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FANTASY MAGAZINE

Amal Singh
K.P. Kulski
Addison Smith
Mark S. Bailen
Oluwatomiwa Ajeigbe
Daniel Ausema

EDITED BY
ARLEY SORG & CHRISTIE YANT

FANTASY MAGAZINE

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**FROM
THE
EDITORS**

Editorial: September 2021

Arley Sorg and Christie Yant

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Arley Sorg is a senior editor at *Locus Magazine*, where he's been on staff since 2014. He joined the *Lightspeed* family in 2014 to work on the *Queers Destroy Science Fiction!* special issue, starting as a slush reader. He eventually worked his way up to associate editor at both *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*. He also reviews books for *Locus*, *Lightspeed*, and *Cascadia Subduction Zone* and is an interviewer for *Clarkesworld Magazine*. Arley grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado, and studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and, in non-pandemic times, usually writes in local coffee shops. He is a 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate.

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FICTION

Sounds for Crustaceans

Addison Smith | 1500 words

“I’m a crustacean.”

Disbelief meets my gaze, then moves away. Jewel looks to the shells that decorate my room, the aquariums, the marked-down netting draped over my window. She looks to anything to save her the embarrassment of meeting my eyes, or the trouble of telling me I’m just a person, like her, like anyone. When she finally meets them, it is with resignation, and I know I’m being humored.

“Why a crustacean?” she asks, too terse, unforgiving.

“Never mind,” I say, looking away. I check an aquarium, skimming a finger over the light algae that floats on the surface. I resist putting the finger in my mouth and savoring its briny taste. Crabs eat algae. Protozoa. Other small creatures, given the chance.

“No,” Jewel says. “Tell me what it is. What makes you a crustacean? What crab thoughts brought you to this conclusion?” Sarcasm. Anger. A tone of voice that is new to recent months, would never have been used before I started changing. She doesn’t know the way my skin hardens on the backs of my hands, white chitin that I pick off daily. She hasn’t spoken with the fish in the giant tanks at the Chinese buffet. All she sees is me trying to be special again, something I’m not allowed to be.

“It’s nothing.” Just me, thinking I could go to her for reassurance. Thinking it would be like old times, when we were in high school and I was her crying shoulder and she stole kisses when no one was looking.

Jewel closes her eyes and runs her hand over her face. It’s something she does when she’s trying to cope. Only with me. An admission that I’m crazy, but she just has to deal with it, because she loves me and doesn’t want to hurt my feelings. She doesn’t know how much it hurts.

“When did it start?” she asks. My heart rises, but I temper it with caution.

“Last week. It was a feeling. Something inside is different.” I mean to start small, but I see the old Jewel in her eyes, curious, prodding. I tell her everything, from the taste for shrimp, the feeling of brine upon my skin. When I tell her about the flaking chitin, she looks at the backs of my hands, and my heart falls. They are raw, and lined, and I know what she must see. “I pick it off,” I say, and she gives me a weak smile.

“We’ll watch it,” she says, and holds my hand in hers. My eyes well and my heart fills with familiar warmth. After a moment, her voice softens. “You’re sure this time?”

I tell her I am, and she holds me close.

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When the sound starts, I worry I am changing too fast. That my body can’t recognize my ears. Can crabs even hear? I look it up, and they can, but the sound is still within me. The internal sound of muscle tearing, or joint cracking. A quiet rasp deep within me.

Jewel puts her head to my chest. She is my doctor more often than not, since we stopped trusting the real ones. Since they started looking at me with pity and condescension. Her mom is a nurse, and she says she’s picked up enough to diagnose me. Sometimes she’s even right. She lays her head there a long time, listening to the beating of my heart and the rasping within my chest. “Huh,” she says. “That’s weird.”

The fact that she can hear it scares me. Is my heart slowly descending, broadening, adapting to this strange body with an internal skeleton? “What is?” I ask.

She looks worried. “You,” she says. “You’re weird.” She grins, and I return it, hiding my worry for the length of a kiss. “Let me listen again tonight. I might have heard something, but I can’t be sure. It could be nothing.”

She pulls me down onto the bed, and we lie there staring at the ceiling, and each other, and we talk about the sea. I laugh at her awful jokes. Jewel goes quiet, and I turn to see her looking at me, into my eyes. I lay an arm over her side. “Are you okay?”

She nods, but it’s slow. “I’m sorry,” she says. “About yesterday. I should have believed you.”

I bite my tongue, something she’s taught me to do when I’m going to say something bad about myself. That it’s okay, because I do it all the time. Why should she believe me? Why would this time be any different from when I thought I was turning into a rain cloud, or a redwood, or any of the others? I can’t be trusted to know myself, or when I’m changing inside.

“It’s okay,” I say, but she still holds my gaze. “Really, it’s okay. We can’t ignore the past.”

Jewel nods, and smiles, but it’s misplaced and far away. “No,” she says. “Why would we want to? There’s a lot of good stuff back there, Crabby.”

I smile and hold onto the ridiculous moniker. Crabby. I like it.

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Jewel is worried about me. I don’t leave my room much anymore, preferring to stay close to the aquariums. I haven’t eaten the tank algae yet. Instead, I make health shakes with dried seaweed, using double what’s in the recipe. She drinks them with me and complains that they are awful. She tells me it can’t be good for me, and plies me with potato chips and nachos.

“Hey,” she says, deep within herself. “I think you should see a doctor.” She grows more concerned by the day, listening to my heart, checking my hands for new marks. I feel her pulling away, even as she worries over me. What will happen when I am a crab? Where will she fit into my life? How far can I transform before we can’t take the strain anymore? Before me being a crab is too much for our relationship?

I tell her I’ll make an appointment, but know I won’t. The doctors won’t understand. I sit in our room and search YouTube for information about crabs, looking for anything that might help. I find videos about the courtship of blue crabs. How they dance to impress their potential mates. How the female molts, makes herself vulnerable, and after the mating, the male protects her for days, until she is strong again. And then they part. I wonder which I am, the protector or the vulnerable. I wonder if I could dance well enough to convince Jewel to stay.

I find videos of crabs in captivity, and turn the volume up until I can hear the click of their steps over the glass-bottomed aquarium, the snap of their pincers, and the faint rasp of claws rubbed nervously together.

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Jewel retreats, and I know I haven’t danced well enough. I hide in our room, so she hides in her office, lying on the love seat and staring up at the ceiling. I worry I have lost her. I worry she will move on to another who is easier to be with, doesn’t require the constant care and attention I’ve asked of her.

We remain in stasis for hours, her in her office, me in our room. I am the first to give in, unwilling to stand by when I know she is hurting. Even if I am the one hurting her.

I pick the chitin from my skin before leaving the room, removing that constant reminder of what is wrong. I find her on the floor, stretched on her back, hands raised above her head. She looks to the door when I enter, then back to the ceiling.

I lie beside her, and we stare together for a while, neither willing to speak. She is the first to work up the nerve, talking without turning her head. “What do you think it’s like?” she asks. “The ocean. Is it a nice place to live?”

I’m not sure what she means. We’d talked about moving east, to the ocean, living in a small house on the beach. It was our dream. After a moment I realize she doesn’t mean in a house, but in the water itself.

I turn to her, and find her already looking at me. Her eyes glisten, and I wonder if she’s crying, because it’s such a foreign sight. “Baby?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

She nestles against my chest, and I hold her tight, and tell her I’ll always be there for her, that my transformation changes nothing. Her voice cracks, and I can’t understand her words. She bunches my shirt in her hands. I try to hold them, and she recoils. I take her hand gently in my own, and see it for the first time. The back of her hand is raw, and red, and I see where she has picked the chitin from her skin.

She holds my hand, and I close mine, carefully, around hers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Addison Smith was born in Texas, raised in Minnesota, and found love in New York where he currently resides. He spent his childhood walking country rivers and sleeping in a bedroom painted like a castle with swords displayed on the walls. Now he works in manufacturing, but in his off-time he writes emotional fantasies about fish, birds, and bones. His fiction has appeared in *Fireside Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and several other publications. You can find him on twitter as @storylizard.

What is Mercy?

Amal Singh | 5800 words

Nanda hauls the bucket from the depths of the well, her palms aflame with red blisters from clutching the frayed rope too tight. The thick rope, screeching against the pulley, trembling under the weight of the water, becomes heavier by the minute. The minute she goes weak, the bucket will plunge, crashing into the sweet water below, and she'll have to start the charade for the fourth time. But she has to get the water. If she can't, she will have nothing to clean her Kaka's feces and nothing to bathe him with.

Behind her, Asha Tai waits impatiently for her turn, her betel-nut smeared lips parting to reveal an impatient grimace. Sweat trickles down Nanda's forehead and falls on the stone parapet of the well, sizzles, and evaporates in a puny fume.

"Quick, chhori, what are you waiting for? The Thakur boys are on the prowl again."

"What'll they do, huh? Eat me?" says Nanda as she pulls the rope with all her might. Her measly breakfast of one roti and some achar threatens to come up. The bucket arrives, water filled to the brim, splashing about with abandon. Asha Tai comes up to Nanda and helps her pull the rope towards herself and untie the bucket. Nanda swipes her sweat with her chunni and holds the bucket, veins of her arms bulging with effort.

"Haven't you heard? Thakur aaye. . ."

"...andhera laaye." Nanda completes Asha Tai's fragment of a sentence, an ancient rhyme. *Thakur Aaye, Andhera laaye*. Thakurs bring darkness. Her Amma snuffed out lanterns whenever they came and no one dared speak a word. At such a time, silence would fall over their household, a silence so all-encompassing that a snip of a feather seemed like a thunderclap. "I don't fear them, Tai," says Nanda with a quiet defiance.

"You're young," says Asha Tai. "When is the baby due?" asks Asha Tai. Nanda shrugs. Kaka often mumbles under his breath about curses that would befall the family if her mother delivers another girl this time. Ever since the lower half of Kaka's body paralyzed after an accident six months ago—three months into her mother's pregnancy—the only thing he is capable of is complaining. He says their fates would turn if somehow a boy is brought into the world, that he would be magically healed and run on his two feet once again.

The thought soon fades away into afterthought, barely a wisp of memory. "Any day now," says Nanda. "I hope it's a girl." If there's anything she wants in the world, it's a baby sister to play with. When she grows up to be five years old, Nanda will braid her hair. When she grows up to be seven, Nanda will be seventeen, and they'll play pitthu and skip rope and the game she has heard the city children call kona-kona.

"Did you hear the Yadav boy can speak to birds now?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes," says Asha Tai, now sitting on the stone wall of the well, blocking the way for other women, as if the well was her own. "Ate something bad and vomited continuously for days. A fever gripped him and the next day he sang songs to the butcher's chicken."

"What kind of songs?"

"Maybe a bhajan, who knows?"

"How did he get it?"

"My bet is on the ojha."

Nanda has heard about the ojha. A tall man cloaked in black, with kohl-smearing eyes and deep blue lips, had entered the village a week ago singing verses in a language as old as the water and the wind. The verses themselves were pleasant to hear, aided by the deep, bassoon-like voice of the ojha. The first person who met the ojha had spent the night under a forgotten banyan tree at the edge of the village, and came back in the morning with nails that could cut through iron. But Nanda has heard similar fables from her mother, and fables only have a sliver of truth in them.

“Be careful, girl,” says Asha. “Off you go now.”

Nanda heaves the bucket, gripping it tight with both her hands, resting it near her chest. This way at least, one of her hands doesn't have to do all the work. The way back is not long, but is treacherous. A shuffling of feet begins in earnest behind her as the other women scramble to take the water from the well.

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Her throat is parched, like a sand-crusted road, by the time she reaches her jhuggi, but she dares not touch the water yet. Not until the elders of the house have had it to do their business. She will probably have to make another trip in the afternoon, and then one in the evening to make up for their daily use. Her lips have started chafing, blood trickling down and drying against the dust, a persistent brown layer near her chin.

She's almost at her doorstep when a thickset woman comes out of her house, wringing her blood-soaked hands. The woman glances at Nanda. Her gaze is like a slap of cold wind, and the bucket slips from Nanda's hands. The woman reaches just in time to catch it. Nanda mutters a thank you under her breath, but the woman thrusts her hands inside the bucket to wash off the blood. Nanda stares at her in astonishment, a weariness seizing her bones. The water turns red.

And then she hears the wail of a child from inside. “Go inside,” says the woman. “Hold your sister in your hands.”

Nanda had opened her mouth to curse the woman, but now it hangs agape. Immediately, the edges of her lips curl into a smile, and her heart flutters. She dashes towards the door, screaming with joy, “My sister is born!” In her excitement, she doesn't see the raised platform on the floor. Her foot hits cold stone, she stumbles, and falls head first.

A sickening bone crunch mixed with the first sounds of her sister is the last thing she hears before her eyes close.

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She wakes up, a mad throbbing in her head, the ground beneath her cold as a whetstone at night. Darkness has fallen outside; she can tell from the pitch black of the sky. But why are the insides dark too?

“Maa . . .” she calls, fumbling around in darkness, her hands eager to find purchase. She can't see even a morsel, all light snuffed out. She was sure she had enough kerosene to keep the lamp burning. What has happened?

“Shhh . . .” A cold grip seizes her hands. “Keep your voice to a whisper. Or better yet, shut your mouth.”

It is the voice of the woman who she saw outside her house.

“What's the matter? Who are you? How is my sister. . . Where is mother?”

“Your sister is asleep,” she says, her voice a cracked whisper. There’s something in the air, a forgotten letter, a half-formed sentence, which doesn’t quite come out of the woman’s mouth, but Nanda senses it.

“My mother?”

“Look . . . child . . . what’s your name? Nanda . . . The Thakur boys came.”

A chill creeps through her spine and finds a home at the base of her neck. She wants to scream, but the black pit that has formed in her stomach clutches her insides and denies her any voice. *Thakur aaye, andhera laaye*. Thakurs bring darkness. Before today, that darkness had been distant, wrapped in hushed whispers and stories. She’d never assumed it would come to her doorstep so soon.

For the past three months, nothing untoward has happened in the nearby village where people of her caste lived. It was an uneasy truce. But when a boy and a girl were beaten, burned alive, and hung by a tree, just because they’d drunk water from the wrong well, ugly shockwaves had shaken the district, the neighbouring towns, and subsequently the state. The police had brushed the case under the carpet and the government had termed the murder “an international plot to disrupt communal harmony.”

If there was one wise thing that Nanda’s father had taught her, it was this—there was no communal harmony. Their heads would always be down, their steps always silent, their bodies always tired, their wills always broken. And that was a truth which Nanda’s heart pumped in her veins every passing second, a truth which was as much part of her as her blood.

“But why . . . did anybody do anything?”

“Do they ever need a reason? Your existence is reason enough,” says the woman. “You, I hid under a thick blanket so they couldn’t see. I took your sister and went behind a shed.”

“What . . . what did they do to my mother?”

“I don’t know. They brought a lot of smoke with them. Your mother wasn’t here when I came back inside. But if she’s lucky, she’s dead.”

Nanda wants to scream, but her own body rebels. No voice comes out, and she shivers, chokes, gasps. Her eyes brim with tears too afraid to flow. She wants to touch her sister. She wants to sing lullabies to her and tell her everything will be alright. Her will won’t be broken, her head won’t bend.

“I think they’ve left now,” says the woman after a long, deep silence. Then, a sound comes, sharp, like metal hitting stone. “I am burning the lamp.”

Nanda listens to the mechanics of the kerosene lamp and the hiss of the matchstick that follows. But the pinprick of brightness and the flame she expects never come. She waits and waits in darkness. Waiting for light so she can at least see her newborn sister and hold her.

But it doesn’t come.

“I can’t see and my head hurts,” Nanda whispers, grabbing her forehead. She can feel crusts of dried blood on her skin.

“Can you see how many fingers I am holding up?”

“No, I told you, it’s all black. Oh my god; oh my god, I’ve gone. . .”

“You need to rest. It’s late night anyway. I’ll take care of your sister.”

Again, a pause, like the deep lingering silence between two tides hitting the shore. A silence which presses upon Nanda. It threatens to linger for too long until it’s finally broken by her sister’s wailing.

“So, ja, bacha.” Sleep, baby, sleep, says the woman in a sing-song lullaby. It is entirely the wrong sort of rhythm. The words are barren and don’t have the desired effect. Her voice is too harsh, like a

saw on a wooden bench.

“I want to hold her,” says Nanda, holding out her hands. “Please.”

The next second her arms touch skin softer than clouds. A delicate bundle, like it would melt if held for too long. Without sight, Nanda has to rely on her own instincts. She is intimately aware of the lightness of the baby, but the weight of a precious life is enough to send her heart hammering. Yet she prevails. She is the elder sister, after all. A protective warmth surges through her.

“Be careful,” says the woman.

“Rukja raat, theher ja re chanda. . .” *O’ night, stop. . . O’ moon, cease your turn.* The old song is barely a trickle in her brain, and yet it comes out. This is the song her mother sang for her when she was little. Her voice, her cadence, her words are still deep inside her, and now they come out pouring.

The baby stops crying and cooes silently.

“What are you going to name her?”

“Yamini,” says Nanda.

Nanda holds the baby until she can hear soft snores. Then she feels the weight being lifted as she falls into the comforting arms of sleep herself.

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A grey cloud hangs in front of Nanda’s eyes, persistent, unmoving. She can make out an inkling of light at the edges of her vision, but most of it is still blurry. Gori, the cow, moos and the sound is thunderous and that’s how Nanda knows it’s morning. The other signal of morning—her Kaka’s persistent yelling of her name to help him in his morning routine—is curiously absent. She has to go to the well to collect water for her and her family’s daily needs.

Family. The word tastes rank on her tongue now, almost alien. What did she have left? She wasn’t even sure if her mother was alive. Where was Kaka?

Yamini.

She has a sister now! A younger sister to take care of. Nanda wipes dried spittle from her chin and scrambles on the floor, her hands feeling for signs of life. “Yamini . . . Baby, where are you? Yamini, it’s your sister . . . Nanda.” The air is still, oppressive, and the quietness of her surroundings gnaws at her. There’s no sign of Yamini. Is the baby still asleep? A cold terror grips her heart as she goes on all fours, searching, panting, searching for her last thread to a brutal world. Yamini.

“Nanda! What are you doing, girl?”

“Where’s my sister?”

“She was crying in the morning, so I took her outside,” says the woman. Her words seem earnest. Nanda has no choice right now but to trust her. She sits down on the spot, holding her head, helpless. The grey in her eyes dissolves, drowning completely in sudden tears.

“I figured your vision won’t be back, so I brought you something.” Nanda moves her head in the general direction of her voice. “But it will only work after you’ve eaten.”

“Has my sister eaten?” Nanda says while holding out her hands.

“I breastfed her,” says the woman. “Here, have this first.”

As the woman speaks, an angular thing plops in Nanda’s hands. Hard, oily and warm, its smell is both nutty and buttery, something which she has witnessed only once before in her life. She brings it to her mouth and takes the first bite. A savoury crunch of bread later her teeth dig into warm and spicy potato fillings. A samosa.

Nanda wolfs it down in four big bites.

“Now, this. . .”

The next thing is slimy to the touch, similarly warm, a liquid, blob-like, misshapen, unruly thing. She brings it to her nose and the smell is unbearable, flies over dead-meat, deep sewer, algae on stone. The samosa almost comes up in her throat in an oily bile.

“You trust me?”

“I am not sure.”

“I’ll leave you to your devices then.”

Nanda takes a deep breath, holds it, and then brings the thing to her mouth. She takes a bite, and the taste is metallic, like scraping rust off iron. She chews and chews and chews and the thing won’t dissolve in her mouth, and she chews for the life of her, until the thing is nothing but water and fiber and then she swallows it.

Her breakfast comes out of her in a greenish yellow gloop. She can tell it’s green by just how it feels on her tongue. Then her eyes burn, a raw, primal fire rages inside of her eyelids, and she howls, her guttural cry enough to make her sister cry, too. She wants to claw her eyes out, but her hands are gripped by the woman.

“No, no, no, it hurts, hey raam, it hurts. . .”

“It will pass, child,” says the woman.

And it does. The fiery sensation vanishes and the absence of fire makes her eyes cold. Then a red prism comes in front of her vision, and everything becomes awash in blood. She can see, but what sight is this?

The woman sits down in front of her. She wears black robes, her eyes smeared with black kohl, and her lips of an unknown dark colour, which would have been blue had it not been for the reddish hue through which Nanda is seeing the world.

“You . . . You are the ojha . . . the one who cursed the Yadav boy with . . . whatever the hell he can do now. I thought the ojha was a man.”

“Don’t call me with that foul moniker,” says the woman. “And yes, I gave the Yadav boy the ability to speak with birds.”

“What have you cursed me with, woman!?”

“You can be kinder to me. I saved your life and your sister’s.”

The woman kneels down on the hard floor and shows Nanda her sister. Even basked in red, the sight of her sister fills warmth in her heart and softens its maddening thump.

“I can’t wait for her to grow up,” says Nanda, touching little Yamini’s forehead.

“I don’t wish this village, or even this district upon her. Promise me, Nanda. You will move out of this place the first chance you get.”

Nanda nods, absently. She doesn’t know what she’ll have to do to forever move out of the village. Its dust, its grime, its furnace hot air are a part of her now.

She looks around to find her Kaka on the bed, gazing at the ceiling above, catatonic with a wide-eyed horror. His lips are moving and he seems to be murmuring something. Nanda crawls towards him and grabs his right hand, which hangs limply by the side of the charpai. His skin is clammy and cold to the touch. Nanda strains her ears—his Kaka is chanting an age-old prayer. A prayer to Goddess Durga.

“He has been like this since the events of the last evening,” says the woman. “When the boys took your mother, he screamed at them, and then his head hit the pillow. Then he started praying.”

“His lips are completely torn. He needs water,” says Nanda.

“I brought some for us, but I think a trip to the well is in order.”

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Crimson sight is better than no sight at all. Nanda is reminded of the peephole camera person who came to the village once and showed them moving images inside a wooden box. It cost ten rupees per viewing, and Nanda had begged Kaka to give her the money just so she could catch a glimpse of a horse galloping across a race track. The moving images were tinged in green and yellow, but the feeling is the same.

On the way to the well, she is stopped by Chacha Iftiqhar, the postman, standing by his old bicycle. “Why are you running, kid?” he asks as he sifts through envelopes in his bag. This is when Nanda, too, realises that she’d been hurrying. As if some great disaster would befall if she didn’t reach the well on time.

“I have to get water from the well.”

“You shouldn’t be alone,” he says. “I can drop you there.”

“I can manage, thanks Chacha,” says Nanda. But before leaving she notices a dark shadow hanging on the postman’s shoulder, eager to devour him whole.

The way to the well is familiar yet strange. Where she’s previously seen cobwebs and pebbles she now sees animal and insect carcasses, always shifting, moving, disappearing and appearing again. She sees the trees on her path reduced to husk. A stream under a stone bridge reduced to vapour. All red, all dead.

When she reaches the narrow path tucked away beside Jatav’s cloth shop, she hears a faint whistle of the wind. On a normal day, at this spot, she’d hear the voices of the women huddled around the well, chatting away their concerns of ignorant husbands, skipped meals, or useless household chores, jobs which didn’t pay well. But today she hears nothing.

When she’s twenty feet away she sees dark figures lying around the well, all red, flies buzzing around the area. Her heart skips a beat, two, then stills, then starts beating madly again. The women.

She dashes towards the well and sees tumblers lying on the ground, their water spilled, steam oozing from cracks on earth. The faces of the women are aghast, eyes bulging outwards, skin a deep purple which, when mixed with the red haze of Nanda’s sight, looks blacker than the night. She sees Asha Tai sitting against the wall of the well, her head lolling forward, her face wearing the same horror as the other women.

“What happened here?” she screams at Asha Tai. “Tai, tell me.”

Tai doesn’t speak. She’s dead, deader than the others. The corpses around Nanda are all real, and not phantasms of her blood vision. Her heart feels heavy inside her chest, her breath coming in chokes and gasps. She places her hand on Tai’s lifeless arm and sits there, a coldness gripping her insides.

The dead Tai wakes and glances at Nanda, her eyes grey and mottled with white. Her speech is a webbed crackle when she eventually speaks, a dry heave of a sound coming from the depths of pataal. “Ladki, they came and poisoned the well.”

And soon the other women also wake slowly, all their eyes grey and white and grey, their voices the same husky, guttural drawl, all of them chanting, “Ladki, the Thakur boys came and poisoned the well.”

Nanda staggers to her feet, but the soles of her chappal feel fused to her skin, the entire lower half of her body a heavy, rubberlike mass. The other women go back to being dead.

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The air feels bloated, on the cusp of exploding into an unforgiving morass. The road Nanda had taken is emptier on the way back. Chacha Iftiqhar's bicycle hangs an inch from the ground, impossibly cradled by the air. As Nanda walks, her vision goes darker. The back of her neck feels cold. Something salty and serrated crawls on her skin, but she can't see what it is.

She turns.

Thakur aaye, andhera laaye. The saying, like a clarion call, rings through her head. A black, vapory mass trails across the road, approaching her, engulfing shops, houses, vehicles. A darkness, with wispy tentacles, ever growing. The saying was true. The Thakurs on their prowl *always* brought darkness. A real, palpable, magical blackness which killed and maimed, as the Thakurs wanted.

Nanda runs across the deserted village, and the blackness follows.

••••

"They were dead, and then they spoke to me." Nanda's chest hurts while speaking. The words tumble out of her mouth and hang in the air, waiting to be picked up by the witch woman. "What have you done to me?"

"You told so yourself. You could speak to the dead. Just like the Yadav boy could speak to birds, and the barber who cut open a cycle with his bare hands. Many more I have given such gifts to, and many more I would keep giving." The woman cradles Yamini in her lap who looks at the world with innocence. Nanda's eyes dart towards her sister.

"Bet you gave it to the Thakur boys too," Nanda spits. There's an urge in her to lunge at the woman and claw her kohl-smearred eyes out. But Nanda resists. "I want no part of it. Take it away from me."

"Stop, girl, you've already said too much," says the woman. "I come from afar, and I have heard of the darkness those men carry. I came here to put an end to it, but little did I know you people have resigned yourselves to your fate."

"What do you mean?"

"Their kind has fought my kind for ages now." The woman's voice cracks and comes out as a hoarse whisper, like sandpaper on a saw. "The boy in the other village who was found hanging from the tree . . . was my nephew."

"So it is personal?"

"Isn't it personal for you? For everyone in this village and the surrounding ones? They do all these crimes . . . You know all the Yadav boy wanted was some laddoo from the mandir. He was beaten up for having a sweet tooth, because the Thakurs didn't deem him pure enough to enter the temple. I gave him a *gift!* He could have brought down a swarm of hawks upon those sneering Thakur boys from the other village. But all he did was speak to chickens."

Nanda sits down on the cold floor. Her breath comes slowly now, and her heart is a distant thrum inside her chest. The woman continues.

"You are surrounded by suffering and injustice, but when given power to fight, you always flee. You have been so powerless, you don't know what to do with power. You have been without justice for so long, you don't know what to do with it."

The woman's piercing words hang in the air, echo around the hut, and take their sweet time to fade away. Nanda's father mumbles in the darkness, chanting a hymn, unperturbed by the accusations thrown. Yamini points a small finger at the ceiling, unaware of the blackness of the world she is born

in.

“Their darkness . . .” says Nanda, after a while. “It’s real. I saw it.”

“They turn into vapour and then they turn back. Which is why we never know properly when they come and go. But they’re fragile when they transition.”

“I am scared.”

A clatter of hooves and a resounding neigh, outside. Nanda turns to see a figure in the darkness, black against the red of her eyes. The woman places a warm hand on her shoulders.

“We have time,” she says.

• • • •

Leaving the small hut she grew in wasn’t that difficult. Hunger was the only memory she had attached to that place, mixed with Kaka’s scoldings and her mother’s gasps as she made four rotis for three people on a small, smoky choolha. But hauling Kaka’s wet potato sack of a body onto the woman’s carriage was the most difficult thing Nanda had ever done in her life. A sliver of her being was convinced that it would be best if she just left Kaka behind. He isn’t himself anymore, and there isn’t much of a life left in him.

The carriage moves leisurely, depending on the horse’s pace. Nanda sits hugging herself, watching the world outside, awash in red. The witch woman sings a crude song to Yamini who seems content in listening to misshapen, badly formed ragas. Kaka is on the floor of the carriage, mostly a vegetable.

“What will you do when you grow up, ladki?” asks the woman, stopping her bad song.

“I don’t know,” says Nanda. The carriage lurches. Kaka’s body shakes violently, uncontrollably, for a brief moment, before going back to its catatonic self.

“Can’t you do something for him? Don’t you people always have a potion?”

“Don’t show sympathy for this man. I saw in him what he is capable of, and it’s not a pretty sight.”

“He was always good to me,” says Nanda.

“He didn’t want Yamini in this world. He looked at you with disdain.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I told you, I saw.” the woman stressed on her last word.

The carriage lurches some more and comes to a jittery halt. Nanda is almost thrown towards the woman in a fierce motion. The woman shields Yamini from hitting Nanda’s lithe but harsh body.

“What happened?”

“The horse might be tired, let me check on it. You hold your sister.”

Nanda holds her sister’s soft body close to her chest, her heartbeat mirroring the little child’s. The world outside grows progressively darker, and redder, and the air grows heavier. The tarp over the wooden carriage flutters, then comes to a stop.

“Ladki!” the woman’s harsh scream rattles Nanda. She shivers, her hands clammy as Yamini’s light body feels alien. Her sister coos, unaware of what is about to befall. Nanda glides out of the carriage, forgetting that she has stepped over her Kaka.

To her right, the witch woman hovers in the air, smoke coiled around her, even as more smoke oozes from cracks on the barren earth, taking a vague humanoid form.

“Run, Nanda!”

A man six feet in height with smoke for hands envelops the witch-woman, his face contorted in a snarl, revealing lips smeared in paan or blood. The man opens his maw and digs his teeth into the witch-woman’s neck. The next second, everything is blood. The man, the woman, the world. All

blood, all red.
Nanda runs.

•••

She doesn't know where her feet hit on the hard, parched earth. She doesn't know what stone, what nail, what thorn pierces her naked skin, numb from all pain, numb from every feeling except one—survival. The air around her knows her breathless gasps intimately by now, the ground her skin. On the road she sees corpses of people she has known all her life. Chacha Iftiqhar, the kind postman, who once took her to the other side, where the narrow road from the village met the road from the city and she saw an airplane in the sky for the first time. The village darzi's wife, Meena, who took the measurement for her mother's blouse one time, and had sneered at Nanda. The small Pathan boy who had once given her a sweet. All those lives touched by her. All those lives snuffed out by a being that consistently denied their existence, and *fed* on the fact, becoming stronger.

The temple looms in front of her, a milk white, conical tower with a saffron flag atop it, fluttering noiselessly against the wind. If there was some sort of a divine justice, a divine mercy, then Nanda would find here.

Holding her sister tight, she ascends the steps of the temple. Each step she takes, she hears a sharp slice of air, once, twice, thrice, then relentless clawing, fluttering sounds. On top of the stairs, just beside the stone statue of a lion, sits the Yadav boy, caressing the wings of a pigeon. Above him, in a spiral, hovers a murder of crows. The crows don't speak, yet their eyes shine. The boy looks at Nanda. She believes, in that impossible moment, that the witch woman was right about many things, but wrong about one thing.

“Did you lose someone too?” the boy asks.

“Amma and Kaka,” says Nanda.

“The Thakurs killed my babuji. I ran . . . and then the crows came to me. I speak to them. But they're angry.”

A pause builds between the two children, and for a moment the air feels oppressive, rank, redolent of evil, despite the presence of divinity around them. Nanda holds the gaze of the goddess in the temple, not expecting any divine justice.

“How many times do we have to drill in your head the same damn thing?”

The voice is harsh, adult and commanding, yet flat. Nanda turns to see two men, wearing black kurtas, sporting thin moustaches, their hair neatly parted in between. Clean, prim, they look. The two Thakur boys—Prakash Thakur and Vinay Thakur.

“We had to poison the well because what choice did you leave us? Polluting the waters with your filthy hands,” says Vinay.

“But desecrating our place of worship with your presence. Again?”

Nanda's insides feel hollow, and a cold rotten fear grips her. Yamini begins crying and her wail echoes in the empty temple lot.

“Your kind just keeps breeding,” says Prakash Thakur. Smoke curls upwards from his right hand.

They're fragile when they transition. The witch woman's words ring like a temple bell in Nanda's mind.

“Yadav,” she whispers. “How angry are your crows?”

The Yadav boy looks at Nanda. His face tells her he wants no part in what is about to befall the two of them, but has to make a choice anyway. Nanda clutches her sister to her chest as she waits for

him to reply. The air stills.

The boy makes a swift hand movement. The swarm of crows descends upon the Thakur boys, engulfing them completely like the smoke they turn to. They swat at the crows helplessly, but the birds keep clawing them back, tearing at their kurtas, their vapoury flesh. A smattering of fresh, red blood droplets on white marble steps of the temple follows.

“We should go,” says Nanda. The Yadav boy gets up and follows Nanda downstairs. Her gaze is affixed on the Thakurs who are fighting the crows. A dark fear bubbles deep in her stomach. A fear that she will take the last step, and just at that moment the crows will be defeated, and the Thakur boys will give another chase, this time of a more successful kind.

• • • •

On the last step, the fear becomes all too real. Out of the flock of crows comes out a black, smoky hand, and it grips Nanda’s arm.

“Not so easy.” the arm shakes Nanda. The Yadav boy is two feet ahead of her. He holds out his hands. Nanda doesn’t want to part with her sister, but she has to. She has to keep her safe. And so she does.

She is taken in by the unforgiving swarm of crows, all around her. She and the two Thakur boys, wrapped in smoke and feathers and blood. Her eyes meet Prakash Thakur, who grimaces at her as he shakes her body hard.

“I am going to do to you what I did . . . ”

Nanda doesn’t let him complete the sentence. She pulls all her might and kicks him in the crotch. As he crumbles to the ground, the crows fall on him again. Nanda staggers back, but this time, the other Thakur boy emerges from behind the feathery curtain, smiting at the birds left and right, his eyes affixed on Nanda.

“You pesky little girl.” He snarls. “Bend down and lick my feet.”

“No,” says Nanda, defiant. “My head won’t be down, my steps won’t be silent, my body won’t be tired, and my will won’t be broken.” In her mind, something terrible takes birth. One by one, she recites the name of the dead, the lives she touched, the lives which touched her. Asha Tai, Chacha Iftiqhar, Meena, the Pathan kid. And many, many more.

Behind the Thakur boy, a movement. Dust swirls from the ground, then vanishes, revealing a crowd. White eyes, dead, deep-blue skin, crooked walk. The people she saw on the streets. The lives she touched.

“What are you saying? Do as I say, and maybe I will have mercy on you!”

His hands turn to vapour. But then the air is filled with chants. The crowd of the undead marches ever closer, singing a hymn.

Our body won't be tired, our will won't be broken.

Nanda takes a step back. The people push in closer. The swarm of crows ascends as the undead force themselves upon the Thakur boys, bare teeth on skin, biting, clawing, ripping apart smoke and flesh alike, chanting. Nanda stays and watches the Thakur boys stripped to their bones. As the crowd of the dead retreats, a head lolls to the side, its eyes gouged out, staring at the heavens in mute horror.

Nanda holds its dead gaze and whispers, softly, “What is mercy?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amal Singh is a screenwriter, author, and a cat dad currently living in Mumbai, India. While his cat silently judges him, he can be seen drafting a novel, or trying to bake brownies in a cooker. His short fiction has appeared in *Apex Magazine*, *Clarkesworld*, *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, and is forthcoming in *F&SF*. He tweets at @jerun_onto.

Lost Portals

Mark S. Bailen | 1064 words

In a furniture showroom in Stockholm stood a large wardrobe called a Kleppstad. It was made out of cheap particle board and wooden pegs. If the shelves were removed and a person scrunched inside, the back panel would disappear and a passage would open into the shuddering woods of Myrkvior, where the highland trolls dwell. But a forklift backed into the wardrobe and it was taken to a dumpster.

In a weedy glen outside Evesham was a mound with a shallow hole that happened to be a second entrance to Wonderland. Nobody ever fell into the hole, although more than a few stumbled over it. Once, a girl lost a shoe. The hole was paved over when the A44 highway was extended to Oxford.

In the coastal town of Komatsu was one of the world's oldest hotels, Hoshi Ryokan. The grounds contained a hidden hot spring that was a portal to the Dragon Tooth Temple. To enter the portal, one needed a noble heart, a brave soul, and a still mind. The nervous and reclusive tea master, Kobori, often visited the hotel. He witnessed dozens of travelers entering the hot spring, disappearing into its depths. Although he attempted many times, he never breached the portal. Kobori studied every inch of the hot spring, prodding the stones, and he often dunked his head, but still no success.

Never was the stained futon stored in Marta Cruz's basement in the suburbs of Lima struck by a wooden spoon. If it had been, the futon would have sprung to life, flown through the nearest doorway, and then soared above the barrio. The futon was capable of transporting passengers over the ocean to the magical island of Namboobu, where they could interact with talking animals. Unfortunately, the futon was destroyed in a flood.

Above a restroom sink in a Kiev gas station was a cracked, dirty mirror. If a person ingested amanita muscaria mushrooms and looked directly into the mirror, they would get sucked through the glass, starting with their hands and ending with their feet. On the other side was a stone stairway that led to the crypts of the Kings and Queens of Scythia. This portal was lost when an employee accidentally shattered the mirror with the handle of a mop.

After years of frustration with the hot spring, Kobori tried asking the travelers how they entered the portal and reached the Dragon Tooth Temple. They only shook their heads and laughed. Kobori bowed, shuffled away, and never asked again. But he continued to spy on the travelers, growing more and more resentful of their journeys.

Beneath the Hoggar mountains in the Sahara desert was a jutting stone formation. If a person uttered a secret phrase, the sand-bitten stone shifted aside, revealing a large cavern containing immense treasures. Enough gold to blind you. Enough jewels to bury you. But the treasure was never discovered. Not only had the phrase been forgotten by history, but also the language in which the phrase first occurred.

A storm in Nebraska moved eastward until a tornado spun up. It picked up a house and tossed it a half mile into the sky. Oddly, if somebody had been inside that house, they would not have been battered, bruised, or scattered among the debris. Instead, they would have woken unharmed in a field of poppies, over the rainbow, in the Land of Oz. But this never happened. The owners were vacationing in Florida.

One day while drinking tea outside the hot spring, Kobori felt the ground tremor. The stones beneath the hot spring shifted, the water bubbled, and his teacup flipped over. As Kobori crouched,

waiting for the earthquake to cease, he was mesmerized by the tea leaves spreading over the stone. A pattern formed in the leaves, a circle with two lines. Months later, after the travelers stopped coming, Kobori realized what the tea leaves had meant. The hot spring had been damaged by the earthquake. The portal was lost. Nobody would visit the Dragon Tooth Temple again.

The number 14 streetcar, which ran down Saint Charles Avenue in New Orleans, when taken to the end of the line deposited its passengers at the entrance of Lafitte Alley. The alley was frequented by vampires, snake charmers, and voodoo practitioners. But the city renovated the number 14. New paint was applied. The windows were unstuck. The wheels were greased. And the passengers could no longer locate Lafitte Alley.

Magic beans, the sort that grow into large beanstalks, climb upward, pierce the clouds, and reach the castles in the sky, are extremely rare. Even when they do appear, the beans are seldom replanted. Instead, they are steamed, added to casseroles, or sauteed in butter.

After he discovered the symbol for lost portals, Kobori practiced reading tea leaves every day. Not only could he discover when a portal was lost, but also from where on Earth it had disappeared. Finding the pattern became a great joy. Sometimes he would discover two in one day. Other times, none for many weeks. Of course, he never visited these portals. Why should he? They were lost.

In the Catskill Mountains lived a hermit who brewed cider flavored with chokecherries. Occasionally he wandered through the woods and gave away corked bottles. The cider was pungent and caused a deep slumber that lasted months, years, or decades. Sleepers would wake unaged, transported to the future. No one knows what happened to the hermit, but some believe it was his bones found by hikers at the bottom of Verkeerderkill Falls.

While cleaning her attic, Ms. Whipple of Melbourne discovered an unopened board game. During her grandchildren's last visit, they decided board games were boring. They hadn't realized that the game opened a doorway to a tropical jungle, lush and humid, stocked with lions, wildebeests, and great apes. Mrs. Whipple tossed the game into the trash, along with a stack of comic books.

For the rest of his life Kobori worked tirelessly, brewing tea and searching for lost portals. Yet he never forgot his failure to breach the Dragon Tooth Temple. He never forgot that he lacked the noble heart, the brave soul, and the still mind. And he never stopped feeling resentful of the other travelers. Thus, every time the tea leaves told him of another damaged or forgotten portal, wherever on Earth it had been lost, he silently rejoiced.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark S. Bailen is an author, website developer, illustrator, and lousy photographer. He lives in an orange cabin in the woods outside Flagstaff, Arizona with his wife and teenage son. His two favorite activities are hiking and doodling. He would do both at the same time if this didn't increase his risk of running into a tree. He earned an MFA from the University of Arizona, attended Taos Toolbox, and participated in the Storied Imaginarium. He is a member of Codex and the SFWA. His work has appeared in the High Plains Literary Review, the Sonora Review, and Little Blue Marble. He has also written and illustrated an award-winning children's book titled *Earf*. His website is at fakemountain.com.

An Arrangement of Moss and Dirt

K.P. Kulski | 2200 words

I have spent a lifetime in front of this window, mortality seeping out in waves of nausea and lost weight. There she is, just beyond the grime-cornered glass, in the yard, playing like all children should. I almost tap to get her attention, to give a weak wave of longing and vanished time, but I only watch her move through the grass and tree trunks, hair blown by the breeze. From the moment Nari was born, she fit into the mold of my arm, the nook that I had unwittingly grown for her, a fleshy cradle of her very own. As is the way of motherhood.

She is laughing, playing some game with a neighbor. I too want to play, but my limbs are heavy and I am drowning, huddling into the spools of veins and nerve endings of my existence. She flies, my Nari, like a hawk. I want to tell her all these things.

To tell her that I am sorry that I am sick. More importantly, that she is free, that she is the color of life for me.

But the door creaks open and the window is black. Someone brings me thin soup and tea. Always hot liquids to be ingested by the weak. I am dutiful in consuming these things with a pang of hope, that somehow I will stop ingesting myself.

The world winks and spins. I moan in my dreamless dreams.

“Mommy,” her little voice calls. Thin and high.

• • • •

Someone props me up in the chair, piling pillows around me like blubber. It is day. So bright, the sun, that I have to squint to look out. The trees shiver. Were they not just sweltering? Ready for raw kisses and insect burrows? Secrets crinkle in their bark, breathing. It rains like sapped energy, and I lean back on the softness of excess. There she is, Nari, dressed in a bathing suit, drinking from a hose. “Put on a coat,” I shout. Who has let her go out into the cold like that? She will get sick. “Get a coat,” I rail at my daughter, angry. Startled, she looks through the window, stopping in mid smile. Someone throws a blanket over me and the window disappears into plaid and wool and I am fighting to get out. Threaded coats of long dead sheep try to slither down my throat, quilting over my brain, straightening the gray crinkles of everything I know.

• • • •

Canned soup, escaping the aluminum air.

• • • •

Nari comes to see me, tiptoeing into my room, her worry held out before her like an offering. “Come now girl, you can’t fret me better.”

The flowers of her love droop and I hate myself for saying that. Nari, I meant for you to live and stop thinking of me. I meant for you to hunt and soar. Feathers are power, not jewelry.

“Don’t worry,” I say. But the void can’t be filled.

She pats my hand, small fingers like baby spiders tapping out the first moments outside the jelly of their sacs. “I have a plan. Don’t worry,” she says back at me.

She's gone before I can wonder what those words could mean.

••••

The two trees stick out of the ground like a pair of legs, edging the yard, blocking a beyond-world. They know they are the edge of my existence, and those trees waggle themselves, bragging at how their needles grow even in the cold. I haven't seen the neighbor out playing, but Nari is there, walking toward the pines, a stick in hand. She shouts, holding the deadwood up high. What game is she playing? Her eyes are fixed on the obscene opening between the trees. Her eyes are wide and she seems so utterly alone. That's what illness does, it leaves the sick and their loved ones on unreachable islands. They who are suffering at the sight of another's pain, padding quietly from the room, promising to let their dear one rest—yet they never really leave the room. A part of them stays there, a pulling worry. Nari shouldn't have to live this, she shouldn't have to have a mother who can only sleep, rising only to stare at her forlornly through this window. Yet here we are. A little girl all alone, forever locked in a sick room.

She's out there in the yard and she is afraid.

••••

The snip of scissors too close to my ear makes me stir, but my eyelids won't cooperate, won't open to see what is happening. The shafts are snapping between the cruelty of the blades of metal, closing on each other, severing the threads. Nari smells like pine needles and candy. I want to hold her close, but my limbs won't listen any more than my eyelids. She emits a soft snuffle and I can see without seeing, how she draws up her sleeve to wipe her nose.

"Sigtun mulvik, hamal shaldish," her little girl voice says.

I murmur, trying to form the words of a question. Nari continues, her voice a jumble of consonants clanging against open vowels. She doesn't notice, or chooses not to respond to my own nonsense, continuing with hers.

Rubber soles smack against the wood floor as she runs into the hallway, like a child ready for a game. Nausea cripples me and I retch, my body stretching to pull whatever poison that sickens it up from my feet. The only thing it achieves is a dribble of soup, rancid with stomach acid.

••••

An animal shrieks outside my window in the darkness. Some poor creature caught by the hunt of another, and by the sound, it is not a quick death, but hard and sharp, the kind of death that erases the way the thing may have lived. Soon I'm begging along with it for the end to come because the sounds are the same thing gurgling in my own throat. The soup that I regurgitate has stiffened on the blanket, a rough smelly patch of my humanity. I want to add to the collection, but there is nothing left for me to throw up. Even my tears are dry.

••••

The wind slashes through the trees. The tops of them try to bend, making big shows of deference, but that wind wants more. I wonder what they did to deserve being punished so. Those pines at the end of the yard are arrogant still, they aren't bending much, acting as if nothing could topple them.

Something slithers up a trunk, white, almost translucent and slime-like. It has hands but I can't tell where those begin on its body, or legs, or how it manages to contort and inch like a gastropod upwards. Wide eyes are fixed within it, pretty gem-like things set into the mess, they are staring back at me through the window, and when they blink, it seems as if the world darkens. A heavy rain drops from the black clouds. Leaves and small branches from other trees fall like ants. And the thing shimmies up the tree, or into it, I can't really tell. It seems like my eyes are playing tricks, or my mind.

Then I notice Nari. I did not see her before, the slight form in a blue raincoat. She hasn't put up the hood, and the rain soaks her hair until it sticks to her face. She's holding something up to the tree, strands in a child's fist.

So quick, a blur of white against the air, a clawed hand snatches the offering. Nari doesn't move. She watches the thing disappear once again up the trunk. When my girl turns, I gasp. A long cut has slashed her cheek, the wound open as if it has something to say, a red angry mouth railing against the fabric of reality.

••••

That woman has returned, trying to force soup into my mouth. It tastes of the ocean and dead chickens. Why won't she let me alone at the window? I need to track that creature, the pale thing in the tree. I must see it again and understand what it is. All that I own are questions and a ball of fear tight in my chest. Someone needs to know about the creature, how it hurt Nari. Could it do worse? Where is my daughter?

I groan and manage to swing my head away from the spoon. "Come on, eat a little." I gag and spit. In defeat the spoon clanks against the bowl. "Fine, have it your way."

It isn't my way. None of this is my way.

••••

The nightly scratching at the window is enough to drive me to insanity, like a branch begging for entrance. Go away, I want to yell. Let a sick woman lie in peace. But there will be no peace because it will start again tonight and the night after that and the night after that. I know.

I am lifted and diapered like an infant. Tucked in again. The room flashes like a sundial and I know the time, just looking at the illumination and shadow. When the sunlight turns crimson gold and falls upon the hutch in the corner, darkness soon falls.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

A squirrel scrounging for food. Chalk sliding over a chalkboard.

Owl-like eyes through the window. Pale and lewd in its nudity, the creature shimmies across the window like a gecko. She stops to stare back at me, her lips two fine petals of a rose. Fingers topped with long curved claws flex and stretch, making soft taps against the glass. She holds a clump of long hair that flutters in the wind. I want to feel at the place where scissors met my hair, to verify missing locks. The creature scratches against the window and leaps into the darkness beyond.

••••

I am dreaming of gossamer wings fluttering along the breeze. Flowers soak the air with sweet calls to their pollen. Sometimes when I wake up, I cannot open my eyes.

••••

“Mom,” she says to me, the voice still childlike. It stirs a memory that I cannot grasp. How can the voice of my daughter come from this woman? This grown person with sad eyes? “I love you,” she continues, “and I’m so sorry for all of this.”

I try to speak, but only odd moans flutter in my throat.

The woman tucks a hair behind an ear, just like Nari does, a scar crinkles over a cheek. The red mouth long quieted. “She told me that if I gave her what she wanted, you wouldn’t die. She promised that you’d never cry in pain or speak in anguish. She promised.” Her eyes shine with crushed glass and tacks.

“Who?” I want to scream, a question that pierces the dark. While I know it is the pale thing who claws at my window, I must hear Nari say it. My voice buzzes against bone and tongue, wishing for any escape.

It does not come. It never does.

She takes a long shuddering breath, tears welling, and she reaches for me, putting a tender hand on my cheek. Her trembling vibrates into the center of my mind. “I learned my lesson. I lost you that day forever.”

The memory of screams in the night floats about me, thickening the air, and I gulp at the oxygen like a fish. A little girl holding hair. Where is the neighbor child? Where are the scissors? Where has my little Nari gone?

“You lived. Yes. She kept that part of the bargain. But I’ve learned. Never make deals with the faeries. No amount of fresh milk can fix this.”

My mind screams, trying desperately to speak, to ask one thing. What, dear sweet daughter, did you trade? What did you give her in exchange for this hell?

Nari puts her face in her hands and weeps, and I cannot comfort her. My body does not belong to me. She slides the chair and gets up to leave, rushing toward the door in bitterness. I can only watch and long.

As the door clicks shut behind her, I can no longer remember what had gone through it. So I shift my eyes back out the window and hope Nari will be outside soon, playing with her friends. It is good for children to play.

••••

I have lain here long enough to watch black decay creep up to the rafters. Rats scatter their droppings around me, even as they gnaw on my bits and pieces. Today the roof has finally given way and the sunlight shines yellow through the damp, rotting wood. No one comes to prop me up anymore. Long enough I’ve lain here that I can no longer remember the taste of soup or tea.

I am still alive because I can feel my chest rise and fall. The pain of the rats, the aches of a moldering body. No whimpers escape my lips. I can only cry within my skull and try to remember to shut my eyes tight, because that is the only thing I have left, and God help me if the rats take those.

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K.P. Kulski is the author of the novel *Fairest Flesh*, a gothic horror from Strangehouse Books. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in various publications including *Unnerving Magazine*, the *HWA's Poetry Showcase*, and *Not All Monsters*. Born in Honolulu, Hawaii to a Korean mother and American-military father, she spent her youth wandering and living in many places both inside and outside the United States. Now she resides in the woods of Northeast Ohio where she teaches college history. Check out her website, www.garnetonwinter.com or follow her on Twitter [@garnetonwinter](https://twitter.com/garnetonwinter).

POETRY

The Herbalist

Oluwatomiswa Ajeigbe | 245 words

My grandfather was a herbalist—
he mixed rare leaves and seeds, ground them together
& when he was done, he smeared the mixture on my forehead.
This will protect you from evil spirits, He said.

on feast days, he held the kola in his hands & blessed it
before splitting it in two and throwing one half to the ground.
The gods must eat. Never forget to feed the gods, He said.

my grandfather always poured palmwine to the ground before drinking
because the earth is always thirsty—for wine, for blood, for sweat.
Do not neglect the earth. From her we came, to her we return, He said.

the day my grandfather died, he was asleep in his room
when the earth opened up and swallowed him,
& when she was satisfied, she spat out his mangled remains.
He forgot to feed her so she took his blood to feed herself.
I wish I had been able to tell my grandfather,
Who the gods want to destroy, they turn into a slave.

©2021 by Oluwatomiswa Ajeigbe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oluwatomiswa Ajeigbe is writer of the dark and fantastical, a poet and a reluctant mathematician. He has poetry and fiction published or forthcoming from *Dust Poetry Magazine*, *The Future Fire*, *Eyes To The Telescope*, *Star*Line*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Kalahari Review* and elsewhere. When he's not writing about malfunctioning robots or crazed gods, he can be found doing whatever people do on Twitter at @OluwaSigma. He writes from a room with broken windowpanes in Lagos, Nigeria.

The Forbidden Path to Forgetting

Daniel Ausema | 180 words

To trace the taboo labyrinth, sneak
past the frigid swells, between breakers,
make your way
up the pebbled strand, bare feet bleeding.
Enter the sinister path between upright stones.
Touch no rock but walk upright, toes pointed
inward, thoughts pointed outward;
take the route the rodents took,
the turning marked by no human feet.
When you have forgotten your body,
bruised and bloodied and chilled with subarctic air,
discover the maze's center.
The forgetting will always find you there.
Draw into yourself the stones,
the sea,
the tracks of forgotten beasts,
the mystery of unknowing.
Then leave the labyrinth behind,
unaltered, untouched, unforgotten.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Ausema's fiction and poetry have appeared in many places, including *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Diabolical Plots*. He is the author of the high fantasy trilogy *The Arcist Chronicles* and the creator of the steampunk-fantasy *Spire City* series. He lives in Colorado at the foot of the Rockies and can be found online at <https://danielausema.com>.

NONFICTION

Interview: Jennifer Marie Brissett

Arley Sorg | 2110 words

Has the pandemic and/or current events impacted your writing practice? And how have you adjusted?

I'm not gonna lie to you; it's been hard. This whole notion that, because we've all been locked up in our homes, we "should be a great for our writing" is utter nonsense. I used to: get up-write-lunch-write-nap/errands/chores-dinner. Now my writing routine is all over the place. I mean, how does a normal human being not be affected by a freakin' *pandemic* that is killing thousands of people?

My husband and I both got Covid at the very beginning of the outbreak in early March of last year. We actually didn't know what it was. We thought of it as a really, really bad flu. We both had temperatures around 103°. I coughed so hard that I lost my voice for a week. After we recovered, we debated on whether my husband should be working at home or not. Then the debate was over, no more questions—he's home. We just didn't know how long this was gonna last. We still don't. I basically gave up my home office for my husband to work, since he has Zoom meetings and phone calls and such. So I've been writing on the bed, which is a bit uncomfortable. We've both tried working at the dining table and it also doesn't seem to work. We are still figuring things out.

But what's been interesting is that the pandemic has forced us to rethink how we as a couple work. He used to commute to work two hours to and two hours back. That, plus the work day itself meant that I didn't see him much. So now we're talking about a more balanced work week, where sometimes he's home and sometimes he's in the office. I would miss him if he went back to the old schedule because I like having lunch with him.

You started writing in your 30s, but I am guessing you were reading long before that. What were the books that were significant for you when you were younger, and do they still hold up? Do you see their influence your writing?

I don't think I was assigned enough reading in my pre-college education. So I spent a lot of years feeling very behind in my reading. I loved reading, though, and spent years trying to figure out what would be good to read. When I was still in college, I once asked an English teacher—a black lady who was teaching high schoolers in the summer program I was a TA in math and science in—if she would recommend some books to me. She laughed and joyously wrote down about 10 or 12 authors and titles. I carried that list around for years, ticking off the books and authors as I read them. People like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and James Baldwin were on that list. Reading *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison and *Bailey's Café* by Gloria Naylor opened my mind to the possibilities for how black people fit into the literature spectrum. These were beautifully written, powerful books that left me sitting still in the quiet to take it all in when I finished them. Later on I read *Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, and I guess you could say after that my fate as an author was sealed.

You have an MFA from Stonecoast, and more recently did the Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop. Have these programs had a significant impact on your craft, process, or career?

After my bookstore closed, I felt pretty beaten up. I know there were a lot of forces at work to make that happen, but I couldn't help but feel depressed about it. People tend to treat someone who tried something that failed like it's a disease that they can catch. (Once an old customer who used to talk to me all the time saw me and crossed the street.) So yeah, my confidence took a hit.

I began writing as a coping method, sneaking out of bed at night to work at my computer. I wasn't sleeping much, anyway. This went on for a few years. I wasn't doing it seriously, just writing what came to mind. There may have even been a novel attempt in there. I never showed anybody anything. It was just for me. Octavia E. Butler's death shook me into taking my writing more seriously. I had heard about Clarion before, but now I finally understood what Clarion was about, so I applied. I was rejected three times. I figured, hey, three times is the charm, right? I'll try something else. Applying to the Stonecoast MFA program to me was just to see what they would say about my work in the rejection. I didn't think I'd actually GET IN!! I remember my hands shaking and having to drink a beer just to calm down the night I received the acceptance.

Really, it was my mentors who were the most important part of the program for me. They seemed to realize quickly that I had a confidence problem and that I needed to know that I actually was a good writer. The structure of the deadlines and the encouragement of Stonecoast really helped to reinforce a sense that writing is not a hobby but a discipline. That if I want to be good, I have to keep at it, be persistent. I tried really hard while at Stonecoast to take advantage of the multiple disciplines of the program by attending seminars for poetry and creative non-fiction as well as my popular fiction seminars and workshops. It's a multiple-genre practice that I maintain to this day.

You also have a Bachelor's in Interdisciplinary Engineering: Electrical Engineering with a concentration in Visual Art. Does this background often show up in your fiction?

Yes and no. No, in that, I don't try to reference those parts of my background in my work. (Although one day I might. Who knows?) And yes, because the specifics of my training in each discipline come up in *how* I actually go about writing. For instance, the engineering comes up in how I sometimes look at my writing like fragmentary parts of a puzzle that I have to piece together. Sometimes my visual art training comes into play metaphorically in my writing, like how I was taught to draw a figure by lightly and quickly laying down a gesture line. It will be "wrong," but it's just to get a feel for the structure. Then keep laying down lines, looking closely at the object I'm trying to depict. Each line won't be "correct," but each will be closer to "correct." Slowly the image will emerge . . .

Your first short story publication was "The Executioner" in 2009 (recently reprinted in *Lightspeed*) and you have a number of short stories out since then. Has your writing changed in specific or important ways since then? And if so, what do you attribute the changes to?

"The Executioner" still remains, to this day, a story that stays close to my heart. It's a story that I hope evokes empathy in readers. I try to challenge myself with every piece of work to push harder to be clear and to *feel* each piece that I write. I think (hope) my writing has changed since I wrote that story. Any changes would've come from me growing as a writer and a person. It's hard for me to say specifically how. I guess I leave that for readers to judge.

Your debut novel was *Elysium*, which came out in 2014 with Aqueduct Press. Did you learn things or have experiences with that book, on either the writing end or the publishing end, which informed or carried over into your upcoming book, *Destroyer of Light*?

I learned (and am still learning) a lot about the business end of the “Book Business.” I learned that it’s important that you and your agent be on the same wavelength about what is happening in your career and where you are going. When you’re writing, you’re doing it all alone. When you’re publishing, it becomes a team effort. I’ve lost count of how many people have been working with me to get this *Destroyer of Light* out there. There are people involved in this project that I’ve never met or spoken to personally. It’s hard to give up control over aspects of a work that you put so much of your personal feelings into, yet that’s the nature of this business: art and commerce working hand in hand.

***Elysium* had strong connections to history. It was based on the story of Roman Emperor Hadrian and his lover Antinous, and tapped into Roman motifs. Does *Destroyer of Light* have similar connections to history? What was the inspiration, how did the narrative start for you, and how did it develop?**

The inspiration for *Destroyer of Light* was more myth than history. I did do some history research for the book, but the incidents I studied were more contemporary. I looked into the child soldier experience in countries like Uganda and Nigeria. It wasn’t easy to find narratives from girl soldiers, though. The few stories I found were word-of-mouth confessionals. Hearing a young woman talk about her experiences out there was pretty heart rending. After a while, I just knew that I needed to write about these girls, and that their story *needed* to be told, even in this fictionalized way.

What is your favorite thing about Cora, and the other characters in the book; what was the best thing about writing them?

I think the thing I love best about Cora was watching her grow up. It was also a painful thing to watch/experience/write. She goes through so many hard things in the book. But watching her begin to take on her own power was really elating for me. I was glad to author her into life.

In your *Uncanny Magazine* interview you said this book is “technically and emotionally the hardest thing I’ve done to this point.” What were the biggest challenges, and how did you deal with them?

Watching documentaries and reading about child soldiers. Seeing children being warped into killers, oh my God . . . I took several breaks while writing some of the more difficult scenes. I just needed to stop to take care of myself. At one point I just said, I’ve seen enough. It still kinda haunts me. I never want to look into that kind of darkness again.

What is really important or special to you about *Destroyer of Light*? What do you want readers

to know about it, beyond blurbs and reviews?

I would like readers to know that, although this is a work of fiction, the practice of forcing children into becoming soldiers has happened all over the world—from Nazi Germany to Cambodia to Uganda, on and on. It’s a horror. As human beings, we must do everything we can to make sure, as a race, that our children are *never* forced into these situations.

What else are you working on, or what do you have coming up that readers and fans should look out for?

I’m currently working on my next novel. It’s the first time that I’ve been working on a real deadline, so it’s a bit scary. I don’t like to talk about this project too much, as it’s in that goopy stage and I feel like talking about it might “harden” it before it’s ready, if you know what I mean. I have a story coming out in *Apex Magazine* if their Kickstarter funds. It’s a story that’s been percolating in the background for me for a few years, actually. It’s called “The Healer” and I hope folks like it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arley Sorg is a senior editor at *Locus Magazine*, where he’s been on staff since 2014. He joined the *Lightspeed* family in 2014 to work on the *Queers Destroy Science Fiction!* special issue, starting as a slush reader. He eventually worked his way up to associate editor at both *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*. He also reviews books for *Locus*, *Lightspeed*, and *Cascadia Subduction Zone* and is an interviewer for *Clarkesworld Magazine*. Arley grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado, and studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and, in non-pandemic times, usually writes in local coffee shops. He is a 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

Author Spotlight: Amal Singh

Phoebe Barton | 715 words

Welcome to *Fantasy Magazine*! We're so happy to bring your story "What is Mercy?" to our readers. Can you tell us what inspired this story and how it came about?

I'm glad that this story found the perfect home. "What is Mercy?" is probably one of the darkest stories I have written, which tackles some difficult subjects. Caste violence in India has seen a massive upsurge since the ruling party was elected and then was re-elected for a second term. The story came as a response to one such incident that happened in Hathras, UP, in September 2020. The event got much media attention, and many people felt a similar rage towards the state of events and the helplessness of the victims.

In my reading, so much of this story pivots around the ojha's comment: "You have been without justice for so long, you don't know what to do with it." In this story, so much suffering could have been avoided if not for the very 21st-century-feeling "learned helplessness" of the villagers. How important do you think it is for themes like this to resonate in stories today?

I kept repeating this phrase in my mind, even while the story was on subs, and I think it's extremely important for stories that talk about loss and oppression to also tackle themes of justice. Even when presented with incalculable power, Nanda doesn't know what to do with it, initially. Being powerless and voiceless for too long creates a weird dissonance. So when a ray of hope actually presents itself, it comes as a shock. It's only when that initial feeling of shock and helplessness abates that one can learn to pick up the pieces and move on.

The Thakur boys struck me as effective villains, especially through their absence for most of the story: I was reminded of the shark in *Jaws* in that regard. They struck me as embodying both pure cruelty and the merciless system of society in general. Is there a more specific kind of villainy you were aiming for here?

Some of my favourite villains in fiction have been people (and creatures!) who embody pure remorselessness and cruelty. Anton Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men* immediately comes to mind. I didn't want to give too much context or backstory to the Thakur boys, because much of what they do, both on the page and off it, is grounded in reality. This cruelty stems from their privileged worldview and how they treat anyone who is beneath them in the caste hierarchy. In creating them, I wanted to give them a mythic darkness, while only barely hinting at a personal history with the ojha.

I appreciated how the central question of the story, *what is mercy*, is left for the reader to answer and shows the difference between Nanda and the Thakurs: to the villains, "mercy" is a tool that may or may not even exist. As the author, do you have an opinion on it yourself? What *is* mercy?

That's another thing I've been thinking about, lately, especially since the story ends with the question. It's interesting how aspects of the stories that authors tell keep coming back to them in newer ways. I think it says a lot about power. The powerless find themselves at the mercy of the people who hold power. In doling out "mercies," the powerful exert their control. In the end, questioning the nature of that "mercy," and perhaps rejecting it, becomes an act of revolution itself.

Is there anything you're working on now that you'd like to talk about? What can our readers look forward to seeing from you in the future?

I have a story coming out in the September issue of *F&SF*. Other than that, I am working on a noir SF novel which is set in an expanded universe of one of my short stories. I also have another interesting project, in a different medium, in the pipeline, which I hope I am able to announce soon!



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Phoebe Barton is a queer trans science fiction writer. Her short fiction has appeared in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed*, and *Kaleidotrope*, and she wrote the interactive fiction game *The Luminous Underground* for Choice of Games. She serves as an Associate Editor at *Escape Pod*, is a 2019 graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, and lives with a robot in the sky above Toronto.

Author Spotlight: K.P. Kulski

Veronica Henry | 733 words

Welcome to *Fantasy Magazine*! “An Arrangement of Moss and Dirt” is a delightfully chilling story of good intentions gone wrong. Can you tell us how this story came about?

This is one of those stories that was directly inspired by an experience. I struggle with autoimmune disease, so I get periods when I am hit hard and end up bed bound. Usually, it only lasts a day, and thankfully, my experience is nothing like the protagonist's.

But in my case, during summer, I had one of those days. From my bed I could see my daughter playing in the yard. Very much like the protagonist in “Moss and Dirt,” I watched her play—worried with normal mom concerns and feeling a bit down that I couldn't spend the day with her too.

My daughter is such a thoughtful kiddo, she would come and check in on me. I would of course reassure her that I'd be back on my feet in no time and that things were alright.

Then I got to thinking about how sad it would be for a mother with a terminal illness that would never get better—and if presented with an opportunity, what lengths a child would go to make their parent alright.

Our protagonist's view of the world is limited to what she sees outside her window because of an unnamed illness or disability. Was the decision not to name her condition a conscious one?

I didn't want to make any particular illness the focus of the story. I also felt keeping it unnamed allowed for a kind of universal communication regarding the experience of being an ill parent, or being a child worried for their ill parent.

The story does an outstanding job of conveying what illness does to both the person suffering and those who love them. How, in a sense, neither can escape the illness. Can you talk a little about that?

Thanks so much. I think my personal experience with chronic illness speaks to this. When I have down days, it affects the whole family. My husband, daughter, and son all worry, despite how much I don't want them to. There have even been a few times (thankfully rare) that my husband has had to help me get out of bed.

They all know me as a pretty independent and active person, so I think it's an image that jars them a bit. My withdrawal into the bedroom creates a hole, a constant reminder that mom is sick.

The moment when Nari reveals the bargain she made with the faerie is followed by the final scene where the protagonist is alone. I drew some stark conclusions about what's happened, but can you tell us about what's transpired?

Oh yes, dark things between those two scenes. So, the daughter admits to agreeing to a bargain that would prevent her mother's death, additionally that her mother would “never cry in pain or speak in

anguish.” Unfortunately, deals with supernatural beings often work out with unintended consequences.

The protagonist doesn’t die, but doesn’t get any better, either. Further, she becomes unable to express any physical or emotional pain.

She is essentially stuck in that bed forever, outliving those who love her and therefore anyone who could care for her.

Eventually, the bed, the house, it all begins to rot away and all she can do is watch.

What are you working on now, and what can we look forward to seeing from you in the future?

At this time, I am working on a novel inspired by Korean history, folklore, and of course, feminism. It might end up a novella, I don’t know, but the story will tell me when it’s done.

I have short stories coming out in the next Kandisha Press anthology and a Cemetery Gates pagan holiday anthology. Of course, a few things are out in submission land, too. Lately, I’ve been particularly interested in the story of Korea’s Queen Min, as well as Korean shamans, so I’ve been drawing a lot of inspiration from there and I think some of the forthcoming publications and works in progress will reflect that quite a bit.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Veronica Henry is an author of science fiction and fantasy. Her work has appeared in *Fiyah Literary Magazine* and *Truancy*. She is a graduate of the Viable Paradise Workshop and member of SFWA. Her debut adult fantasy novel, *Bacchanal*, is forthcoming in May 2021 from 47North. Follow her online at Twitter: [@veronicawrites](#) and her website: [veronichenry.net](#).

MISCELLANY

Coming Attractions, October 2021
Fantasy Staff | 1 words

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The Editors

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