

# MINA

BY RADHIKA KAPOOR

It was on an autumn Wednesday, muggy in that other hemisphere, that Mina stopped saying *no* to everything we asked and started saying *maybe, but you have to ask Pa, too*. We asked for boiled sweets, then to sleep in separate chambers in the evenings, and finally for new milk tumblers (me) and more phone data (he). Mina grabbed us by the hands, the three of us forming an undulating human Mobius strip that writhed through the gutters now tumid with floodwater, and we swam to the bazaar, Mina crumpling a bill in her fingers as she picked out plump, translucent sweets from a basket piled as high as the peaks of us. *Did you ask Pa?* A question floated to us like a swamp lily, fragile and pregnant with promise. We mumbled our responses into our gums but she didn't ask again and so we pressed on, wanting ironed frocks for school (me) and fresh chalk for licking and for our weekly hopscotch appointment (both).

That summer we requisitioned a block of slate to write on, woven blankets when we napped outside, and tiny-holed mosquito nets that smelled sweetly of camphor. We wrote legions of poems, rhyming words that didn't rhyme (*apples with cattle; stopping with crossed rings*), and tried sliding down the railings near the dam, only breaking a total of three fingers and one thumb between us. Mina sewed us up nice and fine, but we were like the drawings in ancient cartoons, shape-shifting the moment we were out of her slippery grasp.

We are then sitting on a blushing linen sofa, creased with the space between skin-folds from Mina's bottom and our legs and our heads. Pa's maw is still off and our lips are still stained with shame and with currants from the pie we have eaten with our faces dropped to our plates and our arms twined behind our backs. We still want more, so we flex the tips of our feet and we poke Mina. *You stop that*, Mina says, but her bottom stays where it was and we sink the tops of our toes into the reliable flesh that pads her there.

This was then and today is now and Mina has died, a short, sputtering death where she choked on so much of her own blood that our eyelids kissed our lash lines when she finally lifted off, her body physically hovering a few inches above the stretcher from its effort of reaching in through her mouth, looking around, marshalling all its baggage and sinews, and then leaving, ichor and heartbeat in tow. We put our hands out in the negative expanse between white sheet and bare spine to see if she left a molecule or two behind, warm from the sweat on her back. The air is soft, wet with toil, and when our hands join mid-air they fuse together, all marble and muscle. We let our breaths rise.





## **TIME CAPSULE BY RAE STONE**

Bury the memory you have  
of me in a peat bog; preserve it  
in the moss and tannin  
and let the acid erode  
the sadness I languished in.

Leave the mummy of  
my legacy in the fen  
to be discovered  
millennia from now for  
descendants to dissect.  
Allow them to pathologize  
the notches in my skin from  
the sacrifices I made for  
people who left my heart  
to decay once they scavenged  
the marrow of my soul.

Take the love and happiness  
I gave in my time and dig  
a grave among the wetland,

let the ground be fertilized  
by it so that the sphagnum  
may be sustained to shelter  
the echo of my existence.

## **BY THE RIVERBANK BY LAWRENCE MOORE**

The sun was strong, the water still,  
the willows bent to wash their tips,  
the lily pads were whispering,  
the insects dreamt of sleep.

A frog sat by the riverbank  
and waited for a maiden's kiss.  
He knew he was no handsome prince,  
but strove to measure up,

for hope is a resilient weed,  
resistant to the harshest frosts,  
resplendent and abundant  
with the slightest chink of light.

A spiteful curse could come to bless  
if leading to a blissful place.  
A life spent eating worms and slugs  
may land among the clouds...

and here she comes, the maiden fair,  
whose drifting gaze delays on him.  
His bulging eyes invite her lips  
to find the final verse.





A Puddleful of Sky by Helen Gwyn Jones



**THIS ISN'T MY IDEA**

**-OR-**



**A PLEA TO THE SWAN PRINCESS TO NOTICE THE FROGS AND TURTLES  
BY ELLEN HUANG**

So much depends on the swan princess,  
tattered gowns still pure white in lake water,  
and a vow of everlasting love, over faint dead bodies.

Alas, I'll admit, dear princess,  
I thought you deserved better than the puffed up human prince,  
better than a betrothal, year after year hanging your destiny  
upon marrying someone you saw so young and so often  
he might as well be your cousin.

Alas, Odette, I know you said no,  
and in this fantasy, to everyone's devastation,  
your no held power to separate kingdoms preparing to unite.  
Aren't their binds all your life too tight, haven't you ever wanted  
wilderness? I could never understand  
how you almost said yes, when evidence  
of summers upon summers showed  
you despised the arrangement, everything about your romance  
premeditated, pressured, curated with politics  
holding their breath over weddings and lower taxes.

Say you could have been happy. What coerced you to change your mind  
so suddenly, settling for just more castle walls with forced familiarity?  
I am trying to understand how they got to you. How it happens. Their spells worked  
far before any of my re-enchantment did. Their tricks befell you long  
before, and sadly shall continue far longer than forever.  
What is this love, but the warmth and relief  
awaiting you at the end of cold spells.

Say I freed you, gifted you with flight and swan feathers,  
wilderness and forest dances, shared speech with animals that swim and soar  
a view of clouds and heaven that man could never reach.  
Say I released you from romance and bid you escape, felt your heart fluttering,  
told you leave their world behind. There is far deeper magic than flimsy vows  
of everlasting love without practice. The spell doesn't even last the whole day.

Look, I am bringing you an alighted ball among the fae and animals,  
music of the woods like no parade of princesses have known.  
Notice the puffins, wanting for nothing, princely enough  
with flight of fancy and wondrous sunlight views.

Notice the frogs, coolness of change,  
webbed feet, floating lily pads. Notice the turtles,  
happy at all the longevity of life,  
opening up beneath the stars.  
No fear here, no more living for a love that could kill you  
when moonlight touches your wings  
on this other side of Swan Lake.



BY MADELINE TROSCLAIR

# MAUREPAS

## MIRE

Sometimes we have to give ourselves over  
to what the body softly chases

like a dog seeking out the windblown weeds.  
All night knows is of the dark and dazzling

light collapsed to the earth stuck in the ditches.  
Mud tickles the toes of decayed stars.

Give yourself over to the swampy earth--  
know it'll devour you whole,

and pass you through the earth's bowels  
digested and wholly new. Holy, holy.

I dance in sparkling mists hugging the tops  
of trees until the grit between my toes

weighs me down. I am dragged to the bottom  
of the pond and my vocal cords rub together

and I croak. I croak like a child's fairytale frog  
begging the princess for attention

until the marshy fringe appears and kisses  
my sweating cheek. I am a saint. I am silt.

I am a proverbial arm reaching for the moon  
and whatever she can offer me.

There is little known here  
Where the earth chews slowly  
Always some moment between

Life and decay. A foot slips into  
Dark waters while playing  
And shadows stretch across

Slow moving rivers of another  
World present before us.  
We are only visitors

In this agitated land, always  
Rotting from the inside out.  
This is no garden

For the living, only ghosts  
Willing to share a bite.  
The earth chews petroleum

Slowly as though natural  
Gas aids the quick living  
Quick loving quick

To love and lose  
All too soon  
In the stretching shadows

Of the bayou below  
Where the agitated land  
Rots from the inside out.

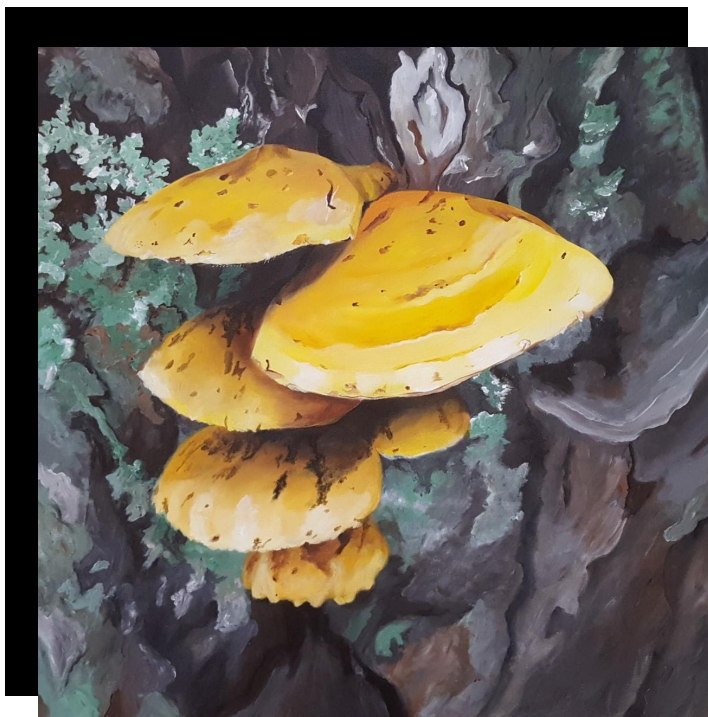






**FUZZY BUG  
BY LINDA  
HAWKINS**

**HOLD ON,  
HOLD ON  
BY SHARON  
DENMARK**



## [BULLFROG!]

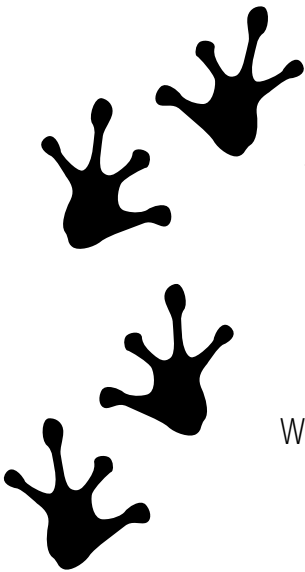
My eyes and I are easily impressed  
Marveling makes me happy to be alive  
To see ancient trees of extinct sizes  
Steaming mud and clouds of bugs  
It gets me excited  
My mother often tells me to close my mouth  
"You'll catch flies that way!"  
Well, mama, I think I'm part bullfrog  
The way I can't hide my tongue for a second  
Because when I think of the bugs, that's when my jaw drops  
And I sit stumped, in wonder  
In awe of the sulfur galaxy of earth and animal  
With a mouth full of flies!



## [MIRE]

In this mud I can sink  
I choose to be consumed  
A bit scary - but I like it  
This swamp can eat more than me, I know  
Why do I try to match its pace?  
Why does my gullet gurgle like the muck  
Bubbling, hot, and foul

I sat on a stump and a toad looked at me  
When I left, it continued staring where I sat  
You think it saw me?



BY EMMANUEL PARADELA

# THE GARDEN

## BY JANE PINE

### **A Raised Bed**

I stretched the tarp outside this morning. I woke up and realized darkness was beyond my memory, and wondered if the grasses could forget the light. I know I didn't ask first, but I'd hoped you wouldn't mind. You unfurled with me yesterday, in the bright night under the same tarp. I pressed you. You told me. I can't remember the night. I can only sleep in the shadows. Your body once cast silhouettes all over mine. They crowded here, in the little space between us. We found rest. You remembered how it felt fumbling around, carving yourself into the carpet for stability, like a dried out pen, limited. Swirled intricate dances of bees, communication vacuumed before the sun. Don't tell anyone. The fibers thickened, and the vacuum shifted to the third setting, three blue lines on white canvas. We continue to resist the inking, even though we know our skin is made of metal. We are engraved, when we want it. At least we can agree that grass suffocates, some things are certain. But no one remembers germination. The hot damp bags resting in the drawer, teeming. The same drawer with the pen we wanted, the one they were always looking for. It's no longer there.

### **Germination**

A leashed puppy can't stop the spruce trees from reaching me. Their writhing fingers distract from the task at hand. A bird caws at my shoulder, faster than footfalls reverberate in my ears. When my legs can't turn over any faster, I grow eight more limbs. I have no choice but to listen as my body disassembles, and yet the leashed puppy chirps at a low-hanging squirrel. Apologies could never suffice for having been born. I woke up like this. I entered the nightmare late, and further tardiness tumults leaves all around me. An unknown beverage brews in the earth, and I can't wait to taste it. These needles will tattoo words onto my skin that I cannot say out loud. I should have finished eating them while they were still soft. Then I could have made more. Steam rises from dirt roads and ruins my perm. This path wasn't paved, and my throat is closed. I haven't been able to return home, and yet I am already unrecognizable.

### **Growth**

My shirt is made of pollen. It's yellow, like how you like it. I think the color makes me look sickly, but you never minded as much as my mother did. Colorful rays of sunshine burn my back, scarlett through loosely woven thread. She prefers me with color, just not this much. When I bathe in the sink bucket, the cotton grows heavy, umber. They tell me not to wear it, the parlor is unbecoming. Immaterial. But I feel safe in the colorless depth. Yellow, answer the phone with your feet. When you last called, I wasn't available. Orange you there now? I was among the dwarfed sage trees, in the mud where we buried our dinners. I am running out of excuses.

It's dry season now, and I'm blue, but I can't drown like before. Old potatoes resurface in the yard. I towered, in my infancy, but those things never last long. Cable ties keep my life together, tightly so my digits fill with sangria. It had to work out, somehow. Eggplants can't dial as nimbly as you can. When you call again, ring twice and then hang up. Then, ring once more and ask your question. I can't promise I'll answer.

### **Bloom**

We came from different backgrounds, but it all looks the same now. The watercolor spread, lubricated with alcohol. You ink the shadowy skeletons of your hometown, but your memories bleed together, muddy and you've learned you have no patience. Just expectation. A knife can scrape at the surface, but watch your capillaries or you'll bleed to death. They drained three mice, last time, to get you back. Science was set back an entire year, but at least you are pretty now. Repent. If you were to sail across the Pacific, you'd know about the pink trees and the jagged leaves. Tall ice cream and hot waffles. I couldn't have flown without my supplements, I have you to thank for those. I needed help getting to my seat. We held hands, touched elbows, and then the canvas seeped. The whole book was ruined, all because of some tea. I think it was green, but no one lit the spotlight so I can't be sure. Between morality, there's a two-step dance. Master the recipe, and republish it.

### **Scream.**

There's a doorway I used to get stuck in. My hips couldn't get through the first time. They'd get wedged. My shoulders had to be turned sideways, the way you'd meet a wave, to stand any chance of passage. I saw everyone inside. They were communicating. My mouth ran dry. I wasn't at that job for long, I left as soon as it was legal. It doesn't make sense to remain unseen when you are so large. My next position was a better fit, in more ways than one. They needed me, you see? To spread the word. After their wagons broke, I carried their dogs for them. I didn't know they could bite, just that they wouldn't. They ate with the king, at the same table. I collected their furs from the grasses, and made sweaters for the princess. She was always too warm, but she never left the sun. She itched. I wanted to scratch at her, but I knew it wasn't right. The wigs were supposed to hide the evidence, but they were never long enough. It was me, you see, who pointed out the discrepancy. It was me, you see, that took the blame at the chopping block. I had only grown larger, and this was the only way to get back through the door. I should've known the chef's knife was the biggest. I've been reduced to halves.

## POEMS BY CATIE WILEY

### Shrek's restaurant

Shrek is the executive chef  
of The Swamp restaurant  
and he sprinkles mosquitos  
like parsley leaves.  
their half-dead buzzing  
adds a certain something  
to the mouthfeel.

if you order a cake,  
he'll forgo the fondant.  
he prefers to wrap his sweets  
with snakes.  
(the venomous ones  
cost extra.)

he offers a variety of cocktails  
like the Mudslide:  
coffee liqueur, irish cream,  
a drizzle of chocolate,  
and of course,  
a scoop of real mud  
(organic, locally sourced.)

the menus are made from  
recycled lily pads,  
no ink,  
just carefully placed ants.

please make your reservation  
soon,  
tables fill up fast.

### frog choir rehearsal

at night, I hear the frogs  
croaking.  
i stumble out of the house,  
give in to the hum of humidity,  
let my feet kiss the mud.

their ribbiting ricochets  
against the trees.  
forgive them,  
frogs don't know much  
about acoustics.

i dip my toes in their home,  
their jade colored stew,  
and they hop over to me  
to keep me company.

under the midnight blue,  
we sing to the moon  
and the moon doesn't mind  
if we're out of tune.



### alligator safety

i know the odds are slim  
for an alligator attack.  
a lightning strike is more likely  
than their toothy bite.  
still, i sit in a florida airport  
and google wrestling techniques  
in case i need to win  
an alligator fight.

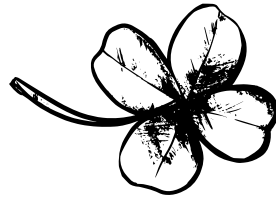
# THE CLOVER BED, MY FRIEND

clover winds itself around my feet  
and i am reminded of  
how soft it is to lie in a  
bed of leaves i made myself.  
a halo of green  
made only for my soul,  
    compliments my pale skin  
    overlaid on dark blue veins.

i whisper...  
as green clover ivy snakes  
around my ankles,  
a green embrace i've never  
experienced before.  
it whispers back,  
    and i hear the smile  
    in the photosynthesis

this castle of green  
eases the aging, aching mind  
and reminds me it's okay  
its safe,  
it's normal  
    to live and age. a body withers,  
    but souls sprout green

BY VERONICA JARBOE



# THE GREEN FROGS DANCE THEIR WAY TO HARMONY

one, then two like popcorn  
slowly, more arrive  
an endless hopping  
    *hop hop hopping*  
still-less time, all but green  
and croaking becomes  
baritone harmony  
    *croak croak croaking*  
what performance this  
musical of frogs,  
the reeds sway and applaud  
    *whoosh whoosh whooshing*  
the spotted frogs hop to their bows  
on their lily pad stage,  
then over into the water  
    *plop kerplunk kerplunking*  
silence...  
    the harmony ended



# THE PAINTED FROG, UNCERTAINLY

## By Rick Hollon

So it was around this time that the painted frog had an inkling that not all was as it seemed. She could hop well enough within the confines of her frame. She had a shadowed logjam to hide in, she had a deep duckweed pool to dive into, she had piles of decaying leaves as a hunting-ground. All the same, something was amiss.

The painted frog hopped a perfect stairstep of pheasant-back mushrooms to the summit of a stump. She submerged in the pool at its heart for a while, but the feeling wouldn't leave her alone. When a damselfly thrummed along and perched with her needle-legs on the lip of the stump, the frog couldn't muster the energy to snap her up.

"The air is too still," the frog complained.

"Suits me fine," the damselfly replied. She stretched and shivered her wings in a tantalizing dance, but the frog's tongue wasn't tempted. The damselfly shrugged her wings and hummed away, back into the sunbeam that always highlighted the single lily pad.

The painted frog dozed, and woke again on the lily pad, the damselfly pirouetting just out of reach. She grumbled deep in her throat and jumped into the pool. Her strong kicks peeled water aside and brought her to the bank, where the badger peered from his shadowy den.

"Storm's a-brewin'," said the badger, though the frog could see no sky, only the dappled leaves of beech and willow and sycamore roofing the world. Not a leaf stirred.

"I have never felt hunger," the frog said, but the badger paid her no mind. He narrowed his eyes at a sky that wasn't there, somewhere beyond the frame.



She tried to hop her way through the cardinal-flower and jewelweed and button-bush that rimmed her pond, but no matter how she twisted and dodged, she always found herself square atop the lily pad, pestered by that damned damselfly.

"Your kind only lives a day," the frog snapped at her.

"The sun hasn't set," the damselfly hummed, spreading her wings luxuriously.

The frog buried herself deep in the mud beneath the pond. Perhaps this was a season, one she could hunker down and shelter through. She had never felt her blood stop in winter, never known the midges and sunswoon of spring, yet a dim notion of these things licked at her, struck green sparks within her.

A time passed. She was back on the lily pad again. The sunbeam gave no warmth. She didn't know what warmth was. Did she?

She swam again, and met with a fish who was little more than a brushstroke, a suggestion of dappled shadow. "What are we?" she asked.

The fish could only move in a stiff arc. Only half-realized, it could not answer.

So the painted frog sat herself squarely on the lily pad. "You know something you won't say," she told the damselfly.

"Perhaps," the damselfly said. She swept close, buzzing her wings just above the water, just above the frog's nose. "How will you find out?"

The frog launched her tongue. With a laugh, the damselfly stayed just out of reach.

"I'll find a way," muttered the frog. Time passed, and the sunbeam shined where it always shined. The frog settled in to wait.

# TURKEY TAIL



BY SHARON DENMARK



# THE CHAIN

# KEEPER

By Madeleine Tomaso



You are falling into the swamp at the end of the hill.

You peer downwards and have to stop yourself from falling in; startled by the shape of your body mirrored upon the murky surface.

Overhead, the clouds continue their onwards march. The ants are as large as the sky.

You see me waving at you from underneath the water's surface, and you want me to be the monster that eats you alive. Instead of quiet intimacy, you want us to yearn out loud, bodies being disgusting together, spittle flying through the air as we kiss, the world spinning around us, leaving nothing but our colliding mouths together underwater before we return to the land, streaked in dirt and lust.

There's the smell of the grass and detergent, again. A whistle blows, cracking silence open in half. You hear the agony of the wind. The salty taste of sweaty jerseys. Your mother's voice through the phone, asking to call her back, *it's been so long since we last heard from you, you know, we hope you're safe, dear.*

This too, in time, will burn and set itself alight. This too will tear itself asunder.

I am gone, now, having walked out alone, footsteps dying in the soiled ground. You are left with the company of your own shadow and your own tears. Tongues darting out, brows furrowed in concentration. Someone bums a cigarette off of you, and you oblige, mouth tasting like fire and ash. Someone else parts your lips open. You oblige again.

A crackle of the radio. Static, and then silence again. The swamp is still. There are no ripples on its surface to be found. You skim your hand on the surface and find nothing. Your hand penetrates the water. Still nothing.

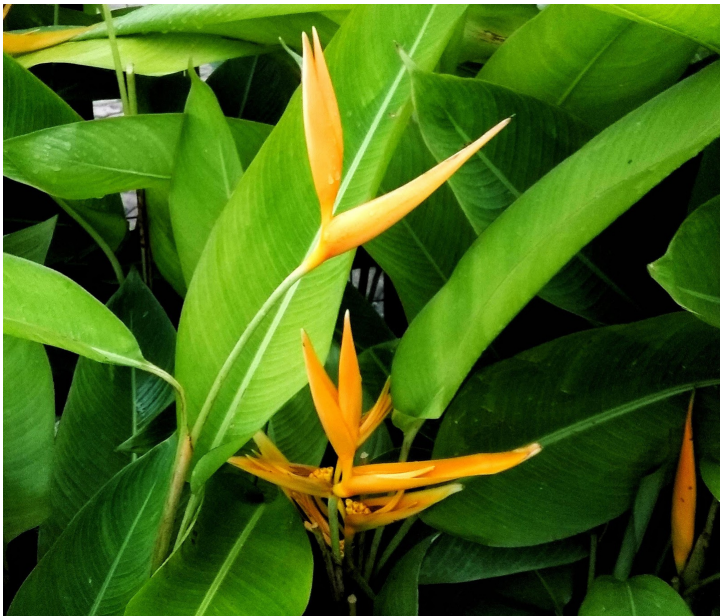
Light leaks through the clouds, illuminating the green of the swamp. Your pale reflection re-emerges on the surface. You kick at the water, willing it to disappear. It doesn't.

*Who are you when you're not watching,* a voice from outside your body says, and you plunge headfirst into the water, unwilling to give them an answer.

**Untitled** by Jim Zola



**Orange Buds** by Jasmine Kaur



## AFTER THE MORNING

The path smells of musty damp morning. Your shampoo trails behind you in fruity streaks. We are still in our slippers, yours flapping words at the bugs up front, mine newer, fluffed up with fresh enthusiasm. Grasses in nearby fields are pink-tinged, perhaps only now, perhaps only today. You let me stay. For months my toothbrush has been on your shelf, for months I have walked my floorboards barefoot because my slippers had made it, but I had not. You point out sticky jack spiralling up a fir. I think of places it doesn't belong. I smile around dog roses tangled at our feet, clasp your hand. Tiny thorns tease our bare ankles, we kiss. You haven't told me where we're going. I didn't have time to shower; you said it was fine. You took so long. I wonder if you always do. A foxglove whispers how little I know; I shush it. I know last night we were together. I know my watch is still by your bed. I know the feeling of my feet, wet in my slippers. I know I must follow you.

**BY MARIE LITTLE**

## NIGHT GLUE

The run-off from night is like tar; it is all my recurring nightmares made real. A sticky trail of stuck lifts, bottomless stagnant pools and elephantine bluebottles follows me through the day. A hot thick murky soup of faceless relatives, old fears and fresh regrets pools at my feet whenever I sit down. Night will not leave me.

By midday I have walked carpet-miles in shoes full of sludge. My hair is matted with sweaty dreams about slugs and Lost Child stations. My sandwich tastes of aeroplanes dropping from the sky, pets running loose on motorways. My legs are heavy with what might come next, my eyelids begin to stick.

I head out to the ponds. I take an empty rucksack, ready to fill with disappointment. Every step towards my front door is quicksand, but when my boots hit the pavement, they are lighter. I lift my chin; the day is still bright, the air tastes sweet. A neighbour waves. I take another step. I think I feel a breeze.





Two Trees 2019

by **M. Patrick Riggin**

Harbour



# MY VIEW FROM THE GARDEN BY URIAH HOWARD ALLIS

a bird with broken wings  
perches precariously  
on a windowsill, as fingers  
of a cherry tree beckon it  
into the garden, as if  
summoning a power  
that far outweighs  
this creature's strength

yet what if this tree  
is correct in bidding  
on fragility and fatigue?—  
not because they conceal  
some deeper wonder,  
but because they capture  
a truth that lies  
at the roots of the roots;  
where leaves bend  
to scratch the sky

we are striking things, but  
you cannot reach the stars  
without first crossing  
where you can  
no longer trust the bough  
to keep from breaking

# YELLOW BIPLANE BY LYNN FINGER

Old county line road  
rubs patched along wetlands.  
A hard quartzite ribbon

& sated soybeans spread  
by muffled cattails, all green  
& dotted butterflies. One

morning I walk the road  
further than before  
& find three biplanes,

mosquito dusters, yellow  
as bathtub duckies,  
rest noses up near

a corrugated steel shed  
& a 1930s gas pump,  
all on empty.

One plane faces the swamp road  
but hasn't been moved in years,  
they mow the sedge around it.

The second waits by itself,  
& the third is upside down.  
Two men & a boy in overalls

fill & start up the first one,  
tend the props that turn,  
make soft air blossoms in the wind.

The air ripples & tears  
around the plane, wings  
translucent, the yellow biplane

shudders with joy,  
the cicadas & bullfrogs  
echo.

# INTERSTITIAL



BY GEORGE L STEIN



DESMOND, RIDING HORSE



# I ATE EARTH

BY VRINDA GANDHI

...before it swallowed me as a whole  
about 10 years back or so  
when i was still young and didn't forget easily  
i ate mud, raw with bell-like hands  
golden from sun among some kids i called friends  
we dug deep, like raccoons with their little nails  
soft fallen grains sticking in our fingernails  
"mother would be angry," one of us whispered  
we kept scratching the back of the earth  
a deep hole to fill our dreams and dilemma  
as a child, even we had secrets to ink  
we stored burned pages, murky words from uncles  
hid them in the fog of confusion  
as we patted the musky mud above our hidden treasures,  
we found pages of raw emotions from our older siblings  
"they hid them too," one of us said  
no one moved, we were astonished  
"don't stop," i said, "let the hide & seek begin"  
we climbed our way to the broken wooden ladder  
hanging awfully close to the inverter house  
from the top, you can see all the smiles and frowns of people around  
and we jumped to make sure all the land is covered  
our secrets are hidden, and then no one can find we were even here  
so we ate earth before it swallowed us  
because we were afraid of its womb  
(even though the womb made us alive)



## BY ANDREW MCSORLEY

### Baseball

My father gives me a baseball and it bursts into a hundred river flies. My father gives me a baseball bat and it turns into a cattail stem. My father gives me a glove and it melts into the black belly muck of a swamp. My father gives me cleats and they peel away from the bottom - dark roots of tag alder underneath. My father gives me a hat and it's too heavy for my body. I run towards the first light at the horizon. I sink deeper into the marsh we made.

### Lullaby of the Lingering Wind

A crooked knoll set low in valley-shadow, tired and dreaming it seems to rock back and forth in the lipless wind, heaving its chest, barreled song of hiss and heavy breath – what keeps it here, deep in this swampy hillock, under crags of moss and widow web, what roots grip full to the bars of earth, and why do I hear it sing to me in the golden-drunk dusk? Because its heart rattles in its sleep, ghost drum echoing from soil to canopy, and we feel the thunder before we hear it, feel it in swamp grass, alder branch, in cattail seed and sand hill storm: we see, we know.



## STEP INTO THE MIST BY HELEN GWYN JONES

## LANDLOCKED BLUES BY RICHARD LEISE

Mallory was not surprised to come upon the pond. Since crossing the hedgerow the air carried the fungal aroma of rotten produce, a stench of death and decay that had nothing to do with humanity. From a distance, hiking up a bit of a hill, the pond was less an opening within the earth's surface than something deposited upon it, a pile of crushed stones, moonlit, minerals glittering. Mallory had been curious. Cresting the hill, the smell grew stronger, and, making its summit, the pond presented itself in outline. Tiny patterns like oil swirled upon the surface of the stagnant water. Only there were no patterns and what existed Mallory created. When Mallory stopped walking nothing swirled. It had only looked that way.

Bubbles broke the water's plane somewhere near its center. Somewhere near its center because the pond was not circular, it possessed no named shape. Mallory untied her sweatshirt and lowered herself to the ground, she made a seat. Was it possible for something to lack a center? Mallory placed a hand upon her stomach. She wanted to feel her child inside her. A sensation that, in its self-same singularity, registered as unique phenomena. She did not mind waiting.

The bubbles issued forth like there was a fountain placed beneath the surface. It was probably a snapping turtle. Mallory tossed a pebble into the pond. The bubbles stopped. A few moments later, bubbles appeared in another area. If Mallory had not thrown the rock, the bubbles would not be there. "If the bubbles had not been there, would I be here?" Mallory said. She didn't know what to say.

Mallory didn't know why she was thinking this way. She freed her phone. There was no sound to distract her and even that which moved, moved silently. The bubbles. The breeze. There was an animal not far from where she sat, and the creature slid into the pond. The algae was thick and green and moved like a wrinkle in a sheet. A snake. The creature's head moved across the water. The green slime parted into heavy gullies. From Mallory's lap a buzz, and a cool blue glow – a text. She blinked. When she opened her eyes she could no longer see the snake.

Cattails rose from the shallows. A slow trickle of water fed into the pond from a drainage ditch. Here, the water ran black and clear, and water lilies lay upon the surface like bright chalices carefully arranged. Over there blue water lily flowers, their long pedicels erect above the water, luminous within the moonlight, the tips of so many candle flames. Water lilies were depicted by the French painter Claude Monet. Mallory's mother liked Monet. Mallory's mom would have liked it here.

Pregnant, Mallory was that much more alive. She had experienced a different sort of femininity when with her mom. Beside her mom—with her skeletal expression and her sinking soul—Mallory experienced a sort of elevation. Mallory, who last year could not tolerate thinking of the woman and who, when in her presence, demanded a definite proximity? Now, being around her mother was— Mallory's phone pulsed. It glowed. Its light interrupted everything.

Even now dragonflies dipped and skimmed the water. Hovering, rising and falling, suspended in air, movements impossible, and in these creatures and in their movements no great mystery, like the unspoken acknowledgement of a common misunderstanding.

A log broke the surface of the water. That place where, come mid-morning, turtles basked in the sunlight. A frog rose to the surface and moonlight made black spectral points of its weird round eyes. The frog sunk beneath the algae. Directly across the water there was a heron. Sleek and graceful, it was impossible to know. Was the bird awake, or was the animal sleeping?

Tall grasses shape-shifted in the breeze, and petals from some nearby tree fell like petals upon the water's surface. Such simple cause and effect. Mallory was a little dizzy. Why didn't she faint? Mallory closed her eyes and the world remained. Not as it had been, but how it was. When Mallory opened her eyes, things were exactly the same. But of course, and she rubbed her belly, they were different.

A mosquito bit her arm and drew blood. Slowly, very slowly, Mallory moved her finger several inches forward, and from side to side. Mallory brushed the mosquito. She had not intended to injure the bug. The bug died. Squashed, its guts, mixed with Mallory's blood, smeared across her arm. There was a lot more blood than Mallory expected, in color closer to black, to crimson, the petals of a dead geranium. This would not have happened had she been wearing her sweatshirt.

It was not dark. The moon was not quite full, a bright shape set within the sky. Mallory turned. From here how easy to determine north from south, east from west. To the north, Owego Lake. It was easy to imagine. Some time, somehow, Owego Lake was going to break—or, at the very least, crack—spilling from its southern shore and into Endwell, devouring first the waterfront district with its public golf course and pretentious farmer's market before rising like a pulse from Owego Lake's primary tributary, Cass River, to overtake Endwell proper, flooding the public housing and historic homes quartered into rundown apartments that dot the grid of streets surrounding the tiny city, tenants and landlords and college kids and small families alike scrambling for safety and clinging to the shingles of steeped rooftops only to be lifted by the rapidly rising current like so many leaves in the gutter, the women and the men too kicking and screaming, the water cresting just below second story windows and through the windows stay-at-home moms and their bright-eyed babies hanging upon hips and looking out onto the hopelessness, this sea of swirling mud-brown water, and climbing further still this rumbling floodwater, rising without ceasing this end of times, submerging all of Endwell proper and drowning every dog and cat, every man, woman, and baby.

It would be something to see.

And Mallory turned her back to the breeze. She cradled her belly. The newly flooded city, wiped clean, wind warm and westerly, making choppy the waters of a broken lake awash with the flotsam of its bloated citizenry, the water quickly receding, the traffic lights, supplied by power stations well outside the city limits, blinking with purpose but a purpose for which there is no longer any meaning. It is like the defrocked priest. What remains of his omniscient God? These lights, blinking, broken commandments, reflecting upon the water visions of themselves. It's like penance, absent faith. Of course Mallory was raised Catholic. If not? She'd have had different thoughts, entirely.

East? Endwell Community College. The campus dark, silent. A series of stark, base shadows black against the austere rise of the distant hillsides. Iridescent rape lights sparkled bug zapper blue above the sidewalks of roadways and the sidelines of athletic fields and from within that deep solitary darkness glittered like planets from some distant galaxy. Light posts line the empty streets and light posts illuminate the empty parking lots and together they work to form a pattern like that of some unknown constellation. Some of them like collapsing stars blinking on and off and then back on again. On and off and then back on again. A fixture eradicated only by the risen sun.

And of course Owego Lake, opposite the direction from which she had come. When there is a moon the lake glows a deep, a sapphire blue, a color that brings to mind the stained glass windows inside Our Lady of Sorrows Church. There are fourteen windows inside Our Lady of Sorrows—seven on either side of the nave—and the windows, taller than they are wide, and rectangular before angling off to form imperfect, trapezoidal points, are set in perfect opposition from one another. One window for each Station of the Cross. They have always been pretty, despite what they depict.

And like the amount of direct sunlight determines the degree of blueness that defines the defeated form of a crucified Christ, and whether it is a cyan or a periwinkle blue that makes a mournful Mary, anyone who pays any sort of attention would certainly agree that the position and phase of the moon have a similar effect upon the blueness of Owego Lake. A luminous moon, like now, and the water shimmers the powder blue of the Virgin Mary's cloak. A crescent moon—waning, say, low over the city's south side—and the lake is that same sapphire as the ridges of those bruised ribs in outline atop the Son of God's pierced, emaciated, abdomen.

But even when the moon is new you can see Owego Lake. Even when clouds mask the moon and the world is obscured you know Owego Lake is there. Only the lake isn't blue. The lake is black. Much blacker than the skyline, and made even darker by Endwell's twinkling lights, whose streetlights, gold as the flames of votive candles, run in neat, parallel lines across the city and whose house lights, luminous as the wings of fairies, lay scattered in various degrees of concentration around the blackened body of water, the lake is the pitch of unreflected light, and Owego Lake seems to descend into that swath of eroding earth with the same dizzying speed of the black expansion of nightfall bleeding up and into outer space.

Mallory doesn't need to walk around the pond, she no longer needed to search the tombstones, the rest of Endwell Cemetery. She had captured enough names, her baby still inside her, awake, or asleep, in its womb. With one hand she cradled her stomach. Next? She answered the phone.



**BOB AND RIPPLE BY HELEN GWYN JONES**

## **OUR FAMILY RELIGION BY FREDERICK CHARLES MELANCON**

Moments are like bayous. They may be still on the surface, but underneath, the current moves in unpredictable ways. And you never know what you'll find alive down there. For instance, one of the most embarrassing times with Mom led to one of the proudest with my sister. Mom's tale was one of those stories that you'd later laugh about with friends, but when it happened, you hid behind one of her scaled legs while praying that you'd die before it got any worse. Mind you, it always got worse, but you hoped.

Mrs. Janice started it over a cantaloupe at the Schwegmann's. She was the Sunday school teacher who helped with church outreach to all those less fortunate than her people, yet everyone in the community knew more about her from her dress than her Christian values. She wore her best even to the grocery store and had a small handbag to match each outfit. In the middle of the produce aisle, she wagged a pink gator-skinned one at my mother as Mom placed the last melon in her basket. The golden chain to the purse swung back and forth in pure wrath, and Mrs. Janice said, "Honey, you need to find Jesus."

I think a little explanation's in order. My mother's name wasn't Honey, and in this world, you might've realized as I did that sometimes humans use words of endearment to put each other in their place. But, an even darker purpose simmered in Mrs. Janice's tone. You see we're Honey Island Swamp monsters. At least, this is what the shaved nutria, as Uncle Eau calls the humans, stamped us with when they first met one unlucky member of our species out in, well, the Honey Island Swamp. The humans aren't really that imaginative, but in all fairness, we're a hard group to pin down. Fur covers the majority of our body except the legs, which is covered in dull scales that look better on an alligator if that creature took growth hormone as a child. But the best, is the yellow beak that clacks together when we snore at night. Of course, they could've always used the name we gave ourselves, the Letiche, but we're talking about humans so that might've been too much to ask for. The point is when humans used the Honey designation with our kind, it wasn't an informal address directed to someone they cared about.

Back at the produce aisle in Schwegmann's, Mom turned her furred shoulders square at that woman and said, "Ma'am, you need to find Swamp Jesus."

My sister's claw poked my side. She had a talent for hitting the soft spot of flesh under the ribs that forced you over and made you pay attention to her. "Who's Swamp Jesus?"

"This is embarrassing," I said.

Mom didn't take an eye off the human down the aisle when she responded to me. "There's nothing embarrassing about Swamp Jesus and don't let these humans make you think otherwise."

The store manager Mr. Hendricks shuffled down the aisle to check on us. He'd hurt his leg in a boating accident with Uncle Eau. "Is there a problem here?" Our prospects didn't look good. Everyone in the family knew that Mr. Hendricks still held Uncle Eau and all his kin responsible for that accident. Of course, you could hope that common decency would win the day, if you believed in that sort of thing.

"Yes Sir, there's this Honey who needs Jesus."

"Mom, why does she keep calling you Honey?" my sister asked. "That's not your name."

I asked, "Can we go?"

Mom seemed to ignore the both of us, but I'm pretty sure she at least heard what my sister said because of the way she snarled her next words. "That's funny because we have Jesus and unlike you Swamp Jesus is a saint."

Realizing what was about to happen, Mr. Hendricks stationed himself between the two females of their respective species. I'd seen enough fights to know that was a mistake, but I'd also tried to help enough grownups out of a tight spot only to learn it wasn't worth the trouble. The plan here was to stand back out of the range of any projectiles. Mrs. Janice ran right into Mr. Hendricks, and the impact made him stumble back a little. Then the best part, as she flailed her arms trying to get to my mom, she accidentally, though you could never be too sure with humans, slapped him across the face with her purse. The chain snapped, sending gold fragments under the shelves, and Mr. Hendricks went straight to the ground.

He held his jaw in his palm and his eyes were all wet. Mrs. Janice composed herself, perhaps realizing that she'd crossed a line. "Janice," the man said, "I told you about starting something in my store. Get on out the both of you."

For our protection, Mr. Hendricks followed my family to the sliding door at the front of the store, but I was confident that he was just using our escort as an opportunity to get away from that crazy human. As a burst of AC cooled the tops of our heads, he said, "Tell your brother he still owes me for that wreck."

Mom didn't even look back as the doors to the grocery store swished shut. My sister tried to ask why we had to leave, but Mom and I ignored her. I couldn't believe that human. He was worried about something that was ancient history while I just spent a whole afternoon in his store to leave empty handed. This could only mean that we were about to do this all over again at the A&P.

Shortly after that showdown, my sister and I were kartered off to Sorrento, or the country as my family called it. I'd like to tell you that this was some kind of safety measure for the two of us, sending us away to keep us out of the civil unrest that happened next. But there were no threatening phone calls or bricks with receipts for repairs to a certain boat thrown through our window. Trust me, when I got back, I checked, and all the windows were the same. And there certainly weren't any marches or protests through the center of town, demanding equal rights for all citizens who'd missed an entire morning of cartoons because of two grocery trips. It was getting too hot for that nonsense, and everyone equally agreed on how much of a hot mess Mrs. Janice was. That's if they cared at all.

Nope, it all started with Mom and Dad calling a family meeting about our vacation and us being excited for a few minutes. Dreams of a trip that might actually take us to the beach or somewhere fun danced in my head, but once still, we were told: "It's time you two knew where you came from. Had some pride in it. So, you're going to the country to stay with your Maw Maw."

That wasn't a vacation. Whenever we went there, we were obliged to do chores for the poor old monster, and if we didn't, she bring down divine judgment with her backscratcher, which stung worse than the wasps behind the garage. Even my sister's cry of: "I don't want any pride," couldn't stop this injustice. And it's not like they could've picked a worse time. The real vacation, summer vacation, had just started. School let out just the week before, and there were video games to play and friends to get in trouble with. Worse, it was going to get the kind of hot that forced your fur to molt off, and I'd been out in the country enough to know that when you made too much noise the punishment was getting sent outside.

Maw Maw's house, the place our parents abandoned us at, wasn't a pillar of family heritage. It was a dump in the middle of the swamp with pictures on the wall showcasing how many times it flooded. There was one of Aunt Tee and Uncle Eau swimming in the living room. To the right was a picture of Maw Maw sitting on top of the kitchen table with her legs dangling into the water, and there were even a few of Paw Paw wading through the front garage trying to shore up the water with sandbags that leaked everywhere. He'd even constructed a little levee around the whole house that didn't seem to do much of anything. Paw Paw long ago returned to the dark waters that we all come from, so we barely spoke about him, especially in front of Maw Maw. This perplexed me to no end because if we weren't supposed to talk about him Maw Maw made that difficult by leaving up so many pictures of him.

When we first got there, my sister ran into the den to turn on her favorite TV show, and as the volume increased, Maw Maw, the monster who supposedly loved us, sent us outside. I hadn't even done anything wrong yet. "Go play with your cousins," she said.

The thin monsters we were somehow related to sat on Paw Paw's levee. I suppose Maw Maw thought we'd be a good influence on these creatures who lived in that mobile home down the street. You know, the one with the flat tires. Their patchy hair proved that they spent the majority of the warming Spring weather outside, and they looked like they belonged to the overgrown lot behind them, and let's be honest, the reason they hung out on Paw Paw's levee was so that they were out of eyesight of their own guardians.

"I heard about your mama," one said. "She took down some human at the store."

"I heard she killed that human," another said.

The other cousins nodded their heads in approval, and Sis and I plopped down next to them on the little hill. We were celebrities for a short time. Questions peppered our every detail about the fight at the Schwegmann's, which we embellished to keep the interest up. It didn't last the day, but it allowed us an entrance into the group that even our blood wouldn't have made happen.

When the questions began to die down, I patted the grassy hill. "You know our Paw Paw built this."

Cousin Gat chirped a laugh. "You know it never worked right?"

I wanted to tell him that his mobile home's tires weren't always flat too, but it didn't seem like the right time. He probably knew, like I knew, that the overgrown hill didn't keep back the bayou water. We played back in the trees for most of the day. The cousins were right about one thing; back in the overgrown lot that bordered Bayou Conway, the shade kept the majority of the sun off you. The paths they cut with machetes and little axes curved around open areas and a larger tree that someone hammered a rope into for climbing. We ran with them until we realized that we hadn't eaten. It's in that discussion of food that Sis reminded them of something they didn't have.

"We always have gator meat. Our dad's the best gator hunter around. My Maw Maw said so."

The rest quieted down, and after a moment, Cousin Gat spoke up, "What do you know? Y'all just city up and down."

He pushed her, and she cried out as she fell. The others laughed, and I even had to admit that she looked kind of funny thrashing about as she went down. It was obvious that she wasn't hurt, but something must've happened to impair her judgment because she got up and punched my cousin directly above his beak. The others circled, and as my cousin wiped a claw along his face to check if she'd drawn blood, which, come on, there's no way that could've happened, a burning look crossed his face. He eyed the both of us. I wanted to explain that I didn't even know her, but he was about to lunge like I'd seen so many others do when familiar whistles cut across the woods. It was time to go home. Maw Maw's whistle shripped above the rest, and the purpose was clear. She had just set food on the table, and if we wanted some, we'd better not be late.

"I'll see you tomorrow, City," Gat said. All of a sudden, I was back with that human in the Schwegmann's. I was pretty sure we didn't want to see him tomorrow.

At dinner my sister told Maw Maw of the battle. "I punched one of those boys right in his beak." In truth, she was nowhere close, and I was surprised that she'd made contact, which I expressed to those at the table.

Maw Maw nodded her head and clucked, "You don't let someone push those you love around, and don't let your brother make you think you did something wrong when you did it right, no matter how much trouble you get in."

I wanted to tell her she didn't understand how much it was going to hurt to get beat up by my cousins because of something my sister did. Fortunately, a certain swamp deity, because let's be honest, there's no Swamp Jesus, must've realized. It rained for the next two days, which commuted our death sentences with Gat. It's too bad the rain didn't last all week, but it was just one of those rain showers that somehow makes everything hotter and stickier.

The next day, the cousins waited on Paw Paw's levee. Little puddles formed on the inside, and to stop thinking about the pounding I was about to get, I wondered how those hills could keep out the water. What had that old monster been thinking when he dug that continuous mound around the house? I never thought up an answer, but I was distracted. In the end, Maw Maw saved us because she let us watch TV inside. One of the cousins even came up to the screen door and asked if we could come outside to play. "No, they have chores to do. No playing today."

I was impressed with her quick thinking, but then we started shucking green beans into pots. It wasn't so great anymore, and when the green beans were in a casserole, we found ourselves not in front of the TV but the toilet with brushes and mops. "This place's going to shine with y'all here," she said.

The next day we tried to slip out the back to avoid our indentured servitude, but she caught us and began our greatest humiliation. Visiting one dump after another in the swamp, she brought us to visit the relatives. I'm almost certain that most had no real connection to us, but some sort of kin was placed in front of us along with the cousins who'd witnessed my sister's humiliation of their real kin jostling around in the periphery of the discussion. Maw Maw and the other adults ignored them. Instead, they pecked our heads in greeting, which was embarrassing, and then we listened to Maw Maw talk about the great help she'd had in us in making her famous green bean casserole that had been passed down for generations. Apparently, the stuff was pretty good because, despite their loyalty to Gat, the cousins swooped in to get whatever they could.



By the time we made it to the no longer mobile home, Gat waited at the screen door. He lifted the lid and sucked in air until his lungs must've been ready to burst. "Y'all really made this?"

"We didn't have a choice," my sister said.

After a few bites, Gat said, "You ain't one of us but this is good."

Maw Maw winked at us as Gat's mom refilled her water.

The next day, Gat punched me once in the chest, but after that, no one had an issue. And if I'm going to be honest, I don't even think he hit me as hard as he could. It was more like a push than a hit. It still bothered my sister. She put her claws up, and told him, "You better back off."

Gat asked, "Or what?"

My sister had a smart answer, but no one heard because Gat took off. When he left, everyone else, including myself, followed.

It was about midday that the real fun began. A human lived nearby, just down the road. On his mailbox were the faded words of Charlie M. He kept chickens but not in a pen, so you could chase them all over his yard. Of course, the cousins knew and didn't tell us until much later that you could only do this for a few minutes before he came out madder than a mother alligator, their words.

The reason the cousins let us tag along became quickly evident. On these escapades, only one person needed to worry about Mr. Charlie, the slowest. The old man caught my sister without even trying, and when he did, somehow I must've lost my mind. Because as the last cousin, really an uncle by some weird family trick, ran by me, I turned around to that man who had an odd chemical smell that I later learned was alcohol and slammed my claws right into his nose. The thing squished from the impact, and at first, I thought I didn't really do much of anything. But the man let go of my sister to cradle his nose. My sister grabbed my arm and tugged, but it took me a second to go with her because I was lost in shock upon actually hitting a human.

When we got to the fence, I picked my sister up, and flipped her over the metal pole. The sound of fabric ripped as my jeans caught on the tops of the fence. I checked back to see where the man was. He looked me straight in the face and yelled, "What's wrong with you Honeys?"

It's at this point that my sister, safe on the other side of the fence, yelled at that man, "There's nothing wrong with us because compared with you we're saints."

This challenge gave the man license to teach us a lesson. The human screamed and chased us all over the swamp. We dodged from house to house that we'd just visited the other day. At times, his huffing faded, and we thought we were safe. But when we looked back, the human still barreled down at us. Somehow, we made it back to Maw Maw's without that man actually catching us, and our savior was none other than Paw Paw's levee. Hiding in the mud on the other side, we didn't stir so that when the man stormed down the street, he passed us by without realizing we were there.

When Maw Maw saw my ripped jeans, she had a fit. "What's your mama going to do to us?" For once, I completely understood; I was scared of that lady too. My sister came up with a good lie. "Just tell her it was an accident," she said. Maw Maw clucked something about just telling the truth that I ignored, but thank Swamp Jesus for my sister because when we got home, she remembered the old monster's words and told my mother about the drunk human. And my mother actually bought it.



*UNDERWATER MEADOW*  
**BY BETH MULCAHY**



## ANNIE'S BULLDOG BY LYNN FINGER

Annie's bulldog, Lucky, got caught in the swamp quicksand, & next-door Ricky said he'd be OK, but once Ricky told me not to talk so much, so I don't believe Ricky. The swamp swallows people like my aunt plays bingo, mercilessly & barefoot. The swamp is all black canopy & no maps, rough fluted pillars rooted in blue water. From the house we heard Lucky howl & as I run out the door my girl Danni with her hair shaved on one side, says take the gun. There's only a .45, but she said there's an old gator there, he was fifty yards out on a log this morning, he lives in the widowed peels & greedy roots of swampland, but he moved inland this morning while you were making coffee. If not for the Circle K at the corner cross roads, we would be almost completely surrounded by wetlands. We cross to the lapping waves at the edge of the mangrove roots, I see Lucky sinking into the slime. The gator's eyebrows are two moldy bumps moving swiftly towards him. When you shoot, go for the eyes, Danni says. I take a step into the fetid water, but alligators can even kill there. Annie would never forgive me if her dog got eaten & I was too scared to do anything. The gator sweeps to the bulldog like an oversized Twinkie log of darkness & white foam, & I graze its nose with my next shot, but the bulldog churns the water with his claws & clamps hard on the gator's nose, teeth sunk deep. I didn't know alligators could make such noise, nature is just humans in skin & leaves, or was it the other way around. The gator screamed in words from the other side, slashes of sound low & high like reversed sonic booms from the base & dismembered lily pads, & by the time Danni & I get to them both hip deep, the gator tossed the bulldog aside & dropped out of sight into the swamp. We pick up little Lucky & stare at the bubbles where it all had gone down. We return to the house, shook up, & decide to have a sweet tea & a beer, while we give Lucky his favorite treat, canned jack mackerel. We sit & think about it. There's an art to the swamps, flowers like blue glass, hidden roots & fronds like hands, but better to leave it alone, it's like talking about your deepest fears with a psychopath, don't do it, nothing good will come from it at all.

## **SHREK'S ADVENTURE LONDON BY PHOEBE THOMSON**

Ok, but Shrek is kind of fit, especially as an ogre.  
And it's something to do with sulking,  
and his loneliness,  
his swamp,  
his crooked teeth, just get to me.

I'd like to yank the wax out of my ears in one clean scoop  
like Shrek does  
and then candle them,  
and be green, and robust, then soft,

and wash myself in bogmud,  
and warm myself in farts.

And the first and only Tinder date I ever went on said  
we'd have our second date at Shrek's Adventure London,  
and I saw myself with bought green horns,  
and didn't like it.  
I imagined standing with him,  
and both of us getting louder, and more Scottish, when we said  
'ogres have layers' and 'onions have layers'.  
I imagined the onion,  
and one of us getting it wrong  
and having to correct the other in the middle  
of Shrek's Adventure London, which I haven't even been to,  
and won't go to. It's too clean.

## **ROOTS NEED A SPA TO LUXURIATE BY IRENE WATSON**

They like to stretch long legs  
at sides of pools, reach into mud packs  
thicken and swell: eyes closing upward facing  
bright light. Rain to fall from vapour: heavy-  
soaking ground that seems surprised: a closed  
door. It lies in wait for surfaces to soften, allowing  
entrance to earth. Creatures gently sip: dampness  
inside dry nests. I think I would close my eyes on a day  
like this; dream of the unclouded with highly glazed  
Victorian vases covered in hand-painted peonies;  
it comes back at you, flies back at you. Green canopy  
weed grown thicker—I saw them. Still. Sleepy in swamp.  
Evaporation takes from ponds in throbbing hot-sun; damp  
adds to water in silence of water. Shell finish consoles.

## BEAUTY OF SPHAGNUM MOSS



BY MOJCA BOZJA



SPRUCE CONE LANDED PERFECTLY

## **LONG NIGHT, HENDERSON SWAMP**

Close your eyes  
and breathe  
the moonlight.  
Let the shadows  
of the trees  
pass over you  
like snakes on their way  
to tall grass.  
Listen to the water  
swell all around you.  
Feel the breeze  
reach out to touch  
your chest. Hold it  
tight against your skin.

This will get you  
where you need to go.

## **SUMMER STORM, LAKE BIGEAUX**

As soon as the sky breaks open  
and the rain crashes down on the boat,  
it's clear we've managed to find ourselves  
dead center on this lake, no need  
to factor time or distance, no chance  
to get out from under these clouds.  
The one huge cypress trunk  
left in this swamp would have  
no trouble sheltering us in the storm,  
but we'd already be soaked  
by the time we made it there  
across the lake, and I'd miss  
all this raindrop shine on your face.

**BY JACK B.  
BEDELL**

### **Alligators in New Hampshire by William Doreski**

Alligators have colonized our marsh. Climate change has rendered New Hampshire so warm that these creatures have migrated by the dozens, toting their human-hide luggage. They cackle, whisper, and snarl as they sample the mud and slither about in search of food. I walk down to the edge of the marsh to watch them. One friendly fellow sidles up with a big smile. His teeth look like scrimshaw. His breath reeks of some raw creature. His tough hide flatters him. His rubbery muscular torso looks powerful as a turbine. I speak to him in simple sentences most local reptiles and amphibians understand. He nods with a hint of wisdom and opens and shuts his jaws as if fumbling for words. I don't expect an actual response, of course, but the glimmer in his eyes is unmistakable. We gaze at each other in a friendly way for a while. The warm smell of the marsh thickens with gnats and flies. Then he turns, dragging his limber tail, and slumps back into the shallows. I look over the sullen expanse and note the eyes watching me in the summer dusk. The oily water looks like broth. Hundreds of frogs had been croaking here since the thaw, but now I don't hear a one.

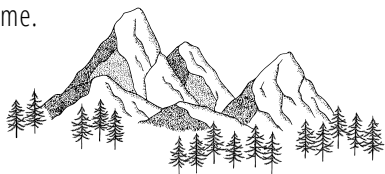


# A WOODLAND ADVENTURE

By Sarah Robin



I run around the mighty towering trees like an ant manoeuvring its way between long, thick blades of grass. I splash into cool streams and leap over roots protruding from the earth like wooden snakes lay sporadically on the ground as I race further into the woodland. Rays of sunshine beam through the trees like spotlights shining down on the beauty of nature that surrounds me. Birds joyously sing for miles around, their music echoing throughout the land; bright orange butterflies dizzily dance around me; bees buzz past me hard at work; squirrels hunt for food, their tails wiggling in the air as they scavenge. I am happiest being in the woodland with the wildlife, it's where I feel most safe and at home.



My pink dress flows around my muddy knees as I play with anything I can find. I scrape my hair back and pull on a navy-blue baseball cap I found on a tree stump a mile back. Smudges of dirt on my face act as my war paint and I'm ready for action. A fallen branch is a powerful sword; the muddy soil is black tropical sand hiding buried treasure; large crispy leaves on the ground are sacred scrolls of ancient maps leading to hidden places left undisturbed for centuries; birds swooping through the air are baby dinosaurs searching for squirming insects to gobble up; mushrooms provide shelter for grumpy leprechauns.

An almighty thud behind me freezes me in fright, interrupting my fun. I swing my head around to see a huge spider - maybe ten feet tall - angrily glaring at me with its hundreds of black, shiny eyes. I let out a piercing scream and dart to the nearest tree. I climb as high as I can, scraping my knees as I wrap myself around the rough bark. I pant heavily, peering down on the threatening beast below me. I shout for help to anyone who may hear me but after a while I start to feel like I am truly alone and I will eventually tire and become this monster's next meal.

Just as I'm about to give up hope, a blinding bright light fills the space around me. "Mrs. Jackson! Get off that plant at once!" A gruff voice approaches me. "She's in here! Switch off the buzzer, she's in the conservatory."

My eyes adjust to the light and I see a swarm of women in light blue uniforms surround me. "Look at your new nightgown, it's covered in dirt! And what were you doing with Malcolm's hat?" A large, frizzy-haired woman barks at me, tutting and shaking her head.

"Your grandchildren are coming to see you tomorrow; you must get some sleep. Let's get you cleaned up and back into bed." The nurse reaches out her arm for me to hold onto. As we slowly exit the room, I look behind me to see a house spider run out from a broken ceramic plant pot on the tiled floor.

*LOOKING UP AT LEAVES AGAINST THE SKY*  
*BY JASMINE KAUR*





# MYCORRHIZA BY KIRI DELANDÉ

There are no misunderstandings amongst flowers.

We signal electric; a beloved mycorrhizal network  
sings love songs with loamy soil, molding memories

with melodic microbes. Listen to our roots rumble.  
We're passing notes through sweet petrichor: it's a  
whisper, it's a warning, it's a requited *I care for you*.

When I leave the forest, I'm foaming flowers at the  
mouth. Can you comprehend the chlorophyll filling

up my lungs, washing my words in evergreen ink?  
When I speak the earth seeps through my tongue  
and my teeth; I twist thorns in my throat for you.

It was so simple in the copse. Now I'm coughing  
up conifer, attempting wordplay with dark wood

wedged inside my mouth. You think me a weed  
in your garden; don't you see my roots reaching?

All wildflowers perish after they've been plucked.

There is understanding in the undergrowth; our  
organic compounds can't obfuscate. In my dreams

Gaia's bramble and branches are my bed; she says  
*Welcome home* and means it. With my body buried

and my mouth filled with dirt, I can finally speak.

# FLORIDIAN SHOWERS BY AMANDA LOPEZ

Emerald sewer, my enchantment,  
make me sweat a milky dew  
you blow with wide mouth open,  
palms pricking and slip  
past my burning skin.

The sun set in rear view; yesterday's barefoot walk turned muddied  
embrace. The pipes overflow with gratitude, these waters murky  
with the promise of a long, sweet soak.

Lightning burst, simple longing  
for rain in the middle of an afternoon  
we spent in bed, wiping clean the last  
beads of drain water  
from sticky pores.

Faux wooden blinds off-set the white plaster of these walls,  
glow like embers with each electric strike; still we wait  
for the crackle, the vibrations of the thunder to reach our fingertips.



## What I love about this land:

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By Cheyenne Dunnett

the way the twigs stick  
and poke out at the sky, dark  
against grey-blueness;

the moss cushions clinging  
at the trees' elbows and knees;

the brambles that tumble  
madly across mud,  
soon to be singing  
with life, bearing fruits  
sweet and red, an explosion  
for the senses;

the wrens flitting from branch

to

branch, so loud but so

small, a brown smudge;  
and the wind's whisper,  
a breeze crisp as daybreak, or  
brand-new bedsheets.



# ON THE WAY TO WORK

BY BETH MULCAHY

the fog is so thick  
driving through the valley  
that i can't tell where the sky ends  
and the ground begins  
the trees are proudly bearing new buds  
the grass is long and so wet  
that multiple large drops of dew  
are hanging off of each blade  
but the blades spring up tall in spite of it  
balancing under the wet weight  
the sky is a shade of such cool bright blue  
that the birds are singing about it  
from everywhere around like a chorus of voices taking turns  
each doing a different part  
in a different way  
at a different time  
but somehow it feels like harmony  
the air is heavy with the smell of earth and worms  
the new flowers are smiling at me  
looking fond of being the first ones  
to have broken through  
standing ready for whatever  
this day will bring

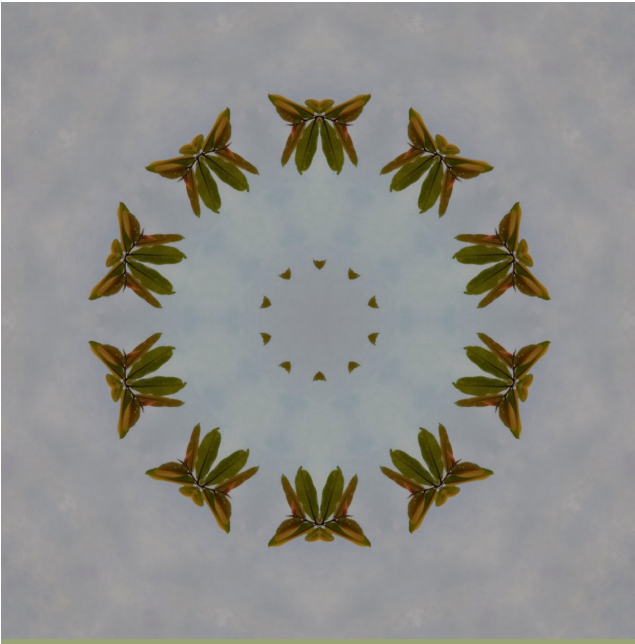
**LISTENING TO ECHOBELLY'S "GREAT THINGS," I REMEMBER CHILDHOOD IN FLORIDA AND DECIDE, UNFORTUNATELY, IT MUST BE SOMETHING WE DO TO OURSELVES, AT LEAST AS MUCH AS WE DO IT TO EACH OTHER**

love's a frog—you snatch it  
 from the creek  
 just to release it  
 in the ditch  
 in your backyard,  
 a mostly tender temporary  
 selfishness—you cannot keep it  
 how you'd like to  
 so you chase it down  
 on the weekends  
 when you're free, terrorizing  
 the water's stillness, begging less  
 forgiveness than you should  
 for this shred of joy—you call  
 any new frog you find  
 by the same name, never  
 knowing for sure  
 if it knows the difference—it does not answer  
 except with a bit of piss in the palm  
 so you hold it, careful  
 clean fingers gently dragging  
 guilty down its back, from crick to ditch  
 it's almost like company—it's almost like  
 you can believe you live with it  
 and for a moment you do  
 from crick to ditch you do  
 until it's time to set the frog down  
 again boundless but here for now  
 an outdoor cat you never have to feed  
 a million maybe frogs  
 hiding in the tall grass, ghosting  
 at the ditch edge—you'll never know if  
 they've run away

**BY TIMMY  
 SUTTON**

we're sweating through our shirts  
 in our marshy woods behind the junior high  
 gumming on pocket warmed red vines and trying  
 not to say all the things we are thinking  
 but, boy, are we thinking  
 or at least I am, you can tell if you look  
 at the sweet sweat gathering in the wrinkles  
 of my brow threatening to sting my eyes,  
 to give me away,  
 but you are not looking, I can tell,  
 because I am looking at you not looking  
 at me and instead at your phone  
 which is almost a relief  
 it is getting harder to avoid myself  
 I am running out of places to hide  
 in all this quiet we are so good at making  
 and sitting in like a married couple  
 doing dishes or watching tv, making house  
 I am no good  
 at playing coy  
 but earnestly is impossible  
 what, with all this sun?  
 blooming through the humidity?  
 just to graze golden across  
 the hairs on your arm, fluorescent?  
 I can't help myself  
 so I imagine little worlds  
 where little things are shifted  
 where we know each other sooner  
 even in that junior high  
 where our knees are touching  
 on this log but you are feeling it  
 how I am feeling it  
 where we are not where we are  
 but where we hope to be  
 where we build forts of honeysuckle  
 where we live in the forts and drink the sweet of home  
 where you are looking at me  
 asking what I want  
*I want you to love me*  
 and you look at me like  
*well what did you think dummy*  
 and I doubt that it's true but it's true  
 enough to get me through the day  
 I know it would not be a lie  
 the trouble is that nothing  
 is ever so symmetrical as I'd hope  
 I'm saying there's no such thing as perfect  
 reciprocation I'm saying I should've said  
*I want you to love like me and then*  
*I want you to love me and then*  
*I want you*

**BY JASMINE KAUR**



**A KALEIDOSCOPE OF  
LEAVES IN THE SKY 2**

**A KALEIDOSCOPE OF  
LEAVES IN THE SKY 1**



**BY JASMINE KAUR**

# **MEN OF SCIENCE BY AVERY NGUYEN**

Long, long ago, the Massachusetts Bay Colony pulled two pearls from the marsh. Enshrined in red brick and in limestone, twin titans of the moors. With time the Cambridge jewels acquired their particular luster: Nobel Prizes, Pulitzers, Fields Medals. Whispers in the President's cabinet. Words on the Senate floor. But in spite of their glamor, they were born of the swamp. They will always be born of the swamp.

Picture a pretty, young scientist. She sweeps up her hair into a bun, and wears her chunky safety goggles, and protects the softness of her palms with periwinkle blue gloves. Her hands still shake as she tips too many nitrates out of her beaker and into the sink, because there is no such thing as personal protection from knowing the enormity of what you have done.

In lab we tell ourselves the gorgeous lie that we are men of progress. In truth we avert our eyes as our wastewater chokes river fish and feeds algal blooms. We let oil companies slip money into our pockets and pretend that we are not liable for smears of smog in the clear blue sky. We drive wild things out of their homes and reduce the salt marsh to a single narrow strip of land in East Boston, and we call it Belle Isle, as if speaking its beauty erases the tragedy of its rarity. As if we are not culpable. As if all of this has nothing to do with things we have done.

When you say salt you mean the brackish water at the mouth of the Charles and rivers of sweat down the spine, but when I say salt I mean ammonium nitrate and potassium sulfate swirling down the drain.

So tell me: what is prestige worth?



*HARPER'S STEM*  
BY REBECCA MUNOZ



# CATFISH

BY MELISSA FLORES ANDERSON

*Just wanted to compliment you on your great tweets and retweets,* Ryan d Coleman wrote in a DM to my personal Twitter account.

I was only on the app again after a decade hiatus because of my new comm job at a nonprofit. I worked with a college student named Marie on social media. She sought out trends and created graphics. I wrote copy and made sure the posts were on brand.

I'd never received a DM before so I wasn't even sure what the little envelope was when it first popped up on my phone notifications. I clicked it and found the message. I looked at Ryan d Coleman's bio: San Jose Sharks superfan, dog lover and North Carolina native. He smiled confidently in his pic, sweeping vistas behind him that could have been from Castle Rock Park, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He looked 23. In my picture, my dark hair framed my full face and my glasses obscured the lines around my eyes. But I looked my 37 years.

I knew the deal with Ryan d Coleman.

When I was 7 and my sister was 4 my dad took us fishing at Sprig Lake. It was more of a pond, in truth. My dad carried a tackle box full of lures. I held my sister's hand as we walked under the pine and oak trees. We set up on a concrete bridge over the water. I had a white Snoopy pole with a wonky reel and my sister had a pink one. My dad let us pick bait. I wanted the orange puffballs. My sister picked a rubber thing that looked like a gummy worm. We dropped our lines into the water below.

We sat there for an hour when I felt a tug.

"I got something."

My father helped me reel in my line. He pulled the fish up and held it in his hand as it jerked. He released it from the hook and tossed it back.

"Be wary of catfish," he said. "Those bottom dwellers taste like dirt."

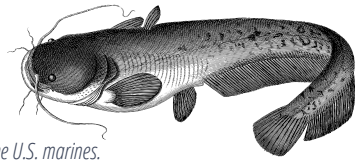
"I want to take it home," my sister said.

"No," my father said. "We don't take the first thing that comes along if it's no good. We wait for the best fish. Be patient and we'll get a bass or a Bluegill."

I wrote back to Ryan d Coleman. His responses were full of bad grammar and syntax. He sent me pictures. Working out. Hiking with his dog. In his apartment. I did Google image searches of each one, like those guys on MTV. None hit.

I responded to his inquiries without revealing any personal information.

*What do you do for work?* I asked.



*I go to the U.S. marines.*

*What do you do, though?*

He sent a message about being a Marine trainer in markedly better English. I cut and pasted the words into Google. I was a newspaper editor once and it was a trick I used when I suspected one of my reporters of plagiarism. I found Ryan d Coleman's words verbatim in a photo caption from a military website. He wasn't in the photo.

*Where are you stationed?* I asked.

*San José.*

*Weird. I didn't know we had a base here.*

When he sent a pic in his uniform, I finally got a hit on Google image search. A Facebook profile for Mike Bukowski from NY. Age 34, 345 friends, a fiancée, 10 years of posts. The man in the profile picture looked older with thinning hair and maybe 20 more pounds on his frame. But his public albums revealed every one of the photos Ryan d Coleman had sent me.

*Do you know Mike Bukowski?* I wrote.

*No. Who is?*

I sent a link to the Facebook profile.

*He looks a lot like you.*

*His stole my pictures. I got hacked.*

*I think you stole his photos.*

He didn't respond, but I got an automated message that I had been blocked. Ryan d Coleman let me off the hook. But I knew he had more than one line in the water. He was also following Marie.

I thought she was smart enough not to fall for a scam, but her boyfriend had just broken up with her. I found her crying in a bathroom stall at lunch some days. I waited until I had definitive proof to send her a text message.

*Got a DM from a guy, Ryan d Coleman. I think he's a catfish, just FYI,* I wrote.

*K. Thanks.*

When she was back in the office the next day, we didn't mention it. Maybe he had never sent her a message. Or she was embarrassed to be a target, to be thought of as desperate and lonely. Maybe, like me, for a split second before the suspicion set in, she felt a little excitement at a tug on the line.



# RAY AND THE FROG

## MATTHEW MCGUIRK

"Ain't that the biggest bullfrog you've ever seen?" Jack shouted watching the football sized frog hop from one lily pad to the next, each starting to take on water like a sinking ship.

"Seen bigger, but he's a good one." I waded a little deeper, keeping the water just below the boot line so I wasn't drowning my socks or anything. I felt the bottom of the bog pulling at the boots making going any deeper difficult. The mud smelled a little like shit, which is something I'm not supposed to say, but thinking it's probably fine. I always got whapped upside the head for saying things like that in front of my mom. I held the net out behind my back like one of those hobo sacks on a stick, think I heard it was called a bindle or something.

"Well, get him!" Jack shouted, his words running off the swamp growth in that late afternoon light. I swung the net and watched the big frog try and hop out, twist and flail, I'd got him and there was no way he was getting out now. "Nice! Get him over to land." Jack had already made it back to shore and I pulled the sticking boots through the mud and was soon there too.

I lowered the net with the twist still in the mesh and his feet landed on the ground again and he sprang up, but was sent tumbling back again by his new cage. "Alright Jack, you're going to grab him and take him out and I'm going to go pull a stick off that tree over there." I'd heard about dissecting frogs in high school, but couldn't wait that long. I wanted to try it and see what the guts looked like and everything else he had in there. I wondered if he had some flies still buzzing around or if they died once they went down his throat.

"Ray, this is just like when you burnt all those ants with that magnifying glass or when you poked that dead cat all afternoon." Jack shook his head, but was already taking the net from me and fishing the frog out. He always put up a fight, but in the end he helped me out, like a good friend.

The low hanging sticks were brittle and I snapped one off and brought it back in his direction. He had the frog cupped between his hands and its eyes were all black and looking at me and its mouth was snapped shut, maybe like one of those mob movies and he wasn't talking. "Is he slimy?"

"Course, he's slimy, he's a frog. Now whadda you want me to do with him?" His eyes darted down toward the frog and back to me. Ribbit. Ribbit.

"Just sort of hold his arms out so I can poke at his belly some." He shook his head a little, but uncupped his hands and spread the frog out so I could see his underside better. It struggled and tried twisting and one of its arms went in a weird direction. I pulled the stick back and began prodding at it causing wincing with each poke. I knew dad would want the legs after we were done with the dissection because he always talked about frying some frog legs if he ever got the chance, but we really needed to check it out before any of that.

"Ray Michael Parson, what do you think you're doing?" I heard mom's voice from behind me and I knew she was standing there with her hands on her hips and the apron still tied around her waist. "Are you kids picking on that defenseless frog?"

We paused and I knew what was coming next, what always came next. "We were just playing mom."

"No back talk from you. You know what it says in the bible, 'for every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine.' All the animals belong to God and you know you shouldn't be torturing poor little frogs." I didn't want to turn around because I knew her eyes were narrowed right at me, but I nodded to Jack who was already letting the frog go. It hopped back to its sinking pads and shit smelling water. "That's better, now you better not let me catch you doing that again." I knew her steps would tread off at this point and we'd need to get the net again to find another frog.

I looked over my shoulder and she'd already disappeared back to the house. "Alright, now that she's gone, we need to get that big one back. Where'd he go?"

Jack paused and kicked the dirt with his feet. "Uh Ray, I don't really want your mom talking to mine about what we're doing out here. I think I'm gonna go home."

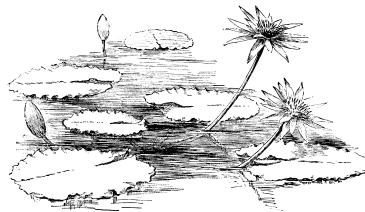
I just shook my head as he walked off, "chickenshit!" It was worth saying it that time, even if my mom heard me. I scooped up the net and made my way back into the marsh. I saw bubbles and movement between the pads and waded a little deeper. I'm going to get him, he's not getting away.



"The night had darkened a bit more, but still plenty of light to see the difference between lily pad and frog head. I threw the net at him, knowing I'd got him again. I watched him squirm as I pulled it up and felt a heavy shower of water wash over me. Rising up out of the marsh was a giant form, a frog bigger than anything I'd seen before. Bigger than a car, a building, he probably could have even hopped over the steeple at the church.

I looked at him and felt that coldness in the air now, a shadow or darkness cast over me and in one snap, his tongue rolled out and snatched me out of the swamp. My mind was rushing and my skin oozed with the moisture from his mouth. I was wrapped in his tongue like a pig in a blanket and he pulled me in just as quick as the tongue had spit out.

I only had one thought in my mind and that was the story of Jonah and the whale, I'd heard that one dozens of times from my mom. I wondered if they were still writing books of the bible or if they would be writing them after hearing about me being snapped up by a giant frog. I prayed that I'd be alright in the end, like Jonah was and they'd all talk about the book of Ray or the story of Ray and the frog in church on Sundays.



## THE FENNI\*

Bog and wrack, lake and reeds,  
weaving a duck's nest of stories,  
the world born from the shards of its egg,  
hatched from nothingness.

Mossy stones trundle as giants  
when our backs are turned,  
the old man carrying on with his wife  
causes the thunder to crash.

Our silence carried in baskets  
and in pockets protects us,  
to remain unobtrusive to our neighbours  
wrangling to the East and the West.

We make the most of what they leave us,  
what they find too difficult to tame,  
the murky waters, our unmoved nature.

Mire and waves, silt and sand,  
our stone hearths slip beneath the tides.  
We dry our feet and continue on.

*\*name of group of ancient people mentioned by Roman historians, possibly earliest references to the Finnish people*

## "THIS IS THE FOREST PRIMEVAL"

*HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW*

Roots like scraggly claws  
grasping beneath the blanket of moss.  
My voice, my thoughts lost  
under the shout of the river,  
the torrent's crash.

Rain falls straight as the high pine trees.  
soaks into crinkled rock,  
drips out onto the cut-out steps,  
slippery with muck and leaves.  
I swim in a watery world.

The edged paths, the California pines  
remind me this is a folly,  
Puck's Glen coddled and shaped.  
But the burn's music is real,  
the woods, wet and wild,  
escaping man's boundaries.

Angel hair waterfalls rushes  
to meet the peat-brown water,  
tumbling from stone cup to ferny pool.

The rain glints in its pockets like emeralds.

## BY GERRY STEWART





TORTUGA TREPADORA BY REBECCA MUNOZ



# BEAUTY OF THE BOG

By Rebecca Munoz

There once was a woman in the water,  
amidst the cypress trees of old swampland.  
She was not known as human or daughter,  
yet she brought many into the marshland.

Her voice fed the rose mallows and cattails,  
her songs nourishing the softened green earth.  
She is the silhouette of many tales,  
a far cry from stories of joy and mirth.

The plants thanked her for her contribution,  
and the toads croaked loudly in gratitude.  
Trees grew tall from her clever solution,  
while the algae consumed the crimson food.

Her call drew men in like moths to a flame,  
their bodies decaying under wet logs.  
For this creature there was only one name,  
a siren who mothered the swamps and bogs.

The wetlands are calm and teeming with life,  
free from the destruction of human strife.





**BOTANY BY CRISTINE GOSTINSKI**

## MY WIFE IS AN ALLIGATOR BY ANNA LINDWASSER

My wife Caitlin is an alligator. I didn't know this when we first met. Her dating profile didn't say so. It said she was a nurse. That was true too - just as my humanity doesn't contradict my job selling cursed books, her alligatoriness didn't stop her from working double shifts at the hospital.

But Caitlin didn't look like an alligator either. She had dark, curly brown hair that she usually wore in French braids and beautiful brown eyes that always slid towards the left, even when she was looking directly at you. I don't want to talk too much about her breasts, because I don't like it when people talk about mine, but she has them, and they're great. More importantly, alligators don't.

They don't talk, either. I should have started with that. My wife talks all the time. One thing she talks about a lot is Pokemon. She loves how many reptiles there are, and her favorite is Totodile. I like Totodile too, so at the time, I didn't think anything of it. I just sewed her a dress made with sky blue Totodile-printed fabric and gave it to her for her 26th birthday.

She was wearing that dress when she came to the cursed bookshop to tell me she was actually an alligator. I don't know if she was wearing it to feel closer to her true self, or to prove she still felt close to me. She certainly stood out in the cursed bookshop - most people were wearing either black clothes with hoods that obscured their faces, or nondescript jeans and plain tee shirts.

It was an hour or so before I could take my lunch break, so she spent the time browsing the books. She took a photo of a book full of sex spells and said she was going to use the one that caused remote orgasms on me. I was so delighted by this notion that I forgot to tell her that photographing the books was strictly prohibited.

When lunchtime hit, we headed to a sun-soaked Mexican spot that was around the corner. I got carnitas tacos and she got a shrimp burrito. At first, we talked about our plans to go to Aqua Zumba the following week, but that didn't last long. Caitlin picked up one of my hands and sandwiched it between her own.

"Regina, I have something important to tell you," she said.

"You can tell me anything," I said, wiping up a glop of carnitas I'd dropped onto my 'Bronte Sisters Fight Club' t-shirt.

"I'm not human," she said, taking a sip from her guava soda.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Are you like a vampire or a werewolf or something?"

"Werewolf is a close guess, but no. I'm an alligator, currently occupying a human form."

I took another bite of my taco and frowned. "So, is it a curse or something? How did you become human?"

"I love that you instantly believed me."

"There are books at my shop that can turn animals into humans and vice versa. So it's not like it's impossible."

I'm not under a curse. I just felt like trying out life as a human. I started off in Norfolk, Virginia which was near the swamp I'm originally from, but after I completed a nursing program I couldn't find a job anywhere nearby, so I moved to D.C."

“Oh. Do you enjoy being human?”

“Not at first. I shouldn’t have jumped into nursing right away - it’s exhausting. There’s so much human misery, and so little you can do to help with any of it. But I didn’t get to eat Mexican food with my girlfriend while I was an alligator. I mostly ate birds and snakes and small mammals - whatever I could catch on my own.” She sighed. “I am starting to miss the swamp, though.”

“Do you want to go back?” I asked. I tried to keep my voice even. We’re married now, but back then we’d only been dating for a couple of months, so I didn’t think it was my place to try and influence her.

After a moment spent twirling her hair around her finger and sipping her soda, she said she probably would, at some point.

“The problem is that if I go back, I’ll turn into an alligator again. I’m not sure, but I don’t think I’ll get another shot at being human.” She sighed. “I want to do both.”

“What if you just went back to whatever town is near the swamp and visited sometimes? Could you stay human then?”

“No, the swamp really wants me to be an alligator again, so if I ever go into it, it’s alligator time. It’s called the Great Dismal Swamp and it used to be filled with alligators, but they’re mostly gone now. It misses them. I feel bad about abandoning it, but I was lonely there.”

I thought about the loneliness that radiated off of my mother after I left for college. I was the last of my four siblings to do it, and I thought she’d have been used to us leaving her by that point. She wasn’t. She gave me a necklace to remember her by - a copper skull with baby doll eyes in its sockets - and said I should wear it so that she could use it to transmit her love from a distance.

At the time, I thought she was being extra for not just texting me instead. I’d been annoyed about it too, because I thought she’d send me guilt, not love. I kept the necklace in a drawer at home, and never wore it.

I’d been lonely too, since leaving home, but no more so than I was when I lived there. With Caitlin in my life, I wasn’t lonely at all. Whether helping her meant giving her a life where she could stay with me or one where we were torn apart, I still had to do it. I owed her that much.

“I know you said it’s not a curse, but there might be something at my shop that could help you.”

Caitlin blinked at me with sun-spun eyes, then smiled. “That’d be wonderful,” she said.

As usual, I couldn’t close the shop on time - I had to spend about 45 minutes explaining to a customer that I would not be helping him find a spell that would make his ex-wife’s new boyfriend cheat on her, and that he should work out his issues in therapy instead of through magic. So it was a while before I could start working on Caitlin’s problem. Luckily, she’d gotten a jump on me. She was lounging on the couch by the window, flipping through a green book with an ornate cover.

“I think I found something,” she said, pointing to a spell at the top of the page. “It’s a reversible transformation spell that will let me turn into an animal of my choice and then back again whenever I want.”

I squinted at the spell, then pointed to the subscript, which was in an ancient magic language that I knew she couldn't read. "You have to eat the animal you want to transform into. The whole thing, but especially the brain."

"So, I'd have to eat a human when I'm an alligator? Or an alligator when I'm human?"

"Are you willing to do either one?"

She hung her head. "Of course not."

"Then it doesn't matter. Let's look for something else."

Looking back, it's annoying how confident I was. I didn't get this job on the strength of my expertise. I had a BA in Ancient Magic and Curses, but you didn't really master the subject without a Ph.D.

The owner was my cousin's ex-girlfriend, Molly. My cousin had held Molly's cat hostage in his apartment after she dumped him for cheating on her, so I stole the cat and gave it back to her. That made me a badass, but not somebody who was qualified to figure out Caitlin's alligator situation.

You probably guessed by that last anecdote that something went wrong with the spell book. If you did, you're more perceptive than I was at the time. I was too busy stroking Caitlin's hair and getting kissed on the cheek while we paged through the books. How was I supposed to concentrate with somebody so beautiful leaning against my shoulder?

We did find a spell, and I really thought it would work at the time. I did the incantation right, and flicked my wand with the appropriate deftness. But I misread the explanation. I thought that "versatile transformation" meant "changing back and forth at will" not "choosing from a wide variety of animals."

Here's what happened. She transformed, but not into a being that could flip between alligator and human. Instead, she became an alligator-human hybrid. She shot up from 5'4" to 7'6" within seconds. Her skin gave way to moss-colored scales. Her teeth sharpened and sliced up her tongue, and her body burst the seams of her Totodile dress. A tail shot from her backside, whipping from side to side. She was still gorgeously wall-eyed, but those eyes were yellow now, not brown. She kept her human stature, and when she tried to transform back she said that she couldn't in a gravelly voice.

"Oh my god I'm so sorry," I said, my hands covering my mouth. "I'll find something to fix it." I tore through about twenty books, growing increasingly frantic as I struggled to find a spell that would reverse this. But none of the standard 'reversal' spells I tried worked. One of them gave her vestigial wings, and another one made her forget that she'd ever seen Gilmore Girls.

"I'll call Molly," I said, digging my cell phone from my pocket. I didn't want to call my boss and admit how badly I'd screwed up, but I'd do it without a second thought for the woman I loved. But the woman I loved stayed my hand with her newly-sprouted claw.

"You know, this isn't what I thought I wanted, but an alligator body and a human mind might be a good compromise. It won't even be a problem - my coworker Lila accidentally turned herself into a giraffe last year, and everybody was cool about it. Well, Jonathan was kind of a jerk, but Jonathan always is."

"That's true. Look, are you sure? If I keep looking I'm sure I can find a way to fix it."

"I'm sure! Just sit down Reg, you look exhausted."

I was exhausted, so I just sort of gave in and flopped against Caitlin on the couch. She wasn't as soft as she used to be, but she was welcoming. She kissed the top of my head with her snout, and I realized that I could easily have an alligator girlfriend.

"I'm going to have to sew you a new wardrobe," I said, swiping at the tears gathering in my eyes.

"That'd be great," she said. "You know what else would be great? If you'd marry me."

I nearly started arguing with her. Why the heck would my screwup have inspired her to dedicate her life to me? I'd screw up again, and I'd screw up worse than before. She'd have to deal with it, if we were married. Was she really prepared for that?

But I didn't get the chance to say any of those things, because she was still talking.

"Don't feel like you have to just because your spell didn't work. I get it - being with an alligator-human hybrid isn't for everyone!" She flashed me a warm, fanged grin. "I'll live a perfectly wonderful life without you if I have to. But I'd much rather live one with you. Getting closer to my true self helped make that clear."

"Okay," I said, wrapping my arms around her shrunken scaly shoulders. "I'll marry you."

We didn't get married in the Great Dismal Swamp. We still weren't sure what would happen to her when she entered it, and she was too delighted with her new form to risk giving it up. After finding a photo of the Everglades at sunset that was so beautiful we started making out about it, we chose Florida.

Alligators don't normally stay with their parents beyond a year or so, but she was still in touch with her folks. I got my friend Vicky to load them into freshwater tanks on the back of her pickup truck so that they could be transported to the Everglades. That wasn't the hardest part of getting everybody to come. Molly couldn't leave the shop unattended, and some of Caitlin's coworkers had nursing shifts that couldn't be shifted.

My oldest sister lives in the Netherlands, my second oldest sister lives in an inter-dimensional sandstorm, and my brother and my mother just don't like a to leave D.C. My father, who is dead, had to be temporarily resurrected as a ghost in order to attend. My friend Crystal is allergic to Florida, and my other friend Wentao is allergic to Amtrak trains and airplanes.

Guest problems weren't the only problems either. Don't even get me started on finding a wedding venue in Florida that doesn't donate to the Republican party. We ended up getting married on a platform overlooking the swamp and having Wentao - who ended up hitching a ride in Vicky's pickup truck - officiate the wedding.

My father possessed her father so that they could walk both of us down the aisle. We said our vows in a cloud of orchids and buttonbush flowers. Caitlin wore a wedding dress I sewed for her, and I wore a swamp green tuxedo that Crystal helped me find at a thrift shop. When we kissed, my mother threw baby doll eyes at us, and her mother growled and purred.

Afterwards, we had a feast of fish, frogs, snails, and fried chicken and tacos, then we chased it with a wedding cake that was big enough for the alligators to devour after the humans took neat slices. That night we danced to a bluegrass band until it got too foggy to see each other.

Clutching my alligator wife in the sultry damp, I loved her so much it was leaking out of my ears. And I haven't stopped loving her since. Sure, we argue sometimes - we're still trying to decide whether to live in the swamp or the city, whether we should adopt human and alligator children or try to conceive hybrids via a magic spell, whether we ought to buy orange juice with pulp or without it. But when I roll over in bed and plunge my hand into her open tank to stroke her tail, I'm sure I'll love her forever.



**butterflies as wishbones or flowers - either way it'll  
steal hope and you'll feel more alone By Rachael Crosbie**



## THE GREAT ESCAPE

the predator hunts  
catches its prey  
devours it whole  
digests, excretes, and moves on  
the circle of life  
keeps spinning  
but that's not always  
the end  
of the story

one particular beetle  
when swallowed  
by a frog  
plays a strange gambit  
it crawls through digestive acids  
to the backdoor  
where things get weird

the scientists determined  
the beetle tickles the frog's sphincter  
until it opens  
expelled unharmed  
and covered in frog shit  
life goes on for the beetle  
and the frog doesn't seem to mind  
the tickling

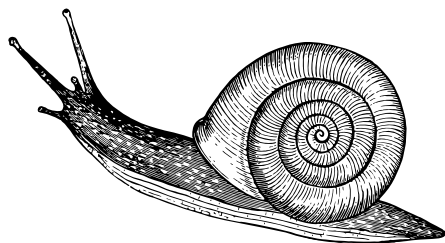
the weirdest part is not  
the beetle's extraordinary  
will to survive  
it's that there are scientists  
in pursuit of major breakthroughs  
who lie awake at night  
wondering  
what they might learn tomorrow  
picking through the frog shit

## SNAILS

in the early morning  
hours before first light leaks  
into the new day from the east  
the armada of snails blazes slimy trails  
across airport paving stones

the snails venture out  
of their manufactured habitat  
to feast on what's left behind  
sucking residue from travellers shoes  
out of the porous surface

I envy their ignorance  
the snails wave their antennae  
oblivious to danger lurking in the skies  
seagulls in the blood orange dawn  
a swift end to freedom



**By J. Archer Avary**



## NIGHTTIME

Through the echoes of the crickets and other starlit demons,  
the hum of the streetlight siphons the moths into the greedy glow  
of gas stations and parking lots.

Another truck rattles past, flashing lights flickering into the distant dark.  
Another mayfly caught in the waiting clutches of the amphibious tongue.

Such things happen in the night, where advantages are exploited  
wherever they are allowed, despite the quivering light,  
and sometimes as a consequence of it.

Sirens wail and the bodies of beetles crisp against the bright.  
Headlights slink into the cold wet, and the frog leaps from its mooring,  
tongue reaching into the black.

## SLUGS

The slugs here are larger than any elsewhere.  
They feast on the strays' dregs strewn from neighboring garbage.

I've seen them lying fat and satisfied in our cove,  
watching the rain from the comfort of a Popeye's container.

I've seen the grease of them sliding in from the flood of the garden beds,  
ready for the soggy tortillas of spilled leftovers.

They only come when it rains, and in the morning,  
only their slime trails remain, tracing their retreat back into the storm.

**By Mel Wilson**

## **OUR LIFE TOGETHER ISN'T WORKING** **BY BRIAR RIPLEY PAGE**

Mud, railway, live oak, vines—  
Gravel, beetle, lemon tree—  
Meth lab down the road from our house,  
that's the rumor. Smell the sea  
on the swamp air when the gulls shriek.  
In our rotting single-story, we kill time.

We pull time apart, like cats with a mouse.  
We swallow it in morsels; there's always more  
spilling down through the hole in our low roof  
that we can't afford to fix. A bore, a snore,  
another day dead. Get beer at the store—  
maybe I should find the meth dealers? Pounce

on anything to break this up! Look at the bloom  
on that vine; it has a lizard resting in it.  
Take a walk to see two gators lurking  
in their brackish greeny water. Take a minute  
to wonder if they eat people. Step in dogshit.  
Scrape it off on a mossy slab, some tomb

for an unknown creature. Sigh. Return to your room.

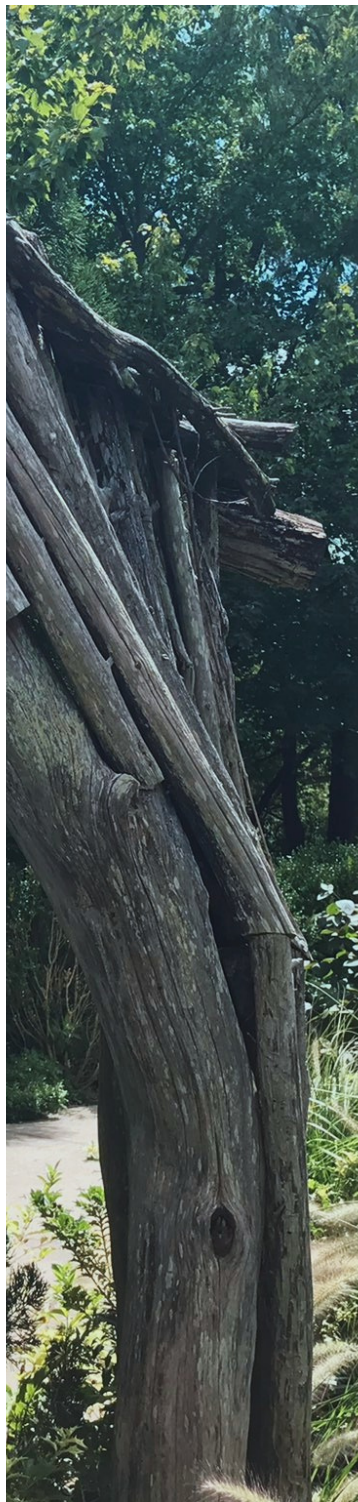
## **BOG BY ANDREA LAWS**

in venomous flowers lie a  
secret buried within a secret;  
a dark tale of no mystery, but of  
sad luck and muck

for if secrets were clean, they would  
possess a mossy swamp to  
cover them up and  
leave no one to sit or trot

towards the horizon  
willows layer for oil to burn  
pine of larch and black poplar webbed  
between boundaries with fences high

humor entombs itself  
past the pebble path  
landing finally on a wooden shelf  
where shadows are the aftermath



## DOMINION BY KATIE MANNING

It took us two years to see frogs  
in the swamp we saw daily.

Our eyes weren't trained  
to spot their eyes, dark lumps

just above the dark water.  
But one day, there they were.

They played their mottled music  
while we walked in circles, while

we tried out baby names and my  
body expanded. At a festival,

I saw people feast on frog legs.  
I felt sick. These creatures

were too precious to eat.  
"They're like swamp bunnies,"

I said, and you reminded me  
that people eat rabbits too.

## NATURAL SHIFT BY RHIANNA LEVI

Summon yourself in murky waters,  
And be enlisted into  
this stolen passion-  
a gritty enchantment.

Kiss the wisdom of the  
growling grass frog,  
Dance with the caresses  
of weaved and woven  
water hyacinth.

Be chosen to float,  
And to devote one's heart  
to the eyes of an ancient Mother Nature.

Each marsh is shifting.

## SWAMPWATER BY JOHN C. POLLES

a lantern with no hook bobs in front of me  
as I approach the dark edge  
the crickets keep perfect time  
with a whispered cattail accompaniment  
I feel the wet earth under my bare feet  
they are active here &  
the hollow is cold this time of night  
but the water is forgiving  
fog wisps waft from the surface  
weeds latch onto my ankles  
the pixies' lights surround me  
some kind of divine bioluminescence  
it grows warmer as I wade in further  
nearly six feet deep &  
my head barely above water  
I resist the urge to swim as the  
brackish taste fills my mouth  
I drink & move forward  
my feet sink into the clay &  
my lungs are full  
but I strain to watch  
their opalescent shimmer

## IN MY GARDEN BY ADAM CHABOT

Geraniums mourn conflicted  
spirits. I pinch the spent flower  
between two clean fingers,  
give the slightest pull, like turning

pages of sodden books. Rigid brown  
stems, parched bulbs crumbling  
like sand, I collect wistful  
Darwinism, a progenic covenant.

They call it "deadheading."  
With gloveless hands, I conduct this raw,  
skin-to-stem, botanic act:  
release the nascent undergrowth.





# MURKY WATER

## BY ROBIN WILLIAMS

Have you ever drowned under murky water?  
Where your hands held onto plants  
that slipped like slime through your fingers  
as you tried to break the algae covered surface  
for air?

No?  
Me neither.

But it feels like I did,  
that day I left school for the hospital  
and couldn't see anything past the pouring of my tears.

A million eyes looked at me in that room  
like a million eyes do when you're under unknown waters,  
watching and waiting,  
observing your next move.

I hope those swamp creatures are proud of me  
for digging myself out of the mud.  
It was much easier to die there,  
to lie there,  
than it was to tell the truth in the courtroom.



## **DRIFTWOOD HEART BY HALEY WILDER**

A layer of moss  
Has covered the ventricles of my heart  
In small anchors of olive roots  
That reach through my tissue  
Like a velvet shrug  
Or soft, kinetic sands

It's dark and damp in there  
Holes in the rivets of ribs  
And notched up spinal discs  
That make the rain puddle  
And seep into my atrium

It is not a bouquet of lilies  
Or peonies  
Or roses  
It is not something you gift as a headliner  
It is not a screaming declaration

It is warm,  
It grows into the spots that were uprooted  
It nurtures in the dark  
And fills my body  
Like a weighted blanket made of  
A quiet survival  
The kind of thing that can grow  
Without the sun

## **QUIET BY IRENE WATSON**

Cub of silted mire, I roam wet  
grasslands, collect stones in my ample  
bucket, learn names of dirt grains;  
fish with my hooked line dragging across  
salmon-pools: wince barefoot  
on sharp rock. Hair tangled, my skin  
burns with wind salts, I sing  
to the strange faces, swim with the ones  
who dare; move with bulrushes  
collect the cattail fluff. When  
they come to tame me, I am a spider  
curling into itself, cupping rainwater drops.  
They play differing tunes all at the same time:  
tell me I am a sycamore tree, struggling in shade.



A photograph of a wine glass filled with red wine, resting on a wooden barrel in a vineyard. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with grapevines and leaves. The title 'in a swamp with cass' is overlaid on a white rectangular box with a black border.

## in a swamp with cass

**BY KENNETH POBO**

I should be leery among crocodiles and pythons, and I normally would be, but today Cass Elliot has returned

from eternity to walk with me. She sings "I'm Coming To The Best Part Of My Life" and I wonder if

I've already had those years, but I haven't had a swamp walk or swamp chat with Cass. I tell her

how her contralto voice got me through junior high. My acute headache English teacher covered

me in sentences she said had to be diagrammed. I did it badly, but I hummed "Words of Love"—

the blackboard became chalky roses. I almost put bug spray on, but Cass says don't bother. She has

magical powers. Always did. The swamp, a glass of Moët we share before she leaves.





# pine

BY OLIVER CABLE

Every day felt like seven. Whole months passed in the blink of an eye. In a daze, we wondered what week it was, kept time by milk going sour in the fridge. Come cooler evenings, we'd walk places we knew by heart, trying and failing to see them with new eyes. Glued to screens at 7PM for the Prime Minister's press conference, our hearts lifted at the mention of freedoms. By late afternoon the next day, we were flying like four-wheeled birds to Devon, where Tim's family owned a farmhouse.

"Come down for the weekend," he'd said on the phone. "Break up the monotony a bit."

The whole way there, I felt wings growing from my shoulder blades, begging for open skies and the breeze across fields. Tim didn't have an address, he said, so told us to head to Exeter, turn off at Junction 14 and follow the signs to Blackbury Camp. Phone reception was awful, he'd warned, so we'd printed out a map of the local area. Hello 2001.

I smelled the burning as we pulled away from a crossing deep in woodland, heard the engine rewing too much for our acceleration as we wove up country lanes. The car slowly lost power, and she rolled it into the thick grass verge. Opening the bonnet, a plume of smoke rose into the early evening air. I said a silent thanks to the forest Gods that we hadn't caught fire. The sky held that light you always think will go on forever. Our hazard lights ticked a metronome, a birdcage closing around our newly-winged bodies. Beyond the grass verge, a cliff rose sharply, its top dotted with trees. In the belly of the forest, it felt like we'd driven to a party we hadn't been invited to, and now everyone was looking at us and our obsolete combustion engine. We had fallen off the map, and our phones had a sum-total of zero bars of coverage.

"Let's head to the nearest town and get help," I said. "It can't be far."

We hiked a mile along the main road, then turned onto a dusty footpath for another two. We crossed a rushing stream by a concrete slab slick with moss and ivy that had swallowed up the handrail. Trees bowed their heads over the path. We came to a T-junction with two algae-ridden arrows pointing in opposite directions. There were no words. In a gap in the canopy, two flocks of rooks crossed paths, cawing.

"Fifty-fifty."

"Let's go left."

I trusted her instincts. The path now sloped upwards, hiding itself behind pines at regular intervals. The smell of resin reminded me of childhood walks in the woods with Dad. To our left, a valley of trees in a sea of bracken opened up, their spindly trunks bald. Little light made its way to the valley floor. What sun did slip through formed shadows of age-old forest-dwellers. Far off, a single rook called out for its flock.

"Hang on, I'm only in flip-flops."

She had fallen a little way behind and I turned to wait for her.

"At least it's –" She broke off, pointing up the path behind me. I spun round and saw a shape disappearing into rustling bracken.

"Probably just a rabbit," I said.

"Bigger than that," she said. "Definitely bigger than that."

We made our way over to where the – animal? – had gone into the undergrowth in time to see swaying ferns but no sign of what had caused the disturbance.

"Maybe a boar," I said.

Her reply indicated she wasn't convinced. There were no prints.

We pressed on. I changed the subject to distract myself from the shard of doubt that had lodged in my mind.

"I hope Tim's got the barbecue out."

"Ah, yeah!" she said, "What I'd do for a bucket of wine right now..."

"We deserve it after all this."

She laughed in agreement. Then, serious: "I wonder what time we'll get there."

The shard lodged itself deeper, nestling in to remind me of its existence.

"Before dark," I said.

"You reckon?"

"Yeah," I said. "Easy."

"I hope you're right."

In the distance of the valley, a shape hurtled from canopy to the forest floor. From the corner of my eye it looked like a rock wrapped in a cape, the material billowing up around it as it – didn't *fall*, more determined than that – *dived* into the undergrowth. There was a rustle, then silence fell again.

"What the?" I whispered.

"That was weird."

"That was *really* weird."

"What was it?" she asked.

"A dying bird?"

She looked around suspiciously, willing something else to fall.

"Maybe it was night falling," she said.

Had the sky grown fractionally darker? I didn't like to contemplate what that meant, so quickened my step.

"C'mon."

"I'm not really wearing the best footwear for a hike," she said, stopping to pull an inch of thorn from the sole of her flip-flop. "I thought I felt something."

My eyes widened. She tossed the spike into the bracken. As it landed in the brush, a gust of wind ran its fingers over the trees, making their needles quiver like flakes of silver. The sound sent goosebumps down my arms.

As we carried on, the light and the wind became opposing forces. As one faded, the other increased, the silver needles now wobbling like the surface of tarmac on a hot day. I dug in my pockets for a coin to push into its sticky surface but didn't have one, and anyway, these were trees, not actual tarmac – and pull yourself together man, you're supposed to be the brave one here. I clenched my nails into my palms in my pockets.

"Is that the trees?" she asked.

"I think so," I said, blinking hard. "I dunno what else it'd be."

"We're not getting there by nightfall, are we?" she said, staring dead ahead as she walked.

"We might," I said.

"Yeah, but we probably won't."

"So what do you want to do?"

"I hoped you had a plan," she said.

I didn't. We had no shelter, no food or water, and no idea of where we were. My feet felt like those giant slabs of tree-trunk I used to burn with Dad in the fireplace at home. I faced up to the fact that we might be here overnight.

"Let's keep going until we really can't see. If we pass anywhere with a bit of shelter, we'll stay there. If not, we might yet make the town." The heat was now trickling from the day, and I shivered as I spoke the last words.

"Are you cold too?" she asked. "Do you have a coat with you?"

I didn't. I hadn't set off thinking we'd be out here long.

We could try make it back to the car?" I suggested.

"That's almost two hours. I'm not doing that."

"So you'd rather stay here in this forest, is that it?"

"Oh yeah, here's what we'll do – we'll walk the whole way back to the car and probably get lost along the way and be even –"

The wind again, the silver needles again, the goosebumps again. The smell of resin had been replaced by rotten things on the forest floor: dead insects and decaying leaves; moss, still wet from winter; a dead bird. It coated the hair in my nose and slipped down my throat by stealth, sticking my mouth into itself. Our eyes scanned the limited landscape, our ears swivelling like a cat's. Another fall. A bird dropping off its perch, asleep. Then another, a few seconds later another, as if all the animals in the forest were seeking out the underworld for the night.

"At least it's not –" she started. Then the screech came, as if somewhere beyond the trees a lorry had slammed on its brakes to avoid a deer.

"What the f –" she was grasping at her head, doubled over like she'd been shot. "Something *hit* me –" A clump of her hair was tangled and there was blood on her hands. I pulled off my sweater and used it to stem the bleeding. I thrashed about with my legs, my feet connecting with nothing. My fingers, where they'd touched her wound, were tingling.

"My hands feel weird," she said.

"Like pins and needles?" My tongue was thick, my throat was dry.

"Yeah," she held her hands up, her palms just visible now over the pull of the darkness.

"Just sit down for a moment. It'll be okay," I said, shielding her head with my arms. She clung to me, her heart beating, her body shaking.

"I don't like this," she said. "I feel so spooked."

"It'll be okay," I said again, my voice betraying my actual feelings. The shard of doubt was by now so deep it threatened to slice me in two. I imagined a diamond-tipped drill piercing right through my thoughts, pictured a diamond in my head, one like the emoji but shiny, sparkling, watched it break into a million pieces and shower my field of vision with pricks of light.

"I'm still tingling," she said.

So was I, and it seemed to be rising up beyond my wrists to my forearms. Where my feet touched the ground and where I sat were tingling too. Blinking, I felt my eyelids scraping over my eyes. The silver flakes were loud now, persistent like a chorus of cicadas. My whole body was covered in goosebumps.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I had to force the word out in two parts: "N-o."

She didn't respond, but I saw the whites of her eyes disappear behind her lids.

"I can't open my eyes," she said after a while. "I can't move my arms."

Those were the last words she ever spoke to me. My arms, cradling her head, felt ivy snakes running over them, binding her to me. Behind my closed eyes, the shimmering flakes of diamond and silver were like sunlight on the surface of the sea, ever-growing in intensity. Something was creeping up through the forest floor into me, had entered me, was growing in me. The silver was deafening now, my limbs shaking and resonating inside me, welcoming the sound in, rising up my legs, my spine, my chest. I couldn't move. I felt hot treacle rise up my throat and fill my mouth. Then the vibrations reached my ears and turned into a chorus of human voices, as if everyone in the world were screaming at once. The voices built until their pressure became too much for my skin, my feet bursting open and hard bark coming up to replace soft tissue. My roots dived down into the earth. The skin split up my legs, my thighs, my stomach and diagonally across my face, revealing wisps of silver bark underneath. I felt first shoots sprout, needles growing like hair on new arms, rising up my neck, turning my hair into metal that shivered in the breeze.



I was aware of a slowing of time. Seasons became the new seconds. You'd think it would get tedious being stuck in one place, but trees, it turns out, can't feel boredom. Over time, as new needles pushed out the old ones, human thoughts were replaced with sensations from a place beyond words. I felt the changing of seasons but was absolved of preference, felt no affinity to past nor future, sensed her growing alongside me, felt glad we existed together in the moment.

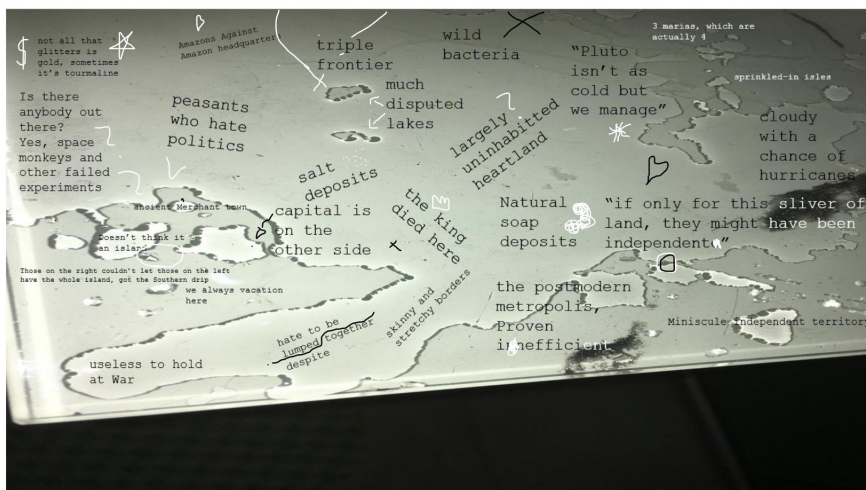
In the early days, people would mark their walks by the two trees that grew together in the middle of the path. The Lovebirds they called us. There grew a myth that if you and your lover held hands and touched our trunks at the same time, you would remain together forever. People put us on their Instagram. In later years, children climbed our branches, their hands and feet clambering awkwardly over our bellies and up our necks like unwieldy spiders. For a few years, an owl nested among our intertwined boughs. When the hand of the wind came, the sound of our needles rubbing together still put a shiver down my spine. Year by year we grew taller, two trees as one, and one overcast day we poked our tops, grown tall on a diet of love and sunlight, over the rest of the canopy. Trees don't see with their eyes, but if they did, we could have made out a thinning in the forest just beyond as first houses sprouted from the ground not half a mile ahead.



## View by Beatriz Seelaender



Satellite Images of the Freagvoharian Continent



### Maracanã

in times of old  
where rain patters  
on cold gray ground  
you heard the sound,  
a clinking bold:  
drops in water,  
wetlands murky,

threaded by oars:  
it was much more  
than the lanky  
trees littering  
sprawling cement –  
it was content,  
breathing in green  
and dappled sun

### Natives

of swamp we rise,  
accustomed to  
floods, treading through  
mud all our lives

by Mariana Feyt

# IRON & WINE

## BY LAURA BIBBY

Rusted iron twists through sun-cracked bark  
I watch closely for the softest greens  
to emerge like tiny apparitions  
A silver lance splits wide the darkening sky  
The clang of metal and your cool wit  
Was never any match for waterlogged soil  
You gave me a fistful  
The fullness of ripened fruit  
Bursting plums soaking the front of my dress  
Purple sinew like veins  
I reach for more and there's nothing there  
Not you  
Not anyone  
Charming and jarring  
Harsh and unpredictable  
This is desire  
However fleeting  
All of the days are gone  
Another season  
These wild vines loom against a blood moon  
I know we will both drink and sing  
And be devoured.

# GOLDEN YEARS

**BY DUTCH SIMMONS**

I see the same old man dressed as a sea captain on the side of the road every time I drive down to the docks.

He's 70 or 80 or 90 but definitely ancient and always spinning spinning spinning a sign advertising a local marina that offered guided charters of the wetlands. Impervious to the weather; a permanent fixture in a jaunty white cap and crisp blue blazer when he should have been dressed like an alligator similar to the ones the tours specialized in spotting since he was as ancient as they were and he death-rolled his signs with his constant spinning spinning spinning. I envy how surprisingly spry and nimble he is for a man of his age. When traffic slows I can see the beads of sweat washing down his face as he's spinning spinning spinning because this is the Gulf Coast and we're a concrete jungle built on a swamp and it was hot yesterday and it's hot today and will be hot again tomorrow. If I were a better person I'd buy him a bottle of water because he must be thirsty but I'm selfish and self-absorbed and it's the thought that counts so I honk to get his attention but not in an arrogant manner and he nods and I nod and we exchange glances because that's what men do we look and then look away and yet he never misses a beat spinning spinning spinning.

As I sit down for lunch I can't help but wonder how the alligator captain got to this point in his life at 70 or 80 or 90 years that he can't enjoy the golden years and retire instead relying upon some minimum wage job touting a local marina when he's probably never left shore once in his life.

Instead he's spinning spinning spinning his sign with knotted gnarled knuckles. Perhaps that's what keeps him young and in shape rather than joining one of those ridiculous Silver Sneakers groups at the YMCA with their mismatched chairs turning the basketball court into god's waiting room. Maybe it gets him out of the house away from some nagging wife or the ghost of a wife who never nagged but he is nagged by her presence every time he's in the house so it's better on the side of the road closer to the swamps and away from the ghosts.

I'll never be that old man because I have a plan. I take comfort in this and smile to myself as I sit enjoying my two-for-four dollar chicken sandwiches and unlimited coffee refills in the gas station convenience store while scratching off lottery tickets.

# JAZZ SWALE

BY PEA FLOWER TOMIOKA

The moor of you bogs my senses.  
Alligator ragtime me stumbling blind into this rhythm

Sump morass to tipsy trick my toes dipping  
Tip into testing waters  
To learn if we can dance here.

To pray here.  
In that wet way we pray.

Worship at the altar of your bullfrog croaking  
Roar out into cypress secrets  
Your deep aches  
Your hungry throat

And how I sing cicada summer to the buzz of your heartbeat  
Feet sunken still in this muck as the world stands still  
In the shelter of your arms

We will sink here, Lover,  
Into wetness and mushroom rings  
This fae way we play  
With our flesh

Kissed in dappled sunlight and ferns  
Where fireflies circle overhead  
As we kiln to kindle this earth  
And sculpt our fire swamp sex from this clay.

# SOMETIMES THEY TAKE SOMETHING ELSE BY KAVAN P. STAFFORD

Elspeth watched the mushrooms.

People not from Puddock wouldn't have noticed them at all. It was only when you were used to looking for them that you could see that the mushrooms were arranged around her in a neat ring, their plump, veined heads bobbing lightly in the breeze.

Elspeth liked the way they looked but she knew better than to touch. Ruairidh once touched one and his finger turned black and sore. In the end his granny chopped it off and when Elspeth saw him next, the finger was gone and his hand was bandaged. Elspeth heard Mummy say Ruairidh should have been taken to the "hospital". She wasn't sure what that was and she couldn't ask because Mummy would have been mad if she knew Elspeth had been eavesdropping. Mad mad.

Elspeth had thought she might be mad that morning when Granddad Pherson called her name. He came out of the house with it written down even though it wasn't a difficult name to remember. He had been in there all morning with all the grannies and granddads talking, talking. They did that every spring and then they came out and called a name. Today it had been hers.

She had been excited. When you were picked, everyone looked at you in a serious way like you were important. But she had also thought her mummy would be mad because it meant she had to stay out in the Mushroom-Ring all night. Mummy didn't even like Elspeth being out after dinner. But she wasn't mad. She was crying a bit and she looked sad. Sad sad.

At first it seemed like Mummy would stop her from going, she was holding her arm so tight. Then she let go and Elspeth went up to Granddad Pherson's side. He looked down at her, unsmiling, and she almost got the giggles remembering how Ruairidh had smeared a raspberry on his nose so it would be red like Granddad Pherson's. She didn't laugh though. Granddad Pherson didn't like laughing. He took her hand in his big dry one and they walked away from the crowd, not even giving Elspeth time to wave to Mummy. That was okay. She would see her in the morning.

When they reached the edge of the village, some mummies gave Elspeth two big baskets with sweets and pies and bread inside them. There were big apple tarts on top. The baskets were heavy and she had to let go of Granddad Pherson's hand to carry them but he didn't offer to help her. He just kept walking and she had to hurry hurry after him.

They walked forever and the sun was almost down before Elspeth saw the mushrooms. She had seen them before of course, everyone went to see them after the first night of their yearly appearance, but it was even more special to be one of the first. Granddad Pherson stopped at the edge of the Ring. She had to go inside it herself. Grown-ups weren't allowed. They didn't like grown-ups.

She went inside and it felt very strange, deep in her belly. It took her a moment to realise why. It was because it felt so empty. The woods had been quiet but inside the ring was different. She couldn't even hear the birdsong and, though she could see the trees swaying, there was no wind. She had been scared then and turned back to Granddad Pherson. He was gone. Grown-ups didn't like to spend too long at the Rings.

So Elspeth had settled down on the soft moss in the centre of the circle to wait. It wouldn't be long until They came. It was almost dark already. And when They came, she would give them what They wanted.

Most of the time They wanted what was in the baskets; pies and bread. That was good because They never took much and Elspeth could keep all the leftovers to herself. She might give some to Mummy and Ruairidh but nobody else. Sometimes They took silly things instead though. When Lorcan's name got picked last year, They took his shoes! And he had to walk all the way back to Puddock barefoot which was funny funny.

Of course, sometimes They wanted something else. When old Christie was little, they took his tongue. He couldn't speak at all any more except when he tried and it sounded like screaming. That was funny funny too. All the children liked to throw stones at him because he would wave his hands and gabble and they would get the giggles until their bellies hurt.

They didn't take things like that very often but you had to let Them if They wanted. Otherwise they would just eat everyone in Puddock up in one big bite – Mummy and Ruairidh and everyone. That was what used to happen before they did the selection every year. They would come down from the woods and They would eat and eat and eat and rub Their bellies and eat some more.

The sun slipped away. They were going to come soon. She wondered what They would take. If she were Them, she would take the apple tart. That would be the nicest.

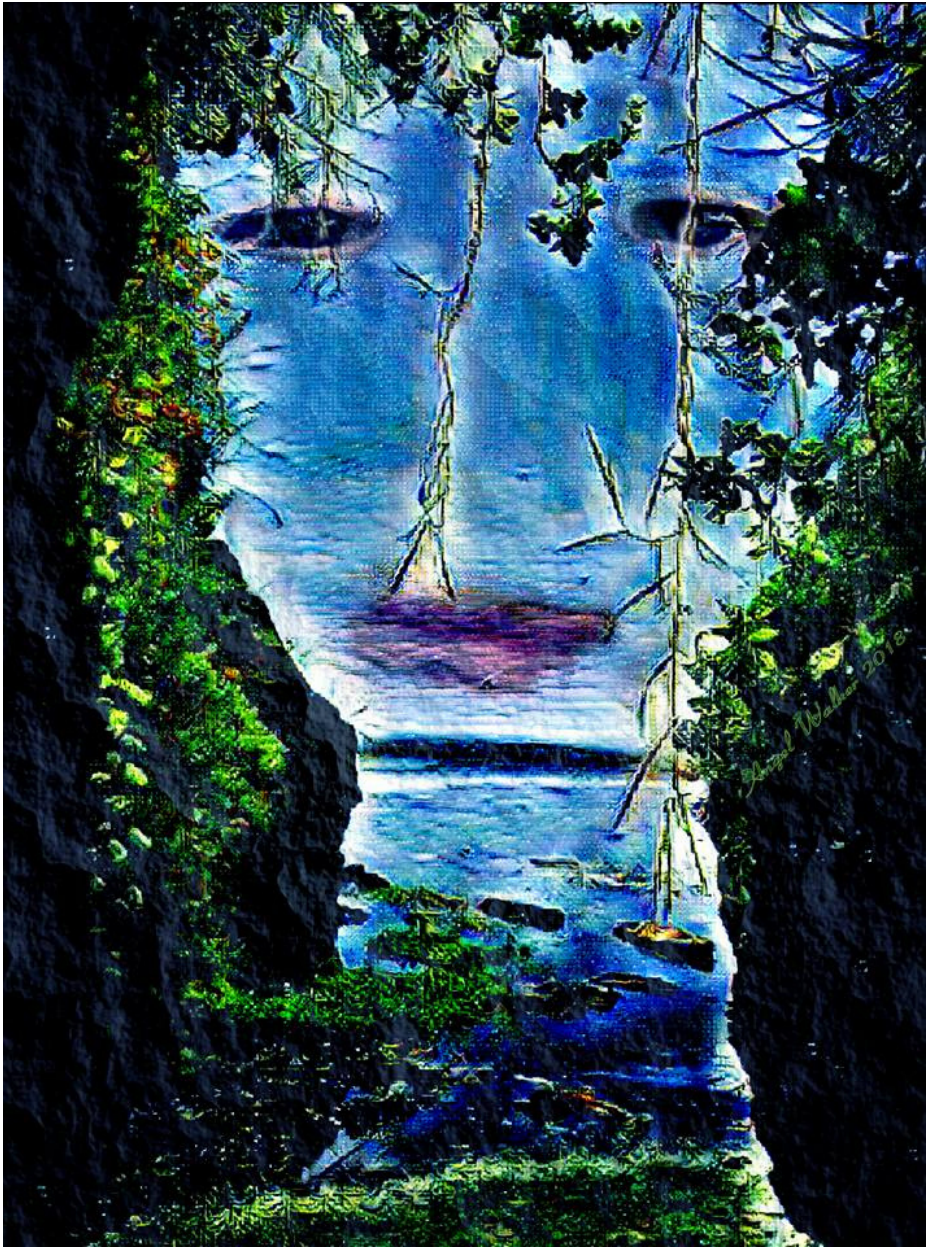
The sky turned black, and then she could see Them lurking just outside the mushrooms, waiting. They didn't look scary. They looked small. Crouched and spindly. They got closer as it got darker until They were inside the Mushroom-Ring with her. There were lots of them. Lots and lots and They were behind her and to the side and in front and she began to feel a little bit scared. Scared scared. She could see Their eyes in the darkness. They looked like dark stars.

Something silently pinched her. She yelped and twisted away desperately but then there were more and more pinches and pokes and she felt one of them cut her and she screamed, screamed screamed.

They didn't want the apple tart.







Cave Woman by Angel Walker

# FOLK OF THE GLADE

## BY PERRY WYATT

The whispers began at dusk,  
If you knew where to look.  
The nights we snuck away from our beds,  
Wind chimes carried our feet to the glades,  
And to those who watched and waited for us.

The tables were laden with spoils of the forest,  
Bushels of golden apples and wreaths of corn,  
Never eat. That was the rule.  
Even if your stomach growled for days.  
Never once.

The moon spilled into the pond and made it glitter.  
The toadstools carried dreams under their hats.  
And the leaves spoke in tongues.  
The bright berries glowed like gems.  
And sugar was weaved like spider's webs.

On the last days of summer we mourned,  
The magic would recede for winter.  
The apples glowed like tiny suns,  
Tiny, easy, now hold out your hands.  
It doesn't have to end here.  
Just take a bite.



## Dappled Light in Shadow

**by James Reitter**

Muck & grime & stink  
often align as a  
swamp is imagined. It is  
where darkness dwells,  
where evil encompasses.  
We know this from  
*The Swamps of Sadness.*  
*Dead Marshes.*  
*The Legion of Doom.*

Yet there is beauty there too:  
blooming water lilies and irises  
jeweled gorgets of hummingbirds  
sunset splashes of tanagers &  
blackburnian warblers.  
There is music there as well:  
Insect symphonies,  
orchestral ensembles  
of tree, cricket, & peeper frogs,  
the bass of the mighty bull.  
Alligators bellow, night herons awk.

Even in death, beauty finds its place  
as the swamp springs with life.

# the world within the world within you by Manahil Bandukwala

*"There are worlds between my toes. I am a bear."  
— A bear (@A\_single\_bear)*

there are worlds within the worlds  
within you

each world spores its own fungi

the forest hidden in your ear canal is spongy  
all the leaves fire-like  
all the dried up streams  
all the little chipmunks ferrying  
acorns across your helix

press your right ear to a pillow

your worlds sleep when you sleep  
to the distant rumble of an  
always-shaking earth

the garden in your hip crease is damp  
from autumn rain  
i try to tread carefully but  
there are so many mushrooms  
each one reaping the harvest  
of early spring

there are worlds that rise with you  
each day

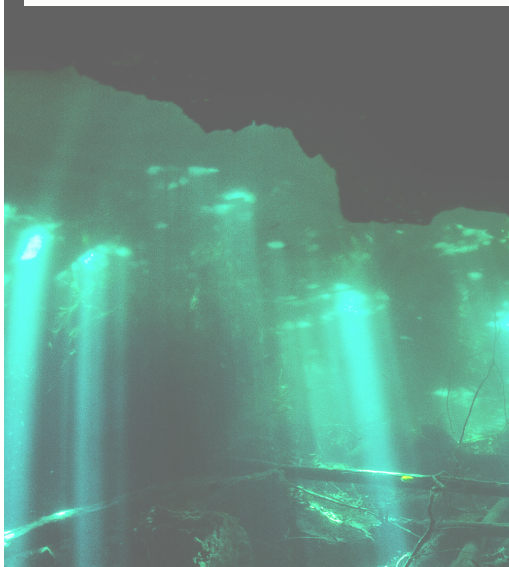
while others exist only  
between moments

the moments where you scrunch up  
your shoulder blades creates  
the inner curve of a waterfall basin  
down to your tailbone  
i swim in the pool under mist  
the nudge of each breaststroke  
the light airiness of a kiss



Two Poems After the Video Game *Hollow Knight*

By **Manahil Bandukwala**

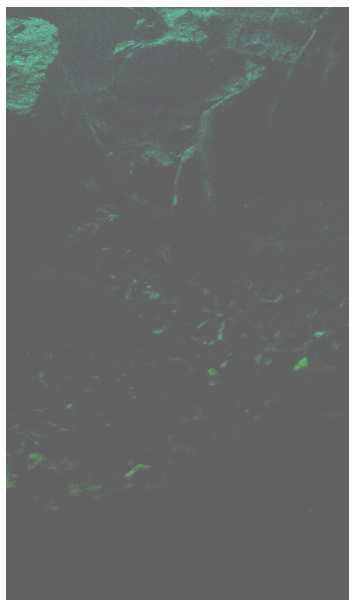


### **THE ZIG-ZAG LINE**

Exit the canyon into a place once calm.  
In abandonment this place grew  
thorns, pink jabs out from floor, out of ceiling  
out of edges of teal paths. Ignore warning  
signs, the masks spiked on sticks. Where shell  
of a creature lies you find strength. Make your way  
through wrought-iron gates  
still-standing pillars. To jump higher  
& higher, to find the traitor that flings  
glowing disks. This world is an impossibility  
with its spires & spikes, overgrown vines  
light up the place & make dreaming possible.  
How what was once a retreat no longer belongs  
to its first inhabitants. Near death you find  
purpose & leak out void. When they say  
healing is not linear they mean you find yourself  
waiting in a glass tram station in a green lake  
dragonfly-like creatures swim by. Where you sit  
for a brief moment while a gramophone plays.

### **THE PILGRIM'S WAY**

Walk into a semicircular  
cavern: sea-green glow, leaf wisps,  
drips of wet foliage  
against the twinkling viola.  
Miniscule birds flutter around  
each wrought-iron bench  
and sign, bright white spots  
hover at the forefront.  
Move through the steamy world  
wander against the backdrop  
of calcified shells and husks  
of jagged teeth inside the beast's  
mouth. Take the journal  
and jab round winged  
creatures with sharp nail.  
Just a world of moss and wool,  
a world to brush up against, jump  
from wall to wall. A green  
path along the way.





## swamp dreams

when anxiety constricts my chest and quickens my breath  
I swallow a single green pill.

what follows are green dreams,  
where dangling vines are rat snakes.

when I stroke my index finger down the murky green of their  
spines,  
they belly flop into the water and become fat

swimming pool noodles to keep me afloat amongst all the algae.  
every log is an alligator, or is every alligator a log?

I don't want to be frightened, so I spear their tail ends with a  
fork.  
the pieces of them I'm left with are summer squash friendly.

they would go great with quinoa, but in green pill dreams  
all I have is expired microwave white rice.

my nosebleed drips into the water and beneath the swirl of dirt  
I see ferocious red streaks dart away with fins cutting the water's  
surface.

I'll never forget the pastel-painted turtles that unwind time  
and pressure from my core, settle my breath into the deep  
evenness

of a memory foam mattress, only less stuffy. when I stroke  
their ageless shells, the only thing they become are green gods.

## self-portrait as a marimo moss ball

at some point (figuratively speaking  
since I'm round)  
I rolled out of the mud onto shore

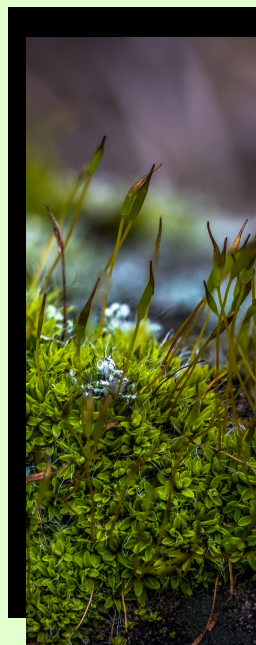
where a pudgy grasping hand  
squeezed and squeezed me  
until I thought I wasn't green.

When I saw myself again, I wasn't brown.

I was placed in a little jar with some white rocks  
and a thin bleached twig and sold  
For \$22 plus tax at an elderly Japanese lady's bonsai shop.

Now I sit on a kitchen counter dreaming  
of what steak tastes like, dreaming of a lake  
with murky waters and fluttering comets of fish,  
dreaming halcyon muddy dreams.

by Hikari Leilani Miya







# swamp queen

by corinna schulenburg

Fists full of wrigglers,  
legs mottled with stings,  
oh my girl, you have bruised  
yourself against the world,  
purpled as any sunset.  
You've made a muck  
of dresses and other  
well-laid plans, dancer  
in the damp, in the dense  
sink of decomposing green.  
Prospector of detritus, you lean  
your salvaged things against  
the trees and give them names.  
No doubt the fairies take heed.  
No doubt I better lock the windows  
to keep the Bowie-eyed goblins  
from making you their queen.  
Oh my swamp daughter,  
there are other dangers  
far more fell than fay.  
They will come for you  
with ribbons, with portions,  
they will name your body  
a thousand words for traitor;  
name your hungers, poisons.  
Never let them take the muck  
from you, or any other muddy  
freedom. Never forget you can step  
into the fog and slip  
away to where your name  
is a rapture of croak and hum,  
where you sink into your power,  
where your crown is a clutch of leaf,  
of weed, of branch, of flower.

# WILL-O'-WISP

BY HOLLEY CORNETTO

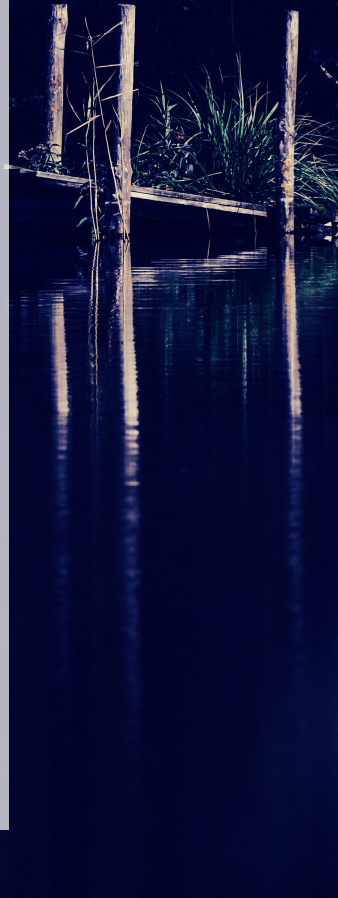
**ON SUMMER NIGHTS WHEN THE SUN SETS AFTER A STORM, AND FOG RISES IN THE DISTANCE, THE CHILDREN OF THE VILLAGE SNEAK FROM THEIR BEDS TO FOLLOW THE WILL-O'-WISP LIGHTED PATH INTO THE SWAMP.**

---

They bring their trinkets – bits of colored glass, marbles, lost buttons, and stray feathers – because after the storm, she will come to dance and frolic among the buttonbush. She, who is said to be older than the mountains, and more beautiful than moonlight on water. Her dance is mesmerizing; a whirling of mist beneath a canopy of weeping willows, lit by the glow of fireflies.

The children watch her dance and leave gifts. Tributes, in exchange for wishes. They all know that after a storm, when the ground is plump and saturated, is her time. And though their parents have warned them of the dangers of playing in that moist wetland, they did the same, back when they were children who believed in wishes and dreams.

Each time the children gather, she accepts one tribute, and the other children return home. The next time they gather, there is one less child, and one more will-o'-wisp to light the path.





## LADIES WITH THE LANTERNS

The ladies with the lanterns look tired  
Standing in fairy circles near the entrance to the  
marsh  
Illuminating alligators floating down the Delta  
current  
She's been dragging stepping stones into the  
wetlands  
Mechanically filtering the diseased dense air  
Bruised by her purified breath  
Wearing damp and soiled greens  
Receiving muddied momentary praise  
Silenced by her oath  
Enraged with phony bureaucracy

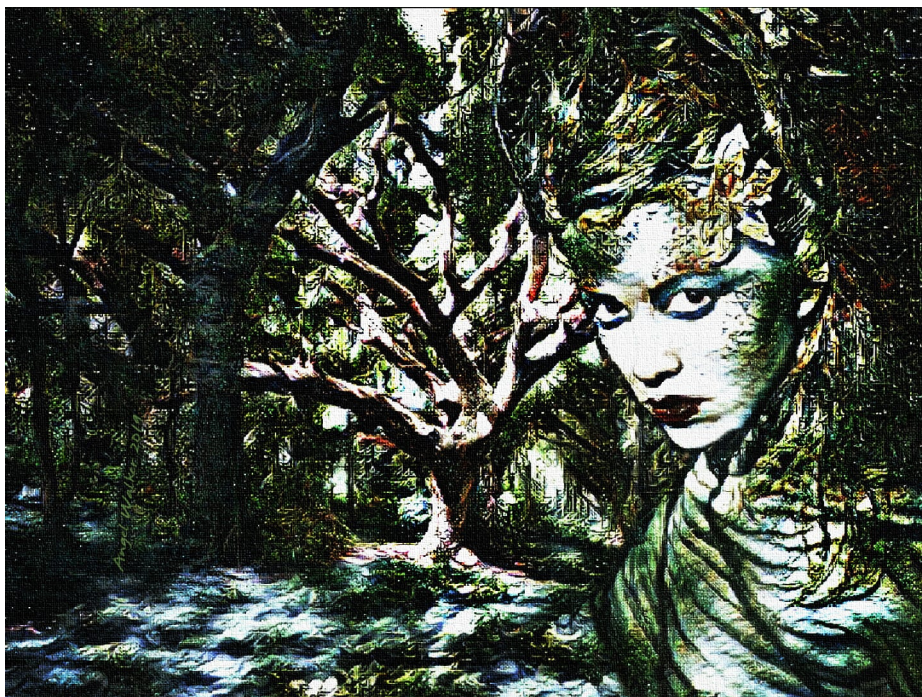
## TINY FEET

Fearless smiles tiptoe across smooth stepping  
stones  
Unsuspecting youth  
Fleshy vegetation signaling the sleepy eyes  
Alligators target tiny feet through murky waters  
Muffled playful chatter turn to shrieking in the  
marsh  
As their salty crimson liquid stains the green



*by Jennifer Mitchell*





Mother Earth & Gaia and the Green Man by Angel Walker





**Osteoglossidae**

Within the heavy murk of swampy peat,  
the bone-tongued arowana lurks,

holds its future progeny within its jaws:  
the oral legacy of future generations.

Jump, skim unsuspecting insects  
from low hanging branches.

“Water monkey”, they call him,  
but he knows no need for limbs nor digits.

But now the ramin trees have been cut down,  
the waters drained.

The air is filled with smoke, carbonaceous  
residue of avaricious hominids.

Where now shall he swim?  
The sloughs are dying.

**Okeechobee**

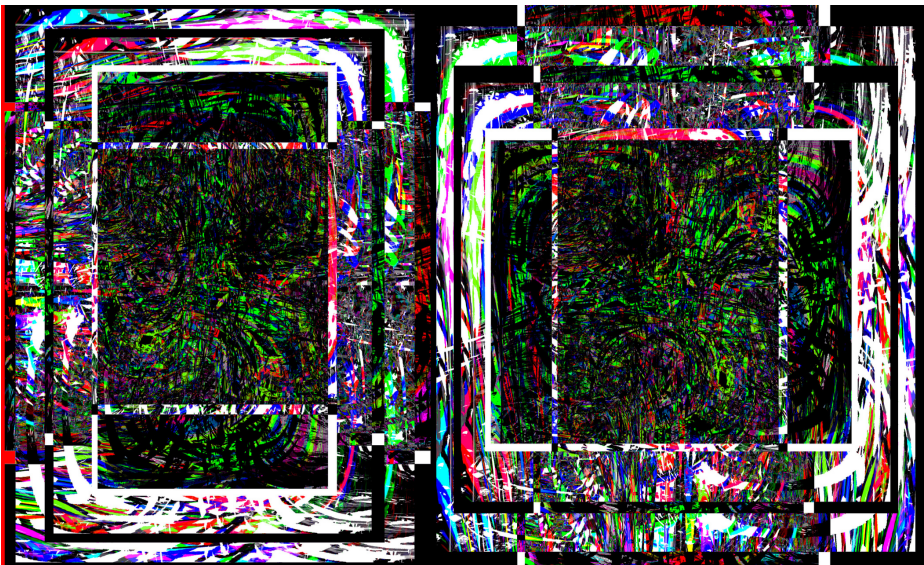
Mangroves link fingers,  
push thirsty, curious roots  
into welcoming mud.

Lonely widower  
revs his grey pontoon boat;  
motor coughs and spits,

Floating dinosaurs  
await unwary dinner.  
Floating air slows time.

Vines droop, kiss water,  
a marriage of convenience  
till death do them part.

**By Mukund Gnanadesikan**



**Open Window by Edward Supranowicz**

A photograph of a bayou with tall, moss-draped trees and water. The trees are covered in Spanish moss, and the water is calm. The scene is a dense, swampy forest.

## alligators in a frozen bayou by jenny wong

A crop of gray snouts  
poke through the ice,  
like half-moon fungi growing  
in a space-frozen wasteland.

Suspended,  
bodies like icebergs,  
with eyes of slip-covered marble  
asleep in their sockets,  
minds firing  
with all the spark and sputter  
of an engine  
that won't turn over.

Scaly survivalists who've learned  
existence can be boiled down.  
The complexities of life evaporated  
into the simplest of patterns.

Breathe.  
In. Out.  
In. Out.



## IN THE WEEDS

BY JESSICA FRELOW

sticks and stones spiked by malice  
sheltered me as i peaked

right below  
the hint of golden suns,  
unchanged.

yearning to be tended to  
because seasons  
followed the curves

of your mouth, as it grew thorns  
cutting little holes into the  
flowers of my earth.

i removed the stems  
one by one  
to prune the rot within,

feeding on  
the semblance of my roots  
hoping to give life again.

## ROOT BALL

BY JENNIFER

MACBAIN-STEPHENS

The root ball  
in the forest  
looked like a figure  
watching me  
my eyesight blurry  
the root ball grew and tremored  
like spiders  
grew from it.  
the sound of a breeze  
or grunt  
through leaves  
the shadow looming  
where you  
catch your breath  
for a longer second  
startled  
something is there  
that isn't supposed to be  
it can stop your heart



Hugh's Boots by Helen Gwyn Jones

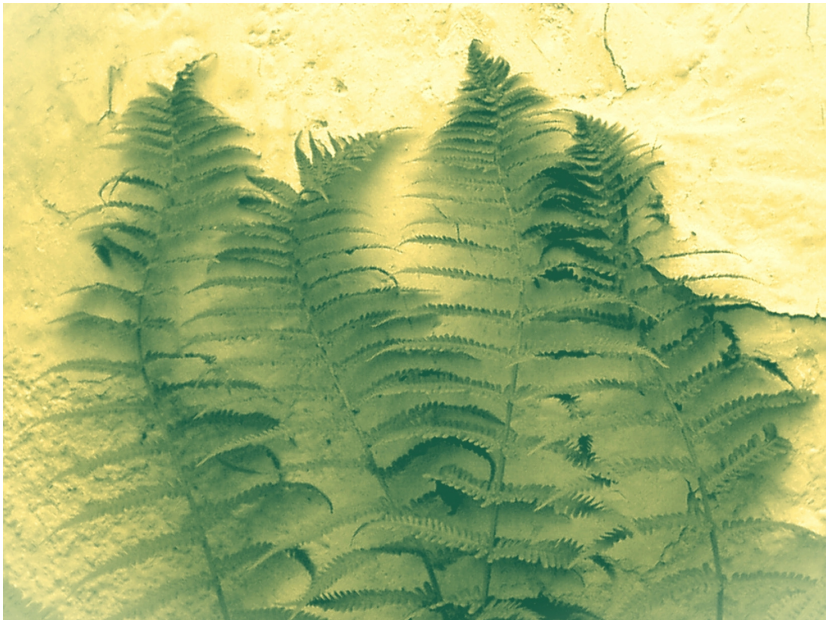
# Bones of You

by **Bonnie Meekums**

I kneel, breathing in the sensuous smell of petrichor, warm springiness of moss on my cheek. I add the moss to my thin fire. A crackle answers the looped song of skylarks.

Then, I spend time arranging bones on the bare earth. I hold your cool, smooth femur, tibia, humerus and ulna in my hands. Your fibula and radius are already shattered. As I let go and bleached bones arrange themselves on red-brown earth, I'm treated to a brief percussion performance. I study the pattern, choosing which one to pull out first. Later, I will play fives with your phalanges.

I hear your whisper from the past. You too walked these peaks alone. When I've finished, your spirit will guard my tent as I sleep and dream. Tomorrow, you and I will walk down this sacred mountain to where I'll choose a sunlit spot. There, I will lay your bones in the deep, deep earth.



Fern by Helen Gwyn Jones

# HOLDING A PLAN AND YOUR DREAMS

by Slawka G. Scarso

You pass the door of the public office  
Holding a plan and your dreams, holding them tight in your arms.  
You grab a number, colourful posters half-masking  
The greying decaying paint on the walls,  
Neon lights already adding a shade of green to your mood.  
Still, you're hopeful. How couldn't you be when you're  
Holding a plan and your dreams, holding them tight in your arms?  
But then all the expectations, all the fantasies,  
Come to the first halt: a swamp made of murky water  
And a grumpy, unhelpful attendant,  
Handing you forms to fill and no hint of a smile.  
With your feet caught in the slimy ground of bureaucracy,  
You read – you can read, can't you? So why is everything so unclear?  
Why does everything seem to be written in a language that's not your own? –  
And with each step you take,  
Your feet feel more sucked in the mud of disclaimers, of more documents,  
Of waiting lists and appointments to be made for next spring, next summer,  
Any time that is not now, not soon.  
And yet you move, because the only thing you know about this mud,  
Is that it dries, and then you're stuck for good, even with all its cracks,  
So you move, slowly, and you rest, and you wonder if it's everywhere like this,  
– it is, but nobody will tell you. – And then one day, you're out  
Holding a plan and your dreams, holding them tight in your arms,  
Now creased and stained with mud and sweat and tears.  
But no matter all the bureaucracy you had to face, all the negligence,  
The long coffee breaks, the holidays they took, not you,  
You've managed, you're out. And maybe, for a day, or even a week, or two,  
There will be no more swamps.

**I Dream I'm Lost in a Swamp**  
**with ee cummings**  
**by Kathleen Stancik**



**Waltzing on Swampland**

*A golden shovel poem on a line by Edna St Vincent Millay*

**by Kathleen Stancik**

moon howl toad chorus in the panther night inert  
 bodies whisper canticles to languorous perfection  
 conjugal oxygen hydrogen distill into dew-drinks let  
 herons attend the feudal feast lie with me  
 the night says summons you from sleep a chip  
 of moonlight waltzes on swampland exalts your  
 private orchestra swooning in its secret shell

a;;igators surveil us  
 like P I s

snaPPing photos with  
 apertures  
 w i d e  
 in studious a;;igator eyes

my baretoes squiSH  
 through murky mire;;mud  
 eruPTS in  
 (toads)tools  
 between my toes

the poet's wingtips  
 mucked  
 up

air sliCKened with  
 boggygreenfunk  
 (our stomachs  
 buckbuckBuck  
 like a gator on a hook)

iamafraidoftheFog

we find a fairy circle  
 of commas,,  
 pause  
 ,,,to rest

an old man  
 with a bouquet of  
 lanterns  
 leads us home



# LARVA

by Emily Daniels

His fingers curled around the swatter handle like a frog tongue, trained and quick. He was in the process of slapping flies against the plaster, bringing their dead bodies close to his face, sniffing, laughing softly at his ability to terminate existence.

The purple swatter had the name 'Sam' shakily scrawled into it. Mama called him stupid as she sat back in her recliner, sipping beer from a sweating can.

Sam had torn down the fly papers that twirled from the ceiling, spilled the wide-mouthed jars of sugar water that sat near the windows of our trailer. This was his game.

"Goddammit," Mama said as spittle gathered at the corners of her mouth. A simple, silver crucifix hung on the wall above her lolling head, the fat stump of her neck quivering as she barked.

Sam pretended not to listen. I felt defensive and jittery, like I might attack Mama if she tried to stop him.

Once Sam made a line of flies about a foot long, he quit swatting. He looked at me, his mouth scrunched in a way that made him look sick. He let go of the swatter and folded his fingers into a duck's bill.

I glanced at Mama. Her eyelids were heavy, dragging. I quietly went to the room Sam and I shared. A pair of bunk beds, the floor littered with paper dolls and found objects, crusted cereal bowls—a sanctuary. I kicked around the dirty carpet searching for a swatch of green.

Sam's hard plastic crocodile sat nestled in a small pile of dirty clothes. I examined it, saw the dried mud layered in the crevices on its back. He had taken it to the creek to play. I cradled the reptile in my arms like a newborn, nearly cooing at it as I walked down the hallway to the bathroom. I scrubbed the scales until they shined.

Sam's face brightened when he saw me tiptoe to his place on the floor. I grabbed the crocodile by the tummy and pretended to bite his arms and legs with it. Sam's laugh was a chortle. I could hear the phlegm lodged in his throat, catching on the sides of his esophagus. He grasped the flies one at a time, careful not to drop them on the floor before he squeezed them into the crocodile's mouth.

There were still five flies left on the floor once the opening was full. He gathered the leftovers and brought them to his own mouth, twisting his lips around the bugs. Listening to the sound their wings made being crunched between his teeth, I imagined I was eating the flies and all I could see were their eyes close-up, chicken wire twitching.

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Sam and I played outside a lot, often picking onion grass in the front yard and making each other smell it until we laughed so hard our stomachs hurt. Sam's favorite activity was crawling around in the creek and picking up pieces of trash that had caught on rocks.

Sometimes, we'd travel so far down the water that we passed the edge of our land, entering dangerous territory littered with 'Beware of Dog' and 'Private Property' signs.

The first time we passed the little shack with the busted-out windows, we were scared. This time, Sam was ready to scavenge. I imagined his mind working, exploring the possibilities of all the trinkets he could find inside the hollow mouth of wood and cinder blocks—its bleached, patchy grass an offering.

I could smell trash burning somewhere in the distance. It filled my nostrils and cheeks, made my eyes water. The air felt colder here, slicing. A large dog barked and snarled at us from the border of the yard.

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The top hinge of the shack's door was loose, making it slump slack-jawed against the frame. Sam squeezed my hand. I flashed a timid smile at him. The door creaked more than I expected it to when Sam pushed on it.

I knew when we stepped through the door that someone was squatting there. The stench of urine blanketed the floors like a wet towel. Sam had no sense of danger. I thought about what it might be like to die, a slow death, drawn-out like a bubble expanding in a toad's throat.

Sam found a can of paint, white exterior semi-gloss enamel. He wielded a giant flat-head screwdriver crusted with flaky corrosion and started digging at the edges of the can's lid with measured movements, hoping to find something inside besides hardened liquid.

The lid flew in front of him, landing on the gapped floor with a dry thud. His eyes sparkled in the dusty air of mid-afternoon. He crooked his finger at me, pulling it backward twice against an imaginary trigger.

The paint was in pristine condition, perfectly preserved beneath the tarnished metal, so starkly white it hurt my eyes. I wanted to drink it, to make myself pure. Sam gouged the untouched surface of the paint with his fist. He slathered it on his arms and legs, covering the stripes of his faded t-shirt, even raking his doused fingers down the sides of his face.

I knew we needed to go home. I grabbed his arm, and he slapped me across the face with his free hand. I tightened my grip, digging my jagged nails into his painted skin. As I jerked him away from the corner of the shack, I heard something. Faint, the sound of crunching leaves beyond the doorway.

I looked at Sam with desperation, then scanned the shack for a place to hide. I spotted a small cupboard in the corner, a closet with a door. He picked up the paint can, trailing droplets behind him as I steered us toward the hiding place. It was bigger than it looked from the outside, providing enough room for both Sam and me to fit.



Sam curled into a fetal position on the floor of the closet, wallering around pathetically, tears streaming down his face as we listened to something enter the shack, making the boards squeak from the weight of it. I could hear a fly buzzing nearby. Sam straightened his spine, searching the air to locate the small sound. More chittering insects followed, fitting through a slight slit in the wood.

They flocked to the can of paint, a lightbulb beacon. Sam watched their legs land in the glowing pool, victims to a trap he didn't mean to set. I dipped my fingers into the liquid, gingerly collecting the flies in the palm of my hand, but they were already dead, silently spasming. I noticed Sam's white fingers in the periphery, inching toward the corpses.

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I hadn't noticed the figure standing above us. I saw a hand. Three fingers, nails chewed like mine. No eyes. The other hand held a cloth. I watched, paralyzed, as it reached toward Sam's painted arm.

The stranger started to stroke Sam's skin with the cloth. I stared in disbelief, my jaw stretching as my mouth gaped open.

"Get out," said the stranger.

I glared at Sam, waiting for him to get up.

"You weren't supposed to be here, to see," he gestured, "this."

His hands reached toward the hollow sockets in his face.

I dragged Sam across the shack. He was whimpering, biting my arms as we walked. I looked back when we made it to the doorway, adjusting my eyes to the darkness. The stranger stood with spine hunched and arms hanging.

I started to run home, holding firmly onto Sam's arm, hoping we wouldn't have to wade through the creek to make it back. Lightning bugs dimly lit the hazy woods around us.

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When we reached our door, I looked at Sam. The still evening had lulled him into a state of calm compliance. I brought a finger to my lips. The screen screeched like an erratic animal. Mama was surely still awake, waiting to punish us.

She didn't look at me once, but her eyes were glued to Sam, whose clothes were still wet and soiled from the paint. I grabbed Sam's hand, but Mama wouldn't relent.

"Go get your dumb fucking toy," Mama said, addressing Sam. He started to cry. "Now," she croaked.

Sam handed her the crocodile, still weeping, the tears creating tiny tributaries through his dirty cheeks.

"Come on," she said. "Help me up."

I coughed at her smell.

She hobbled to the trash can, dragging her slipper-clad feet along the linoleum. Mama threw the crocodile into the garbage, laughing.

Sam dove for it, but Mama slapped him away, hitting his mouth with her meaty fingers and busting his top lip. He didn't howl in pain.

She pointed to our room. We went. Sam fell asleep almost instantly. I was lying very still on the bottom bunk, alert. I was going to rescue the crocodile.

I tip-toed through the trailer. I heard something rustling, fumbling through discarded wrappers and cardboard. The kitchen light was on. I crept to the edge of the doorway and saw Mama digging through the trash. She held the crocodile by its tail.

She went over to the sink and washed it, scrubbing its scales with a sponge. She placed the crocodile on the counter. Mama looked at her soiled hands and licked the fingers clean.

"Goddammit," Mama said.



# LOTUS

BY ARDEN HUNTER