

Noctivagant Press



Issue Two



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Martha Okadigbo is a 22-year-old African fantasy writer studying law at the University of Nigeria. She's in love with the fantasy/sci-fi genre of literature, her favourite authors are David Gemmell and Terry Brooks. Like her favourite authors, Martha has a goal to be a bestselling fantasy author for books – books with more diverse characters (racial, sexuality etc.) and cultures. She intends to use her writing to bring African myths/folklore/characters/culture to light by fusing them with the imaginative settings of cyber and fantasy world. When she's not reading her legal books, Martha spends her time with friends, writing, reading, and doing all other thing millennials do.



THE BIG MAN

In the distant white void, a shadowy figure can be seen staring quietly into the horizon. A movement to his left snatches his attention and he reluctantly drags his gaze from the dreamy sight to acknowledge the figure that materialises to join him.

“Hello, my friend”, the short man says as he moves to take place at his side.

A brief silence, then the tall man gruffs out, “I am not your friend.”

“I see...” Lifting a sharp, misty finger to his chin thoughtfully, he adds. “You have no choice but to be.” He waits for the tall man to say something – something brusque to be particular but is left with an eerie silence instead.

“I am Quatari,” he finally says and makes as if to bring his hand out for a handshake but quickly withdraws it; tucking it back into his form before the other can show a reaction. “Habit. Sometimes, I forget.” He explains his unusual behaviour and lets out a nervous chuckle.

The tall man studies his unwanted companion and after several minutes of careful evaluation, he says, “I don't like your kind.”

“My kind?”

“Aristocratic bastards.” he adds for clarification.

“And how did you arrive to the conclusion that I am aristocratic?”

“The way you carry yourself. The way you talk. You must shake a lot of people’s hands for it to become a habit.”

“Anyone can shake hands; it is simply manners.”

“Not an aristocrat. They are used to offering first and letting others take it.”

“That is not true.”

“Suit yourself.” the big man shrugs.

A short moment of silence passes then Quatari asks, “what is your name?”

“If I tell you, will you let me be?”

“I don’t think so. Company is tough to come about in this realm.”

“I know that, yet I am not in need of yours.”

“You will have it regardless.”

His companion thoughtfully contemplated his options, then as if defeated, he lets out a loud dramatic sigh and with reluctance says, “I am Serghis.”

“Serghis,” Quatari repeats, tasting the name on his tongue. “Why do you hate aristocrats?”

“It is none of your business.”

“I think it is, seeing as I am one and you already hate me even without knowing me.”

“I don’t—

A slow, grave chime rings out, interrupting their speech.

“Fuck,” Serghis curses. “Not again. I enjoy Yura’s dream.”

“I can see why.” The shorter man looks around and admires the ethereal view for the first time. “It is peaceful and not as chaotic as the others.”

“Yes, it is.” he agrees gruffly.

Calmly, they watch the dark clouds of their feet sink into the blackness – it winds slowly and casually up the rest of their bodies.

“I wonder whose dream world we’re headed to next,” Quatari says in a light-

hearted attempt to liven the now uncomfortable atmosphere, but Serghis does not take the bait and ignores him, so he just continues. “I hope it’s not Vers or Ghura. Only sick perverts would enjoy their dreams. I hope to the gods it’s not Dephren either – that one is a monster. Or Tren.”

The darkness reaches their shoulders.

“I do not like Desi’s dreams either even though she may be a queen – it’s always some form of crazy power play. Fren’s is often like that except he—

With a big gulp, the darkness swallows them.

...

The blood-red sun shines brazenly over the bare, grassy landscape dotted with stones, boulders, rocks, sparse trees, and not much else. Its hot rays stretch from the high mountain tops to highlight a small lone farm sitting depressed in the middle of the emptiness.

A girl perches on the steps of the small, drafty bungalow attached to the farm and quietly hums to herself as she throws rice seeds to the ground for the chickens clucking noisily in front of her.

An aged man bends over a small strip of ground in the fenced pasture next to the bungalow and uses his hoe on the soil. Sounds of laughter, heavy running and cutleries clanking against each other come from inside the house.

At the back of the farm, trees cast comforting shade over the cottage, highlighting its scenic beauty. This is all disturbed by the sudden, haunting presence of the darkness moving from tree to tree and coming to rest at the front of the house. A large hole forms in its middle, then with low retching sounds, it spits out two shadowy figures and vanishes.

“One day, I’ll strangle whatever that creature is,” Serghis mutters to himself.

Quatari looks around, observing the scenery that surrounds them. “This one doesn’t look so bad,” he points out.

Serghis simply scoffs. “They all start out like this.”

Quatari chuckles at the comment.

“What is funny?”

“For someone who claims to not need company, you are warming up to me quite well,” he smiles knowing full well that the other man cannot see it and so, would not murder him for the daring smugness. Serghis, clearly annoyed by his statement shows his disapproval with a grunt.

“Fine. I will no longer say anything on the subject of our blooming friendship.” Quatari jokes. His companion ignores him and instead stares with an unreadable expression at the happy girl sitting on the steps of the house. He stares too long as if he recognises her and even if Quatari can’t see his facial expression, he doesn’t miss it.

“Do you know her?” He asks as his form appears before Serghis slowly, blocking his view.

“No.” He moves away from the younger man’s perceived gaze.

“You stare at her like you do.”

“I don’t.”

“Okay.” Later, he adds “She is a pretty lady”.

“I don’t like this dream. A bad feeling lingers over it,” Serghis mutters. As soon as he says that the distant sounds of galloping hooves against the ground can be heard.

The girl stands abruptly, dusts her gown, and excitedly directs her gaze towards the direction of the sound.

Another noise to their left grabs their attention and they watch as an old farmer in a fenced farm drops his tools to the ground, stands upright and gaze towards the same direction with a hand above his eyes to shield them from the sun.

Gallop. Gallop. Ga-llop.

The sounds grow closer and then ceases when five horses with five men atop each one come to a halt in front of the farmland. The excitement on the girl’s face quickly deteriorates and changes to dread.

“Lutha,” one of the men says, then drives his horse forward. He makes a show of flipping his long, dark locks away from his face before he jumps down from the

horse. “Aren’t you going to give me a hug?” he spreads his arms wide open.

“Stay away from her.” The farmer moves swiftly from the garden to stand in front of the girl.

Another man from the group comes down from his horse, walks up to the old man and punches him, causing him to collapse to the ground. He turns with a nasty smile on his face to the group and they jeer approvingly.

“Lutha.” The man with the dark locks says again, this time reaching out and grabbing the girl forcefully by the waist. “I told you this day would come.” The girl tries to struggle herself out of his hold but is only gripped tightly, rendering her struggles useless.

“Please, Namus. Leave me.” She attempts to say boldly, except a crack in her voice betrays her.

“Or what?” He asks. Then, he dramatically turns to his men and says, “Listen to that, she wants me to leave her.”

Please, Namus... One of them mimic and they roar in laughter.

“Or what, Lutha?” He asks again as he spins to face her. “We all know your family is cursed with no powers, no abilities, no talents... Nothing. You can no longer intimidate people like you use to. So, tell me, Lutha... Or what?” He smirks. “You’ll call your father on me? You’ll zap me?”

“Please... Namus,” this time she lets the crack in her voice show and almost breaks down.

He acts like he doesn’t hear her and continues. “We know your father was exiled. Considering all the enemies he’s made in the long run; he is probably dead.”

“Namus...”

“Pretty Lutha...” He lifts a hand to her cold cheeks, caressing it. When his hand brushes against her lips and a finger slips through, she opens her mouth and bites down on it hard.

“Witch!” He instantly screeches and pushes at her head to drag his finger out of her mouth but Lutha clamps on it tightly with her teeth

Quatari notices Serghis nodding approvingly from where they stand.

He shifts his focus back to the scene and watch as Namus scream all abominable curses in the air while roughly hitting Lutha's dark head. "Tarin... Eyon... All of you fools. Come get this witch away from me!" He screams at his men who stand idly by their horses watching the spectacle. They instantly run to help their master at the sudden command.

It takes a while but after much dragging at the girl and pulling at her face, they finally free Namus' badly severed finger from Lutha's teeth; it comes out with a lot of blood and a disjointed shape.

"Fucking witch!" Namus screams and slaps the girl's face hard.

This makes Serghis jerk and attempt to move towards the scene.

"Wait..." Quatari says. "You forget we cannot do much here. They cannot see, hear, or feel us. It is sad but you cannot help her."

The big man listens and then droops his shoulders in defeat. "Curse the priests for this punishment!" he mutters resignedly.

"If it helps, we are only in a dream. None of this is real," he soothes.

"Some dreams are memories, Quatari." Serghis says in a flat, monotone voice. He tries to rub a fist against his chest which only disappears into his form.

Quatari nods in silent agreement and puts his talent of observation to work, reading Serghis like he did with subjects, allies, and enemies who sought his power and help. He observes that the man isn't an ordinary man – he exudes something close to power but a strange one, that is what drew him to the big man at first. He also notices that he has a connection to the person in whose dream they are in; it explains why the dream is more personal. It isn't any ordinary dream for any dreamwalker to walk into; it is a dream reserved for Serghis, which is why the shadow brought them here.

"There are five of you as there are five of us." Namus' loud voice interrupts Quatari's thoughts.

He notices that an extra woman has joined the girl in his absent-mindedness – an older, motherly woman who stands protectively and fearful at the same time over the girl's shoulder.

"Please Namus. Don't touch my mother and sisters, I beg you. You can take turns on me," Lutha kneels down and holds onto her assailant's leg pleadingly.

"Do not listen to her," the mother counters tearfully, attempting to drag her daughter up. "Take me instead. Leave my daughters. I will do anything you want".

"Look at them, so eager to serve me," Namus shakes his head. "But because I'm generous, how about we take all of you? Lutha will be for me of course. She has to pay for biting my fucking finger." He drags the kneeling girl by the hair into the house and his men follow suit, hauling in the older woman along with them.

Quatari looks at all of them as they disappear into the white house but doesn't follow them in. Instead, he turns to Serghis and asks, "why do you hate aristocrats?"

Serghis says nothing and moves to stand at the fence demarcating the farmhouse from the empty landscape outside it. Quatari follows suit and as if he understands the silence of his companion, he stands by him. Together, they disconnect from the present, blocking out the sounds of grunts and screams coming from the small cottage and listening instead to the sounds of the clucking chickens, noisy wind sliding through crops and trees, rustling leaves and the fluttering wings of birds.

For a long while, they stand like this until the sound of the chime comes again and with it, the shadow follows swallowing everything in its way.

"The miserable dream has ended." Quatari says before the shadow engulfs them.

...

Two lonely figures stand by each other in a dark room.

"Always another fucking dream. I wish humans wouldn't sleep so much all the time." Quatari mutters. Serghis ignores him and walks to stand mutely by the bedside of a sleeping human.

"Lutha is your daughter." Quatari's shadow breaks the dark silence as it moves to take its place beside Serghis.

"Yes."

He is surprised that Serghis replies to him and decides to ask more to see how much he is willing to say. Picking his words slowly so as not to offend his companion, he asks. "You have four daughters, no son."

"Yes."

"You're a great man."

"No."

Quatari is confident that his intuition did not fail him, so he tries another approach. "You were a great man?"

"Yes."

"What was your name?"

"Greden."

Greden... The name rings like a bell in the room and as if it can sense the power in the name, it shakes a little – a shuddering jolt that Quatari notices. *No, it can't be*, he thinks to himself. *It can't be Greden. A powerful man like him can't be here; it isn't a place fitting for him.* To clear his doubts that this man was indeed who he said he was, Quatari adds. "Greden the half-god?"

"Yes."

If shadows aren't in their form, Serghis would be able to see how wide Quatari's eyes are and how far his jaw had dramatically dropped.

"You... You..." The short man stutters and then stops when he realises that he can't pass any coherent words. Taking a deep breath, he composes himself and says in a posed tone. "You can't be. Greden was banished to the world under."

"That is what the world believes but I was banished here instead to walk dreams with offenders like yourself and until I have made up for my sins, I can never leave."

"What are your sins?"

"I do not want to speak of them."

Quatari respects the man's decision to be private and instead asks. "Are your sins the reason your family lost their powers?"

"Yes," Serghis says. He pauses, then adds. "We were feared. That bastard,

Namus wouldn't have done what he did."

"What did you do to Namus?" Quatari asks assuming that Namus' hatred may have sprung from something Serghis did to him in the past.

"I killed his father."

"Why?"

"He deserved it."

A brief, silent pause as Quatari tries to gather his thoughts.

"Why do you hate aristocrats?" He asks the question that has been nagging at his mind.

"They're a selfish, proud, egotistic, heartless bunch who use the poverty of lowborn to their advantage."

"Isn't it narrow-minded to view every aristocrat that way?"

"Not to me."

"I was a king." Quatari admits.

"I know."

"How?"

"I am half-god, Quatari." He says, making the younger man feel ridiculous.

"I see. Was I a good king?"

"You were not a good one. But you were not a bad one".

The body in the bed suddenly jerks up, disrupting their serene conversation. They see that it is a woman as she climbs down to look under her bed and suddenly begins to scream when she comes up. A large creature with a mask over its face follows her out from underneath the bed it stands unsteadily in front of her and points out an object that makes her run out of the room; it instantly begins to chase her.

"Nightmares." Quatari mumbles. "I hate those."

Serghis simply shrugs and saunters towards the mirror that sits on a table at a corner of the room. When he reaches, he stands in front of it and stares at his reflection, calmly observing the smoky shape of his shadow with their floating ends.

“Do you think Namus will suffer for what he did?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Gods like people like him because they bring relevance to life – they make it less-perfect, less-good, more entertaining.”

“Why do you hold such morbid views?”

“My existence and experiences do not afford me the luxury to be an optimist like you, Quatari.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gods... half-gods... humans. There is no purpose to us and our existence. Like humans, gods grow bored of existing too. If evil exists, they simply create more of it to compliment good to add spice and purpose to life.”

“So, Namus will go scot-free for what he did?”

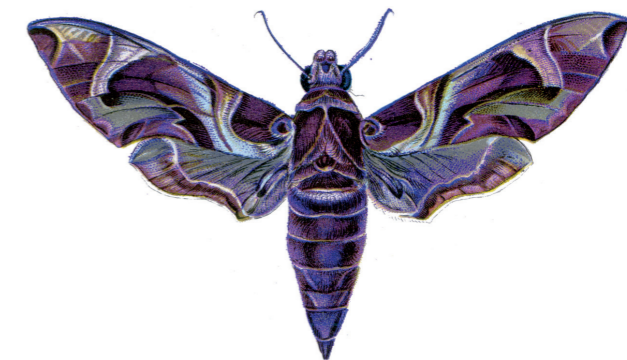
“I don’t know, Quatari.”

“What about—

“Hush, my friend. I’m exhausted from your answering your questions.”

Quatari smiles warmly at the fact that Serghis finally acknowledges him as a friend and walks to stand behind the big man in front of the mirror.

Raising a hand, he rests it on Serghis’ shoulder and even if it only sinks into his form, he decides the futile action is worth it because for a brief moment, he could have sworn he felt a sensation – something akin to warm skin





Frank William Finney:

Frank William Finney is a New England poet whose work has appeared widely in small press publications including Hedge Apple, Noctivagant, Poor Yorick: The Poet's Mask, and Workers Write! He is a former lecturer in literature at Thammasat University in Thailand where he taught for twenty-five years. His collection The Folding of the Wings is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Groundhog Night

Pretend, my friend, there is no plague.
Forget about the weather:

We'll don furry masks
to hide our shadows

and watch the snow ghosts
haunt the fields.

Swan Song

The flocks of cygnets—
reflections now.

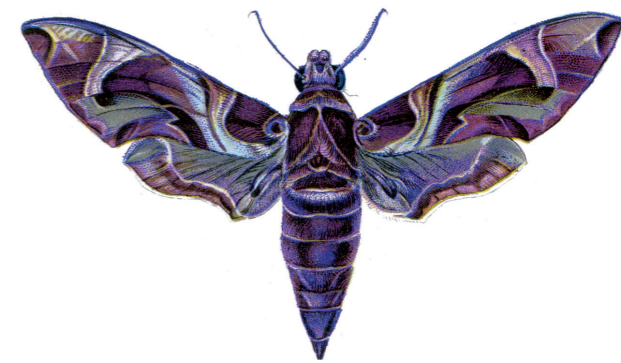
The nest, a barren twist
of reeds.

The trumpeters flutter overhead
as feathers float upon the foam
beneath a glowing orange sky.

A lightning bolt.
A thunder clap.
That sudden gust of wind.

A shadow drifting
in the castle courtyard.

A new clutch cracking golden shells
along the shores of Avalon.





Stormy Brotherton:

Stormy Brotherton is a 38-year-old aspiring writer, living in Alliance, Ohio. As a Pisces, her imagination takes her on all kinds of adventures. And yes, Stormy is her real name.



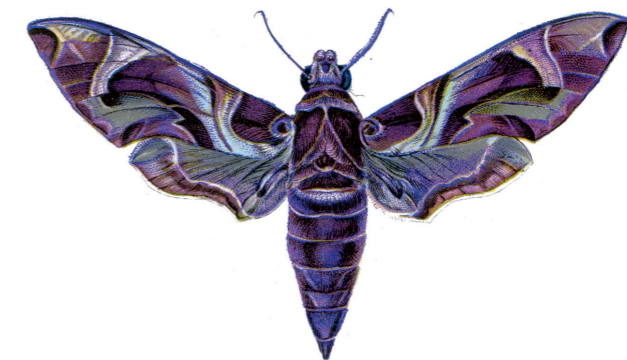
Catalyst of Peace

The hours before dawn are the best. Best for reflection, best for the stillness of your mind to reconcile with the rest of your existence and the best for thinking back on the sins you may have committed the night before. I lay here in all my glory, bare to the world around me. I come to these woods often. The site of many of my sins. The darkness of the trees holds all my secrets. This is where I come to seek out my best self. Not many would see it this way. To them, this is where I come to find my worst side. Very few could see me like this. Then again, very few could stomach the things I have to do. I glance around me, men and women from the night before strewn out. Pieces and parts like grotesque confetti from a wild night no one wants to remember. One party that these pathetic souls would attend but will never leave. I know what you're thinking. Some sick bitch is luring poor souls out into the woods and slaughtering them. And most of that sentiment is correct. I do certainly enjoy tearing these people apart, and I most definitely am that bitch. But these are the types of souls that aren't worth saving. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself... Ever hear of the Pied Piper? Well, it's sorta like

that but I lure the monstrosities of this world out here to these woods and make them disappear. Like taking out the trash. Once a month I'm in charge of doing this, commissioned by the government to do so. You know how they didn't make marijuana legal until they could find a way to make it beneficial to them? This is kind of like that. The government was killing off supernatural beings until they found a way to use us to their advantage. As I said, once a month on a full moon, I draw them out here and unleash my inner beast. My Wolf. For centuries we've been hunted. Bad enough we were slaves to the moon, only now, at the beck and call of those who used to kill us. The government had control of us now. They call it being a catalyst of peace. This work was so important to all mankind and blah blah blah. I call it bullshit. The only thing that keeps me from starting some type of revolution was the simple fact that I got to take out all this rage out on the pestilence of society. The murderer that gets off on a technicality, the drunk who just keeps collecting DUI's, the mom who leaves her kids in the car to go shoot up. These are examples of the people I bring out here to kill. Tonight, we had what I consider the worst of the worst. Rapists and child molesters. The ones who steal the innocence from these children, now being hunted down like prey by me. I had quite the haul. Over a dozen bodies scattered on the ground around me. I had my fill of blood, soaked the soil with it as I tore them all apart one by one. Like I said, the morning is for reflection. Just before the sun comes up and illuminates the scene around me. My flesh was tacky from the blood of my bounty. Bones sore from shifting back into my human form. Lying naked here in the grass, I knew it was time to move. Soon my advisors would be here to take the tally, praise me for the flawless work I did for them. I had to find my clothes. There was a hollowed-out tree trunk that I stashed a change of clothes in not too far from where I lay. I got to my feet and just as I straightened up, I felt four little fingers and a thumb wrap around my index finger. Before I could even look down, I knew everything was about to change. I could feel it in my soul. A pair of big brown eyes looked back up at me through millions of lashes. The outrageously wide-eyed ones you'd

see in some damn Disney movie. Sad eyes. Looking to be found. Only they had found me, stopped me in my tracks and right then, my whole world changed.

The End.





LJ Ireton:

LJ is a poet from London. She has a 1st Class B.A. Honours in English Language and Literature from The University of Liverpool. Her historical poetry was published in the April 2021 Marble Poetry Broadsheet. Her nature poems have been published by Minnow, Eucalyptus & Rose and Chasing Shadows Literary Magazines as well as by Green Ink Poetry. She has poems soon to be published by The Madrigal and Wind-Up Mice Journal.



The Storm Summoner

The squirrel trained with the wizard initially, during the time Merlin lived in the oak.

He learnt how to make acorns multiply, ripen, shine, but what he wanted was to conquer the sky – to make the clouds and wind listen to his whispers strong enough to shake the trees, to bring the acorns down to him.

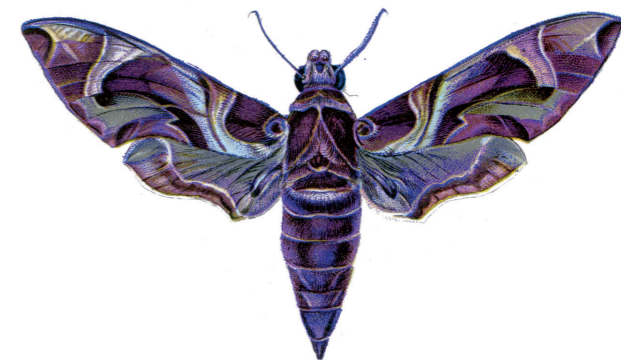
This was where his tail came in. Full of static, spark and lore he whipped and flicked it in circles – a grey cotton candy floss furore, the clouds responding to the cyclone of fur and him uttering, little arms raised, asking for rain.

The squirrel, squeaking, summoned the storm and it came. Acorns brown and green littered the ground around him, brought in from the wind and waves of his own power. He scrambled over them, proud.

So, the next time it starts to rain, remember 'tis folly to underestimate the swish of a fluffy squirrel's tail.

Nimue Watches

I watch them
From my water stone -
Sword against sword,
A slowing dance
On turned-up dirt.
Mortal men on land
Don't know what it is
To have nothing to prove -
To stir the depths of the sea
In complacent daydream.
They forge steel shields
While shells crawl casually.
It amuses me, though -
To sift souls for
The weak and worthy
I see why wizards help kings -
Some men are
Easier to believe in.





Richard M. Ankers:

Richard M. Ankers is the English author of *The Eternals* dark fantasy series. Richard has featured in *Love Letters To Poe*, *Black Poppy Review*, *After The Pause* and feels privileged to have appeared in many more. Richard lives to write.

The Night Rain

The dead with raised voices, the silent given sound, a procession of glistening, milk-white shrouds, the ghosts pooled in the night. A soft dirge, their music of choice, and my tears its wept accompaniment. They led. I followed.

...

In the chill aftermath of their passage, I made my tiptoed way through the hamlet. Beneath the leaning facades and twisted rooftops, I stalked those who should never be witnessed. They slipped beneath the moon like snow beneath the clouds, a blizzard of lives past.

...

Of course, it wasn't the first time. The ghost sightings, or rather, hearings, started as an audible drip that over the months became a sonic river. Where the community had thought their amassing a freak event, they soon realised the ghosts were no once in a lifetime experience. Doors were barred, windows blocked, and even the chimney pots filled as to be rendered impassible. No keyhole, air brick, or even mouse hole was left unprotected. Nobody took that risk.

But frayed nerves could not be appeased by such things. The sorrow of those otherworldly minions and the accompanying death of our once beautiful valley drove the community to disperse like the plague; everywhere and nowhere, and fast. I was left the sole guardian of our properties, although I had no care for any of them. All I knew, all I hoped for in my every waking moment was the possibility of just one of those hidden visages being my dear, sweet Ama-ya.

...

Amaya had died in childbirth. Her attempt to give life to our first born yielded instead two deaths, three, if you counted me; my heart died with them if my body did not. The pulsing organ within my chest still beat, still pumped blood around turgid veins, but through no will of my own. My body was deceased, it just didn't know it.

I buried Amaya in the hamlet's small cemetery, our child wrapped in her mother's Buddhist robes beside her. I kept our shared rings those I'd made for us out of twisted steel, placed them in my trouser pocket; I couldn't bear not having some tactile proof of our love. Within a week the ghosts were heard and not long after, sighted.

...

She was the most beautiful creature imaginable, my oriental bride, my world. Raven-haired, exotic, and silent as the fog, her allure all the more intoxicating for it. She personified everything a man could wish. The china doll had bowed once and placed a finger to her lips, then scratched five letters in the soil: AMAYA. It suited her that name, short, sweet, and as elegant as the Eastern night's she stemmed from.

I never knew what she saw in me. Perhaps it was the chance of a new life or just the opportunity to settle? Maybe, I was the only one who'd dared to talk to such an angel? Maybe, I'd had no choice? Maybe, just maybe, she really did love me? I hoped so. How I hoped!

She'd always seemed happy despite the misfortune of her arrival. When those she'd traveled with passed into the shade, Amaya had remained in the light. She

was too special to share their fate, too unique. I treated her like one might a china doll, with reverence and greatest care. And for a time, our love was divine, our enjoyment of life exquisite. But that was a long time ago. Her death deprived me of life. Her passing was mirrored by my own.

...

The ghosts were easy to track in the cloudless night. Wherever the spectres passed, an aura of sparkling night remained. Like magical snail trails, I was left the signs of their passage. Night by night, I plucked up the courage to approach ever closer. It wasn't that I was scared of them, or intimidated by their oscillating operatics, I was just respectful, that was all.

I'd thought myself the saddest person alive after Amaya's passing, but on hearing the migrating ghosts, I realised my loss inconsequential. Their voices chilled with the emotion of the masterpiece they sang with such repetitious ease. And, although I knew not what the words meant, the soaring crescendo of their sadness consumed me. One does not have to know the meaning to feel the effect.

...

Lantern in hand, I quickened my step until the last of them was within sight. In gentle waves of rippling porcelain, the paired line slipped through our hamlet's winding lanes and alleyways East, always East. Like a faulty compass, the ghosts seemed set upon crossing the landscape in an ever-repeating journey. I had to know where they went and if Amaya was with them. I had to! My course was set and unforgiving.

We passed the church, its bells unheard for almost a year, left the cemetery on the outskirts of our community and headed out into the open space of the grasslands beyond the last dwellings. The land, untilled and left to rot, had grown long even in drought. So high were the brittle grasses they almost concealed that procession of the dead, but the eerie, silver glow that smothered the ground and hung in the air like a semi-transparent mist marked their way. Every corn husk and reed bore the luminosity of their passing and I trailed it like a prowling wildcat.

Once out of the fields the ghosts, shrouds billowing in the easterly breeze,

followed the line of the river, then crossed it. That was a problem. For where they floated as a moving bridge of white, I did not; the water was cold, fast running and merciless. I risked all to cross it as I and the community had each day in fetching the river's life-giving essence back to our homes. If not for the water's cold comfort, the community would have perished, not departed. Fortune favoured me, and despite a near drowning, I succeeded, even if it did push me a mile in the wrong direction. I staggered out of the freezing water and up the muddied bank to my gasped relief of still seeing their distant, glowing passage and hearing their mournful song. I set off in squishing pursuit.

By the time I reached them, the ghosts had reached the foot of the mountains. Those towering peaks of razor-sharp rock protected our valley from the outside world. They were powerful sentinels and ones no foe had breached. Ironic that where muscle and might had failed to conquer, the Buddhists in belief and peaceful determination had achieved the impossible in conquering the dragon's teeth, as the range was called. The power of faith never failed to amaze.

The deceased did not hesitate in ascending the almost vertical rock face. I took two deep breaths and followed.

...

The massif base was as far from home as I had ever ventured. There'd never been a reason to leave. Amaya had wandered into our small community with her father and the rest of his holy order one winter's evening. Huddled beneath their flowing Buddhist robes of ochre, the band of men and women had stumbled into our lives as the rain drenched our community for the last time. The group, bedraggled and near death, skirted the realm of the beyond, so terrible a state were they in. How they even stood was a mystery; they did not stand for long. All passed within a week of their arrival too spent to survive until the summer heat. Amaya's father was the last to go his silent way. She mourned him and the others passing for a long time. I could see it in her eyes if not hear it in her words. But all sorrow passes eventually, or so I then believed.

...

Like swan's feathers caught in an updraft, the ghosts levitated up the mountainside, as I made the more treacherous physical ascent. On and on I dragged myself up those jagged rocks, hands cut to pieces, knees scraped to the bone, but I would not stop because I could not stop. However, despite my best efforts, I was nowhere near as swift as the dead ones and the procession were soon lost to me. All that remained to guide me was their sad song, which I followed, although I knew not where it would lead.

I trawled my way up those peaks for many hours. Up beyond the barren rock and into fields of snow I hauled my exhausted self-thinking I should never reach the top. But I did, and there they were. They sang still, voices meant for the afterlife giving birth to such beautiful music as to make the heavens weep. But Heaven did not weep, only me, the clouds still refused to give life to the valley beneath.

I paused then as the moon came out bright and full to unveil the world from an eagle's eye. How small-minded we'd been, how great the world was beyond what we'd known. A patchwork night extended into forever, a never-ending jigsaw of monochrome perfection. Like an ant, I couldn't have felt any smaller.

And I realised in my marveling that I did so in silence; the ghosts had ceased their dirge. Like spilled milk they lay across the roof of the world oblivious to my presence, to any other soul. When at last they turned as one and parted like the wheat before the wind, she was there. My heart beat at last.

Amaya looked the same in death as life, alabaster features smooth to the touch reflecting the world around her. Only her almond eyes, darker than the ebony I remembered, appeared different. She took me in with an unblinking stare, head cocked to one side as was her way, and glided towards me.

A year had passed in days of gold and nights of onyx, but no jewel could touch her exquisite self even in death. I'd have cast myself off the mountaintop right there and then if it had guaranteed my accompanying her through eternity. But it didn't, so I couldn't, though I would have.

The ghosts took up in choral voice as Amaya drifted before my weeping eyes. As a snowdrop in a rainstorm, she bobbed up and down, never quite still, never

quite gone. She reached for me then, her fingers intangible mists brushing at my face to chilling effect. I cared not for she was there and that was all that mattered. As her fingers dropped from my cheek to rest in midair, palm upturned, eyes longing, I knew why she and the others could not leave. I owned them in my unexpected way, bound them to my western valley. It was me who stopped them returning home and held death to our land.

The rings weighed heavy as I dragged them from my breast pocket and passed them to her. She took them, though in truth they just disappeared, and smiled an ephemeral thing. They vanished before my eyes like two hawks into a cloud, only for one to reappear and be returned; it felt like it had been gone an eternity. And then, as I knew my time with her and the others almost over, she did in death what she never could in life: she spoke.

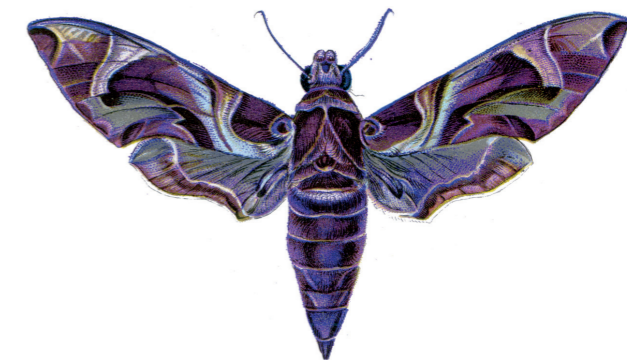
“Amaya,” she said and smiled again. “It means, the night rain.”

And it did. The clouds rolled into one congealed mass, rumbled once, twice, thrice, and then loosed their store of a year’s worth of rain. With each drop, she dissipated before my sorrowful eyes until all that remained was her own. They blinked once and departed. Heaven washed my Amaya away, or maybe washed her home. Who could say?

...

When I returned to the valley floor heartbroken and inconsolable, the others had returned. They said nothing as had she. But I could see beneath the waterlogged clothing and bedraggled hair, they were no longer ghosts, and neither was I.

The End.





Rachel Neithercut:

Rachel was born in Glasgow, grew up on Merseyside, and currently lives in the Peak District. She was part of the ACE funded MumWrite 2020 Programme. Her work can be found in various places including Streetcake Magazine, Selcouth Station, Babel Tower Notice Board, and Tether's End. She is on twitter as [@stars_cricket](https://twitter.com/stars_cricket)s



Lamia

She is a beacon. Men are called, keep arriving. The reason they give is love. They can fathom no other.

The picture on her dating profile is not beautiful. It shows a face that is soothing yet unmemorable. It has the quality of a dust-mote sliding across a retina; within the gaze yet escaping it.

The house is in a flat place where the air smells of bodily fluids and the earth sucks at any feet that cross it. The light is medieval in its purity. Everything is cast with the delicate whey colour of a saint's cheek in a devotional painting.

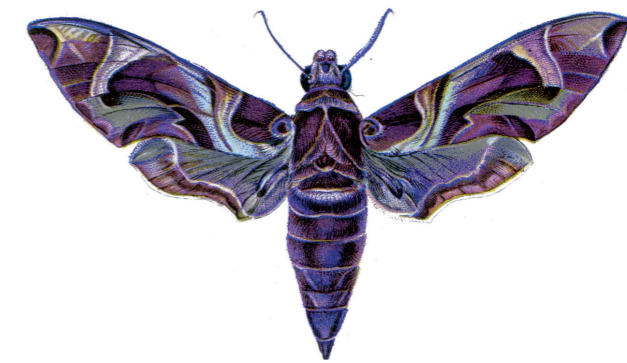
There is always chat beforehand, as blank and artificial as such chat usually is, revealing nothing. Still, it reassures. The script is as it should be.

And if anything were to seem out of place? If the tiny hairs on a man's skin were to wave like the arms of one drowning, screaming - LOOK OUT! LOOK OUT! - still, it would not matter. The house casts a languor over guests. It is a pleasant, fizzy feeling. A tickle, like little bubbles rising in the brain. Reactions and guard are anaesthetised. Warnings are muffled. *You have come so far to reach*

your desire, the house whispers, now sshh...

She wonders if she really is the secret longing in the pit of each man's soul. Whether spells and precautions are unnecessary. Perhaps she has always flickered somewhere behind their eyelids.

Afterwards, she examines the leftover hardware. Watches, wedding rings. Sometimes more elaborate jewellery, self consciously masculine chains and symbols. Always a phone, large and flat as a tombstone. Often there are fillings. Sometimes surgical pins. Once, a device to restart the heart.





Łukasz Podgórski:

Born 1995 in Poland, I came to live in Scotland in 2019. In December 2014, I published a book of poems (in polish) and managed to sell 2 copies out of 550 printed. I deliver a pizza for a living and live with my wonderful girlfriend and two cats in a lovely cottage in a very small village in the Highlands :) I am also a host of 'Excavation for The Impossible' podcast, where I read self-written fantasy stories that attempt to explore problems of morality we face as a society.

About Living Thyself

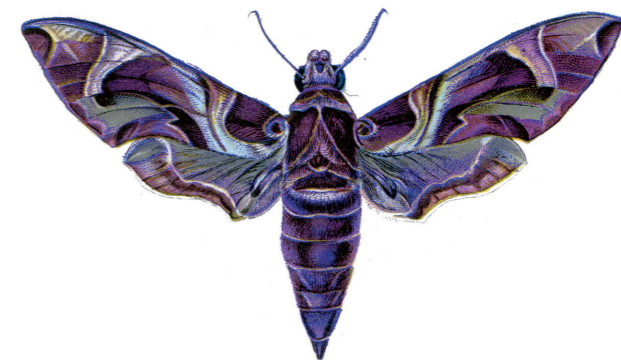
I got a body
I'm told
Deceptive beast growling in darkness
Devourer of thoughts
Embracing warden

Golem of the ancient times
Buried below forgotten graves
Rising anew with every breath
Walk on its own until one's death

Two of the mine
Boiling in meaning
Of act and possession
In mind

Or feeling?

And it just
Can't
Be
It





Yuan Changming:

Yuan Changming hails with Allen Yuan from [poetrypacifi c.blogspot.ca](http://poetrypacifi.c.blogspot.ca). Credits include Pushcart nominations and appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) & *BestNewPoemsOnline*, among others. Recently, Yuan published his tenth chapbook *LIMERENCE*, and served on the jury for Canada's 44th National Magazine Awards (poetry category).

Showers through Day & Night

1/ Vancouver and Me
Rain, it's the rain that's been wetting my entire
Selfhood inside out

Reminding me
Amidst all shapes to be moistured
The water-drops are
The dews from a paradise long lost

Here is another soul fallen from above

2/ Vancouver in Rain

Vancouver, how they sometimes hate you
Being so wet! You could leave all
Your lower content in dark & cold, with yesterday's
Newspapers, flyers, flowers, leaves & even
Tales pickled in the pools or puddles full of vices & viruses
 Among unseen ghosts & monsters
As love & pain flow along runaway rainwaters &
Every wing gets too heavy to flap with whims or wishes while
The whole city is taking a shower as if to prepare for a ritual, &
Me? I am just standing dry close to the window
 Watching



Love Lost & Found: for Qi Hong

1/ Missing in Missed Moments

Each time I miss you
A bud begins to bloom
So you are surrounded by flowers
Everywhere you go

Each time I miss you
A dot of light pops up
 So you are illuminated by a whole sky
Of stars through the night

2/ The Soft Power

What Softens

 A human heart is
Neither money nor honey

Rather, it is a good-natured smile of
Some dog playing with a cat, a bird
Feeding her young with her broken wings
Covering them against cold rain at noon
The whispering of a zephyr blowing
From nowhere, the mist flirting fitfully
With the copse at twilight, the flower
Trying to outlive its destiny, as well

As the few words you actually meant
To say to her but somehow you forgot
 In the tender of last night



DarkSnakeNM:

<https://www.honeyfeed.fm/u/6399>



Memories of the Farm

Beneath a purple sky, at the lake's edge, Jack sat staring at the perfectly still water mirroring the stars in its inky depths.

Mere hours before, he had attended the ceremony. Six of the guild had fallen this season. Their numbers, already thin, had grown yet thinner. Their tags hung on the wall, faces staring out for all to see.

Six Dingoes.

Six of his family.

Gone.

A single tear rolled down his cheek, his face portraying no emotion.

Further up the bank, Mara stood silently observing Jack. He had his knees up to his chest, huddled into a little ball. She sighed sympathetically. He'd not been this emotional for a long time, his usual rough-and-tumble attitude was gone without a trace. A slight breeze disturbed the still summer night, rippling the surface of the lake and making Mara's flowing red hair flicker in the wind. Walking over in solemn silence, she sat down next to him at the water's edge,

draping one arm over his shoulders.

“You doin’ okay mate? Haven’t seen you do this in years.”

Jack sighed, loosening his grip on his legs. “Six, Mara, six. We laid to rest six of our own family. We’ve *never* lost that many in a season. I was prepared for one or two losses, that’s just life, but we lost so many. Cousins, siblings, friends, all taken from us. Doesn’t help that we don’t know who didn’t make it until after the reunion party and the hangovers wear off. Doesn’t it bother you anymore that every year we wait anxiously to see how much of our family is still alive?” His tone had drifted from flat to the verge of sobbing.

“It still does. I hate waiting to see who didn’t make it.” She sighed, brushing a tear off her own cheek with her free arm whilst tightening her grip on Jack. “But it’s just the nature of the job. Can’t expect everybody to always survive fighting the toughest monsters out here, no matter how much we train. You can’t win ‘em all, mate.”

Grabbing his arms, Mara wrapped them around herself and held him.

Jack’s feet made a small splash as his boots hit the water. Not resisting, he pulled Mara even tighter, silently grateful he had somebody like her by his side. They lay there, holding each other beneath the brilliance of the stars.

...

The breakfast after the ceremony was always a grim affair. Uncle Peter, always in tune with them, had prepared a lavish greasy fry-up for all of them. Jack loved Uncle Peter’s cooking, since he’d had so long to practice. ‘A young Dingo doesn’t feed itself’ he had remarked on many occasions.

Nobody said a word.

Across the table, Rhiannon met Mara’s gaze and smiled warmly.

She’d come back from this season safe and sound.

Her brother hadn’t.

“Mara. Why don’t we go out hunting today? Could use a bit of something to clear my head. Whaddy say?”

Mara smiled gratefully, nodding in agreement. Jack was too busy making a pig

of himself. In his defence, it was *good* bacon. “Sho, whatch’s da fmg we hunting?”

Mara poked him in annoyance. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, piggy.” Rhiannon burst out laughing for the first time since the party. Gathering up her cutlery, she took it over to the sink and placed it in.

“Come on, let’s go bag us something good.”

They both nodded. Mara grabbed both their plates as Jack stuffed the last of his breakfast into his cheeks and followed the two girls to the armoury to grab some practice rifles.

As they passed through, Rhiannon grabbed her gear out of her nook and began to suit up. Gazing into the empty nook next to her, a tear rolled down her cheek. Gazing around the room further as she prepared, the ever-growing number of empty places only made it worse.

‘When will it be my turn? Who will be next?’

...

The three of them had ventured upstream from the lake, just below the rocky rapids that wound up the hills and off the edge of the property. In the mid-morning and on hot days, kangaroos tended to congregate here out in the open.

The drowners knew this too, often feasting on the roos as they drank. Rhiannon was confident that they’d stay downstream though. Being mostly aquatic, drowners dry out quickly and would avoid direct sunlight where possible. As the three of them approached from above the rocks, they spotted their prey. Four kangaroos next to the stream. A large bull kept watch. Well over six foot, covered in reddish-brown fur and rippling muscle, he would make for a tasty meal. Three females stood at the bank, to drink directly from the burbling water.

Rhiannon jerked her head toward the group.

“Alright, I’ll take the bull down. Mara, you go for the middle one. Jack, you aim at the far one. We all fire at once or else they’ll all do a runner.”

The two nodded, lifting their rifles and taking aim.

“Ready...”

They all tensed, taking their rifles up to their shoulders.

“Aim...”

Each of them took their targeted spot on the animal to hit, either the head or upper neck.

Mara noticed a small movement as a small black nose poked out of its pouch.

“Fire!”

Three rifle cracks went off in a staggered fashion, with Mara firing last. Two roos lay dead on the gravel.

She'd thrown the shot.

Rhiannon turned to her in annoyance. “What the hell was that? You had that shot and fucking missed! What was wrong with you.”

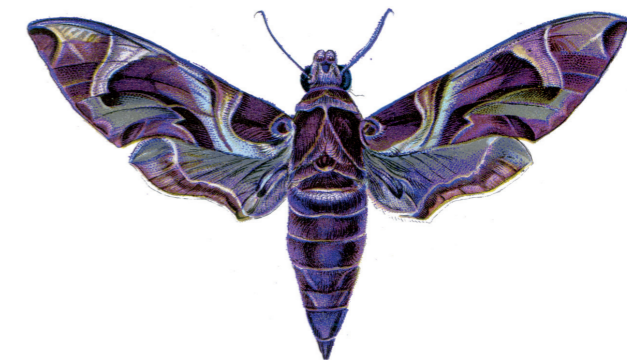
Mara's head drooped in shame. “I saw a joey poking out of her pouch. Figured that there was enough pointless suffering around here already.”

She relented, a solitary tear rolling down her cheek. A moment later, she realised what gun Mara had grabbed. It was his, now merely one of the training guns.

“It's okay. I think he would've preferred it that way anyways.”

The two looked at Rhiannon in confusion. She shook her head in response.

“Never mind that. Come on, we need to get these suckers home in time to start dinner.”





Chris King:

Chris is a lover of all things fantasy and science fiction, particularly fascinated by the peculiarities of time-travel and alternative dimensions. He loves world-building and imagining bizarre and different realities to our own. Chris is also a content writer and journalist, with his work published in Polygon, national newspapers and international sports magazines. You can find him on Twitter at [@Cmking400](https://twitter.com/Cmking400)

The Time Library

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not. Just... Just leave.”

The memory stilled as orange light bloomed. Tears which hung to her eyelashes. Regret. Love. Loss. It was all there, like a masterpiece hung in a gallery. But instead of a frozen scene of betrayal, the scene rewound and then flickered into nothing.

Dark tattoos pulsed a luminescent ochre hue on the watcher’s arm before fading into the black ink the librarian had painted years ago. What they meant, even she didn’t know. But here, in this library, she could see anything. Shelves lined with their history, heroes, the last revolution, the kal’mah curse, it was all waiting to be explored.

For a time, it was. But the days since the viewing stations had been packed were long gone. Historical debates were settled. Questions answered. Now it was just the dreamers. The last of the Time Walkers. Trapped watching their own past, too guilty to walk away.

The only sound was the turning of a page, then, once again, a door clicking shut as the memory restarted filling the room.

“You’re home early!” The grin was giddy. The eyes were bright. Excitement teetering on the edge of an oblivion that she didn’t know she was walking into.

Countless viewings before, the watcher had trodden through this scene, now she just leant against the wall, too numb to get closer but too obsessed to walk away.

“Yeah, I... erm... I need to talk to you.”

“Okay?” Suspicion and concern darkened her brow. The light that danced in her eyes seemed to dim. In the living room they’d shared for almost six years, the final conversation began anew.

“I, well...” “What is it?”

“This isn’t working.” Finality, certain in its conviction and unwavering in its heartbreaking purpose, tainted her words so that their meaning could not be misunderstood. “We need to stop.”

“What are you saying?”

“You’re really going to make me say it?”

“You’re damn right I am! I mean, what is this about? What, are you not happy? Do you not love me?”

“It’s not... I can’t. I just can’t. Not anymore.”

“And that’s it? That’s all you’ve got to say, Kass? Really. After years, ten years, after everything. You just ‘can’t’, and you want me to be okay with that? You think I’m just gonna let you come in here and ruin my life, ruin *our* lives?”

“Talía, please—

“Please, what?” The dark swirling tattoos that all mages in Zuhn’ték used to harness their powers were glowing a dark red. Magic, it turns out, isn’t good with emotions.

The watcher didn’t flinch as the glass Talía had been drinking from exploded, she’d seen this too many times before. Each time, she hoped it would be easier. It wasn’t.

“Just calm down, okay?”

“Calm down?” The inky blackness was beginning to coil up her exposed arms, disappearing beneath her tunic. “You come in here, you tell me what, exactly? That I’m not good enough? That we’re not good enough anymore and you want to just turn your back on everything. On me. On us. And you want me to calm down?”

Instead of the fireplace roaring into life, as it always did, the scene froze.

“I thought I’d find you here.” The librarian, dressed in the university’s somber black robe, stepped through the door and gazed impassively at the memory. “You know, we have other books on the shelves?”

The watcher continued to gaze at the lovers’ quarrel, only locking eyes with the librarian when he’d stepped through the ghostly figure of Talía. Not that the watcher needed to see her face to know what it looked like. Contorted with rage, her dark blue eyes so filled with fury they could be an ocean locked in a storm. She’d studied every inch of that face, just as she had this entire day. She’d watched both of their lives lead to this moment, how they’d walked the path destiny had laid out for them.

And only one of them kept walking. “They’re boring.”

“Ah, so it’s nothing to do with guilt that keeps you here?” When the watcher refused to answer, the librarian offered her a thin, sad smile. “You are not to blame, you know that?”

“She’s dead because of me, I’d say I’m to blame.” “Kass, her magic killed her. Not you.”

“If I hadn’t—

“Then something else would have caused this,” the librarian said, gesturing to Talía’s supernova.

“I shouldn’t have gone looking in her past,” Kassandra protested, looking at her own stupid self. “I shouldn’t have tried to leave.”

“The kal’mah are to be feared, their magic corrupts them. You know that as well as I do. It always ends like this,” he sighed, Kassandra unable to hear the words she’d told herself thousands of times. “You were scared.”

“I was selfish.”

“You were scared,” the librarian insisted. “Talia knew what she was and did nothing to protect you. Either of you. You’ve walked through the pages of her life. You saw what she did. You were right to want to leave.”

“She could’ve—

“No, my dear, she couldn’t.” He waved his hand and the memory burst to life. Cassandra watched herself try to explain before the room exploded. Magic, pure and untamed, shattered her world. The woman she loved fell to the floor, limp like a ragdoll.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not,” Talia wheezed, blood trickling down from the corner of her eyes now jet black. “Just... Just leave.”

“Not without you.”

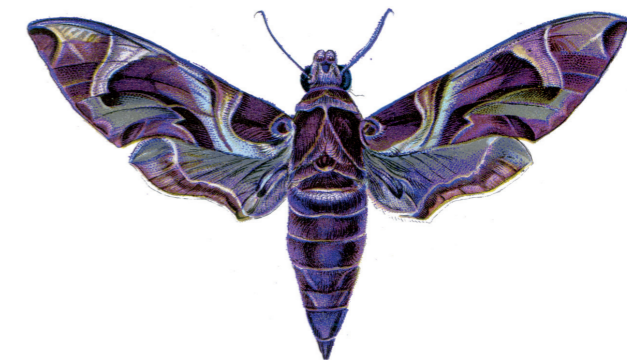
“I should’ve told you. This isn’t your fault.” “It’s fine. Talia, it’s going to be fine.”

Their lives ended with a lie. Talia died a few hours later. Kass with her. She might still breathe. But it wasn’t life. Just guilt masquerading as existence.

“You have to forgive yourself,” the librarian said.

“No,” Kass told him, flicking back a page, and listening to the door of her old home click shut once more. “I don’t.”

“You’re home early!”





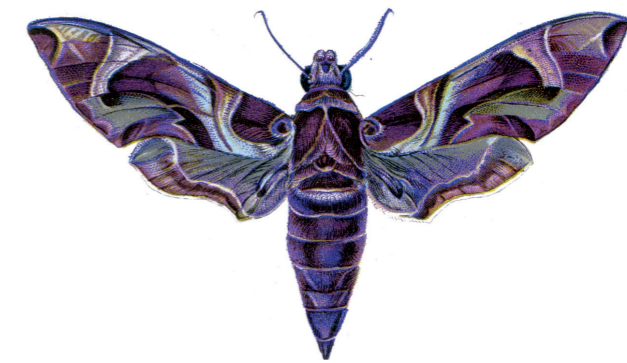
Strider Marcus Jones:

Strider Marcus Jones – is a poet, law graduate and former civil servant from Salford, England with proud Celtic roots in Ireland and Wales. A member of The Poetry Society, his five published books of poetry <https://stridermarcusjonespoetry.wordpress.com/> reveal a maverick, moving between cities, playing his saxophone in smoky rooms. He is also the founder, editor and publisher of Lothlorien Poetry Journal <https://lothlorienpoetryjournal.blogspot.com/> His poetry has been published in the USA, Canada, Australia, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, France, Spain, Germany; Serbia; India and Switzerland in numerous publications including: Dreich Magazine; The Racket Journal; Trouvaille Review; dyst Literary Journal; Impspired Magazine; Literary Yard Journal; Poppy Road Review; Cajun Mutt Press; Rusty Truck Magazine; Rye Whiskey Review; Deep Water Literary Journal; The Huffington Post USA; The Stray Branch Literary Magazine; Crack The Spine Literary Magazine; The Lampeter Review; Panoplyzine Poetry Magazine; Dissident Voice.

MAVERICKS

you taste of cinnamon and fish
when you wish
to be romantic-
and the ciphers of our thoughts
make ringlets with their noughts
immersed in magic-
like *mithril* mail around me
stove dark forest, pink flesh sea
touchings tantric-
make reality and myths
converge in elven riffs

of music, so we dance it-
symbols to the scenes
of conflict, mavericks in dreams
that now sit-
listening to these pots and kettles
blackening on the fire
of rhetoric and murderous mettles-
before we both retire
to our own script.





Wallace Barker:

Wallace Barker lives in Austin, Texas. He has been published in Neutral Spaces Magazine, Reality Hands, Misery Tourism and Expat Press. More of his work can be found at wallacebarker.com

Night Drinker

I saw glass on the floor
nearly slipped
carried on into the dining room
down into the crypt

lolly headed drooping
reflected in the pool
dust on the ceiling, webs in the corners
persist down tunnels felt like a ghoul