The floods that threaten to kill this forest, you dam them solely with Music! But you are like me. Where I am made of rock, you are wood. I
believed that Song may be inspired by the symphonies of nature, but I’ve been away from my quiet home for more than a turn, and I am still silent! I have been beginning to think that it’s true, that my people are stone and that stone cannot Sing, that they’ll forever be cursed to wallow in dusty tents while the worlds of men rose ever-upwards, but then I saw you. How do you do it? How can a tree make Music?

*The wind rustles our leaves as the visitor breathes heavily.*

Elder: You have already lost hope?

*The guest sinks to his knees.*

Elder: Yet you have no reason to. We can feel it inside of you.

*Our roots grow tender and lick the vibrations from the soil.*

Visitor: What do you feel?

*The Orchard sighs a happy, knowing sigh.*

Elder: The beating Song that pulses with the slow confident rhythm of a mountain range. The Music that streams from your soul.

*The bark creaks as the elder mulls hard truths.*

Elder: It will take hard-fought struggle and strife to truly set it loose—and much sacrifice. The first Singer amongst the Trees lost his heart of Oak to a lightning storm, and the first man to Sing in the southern reaches swam to the top
of an enormous waterfall. But perhaps your trials are nearly done?

* * *

Note: Are you sure you want to read this, Doyen-Générale? It may be distressing to see your grandfather’s death recorded in such a clinical fashion. No one truly has a heart of stone, sir. Think on it.

—Commissaire de l’Académie, Aveline Duvachelle

**Coroner’s Report 55-D.**

Signed by Docteur Depardieux, Senior Investigator.

Stamped in Black wax and Knife of l’Hôpital,

Sent by crow from the field.

1119th turn, 1st moon.

On the morning of Duskday on the Second Week, the Hospital had received word from the Palace chambermaids that an investigation would likely be required in the second-last chamber-room on the northwest side of the building. A short time afterwards, the death of the patient had been reported to the Hospital and to the Conservatory of the Academy.

**Location**: Chamber-room marked ‘3’, northwest corner of the Voix Palace.
Witness Statements: Palace residents Elizabeth Curvoieire and Lilian Verve had first seen a team of five strange men dragging a large black sack into the room. They commented that muffled moans had been heard emerging from the bag, before it was taken behind the door. They had also heard speech while outside the chamber and deduced that some sort of violent interrogation had been occurring inside. Mademoiselle Curvoieire testifies that a discordant Song was heard as well as a series of terrible screams. Lilian Verve paraphrases the interrogation thusly:

Q: Why have you left once more? This was no mere stroll past the Banished Gates.
A: I have seen too much of the world to stay locked away.
Q: Would you like to suffer more of this minuet, instead?
A: I have suffered dragon’s flames, shadows, sea monsters, and a host of things in the rainforest that would make your skin crawl and your blood curdle. Your torture is nothing.
Q: What were you doing, hunting in the Royal Forest?
A: I needed more stretched hides.
Q: Why?
A: That my people might be free, even if I will never be able to hear it.

It was at this point that there was only more screaming, and both ladies sent a crow to bid me to the Palace.
Scene Description: Guest bathroom number 3 of the Voix Palace. Decedent is lying supine, with head pointing north. A series of chamber pots have been emptied over his head, and their shattered remains lie in piles to the left and right of the body. White scratch marks in the hardwood follow the body from the room’s entrance to the location of death.

Body Exam: Body is positioned as described above, with several pots’ worth of human waste emptied atop his head and chest. Body shows signs of late rigor mortis, as the limbs and torso are stiff to the touch. Body is cool throughout, and initial measurements show it is already at ambient temperature. Erratic etchings in the hardwood floor at the place of death suggest severe seizures, and when correlated with Mademoiselle Verve’s testimony, indicate use of a Minuet of Pain. Patient is wearing rough-woven black cloth, much weathered and very well used. Most of the robes appear grey due to wear and sun bleaching of the dye. An incision was made with 2" scalpel to completely remove the cloak, and it was revealed that the body is not quite human. Its segments consist of several boulder-like pieces hewn into the shape of a man, though they now appear cracked and broken by repeated trauma. Some iron is incorporated with the stone body in the lower segments and implanted with a series of sliding block
type-letters arranged in various formats. Face is frozen in the expression of a pained shout.

**Evidence:** In haste, the offending interrogators had left behind a single desert flute, carved only to hold discordant notes.

**Notification:** Academy Conservatory immediately contacted after conclusion of the report. Investigation handed over to Chanteur-Marèchale Corvais.

* * *

**Gold-level Resource Request,**

**Sent by Runner from the Banished Gates,**

1119th turn, 1st moon.

PUSH AHEAD WITH ORCHESTRAL MARCH.

DRUM BEATS HEARD FROM ATOP THE DESERT TABLE.

EARTHQUAKES WRACKING THE DOLDRUMS.

WHOLE MESA BEATING LIKE A DRUM.

STONE MEN ON THE WARPATH.

* * *

Note: Doyen-Générale, the history of the war can be found in the Military Records outside the Academy campus. I’d ask why you bothered to comb our archives when you can simply leaf through the Living Libraries, but I suppose I already know your answer. As you say: we must always see things from another
point of view. It is a lesson I’ve learned well, and for that I am grateful. 
As thanks, perhaps you will accept an old, dusty gift from an old, dusty curator. A hand-drum of Naturalist Daroun’s personal make, in the central glass gallery of the Conservatoire. As far as I can recall, it is the very first.

—Commissaire de l’Académie, Aveline Duvachelle

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“On the Origin of Song” is Naim Kabir’s very first story to be published in text—though another is forthcoming in audio form at Pseudopod. He’s currently a student at the University of Pennsylvania, and when he’s not busy hunting for a job, he’s working on a few short stories and his debut novel. Find him trying to catch up to the Twitter-craze @KabirCreates, or on Facebook going by the same name.
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COVER ART

“Endless Skies,” by Rick Sardhina

Rick Sardinha is a professional illustrator/fine artist living and working on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. His passion is to create in traditional oil media, however, he is just as comfortable in front of a computer and often uses multiple disciplines in the image creation process. “Endless Skies” was the cover art for BCS’s first issues five years ago. More of his work can be seen at http://www.battleduck.com.