

Part A: Thesis

**Home Is In The Wandering**

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## *Daughter*

To many, the forest of Fenholt was a place of horror; a place where the denizens of hell slithered and skittered in the darkness away from the holy fire of the Sun. The faithless would tell you no god dare touch the desecrated soil, lest they sully their divine light with decay. The nearby villagers would bombard you with tales of missing children and shrieks on moonless nights. The Church would rather you didn't speak of it at all, for the very mention of the dark wood invited the attention of devils and fiends.

The only truth in the ramblings of the fearful was that Fenholt indeed saw little of the Sun – the ancient alder trees conquering the sky, leaves drinking in the light, leaving the undergrowth in a perpetual dusk. This, however, was hardly a source of discontentment for those who made their homes amongst the bog and bark. Those who dwelled in the forest thrived in the eternal twilight, and none more so than Jadwiga Hajek.

Jadwiga had been adopted by the woods as a youth. She remembered little of her life before. Only fragmented images. The occasional word. A name that may not even be hers. If she were to guess, Jadwiga would suggest she was running from something – though from what, she couldn't tell you. It didn't matter. Everyone has something they're running from; or towards.

*duck beneath the branches; crackling embers, cracking sticks; the bramble parts, you rush through; it reforms behind you, a barricade, protection; the woods embrace their daughter*

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“...as the sword-arm of the Church...”

Caldwell Thorwick was not a man for speeches. Every minute spent pontificating about how ‘they were the last bastion of righteousness’ or how ‘the light of the Sun burns brightest among the hunters’ was a minute that could be better spent being that bastion, going on the holy hunts, actually *doing* something.

“...we cannot allow this rot to fester any longer...”

But there was naught to be done about it. The priest to his side – whose name Caldwell couldn't be bothered to remember – demanded that ceremony be kept, and any gods-fearing soul should find joy in the words of ‘those who serve as the speakers of the gods’.

“...there can be no mercy for the wicked...”

Caldwell wasn't sure what joy could be found in the same tired go-to phrases repeated every time. The *real* joy was in bringing blade and sunfire down upon the godsforsaken – be they frozen beasts from hell or be they members of the apostasy. *That* was true worship. *That* was when one was closest to the gods. He couldn't believe he had run from it once.

*thatch homes ablaze; the cry of heathen voices, wordless; creatures of hell conjured, their caller a mother; the whistle of steel against flesh; the weeping of a child*

He never would again.

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The earth rumbled with warning beneath her. Jadwiga knelt down closer to the soil, brushing her fingers through the muck. She stayed silent as death, listened to the slight shift in the birdsong. The wind felt heavier in her lungs; the bog beetles moved just a little slower. The green of the alder leaves was a shade duller; and through them tore sunbeams.

Something was coming.

She needed to know what.

Jadwiga sat down, closed her eyes, stretched out her arms. Low chants of a voice half hers, half other; her fingers moving in practiced waves; the wet soil reaching up towards her skin; the mud racing up her calves, up her back; viridian motes drifting from beneath her nails; open the eyes, see beyond.

A sparrow lends his sight. There is commotion in the village.

Flick the wrist to the right. Shift. New eyes.

A garden rabbit shares her senses. The village folk are afraid. She cannot discern the source.

Twist the hand left. Shift. Listen.

A horse offers his awareness. Jadwiga can feel a rider. Heavy. Armoured. She tilts her head. The horse's tilts with her. The rider is not alone. There are hunters in their mail, their leather, their plate.

Jadwiga understands now.

Break the spell.

Jadwiga opened her eyes. The wet soil dropped to the ground, the mud cascaded off her skin, the motes dissipated. She rushed to her feet, nearly falling, and sprinted off into the deep thicket. She would find it. She had to.

*stumble into the heart; thorns, cuts, blood; move to rock, move to stone; eldritch voices, sing along; the altar responds, **she** responds. you are her daughter*

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As Huntmaster, it was left to Caldwell to make the final decision. His companions were tired from travel, but the noonday Sun was fast approaching. Could they keep the gods waiting another day?

If it had been Caldwell alone, the answer would be simple: never. He felt no weariness himself, and a part of him wanted to chide the other hunters for their fatigue. A true soldier of the gods needed only their faith to sustain them, as far as Caldwell was concerned. If such a sentiment made him a fanatic, so be it. Fanatics got the job done.

But it was not Caldwell alone – he had to consider the morale of his weaker subordinates. So, he settled on a compromise. Sunfire was strongest at midday, but summer kept the holy fire high well into the afternoon. They would march upon the woods after a few hours of rest.

It seemed his soldiers had not expected this, the relief erupting across their bodies. A few made their way to a local tavern, others to the market stalls. Caldwell went to the chapel. It was a simple building, nothing like the basilicas of the capital. The only feature to even mark the structure as a place of worship was the Sunburst engraved above the front door.

The interior was as unassuming as the outside, with less than a dozen pews and a scant few paintings of the gods. None of the towering statues, the fine tapestries, or awe-inspiring murals he was used to. He found it pitiful, arguably not worthy of the gods' splendour, but it was better than nothing and would have to do.

Caldwell strode down the aisle and knelt before the pulpit – a painting of the High Goddess crudely hung from a nail. Clasp his hands in prayer, eyes shut, he began to call out to those he served.

“Axia, victrix of countless battles, lend your strength to my sword-arm.”

*metal against bone; wipe the blood off the steel; cry out in victory*

“Hossric, guide to all who hunt, lend your swiftness to my stride.”

*soft steps; torch ablaze, hand on the hilt; legs break into a sprint*

“Valente, whose heart is the Sun and whose word is law, lend your fire to my soul.”

*fire raining from the Sun; a brother pushes his sister to safety, he burns; the stench of searing flesh*

A meek voice interrupted his prayer.

“Are you gonna get rid of the bad things, mister?”

Caldwell turned. Behind him stood a child, sickly pale and underfed. The boy’s eyes bulged from his head; they gazed at Caldwell filled with hope.

*the whistle of steel against flesh; the weeping of a child*

“Always.”

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The thicket hadn’t been as difficult for Jadwiga to traverse this time around. She only had misty memories of the path, but they were enough. Like all of Fenholt, this place too had changed. The grove has grown denser; where once a clearing encircled the altar, there was now but a small gap between the rock and trees. Gnarled roots had wrapped around the stone, cracking it in some spots and breaking it entirely in others. It would have to do.

Jadwiga walked reverently towards the altar. In the centre of the stone, untouched by root or vine, was the same sigil she remembered – a contorted tree burrowing deep into the soil, snakes at its roots and birds at its high branches. With a deep breath into her lungs, Jadwiga prepared to do what she did once countless years ago and placed her palm flat against the sigil.

Skin tears for blood to flow; the sigil carves itself into the hand; roots first, birds last; blood turns from red to green, glows; the world crumbles away piece by piece, only emerald nothingness in its place; flesh dies and bone turns to dust; death takes Jadwiga, as it did before; to something beyond the afterlife; to **her**

“Dear Mother, I have come to ask for your aid.”

Jadwiga’s words are not formed in her voice, but the voice of one who is child and elder both. She is no longer Jadwiga, she is the Daughter, and the Daughter alone.

The Mother turns to meet the words of her Daughter. Of all her fractured memories, only one has ever been clear to the Daughter: the form her Mother takes. The Daughter marvels at the grandeur of her Mother; antlers of an elk that flicker in and out of vision, a skull both deer and human worn as mask and as true face both; a cloak of leaves that shift from red to green and back with each blink; sometimes arms and sometimes wings and sometimes none; her skin flesh and scales and bark all at once. Her only constant is change itself.

The Mother speaks wordlessly to her Daughter; holds her Daughter's hand; meets her Daughter's forehead with her own. A viridian light flows from somewhere within the Mother, beyond the Mother, and wraps around the Daughter, making a home in her bones, in her gut, in her soul. The Daughter's eyes turn to the shade of malachite and burn with deep green. She grows antlers, a whirlwind of leaves settles into a cloak, a mask of cervine bone flickers onto her face; then fade into her breath.

The Mother bids her Daughter farewell.

The world reassembles. Jadwiga opens her eyes.

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Having had a brief respite, Caldwell's companions were able to regain their strength – and with it, their zeal. Fenholt loomed before the hunters, but none seemed to falter, as far as Caldwell could see. Good. They would need to be ready for anything. The villagers hadn't been much help in letting them know what to expect. If they were to be believed, Fenholt contained nearly every fiend and monstrosity ever known to civilisation, imaginary or otherwise. Nonsense, of course, but even if it weren't, it changed nothing.

Caldwell was not a man for speeches, and thus he didn't make any. He merely lifted his torch towards the sun and his subordinates followed suit. As each hunter muttered a swift prayer, the torches erupted with sunfire. They were ready.

Caldwell led the march into the everlasting dusk. Shadows cowered in the light of the Sun, slinking back into the earth. The trees turned their branches away from the flame; the critters scurried away into the undergrowth; the soil dried up beneath them. The light of the gods was coming to the wicked forest, and its denizens would be unable to hide from the Sun now.

A sudden scream from behind, cut off as quickly as it began, then a bone-crunching thud. Caldwell turned on his heels to see one of his own, dead, being pulled into the bark of a tree.

One of the hunters tossed her torch at the roots, setting the tree ablaze. The tree began to slowly turn to ash, and the dead man's body with it, but the fire could not spread. Shadows emerged from the soil once more and kept the flames contained. The forest was fighting back.

Caldwell felt fury thrash inside him, a great beast gnashing at its cage. Another yelp, longer this time, came from his side. The torch-tossing hunter fell to the ground as a crooked root wrapped around her ankle and dragged her into the dusk. Silence followed. A brief moment of nothingness.

From the soil arose a hand of bramble, clutching at a hunter's ankle, digging thorns into his flesh. He brought his blade down to assail the hand, but he had already begun to rot. One of the soldiers screamed in horror as he saw his friend decay before his eyes. The others stayed quiet. They could think of nothing to say.

Caldwell could see their resolve flagging. They were weak, he thought. Pathetic, godsforsaken the lot of them. Let the forest have them. He would march on alone. As the hunters shouted for their leader to save them, Caldwell paid them no heed and stomped onwards. The crunch of bone and the fearful yells faded in favour of Caldwell's steady footsteps. He would reach the centre of this hellish place and he would set it all ablaze.

Hours passed, or perhaps only a few minutes, until Caldwell found he was not alone. Standing before him was a human, a woman clothed in old rags – or were they leaves, changing colour in the light? It mattered not. Evil was evil, in whatever form it took. He stomped towards her, sunfire seething atop the torch. As he closed in on the woman, he began to question if she was human at all. She appeared to have antlers- wait, no, she didn't. A trick of the mind, surely. Either way, irrelevant. Human or beast, it would die.

“You are not welcome here, hunter.”

Her voice rippled through him, a sickness in his blood, in his flesh. Caldwell felt his breath weaken, his stride slow.

“You are not welcome here, Caldwell Thorwick.”

Two voices now, speaking in tandem. Caldwell staggered at the mention of his name. How did this witch, no, this creature, know him? His skin felt dry, his throat clenched up. He continued the approach. She never seemed to get closer.

He couldn't hear the woman's words anymore; he could only *feel* that she was still speaking. Caldwell pressed on, torch aloft, blade ready. He hadn't noticed his skin flaking off his flesh, stalks ripping through his muscle into the air, his flesh turning to soil.

The torch began to dim. To Caldwell's mind, it had only grown brighter. He didn't feel anything but the warmth anymore. Not even when his lungs filled with petals and vines crawled up his throat. There was only the light. Only this mattered. His bones turning to wood didn't matter, nor did the mud seeping from his eyes.

Only the light.

Always the light.

Always.

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What was once the Huntmaster sunk into the wet soil of Fenholt. Jadwiga fell to the ground in exhaustion; the borrowed power flowing from her back into the emerald nothingness of beyond. Laying in the still earth, she listened to the birds – their melody returned. The wind had lightened to a breeze; the bog beetles rushed along with renewed haste. The green of the alder leaves held their usual vibrance again; and eternal dusk returned to the forest of Fenholt.

*rest beneath the branches; the soil hums, a gentle bog-song; the wildflowers hold you, the alders your sisters; they grow beside you – warden, protector; the woods embrace their daughter*

## *Transheretical*

I never sat in the waiting room during winter. The garden outside St. Othar's Chapel was prettiest then – skeletal trees, the click and crunch of leaves under my heels, the evergreen plants watching me close. I found it eerily magical. The Sister at reception always asked why I would want to be outside.

“The waiting room has a fireplace, you know?”.

“Dolls don't get cold,” was my usual reply.

She would either chuckle bemused, side-eye me when she thought I wasn't looking, or pretend I didn't exist. The response depended on which Sister she was that day.

I do get cold. All dolls do. Most of us are just used to it.

For all its beauty, however, the garden outside St. Othar's had one inexcusable flaw – the silence. The chapel was on a side road in a sterile neighbourhood. In other seasons, there were at least the birds to listen to. But they never spoke a word in winter, so all that was left was silence. I've always hated silence, hated its effect on the mind.

This time silence had no chance to speak with me before I was being called in.

“Mother Elise will see you now. Please follow me, sir.”

This was the Sister who would side-eye me. It had been a while since I bothered to correct her. She always called me sir, with intent to harm, to disturb. It didn't bother me anymore. Her staring at my jaw every time she saw me, however, did.

Mother Elise's room was at the back of the chapel, in a room that I can only imagine was used for some administrative purposes when St. Othar's still operated as an actual church. The lights in the passageway leading to her never worked, or were never turned on (I never found out which), which made the impending room look rather ominous. Another patient I'd spoken to had told me how scary she found it, walking down a dark corridor to a nun's office, flanked by walls of scarlet and porcelain white. I could understand, though I didn't feel quite the same.

Nothing in a church could scare me. Not anymore.

“Good morning, my little one. Take a seat.”

Mother Elise always spoke to me like a child. I don't think she knew how else to. She first met me as a child after all; I was her favourite choir boy back at the Cathedral. Until my voice broke, that is – an event her and I both hated, though for different reasons. She spent weeks trying to train my voice to imitate its former pitch. It didn't work – again, to both our displeasures. After that, she grew terribly bitter towards me. I don't think she ever stopped seeing me as that child in the choir, though. She could never see me as a woman. A girl, maybe, but never a woman.

“What are we doing today, sweetheart?”

The kindness of her words never quite matched the tone of her voice – a concoction of vitriol and revulsion underlying the feigned civility she tried so desperately to make sound real. Mother Elise hated what she did. Most of all, she hated herself for it.

“Can we focus on the chin this time, please, Mother?”

Last session had been work on my upper jaw, and I could tell she wanted to finish her work there (as did I), but it was still tender from the previous time. Mother Elise took a moment to assess my face before standing up to light some incense – I think cedar this time, I couldn't quite tell. At the other end of the room, she lit her never-melting candles. One last step for preparation remained – the part I hated the most. Mother Elise gave me the shot glass. Its contents were a clashing mix of indigo and neon lime green. Except if your session was on a Sunday – then it would be pure crimson. Regardless of the colour, it always tasted like brussels sprouts and smelled like piss.

“Drink up, my baby. This will make you feel better, okay?”

I flung my head back and let the disgusting mixture crawl down my throat, then jerked my head forward and covered my mouth to try prevent myself from throwing up. It didn't always work. This time it did. With the last step complete, Mother Elise could begin her work.

The chanting always started the same. I could never tell what she was speaking besides that it was somewhat Latinate, but I recognised the sounds nonetheless. The incantation only ever took a verse or two to take hold. Once I confirmed with a wave that my face was fully numb, Mother Elise let the spell continue. The flesh around my chin began to tear, peeling back slowly to give way to the bone of my lower jaw. I was terrified the first time, seeing my skin and muscle roll up the side of my face, only a few drops of blood escaping the spell. By this session

though, I had begun to think of them as macabre little Swiss rolls. It made the experience a bit more whimsical.

The chanting was new now. I could only guess that the words needed to differ depending on the site. Previous sessions had focused on my upper jaw or forehead, so chin work didn't have a precedent yet. I watched attentively at my face reflected in the mirror as Mother Elise's spell reshaped my chin and the surrounding bone, slicing tiny shards off some bits and sanding down others. It was a remarkable feat – I never quite got used to the majesty of it. The other dolls who came to Mother Elise would argue about how she accomplished her work. Some claimed she got her powers from God. Others suggested witchcraft. The remainder gravitated towards some nameless occultism. I didn't quite care. Whatever she drew her magic from, it produced results, and that was all that mattered to me.

About half an hour later, Mother Elise rolled my fleshy Swiss rolls back down my face. It felt more like several hours, but time moves differently in a church, and I could only rely on what the clock told me. She gathered the shards and bone dust onto her desk after my face stitched back together and deposited the pile into her lockbox. Mother Elise never asked for financial compensation. She didn't do this work for money; she did it for the bits of transfeminine bone she could keep locked away in her bedside table.

The sessions ended wordlessly. Mother Elise sat deathly still on the floor of her office and patients were expected to understand that as the sign to leave, back down the dark corridor, past the Sister who may or may not ask how it went – depending on who she was that day – and out into the garden where the cold would baptise your new-born bone.

## *Harbinger*

Red sunlight burns away all life in the dunes. There are skeletons of cacti, withered remains of bear and crow, corpses of bacteria – vestiges of life, but nothing more. All that exists is sand, sun, and They.

*Breathe in the dust. Lungs of burnt orange. Dry veins. Blood and sand blur. Blood and sand will fade before They.*

The sand cannot divine Their origins. They leave no footprints upon the desert, no markings left where They lay Their hands. The sand does not move for Them. It does not know They exist.

*Warp around the glass shards. Traceless bloody steps. Be silent to the desert. Be known to Our mother but never Our child.*

The Sun, keeper of all history, knows nothing of They. She was born before Them, but They have lived longer than her. She can never remember Them in the night.

*Solemn sands, dead and dying. All has gone into the Red Sun. Forget the gates. Remember all that is yet to pass.*

They collect the remains of those lost to time. Where such remnants are taken is unclear. They are never moved nor assimilated. It is if they simply cease to be.

*Watch the bones and what they were will be. Calcified crowns and spines. Green is a dangerous myth. Free our eyes, mother.*

The dunes flatten with each cycle. There is no wind to erode them, for even the air has been scorched away. The top sands merely ascend when their time is done. It is They who choose when.

*Float in fire. The ever-reaching palms. Our time has long passed. Our birth has yet to be decided. We can see you even now.*

## *Unethereal*

My dresses tear on my edges. The floral print petals ripped off by the rock. Walking through the city I see my loves, and I do not recognise myself in the mirror of their eyes. I see a construct of stone where an elf once stood. I am turned to petrified wood. No green adorns my form any longer, only the beige leaves I'd trample upon as a child to hear the crunch. I crush them between the rock. It no longer sounds like it used to.

I dream still in willowy hues and veils – sunset cloth that flows down my hips and fans out into the wind and soil. The fabric recoils at my touch now, fleeing into worlds I can no longer reach. The gateways no longer open at my voice. My songs have turned to grinding stone. They threaten to ignite the palm leaves and pine needles. I cannot feel the loam beneath my feet anymore. I cannot feel the earth.

My loves hold me close and for a brief respite I am elven once more. I am home again. I am not healed, but I am home. It is not long before the buildings return and the woods are steel and rust anew. The rock grows watching the glass. My dearest places a hand on my shoulder and tells me I am elven still beneath the stone. I want to believe her, but I can only grieve.

I lay in the grass with my loves and the rock erodes into the earth. The playful barking of dogs whistle through the leaves and I can laugh, loud and diaphanous. My body cannot hurt me here, not when it fades away and I can only feel alive. There is no rock nor bone anymore. Not until I stand and depart, when my body returns and petrifies. Every goodbye is a gorgon.

And yet, I see glimpses of softness in the mirror. They are fleeting, but they are there. Tiny plants sprout from my rock and bits of moss have made me their home. I am still stone, clumsy and afraid, but there are signs of life in me, and I will carry them with care. I hope to be elven again when next we meet. Until that day, I will water this body of stone, and hope to bloom.

## *Under Stone*

“Oh, we are so fucked.”

Ygritte let out low, breathy laughs between rapid breaths. I watched her will break in that moment. The bravest fighter I ever knew had been lost to oblivion; her courage devoured by that stone hell. She dropped her mace to the ground with a roaring cackle. The crash reverberated through the crumbling halls. I flinched. She had doomed us all! But what was the point? We were doomed the moment we saw it. She knew that. If the noise should draw it closer, so be it. Death was an inevitability.

“No no no, this isn’t happening, it’s not real, it’s not real.”

Declan had been repeating such words since the first sighting. He sat beside me curled up, knees in his arms, muttering in fear. The crash of steel against stone didn’t even faze him. He merely continued his rocking and murmuring. He wasn’t Declan anymore. No, Declan, the brash bastard of a man I loved, died when it first saw us. This was his still-living husk of a body, piloted by his dying thoughts.

“Fucked. Fucked. Fucked!”

Ygritte screeched out into the hollow corridors, talking with her own echo. She... she was truly gone, then. It was just me left. I tightened the grip on my axe and buckler, and I ran. I didn’t look back towards my old friends. I could mourn them later.

My footfalls boomed against the wicked stone. The cold leeches through my boots, the thick air threatening to pull me down into what lay below. Down to where Tadhg’s bones lay, to where Aodh’s ashes fell, to where Declan and Ygritte had gone. Down below the stone where death becomes a mercy.

Without Aodh’s firelights, the umbral corridors of Caer Bronn were dark as pitch. For all I knew, I was taking myself deeper into that abyssal fortress – into the frozen nothing of something beyond hell. An inhuman screech raged through the halls. No, not one, but many, a cacophony of voices shrill and shattering. I wanted to run in the opposite direction, but it came from everywhere. It was in the walls, in the stone, in my skin. I could hear Declan’s murmurs amongst them. Ygritte’s dying cackle. The cracking of Tadhg’s bones. The crackle of Aodh’s last spell. Speaking to me, within me, was an unholy choir of everyone I ever loved.

I know not how long I ran. All I remember is I saw a window and jumped through. I landed on the ground with a bone-breaking thud, let the pain race through me, and the chorus ceased. My legs were shattered. Eirlys, ever-faithful, galloped towards me. I stretched to reach a mending vial from her saddlebag and chugged the disgusting concoction. The stench like rotten apples, the taste like spoiled stew – none of it mattered. Writhing in pain, my hand over my mouth to keep it down, I sat there as it worked through me. Muffled yells erupted from my throat – the potion cracking my bones back into place, each fracture healed at a pace unnatural.

I don't remember standing up. I don't remember getting onto the saddle. I don't remember riding away from Caer Bronn. I came to in brief moments – once when we passed the ashes of last night's camp, then again when I found myself in a middle of a prayer to a god I don't know. We seemed to be taking the path back to the estate. Through it all, Eirlys never seemed to waver, but I could only imagine what she must have been thinking. She didn't know. She watched us all enter the castle, only for one of us to emerge screaming. I wasn't the only one who lost dear friends that day.

When I awoke proper, Eirlys and I were just outside the estate of Sir Lauddry - the bastard who hired us to go to that hell of stone in the first place. I—. I couldn't even remember what we were meant to find. Something below. It mattered not. Not anymore. Whatever we were meant to find would stay there forever, amongst the bodies of my friends.

I could only imagine I had taken us that way to let Lauddry know what happened and make sure he never sent anyone else to that godsforsaken tomb. I don't know why else I would have asked Eirlys to go to the estate. I don't— I don't know.

The estate was different than I remembered. The once-vibrant gardens had lost their verdant colour. The sounds of guards and groundskeepers working and chatting had been replaced by unsettling silence. It was nothing like the sunlit grounds we had departed from just three days prior. I left Eirlys at the gate and slowly made my way down the path. My steps become wearier, more difficult. My body itself seemed to be resisting moving forward. At the time, I dismissed it as exhaustion. I should have listened.

I blanked out, and a few seconds later I was at the door to the vestibule. It was... ajar. No guards posted. No sounds from inside. I forced my legs forward. Faintly, the choir returned. The sick screeching lullaby but a whisper somewhere deep within my psyche. I wanted to stop there. I changed my mind about walking through the door. I would run back to Eirlys and get

as far away from here as I could. But I couldn't stop my legs from moving. My steps were not my own. Something had taken hold of me.

Through the door I was pushed, met with a wrenching sight. The stark white walls were painted red with the blood of Sir Lauddry's guards and servants, their bodies splayed across the room, contorted into unnatural positions, and his at the centre. I am all too familiar with bloodshed, with death. It was not this that set me trembling. It was something far more sinister.

The bodies – stark pallid skin, wounds seeping black sludge, eyes turned to tar. Most barely recognisable as human. Unholy runes were carved into marble and flesh alike. Dread claimed me. I had seen this before. Deep in the umbral halls below...

## *The Kintsugi Method*

You are born. You awake. You are Mother's perfect child.

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The white marble city surrounds you from all sides. It is pristine. No detail out of place. Not one defect. Every citizen walks the stark streets in unwavering order. The guards stand still as corpses. You think back to when you watched one die as he moved out of turn. The arresters never close their eyes. The scars where their eyelids used to be unsettle you still. They cannot detain you – you answer to Mother alone – but some primal fear stirs inside you regardless.

You walk past the queues of civilians on their way to labour. They glare at you when they think no one can see. They don't know you can feel it – a jolt of electricity up your neck. Somewhere deep above your throat is the instinct to react. It tells you they should be afraid of you – and to show them why. You resist. Mother taught you better. You've always been told restraint is your greatest virtue.

The palace looms over all below it, floating through the sky above the city. No district escapes its shadow for long. You can't escape it at all. You grew up in those immaculate marble halls. Memories of gazing out the window as a child, yearning for the world below – they flood into your mind. You refuse to feel them. They disappear into your electric depths.

You approach the levitation platform. The runestone recognises your palm. It is warm. Warmth is not a sensation you're familiar with. Not like this. Your eldest sibling told you in secret that your birth mother built these runestones. Something in you stirs at this memory. You jerk your hand away from the warmth. It is a reflex. You do not take the time to consider why.

The platform lifts you up. It feels like countless arms gripping you tightly. You cannot move when the magic holds you. It does not take long before you are deposited on the palace's platform. There is a weight to the air here. You take a deep breath and feel the electricity course through your blood. For a moment, it feels wrong, before the comfort of the familiar washes over you. This is the first time you have smiled today. You cannot tell if it is forced. You don't stop to think about it.

The doors to the palace are its one point of opulence. Untouched golden filigree decorates the white. It breaks the minimalism that permeates every other aspect of the great marble fortress.

The feelings that swim inside you at this one break in pattern, this one detail deliberately out of place – they both frighten and comfort you.

Into the first hallway you walk. There are no guards here. No arresters either. Mother wants her children to feel at home. One of your siblings claimed there used to be, but Mother got rid of them when they helped one of her children sneak out into the city. You do not believe this, yet you do. Your thoughts conflict. It confuses you. Mother instilled clear-headedness in you, her perfect child. These contrarian feelings have no place in you.

You hear two of your sisters in an adjacent room. You decide to go and see what they are doing. The room you enter is the training room. It is the only room in the house that is not tiled and instead given wooden floors. The walls are the same white, however. They always are. Your sisters are sparring. The younger one looks afraid. Your older sister is letting her aggression control her. Her quarterstaff cracks against the ground every time your younger sister evades. You do not intervene – it would be impolite. You stand and do nothing as your older sister eventually knocks your younger sister to the floor with a mighty strike – far more forceful than training usually allows. Your younger sister is crying. You take this as your cue to leave.

One of your brothers rushes past you into the room. You hear him comforting your younger sister. The yelling match between him and your older sister begins to fade as you turn down another hallway. Mother never taught you to be so loud. You consider informing Mother of the events you witnessed, of your sister's aggression and your brother's rudeness. Not once do you consider telling of your sister's tears, even though you know you should.

You reach the throne room. The doors are open, but you do not walk through them yet. Mother sits on her throne. It is not extravagant as many of the citizens may believe. It is simple, neat, unassuming. You have always felt this made it feel more imposing. Your siblings agree. Mother notices you and stands up. She is not a tall woman, but you feel like she towers over you. She beckons you to approach. You do so.

“Is it done, child?”

You fish the amulet out of your pocket. It shines brighter in the palace than it did in the city. You recall the selenite centrepiece being cracked, but no damage appears on it now. Mother smiles at you. She takes it gently from your hands. She inspects it with care, gives a curt nod, and opens the clasp to place it around her neck. When she closes the clasp, you hear thunder in

your skull. A jolt of electricity shoots down your spine. You try to chase it from your body to no avail. You try to ignore it for now.

“Thank you, child. It is pleasing to have this back. You have done well.”

Mother’s praise is hard-earned and to hear it bestowed upon you leaves you shaken. This is your second smile today. This one is not forced. It is instinctive. The memories of the city fade, and your world shrinks to this one room for a long moment.

“Do you have anything else to report to me, child?”

The world is broken open into vastness once again. You feel small. Mother’s eyes bore into you – not out of malice, but the gaze weighs heavy, nevertheless. The words of your siblings’ misdemeanours jump into your throat, but you stop them there and swallow them back down. Guilt rises in their place. It chastises you for not fulfilling your duties. You try to swallow it down. It refuses to move. You resolve to shake your head and keep your mouth shut for fear of the words escaping into the air.

“Very well, child. You may leave. I will see you at dinner. Do not be late, please.”

You turn around and walk out the throne room. Your pace is faster than when you entered. You hope Mother does not notice. The electricity in your neck tells you otherwise. Her fingernails tapping against the marble seem to resound throughout the palace. She does not betray it in her face or her voice, but you can feel her disapproval. Somewhere within is a part of you that finds liberation in this. You fight it off and it goes silent.

You feel the desire to go back to the city. You have no reason to be there. Mother has given you no task and thus no reason to leave the palace. You are reminded again of gazing out the window as a child. You let yourself feel them this time. When tears come to your eyes, you regret it, but you don’t stop them until your brother approaches you. There is concern in his eyes.

“Are you alright?”

You respond how you were always trained to. You tell him yes, you’re fine. He knows you’re lying. You and your siblings have lied to each other your whole lives. You see him begin to accept your answer, as is the standard for you both. But you see something change in his eyes. There is a spark of disobedience in them. You are comforted by it, until you realise that you are feeling relief where you should be feeling disappointment.

“No. I know you’re not alright. Come with me.”

He tries to lead you towards the palace doors. You do not move. He gently grasps your hand and slowly leads you outside. His hand is warm, like the runestone. You wrench your arm away from him. He looks hurt at this, but takes a moment and offers his hand again. You gently take it and walk with him outside the palace doors. Your younger sister is outside too, sitting amongst the flowers. She does not turn to you and your brother as you pass. You expect your brother to keep walking, but he does not. Instead, he lets go of your hand and makes his way towards your sister.

“We’re going down to the city. I have a task from Mother and I need your help. Would you like to come with?”

Your brother speaks with a kindness he was never taught. It comes naturally to him. You know that Mother tried to train him out of it. It only made him kinder. It reminds you of the runestone. It reminds you of the warmth. You jerk your arm away from nothing. It is merely by instinct. Your sister does not respond in the same way. You watch her muscles relax and her expression change to a gentle smile as your brother wipes the tears away.

The three of you step onto the levitation platform. Your brother places his palm on the runestone. He does not wrench away from the warmth. He makes sure to hold you and your sister’s hands before the magic envelopes him. The magic spreads to you both and as one you begin to float down. Electricity crackles up your neck again. You look behind you but do not see anyone watching you.

You land on a different platform from earlier. You recognise this as the market district. You’ve only seen it from the sky. Your brother and your sister are quick to start moving towards the stalls. You do not follow yet. They turn around when they notice you aren’t with them. They smile at you and call you to join them. Your legs are moving before you register the decision you’ve made. The electricity jolts up your neck again.

Your sister is brimming with excitement, pointing out all the knickknacks that fascinate her. You do not understand her love for such unimportant things, but it makes you smile nevertheless. You fight the smile off. Your brother buys her a small clay horse. You notice it is chipped, discoloured, imperfect. You notice your sister loves it ever the more for it. She embraces your brother, her little hand grasping the toy tightly, as if she intended to never let go. You know how terrible Mother’s disapproval towards your sister will be. A desire to stand up for her rises within you. Disobedience feels empowering, and it terrifies you.

You follow just a bit behind your siblings. Your brother looks back at you on occasion, a gentle look in his eyes. He wants to make sure you're still there. He wants to make sure you're alright. You wonder what task Mother sent him here to do. It is not long before you realise there is no task. He lied. Guilt barrels into your throat once more. You open your mouth to chastise your brother, to demand that the three of you turn back now and hope for forgiveness. No words escape into the air. Instead, you swallow down the guilt, take a deep breath, and begin to walk alongside your siblings.

For a few precious minutes, you stop thinking. For what may be the first time in your life, you give yourself over to experience. You do not recall ever smiling as much as this. The sound of your laugh is a stranger to you, but a welcome one. You start to notice the cracks in the white walls, and they taste of joy. You don't notice the deathly still guards or the ever-watching eyes of the arresters, but you do notice the songs of the crowd. The electricity sparking up your neck feels easy to ignore. For a few precious minutes, you forget what it means to feel fear.

Your brother shows you a ceramic bowl at one of the stalls. It was once a simple vessel, white as porcelain, but it bears a history of damage. Where once were cracks are lines of gold. The bowl is all the more beautiful for it. You do not understand why your brother is showing you this, but you are grateful. Something about the bowl calls to you. It feels cool to the touch, but it reminds you of the warmth of your mother. You buy it without thinking and hold it close, like you will never let it go.

You and your siblings make your way back to the platform. You notice the palace has not moved as it should have. You slow your steps in caution. All laughter between the three of you ceases as the palace looms over you. The electricity in your neck hurts this time. Something in you steels itself and you feel the strength to move forward. Into the market your brother led you. Now, you walk in front. There is no guilt in your throat.

When you place your hand on the runestone, the instinct to wrench your hand away returns, but this time you resist it. You hold your siblings' hands as the magic levitates you into the sky. It constricts tighter now and your muscles ache where they never used to before. You had always hated feeling pain before – it felt like a sign of weakness. The pain makes you feel strong now. It makes you feel alive.

You and your siblings reach the platform in front of the palace. Before you stands your older sister. Her knuckles turn white as she grasps her quarterstaff. There is fury in her eyes – the same fury that sent your younger sister plummeting to the ground. Your younger sister hides

behind your brother. You stand between them and your older sister. It feels like instinct. You watch her face change into shock. The electricity in your neck bites into your flesh.

“Mother wants to see you all. You’re late for dinner.”

Her voice is calm, friendly even, with its usual high pitch. But her features, as always, betray her true feelings. You notice she is angry, yes, but afraid too. You do not know of what yet. You would guess Mother, but to your knowledge, your sister has done nothing to offend her. You wonder if perhaps she is not afraid for herself, but for you.

You walk towards the palace doors. The gold filigree has been removed. There are no traces left of its presence besides your own memories. The stark white makes you feel sick. You daydream of scuff marks and chips in the walls. These contrarian thoughts still frighten you, but you let them be. You feel them collect into the bowl.

The walk to the dining hall is long and silent but for the echo of your footfalls. It is only now you notice how empty the palace is. There is empty space from floor to ceiling. What few decorations there were are gone now. Everything is spotless, except for where your shoes track dirt onto the tiles. This has never happened before. Mother is making a point, or perhaps you are.

You look over at your siblings. Your younger sister looks afraid, but she is brave and she trusts in you and your brother. Your older sister looks conflicted, a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts clashing behind her eyes. As for your brother, he looks proud. You aren’t sure of what at first, until you realise he looks proud of you. You give him a gentle nod and your younger sister a comforting smile. You turn to your older sister and place your hand gently on her shoulder. She recoils at this and glares at you. After a moment, her eyes soften, and she looks away. Wordlessly, she reaches to hold your hand and squeezes it before letting go.

You do not wait for Mother to call you in as she usually would. You walk in and notice a defiance to your steps. Your first thought is to fear this, your second to embrace it. The electricity shoots up your neck and the agony sends you down to your knees. Mother is levitating above the ground, her eyes the colour of selenite. Her thunderous voice is wordless, but it lifts you into the air and brings you before her. The bowl drops to the floor and shatters.

“I know everything, child.”

Now that she speaks, her voice does not bellow, but it bites through you in a way thunder never could. There is a false kindness in it to try and mask the vitriol. It is unsuccessful. You feel the magic constrict you even tighter than before. You try to speak only to find you cannot.

“Why do you disobey me, child?”

You know she expects no answer. You do not know what you would say even if she did. Guilt rises into your throat again for a second, before anger replaces it. You understand your older sister for the first time.

“You were my perfect child.”

Mother feigns tears as she says this. The past tense of her words cut at you. You feel waves of remorse crash over you. Overwhelming is the desire to ask for forgiveness, to be her perfect child again, to abandon everything you felt today. But you don't. Fear grips you and you want to run from it, but you don't. You feel that you understand your younger sister now.

“Defiance does not suit you.”

The vitriol in her voice comes out in full force. You have never seen Mother so enraged before. There is no mask anymore, no porcelain façade for her to hide behind. The defiance stirring in you grows even greater now. You want nothing more than to defy her. You want nothing more than to be imperfect.

“Mother! Cease this, I beg of you!”

It is your older sister who cries out. Hers is the last voice you expected to hear. The magic constricting you drops as Mother's face contorts in disbelief and disgust. She lets her fury overtake her and the selenite necklace glows with the brightness of a white sun. Mother glares at her and burning magic erupts from her stare. You do not think before you jump in the way. The magic rages at your flesh and breaks your skin. You bleed from the cracks. The pain is searing, but it is worth it to protect. You finally understand your brother.

You are in agony. Mother hesitates for a moment and the magic dissipates. You catch your breath and stand up. The wounds in your skin turn to gold lines. Mother scoffs at your imperfections, but they make you feel powerful. You trudge forward under her glare. More blood flows from new wounds. More gold forms to cover the cracks. The voices of your siblings and of Mother fade into nothingness. In their place is a single, calm voice. It is your only memory of your mother. You finally let it in.

You reach Mother. Your breaths are slow and shallow. Your vision is beginning to fade, but you can still see where the selenite amulet has dug its tendrils into her. Weakly, you reach out your hand and grasp the necklace. With all the defiance you can muster, you wrench at the amulet and tear it off Mother's neck. It shatters in your hand. Mother collapses back onto the ground. You collapse too. The world collapses with you. Before you close your eyes, you feel a familiar warmth. You do not run from it this time.

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You are reborn. You awake. You are your mother's imperfect child.

## *Kill Girl*

They kept the angel in a cage. She looked so despairing behind iron. Her black butterfly wings were shredded. The girls' doing. I wasn't a part of it. Not yet.

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I was to be the next Kill Girl. It is a rite of passage every young woman in our town must go through. It is how you connect with your sisters. It binds you to the land. They say once you commit the Kill, you never leave the town. It is you and your sisters forevermore. I don't know how true that is; my aunt left to the cities years ago. My family never spoke of her again. Sometimes I fear I am the only one who remembers her.

The Kill is an uncomplicated ritual. A captured angel is brought to you. The Huntress brings one to the church and keeps them in a cage of iron. Iron is anathema to angels, like it is to the fae. The angel's wings are then clipped to keep them from flying away once the ritual begins. If they're lucky, that is. Sometimes the girls get overzealous. From there, a Kill Girl is chosen. She must be a young woman without blood on her hands. The clergy has a way to tell. The Kill Girl is given a consecrated blade and the angel is brought in. She must then plunge the blade into the angel's heart and cover her hands with the blood. From there, she must mix the blood with that on her sisters' hands. It's a blood pact in essence, but it is not a choice we are given.

I had no wish to kill an angel, but it was not up to me.

The last Kill Girl to reject the ritual was the girl in blue, four decades ago. Most know her only as a cautionary tale, but I know she was a friend of my mother's. Mother didn't like to talk about her, but she kept a small portrait of her in a locked drawer in her study. I don't believe my father ever saw it. He told me she tried to get Mother to run away with her.

I always wished I could speak to the girl in blue. I felt she would understand. It is difficult to keep blasphemy to yourself.

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The day of the Kill fell on a Thursday. My grandmother was upset it wasn't to happen on a Sunday, like hers did. "All the best Kills happen on Sundays," she told me over a family meal. Maybe mine would go wrong then. I could only hope.

My lover came over to wish me good luck. He told me how his past love was a Kill Girl two years prior and that she was never the same after it. He made me promise I wouldn't change too. I lied to him. I think he knew.

That night I broke into Mother's desk and found the picture of the girl in blue. Her hair was cut short, strawberry blonde. Father always said she had hair like a boy. I think I was the only one who heard jealousy beneath the disgust in his voice. Mother had told me her eyes were a deep green, but I had imagined a lighter green than they were. Next to her in the portrait was Mother. She hadn't changed much from then – the same hair, the same style of clothing. The only thing different was that she was smiling.

I looked back at the girl in blue. I loved my mother, but right now I needed her best friend. I sat there for what felt like hours, hoping that somehow I would find the comfort I sought. But the girl in blue never stopped smiling, her eyes fixed forward, her hand soft on Mother's shoulder. I put the portrait back in the drawer along with Mother's other secrets. I forgot it would need to be locked again, else Mother would know I broke in. She never said anything. She did crack a smile at me a little more afterwards, though.

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Thursday came. I had known dread before that day. We were raised on it. As young girls we were taught dread before we were taught to walk. But this dread – it was different. I imagined it was what the girl in blue must have felt on the day of her Kill. A wrenching, gnawing in your gut, devouring your insides. I wanted to be sick, but I knew I had to hold it down. The sisters are vigilant for signs of illness. A woman is only allowed to be sick in private.

Mother dressed me in the ceremonial robes. The attire of a Kill Girl is red in all the places her previous robes were gold. The white stays the same. I could tell Mother was trying not to cry as she helped me dress. It made me want to tell her all my blasphemies, but I thought better of it. The Kill is meant to be a special time for mother and daughter. I didn't want to let her down.

As we left the dressing room, the Huntress walked past us. She was a tiny woman, gaunt and wiry. She wore a mask of iron on her face so as to not betray her expression. Her white dress was accessorised only by a black leather belt from which hung her many knives. None of them fit properly in their sheaths. It was intentional – you could see the flecks of dried blood on the blades that way.

Mother and I entered the ritual room together. The candlelight illuminated only the aisle and the umbral outlines of the women standing in neat lines, chanting softly to themselves. The high priestess emerged from the shadows carrying a red cushion. Atop it lay an ornately crafted blade – a blade of iron with a hilt of white. Gold filigree wrapped around the hilt in delicate designs. The pommel was encrusted with a blood ruby. Rumour says it used to be a diamond before the angel blood changed its colour. It's one of the few town legends I believe.

My hands begged to tremble, but I disallowed it. I firmly grasped the hilt of the blade and took it from the cushion. It was heavier than I expected, but I could still hold it with little issue. I brought it before my chest and clasped the hilt with both hands, blade facing the sky, just as practiced.

My legs fought against taking steps forward, but it was a fight they did not win. Forcing my muscles to work with me, I walked forward. My footfalls echoed across the dark hall. The chants became louder the closer I got to the altar. At some point, Mother must have left and gone into the shadows too. I only noticed she hadn't been behind me when I reached the marble slab. I expected to find bloodstains upon the marble, but it was devoid of any blemish. It would have been beautiful if I had not known what it was used for. I felt that way about the rest of the church too.

The chanting had grown unbearably loud. At a point, I stopped hearing it altogether. There was only silence and the silhouettes of moving mouths. I looked down at the blade. I could no longer stop my hands from trembling. When I looked up, she was there. The angel. The Huntress stood behind her and beckoned her forward. She didn't look despairing anymore. There was conviction in her eyes. Her steps were deliberate. She had no fear that night. I admired her. She reminded me of the girl in blue.

She lay down on the altar of her own accord. She crossed her arms over her stomach and closed her eyes. She looked peaceful laying there. For a moment I wished to be her. I could suddenly hear the chanting again. Not through my ears, but it had burrowed its way deep into my skull. My bones rattled with it and my hands shook in time. It compelled my arms to raise, the grip on the blade to strengthen, my hands to turn it downward. I loomed over the angel, a harbinger of her death. A Kill Girl.

My own heart called out to the edge.

This was my moment of binding.

I plunged the blade.

## *Wood and Warm Light, A Letter*

The fireplace smells of vineyards and almonds. I sat on your couch before the dive – I cannot remember what we spoke of, but I remember I felt okay. Still only half-alive, but okay nonetheless, as contented in undeath as I could be. I choked at the smell of the liqueur, and we laughed. I confuse it with crying to you when the acid rose into my chest. I keep noticing the wooden floors and how much friendlier they feel than my cold tile. The ship on the mantelpiece reminds me of last year, when I still knew the feeling of gardens. The wood rotted and the water seldom flowed, but it was a home. I don't remember it ever feeling cold.

I think I'm in mourning, friend. I drive past the old house for comfort some days. In only a year it's unrecognisable. I know we might have stayed if we could. I know we can never go back. I'll keep chasing the warm light flickering from the ceiling. For now, her and I place a thin red scarf over the lamp. There is magic in the fiery tones – something white fluorescence envies and can never possess. I've read the sunset's grimoires, though I don't know the words. Electrical flame can never match it, but we can come close.

I am becoming close with the winter sun. She is far friendlier than her brother, though the flowers love him. We don't talk, but we do sit together. It is our instinct to hide from the sun. Mornings are times of fear and nights we cling to before we must awake. But I am making peace with daylight. I am learning from the flame. My spells before were seldom of fire, as you know, for I have never done well with the heat. I am rediscovering the joy, though, of sundresses at noon and dawn.

The sunbeams that flicker through the green leaf marks on me. The parasite cowers from warm skin and cool breeze-breath. I am still undead in the sun, friend, even she cannot burn away the curse on her own. Still a shadow, but one brighter for but a moment. I learned of the sun from the bodies of old trees. They still chant when the wind blows through this house, the same as the others. I used to know their incantations, though they were lost to the white walls. I am slowly learning them again. Sitting here helps – they're more talkative when I'm not alone.

Last week I felt the magic return, for a time. They lit a fire to glow, enchanting the space we breathe. My spells were flowing through my blood again. The soul electric, storm in palm, the fire washed over my soil and skin. Arcane sparks crackling along my bones, in tune with the embers and the leaves beneath our feet. We sat in a circle, our laughter our evocations, and

brought forth some long-forgotten sorcery. There was something undeniably human about it. The magic lived not through us, but as us. It enveloped me, dear friend, and I had missed it like a mother. I wept when it left me once more.

I am reconnecting. It is a slow process, but I can feel it beneath my skin. I have been hearing songs long forgotten on the horizon. They remind me of words once etched into my wood and bark. I'm carving the runes into my bones again, friend. The curse has not lifted, and some vestige of it will always remain, but with each step on wooden floors and each burst of warm light, it recedes. I am going home, dear friend. I will see you there.

## *All Is Myth*

“Heaven waits for us alone, Aniktheia.”

The Fable continued to string her lyre anew as the hoplite spoke, but she deigned this conversation worthy of her gaze at the least. Her eyes shone back at her where the bronze armour hadn't been overcome by patina. Her fire-gold sclera unsettled most, but the hoplite had grown used to it over the course of the year.

“My love, please do not look at me like that. This is not mere bravado this time.”

The Fable gave a rare blink. She considered the hoplite's words for a moment. Out of love she made certain she never rushed to an answer, even when she knew she had found one already. The consideration was merely a gesture. Perseia was proud and brash. It was clear she had not thought this through.

“You have no faith in me, my love. Fine. You will see once we reach the Gates.”

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The host had been travelling northwest for two years. Reports of Heaven in the ice had come to the peoples of Aolia from refugees. The Aolian Councils had not even finished hearing the refugees' tales before beginning to amass an armed force. The army was sent to the Gates with the objective of securing the location and taking it under Aolian control. All warnings from the refugees were ignored.

Most of the force consisted of hoplites and a contingent of diviners and priests. The remaining few were cooks, herbalists, two quartermasters, and the Fable. Purposed with keeping record of the historical event, Aniktheia was a constant presence amongst the host. The Fable had no need to write, she merely needed to watch and sing. Everything was myth to the Fable – and she could never forget myth.

The army had made an encampment on the outskirts of the Karlovan Woods – supposedly the last obstacle between them and Heaven. Aniktheia strolled through with deliberate steps, fire watching every word and movement. She knew they all felt her presence – everyone had a tell for when a Fable was close by. The quartermasters both reported blurry vision when she observed them. The general – a man named Altheos – would feel an itch in his lungs. For Perseia, her neck would ache, though she had grown used to it. The pain dulled the more time she spent with Aniktheia.

“Honoured Fable,” a voice began. Aniktheia turned to meet its source – one of the priests. His face had turned pale white. Amaios, then. The Fable could only tell the priests apart by their tells.

“General Altheos and Lieutenant Perseia request your urgent presence at-”. Aniktheia did not hear the rest of his message – she had already left. The Fable knew where they would be. Not the general’s tent nor Perseia’s. They were at the entrance to the woods. She had watched them leave that way.

At the entrance to the camp stood a small group – Altheos, Perseia, and two of the priests. One was blinking rapidly, and the other’s right hand shivered at regular intervals. Erelandra and Phaedra, then. Aniktheia only noted them for a moment before turning her fire to look upon the bodies on the ground. By their flexible leather and bark brown tunics, she identified them as scouts. Humans have no tells when dead, so names were lost to her. Names were not important anyway. The Fable cared more about the dark frost that clung to the corpses – indigo-black crystals replacing skin and sinew.

“Aniktheia! Over here!” Perseia called.

The Fable hovered over to the corpses. The frost began to melt slightly at her gaze.

“Fable, what do you make of this?” asked Altheos.

The Fable had not lifted her eyes from the bodies. She took out her lyre and plucked it gently, wisps of flame running up the string with each note. The fire disappeared behind her eyelids as she listened to the music echoing. Brief glimpses of the scouts’ final hours entered her mind. They fled from something in the woods – no, something beyond the woods. The frost had started eating at their flesh already by that point. She was unable to see further back to the source. She could only watch flashes of the frost tearing deeper into the muscles of the scouts. The cold seeped into their organs. She could feel it for just a moment. The frost may have been even worse on the inside. Their running slowed minute by minute until they could only walk. Weighed down and with belaboured breathing, the scouts began to fall. Only two were able to crawl out of the woods, and even they could not make it far.

Aniktheia moved closer to Perseia and placed her hand against her lover’s forehead. The cool brown skin of her hand began to glow with the same fiery gold of her sclera – the light moving from her fingers into Perseia’s head. The Fable’s every observation of the scouts rushed into Perseia’s mind. Her face was stoic, but Aniktheia could see rage bellowing beneath the exterior.

“Gather my finest hoplites. We’re finding the source.” Perseia declared.

“Are you giving me orders, Lieutenant? Altheos asked.

“I know what needs to be done. Now, if you please. I need to discuss with the Fable alone.”

Altheos grumbled under his breath and left with Erelandra and Phaedra to assemble a battalion of hoplites. Perseia looked into the woods with iron eyes. The Fable gently placed her hand on the lieutenant’s shoulder and could feel her intentions. Perseia wished to find the source of the frost and eliminate it – this much would be obvious to most – but she also wished for something more. There would be fire in the north soon.

“You’re doing it again, love. I asked you not to.”

Aniktheia removed her hand but did not leave the lieutenant’s side. Instead, she took out her lyre and began to pluck its strings. A haunting lament began to echo across the sky – a dirge for the death passed and the destruction to come. The Fable saw crimson motes flitter off Perseia’s body into the air. Fury smells of blood. The scent lingered on Perseia often. Aniktheia had grown used to it.

“How can you not feel it?”

The Fable continued playing her melody. The lieutenant received no answer.

“Never mind, Theia. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Aniktheia moved to face Perseia. She tenderly held her shoulders, intuiting nothing of her beloved’s mind, and kissed her. The lieutenant received an answer.

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That evening in the encampment, an unease rode on the fog. Whispers spread around of the scouts’ deaths in exaggerated detail. Hushed talk of desertion permeated the ranks of the foot soldiers, and several of the priests felt their faith shaken. They had faced much death on this journey, but something about this was different. Even the most fearless hoplites felt shaken. They had engaged countless foes, but every one was human. The frost was not something they could kill with spears.

Perseia wasn’t planning to use spears.

“Phaedra! Ready!” Perseia shouted.

The priest began reciting a prayer in the secret tongue. An array of archers stood in formation before her, arrows nocked and aimed at the skyline above the trees. Phaedra's words could not be understood by any of the archers, but they knew what to expect. As the priest prayed, she knelt to the ground and closed her eyes. Her pale skin flared with redness, sweat dripping from her body. The words grew louder and with it her hair turned from blonde to a bright, fiery orange. Embers erupted from her fingertips into the soil, melting the remnants of snow but refusing to let the melt snuff them out. They raced from Phaedra's hands across the ground and up the bodies of the archers. The flame reached their fingertips and pulsed across the string and wood of the bow until the arrowheads all ignited in a burst of light.

"Release!" cried Perseia.

A volley of flaming arrows roared over the skyline and found their marks amongst the woods. Within seconds, the flames began to leap from their carriers and spread across the forest. The archers cheered at the expanding inferno, but Perseia merely watched. She held her breath and waited. This was no time for celebration. The lieutenant readied her shield and spear. From behind her came a chorus of footfalls in sync. Her hoplites.

Phaedra startled at the approaching forces. The prayer had left her senses heightened and overwhelmed. She could not speak after using the secret tongue, at least not for a while, so she resorted to tapping Perseia on the shoulder to draw her attention to the hoplites, though she wondered how anyone could miss the din of their approach. The lieutenant did not turn around. She only offered a quiet response.

"Go back to camp, Phaedra. Now."

The priest blinked her eyes in confusion. There was something sinister in Perseia's tone. It unsettled Phaedra, intimidated her. She was usually one to question orders, but this time defiance lost to dread, and the priest briskly walked away – her fingertips coated in ash and the crackle of the wildfire biting at her ears. As she passed the hoplites, she heard a lyre in the distance, and an unnatural screech from behind. She dared not look back. It only made her march harder.

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The air had turned frightfully cold, but it was the howl from the burning woods that set the soldiers to shivering. The archers, lined up at the front, turned to run and take cover behind the phalanx, but their protectors stared them down, spears raised.

“Stand your ground. You will not be forgotten,” spoke the lieutenant.

The screech grew closer by the second. A few of the archers, driven by panic, tried to charge through the line. The sound of metal piercing flesh was all but drowned out by the flame, the dirge, and the howl. Two others ran off to the sides – both received javelins in the back. The remaining archers stayed deathly still. The lyre song grew louder and more melancholy. Aniktheia sat atop a nearby outcropping, watching what was to take place. She tried not to think about it too deeply. She was merely recording myth, as she always had.

Just before the crescendo could begin, a great gust of wind blew into the backs of the archers, turning their bodies frigid. Indigo-black crystals began to form at the edges of their eyes and mouths. Their pupils went stark white and their skin began to freeze. Perseia had seen enough. She gave the signal, and the remaining archers were run through.

A few of the hoplites were hurt by the frost wind, but none were mortally wounded. The line of archers received the worst of it, and what passed them was mostly kept at bay by shield and armour. The only grievous injury was a soldier who lost her left eye to the ice crystals, but with that side of her face frozen, she could not feel the pain.

“Hoplites!” Perseia roared. “We may not be sure of who our foe is, but we have seen what it can do. The fire caused it to lash out in the open. We have angered it, but so too have we weakened it! Rest here for a time. We wait for the fire to die down.”

Perseia began to walk away, before turning back to her battalion.

“No returning to camp, and no word of this to anyone besides each other, myself, and the Fable. Understood?”

Murmurs of hesitant agreement were drowned out by the more enthusiastic, but she could hear them nevertheless. Perseia knew there would be thoughts of dissent. She had decided it was worth the risk. For a moment her confidence wavered, but she dismissed the thought, and marched towards the outcropping.

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“It is done.”

The Fable looked up at the sound of her lover’s voice. The lyre song became the slightest bit more jovial, until she remembered this was a song of mourning. Perseia sat down beside her, gazing out at the fire. It still spread, but its fervour had begun to wane. Flame of prayer was

empowered by the priest who called it forth. The presumption was that Phaedra has little strength left to give after the night's feat.

"How do you think they do it?" Perseia asked.

Aniktheia looked at the lieutenant quizzically. She restrained herself from intuiting Perseia's meaning. The moment of silence lasted a while before Perseia looked at the Fable confused. It took her some time to realise.

"Ah. Thank you. I guess I'm still not used to you not reading my mind, or whatever it is you do."

Perseia took in a deep breath, the smell of burning bark filling her lungs even at this distance.

"The priests, Theia. How do you think they do it? Connect like that. With the gods."

Aniktheia stayed still for a moment. Her pondering was not on the question. She already knew the answer. She also knew it wasn't what Perseia was really asking. The Fable gently brought her hand to the lieutenant's cheek and turned her face towards her. She let no intuition flow through. She didn't need to.

"You already know, don't you?" Perseia choked.

Aniktheia merely nodded her head once. She used her thumb to wipe away the single tear cascading down Perseia's cheek. The two women sat there in a long silence. They didn't need to speak of Perseia's time at the temples. Not tonight.

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Come midnight, the fire had spread deep enough into the forest that the expedition could begin. Aniktheia listened as Perseia began to shout orders at her battalion, getting them ready for the march into the Karlovan Woods. To most, the lieutenant was unshakeable. Only the Fable knew what it felt like to watch her weep.

"Shouldn't we let General Altheos know we're going-" a hoplite began, before Perseia's glare swiftly cut him off.

"He knows."

No more questions arose. Perseia led her battalion into the woodland entrance, with Aniktheia at the back, observing and recording with her songs. With the leaves turned to ash, and with fire and moonlight illuminating the charred woods, the hoplites could see far into the distance.

Any beast or wind that may threaten them would, to their minds, be unable to ambush them. But it was not the fear of surprise that gripped the soldiers' minds. Such preparedness means little when you don't know your enemy.

Aniktheia reflected on the event she witnessed from the height of the outcropping. In her sorrow, Perseia had not asked about it. The Fable could barely remember it either at the time. The lieutenant was the only person to ever make the Fable forget. Now that she had space to think it through, however, Aniktheia felt stuck. Such phenomena were not unheard of, nor unseen. The priests of Aolia could call upon the gods to lend them power. Phaedra's appeal to Heaven allowed her to bring forth living flame. The blinking one was a masterful prayer-healer. But Aolia knows no god of frost and winter, nor did the refugees ever speak of one – and if one did exist, the Fable would know of it.

Aniktheia recalled the refugees calling Aolian prayer witchcraft. They spoke of it only in whispers and accusations. Every attempt by the Fable to intuit more from them was a failure. The refugees proved difficult to read beyond the words they spoke aloud – and they did not speak of much more than warnings and superstitions. Aniktheia wondered now if their warnings had merit.

“E-excuse me, Honoured Fable.”

Aniktheia's thoughts dissipated at the interruption. One of the hoplites had fallen back to walk alongside her. She was wirier than her fellow soldiers, adorned with lighter bronze and a smaller shield. Perseia's niece, Danai. The Fable knew much about the young woman, most of all that she was not considered fit for the battalion. Nepotism was a common accusation behind tent walls, but what Danai lacked in strength, she made up for agility. She had earned a place amongst her peers, much to Perseia's chagrin. Aniktheia recalled the lieutenant did not get along with the woman's fathers.

“Did you know?”

A puzzled look returned to Aniktheia's face, and with it, a familiar long silence.

“You... know that I mean, right? Don't you read minds?”

Aniktheia let out a deep sigh. She placed her hand on Danai's shoulder and let the intuition flow. It did not take long. She wanted to know if Aniktheia knew of the plan – the fire, drawing out the frost, what would befall the archers, the hoplites' orders; everything. The Fable also

knew what the young woman wished to hear. Unfortunately, Aniktheia did not know how to lie. She merely nodded her head.

“Ah.”

Perseia had always said Danai was too soft, that she was not cut out for warfare and bloodshed. Aniktheia agreed, but with more sympathy than the lieutenant. Over the past two years, she had often heard Danai softly sob in the night, especially after a battle. Once, the Fable played a song only she could hear. Danai did not cry that night. The soft need softness too. Perseia never understood that.

“Perhaps... Perhaps it was right then. If you knew.”

Danai had always looked up to Aniktheia, ever since the song. She would harbour feelings of distrust towards her comrades, the general, and her aunt most of all. But she trusted in Aniktheia. Danai had faith in story, if not the gods. But stories, like gods, are fallible. The Fable was no unbiased observer, like Danai believed. Such a thing does not exist. Aniktheia realised that now.

The young hoplite rejoined her ranks, and Aniktheia returned to her thoughts.

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The company had to stop for a time to let the fire peter out. Perseia was hesitant to halt, but continuing the march would bring them too close to the fire. The lieutenant had little success hiding her unease from her hoplites. The frost had not made itself known since the incident with the archers. She comforted herself with this before it turned to fear. She remembered what Aniktheia had shown her. The scouts were running from something beyond the forest, not within it. Guilt ate at a part of her. She had not told her soldiers this. She had no faith that they had weakened the enemy as she had claimed. Perhaps this was mere bravado. Perhaps Aniktheia had been right.

The Fable hovered over to Perseia and held her close. The lieutenant flinched, but then settled into the embrace for a few moments. Aniktheia did not wish to let go, but she knew her love did. She began to move away before Perseia spoke.

“Aniktheia.”

The Fable turned to the lieutenant, awaiting the rest of her sentence, but Perseia said nothing more. She only gave a melancholy smile and looked away.

Aniktheia sat in silence with her bevy of conflicting emotions. The conversation with Danai had unsettled her. Danai's trust in Aniktheia was not borne of the Fable's actions, but of a perceived infallibility. This had never troubled the Fable before. She was purposed with keeping record, not with intervention. This had been enough for her, before this day. The illusion of neutrality had been shattered before the Fable. Her neutrality had begotten death. If anyone could have kept Perseia from sacrificing those lives, it was her. She didn't even try.

“For you, Honoured Fable.”

Danai stood before Aniktheia, offering a handful of berries that survived the fire. The Fable looked up at the spindly woman and smiled meekly in thanks. Danai lowered her head in reverence before walking away. The berries tasted bitter to Aniktheia's senses.

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The fire eventually ceased, and the company continued deeper into the woods. The frost had still not come for them again, but remnants of its presence became more and more frequent as the march went on. What began as bits of indigo ice attached to bark turned to frozen trees and crystallised loam. The Fable saw what little remained of the scouts' corpses, encased in ice, only known to her by her visions. She said nothing of them to anyone. Not even Perseia.

Fear grew in the hoplites. Even holy flame had not melted away all of the frost. What hope did mortal hands bear against that which the gods could not destroy? Many turned not to their lieutenant for guidance, but the Fable. She was used to eyes on her, but before they had always been of caution or disdain. Now, they were eyes of pleading, seeking guidance. The pressure weighed heavily on Aniktheia. She wished to be rid of it.

As the frost's wake became stronger, so too did the forest begin to thin. They were nearing the other side of the woods. They were nearing the source. This slowed the hoplites' steps, but not Perseia's. Something drove her forward that could not be compelled to stop. Aniktheia gently played her lyre and watched red motes pour from Perseia's body. The odour of blood grew overpowering. The Fable ceased her song. Perseia looked back at her with a half-glare. Aniktheia stared back. The lieutenant brought her shield hand to her neck. Aniktheia's gut turned to sorrow at the sight.

In time, the forest ended, and the company stood on its border, gazing out into the horizon. What met their eyes was emptiness. Vast fields of snow and ice rolled out before them. There were no Gates. Aniktheia heard the soft sound of Perseia's tears, saw the subtle shakes in her

body. She cautiously moved closer to her lover. The blunt end of the lieutenant's spear dug into the ground. The force began to chip away at the ice below. If Perseia gripped the haft any tighter, Aniktheia feared it would snap in two.

“No...”

Aniktheia placed her head on her beloved's shoulder, wrapping her arm around her waist. The Fable could not remember the last time she shed tears. She let them flow, the reflection of the fire-gold glinting off the droplets. She brought her hand up to Perseia's, and the lieutenant's grip loosened.

“It was meant to be here, my love.”

Aniktheia moved in front of Perseia and held her in an embrace as the two women cried. Perseia in rage, Aniktheia in sorrow.

The sound of bronze armour in movement started behind them. Some of the hoplites were heading back into the woods from whence they came. Perseia's grip on the haft tightened again, but Aniktheia kept the fury contained. She brought her hand to her lover's cheek and warm golden light flowed from it once more. It carried a single message – to let the hoplites be, for they have suffered enough.

It was only when the crackle of flame burst into being that Perseia turned.

With flame of prayer at the ends of their spears, Altheos and a cohort of soldiers stood on the border of the woods. It had not been the hoplites leaving that made the sound of clattering bronze, but Altheos' approach. Behind them were a few of the priests, Phaedra amongst them. She appeared frightened.

“Lieutenant! I must thank you for your ingenuity. You have carved out the path to the icy Gates of Heaven for us!”

Altheos' words brought relief to the hoplites who feared punishment for their actions. Not all trusted that the general knew of their movements. Aniktheia could tell Perseia did not feel the same relief. Her face contorted in distrust. The haft threatened to snap once more.

“But... I will not tolerate dissenters in Heaven.”

Altheos and the soldiers readied their fiery weapons. Many of Perseia's hoplites laid down their weapons in surrender. The remaining few raised their shields and spears in response. Only

Danai stood frozen in place. Aniktheia realised that she could hear the same thing that gripped the young soldier with fear. The howling of the wind.

Perseia wrenched herself out of her lover's arms and charged with abandon at Altheos. Even without the aid of her lyre song, Aniktheia could smell the thick stench of blood before any had been spilled. It came not only from Perseia, however. It travelled on the air, from somewhere deep in the ice.

In moments of violence, time moves quickly, but takes an age. Aniktheia could do little but watch as each long agonising second passed, each instant hurriedly following the next. Perseia cut down soldier after soldier that stood between her and Altheos, her blade stained with the blood of people she once knew as friends. Altheos and his soldiers brought their blades swiftly upon any of Perseia's hoplites that still showed loyalty to her, their flames melting the bronze and singeing the flesh of former comrades.

This was not a story she wished to sing tales of. It was not a story she wished to observe.

Aniktheia levitated into the air and flung her body forward towards Perseia. The screech of the wind grew ever closer. The expressions on all those facing the horizon turned to disbelief. The scraping of frozen air against ice bellowed across the frigid wastes. A gale erupted in a shattering sound. Aniktheia tackled her lover to the ground and from behind them the frost came as a hurricane. Altheos and his soldiers were overtaken by the indigo ice, their flesh sloughing off from the cold. Aniktheia and Perseia began to freeze too, but the fire-gold song in the Fable kept the worst of the frost at bay for but a few moments.

A few moments were all they needed.

The hurricane passed and a long silence followed. Aniktheia stood and helped Perseia to her feet. Frozen bodies surrounded them, except for a few. Three other survivors walked over towards them. Phaedra's prayer-magic had provided enough flame to keep the worst of the frost from Erelandra and Danai. The hoplite had lost her arm to the frost, and parts of both the priests' bodies were frozen in indigo, barely moveable, but they were alive. Aniktheia's mind raced back to a misty memory of Danai rushing to Phaedra after hearing the wind approach. She had failed to notice at the time – a feeling unfamiliar to the Fable. To miss such a detail is to miss part of the myth. Her actions dawned upon her in that moment. She had abandoned neutrality, abandoned the role of the observer, the recorder of history, so that she could play a part in it.

But had she not done this all along? Reaching for visions of the scouts, playing music for the weeping Danai, acting on her love for the lieutenant. Neutrality had always been a falsehood.

The smell of blood hung upon the air still.

“Phaedra.”

Perseia’s voice was low as she spat the priest’s name.

“Their weapons burned with your flame, did they not?”

“Perseia, please...”

Phaedra spoke meekly in her defense, her face pale and her hair nearly white. The fire had been drained from her. Perseia marched towards her, and the priest flinched with each step.

“That’s enough, Lieutenant.”

Danai, ever fearful of her aunt, challenged her in this moment. Her hand trembled as it gripped her half-iced shield, but still she stood our ground. She moved to stand before the priest.

“I will not hesitate to put you to the blade too, niece. Do not think because you are my blood that I will not spill yours. I have searched for divinity my entire life, and somewhere in this ice it lies. I will cut down any who stand in my way. Heaven belongs to I and Aniktheia alone!”

Aniktheia had always picked sides. She would now again.

Perseia thrust her spear at the young hoplite. Aniktheia took her place.

Blood, glimmering with a faint golden light, seeped from the Fable’s wound onto the snow. Danai tried to keep her steady as she began to fall. Erelandra rushed over to try and heal what she could. The fire-gold began to fade from Aniktheia’s eyes. Perseia wept in disbelief.

Aniktheia could no longer smell the stench of blood.

# *Our Shadows Know The Way Home*

## *In The Dark We Come To Life*

A lone vine of ivy had grown between the stones of the holding cell, climbing through a tiny crack in the wall. It clung to the shadows, crawling around the tiny patch where the afternoon sun would hit, the only semblance of light between the prison walls. It had come to share the cell with a witch before the siege began.

The constant silence that plagued Kerrigan's senses was broken by the din of clashing steel from beyond the lead and stone. Kerrigan tensed with each tremor as boulder and bolt assailed the prison tower, threatening to topple it and turn the surrounding city into rubble. The lightning did little to penetrate the lead-lined walls, but siege engines don't need sorcery for destruction. A rock barged through the stone of Kerrigan's cell, followed by a searing incandescence. The witch's pale skin burned at the sunlight she had grown so unfamiliar with the past weeks. Her eyes narrowed at the glow, hiding behind the dishevelled tufts of her black hair. The vine, her only companion, seemed to recoil alongside her.

The sounds of battle echoed far louder now. Kerrigan's ears had become accustomed to silence and ached at the overwhelming noise from the city below. The floor below her feet began to crumble, leaving an opening to the level below. A chance to escape had presented itself. Kerrigan reached her hand out towards the ivy, its leaves glistening in the sunbeams, and consumed it. Shadows cowering in the cell's last dark corner raced towards Kerrigan's fingers, crawling inside her skin. The vine wrapped around her wrist and faded into living ash. Invigorated, the witch jumped to the stone below. Pain shot up her legs as she landed, her body still weak, but her shadow had helped to soften her fall. Kerrigan found herself in a dead man's cell. In the midst of the siege, a hole had been opened in the wall of his cell. Kerrigan could just fit through, but the drumming from the hallway gave Kerrigan pause. No living guards patrolled this tower, but rather tireless constructs, ever vigilant. Hesitation did not live long before its death, though, and Kerrigan pushed herself through.

The construct turned to meet Kerrigan, the screech of stone against stone as it moved. The witch drew on the power of the shadows coursing up her arm, her eyes the colour of pitch and

deep scars rising again across her body. The gloam raced from her skin down to the stone floor, darting towards the statue, coiling around its lifeless form. Vines of ivy emerged from the shadows, binding the statue in place. Kerrigan's fingers burst into searing pain, drops of blood beginning to seep from her nailbeds. Kerrigan was afforded no time to deal with the price of her power, not now. She sprinted to find the nearest stairwell. Another boulder crashed through the stone as Kerrigan descended. The tower would not hold much longer before the entire structure collapsed.

The yells of her fellow prisoners echoed down the hallways and burrowed into her skull. In an ideal world, she would have the time to save them, but in an ideal world, they wouldn't be here at all. Passing one of the lower floors, Kerrigan collided with another escapee – a gaunt, pallid woman fearfully clutching a kitchen knife. The woman swung the blade at Kerrigan, whose shadow rose to meet it. The iron of the knife rusted amidst the darkness. The woman's face twisted in horror as she watched. She dropped the wooden hilt of the blade and sprinted down the stairs on fragile legs that threatened to buckle beneath her. Kerrigan's gut wrenched at seeing the terror, water welling in her eyelids for a moment before she swallowed away her emotions and returned her focus to survival. She could weep later.

At the bottom of the stairwell Kerrigan saw the woman crawling on the icy floor towards the door. Her knees had given in, refusing to hold her upright any longer. Her skin flaked off as it scraped against the stone. She yelled as she felt Kerrigan's cold skin against hers, the witch lifting her up to her feet. The screaming ceased when, in a quiet moment, she understood that this was not danger, but help. Kerrigan placed her arm around the woman, holding her up with a hand beneath her shoulder, and slowly the two women walked in silence. It had been so long since Kerrigan talked to anyone, she had forgotten that day that she could speak.

Kerrigan raised her free arm to stretch out before the locking mechanism on the door to the wardens' office. Scars ruptured in Kerrigan's flesh as she let loose a burst of darkness, shattering it against the lock. The door swung open to the empty hall – empty but for one man. The rest of the wardens, the prison's only living personnel, were likely in the thick of the city, leaving only one behind to keep watch at the entrance. He was young, somewhat boyish even, and deathly afraid. He trembled at the sight of the two women, shakily raising his spear towards them. He opened his mouth wide to shout, but Kerrigan had already brought his shadow forth from beneath him to seep through his armour and into his flesh and bone. Mushrooms and moss erupted from his body, his mouth filling with fungus, silencing him as the rot made its home in

his body. The woman with Kerrigan could not stop staring at the heap of flesh and fungus now laying on the floor. Kerrigan couldn't bring herself to look at it.

Outside the prison walls was the stench of smoke and a sunset sky like spilled blood. Militia scrambled to keep the invaders at bay and get the wounded to safety. Kerrigan stayed close to the shadows wherever she could, but as more fires spread across the city, the less pockets of gloam she could keep to.

The woman's steps were becoming slower and more painful, even with Kerrigan's help. Escaping through the high walls of the castle district, the two emerged into narrow streets lined by houses and shops, almost entirely abandoned in the wake of the siege. At the far end of the first street, the woman lightly tapped Kerrigan's shoulder and pointed to a small, derelict home. Weakly, she spoke, the first voice Kerrigan had heard in weeks.

"Home. Let me... die here. Please."

Kerrigan froze. She could not leave the woman here. They could both make it out alive. She had to try.

"Please," the woman repeated in a hoarse whisper.

A void grew in Kerrigan's stomach, something deep and hollow. Slowly, with care, the witch walked the woman into the forlorn house. She directed Kerrigan to a small room in the back. A single muddied mattress lay on the floor next to a broken bedside table. Kerrigan helped lower the woman onto the bed, keeping her steady as was brought to rest. A long pause followed. The woman looked at Kerrigan with a grateful smile, tears welling in her eyes.

"Go. Live."

With a gentle nod, Kerrigan got up from the woman's side and headed towards the door. She flexed her scarred, shrivelled hand as she left. The shadows of the dim room coalesced together and slithered to the mattress, intertwining for a moment with the woman's hair, leaving a tiny sprig of ivy in their wake.

## *A Place To Which We Can Never Return*

The woods had long been Kerrigan's home. Comfort had always born the names of shaded groves. Kerrigan watched the thicket from atop the hills. Here she felt no such peace, only fear and the vicious sun beating down upon her pale skin.

Sitting amongst the blades of green, Kerrigan stared at her hands and arms. Scars of deep purple surged through her flesh. Her fingertips were stained with ash and soot. Her hands were slowly softening again, blood and moisture returning to them, but they still ached. It had been a long while before Kerrigan had called upon the shadows. Her body was no longer used to it, if it ever was. Wiping away her tears, Kerrigan found they were still tinged with black hues, sparkling in the sunlight.

Her eyes returned to the woods, watching the shadows dance beneath the boughs. For the first time in weeks, Kerrigan smiled, muddled with sorrow though it was. From deep in her chest did the desire to run into the dark hursts and lay down in the moss while the night held her like a mother. Her soul reached for it from within her body, but Kerrigan looked once more to her scars and turned away.

## *The Body Knows Its Worth*

The backroads that weaved between hillock and hamlet kept Kerrigan from too many wary eyes, her black cloak and long tunic hiding the hue of soot around her eyes and the pulsing scars of her flesh from the occasional passersby. Many witches could hide the marks of their power – illusions and glamours were favoured spells, but Kerrigan vowed off them years ago. She remembered well the feeling off ripping the pages out of her grimoire and turning them to mulch. She was lankier then, her face long and sharp, her chest still bony and flat, her hips still narrow. She had been taller then too, before the herbs took off a few inches. Kerrigan barely recognised the woman in her memories, but she respected her and her conviction. Illusions were a forbidden magic to her, and so likewise to Kerrigan.

It had been too long since she had taken her herbs.

“Ho there, traveller!” a voice called from an approaching wagon.

A friendly-faced young man with cool dark skin waved to greet Kerrigan, slowing down his horses to a halt so that he may speak to her.

“Sorry to spook ye!” he laughed, but not without sincerity in his words. “I just wanted to give ye a word o’ warning.”

The man’s jovial expression turned grim for a moment. His eyes darted from one side to the other, as if to check no one else was around. Kerrigan noticed a tiny curve of his lips, though – maybe he enjoyed the drama of it. She couldn’t be sure; Kerrigan had never been good at reading people.

“There’s s’posed to be a blood mage ‘round here. Reports o’ unnaturally grisly remains, dead soldiers with their hearts ripped out, that sort of thing. My wife, my workers, and I, well, we’re just passing through, hired to help with reconstruction – we come from further west than these hinterlands y’see, where the smell of the warm sea wakes you up every morning, ye really ought to see it-”

A muscular woman with olive skin at the back of the wagon spoke up. Kerrigan hadn’t seen her before then, her hood concealing the woman and the rest of the wagon-riders from sight.

“Ayodi, sweetheart, you’re rambling.”

The young man took a second to register the woman's words before giving a polite chuckle.

“Right, yes, thank ye darlin’. That’s my wife, Suki. I’m Ayodi, as ye heard – forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. And ye are?”

Kerrigan froze just a little at the question of her name. As friendly as the man was, she had learned many years ago that trust is cautiously given, especially to those who seem like they have the best intentions. She thought back to the pseudonyms she had used over the years – most of them names she tried before settling on Kerrigan.

“Morwen,” she answered.

“Lovely to meet ye, Morwen! Anyway, as I was saying, blood mages, guts and bones in weird places, that kinda thing. Just, if you’re heading deeper to the hinterlands, be careful. We best be going, the walls aren’t gonna rebuild themselves! Farewell, traveller! I hope to see ye again someday!”

Ayodi and his wagon-riders began moving once more, the horses neighing as they moved to a trot and then to a canter. Suki lifted her hand in a wave to Kerrigan as they passed. Once they were far enough away, the witch felt breath return to her in full. She hadn’t realised how tense the anxiety had made her. She let the fear dissipate from her gut down into her legs and feet and back into the ground.

The nearest hamlet was a place called Norrenwick. Kerrigan had been there before, though only once. It could offer her a warm bed, a hearty meal, and shelter under which to rest. A comforting thought, but not why Kerrigan needed to risk venturing into civilisation. She had heard a year prior that the Norrenwick apothecary was kind to women like herself and kept a stock of the herbs Kerrigan needed. Foraging and preparing them herself was an option – she had done it countless times in the depths of her woods, but her woods were far from her now. She did not know this part of the hinterlands well enough to go looking for crescent flower and thistlethorn, not when she had missed as many doses as she had during her time imprisoned, where her scent had changed and the hair on her face had grown thicker and faster.

Nightfall approached. Norrenwick was not far, but Kerrigan’s chances of reaching it before dark were nil. Her body ached from travel, and it begged her to let it rest. She had scarcely

eaten since the journey began, only finding a few berry bushes along the way, and some potatoes when she had resorted to petty theft. Water had been easier to come across with Kerrigan encountering a few small streams, but her makeshift waterskins could only hold so much at a time. Worse still, her body had not yet recovered from her magic. She could not remember the last time it had hurt for this long. Hate it though she did, walking through the night was not an option.

Kerrigan felt uncomfortable under an open sky. She could see too much of the beyond above and too far out towards the horizon. More unsettling was the quiet. In the woods, there is almost always sound, but here, amongst the hills and the grass, there was only silence. Kerrigan did not expect to fall asleep for a number of hours, but where her mind was discomfited by her surroundings, her body seized the opportunity for rest before Kerrigan had a chance to reconsider. Her breathing slowed, her muscles let go of the tension, and her scars faded just a little back into the deep flesh. The moon watching over her, Kerrigan fell into slumber within moments of laying down.

## *The Magic Knows Our Names*

Norrenwick had not changed since Kerrigan's last visit several years prior. Small communities have a habit of stagnation or rapid change in Kerrigan's experience, and Norrenwick was a perfect example of the former. She remained cloaked, but on a day as cloudy and miserable as this, many folks opted to stay inside. Kerrigan's path to the apothecary was a quiet one, allowing her to breathe easily. She knocked gently on the mahogany door, a beautifully crafted work of carpentry.

A heavysset woman nearly Kerrigan's own height opened the door and beckoned her in with a smile. The clinic itself was a modest building, plainly decorated with potted plants and medical sketches upon the walls. The window shutters remained closed and light instead came from lanterns and candles set up upon cupboards and tables. The warm light of a small flames always felt more comforting to Kerrigan than the bright blaze of the sun or the roar of a great fire, but there was something more about the place that made it feel safe and welcoming, something she couldn't identify.

"How can I help you, doll?" said the woman who had invited her in, her voice husky and gentle.

Kerrigan looked around the room, an instinctual caution. There were few others with them. One was a young man in an open shirt that revealed chest scars against his umber brown skin, helping to organise the bottles of tonic and herbs on the shelves. The other two were an older couple, grey-haired and full-bearded, sitting in the corner quietly discussing one of the wall sketches. Kerrigan's breath eased, her jaw and shoulders let loose their tension. She looked back at the apothecary, her smile still gentle. She displayed no signs of irritation with Kerrigan's distrust. If anything, she appeared to understand.

"Do you have crescent flower and thistlethorn, perchance?"

The apothecary nodded her head.

"Of course, dear. Follow me."

The woman led Kerrigan to a counter in the corner of the main room. It was only dimly lit; the lantern atop the counter had petered out. The apothecary brought two fingers up to her lips and kissed them. Embers danced onto her fingertips, which she moved to touch the glass

of the lantern and rekindle it. Kerrigan was not used to seeing small acts of magic in the world. Few spellcasters she knew would so openly cast for such a trivial matter. But as the firelight shone against the woman's russet-brown skin and her black hair shimmered in the warmth, she appeared wholly at peace, wholly without fear of suspicion or disdain. There was only calm and kindness. Sometimes the most powerful acts are the simplest.

The apothecary dropped to her haunches to look through the shelves beneath the countertop. The sound of gently clinking glass fell into the background as the woman spoke.

"I'm Surayya. May I ask your name, if you're comfortable?"

Kerrigan's heartbeat rose a little at the question, but not as much as she was used to. It was that something unidentifiable, that homely comfort, that kept the panic away. Kerrigan felt safe here. It was a rare feeling, one that unsettled her in its unfamiliarity. Something in deep inside her skull and her ribs screamed at her to flee, but it was drowned out by firelight and the hearth-like warmth of this small building. For the first time in many months, she gave an honest answer.

"It's Kerrigan."

A pause followed as Kerrigan struggled to get her next words out from being lodged in her throat.

"Thank you for asking, Surayya."

"Of course, dear. You know as well as I do the importance of names, especially those we choose for ourselves."

Surayya emerged back to her full height. In her hands she held two bottles, one with dark green stems and white crescent-shaped flowers, the other to the brim with a type of thorned ivy bearing splashes of blue and lilac from its small flowerheads.

"If you can give me your dose, I can prepare these for you?"

Kerrigan took a second to think.

"I-, I usually just, *feel* for the right amount. I-, I can't quite explain it."

Surayya smiled at the witch and nodded.

“Don’t worry, I do the same when I prepare it for myself. Our magic knows.”

Kerrigan’s eyes widened. She had made no signs of her magic known, she had kept her scars covered, and yet Surayya knew. How, Kerrigan could only guess, and every guess only raised more questions.

Surayya chuckled to herself a little at Kerrigan’s bemusement, then placed the bottles of the table. The man Kerrigan had seen at the shelves walked over and signed to Surayya, who signed to him in turn. The sign language in the hinterlands differed from the one she learned as a child, but she could make out a few meanings. The signs for crescent flower and thistlethorn were the same.

The man turned to Kerrigan and gave a friendly wave before kissing Surayya on her cheek and moving into the next room.

“My husband, Lesedi,” Surayya said. “Just about our stock.”

Surayya pushed the bottles of herbs towards Kerrigan. The witch fumbled through the pockets of her cloak searching for the few coins she had lifted from a pocket on her way. Surayya gently took her other hand.

“Keep it, dear.”

## *We Know Not What We Seek Until It Is Found*

Kerrigan darted behind a tree on the roadside as she heard weapons being drawn further down the road. She didn't think the war had reached this far west yet, its frontier still along the eastern city-states, to her knowledge. The most likely scenario was a group of hungry brigands holding up passersby.

The noises that followed disavowed Kerrigan of that notion.

First came the crunching of bone. Next, the spurts of arterial blood. Then the screams, an unholy concoction of fear and rage.

“’Tis her! The demon mage!” came a shout from beyond, the accent reminiscent of the haughty knights Kerrigan faced down before her capture. Whether motivated by vengeance or curiosity, she did not know, but something moved in Kerrigan to dash from behind the tree and crest the knoll that blocked her view of the combat. A small band of militia in their padded armour and brandishing simple spears circled a brightly dressed woman in the centre of the roadway. At the head of the militia band was a steel-plated soldier, possibly a knight, but bearing no heraldry. On the ground lay the misshapen corpse that was once a militiaman. Terror held back the assailants' feet from moving closer, but something else kept them from fleeing outright. Perhaps fear, too, Kerrigan thought. She dropped to her knee, searching the environment for shadows she could call upon. This was not her fight, but she was drawn to it.

A few more trees dotted the roadside, providing shade beneath the late morning sun. They would have to do. Kerrigan closed her eyes and breathed the shadows towards her. Courage had overtaken the militia and Kerrigan could hear them charging at the mage. The same crunch came, then the boom of bursting flesh and the boil of blood. She could feel the shadows reach out to her, stretching in defiance of the sun. Her eyes opened. The mage seemed to not tire, but only become more invigorated as more blood flowed. From the pool beneath the first militiaman, she brought the crimson ichor to her palm. Kerrigan watched the blood transform into a sanguine light in the mage's palm, and with a clench of her fist, the blood vessels in an assailant's neck ruptured, his spear-blade narrowly missing the woman as he fell.

The shadows reached Kerrigan's flesh and pooled together before her. She breathed them in and swallowed them down her throat. Menacing magics coursed through Kerrigan's body, her

scars erupting back into view, her sclera turning to the hue of tar, the blood vessels around her eyes turning black, spreading like spider legs. Kerrigan rose from her knee. Only now did one of the combatants see her, a looming figure of gloam that overlooked them. The woman yelled to inform her comrades, but the distraction had proven her downfall as the blood mage impaled her upon a blade of bone.

Kerrigan reached for the darkness settled within her body and released it. Tendrils of shadow crawled along the dirt track and coiled around the limbs of the militia, turning their flesh to rot and mulch as they tightened. The few tendrils that found their target in the knight did not reach the skin, but the armour rusted and began to disintegrate bit by bit. The mage looked back for a moment at Kerrigan, her eyes crimson in hue, and returned her focus to those around her. Kerrigan could not hold the shadows under her control for long, and after a few seconds she had to let them go back to the earth. The witch fell to both knees, her breathing quick and heavy, and retched up black bile into the well-trodden dirt.

The knight's armour had opened to expose his flesh, the rusted edges of the new holes betraying him. The mage flung her arms to her side, palms flat and facing the man, her fingers splayed, and began a low chant. Kerrigan could not make out the words over her retching, but she doubted she would know their meanings. What sounds she could hear did not seem the syllables and clusters of any language she knew. Blood obediently rose from around the mage into her palms, swirling into dark red helices. The knight made a move to slash at the mage, but his legs crumpled beneath him, blood pouring from his skin like sweat. His eyes were transfixed upon the spinning whirlpools as they drew his blood out of his body and into them. His breath shallowed until it turned to heaving, gasping. Kerrigan looked up from her vomiting. She saw resignation overtake the man's face as he accepted his loss, accepted his death. She watched how his shadow let go of tension and faded, ready to let go of the man and go back to the earth.

Silence held the world for a brief moment.

The quiet was broken by heavy breathing – two sets, each belonging to a survivor. Kerrigan pushed herself back up to her feet. Her eyes returned to their usual green, her sclera white once more. The scars lightened just a shade, and the spidery veins shortened, slowly retreating into her flesh, though not disappearing. She focused her eyesight and saw the blood

mage staring at her, crimson helices still swirling in her palms. Kerrigan learned what it felt like to be distrusted in the same way she distrusted others.

In the chaos of battle and distracted by the protest of her body, she hadn't been able to look properly upon the woman. Cascading down to shoulder-length was her curly auburn hair, strangely untouched by the throes of combat, still kept almost meticulously in place. Freckles lined the golden-brown skin of her face, moving from cheek to cheek and up the bridge of her nose to sit between the deep brown of her eyes, no longer glowing red. Even under the blood caked upon her face she seemed somehow to still glow. She had seemed taller in the midst of the fight, but she looked now of a more moderate height, easily several inches shorter than Kerrigan.

The pale witch felt a gentle warmth come to her cheeks.

The blood mage slowly let the helices dissipate, red mist fading into the air. With a deep breath she calmed herself and shot a cocky smile at Kerrigan.

"Thank you. I appreciate your aid. Those bastards jumped me. Thanks to you though, I didn't lose any blood of my own."

The woman walked on over to Kerrigan, a look of pride on her face. She carried herself with such confidence she made herself seem unkillable, Kerrigan thought. Maybe she was.

"You fight well, Shadows. What's your name?"

The warmth in Kerrigan's cheeks grew hotter.

"Kerrigan."

"A beautiful name, Kerrigan. Mine's Áine."

Áine spoke a quick incantation and all the blood upon her skin and her garments flaked off into the dirt. Her robes were a light pink in hue, accented with white, green, and yellow. A simple colourful design, no longer sullied by the dark red stains it bore a minute prior. When Kerrigan had been told of a blood mage in the hinterlands, she hadn't thought much about how the mage may look, but she had certainly not expected them to be adorned in bright, cheerful hues. Perhaps that was the point, to play on the expectations of others for survival.

Something in her doubted it though. Something about the brightness fit the way Áine's eyes glistened when the sunlight deigned to touch upon them.

Áine turned to walk back down to the battlefield. Without thinking, Kerrigan followed her, walking a short distance behind.

“So, Kerrigan, you from around here?”

Áine knelt down beside the bodies of the militia, inspecting their satchels and pockets. Kerrigan saw her find a few coins, some scraps of food, the occasional note or piece of paper. Áine whispered under her breath and the blood fell off each object she decided to take.

“Well, Shadows?”

Kerrigan suddenly zoned back in, realising she had just silently been watching Áine work.

“Uh, no. I'm a bit of a wanderer, but I'm originally from the north.”

“Used to cold, wooded lands then, I imagine. What brings you so far into the temperate south?”

Kerrigan's shoulders tensed at the question, her breathing stopping for a second.

“Wrong question? Don't worry, you don't have to answer.”

“No, it's okay,” Kerrigan responded.

A pause hung in the air between them after Kerrigan's words.

“I'm searching,” she finally said.

“I want to ask for what, but I respect your privacy,” Áine chuckled.

“Thank you, Áine.”

“Here.”

Áine offered a satchel to Kerrigan, picked up from one of the dead and cleaned of blood.

“Inside is some food and half the coins I scrounged up. The knight had quite a bit. This should keep you fed for a little while.”

Kerrigan's words caught in her throat and her hands kept still as Áine held the satchel out towards her. Kerrigan was still unused to kindness. For a few seconds she retreated into the recesses of her mind, back to a place where help was a threat and lonesomeness was a defence. With a shiver of her head to shake off the fog in her mind, she came back to reality and gently took the satchel from Áine's hands.

"Thank you, Áine."

"Sure thing, beautiful," Áine responded with a wink.

Kerrigan's cheeks reddened even further. Áine laughed, and Kerrigan knew she must have noticed.

"You're cute, Shadows. But I must bid you farewell, I have someone I need to see. Maybe our paths will cross again in your search."

Áine turned around with a flourish and walked further down the dirt road, uncloaked, sunbeams bouncing off bright hues.

"I hope they do."

## *The Taste of Unbelonging*

“Excuse me, uh, miss? Sir? Miss.”

Kerrigan turned her eyes to the librarian, a stout pale-faced woman in her midyears, her hairs beginning to grey.

“Miss. Yes?”

The librarian appeared unsettled. Her eyes flickered from side to side as she spoke, her voice holding the slightest tremble.

“It happens to be that some – not I! – but some in our house of books feel... uncomfortable with your presence here.”

Kerrigan surveyed the library to see the other readers. There were many for a small city institution, and most seemed to not pay her any heed. A few, however, glared at her as she met their eyes.

“On account of the, well, dark cloak, and those uh, scars you have. Those circles around your eyes too they- they are also a bit... disconcerting. You are also looking in our section on magical history and that does not help your image, I’m afraid. It is nothing personal, miss, it is just that- well you see- this is a reputable establishment, and you are causing dismay to our regular visitors. I must humbly request-”

“That I leave.”

“No, no, you do not have to leave. Maybe perhaps... stay out of sight? Take some books and, uh, go to my personal little reading room at the back. Would that be to your liking?”

Kerrigan had become desensitised to this by now – to the friendly façade, the request that was more of an order, the underlying, unspoken threats that came with such farcical niceties. Over time, you learn the many different ways people say *you do not belong here*.

“No, thank you. Your pity, it insults me. I would like this book on the lesser studied magics, and I will be gone. It will be returned in three days. I’ll come in the night, so as to not frighten any of your *regular visitors*.”

The librarian looked taken aback, her mask of friendliness dropped at the slightest pushback. Kerrigan had learned years ago that people like the librarian are no less disdainful than those that glare and hiss at you. They just expect you meekly lay on your back and accept your treatment. Kerrigan had long since stopped accepting.

The book was returned by the evening.

## *We Cannot Help But Feel*

The lake water in the hinterlands had a coldness to it, as the northern lakes did, but further south the cold was soothing and refreshing. Kerrigan knew best the icy waters of her birthplace – a danger, something to be avoided except to drink or to bring home to heat over the fire. In the south people could swim in their lakes, drink of it and bathe within it, with no fear of freezing to death. She found she still instinctively flinched as she splashed the water on her face, but seconds after her shoulders tensed and her neck hairs stood on end, she would relax to a point calmer than her usual. With the coin from Áine, Kerrigan had been able to afford two new waterskins and a pack in which to keep them alongside foodstuffs she acquired along the way.

Heavy was the absence of her grimoire, long since burned.

Even with her propensity to avoid the sun, Kerrigan marvelled at the way the light gleamed across the water. It recalled to her the moon at her brightest, a light she could better abide. She vowed to return to the lake one day when the moon was at its fullest and bathe within the waters its beams consecrated.

A vow to return – when last had she made one?

Kerrigan was pulled from her mind by her wandering eyes, her sight catching upon something at the far side of the lake. Charlatan's Reed. She remembered it as an ingredient of many glamours – the very same she swore off years ago. The smell of burning paper rushed back to Kerrigan's nose from the memory. She blew air from her nostrils, a reflexive response to try remove the odour. She circled the lake to where the reed grew. She knelt beside the woody stems, running her fingers gently against the plant. The scars on her flesh throbbed.

It would be so easy to hide again.

Kerrigan wrenched her hand away from the reeds and recoiled her mind from the thought. She had let go of glamours for a reason. To go back would be a betrayal of her younger self – a betrayal of a woman trying so hard to survive.

Isn't that what she was doing now? Surviving? Surely, she would understand.

Kerrigan recoiled again and flung herself up to her feet, forcing herself away from the reeds. Slow, steady steps took her back around the lake to where she had left her bag and cloak. A thread still pulled at her mind from across the water.

Halfway through her return, another unexpected sight brought Kerrigan back from the reaches of her mind – this one more welcome. Áine leaned against one of the trees near the lakeside, watching the light shimmer off the lake, then turning her eyes to Kerrigan.

“Hey there, Shadows!” she called out. Kerrigan lingered on the sound of her voice. “Come over here!” Áine continued.

Kerrigan’s steps resumed, but faster, clumsier than before. Twice she nearly tripped over herself. She hoped Áine had not seen. She knew that she had.

Áine was as sure-footed as the last time they’d met, her walk down closer to the lakeside confident and unwavering. Even in the smallest acts, Kerrigan saw within the mage the unstoppable.

“I had hoped our paths would cross again,” Áine said, a playful grin upon her face.

Kerrigan could feel her cheeks flush again, the red being easily seen against the rest of her pale skin.

“As did I, Áine.”

Áine turned to look out over the lake. A wind roared past, leaving ripples on the water and blowing through the hair of both women.

“It’s a beautiful lake,” Kerrigan said. When she didn’t know what to say, the witch usually kept quiet. But with Áine, she wanted to keep talking. She didn’t want the conversation to end and the mage to go. Instead, she said the first thing that came to her mind. It reminded her of the small talk she was inundated with in her youth – it had always felt meaningless. This didn’t.

“Gods, is it! It’s my favourite to visit when I’m in these lands. The other lakes nearby tend to be frequented by people more often – less out of the way, closer to towns and villages. This one though, it’s hidden away beyond a grove – one you won’t even pass if you don’t take one of the backroads.”

Kerrigan was in awe of the passion with which Áine so often spoke. Her voice was loud, carrying across the air, tinged with notes of laughter and interwoven with stitches of cheer. Kerrigan thought back to the reeds. She doubted Áine had ever hidden in her life.

“I came here to bathe. Do you want to join me?” Áine asked.

Kerrigan froze. A fear came over her, one she could not place. Perhaps she felt it too intimate. Perhaps she felt she wasn’t supposed to be here. She wasn’t sure.

“Unless you’re uncomfortable with that, of course. No pressure, I just thought it would be nice. Maybe float on the water a bit and talk after.”

The fear in Kerrigan’s chest began to soften. It stuck, its claws gripped onto her ribcage still, but she would not fight it. She would let it sit and live despite it.

“I would love that, Áine. Thank you.”

The two women disrobed, leaving their clothes on the lakeside, and made their way into the water. Áine did not flinch at the cold and was barely slowed by the water. Kerrigan took longer to submerge herself in the glistening blue. It felt wrong still to enter water as easily and as brazenly as she did now, but as her mind and body were assured that she was not in danger, they relented, and the witch was soon up to her neck in the water. She had gone further in than Áine, who had gone in only up to waist height. Kerrigan tried to keep her body hidden beneath the ripples of the lake. She had made strides in feeling comfortable in her skin, but healing is slow, and here, in front of Áine, she felt afraid of the mage’s eyes upon her form.

Áine’s eyes did turn to Kerrigan often, gentle and reassuring. For all her passion, all her loudness and her fire, there was a softness to Áine. Kerrigan felt cared for by her. She could not understand why Áine would. She could not understand why anyone would.

“Did you find who you were looking for?” Kerrigan asked.

“I did! He won’t be bothering me anymore. Or you. Or anyone for that matter.”

Kerrigan ached to ask, but if Áine wanted to speak about it, she would. She would keep her curiosity at bay.

“Did you find what you were searching for yet?”

Kerrigan thought back to her search. Every step forward was met with a step back. She had thought of abandoning it, but in this moment, it felt closer.

“No, but I’ve made progress.”

“That’s great! Proud of you, Shadows.”

A pain welled up in Kerrigan’s chest. Behind her eyes came the feeling of oncoming tears. She shook her head and pushed them back. The pain was joined by a fuzziness, the tears making their way back, for different reasons. Kerrigan shook her head again.

Áine’s voice broke the cycle.

“How about we just float here for a bit? Fade away from the world for a few moments?”

Before Kerrigan could respond, Áine lay back onto the top of the lake water, her eyelids closed to keep the sunlight out.

“It’s better at night, under the moon, surrounded by the peace of night.”

Kerrigan felt her vow change. She would return to this lake under the moon, with Áine.

The witch took in a breath and let herself lay back and float. It proved more difficult than it looked as she plunged deeper into the water, unable to keep atop it. From under the ripples she could hear the muffled sound of Áine giggling. Kerrigan raised her body back and breathed in deeply.

“I don’t suppose there’s much reason to float in the icy north, huh?” Áine chuckled.

“When most open bodies of water threaten you with the winter sickness, not really.”

A small laugh escaped Kerrigan’s lips. There was a joy in this moment she hadn’t let herself feel. A moment of happiness must always end. Something hurt within her thought it easier to avoid feeling it at all. But Áine was able to bypass that. Áine forced her to feel.

“Come, I’ll teach you.”

## *The Blood Tells Its Own Stories*

Kerrigan's eyes would not be torn away from the carnage, no matter how much she pleaded with them.

Before her and Áine lay the remains of a violent struggle. A few were knights, though once again without heraldry, only their plate mail, bent out of shape, broken apart in places, scorched in others. The more numerous rest were unarmed and unarmoured. Dressed in reddened tunics and torn frocks, they had been cut open and pierced by blade and by spear.

Áine walked towards the gory sight, a grim expression on her face. Kerrigan hadn't seen that look since the battle in which they met. The witch had never been adept at understanding body language or picking up on facial tells, but Áine's shadow, stepping in time behind her, was seething with a rage that she did not betray on her countenance.

The mage knelt closer to the blood pooled upon the soil. She placed her fingers gently against the sanguine. She whispered incantations under her breath and thin tendrils of bright crimson slithered from her fingertips.

"The spill is still young. It hasn't left its vessels for more than a day."

Kerrigan opened her mouth to speak, but as Áine closed her eyes, Kerrigan stopped, fearing interrupting the blood mage at her work.

The tendrils thickened and grew further from Áine's fingertips, weaving throughout the blood. Kerrigan noticed the red rise up Áine's arm – the tendrils held her too. She looked down at her own flesh, reminded of the scars she bore from her magic. Áine's body showed no signs of consequence, but perhaps she had been looking at it wrong, Kerrigan thought. Not all scars come to the surface. Not all consequence is easily seen.

"Hmm. The blood is difficult to read. I'm going to need some time."

"Read?" Kerrigan asked.

"Read, yeah. You can learn a lot from blood. Your blood keeps your history, your tales and experiences, contained within it. That's a history I, with the right magic, can reach for."

"Memories. You're trying to find their memories in their blood."

“In a sense, yes. But the blood tells its own stories. It may not be the same you would tell.”

Kerrigan said nothing as she watched Áine continue her spell. The blood mage gritted her teeth, her eyelids tightening, her jaw growing tenser. The tendrils slithered further up, their ends grasping at Áine’s shoulder. Kerrigan saw Áine’s shadow flicker and move like smoke, its shade turning a dull red.

“Áine-”

“I’m fine, Kerrigan. It passes,” Áine interrupted, her tone curt.

Kerrigan was struck still and silent for a moment. A long-buried wave of helplessness held her, though she knew not from whence it came. The tendrils had reached beyond Áine’s neck now, reaching for her eyes. Kerrigan looked to Áine’s shadow. It was losing its form, its substance. Kerrigan moved towards it and sat on the ground before the shadow. Closing her eyes, she reached out to it, arms bent, palms up to the sky and fingers splayed.

Kerrigan entered conversation with the shadow.

Her mind had exited the physical realm around her. The world collapsed to reveal beneath it a sea of gloam. The shadow would not move to her. It stood still, enduring, bearing wounds, some fresh, others decades old. Kerrigan sent her own shadow forth, gentle strides, arm outstretched. Áine’s shadow still stood resolute. Only its smoky edges moved against the waves of night. Kerrigan began her incantation, wordless, ancient. A magic from before language. Through her shadow the gloam reached out, its tide slow, its limbs patient, cautious, tender. Áine’s shadow softened. Kerrigan’s shadow offered a hand.

There.

A connection.

The world reassembled around Kerrigan. The ground took back its place beneath her. The trees regrew from their sprouts. The sky wove its threads back into place. Kerrigan fingers rose and fell as she worked with Áine’s shadow. Her magic reinvigorated it. Kerrigan called it healing. It reformed itself, devoid of smoke and red. Kerrigan could see the slightest glimpse of the tendrils retreating back down Áine’s neck, coming to a resting point between her

shoulder and elbow. Áine's body was still tense, still burning, but a little less. Her breathing slowed and deepened. Kerrigan's spell had succeeded.

Several long minutes passed. Kerrigan kept her safeguard of Áine's shadow powered, though it began to fatigue her. Áine's focus did not break, not even to acknowledge the change in pain minutes prior. Kerrigan craned her head to look around Áine's body to see what she could of the blood work. The mage seemed to be separating the blood, pulling the continuous pool asunder into its component parts. She had nearly done it.

"There!" Áine exclaimed.

The tendrils burst into red mist, rising from the mage's body into the flow of the wind. She hunched over, taking in deep, rapid breaths, then lay her back flat against the ground. Her breathing regulated after a few moments, and a brief laugh escaped her lips.

"Thank you, Shadows. I don't know what you did, but, thank you."

A warmth settled in Kerrigan's chest. The wave of helplessness she felt had crumbled. She had done something right.

"It's shadow regulation. I like to think of it as a form of healing. Our shadows are connected to us – we influence each other. I saw your shadow hurting, like you. I can't ease the pain of your body, but I thought maybe I could help in another way."

"I am grateful, Kerrigan. Thank you." There was none of the usual playfulness in Áine's tone, but a serious sincerity. The warmth in Kerrigan's chest grew. It was a comforting feeling. Kerrigan wished to hold onto it for as long as she could.

"Separating the blood... to read them better, I presume?"

"You catch on fast, Shadows." The playfulness had returned.

"It had all intermingled. You can't isolate the blood's stories like that. They get muddled up. Bleed into each other, if you will."

"Why do you want to read them anyway?"

“Stories deserve to be heard, even if it’s just by one person. No weapons, no armour – these people were defenceless. And the armour these knights are wearing – familiar, no? There is something deeper afoot here.”

“The scorch marks. You think they were casters?”

“Maybe. That’s something the blood can tell us.”

“Should you be casting again? That last-”

“I’m fine, Kerrigan.” Áine’s tone was gentler this time. “Thanks to you.”

“Come, sit by me,” she continued, patting the ground beside her.

Kerrigan sat beside her, a little closer than she intended. She opted not to move away.

Áine closed her eyes and hovered her hand over the first pool of blood. The red mist poured from her palm in concentric circles, seeping into the stained ground. The blood began to glow, a brighter sanguine than its current colour. Áine spoke as aloud as she read.

“One’s a mage. Pyromancy. Refused conscription. On her way home. She has- had a family. Uncertainty riddled her. Feared herself. Thought often of her gods. A mother. Not hers. Not her. She- a blank. A long blank. Steel blades. Wildfire- no, wait, yes. Inside. Her? Blurry words. The taste of burnt orange.”

As Áine spoke, Kerrigan watched the red hue drain from the pool. The blood aged rapidly as Áine read. Kerrigan may not have understood the magic in full, but she guessed there would not be much left to read, or not much time left to do so.

“Last blaze. Not enough. Bitterness on her ears. No remorse. Never mourned in the last moment. She-. Fuck. That’s all I could get.”

“How much of it made sense to you?” Kerrigan asked.

“Hmm? Oh. All of it. I- Trying to translate it into words is... difficult. I am sorry for that.”

“No no, nothing to apologise for. You make sense. I can’t explain the way I talk with the shadows either.”

Áine smiled and nodded, her shoulders dropping to relax.

“There’s more here. I can hear it.”

“Hear?”

“Feel, I guess. Just, trust me.”

“Always.”

Kerrigan had not known Áine for long, but the witch trusted her with her life. People say bonds take a long time to form properly. Kerrigan disagreed. She had a gut feeling Áine did too.

“One of the knights, perhaps?” Kerrigan suggested.

Áine nodded and moved to a different pool. Her grim expression from earlier returned as she began casting. A grimace took over her face.

“Honour. A feeble concept. Taste of steel. Echoes of prayer, overpowered by fear. The learning of doctrine. Training tasted of unripe strawberries and sounded like his grandfather. Plate mail, false security, The sound of seared flesh and the taste of flame. Automatic movements. Spear-arm instinct. Wishes of home. A burning building. The smell of loss. Prisoners escaped. Died from his wounds. Listened to abandonment.”

Áine stopped, though the blood had a little left to give, if Kerrigan were to guess by its hue.

“There are survivors. We can help them.”

Kerrigan wanted to ask how Áine knew there were survivors, and how she knew they needed help, but she settled for simply trusting her and asking questions later. The question of how turned to a new one.

“Which way?”

“The knight felt- no, heard them running... eastwards, into the fields. The sound of scraping metal amongst them. They are hunted still.”

“Then we find tracks and follow them.”

“You-” Áine began, but her words ceased.

Kerrigan waited a few moments before speaking up. Áine’s eyes glazed over, looking not at Kerrigan but past her, through her.

“Everything alright?”

Áine’s eyes refocused.

“Oh, right, sorry. Yes. It just. It feels... nice. To be trusted.”

## *All Else Falls Away*

Most of the day had passed by the time Kerrigan and Áine came upon the survivors. They had set up a small encampment – little more than a few shoddily constructed tents. On the way, Kerrigan and Áine had encountered a few more corpses. Most were dressed similarly to the former prisoners they had found at the site of earlier bloodshed. Áine deduced they had died from their wounds. One corpse was adorned in the knight's plate mail. Her demise came in the form of not fire, but frost, her skin blue beneath the armour.

Kerrigan and Áine approached the camp, hands raised. They did not have time to speak before they were confronted.

“Who the fuck are you?”

A short, wiry woman exited a tent, her body tensed to fight. At the tips of her porcelain white fingers were tints of blue. The frost caster, Kerrigan intuited. A few more frightened faces peeked out of the tents, caked in dirt and dried blood. Their icy guardian seemed spotless in comparison.

“We're friends. We saw what happened and wanted to-” Áine began.

Her words were cut off by an unfamiliar incantation, its sounds harsh, constructed from forceful syllables. The blue tint deepened and spread up to the cryomancer's wrists. Ice crystals formed in her palm, turning to vicious knives of frost. She pointed her palms towards Kerrigan and Áine, but did not move to strike.

“You one of them?” she interrogated.

“The knights? No, quite the opposite,” Kerrigan responded. She was surprised at the composure she maintained in the situation. She'd usually meet being threatened with her own threats, but something was different this time. She couldn't quite figure out what.

Áine stood beside her.

“Casters, then? Mages?” the woman interrogated further. She kept her spell up, the knives still firmly pointed at Kerrigan and Áine.

“Yes-” Kerrigan began.

“Healers, perchance?” the frost mage interrupted.

“In a sense. We may be able to help,” Áine responded.

The cryomancer narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow. Her feet dug deeper into the ground. More frost swirled into her blades.

“Elaborate.”

“What wounds do you all sustain? I have limited control over flesh and bone, I could stitch a few wounds, maybe reset dislocations, that sort of thing. I’m not trained to be a healer, though. My companion does this thing with shadows that could help and I could try work with your blood to-”

“No.”

The woman before them shifted from suspicion to anger, her eyes widening and her teeth gritting against each other. The ice knives had grown larger and sharper still.

“You will not defile our camp with your sinister spells. Leave before I gut you both.”

Áine and Kerrigan looked over to one another, the former seething, the later resigned to compliance.

“Now, devils!”

“What the fuck is your problem?!” Áine retorted.

“You. Both of you. We suffer because most people cannot tell the bleeding difference between our magic and your abominable arts. That shadow fuckery? The shit you pull with peoples’ blood? We suffer the godsforsaken consequences. If it weren’t-”

“Let’s just go, Áine.”

Áine whipped her head to the side to face Kerrigan, her expression one of fury, but it seemed to settle when she looked at the witch.

“Okay, Shadows. Let’s go.”

The two women turned their backs and walked away, the yelling continuing behind them.

A blade sliced into Kerrigan's back. The witch toppled forward. For a moment there was no world around her. No sound, no sight, no senses at all. None but pain.

The world came raging back into Kerrigan's skull.

She could not yet make out the words being screamed back and forth between Áine and the frost mage. Lurking beneath the yells were the sounds of ice crystals forming rapidly by magic, alongside them the crunch of breaking bone.

Kerrigan pushed herself up, her arms shakily trying to hold her height. They collapsed beneath her. She lifted herself again. Once more they collapsed. She could feel frost spreading across her flesh. Her body was struggling under the pain and the cold. Her body was not strong enough.

Something else was.

The witch muttered incantations under her breath, calling forth the horde of shadows that surrounded her to reinforce her own. Kerrigan's shadow began to spiral around her limbs and seep into her spine. It lifted her up, first to her knees, then to her feet. She could not gain her balance, but the shadows supported her. Her sclera went black, her scars pulsing into view across her flesh, blood seeping from beneath her nailbeds. She turned around to face her assailant.

Áine had already injured the cryomancer's right arm, which could do little but hang limp at her side. It was a small victory only, as Áine struggled against her opponent. Her eyes had turned sanguine again, surrounded by unnaturally prominent veins glowing bright red. Grunts of effort escaped through her clenched teeth. Áine's sight caught hold of Kerrigan, diverting all her attention suddenly to the witch.

It was only for a moment, but a moment was enough.

A blast of concentrated cold air struck Áine's gut, knocking all the air from her lungs and pushing her back. She hunched over in pain, coughing up blood that dripped from her lips to stain the earth below. Another blast of frozen air came towards her.

A shield of shadow and root rose to meet the blast. The cold broke against its thorns.

"Her blood. Near frozen. New plan," Áine sputtered.

She called the blood back to her, circling it around her fingers. Through her bleeding mouth she spoke softly her incantations. The skin on her arms gave way to open wounds, the blood seeping from them, moving not with gravity but towards Áine's hands. It streamed into her palms, around her wrists, around her fingers.

Áine loosed her own blood at the foe.

As it met the skin of the frost mage, Kerrigan saw it sear through the flesh, twisting across the body in spreading agony. The frost mage turned her attention to freezing Áine's blood upon her. A few of the frightened in the tents emerged to try carry away the frost mage from the clash. She flailed against them as they pulled her, striking one in the head and elbowing the other in the gut, leaving frost behind where she struck.

“Áine!” Kerrigan shouted, seeing her companion's strength rapidly slough away.

Áine's focus broke and her magic dropped. The blood stopped streaming to her hands and returned to gravity. Her eyelids dropped, as did she. Kerrigan commanded her shadows to rush her to Áine. The witch caught her as she fell forward from her knees. Her head slumped into Kerrigan's shoulder, her breathing weak and slowed.

Behind Kerrigan came the sounds of struggle, yells she could not make out – all dulled in her senses as they focused in on Áine. The rest of the world ceased to exist.

“It's okay. I'm here. I've got you.”

## *Another Way To Say I Love You*

“Don’t move, Shadows.”

Kerrigan tried to keep as still as possible as Áine worked at her wound, but the unfamiliar sensation of magic stitching flesh kept her body jumping at the pain. She had insisted that she was fine, Áine insisted otherwise in turn.

The first attempt to tend to each other’s wounds had been rushed and rudimentary. Kerrigan had only been able to do enough to stem the blood flow from Áine’s wounds, and Áine had only enough strength left in her to keep Kerrigan from bleeding out. The past hour Kerrigan had slowly worked with Áine’s shadow to help ease the pain and support Áine’s attempts to close the wounds from her magic. Now, Áine was working to stitch up and accelerate the healing of the gash in Kerrigan’s back.

“Don’t overexert yourself for me, Áine, please.”

“Hush, I’m taking it easy, I promise you.”

The two women sat in contented silence. After a while, Áine completed her stitching of Kerrigan’s wound. It would take time to heal fully, and touch-ups from the blood mage over the next few days would be needed, but it was at a healthy state for a wound of its depth and size.

Áine walked around to face Kerrigan and leaned down, placing a gentle kiss on the witch’s forehead. She sat down beside Kerrigan, laying her head on her shoulder. It was a long while before either spoke. Áine broke the silence first.

“Why do you hide your darkness?”

The witch remained quiet.

“It is not a thing of evil, Kerrigan. Nor are you.”

## *This Is What We Are*

Kerrigan awoke beneath the shade of the alder trees. Sleep took its time letting go of the witch, struggling to open her eyes. She felt the warmth of Áine's body behind her, the mage's arm draped over her torso. Kerrigan settled back into comfort and drifted in and out of slumber for several hours. When eventually sleep released her, it was mid-morning at the earliest.

Sleeping beneath the treeline rather than an open sky ensured Kerrigan's sleep was less distressed – not necessarily peaceful, but better than the alternative. She sat up and watched the breeze dance through the leaves, their shadows flickering upon the grassy floor. It was only after a few minutes that Kerrigan realised Áine was no longer sleeping beside her. She was nowhere to be seen.

Whatever residual hold sleep still maintained on Kerrigan fell off into nothingness.

Kerrigan shot to her feet and called out to Áine. Panic set into her chest, her breathing tightening, her heartbeat fast, her adrenaline shooting through her system. She rushed around the little grove they had chosen, trying to find traces of Áine. The grass bounced back from footsteps with ease – Kerrigan wouldn't be able to track her own prints, let alone Áine's.

The peaceful winds amongst the alders gave way as Kerrigan's senses retreated into her mind, visions of flame and sunlit smoke replacing them. The acrid stench of a burning home returned to Kerrigan as she ran, calling out to Áine. The heat of blazing trees and seared flesh, the burning of pages, the dearth of shadows to call to her, the unyielding light of the sun in her eyes-

“Kerrigan? Are you okay?”

Áine pushed through the thicket, thorns scraping at her skin and drawing drops of blood. The fire vanished and the alders returned. Kerrigan let her knees buckle, letting her body gently fall to lay against the base of the nearest tree. Her breathing regulated, the taste of smoke disappearing from her throat. The cool breeze took the realm of any infernal heat her memory had conjured forth.

“Shadows, darling, what happened?”

The concern in Áine's voice felt a balm and bruise both to Kerrigan. She hadn't intended to frighten Áine, but to feel cared for like this, it ached, in the way all good things do.

"I-. Sorry, Áine. I'm alright. Just. You were gone. I feared. Then... memories. I'm fine. I promise."

Áine sat before Kerrigan, her hands gently holding the witch's. Her thumb lightly grazed Kerrigan's knuckles, a slow, repetitive motion, a way to remind her she was there. This was the present. This was what was real.

"You needn't fear. I wouldn't leave you like that."

"It's not that I thought you'd leave, it's that-. I-. I worried something happened to you. I had no reason to, it's just-"

"I understand, Kerrigan. You don't need to explain to me."

Tears welled up in the witch's eyes, clear and cold. Silence held time for a while.

"Thank you, Áine."

The two returned to the spot they had set up camp in. In the short walk there, Kerrigan let her senses take in her surroundings in full. The hues of the grass and leaves seemed deeper, brighter even. She could smell the wood and sparse flowers where just notes were before. The sounds of skittering insects and the rustling of leaves grew clearer, louder, but not overwhelming. Kerrigan let the present into her body. She began to feel every step, know every movement of her limbs, feel the way her fingers twitched. She was real. This was real.

Back at the camp, the two women sat together as Kerrigan's body relaxed, coming down from the adrenaline spike. Áine braided the witch's hair, weaving in flowers that burst into colour against the jet black and occasional strands of grey. Kerrigan felt a tenderness in this quiet act, a contentedness she wished to live within. They did not need to speak in this moment. The movement of Áine's fingers, the calm in the witch's breath, the soft melody of the breeze to which they hummed in time – these spoke for them.

When Kerrigan felt Áine tying the final fibre at the end of the plait, a sinking feeling gripped her ribs and pulled towards her stomach. It did not hold within her for long. Somewhere deep

within her psyche, Kerrigan held close that something which hurt within her. A moment of happiness must always end. It must always end so new moments can arise.

“Done! Turn around so I can see how it looks from the front!”

Kerrigan turned to face a smiling Áine, wrinkles formed at the corners of her eyes. Áine stayed still for a moment, her pupils dilated, her eyes widened just a little.

“You’re so beautiful, Kerrigan.”

The witch could not bring words forth from her throat, but tears welled at her waterlines. She took Áine’s hands in hers and gently squeezed.

“I’m glad I chose the lilies and violets. The orange of the clivia might’ve matched the green of your eyes nicely, but I adore the way the cooler purples and blues look against your hair and your skin. You look like you were made for flowers, Kerrigan.”

The shadows around Kerrigan came not at her conscious command, but obeying something deeper, and swirled around the flowers. The petals grew and the stems elongated to weave further into her hair. From there they circled Kerrigan and Áine, seeping into the soil, from which grew mushrooms – fly amanita, chanterelle, and oak bolete. Moss burst into being on the trees around them, bits of lichen spread across the bark.

“I wasn’t out for the flowers. I just happened to find them on the way.”

Áine rummaged in her pack and brought out a bunch of white flowers like moon crescents, intermixed with thorned ivy bearing tiny bursts of blue and lilac.

“I know last night you ran out of your elixir. I remember seeing these herbs in this area a few years back. So, I thought I’d go get them for you. Took me a bit longer to find than expected, I was hoping to be back before you awoke.”

The dam at Kerrigan’s waterlines broke and tears flooded down her face. She wrapped her arms around Áine and held her close. Áine brought her hand up to stroke Kerrigan’s hair and held her close in turn.

“I’ve got you, Shadows.”

“Thank you, Áine. Th-Thank you so much.”

After a few minutes had passed, Kerrigan leaned back from Áine's shoulder and took the herbs into her hands.

"I'll prepare them tonight. I need the night."

Kerrigan paused.

"Would you sit with me when I do?" she continued.

"Of course, Kerrigan."

"You're ever kind to me, Áine. I don't feel I deserve it."

Áine tilted her head in confusion, her brows furrowed.

"And pray tell, Shadows, why would you not be worthy of love?"

Kerrigan did not answer in speech. Instead, she called forth the shadows to her palms and let them sit there, swirling in gloomy orbs. Her scars came forth across her limbs, the spidery veins reaching out from her eyes, her sclera the colour of pitch.

"Kerrigan."

There was an assertiveness to Áine's tone. The witch met her eyes. Something within told her to look away. She did not heed it.

Áine's eyes turned sanguine, whips of red magic racing up her body, the vessels in her face and neck swollen and crimson. Tiny trickles of blood came forth from her fingertips and circled her palms and wrists.

"This is what we are. Who we are. Shadows and blood. There is darkness in us. Just as there is darkness in the night, in the deep sea, beneath the groves. What is darkness but another part of the natural world? It is no evil, not unless the light of the sun and the shimmer on the open water is too."

Áine paused, gesturing her hands to their surroundings.

"Look around you, Kerrigan. See what abundance your darkness has created? How it has grown the blossoms, brought to being the mushrooms and the moss? Look at my wounds.

Did not your work with shadows help them to heal? Did your shadows not save my life? Look where we sit. All the life around us, the peace. Is there not darkness here, even in the day, in which we can rest, in which we can love?"

Kerrigan let go of the shadows in her palms, returning them to their homes beneath the trees. Her scars did not fade, nor did the veins. She kept them there.

Áine let the blood trickles settle back into her veins. The tendrils stayed in their place. Her eyes did not return to their usual brown. Not yet.

Áine took Kerrigan's hands.

"I love your darkness, Kerrigan, as I love you."

Áine leaned forward, as did Kerrigan in turn, until their foreheads touched.

"I love you too, Áine."

They sat there for a time, keeping each other close. The world was silent but for the beat of their hearts, the rise and fall of their breath, and the wind in the leaves. Áine brought her hand to Kerrigan's chin and lifted her face ever slightly. Smiling at the witch she had grown to love, Áine brought her lips to Kerrigan's.

They didn't have to speak. The new moment spoke for them.

## *We Keep Our Histories Close*

“Can you read living blood?”

Áine slowed her walk as she turned to face Kerrigan and her question.

“Of course. The spell differs slightly, and typically I have less blood to work with, but I’m powerful enough that it’s possible. Why do you ask?”

Kerrigan slowed her walk down too, eventually coming to a stop.

“Would you like to read mine?”

Áine’s expression betrayed that she had not expected the question. Kerrigan wondered if she had ever thought about it. It had been a fair number of months since they started travelling together, and the thought had crossed Kerrigan’s mind numerous times since she first witnessed a reading.

“Are you sure? You needn’t feel obligated, you know?”

“I don’t. I’ve told you much. I can’t help but wonder how my blood would tell it differently.”

Night surrounded them. Clouds kept the light of the moon and stars hidden. They were off the road now, amongst the dry grass of the western savannahs. There would be no one to witness the blood work. It was as safe a time as any.

“Sit with me.”

Áine and Kerrigan sat across from one another, their bodies silhouetted against the midnight shadows. A flash of red light hummed into life alongside the gloam.

“I’m going to need to make a wound. Is that alright, love?”

Kerrigan nodded, a rumble of affirmation in her throat.

“Give me your arm.”

Whispering incantations beneath her breath, Áine made an incision above Kerrigan’s elbow. She drew the blood towards the ground between them.

“You can take more if you need.”

“No, I will work with what I have. I don’t want you fainting on me now, Shadows.”

Being a wound of her own making, Áine was swiftly able to close the incision, Kerrigan’s flesh quick to accept. The blood mage shut her eyes and placed both her palms over the small pool. Red light turned to mist and disappeared into the bloodied soil. Kerrigan’s blood glowed, just as the blood at the battle did, but where then the glow had produced striking lines of crimson, here it was not lines but waves that emanated from the blood, incandescent with a subtly different hue.

“Mushrooms under the tree roots. Running with the snow foxes. The sound of your second shadow. Eyes like pitch. The first scar. The third. Pushed aside. The last glamour. The first dose. Crescent flower and thistlethorn. Tearing out the pages. New shadows to learn. Ghosts of your great-grandmother. Ancients aflame. Burning pages. The taste of lost history. Fleeing with the snow foxes. Tendrils. The feel of your third shadow. The last day like nightshade. The search ever since. The lone wandering. New spaces feel like loud crackles and searing eyes. The death of your fifth shadow. The rust of steel. The sound of betrayal at your skin. A stolen grimoire. Burning pages. The loss of yourself. The falling shadows. The telling that it is all your fault. Hiding under open skies. The first time unnamed. Your second death. Your third. Unbelonging. Always unbelonging. Until-”

Kerrigan’s blood had turned dry and devoid of colour. Áine’s body fell into exhaustion. Through the tears, Kerrigan saw her breathing deepen. The spell had caught up to her. Kerrigan moved to lean forward, but Áine embraced her first, her limbs weak and shaking, but to Kerrigan they felt strong, a place of safety within them.

Áine spoke weakly, her voice wavering from weariness, but never less sincerely.

“It’s okay. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

## *We Find Ourselves In The Pages*

Kerrigan's body had grown unused to the cold that came with travelling further north. The pair had not gone so far as to venture into the lands of Kerrigan's birth, but even so the air grew frigid as time moved closer to the eve.

As cold as Kerrigan was, however, Áine was far colder. She was wearing two more layers than Kerrigan was – long, heavy coats of beige and tawny shades. Beneath them Áine still wore her bright colours, but seeing the blood mage without her signature vivid hues was a sight Kerrigan found unfamiliar.

“How in the hells d-d-did you survive this kind of weather, Shadows?”

Kerrigan let out a hearty laugh. She had grown more comfortable with the sound of her joy the past couple of months. She felt it liberating to laugh again – not a gentle chuckle, nothing so subdued, but a genuine, enthusiastic expression of happiness.

“Darling, I lived much further north than this. This was our summer weather.”

“We're never living there, then.”

Kerrigan's smile dropped, her eyes fixed on a place beyond the horizon.

“No. No, we're not.”

“Oh, love, I'm sorry I-. I didn't mean it like that.”

A soft smile returned to the witch.

“I know, Áin. Don't worry.”

Kerrigan paused before continuing.

“*We're* never living there, huh? You think of us living together?”

“Are we not already? Living needn't mean staying in one place.”

Even through the cold, warmth settled in Kerrigan's chest. Before she could respond, her sight caught a hold of an interruption.

“There! That’s the kind of tree I need,” Kerrigan exclaimed.

A lone rowan tree stood watch on the roadside. It bore leaves of red and orange, a sign of winter’s fast approach. Kerrigan reached into her pack and took out the stack of linen rags she had acquired for use as pages. They had been bound together with strong hemp twine Kerrigan had bought two weeks prior. Now it was time for the cover.

“Do you want us to get some wood for a fire before I start? The process takes some time.”

“Fuck yes. I’ll go find, you get started so long.”

As Áine left, Kerrigan sat before the rowan tree, her stack of pages held in her hands.

“Hello, friend,” spoke Kerrigan to the rowan. “I’m making a new grimoire. It’s time. I would appreciate your help.”

Kerrigan uttered her incantations and her shadow began to hold up the pages, freeing her hands to cast and to guide. The shadow of the tree swirled up the trunk, reaching up towards the branches. From the tree new branches slowly emerged, coiling around each other. Kerrigan’s shadow brought the pages closer to the new growth. The shadow of the rowan took the rags into its branches. Tied by gloam to the branches, the pages receded with the new growth into the trunk of the tree, disappearing behind the bark. For a brief moment the crackle of flame entered Kerrigan’s mind – Áine was back; she likely had been for a while. Time passed differently during the ritual. What was minutes for Kerrigan could be hours to the outside.

The witch raised her hands, kept her eyes shut, and felt the shadows and the pages within the tree. Ever slowly her fingers moved, guiding the wood into form and place. The tree worked in tandem with her, offering of itself to the witch’s work. Kerrigan’s mind wandered back to her first grimoire. She had used a rowan then too, just as her great-grandmother had before her. Myth told that the rowan wood kept the magic stronger. Kerrigan knew not if there was any truth to this, but it was not why she chose the tree. What the tree meant was far more important to her than any of its potential properties.

Once the cover had been formed, the tree and its shadow presented the grimoire to Kerrigan. A slice of its shadow stayed with the cover, the tree and Kerrigan connected through the tome. Kerrigan graciously took the grimoire into her hands again. The weight of it carried a piece of

home. Kerrigan held the book close to her chest, embracing it as a friend. She placed her hand on the rowan tree, closed her eyes, and nodded in thanks.

There was one step left.

Kerrigan fished a cut of black cloth out of her pack. Her shadow worked to adorn the book cover with the decorative fabric, binding it in place atop the wood. Sigils rose atop the cotton cloth, alongside an array of symbols – crescent moons, rowans and alders, fly amanita and violets, a hand and a lake. Kerrigan removed the stopper from her inkwell and dipped her quill pen into the liquid. With it she wrote a name – the only name she'd ever need again.

Kerrigan.

## *I Will Be Changed When I Return*

Returning to the eastern city-states brought an uneasy tension to Kerrigan's chest. The war that freed her had ended a month prior, but it brought little comfort. It was not the war that imprisoned her.

It would be worth it.

"I haven't been this far east for years. I was a child the last time I saw those walls," Áine said.

"It's been over a year."

Kerrigan spoke not only to Áine, but also to herself, and to another.

"Hey, Shadows? I know this place brings back some foul memories. You sure you're up for this? We can leave whenever you need."

"Thank you, Áine. I know. I'm ready."

The pair walked towards the walls. They were still under reconstruction. Kerrigan recalled looking back towards the city as she ran, its walls in ruins and smoke willowing from its buildings. Now it was only chimney smoke that broke the cloudless cerulean sky, and though the walls still bore its wounds, they were less than she remembered. The city was healing. Even after all it had done to her, even knowing it would hate her still, she felt a comfort in its healing. It is a home to many. It was a home to a friend.

Fearing that the guards on watch at the city gates would recognise her, Kerrigan had planned to take advantage of the noonday foot and wagon traffic. There were less people moving in and out as she would have liked, but she hoped the cloaks her and Áine wore would compensate. Whether because of the cloaks or because new eyes watched the gates, Kerrigan and Áine made it into the city unnoticed.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the size of a city," Áine said as she marvelled.

"Nor I," Kerrigan responded. "Between you growing up in a village and me spending my childhood in a snowy forest, I'd say we're not exactly cityfolk."

Áine chuckled and intertwined her fingers with Kerrigan's as they walked.

"I suppose not, Shadows. I suppose not."

A few busy streets into the city, Kerrigan was finally recognised.

"Morwen! Is that ye?"

A familiar jovial voice met Kerrigan's ears. A year ago, Ayodi had been a passerby, but he had been a kind one, even as Kerrigan hid herself and her visage from him. They had never met since, but something within her had grown to consider him a friend. By the excitement in his voice, she thought it likely mutual.

"Ayodi! It's good to see you!"

Ayodi opened his arms to offer Kerrigan an embrace – an offer the witch accepted.

"How are ye? Ye look well!"

"I'm-. I'm doing a lot better, thank you."

"Grand news, that! And yer friend here, Morwen?"

"Áine. Pleasure to meet you."

"I recognise ye actually! When I was in the hinterlands, we rode past ye once. I couldn't forget those bright colours of yers!"

"They are rather distinctive," Kerrigan chuckled.

"Hold on, let me get Suki. Suki! Suki, it's Morwen and the colourful lady!"

"Just a minute, honey!"

Kerrigan looked to see Suki carrying a block of hewn stone. It seemed as if she lifted it with ease. Kerrigan doubted her own arms could even get the block off the ground. After handing the stone off to another builder, Suki made her way over to the pair and her husband.

"Morwen! Good to see you. Ayodi brings you up at least once every couple of months."

“I like to remember the interesting travellers I meet on the road! I find a sense of community in it. When ye travel as much as we do, yer community is one of travellers and wanderers.”

“What brings you here?” Suki enquired.

“Visiting a friend,” Kerrigan responded. “Three, actually, now that we’ve run into you both.”

“Suki, darlin’, I think we should let everyone break for luncheon. Then we can treat Morwen and Áine to a warm meal!”

“Oh, it’s really okay-” Kerrigan began.

“No no, I insist!”

“That is very kind of you. Thank you both.”

As Suki and Ayodi went to inform the builders of the break, Áine turned to Kerrigan.

“You trust them?”

“I do.”

“Then so do I.”

The short walk to Ayodi and Suki’s house consisted mostly of Ayodi excitedly telling Kerrigan and Áine of the progress they have made with the walls, alongside minor contracts on new housing.

The building into which the pair stepped was a quaint space, simply decorated with small figurines and potted plants. The entranceway opened right into the dining room.

“Suki and I will go prepare the food. Ye both make yerself comfortable now, ye hear? A traveller has many homes. Let ours be yers for the noon.”

It was not long before the couple returned with lunch.

“You have a lovely home,” Áine said.

“Thank ye! Like I said, travellers like myself and my wife have many homes, as I’m sure you both know from yer own travels, but I will admit this is one o’ my favourites.”

“Many homes,” Kerrigan muttered to herself.

Áine placed her hand on Kerrigan’s back for comfort.

“So, Morwen-” Ayodi began.

“It’s, uh, Kerrigan, actually. I apologise for lying to you before.”

Ayodi and Suki appeared to Kerrigan’s eyes utterly unfazed by the new information.

“No worries, Kerrigan! Ye had yer reasons, I’m sure. Lovely to learn yer name. Might take me a little while to get used to it over Morwen, but it’ll be grand.”

“Thank you, Ayodi.”

## *I Went. I Lived.*

For all the work that had been done to restore the city, the forlorn house appeared untouched by anyone and anything but time.

“This is where she lived?” Áine asked.

“Her home, yes.”

“I can stay outside if you want to be alone.”

“Thank you, but no, I’d like you with me.”

Kerrigan took Áine’s hand and walked into the old house. It looked inside just as Kerrigan had remembered it, only dustier and with more insects. She led Áine to the small room at the back. The mattress had grown filthier, and the bedside table had collapsed even further, but she had stayed still.

Her flesh had decomposed, but her skeleton remained. What was once a tiny sprig of ivy in her hair had birthed into life a garden that weaved throughout her bones. Some were broken – a rib, an ulna. If there were others, the garden hid them.

Kerrigan knelt beside the mattress.

“I’m sorry I’m a few months late. I just wanted you to know I’m doing it. You told me to go and live. I finally feel like I am.”

Áine placed her hand tenderly on Kerrigan’s shoulder.

Kerrigan called forth the shadows from the corners of the room as she had done over a year before. She guided them towards the first sprig, still growing in the skull. She swirled them around the vine until they seeped into leaves. It did not grow, but its colours brightened, as did the garden with it.

“Did you find your answer, Shadows?”

“I think I did.”

Kerrigan rose to her feet and took Áine’s hands in hers again.

“There’s somewhere I want to show you.”

## *The Hearth Lives Alongside Us*

Norrenwick hadn't changed since Kerrigan last walked through it, but she had. It had turned to eve when her and Áine arrived. She hoped they'd still be open at this time. Most apothecaries she had encountered would be. The witch knocked upon the door of exquisite mahogany.

Surayya opened the door.

“Oh, Kerrigan! How wondrous to see you again! Please, do come in, doll. It is freezing out there. Both of you, inside. I have the fires going.”

No patients were in the clinic. The only other person in the room was Lesedi, reading a book in a well-lit nook. He lifted his head from his reading and greeted Kerrigan and Áine with an excited wave as they entered.

“What brings you here today, doll? More herbs?”

“No, well, yes actually, I am running low, but I wanted to bring Áine here.”

Surayya turned her eyes to Áine. Kerrigan saw what seemed to her like recognition in the apothecary's eyes, as if she had encountered Áine before. She seemed happy to see her. Surayya turned briefly to Lesedi, who responded with a look of recognition in turn, if Kerrigan's mind did not deceive her.

“An honour to meet you, Áine.”

Kerrigan conceded to herself that she must have been imagining.

“Let me get you those herbs, doll, then we can speak. You feel different. I want to hear how you have grown.”

In that moment, it struck Kerrigan. Why Surayya had felt safe, even a year ago; why she wished to bring Áine to the hearth of the apothecary; why she wished to return.

Surayya felt like a mother to her.

Kerrigan's mind fell into a whirl of trying to figure out why – why she felt the safety of a mother's love from a woman she had met once only a year ago. She looked around the room,

its warmth cascading onto her skin, the shadows resting in the glow of the firelight. The crackle of flame here did not send her back in time. Here it was a sound of rest. She had heard it so before: at the fire with Áine.

The witch turned her eyes next to Surayya and to Lesedi. The man had put his book down now. Kerrigan watched Surayya sign and he responded in turn. There was a warmth to them too, a firelight, but like the room it existed alongside the shadows, not over them. Kerrigan recalled how she had felt the first time she came to the apothecary, though she had not realised it at the time. These rooms were a microcosm in which the outside could fall away, a place of rest by the hearth for the lost and the weary.

She began to suspect this was no mere apothecary building. It was something greater, something far more powerful.

That was enough. She didn't need answers. She just needed to feel.

"I imagine you're happy to have your grimoire back? I know how much you missed it."

Surayya's voice came from behind the counter, but it sounded as if she was right beside Kerrigan and Áine.

"How did she-" Áine began.

"The magic knows," came Surayya's response.

She returned with the herbs, this time in bottles twice the previous size.

"Enough for several months. Now that your search has reached its end, I imagine you may be far from here for a while."

Kerrigan wished to ask how Surayya had known. She suspected Áine did too. Neither asked.

"Thank you, Surayya. For everything."

Surayya brought Kerrigan into a hug. She radiated a warmth beyond mere body heat, a warmth beyond the physical. Kerrigan embraced her too.

"You're always welcome here, Kerrigan."

Surayya let go of the witch and pivoted to Áine, offering her a hug too. The blood mage accepted.

“As are you, Áine.”

“Thank you, Surayya.”

She turned herself to Kerrigan once more. Tears welled at her waterlines. Behind her Kerrigan could see the firelight glint off Lesedi’s eyes too.

“I knew you’d find your belonging.”

Kerrigan felt something in the room shift for a brief second, as if she were afforded a momentary glimpse into the true form of the world between these walls.

Surayya’s voice continued. Part of it sounded as if it spoke from within Kerrigan herself.

“Return to where you felt it first.”

## *We Are Chimeras Of All Our Homes*

The lake had been beautiful in the daylight, but as many things felt to Kerrigan, it was only in the night that its majesty could be seen. The light of the full moon rippled across the water. There seemed a mysticality to the lake now. Perhaps it was them who made it magical.

“I had hoped we would come back here someday,” Áine said, her head on Kerrigan’s shoulder.

“I knew we would. I made a vow.”

Kerrigan took a few steps closer to the lakeshore. She fished her grimoire out of her pack. The past few months she had been reconstructing it, scribing what old spells she could remember. Alongside the memories were new invocations, though, some she had formed with Áine. As of the past week, the grimoire contained more new magic than that of old.

“I have never forgotten what you told me,” Kerrigan spoke. “In the woods, amongst the mushrooms and the moss.”

Áine took Kerrigan’s hand in hers, and the two women looked out onto the lake together.

“I meant every word.”

“I know. I am more grateful than I will ever be able to tell you.”

The shadows moving alongside the moonlight on the water slinked towards Kerrigan. From the trees came their gloam too. Even the blades of grass lent their darkness to the witch.

“But maybe I can show you, even just a little.”

Her shadow beneath her, Kerrigan stepped onto the water, her footsteps interweaving between where the moonlight shone brightest. Her eyes turned to pitch, the spider limbs reaching towards her ears and down her cheekbones. The scars upon her flesh shone in deep violet hues. Her fingertips turned to the shade of soot, her hands shrivelling slightly as she moved them across the air. Drops of blood escaped her nailbeds to ripple upon the water. Her grimoire swung open, its pages fluttering in the wind that gravitated towards the witch. The sigils in its pages grew into tangible gloam, the letters and runes bursting from the page and whirling around the witch’s body, settling on her flesh.

The shadows flocked to her, swirling around her until they enveloped her, blocking her from sight, from senses beyond the shell of night. Amongst them she lifted into the air, her incantations growing louder on the wind. She brought all the darkness around her into herself, until it reached its crescendo.

Then the release.

The shell ruptured and shadows burst out into the sky, into the water, into the grass and trees. The ground around the lake erupted into life and decay as mushrooms grew from the soil – fly amanita, chanterelle, and oak bolete widespread across the surroundings. Clivia plants sprung into being amongst them, lilies blossoming on the lake shore, violets blooming at the base of each tree. Blue stars and pond flowers moved into life upon the water edges. New branches emerged from the alders and yellowwoods. Ivy tangled around their limbs and moss found home upon the bark of each bough. Crescent flower and thistlethorn amongst it all. The light of the moon turned softer, but brighter still against the shadows it lived alongside. The water below Kerrigan rippled in gloom and in glow.

She fell from her height and plunged into the water.

She breached the surface with a great laughter. Her eyes were still the hue of tar, dark circles around them, scars pulsing deep purple across her body. But there was joy in them, as there was joy in this moment.

Her shadow floated away from her to take her grimoire, protected from water damage by its gloam, and placed it safe amongst the mushrooms before returning to the witch.

Kerrigan waded through the lake, emerging onto the lakeshore once more. Gesturing to the water, she spoke to Áine.

“Do you want to join me?”

Áine walked to her lover and placed a kiss upon her lips. She took the witch’s hand and walked with her into the waters. Kerrigan breathed in the smell of the lake and its surroundings, letting every sense envelope itself with the world around them.

Floating upon the waters, Áine asked a question of Kerrigan.

“So, tell me Shadows, did you find what you were searching for?”

The witch looked at Áine, at the abundance around them, at the sky, at something beyond sight.

“I did.”

Home.

Part B: Portfolio

**Home Is In The Wandering**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

**Bradley (Brianna) Purdon**

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	98
Reflective Journal .....	100
Quarter One .....	100
Quarter Two .....	107
Quarter Three .....	114
Quarter Four .....	123
Final Reflection: Reader Report & The Editing Process .....	127
Book Reviews .....	133
The Mothering Coven – Joanna Ruocca .....	133
The Physics of Imaginary Objects – Tina May Hall.....	136
The Taiga Syndrome – Cristina Rivera Garza .....	138
The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion – Margaret Killjoy .....	140
Poetics Essay.....	142
Identity, Energy, and Writing: A Tapestry.....	142
<i>Postscript</i> – On Fantasy .....	149
Writing In Community Report.....	154

## Introduction

As a writer I am naturally passionate about my craft, and so I applied for a Master's in Creative Writing expecting to learn skills and tools necessary to improve my writing both from my experienced lecturers and my fellow classmates. Now, at the end of the course, I realise I have learned so much more than I ever anticipated. This portfolio is one culmination of all I have learned, alongside my thesis – a collection titled *Home Is In The Wandering*.

This portfolio begins with a Reflective Journal. Throughout the course, I have been journaling my experiences, thoughts, and feelings that have come about as a part of the course. The reflective journal present in this portfolio is an amalgamation of those, edited down to reflect the core learning curve of my time in the course, focusing on the most important insights and moments of growth. It is arranged by quarterly structure with subheadings. There are also occasional additional notes written in double square brackets throughout the journal – these are thoughts on previous reflections that have emerged at a later stage than that at which the entry was originally written. Note each part of the reflective journal is kept in the tense of when it was written.

The Reflective Journal concludes in a Final Reflection. This reflection focuses on engaging with the reader report given in response to my draft thesis, as well as the process of editing my thesis into the final version.

Following the Final Reflection are four book reviews on a varying range of works written throughout the year as part of the coursework.

The Poetics Essay follows the book reviews. Poetics is the theory of literature – in essence writing about writing itself, and this essay hones in on a particular aspect of the craft and the literary world, while drawing on a number of poetics readings from a diverse range of authors. My Poetics Essay also has a postscript mini-essay on the fantasy genre – my preferred genre to work in and the genre of my thesis.

Finally, the portfolio ends with the Writing in Community report. This report discusses the experience of running a writing workshop and reading some of my work for a group within the wider Makhanda community, specifically the Ink Society. The report combines practical details of events as well as reflective insights.

I am a different writer than I was before beginning this course and my writing will be forever changed for the better as a result. I am beyond grateful for all I have learned in this course.

# Reflective Journal

## Quarter One

### Fierce Writing Seminar

This week's theme of fierce writing resonated a lot with me, while simultaneously being difficult to read and write about. The seminar readings brought on a myriad of emotions, some of which ended up triggering overwhelming anxiety, such as Pascale Petit's 'Her Harpy Eagle Claws'. Despite the emotional toll this topic had on me, I feel it is important for writers to be unafraid of tackling these difficult topics and to write on traumatic experiences – for a multitude of reasons ranging from personal catharsis to social commentary and protest. As such, though it was difficult, I want to both read and write more about that which can fall under the umbrella of fierce writing. [[Reflection note from 3 November: Since writing this in early February, I have come to accept that I prefer to take a more oblique approach to difficult topics than that which the notion of fierce writing tends to take]].

The assignment proved more difficult than I expected. In my personal life I am fairly open and direct about my traumas. However, I found that writing about them directly proved to be significantly more difficult. It made me realise that much of my writing that discusses or otherwise incorporates elements of my traumas tends to be done through metaphors and allegorical imagery.

The feedback session proved to be exceptionally helpful. Receiving constructive criticism can be difficult, but it is ultimately important and I am learning how best to handle and accept feedback.

### *The Mothering Coven*

With regards to my independent reading, I recently finished *The Mothering Coven* by Joanna Ruocca. My primary takeaway from *The Mothering Coven* (besides my overall enjoyment) is to consider being bolder and more bizarre with my worldbuilding. The world of *The Mothering Coven* is ultimately highly peculiar and nigh-nonsensical. Yet there is a strange consistency to it that, when combined with the utter mystery of what is going on, makes the world of *The Mothering Coven* exceptionally compelling and leaves me wanting much more. Furthermore, the strangeness is never explained. What is a Theta-brain? Why is there a burning sky over Siberia? Why does Japan have water buffaloes that spread cannabis sativa? None of these

questions are ever answered, and it makes the world even more engrossing. I would like to explore a similar approach to world-building in experimentation and find ways to incorporate elements of this approach into my overall approach to world-building and setting construction.

### **Poetry Seminar**

An important piece of feedback I received in the poetry seminar by Mxolisi Nyezwa was to not let my writing be so tied down by the assignment and to make it my own. My piece was constricted by trying too much to make it fit the assignment – I need to find a balance between still fulfilling the assignment but making the piece my own outside of it. Another piece of feedback that has stuck with me from this seminar is ‘don’t follow a map’. I am in the process of unlearning the pressure to always write conventionally, overcoming a fear of experimentation, and this piece of feedback has reinforced my drive in that regard.

During the reading group, I encountered Diane Williams’s ‘The Source of Authority’, which brought up a realisation. The imagery didn’t make much sense to me – I struggled to see the connections. However, it may well make perfect sense to the author. This caused me to reflect on something in my own writing: I tend to focus too much on trying to make sense to everyone – making sure people who read my work understand the meaning and metaphors as I do. I don’t have to do this. I can still evoke emotion, and perhaps even intrigue or captivate regardless. Not everything needs to make perfect sense to everyone.

### ***Redemption In Indigo***

I recently finished reading Karen Lord’s *Redemption In Indigo*. *Redemption In Indigo* stands out to me for its balance of whimsy and seriousness – exemplified in the mischief of the Trickster versus the profound things it says about the consequences of events and being human. Amongst the moments of weight, conflict, and danger, brevity and rest are immensely important. This is a technique I try to emulate in my own longer works. *Redemption In Indigo* also has a good balance between mystery and answers. This balance of mystery and resolution stands out to me as up until this point I have approached my writing and worldbuilding as if every question needs an answer, but it does not – in fact, it is stronger with some mystery. This is something I will keep in mind going forward as a writer. [[Reflection note on 3 November: This is something that has had a profound impact on my writing, as I have indeed been much more open to introducing answerless mystery into my work, especially in works such as ‘Transheretical’ and ‘All Is Myth’]].

### ***The Physics of Imaginary Objects***

The second book I read was Tina May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*. What stood out to me most in the collection of short stories was the novella: 'All The Day's Sad Stories', with its vignettes of Mercy and Jake's life that beautifully capture one of my favourite details in storytelling: the minutiae of everyday life. [[Reflection note on 3 November: This would go on to directly inspire the creation of the short novella in my thesis – 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' – which started as a series of vignettes]]. Additionally, this collection has me considering writing more short stories and novellas where I've most been focusing on novels. Moreover, the stories in the collection can vary wildly in tone and writing styles – which is something I would like to do with a short story collection. This has influenced me to strongly consider a short story collection as my MACW thesis.

### **Writing Obliquely Seminar**

The seminar on writing obliquely by Jo-Ann Bekker gave a name to a style of writing I both enjoy reading and have been interested in writing. Oblique writing intrigues me and I would like to investigate it further and experiment more in the style. [[Reflection note on 3 November: This desire to experiment turned into approaching difficult topics obliquely through the lens of fantasy in my thesis]]. One of the seminar readings - Carmen Maria Machado's 'Inventory' – stood out to me. The manner in which 'Inventory' is written obliquely – a set of vignettes telling an overarching narrative – really grabs me [[Reflection on 6 November: This was also an influencing factor in taking the approach of vignettes in the construction of 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home'']].

### ***Green Girl***

Having finally got around to reading Kate Zambreno's *Green Girl*, I can confidently say *Green Girl* is a book that will stick with me for a long time. In particular, Zambreno's use of language and experimentation with style to give greater insight into the inner world of her protagonist has struck me and is something I believe will influence how I illustrate the inner worlds of my characters – perhaps not to the extreme that Zambreno's style goes to sometimes (which is immensely effective in *Green Girl*, but less what I am aiming for in my own work), but nevertheless it has had a significant impact on my writing. [[Reflection note on 6 November: *Green Girl* would go on to be a major influence in my writing as I have worked a lot more with the inner worlds of characters since being inspired by Zambreno's work]].

## **Punctuation Seminar**

During Stacy Hardy's seminar on punctuation, I realised just how much I enjoy using punctuation and rhythm to reflect the emotional, mental, and sometimes even physical state(s) of a character, particularly with regards to sentence length or the absence of punctuation to evoke anxiety. I want to utilise these techniques more in my character writing and this seminar has helped me to remember to do so. [[Reflection note on 3 November: Though I did not ultimately experiment with punctuation to the extent that the seminar dealt with, using punctuation in more unconventional ways and using it to deliberately impact a piece's rhythm has been a technique I have kept in mind and utilised in various ways throughout the year, especially in 'Daughter' – where Jadwiga meets the Mother and in the memories – or in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home when Áine reads blood]].

Something I have learned from the assignment for Stacy Hardy's seminar on punctuation is how my overthinking can kill the spark in a piece and make it lifeless, as happened with 'Revivify'. This experience has taught me not only about the dangers of overthinking and over-editing a piece but also how to look for telltale signs of this phenomenon – most of all when I am trying to force in elements of a piece that are not working but I seem to feel like need to be there (they seldom do).

One of our tasks was to repunctuate a piece from our application portfolio. I chose to repunctuate an excerpt from 'Amanita'. The exercise completely changed my three-year old piece and moved from a focus on the narrative of the event to the more internal goings-on. I am proud of what I was able to create with this repunctuation, I do feel I lost some of the narrative elements as a result. This works fine as an excerpt but for a complete longer narrative, I would like to find a better balance between outer events and inner experience, and thus this exercise has taught me that in general I prefer narrative-driven pieces.

### ***Call it a difficult night***

I read Mishka Hoosen's *Call it a difficult night* and found within a beautiful musicality to the work accomplished effectively through the interchanging of shorter and longer sentences and shifting style from time to time. I am trying to experiment more with rhythm in prose work and this has given me some ideas on how to do so.

## **On the Mind's Eye & Writing the Senses**

I have come to reflect on something I have known for a while but never thought of in terms of my writing: I do not have a strong ‘mind’s eye’ and much of my mental imagery is unfocused and undetailed. This affects both my reading and writing as detailed visual descriptions are often lost on me when reading, and writing detailed visual descriptions takes a lot of extra time and effort. What is most important about this realisation however is I have become more interested in looking at more ways to write different senses besides the visual, while also finding what methods of visual description work best for me. [[Reflection note on 4 November: This has been something that I have been reminded of throughout the year. I have been working on incorporating other senses, particularly those of touch and sound, in my work, as well as more incorporation of how the body feels, such as the body’s reaction to anxiety and panic in ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’. I also feel I have found my technique for how best to approach visual description in my work – avoiding the intensely detailed and taking extra time and care when I do visual description]].

### **Book Reviewing Seminar**

Before Paul Wessels’ seminar on book reviewing, I had given little thought to book reviews. Now, however, I have not only a newfound appreciation for book reviews, but have become interested in writing my own outside of those required for the course.

The reviews we read during the week have shown me what I feel works best in a book review and thus has shown me how I want to write book reviews of my own. Some of the reviews were highly academic in tone and register, which I felt lost me as a reader, while another posed her subjective interpretations of the book as objective meaning – an approach I disagree with. The reviews were at their strongest when short and when focusing on the style and themes of the work, which is what I intend to focus on in my reviews.

Lecturer Stacy Hardy raised two important questions for writing after we read Oscar Schwartz’ ‘How to Write an eBook of Poetry’ in the reading group. Firstly, how do you add little details that are unique to your eyes and your lived experiences? [[Reflection note on 4 November: This is something that has stayed with me and is something I have worked to incorporate into my writing process – finding and including details from my perspective and my experiences that enhance a work where I can]]. Secondly, when should you maintain the same pace and when should you slow down to zoom in on the details. Both questions have stuck with me. The former is something I try to do but need to pay more attention to. With regards to the second, I know I have a bad habit of going at too fast a pace in my writing and leaving little room to

slow down, and it is something I am working on [[Reflection note on 4 November: I believe I have made significant progress in this regard – I feel ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ is a good example of said progress, where I do take more time to slow down and zoom in on details, as well as speed up the pace where it feels appropriate (such as combat scenes)]].

I was reminded of something important in the feedback to one of my chosen pieces for the reading group: Kate Bernheimer’s ‘Whitework’. I was seemingly the only one in the reading group who enjoyed the piece, with its dreamlike quality and rhythm, but everyone else found it boring. This reminded me of something very important to remember: no piece of writing is for everyone; each piece has its own audience. The reason that this is so important to me is that I need to remember this for my own work. I have a habit of trying to please everyone, and not only is this not feasible, but it can kill the spark of a work. This experience has reminded me to keep in mind that my work will not be for everyone and that’s okay. I hope this will help keep me from overthinking about such things when I write. [[Reflection note on 4 November: This reminder would go on to keep being important throughout the year, and I feel it is something I have learned that has been incredibly important to my growth as a writer. I have become a lot more confident in my work and in that it has its audience, and it’s okay that there will be people who will not like it, that is unavoidable]].

### **‘Deer Dancer’**

With my interest in shorter works emerging, I have started reading short pieces from ‘short’ edited by Alan Ziegler. A few have stood out so far, most of all Joy Harjo’s ‘Deer Dancer’. ‘Deer Dancer’ is a remarkable piece of prose with a myriad of magnificent lines, such as “Some people see vision in a burned tortilla, some in the face of a woman” and “She borrowed a chair for the stairway to heaven and stood on a table of names”, making for an explosively captivating work with fresh and original descriptions that make the piece feel so alive yet so haunted. I particularly appreciate how folktale merges with the mundane in this piece. I would like to draw inspiration from ‘Deer Dancer’ and its use of striking imagery to create feelings of otherworldliness.

### **Motif Seminar & Writing ‘Transheretical’**

Henali Kuit’s seminar on motif has made me think more on the motifs I use in my own writing – common ones being motifs associated with nature, magic, and divinity. My central takeaway from this seminar is the utility of motifs as a device to create cohesion. Being more aware of this overtly is useful in keeping a piece consistent. A prime example of this is in my assignment

for this week – keeping the motifs of bone and the church in mind as I wrote helped me keep everything cohesive in ‘Transheretical’.

Originally, I planned for ‘Transheretical’ to be much longer and I feared it ended abruptly and would thus be received poorly, but I received positive feedback on the ending from multiple sources, including the lecturer, and it made me realise that often we as writers cannot entirely predict how our piece will be received.

Another important reflection to emerge from this assignment comes from the use of the term ‘doll’. In ‘Transheretical’ I am using ‘doll’ not as in an actual physical doll but as in an affectionate colloquial term used in the transgender community for transfeminine people. However, the feedback session made me realise that everyone else in the group (understandably) interpreted the use of ‘doll’ literally, which caused minor confusion. Trying to add in something to explain how ‘doll’ is meant in this context proved clunky, so instead I made two versions of the piece – one using ‘doll’ and one without using ‘doll’. Though I much prefer the version using ‘doll’ as I really like the way “doll” fits into the story thematically and how it fits in the rhythm and the language use of the piece, I have not decided yet which will be the final version. [[Reflection note on 3 November: the version I settled on included the use of ‘doll’. As I mention earlier, we cannot entirely predict how our piece will be received and if a reader wishes to interpret ‘doll’ literally, that’s okay. I wish to keep it in for myself and for my trans and queer readers who are likely to know the meaning]].

A piece from the reading group stood out to me: Lauren Schiffman’s ‘Some Days Like Superheroes: A Povella’. Schiffman uses some really interesting writing techniques such as a style shift to something more akin to poetry than prose to illustrate an altered mental state, which is something I am interested in exploring in my own work. [[Reflection note on 3 November: this would evolve into using shifts in style to illustrate otherworldliness in some of my works, such as ‘Daughter’ when Jadwiga is in the emerald realm of the Mother]]. Moreover, a lot of the metaphors and imagery used by Schiffman feel highly original, which is something I’m trying to keep in mind more in my own writing to avoid clichés and keep my allegory and imagery fresh and interesting.

## Quarter Two

### *Blindsight*

Reading Peter Watts' *Blindsight*, I have come to think more on first-person versus third-person narration. Most of my narrative work has been third-person narration only, but Watts' use of the first-person has made me more aware of how effective first-person narration can be in such a story, and something I will keep in mind going forward. [[Reflection note on 3 November: I went on to create more with first-person narration in works like 'Under Stone' and 'Kill Girl']]. Additionally, the second-person section early on in the novel is really interesting to me. I recently read Aysha U. Farah's 'A Hollow Body' (a short story written for *Magic: The Gathering*) which was written entirely in the second-person, and have since found second-person narration a fascinating technique – not one I'm likely to use often, but one I'd be interesting in experimenting with at some point. [[Reflection note on 3 November: This interest in second-person narration would go on to influence 'Daughter' and culminate in 'The Kintsugi Method']].

### **'The Art of Making a Clay Pot' Seminar; Fantasy & Writing 'Daughter'**

Mthunzi Mbungwana's seminar 'The Art of Making a Clay Pot' has taught me much, but my primary takeaway is found in thinking more of how we construct our works and what elements we draw on to do so. I took special care to keep this in mind while doing the assignment for this seminar, keeping in mind what building blocks (themes, motifs, etc.) I most want to incorporate into my writing, and creating with that in mind, allowing me to create my favourite piece I've written this year so far. I also found it really interesting to look more closely at how I construct a work, what materials I draw on to do so, and how I make the work my own – it has given me a lot of insight into who I am as a writer and what I like to write about, instead of what I feel I am supposed to write about.

The assignment for this seminar proved to be one of the most useful I have encountered so far. I understood the purpose of the assignment as being to think more on how you construct your work and what makes your work your own. So, with encouragement from lecturer Paul Wessels, I wrote in my favourite genre – fantasy. My favourite pieces to write and read are fantasy pieces, and I had been somewhat avoiding them (aside from the fantasy elements of 'Transheretical') for fear of them not being taken seriously. In my experience, fantasy is often not taken very seriously in certain literary circles I've encountered, and these experiences have

kept me afraid to write more fantasy in the course, especially as I feared it was not the kind of writing the course wanted from me – even though that is ultimately what I want to write long-term. [[Reflection note on 4 November: Overcoming my fear of what I felt the course and the lecturers wanted me to write and instead building up the courage to write what I wanted regardless of this was a really important step in my growth this year and I am grateful for the confidence and respect for my own writing that it has brought me]].

For this assignment, however, I leaned into writing fantasy and it proved to be a really important step for me to take in my growth as a writer in this course.

Writing fantasy for this assignment allowed me to incorporate some of my favourite elements to use in story construction. I intentionally included three of my favourite and most common motifs/themes in my work – nature, magic, and divinity. These elements also work in making the piece my own, making it feel more specific to me as a writer.

‘Daughter’ is centred on all three of these elements – and they intersect with each other, which I am fond of doing in my writing. The element of nature is present not only in the forest of Fenholt itself, but found in Jadwiga’s magic and the goddess – The Mother – that she calls on for aid. Magic makes up a core part of the work, most obviously with Jadwiga’s druidry/witchcraft and the divine magic the hunters call upon, but also in the nature itself. The theme of divinity is at its most explicit in the hunters and their church, but the Mother is a goddess figure herself, and it is with her divine influence that Jadwiga and the forest are able to fight back. She is a nameless deity, unlike those Caldwell follows; she exists somewhere beyond death and the afterlife, and yet she is found in the nature itself – something innately physical. Keeping these elements in mind throughout the construction of the piece allowed it not only to feel more cohesive (the use of motif as a cohesion device relevant here again) but to feel more my own than any other piece this year with the arguable exception of ‘Transheretical’. [[Reflection note on 4 November: This approach to the construction of piece exhibited with ‘Daughter’ went on to guide and influence all the other pieces that became a part of my thesis, especially ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ which came about in much the same way ‘Daughter’]].

Another important note in my construction of the piece is that though the narrative style may be considered more conventional, as is some of the structure, it is done through a new lens of writing after learning so much in this course so far. I try to utilise fresh descriptions, which I think I succeeded in, such as in scenes like when Jadwiga begins casting the first spell. I am

also not afraid anymore to break convention where it serves a purpose. For instance, most of the story is told in the past tense, but I shift to present tense when in scenes where I feel the present tense works well to create moments of magical liminality. I am also interested in working more with third-person limited narration like I did in this work. [[Reflection note on 4 November: Third-person limited narration would go on to become my favourite style of narration that I utilised often, most prominently in ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’]].

With returning to fantasy, I also engaged in an exercise that yielded interesting results. I decided to practice writing and see how much my writing has grown so far as a result of the course by editing an old piece. Editing turned to rewriting as I changed many elements of the scene and utilised new writing techniques I have since learned, particularly with regards to use of punctuation to create rhythm and changing pace to better suit the scene at hand, as well as replacing clunky and cliché descriptions with ones much fresher and more effective. What is particularly interesting is that much of that improvement I utilised without much deliberate thought to do so, showing how this growth has become a natural part of my writing style now.

### **Narrative Convention Seminar**

From the assignment for Paul Mason’s seminar on narrative convention emerged ‘Colours At Sunrise’, one of my favourite pieces I have written for this course so far. I wanted to experiment with non-linearity in the story’s timeline, as well as with dual identity. This manifested as the protagonist Dawn recounting her meetings with Rhys before her ‘birth’ (i.e. the beginning of her transition). Though the narrative follows Dawn meeting Rhys in her chronological order, it is not the same as Rhys’ timeline, giving a non-linearity to the timeframe the plot takes place in. I also feel that in the background while writing this piece, I was inspired by the way Karen Lord’s *Redemption In Indigo* plays with time.

### **Still Life Seminar**

As part of Mangaliso Buzani’s seminar on still life and writing from objects, I created ‘Fragments of Decay’, which I feel has been excellent practice for coming up with fresh descriptions, such as “We all eat away our rot and become our own mothers” or “My roots are garlic, degenerating into existence”. I feel I have come a long way in keeping my descriptions original, though I still have much to learn. [[Reflection note on 6 November: ‘Fragments of Decay’ is one of my favourite pieces this year, but was left out of my thesis due to not fitting well into the collection. It is thus a good example of when to know to leave a work out if it does not fit, even if one is happy with the work]].

## **Monologues and Rants Seminar**

During the feedback session for Paul Mason's seminar on monologues and rants, I was informed that my assignment piece for the week was over-explained and would benefit from contraction and cutting out unnecessary words and lines. This was a good exercise in contracting and sharpening a piece, something I have been battling with when editing, and I feel this experience has helped me improve at this skill. I was able to recognise lines that were clunky and over-explained in the first draft and otherwise shorten them significantly or cut them out completely. This process also helped to solidify that I can be more non-specific, there can be mystery, and not everything needs to be explained. The fact that I am becoming more self-assured in this is one of the ways I feel I have grown as a writer this year, as before this course and during the early weeks, I still felt that I needed to explain everything.

## **First Book Review**

This week was the first week this year one of our book reviews were due. Starting my book review (which I did on Joanna Ruocca's *The Mothering Coven*) was difficult, but once I started, it gradually became easier. This was my first time ever writing a proper book review. Now that I have written one, I have a better idea of what to do next time, which will help assuage the anxiety for future book reviews. I made sure to focus on style and themes, drawing from what I found most effective from the reviews we read during the seminar on book reviewing. Additionally, I found that writing a book review on *The Mothering Coven* gave me even more appreciation for the work.

## **Voice Seminar & (Re)Writing 'Under Stone'**

Masande Ntshanga's seminar on voice resonated a lot with me and has reinforced for me the importance of making a work your own and finding what your voice as a writer is. The assignment involved editing and rewriting an older piece, and for this I chose 'Under Stone', a piece from my MACW application portfolio. My writing has evolved a lot since then and so I rewrote the piece from scratch, utilising the techniques and skills I have learned in the course thus far, while still aiming to hit the same story beats and imagery I liked about the original. I shifted 'Under Stone' to first-person narration to serve as a vehicle for getting a better idea of what is going on in the protagonist's psyche after the encounter with the creature at Caer Bronn. I have been working more with illustrating inner worlds of characters this year and I wanted to bring this into the edited piece, whereas the original was quite distant in terms of the narration. I also changed the piece to have a greater element of mystery – the story starts after the sighting

of the creature, never revealing what it is, thus increasing the mystery and the ominous nature of the story. I also found that my descriptions in the rewritten version were much fresher and more original. Similarly in terms of style, I added in shifts in style to create different effects, such as manipulating the form at a point to try capture the atmosphere of sensory overload and encroaching madness.

Feedback to the piece gave me a better idea of where my strengths and weaknesses currently lie. My narration, imagery, and worldbuilding were given a lot of positive feedback, while the main piece of constructive criticism I received was that I needed to make the piece more streamlined and watch out for repetition, especially in the more action-oriented scenes. This will be something I continue to work on.

### **Contact Week**

Contact Week proved to be intensive, but immensely helpful. Alongside the array of interesting seminars were a series of feedback groups. Being exposed to feedback from not just my classmates and the lecturer of a particular week's seminar but instead a group of many lecturers allowed for a range of differing perspectives culminating in very useful feedback. Of the seminars, lecturer Carol Leff's seminar on place has stuck with me the most and has me thinking more on how to write place and the feelings and senses that come along with it effectively.

I got feedback on two pieces of my compilation for the week. The first set of feedback was on 'Transheretical', which was primarily positive. The piece of feedback that most stood out to me came from lecturer Mxolisi Nyezwa, who stated that he could see my writing has developed a lot and that my work was stronger and tighter than it had been in my application portfolio. This has stuck with me because it is indicative of my growth as a writer this year. I am happy that this growth comes across in my writing and that it is clear I have made use of what I have learned in this course so far. I also received feedback from lecturer Carol Leff that she appreciated how the little details in the piece held a lot of importance – I am glad about this as trying to incorporate important little details is something I have been working on. Finally, lecturer Jo-Ann Bekker mentioned that she appreciated the mystery of the piece and that she liked that some things were left unanswered. This feedback reaffirmed what I have learned about the importance of not explaining everything in my work and how mystery can strengthen a piece.

The other piece I received feedback for was ‘Colours At Sunrise’. In contrast to ‘Transheretical’, most of the feedback on ‘Colours At Sunrise’ was focused on the weaknesses of the piece and where I can improve. Such feedback included that the piece only becomes my own part way through and that there could be less that could be more. Additionally, it was mentioned that by a few people that the piece lost them, or they were unsure of its direction. I have much to think on with regards to this piece and where I can improve it. [[Reflection note on 4 November: I ultimately decided to leave ‘Colours At Sunrise’ out of my thesis. Though I have a soft spot for the piece, I wasn’t sure of how to take it forward. This was an important lesson on knowing when it is time to leave a piece for now – not every piece is going to be able to be taken forward and recognising when to stop trying to make a piece work is an important skill that this experience has taught me]].

As part of contact week, I had to construct the first draft of my thesis abstract. I have decided to construct a collection of fantasy short stories ending in a short novella, inspired by the structure of Tina May Hall’s *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*.

### **Poetics Week & Writing the Poetics Essay**

The week of poetics readings was one of the most fascinating experiences of the course. Throughout the course we are exposed to many different works and many different styles of writing, but during this week we were exposed more to different ways of thinking about writing, to looking more at abstract elements and various theoretical bases behind the writing and the process thereof. Taking in the plethora of readings given to us was something I found both taxing and rewarding. The one which stood out the most to me was Jackie Wang’s essay ‘Aliens’. The most striking part of Wang’s essay for me was when she spoke of how she found a sense of belonging in the concept of aliens as a child due to her identity as a mixed-race queer person. From this emerged a myriad of thoughts on the fictional other and how it connects to identity. In literature and other forms of media, as well as in my own writing, I find myself drawn to elves, witches, shapeshifters – outsiders or the non-human. This, I believe, is connected to my identity as a trans and queer person. This is where my poetics essay began. I found related ideas and connections throughout the work – Bettina Judd and Christina Rivera Garza speaking about how we cannot separate our writing from our bodies and identities – and expanded from there, bringing in several other ideas and concepts from the readings. In particular, I connected this writing on identity to fantasy - looking at fantasy as a way to explore

issues of identity and how fantasy can be a place of belonging for some people of marginalised identities.

Another aspect of Wang's essay that stood out was her idea of writing as energy, and I wanted to incorporate this into my essay as well, tying it to identity. Federico García Lorca's piece on *duende* and Mxolisi Nyezwa's writing on *inkenqe* reinforced my discussion of this concept. Wang also spoke of this energy as connection, and from this I wrote about the connection between writer and audience (and the energy thereof) – this aspect of the essay found influences in several other readings such as those by Amina Cain and Garza.

Despite being really happy with all my ideas for the essay, the process of putting them all together was one of the greatest challenges I have faced this year so far. Tying everything together into a cohesive whole proved more of an obstacle than at first anticipated, and I am not sure I am satisfied with this essay yet. I believe there is much more editing to do and I have received helpful feedback on how to approach this.

### **Second Book Review**

I wrote my second book review for the year recently, this time on Tina May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*. I learned a lot from my first book review and it thus made this one easier to approach, as I now have an internal guideline from experience.

## Quarter Three

### Thesis Writing – ‘Unethereal’, ‘*Wood and Warm Light, A Letter*’ and ‘Harbinger’

I have worked on several short pieces recently, three of which stand out in particular.

The first is a piece titled ‘Unethereal’. ‘Unethereal’ is a piece that examines the feeling of being disconnected from your body through the lens of fantasy imagery. I feel this is a good example of how I prefer to write difficult topics through the lens of fantasy. The narrator of the piece, an elf, speaks of her body now made of stone – a body they feel no connection to – and how they grieve for their former body. The themes are that of grief and longing – there is mourning in what is lost. Yet simultaneously a theme of hope underlies the otherwise somber piece – the narrator has moments where their body feels like theirs again or disappears all together.

The piece plays with two opposing motifs to accomplish creating this feeling of disconnect. The first is defined by softness, elegance, and at times the incorporeal – images of flowing dresses and vibrant greenery are some examples. This represents the former body – that of the elf before she turned to rock. It is the object of longing and the object of grief. On the other hand, there is hardness – rock, bone, metal. This is the body the narrator has as she speaks, and it is meant to feel harsh and unwelcome.

There is some influence from Tina May Hall’s work in *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* on ‘Unethereal’ – specifically in working with more personal first-person short pieces that focus a lot on a character’s headspace and emotions. Having re-read *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* for the second book review recently has brought this influence to the forefront again.

The second piece is ‘*Wood and Warm Light, A Letter*’. The piece begins mostly grounded in reality, but steadily becomes more fantastical. What starts as a piece that speaks about sitting on a friend’s couch and crying to them over the phone morphs into a piece about magic. This came out of a desire to create a piece that steadily becomes more and more fantastical as it goes on. Central motifs in the piece are that of the juxtaposition between wooden floors and cold tiles, and that of warm light versus cool fluorescence. [[Reflection note on 6 November: The seminar on motifs has definitely stuck with me throughout the year – I notice I often come back to motifs being something I keep in mind a lot while writing ever since that seminar]]. Manifestation of place is an important aspect of the work, and here I am definitely influenced by lecturer Carol Leff’s seminar on place that was held during contact week. Another important motif and theme (it is both, in a way) is the connection to the natural world (which is magical

in this piece) and modern construction (which cuts off connection to the natural world and therefore magic).

The third piece I want to discuss is titled ‘Harbinger’. It is intentionally written as enigmatic, focusing on an apocalyptic desert world where all is dead except for an entity simply known as They. What specific inspirations the piece draws on, what it means to me, why I wrote it – I’m not entirely sure of the answer to any of those questions. [[Reflection note on 4 November: I think ‘Harbinger’ is a good example of how a piece can come out of nowhere and how rewarding it can be to run with a piece like that]]. In terms of the content, the mystery is never resolved and even I as the author do not wholly understand it – which is by design. It is meant to have an unsettling atmosphere, formed primarily by the unfathomable nature of what the piece is writing about. I worked to create this effect with lines like “Remember all that is yet to pass” and “Our time has long passed. Our birth has yet to be decided” – things that are impossible in our human understanding of time.

It is also worth noting that, with regards to the form, the piece uses more short sentences and is overall sparse in its description, intended to add to the mystery and unease of the piece. Experimenting with different styles within the same collection, inspired by Tina May Hall, is something I am finding to be rather rewarding.

### ***Wrath Goddess Sing***

I recently read *Wrath Goddess Sing* by Maya Deane and can confidently say that this book will impact my writing for years to come. There is something indescribable but palpably real that *Wrath Goddess Sing* has left me with, and it will influence my work forever. I cannot describe what this is, not adequately, for I do not know the words, if there are any to be found for it. I think of Jackie Wang’s discussion of writing as energy and have never understood it more than I do now.

Though I cannot describe that deep impact *Wrath Goddess Sing* has left me with and the true extent it will have on my writing, I can describe certain specifics of the novel that are both a part of the overall impact and yet also influences on their own.

*Wrath Goddess Sing* contains the most authentic feeling depiction of transness in literature I have encountered to date. Maya Deane is transgender herself and so much of her lived experience undoubtedly influences the way she writes the protagonist Achilles, much like how my trans experience influences how I write my trans characters. But what is particularly

noteworthy about Deane's writing of Achilles is that she does not shy away from painful parts of the trans experience. Deane writes of intense gender dysphoria, of the slurs and abuse we face, and of the mourning for what is unreachable to us. When Deane writes of how Achilles' would rather die than go back to pretending to be a man, of the cruelty of her peers in youth, of her and Deidamia speaking about the children they can never have together – it feels painfully real. I appreciate this about *Wrath Goddess Sing*, even though it meant I needed to take breaks to process all my emotions – the fact that it was able to make me have to step back and feel everything before I could continue is testament to how well Deane writes these parts of the experience. I appreciate it because it does not take the approach of sanitising things for a cisgender audience, as many depictions do. The trans experience can be messy and chaotic and painful, and Deane does not shy away from writing of these aspects. That is not to say that Deane does not also write trans joy well – she does so wondrously, particularly in Achilles' dynamic with Patroklos and Meryapi – but her willingness to write the messy alongside the joy is something that struck me in particular. Deane's portrayal of transness embraces the exceptionally multifaceted nature of the trans experience like nothing else I've encountered in literature and media, and I am so grateful for it. This is one of the ways in which Deane's work will forever influence my writing. I have often been made to feel that I can't write the messiness or even certain aspects of the joy and euphoria, that I'm not supposed to or allowed to, and though it will still take time to unlearn that, and though it will take small steps, *Wrath Goddess Sing* has given me both the courage and the drive to let myself write more authentically in both trans pain and trans joy, and overcome that fear. [[Reflection note on 6 November: In subtle ways (as I am still learning in this regard), this influence is present in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home']].

Even beyond that element, the way Deane writes other aspects of transness is masterfully done and inspires ways I can improve my writing. Of course, I will draw on my own experiences first and foremost, but Deane's work helps give ideas of how to put those experiences into words. I think in particular of how Deane writes the effect of estrogen on the transfeminine body and on the herbs Achilles takes to bring about those effects. [[Reflection note on 6 November: This has a major influence on writing Kerrigan's relationship with her trans body in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home']]. I think also of how Deane keeps a good balance between accurately and clearly describing aspects of the trans experience such as gender dysphoria while avoiding the more modern terminology that would feel out of place in her story set in ancient Greece. Trans people are not unique to the modern age – we have always

existed, with records dating back millennia, but we haven't had the words for much of our experience until the last couple of centuries, and so sometimes that terminology can feel out of a place in a work that is not set in more modern times. That said, making sure as authors we can still accurately put those experiences into words in our works is even more important. *Wrath Goddess Sing* strikes this balance perfectly and will be the blueprint for it that I will keep coming back to [[Reflection note on 6 November: I worked to strike this balance in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' and feel I was successful]].

One final aspect on Deane's writing of transness that I want to touch on is that she does not portray her trans protagonist as flawless. A lot of popular queer media has a habit of making their characters without any real flaw and it is an approach I find frustrating. Deane, on the other hand, allows Achilles to be a flawed character. She is prone to arrogance and anger, she can be mean, she makes costly mistakes. Moreover, she is morally ambiguous in several ways, particularly in the book's first half. This is not only important but even groundbreaking in a way, as this subverts another trend in recent media: queer characters as utterly 'pure', 'innocent', and flawless. I believe this comes from an over-correction to how in reality we have been and continue to be demonised and treated as morally reprehensible, but it is nevertheless a damaging archetype and one that is unrealistic. Deane's writing of Achilles as flawed is already refreshing, but writing a queer protagonist who doesn't always do the right thing is honestly rather radical, especially when none of it makes one not sympathise for Achilles and still root for her. Deane does not sanitise her queer characters, and I cannot express how much I appreciate about this. This will certainly have a significant influence on my writing as well. [[Reflection note on 6 November: My writing of 'All Is Myth' is in many ways inspired by this, as is 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home']].

Aside from Deane's writing of transness, I particularly appreciate the way she handles the divine and the supernatural. The way the gods are written in *Wrath Goddess Sing* are especially otherworldly and even eldritch at times. They are clearly inhuman and there is a terrifying quality in each of them. I deal with themes of divinity often in my writing and the way I write gods in the future will forever be influenced by Deane. Beyond that, Deane balances the divine and the supernatural with the more mundane world really well. The gods are omnipresent in *Wrath Goddess Sing* and they feel seamlessly a part of the world. The way Deane accomplishes this is difficult to put into words, but I have certainly learned from it and will keep it in mind as I write.

There is much more about *Wrath Goddess Sing* that has influenced me as a writer, but I would go on for another thousand words at least (and that's only what I would be able to put into words), and so will stop here. In summary, *Wrath Goddess Sing* has had a greater impact on me and my writing than any other book has in a very long time.

### **Thesis Writing – ‘All Is Myth’, ‘The Kintsugi Method’, ‘Kill Girl’, and ‘Jesus on the Bridge’**

I have spent much of my time lately on a piece titled ‘All Is Myth’. The world in which the piece is set is partially inspired by my background in Classical Studies, but especially by *Wrath Goddess Sing* and its Homeric roots. A major goal I had in writing ‘All Is Myth’ was to create a story with a greater focus on characters of questionable morality. No one in this story is a good person. They have positive qualities, but they are all complicit in heinous acts, just some more than others. Even Aniktheia, who is meant to be a neutral observer and recorder of history, is complicit in the imperialism of the host she travels with. I find this to be a fascinating space to work in. *Wrath Goddess Sing* also has an impact here, as working with characters of questionable morality is something I feel *Wrath Goddess Sing* does brilliantly.

Aniktheia's perceived neutrality and her complicity is one way a major theme of the piece manifests – that neutrality does not truly exist and that no story nor storyteller is free from bias. Aniktheia believes herself a truly neutral party until she is confronted with the reality that this is not true – and this causes inner turmoil within her. Religion is another major theme, but the mechanics and nature of it are left purposefully vague. The way the theme manifests in ‘All Is Myth’ is less about the divine and more about the human experiences of religion.

Another goal of ‘All Is Myth’, and indeed the original goal that sparked the concept, was to write a story centered on a queer couple that was not sanitised and made to seem without flaw. This too is influenced by *Wrath Goddess Sing* which does not try and portray its queer protagonist as flawless. Aniktheia and Perseia's relationship is explicitly written as troubled, where for every moment of tenderness, there is conflict, either internal or external. So often queer relationships, especially sapphic ones, are portrayed as always being perfect and without trouble or conflict, and it is an unrealistic standard. The relationship between Aniktheia and Perseia is meant to counter that, to represent a more troubled relationship between two queer women. A part of this approach also emphasised portraying a queer relationship between two morally ambiguous queer women. This was important to me as queer characters in media are

often portrayed either as perfect angelic heroes or horribly manipulative villains – I wanted characters that fell somewhere between.

Something else I focused on in terms of the writing itself was emphasising the otherworldliness of Aniktheia, through things such as how she communicates only in transferring her thoughts directly into another mind or how everyone has a quirk or tell when she is near. None of her supernatural abilities and features are ever explained and I feel this mystery enhances the piece. [[Reflection on 5 November: This is in stark contrast to early in the year where I felt the need to explain everything]].

The second major story I focused on recently is titled ‘The Kintsugi Method’, named after the Japanese practice of mending pottery using lacquer mixed with gold – to emphasise the breaks as a part of the object’s history. ‘The Kintsugi Method’ began as my foray into experimenting with the second person. This was inspired by a short story written for the card game Magic: The Gathering titled “Hollow Body” by Aysha U. Farah, which is written entirely in the second person. The style of the piece as a whole is informed by this approach: the narration describes the protagonist’s experiences as statements directed towards “you”, akin to the way someone might tell you how you feel. The goal with this was to experiment with using the second person to make the reader feel more closely connected to the character’s psyche and emotional state.

The primary themes of ‘The Kintsugi Method’ is the notion of perfection and the rebellious child. Over the course of the story, the protagonist deals with intense internal conflict over the increasing frequency of their rebellious thoughts and their increased exposure to things Mother told them was improper or disallowed. I work to capture the coldness of the world and the protagonist’s upbringing using form by writing the narration as very matter-of-fact short sentences, while interrupting it with more vividly and intensity occasionally to reflect the increasing rebellion.

Another piece recently written is ‘Kill Girl’. ‘Kill Girl’ is in many ways inspired by the work of Tina May Hall in *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* in its style, perhaps comparable in some ways to her story ‘Skinny Girls’ Constitution and Bylaws’. The story, written as a criticism of the façade of an accepting sisterhood in certain churches, follows a young woman chosen as a ritual killer, focusing on her inner turmoil as she battles with not wanting to go through with it. Originally, the ending was conclusive about who was stabbed between the protagonist and the angel, but instead it was changed to be unclear. This is another example of mystery strengthening a piece.

The last major story of recent few weeks is ‘Jesus on the Bridge’, in many ways inspired by Kate Zambreno’s *Green Girl* in its atmosphere. With ‘Jesus on the Bridge’ I wanted to use purposefully strange allegories that aim to give a sense of the bizarre and the otherworldly to the piece – attempting in some ways to emulate dissociation and complicated emotions of youth (this is where the *Green Girl* inspiration especially comes through). One of the major focuses in writing the piece was continuously calling back to previous motifs and imagery – the bridge, the apple, rot, cars and city streets, etc. It is probably ‘the least fantasy’ of my pieces created these past few weeks, but there is still a throughline of the otherworldly and the supernatural in this piece as well.

### **Third Book Review**

I read Cristina Rivera Garza’s *The Taiga Syndrome* and did my third book review of the course on it. This was a particularly interesting book review to do because it was on a book I did not enjoy and would only recommend to people who enjoy postmodernism (which I do not). This made for the reviewing process that was a rather different experience to the last two, but one equally as rewarding. I feel that finding the balance of sharing my thoughts while being objective and acknowledging that this book is still a beautiful work of art (just one that isn’t for me) was something I have certainly learned from for future reviews.

### **Thesis Writing – ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ Part 1**

I have began working on the short novella I planned as part of my collection, titled ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’.

‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ is one of the most important pieces of writing I have undertaken this year, for numerous reasons. On a more technical level, it is my longest continuous story I’ve written so far this year and it incorporates a lot of my favourite motifs and imagery – the natural world, magic, the body, light and darkness, to name a few major ones. Its themes are focused on the notions of home, belonging, community, feeling defective and like an outsider, and the healing that can arise from finding someone like yourself. But, perhaps most importantly, is what ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ means to me as a writer and what it means for my writing.

At its core, Shadows is about belonging and connection. The protagonist of ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’, Kerrigan, is a witch who utilizes shadows and darkness in her magic, and it is this darkness that had kept her ostracised from the wider world. This same darkness is

what connects her to Áine, whose blood magic is considered similarly sinister. Within and from this connection, Kerrigan gradually finds a sense of belonging. These themes of connection and belonging are a significant part of why ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ is such a passion project. It is also relevant to note that the work is explicitly queer, which adds to the complexity and nuance of its themes, as they can resonate differently through a queer lens. Writing Kerrigan’s transness is guided both by my own experiences, but it is also influenced by how Maya Deane writes transness in *Wrath Goddess Sing*. [[Reflection note on 6 November: I think back to the seminar on ‘The Art of Making a Clay Pot’. Of all my works, ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ is the most ‘me’ of all my work (alongside ‘Daughter’) – it is my clay pot. So many of my favourite themes and motifs to work with come together in the piece. I also thus think back to the motifs seminar and how much that has stuck with me, as the motifs of ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ were always at the forefront of my mind while writing]].

On a technical level, I gravitate towards longer sentences in the piece because I both prefer writing in longer sentences but also because I feel it fits well with a lot of the motifs – the long, grasping shadows; the natural world ebbing and flowing. Furthermore in terms of form, ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ draws direct inspiration from the short novella at the end of Tina May Hall’s *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* and its use of vignettes. Vignettes is less accurate a description for what ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ does, as the parts that make it up are much longer than in Hall’s novella, but it is based on the same principle. It is built around the idea of focusing in on specific events, scenes, and moments of the wider story, rather than one continuous story moving from one plot point to the next. I have really enjoyed this approach and it’s one I foresee myself using multiple times throughout my writing career.

I was discussing ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ with a friend about a week ago and she said something that has stuck with me since: “writing should move you too”. This came about because I spoke about how much I was enjoying writing ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’, but that I feared my lecturers would take issue with it (this fear may well be irrational, but it was and is there nevertheless). I worried it would be considered too conventional in form or the content not ‘sophisticated’ enough (for lack of a better word), but it is a story I am enjoying creating. I am having fun and finding joy in it, and my friend’s response reminded me of how important that is. ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’ is a story I’ve been able to pour my heart into. I compare it in that way to some other pieces I’ve written this year that are more in line with what I think my lecturers will approve most of - and while some have my heart in them, there are those that don’t, that are not me. I am reminded of one of my lecturers telling

me that a story I wrote was well-written and technically sound, but that it wasn't me. That stuck with me, and I am working on keeping that in mind alongside my friend's response: to not forego the heart I bring to a piece in favour of aiming for something more in line what I think my lecturers will prefer, and rather aiming for a balance where I can. [[Reflection note on 6 November: I have since become far more confident in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home']].

## Quarter Four

### Writing In Community Project

Another major focus of these past two weeks was the Writing In Community project. The report as part of the project will have a more detailed and structured reflection, but I have some broader thoughts to briefly reflect on here. The prospect of the project terrified me from the day we were given the instructions, but I was surprised to find I actually rather enjoyed the experience. The freewriting workshop I ran received a lot of positive feedback, as did the reading of my work that I did. My confidence as a writer and as a facilitator grew, and it was rewarding to lead a successful workshop. [[Reminder note: The report appears later in this portfolio]].

### *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* & Final Book Review

I read Margaret Killjoy's *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* and did my fourth book review on it. I will speak mostly about the influence of the book on my writing, but with regards to the review, I feel that I have definitely become a lot more confident in book reviewing than I was earlier this year.

*The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* was an incredible work to engage with. Perhaps my favourite aspect of it is how unapologetic it is – it is loudly queer and anarchist. I already embrace queerness explicitly in my work, but *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* has inspired me further in this regard. The book also strikes a great balance between its fast pace and giving its characters and world just enough time to hit and stick with you. This is a standard for that balance I can see myself referring back to whenever I write similarly fast-paced works. *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* also finds a similarly impressive and standard-setting balance in its worldbuilding, learning just enough about the world to understand what we need to as readers, but leaving enough mystery to still be gripping (but not too much mystery to be unsatisfying). This is another standard I believe I will keep coming back to for shorter works, 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' included. *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* additionally accomplishes an impressive feat relevant to my own work – its politics are clear and integral without being heavy-handed. They are organic and a key part of the story, which keeps them from coming off as preached (which several well-meaning stories with political messaging end up feeling like). All my work is influenced by my politics, in some more subtly than others,

and Killjoy's work gives me a good baseline for how to keep myself from overdoing the political messaging while keeping it clear (in stories where I want it to be more explicit).

### **Thesis Writing – 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' Part 2**

I have finished the first draft of 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home'. The novella is my favourite work I've created all year, perhaps ever, and I feel that in many ways it is a culmination of much of what I have learned this year.

Much of the latter half of writing 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' focused on coming back around to earlier plot points and creating payoffs (for lack of a better word) – Kerrigan getting a new grimoire, giving her true name to Ayodi and Suki, revisiting the home of the woman she escaped prison with, returning to Surayya and Lesedi, and going back to the lake with Áine. Ever since the motifs seminar, cohesion is something I've always kept in mind while writing and so I wanted to make sure that these plot points came back around. This focus on cohesion is also one of the many reasons the motifs and themes of 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' were always at the forefront of my mind as I wrote, working to make sure they stayed present in the story.

In terms of working with form, I continued to make conscious efforts to keep descriptions fresh and original. I think I accomplished this, in particular in the scenes where Kerrigan works with Áine's shadow and when Áine reads blood. Those were also the moments where I shifted the style for effect (something I've become very fond of), working to capture the mystical and otherworldly atmosphere of those moments. Additionally in terms of form, I worked on the pacing in action scenes (thinking back to feedback I received in the seminar on voice) and made sure to not linger on descriptions for too long so as to not lose momentum.

Something that emerged in 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' is working with parallels, which I've come to find I really enjoy doing. One such example is the overwhelming fire of Kerrigan's home burning in her memories versus the comforting warmth of Surayya's hearth. Parallels are one of my favourite narrative devices and I am glad to have found an opportunity to work with them more.

Speaking of Surayya and Lesedi, they are perhaps one of the best examples of how I have learned to keep elements of mystery in my work and not explain everything. In both scenes with them, but especially the latter, I give hints that there is something otherworldly about them and the apothecary building, but never elaborate on what – which I feel is far better than

if I explained it. I myself do not know the true nature of the two of them and the place, and I feel that strengthens this aspect of the piece. I am reminded of how J.R.R. Tolkien never explained the mystery of Tom Bombadil, not even to himself, and the importance of mystery in fantasy.

I also wish to reflect briefly on writing Kerrigan's transness. Kerrigan being trans is a key part of her experience and it ties in with her feeling like an outsider and finding belonging. I wanted it to be more subtle though. Kerrigan's magic takes centre-stage, but her transness comes up through things like the herbs and the brief reference to their estrogenising effects (*Wrath Goddess Sing* is a significant influence here), as well as the importance of her name, as referenced by Surayya and when Kerrigan gets her new grimoire. Writing transness in this way is perhaps the way I most want to – it is not the forefront of the plot, but it is nevertheless an important part of the character and is written into the story and the character naturally.

### **Thesis Writing – Putting It All Together**

Having finished 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home', I have put the collection together for my thesis, comprising of a few pieces from the coursework part of this year – 'Transheretical', 'Daughter', and 'Under Stone' – along with the pieces I have written in the second semester. With themes of home, connection, and belonging being key themes throughout the collection, I have titled it *Home Is In The Wandering*.

### **Editing the Poetics Essay & Writing an Essay on Fantasy**

Editing the poetics essay proved as challenging as writing the first draft, if not more so. However, I am much more confident in the essay now than I was before. Tying everything together was a challenge but it is one I feel I overcame. I am pleased with the result and happy I did not give up on it. The greatest struggle was finding the best way to weave the concept of writing as energy throughout the piece, but once I approached energy as not just relating to identity but identity in writing being a form of energy in itself, the essay came together.

The other major difficulty was how to handle a piece of recurring feedback I received wherein I was told there was an absence of discussion on what fantasy is besides how it can be contextualized and discussion on my technical and textual understanding of fantasy. I initially tried to fit this into the essay, but it ended up weakening the essay and interrupting the flow and the focus of it. Instead, I wrote a separate essay, as suggested by my supervisor Paul Wessels.

[[Reflection note on 6 November: I have since added it as a postscript to the main poetics essay, as suggested by my supervisor]]. This essay also went through multiple versions until settling on the final product wherein I look at fantasy as a genre as a whole and at my fantasy writing in particular. Writing this essay has also made me realise how far I have come this year with regards to my confidence in writing fantasy – going from avoiding writing fantasy for fear of not doing what I think is wanted of me, to discussing my fantasy writing and finding myself confident in my decision to write within the genre I love.

## **Final Reflection: Reader Report & The Editing Process**

The reader report has been an invaluable resource in the editing process, but likewise it has been important in increasing my understanding of how my work is received.

The reader report has shown me the importance of having a reader who isn't familiar with my work. My lecturers have seen my writing grow throughout the course and are thus very familiar with my work, and this affects their perspectives. Having a reader unfamiliar with my work offers fresh perspectives and insights, some of which I believe neither myself nor my lecturers would have picked up on otherwise. Most of all, this gets close to what a general reader would be like and getting close to that perspective is invaluable. This is especially true in terms of seeing if my writing is having the effect I want it to. I am really happy to see that, based on the reader report, my work seems to be essentially having the effect I want. There is also an element of inspiration in that – a confidence boost, in a sense. I can be overly critical of my own work and so knowing that I have created something that has an effect akin to what I want my work to have helps me to feel that I am creating something worthwhile.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, is being given insights into where my work falls short on this front. Knowing where my work does not have the effect I want allows me to firstly, know about it, and secondly, improve. It is important to realise as writers that we cannot control how our work is received, nor can we accurately predict it. Without feedback from readers, we will have no idea about the nature of the reception of our work. I cannot know if my work is or is not having the desired effect. Receiving the feedback in the reader report has not only reminded me of this, but reinforced this concept I have come to learn. I am reminded by something I was told long ago – that as writers we spend so much time with our work, go through so many edits, both on the page and within our minds, that sometimes we forget that to a reader this work is new, in its polished form, and they will thus have a different perspective with which to see the work.

The reader report has given me the rare privilege of getting that perspective in the draft process, so that I am able to have that feedback available while in the editing process, a luxury that is generally not available to us as writers. The fact that the reader is someone I don't know and who doesn't know me is important to me as well, as it allows them to be as objective as possible about my work (true objectivity in art and literature is impossible, but this is about as close as

we can get), and thus this feedback offers an especially helpful perspective with which to keep in mind while editing.

Overall, I found the constructive criticism immensely helpful. As I read through the report, I kept having moments of “Oh, I didn’t think of that, but you’re absolutely right!”. Every insight was very useful and has shown me where I can improve and strengthen the collection, but I am especially intrigued by how much I agree with almost all of the criticism. It shows just how important a fresh perspective can be – after seeing the feedback, it feels like many of the points made in the constructive criticism should have been so obvious, but I didn’t see them until it was brought to my attention from that fresh perspective. There are places where I disagree, but that is a normal part of receiving feedback, and I do not feel any of the criticism is unfair criticism. Similarly, engaging with the reader report has further helped in knowing what feedback to take in and what to ‘trust my gut’ on. Almost all of the criticism has brought about changes, but a few pieces of feedback have not, and I feel that knowing what feedback to take and what to leave is an important skill that I have definitely got better at over the course of the year.

In general, I feel I have got a lot better at accepting and working with critical feedback compared to when I started this course. I no longer feel that jump to defend my work from criticism as if my writing is being attacked like I did at the beginning of the year. Moreover, I have become a lot better at knowing how to use the feedback I receive. As aforementioned, knowing what feedback to take and what to leave is very important, but arguably more important is knowing what changes to make and how to approach them based on the feedback. Early in the course, I struggled to know how to best utilise the feedback I received, whereas now it feels a lot clearer.

With regards to specific pieces of feedback from the reader report that stood out to me, I think to how one of my major goals from the outset of creating the collection was making sure that the collection is cohesive. In working with different styles throughout the collection, I had to keep this in mind even more than usual, as I didn’t want the difference in style to negatively affect the cohesion. Judging by the reader report, it would seem I was mostly successful in my efforts, which is great to see. Moreover, the report has given me clear direction in what ways I can improve that cohesion and where it falters a bit. The major case of this is how ‘Jesus On The Bridge’ does not fit with the rest of the collection. Knowing this from the report is very useful and I have thus removed the piece from the collection and do agree it is stronger for it.

‘Jesus On The Bridge’ fit thematically and the atmosphere felt similar to ‘Kill Girl’ and ‘Transheretical’ in some ways, but after the feedback from the report, I definitely see how it is jarring and an outlier compared to the rest of the collection. It will find its place, but that place is not within *Home Is In The Wandering*.

The reader’s comment on ‘All Is Myth’ was a welcome surprise. I originally thought ‘All Is Myth’ was one of my weaker pieces, to the point that I almost removed it from the collection. I have since grown to be a lot happier with the piece and now do view it as one of my strongest works, but nevertheless this is an excellent example of the difference that can arise between how we expect our writing to be perceived and how it can actually end up being perceived. This ties into one of the ways in which being overly critical of oneself and over-editing can cause detriment – if I had listened to my brain being overly critical and removed ‘All Is Myth’, I would have lost what has ended up being one of my strongest pieces. The feedback on ‘All Is Myth’ has helped me to remember the importance of finding that balance of being self-critical to an extent that is healthy for oneself and their work, but not to the extent of detriment.

Relatedly, I am immensely glad that my worldbuilding and character work are both effective. I feel these are my two greatest strengths as a writer and so it is enheartening to receive positive feedback on them. I am encouraged to continue nurturing these strengths so that they may continue to grow. The reader report has provided me with the knowledge of what to keep in mind when doing this as I know from it what makes my worldbuilding and character writing effective, and thus can make sure these elements are not lost or unintentionally pushed to the wayside in favour of different aspects.

The comment on the influence of Kate Zambreno being evident was also useful. It is good to see that the influence comes across in the work – that it is present and seen – and it is not merely in my head. Working more with the inner worlds of characters has been something I have been working on and practising all year, especially throughout this collection, and it is great to see that I have made progress with it to this point and been successful in improving in this regard.

I am also struck by the reader’s comment on my language use with regards to avoiding the trap of over-description that is common to the fantasy genre. This is something I have been cognisant about for a while and I make active efforts to avoid falling into that trap. It can be difficult for me to tell when and if I am, so to know that for the most part I am successful in avoiding excessive description is encouraging and overall good information to know and keep in mind going forward. Similarly, I am glad that my moments of “more colourful prose” are

successful in being interesting moments and leaving an impression on the reader (and so I hope other readers as well).

The reader report was not only helpful for this collection and for this editing process, but it will continue to be helpful in my writing going forward. Several of the readers insights, both commending and constructive, will stick with me as I continue to write, from the reader's reminder to be careful with common tropes and phrases to the encouragement to pursue longer works (which I intend to do and the reader report has helped me feel encouraged to do so). The insights we receive from our readers as writers not only helps us know how our work may be received or how we could have improved on a particular work, but also help us to improve our writing as a whole.

Earlier I spoke of being overly critical of one's work and alluded to the dangers of over-editing. This was something I kept in mind throughout the editing process. I already can be ruthless in self-editing as I write, often extensively editing before I even finish the first draft, and this can be good in helping to keep my work polished. However, it can be dangerous as well, and one can get stuck in a loop of editing, never arriving at a complete piece. Perhaps no piece is truly complete, and I think getting to a point where we feel that a piece is complete (or as close to complete as possible) is a difficult endeavour not only for myself but for many writers. Finding that balance, however – learning when to let something be finished – is really important. The process of editing my thesis has brought this back to the forefront of my mind. If I were to give in to the overly critical part of my brain, I would keep editing this collection to the point that it would probably never reach any eyes besides my own. I have allowed myself to let the collection be done and I believe this experience has been invaluable in helping me know in the future when to keep editing and when to be finished with a work.

Many of the edits I made to my thesis were thanks to the direction of the reader report. The first major focus was enhancing the cohesion of the piece and those removing many references to more contemporary terms, particularly in 'Kill Girl' and 'Transheretical'. I do believe the collection is stronger as a result and am grateful for the reader's insight that has led to this improvement. An interesting aspect of this part of the editing process was the tension that arose where there were things I didn't want to change, things I liked as they were, but knew it made sense to change it to strengthen the cohesion. Most of these cases still resulted in changes. One of the best examples is in 'Kill Girl', where I did not want to change the references to a photograph and a camera, as they felt more in line with how I envisioned the piece and its

atmosphere, but I opted to change it to be more vague so as to avoid the modern aspect that could, to use the reader's words, "break the spell". One area where I chose not to do this was in a part of 'Transheretical'. I was working to edit the scene where the speaker walks down the passageway and mentions that the lights either never work or were never turned on. Trying to capture that same tension with non-electrical lights did not end up working, so I opted to keep the lights as electrical, which I also felt more able to do given that I had edited out other more contemporary aspects of 'Transheretical', such as removing references to cellphones, earphones, and listening to music online. I also much prefer the introduction of the piece with these aspects removed and thus am once again grateful for the suggestion from the reader.

Another major focus was on 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home'. The most significant edits to the language are found in the first two chapters, which the reader specifically suggested for refinement. Throughout the collection I have made edits to enhance the rhythm of the work, removing superfluous words and adjusting sentence structure, changing the language use to be stronger; but the first two chapters of 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' have had the most changes made to them in this regard. Besides the language use, this is also the part of the novella where the two common tropes the reader points out are found and so changes were made in this regard. Without the reader report, I never would have thought about how the lone flower in the cell could come across as too tropey (for lack of a better word), but it makes a lot of sense. I still like the role the plant in the prison cell plays, especially with how it relates to the gaunt woman from the first chapter and the garden that grows from her skeleton, but I have changed it from a flower that embraces the sun to a vine of ivy hides from it, and I feel this is much stronger than the flower, particularly with regards to the novella's major themes.

Editing 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' also brought about the most back and forth of the entire process. Working on whether or not to add more to the story, and if so where, was a tension I fought with throughout editing. The reader suggested expanding on the herbs and the grimoire as plot points, and I kept trying ways to make this work, but each attempt felt forced, interrupting the flow of the piece and sticking out amongst the rest. I think it likely that the reasoning for this may stem from the fact that doing so felt like I was trying to tick a box. This was one of the very few moments in the editing process for me where I was trying to edit not because I felt an edit needed to happen but because the reader report suggested it. This is a good example again of that tension that arises between what you as the author feel works best and what your reader feels works best. Finding that balance is a difficult but important part of the editing process. I opted to try find that balance by not making a major story edit that felt

forced and disruptive, but rather trying to make it clearer why I put weight on the herbs and the grimoire. This too proved difficult as once more most attempts to do this felt disruptive and out of place, or like I was spelling it out and over-explaining, but changes that felt like they could be worked in seamlessly were made, especially in terms of the grimoire.

Not related to the reader report, but another noteworthy edit I have made does not relate to the content itself but rather how the collection is constructed. From the first draft I put the stories in a deliberate order, but the editing process has changed my mind on that order. 'Daughter' has been moved to the front while 'Our Shadows Know The Way Home' still ends the collection. I feel there is something added by this change – the collection now both begins and ends on the two pieces that feel most core to the work. Home and belonging are themes that exist throughout the collection, but they are at their strongest (I feel) in these two pieces, and so it feels right that the rest is contained between them.

The experience of editing and engaging with the reader report has brought to the forefront of my mind how much I have changed and grown as a writer this year. In so many ways, I am not the same writer I was when I started this course. The core is still there – my reasons for writing, the themes and motifs I enjoy working with, the kinds of stories I want to tell – but the way I tell these stories has evolved into something new, something that is 'more me' than my writing ever was before. I have not only learned a myriad of invaluable skills, both within the writing itself and all that surrounds it, but my voice has transformed and strengthened. I have changed and I am a better writer for it.

## Book Reviews

### The Mothering Coven – Joanna Ruocca

In Joanna Ruocca's *The Mothering Coven*, the bizarre is mundane and everything that shouldn't make sense somehow does.

*The Mothering Coven* follows an eccentric household of seven women, formerly eight, as they prepare for the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of their eldest member, Mrs. Borage. As the women prepare for this momentous event, and go about their daily lives in the process, the absence of the eighth – Bertrand – is keenly felt.

The narrative is unconventional, being closer to slice-of-life than heroic journey in composition. The preparations for the birthday serve as the overarching plot, but *The Mothering Coven*'s focus is short scenes – snippets of the women's daily lives and those of supporting characters. In one scene, Agnes thinks back on how one of the luggage handlers likely stole her horned helmet. In the next, Dorcas is considering going to school to be a shaman. The slice-of-life nature of the narrative never bores, however. Ruocca's style and wordplay is sensational throughout, and each scene feels fresh and exciting to read. But there is more than just Ruocca's mode and skill to keep a reader invested.

The heart of *The Mothering Coven* is its penchant for the bizarre. The book is full of strange phenomena and unusual events that are stated so matter-of-factly you'd think they were common knowledge. Lines such as "Fiona is descended from King Solomon. All of his descendants derive their power from raisins" or "Viking ships are amphibious. Hence, the tactical advantage of Vikings as a land-sea invasion force" fit into the story effortlessly, to the point that it almost feels like such things should be obvious. The strangeness raises many questions, but none are ever answered. In any other story, this could be a source of frustration, but in *The Mothering Coven*, such questions going unanswered is a key part of the charm. They don't need answers. The strangeness needs no explanation. It simply is, and it is all the more intriguing and more enjoyable for it.

Part of why *The Mothering Coven*'s strangeness works so well is that the setting is not some alien planet in a distant galaxy, nor is it a high fantasy world where you are expecting everything to be different. Rather, the setting has familiar locations – Japan, Siberia, Finland, to name a few; the characters celebrate Christmas; real historical figures such as Ivan the

Terrible and Ozymandias are mentioned as a part of the world's past. This is Earth. But it is clearly not our Earth, with its cannabis sativa coral and its procession of ghosts that leave salt in their wake. It is at once comfortably familiar and intriguingly unfamiliar. The bizarre world of *The Mothering Coven* is made all the more wonderfully weird because of the fragments of reality that contrast so strongly with everything otherworldly.

Amongst the charming strangeness and the interwoven mirth and humour are flashes of seriousness and poignancy. Most of these are found in moments when we are reminded of Bertrand's absence. Bryce imitating *The Wizard of Oz's* Dorothy clicking together her ruby slippers using Bertrand's clogs in an attempt to call her home is made all the more heartbreaking when it is contrasted by the wondrously bizarre. Agnes wondering if she can reach Bertrand with the aid of an old book of lost girls evokes a deep sorrow that is as powerful as it is because of its rarity in the otherwise fun and jovial narrative. *The Mothering Coven* is not a highly emotional story overall, but Ruocca is nonetheless excellent at evoking emotion in these brief scenes.

Another strength of *The Mothering Coven* is its handling of its characters. The story has no single protagonist but rather something closer to an ensemble cast. Such an approach runs the risk of character homogeneity, with little to distinguish one character from another. *The Mothering Coven*, however, does not fall into this trap. Where one may expect to struggle to tell the five nieces of Mrs. Borage apart, this is not the case. Agnes is recognisable by her fretfulness and study of paleozoology, Bryce by her unconventional approach to art, Ozark by her intense focus on what she calls 'the episteme', and so on. None of the central ensemble fade too much into the background, nor do they become multiple of essentially the same character, which is an impressive feat by Ruocca for a story that places relatively equal focus on each major character.

*The Mothering Coven's* characters are as strange as the world they inhabit. Each has their share of eccentricities and quirks, from Ms. Kidney's propensity for responding to a conversation partner with something completely unrelated, to Mrs. Borage objecting to the Finnish language itself and Ozark's fixation on her mysterious 'inventory' and 'episteme'. The characters fit seamlessly into the world and take on a similar charm with their strangeness. Their eccentricities are endearing – there is something genuinely lovable about Agnes with her overthinking scatterbrain or Bryce including the word 'syzygy' in a horoscope she wrote for the sole reason that she likes the word. Ruocca succeeds in making you care about the

characters, but in a way that feels both natural and unconventional – they're weird and you don't really understand them sometimes, but you love them anyway.

*The Mothering Coven* is a remarkable feat of imagination that never once loses its lustre. Each eccentricity and each strange phenomenon feels so thoughtfully crafted that it all somehow makes sense even when it shouldn't, and though the peculiar is the book's centrepiece, it is complemented brilliantly by Ruocca's exceptional style and its lovable characters. *The Mothering Coven* is a must-read for any lover of the beautiful and bizarre. It is a thing of wonder, as magical as the witches found on the pages within.

## The Physics of Imaginary Objects – Tina May Hall

At its heart, Tina May Hall's *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* is a collection about people and the connections that bind us, the bonds we make, and their mysterious nature. Hall accomplishes this through evocative prose, creating stories packed with meaning – meaning that will be different for each reader. Not every story will be for you, but those that are will strike you and stay with you.

Woven into these stories is a sense of the strange, perhaps even supernatural, sometimes just below the surface of the normal. In one story, a pregnant woman's house attracts an unusual number of wild animals, in another a hole in a town seems almost alive. So many stories in the collection manage to feel simultaneously believable and yet somehow surreal, and everything that shouldn't make sense somehow does – the internal logic, though it differs from story to story, works so well it feels like all the strangeness could be entirely real.

Perhaps Hall's greatest achievement in the collection is that the stories can differ wildly in terms of style and tone, yet they all feel without a doubt that they belong together in this collection. The dark tone that permeates "By the Gleam of Her Teeth, She Will Light the Path Before Her" is nothing like the whimsy, fairytale-esque nature of "The Woman Who Fell in Love with a Meteorologist and Stopped the Rain", yet neither feels out of place. One story "A Crown of Sonnets Dedicated to Long-Gone Love" uses language in a way that is reminiscent of poetry, contrasting with the first story "Visitations" that uses matter-of-fact, almost flat narration in a way that makes the darker moments of the story stand out all the more. "Gravetending" has many long, descriptive sentences whereas "There Is a Factory in Sierra Vista Where Jesus Is Resurrected Every Hour in Hot Plastic and the Stench of Chicken" is comprised of short snippets of moments. Yet it all fits together beautifully in the same collection, because at the heart of each story is connection in all its different and enigmatic forms.

A particularly memorable feature of Hall's collection is it ends with a short novella – one which in itself is in a sense a collection within a collection. "All The Day's Sad Stories" follows couple Mercy and Jake as they try to have a child, but the story is told through moments of everyday life and all the minutiae within, the tiny details that make life what it is. Each page is one of these moments, with its own title, and they feel like a collection of interlinking short stories. Though the whole collection is clearly lovingly constructed, each word deliberate and

chosen with care, the novella is where this feeling is strongest – everything, though tiny details, flashes of moments in a life, feels important.

There are three short stories I feel stand out above the rest. For you, the ones that stay with you may well differ, but these three I feel are Hall's greatest. I am enamoured by "There Is a Factory in Sierra Vista Where Jesus Is Resurrected Every Hour in Hot Plastic and the Stench of Chicken" and its collection of fragments, brief moments of memory, details that may seem unimportant but to the narrator could mean everything. Hall in this story masterfully captures that feeling of noticing all the tiny details about someone you love. Beyond that, "For Dear Pearl, Who Drowned" is a striking piece about grief, in which Hall utilizes mesmerizing imagery that the story keeps cycling back to, reminiscent of the grief the narrator keeps reliving. "How to Remember a Bird" takes something as mundane as a hole in the ground in a town and makes it intriguing, an object of fascination and somehow through a tale about a hole in the ground, Hall writes a story that contains some of my favourite lines about human connection I have ever read. There are many moments in *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* like that. You'll find the most striking lines where you least expect them, and they will stay with you long after you've reached the end of this magnificent collection.

## The Taiga Syndrome – Cristina Rivera Garza

Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome* is a beautifully written and visually evocative detective novel that shines most of all in its foray into the supernatural and otherworldly, but the ways in which its plot threads weave together and reach the story's climax may be esoteric and alienating to readers seeking a clearer storyline.

*The Taiga Syndrome* follows an unnamed detective hired by a man to find his second wife, who has left with another man to the taiga. Most of the novel follows her search, alongside her companion – a translator – as they investigate the trail of the couple and question people who may have seen them. As the story continues, *The Taiga Syndrome* leans more and more into the extraordinary and inexplicable. Narrative threads and events become more enigmatic, and the focus shifts to the philosophical.

For many readers, the complex, the philosophical, and the unexplained that permeates the book – especially towards the end – would be a positive. It is unconventional and postmodern in its approach. It subverts its genre in that the mysterious only grows as the book continues, with few questions being answered, few meanings being made clear. To readers who are searching for this approach in a story, *The Taiga Syndrome* masterfully delivers. Garza's work is excellent as what it is. That said, for those readers who wish for more narrative clarity, more answers, and more of a focus on plot and events, *The Taiga Syndrome* will be a disappointment.

One of *The Taiga Syndrome*'s most notable features is its vivid sensory descriptions. Much of the book is spent on visuals and on the body. The narrator invites us into her every sense, with lines such as “I remember how the voracity of my own chewing made me close my eyes. Sometimes pleasure is like that.” However, as expressive as Garza's descriptions are, in many ways they overpower the impetus of the narrative. I do not feel it is an exaggeration to say significantly more time is afforded to what the narrator is personally feeling and experiencing than to the plot itself. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and may even be the point, but I personally found myself frustrated by how slow the narrative movement was for a story of just over 100 pages.

A similar phenomenon occurs later in the novella where the story's focus shifts to the philosophical and the increasingly esoteric. Garza goes into deep and complex detail regarding the psyche of the protagonist, but this is to the point that the story almost ceases to be about its central premise. While I found this frustrating as a reader, for others who enjoy postmodernism

and unconventional styles of narrative more than I do, this may even be the book's greatest strength.

However, I argue that the book's greatest strengths are twofold. Firstly, *The Taiga Syndrome* doesn't lean too heavily into the supernatural but when it does, they are some of the most intriguing scenes in the book. A stand-out example comes when a child describes witnessing tiny creatures emerge from the vomit of the woman the detective is searching for. However, the supernatural elements are seldom explored much further, and never given any explanation. This, as frustrating as I found it, is an effective technique in making those rare moments seem even more otherworldly.

The second greatest strength of *The Taiga Syndrome* is how Garza uses motif and repetition to keep grounding the story to a central tether. *The Taiga Syndrome* is inarguably a carefully crafted story. From early on in the novella, the motif of a wolf is used, one that is maintained throughout. Another example is the recurrence of referencing salt and how it "told us who we were. Or how". The motifs and repeated phrases help keep each part of the story connected, even when they differ in many ways otherwise.

Overall, *The Taiga Syndrome* is a meticulously crafted book. Its premise is compelling, Garza's style and form excels at sensory description and exploring the inner workings of her protagonist's psyche, and I believe it is an excellent example of an unconventional narrative approach. However, of all the books I have read, it is one of the most deserving of the disclaimer "This book is not for everyone". Garza's story will either be richly beautiful and gripping to you, or it will bore and perhaps even frustrate you. I do not anticipate an in-between.

## **The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion – Margaret Killjoy**

Margaret Killjoy's *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* is a fast-paced, unapologetic work about queer anarchists, questioning power dynamics, and contending with demons and the undead that remains evocative and engrossing throughout its pages.

*The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* follows Danielle Cain, a perpetual traveller searching for answers about the death of her best friend, Clay. She hitchhikes to Freedom, Iowa – a town of anarchists where Clay had last made his home. Her arrival takes a dark turn as she encounters Uliksi, a demonic deer that revives prey and kills predators. After the death of a celebrated member of the community at the deer's hands, the town is divided on whether the demon should stay or be dismissed. Danielle quickly finds herself wrapped up in the conflict and is faced with solving more mysteries than she bargained for.

One of *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion*'s key features is its fast-paced plot. Killjoy wastes no time getting into the action and keeps the momentum going throughout the book. The main characters, demonic deer included, are all introduced in the first few pages and the conflict that serves as the plot's crux begins shortly after. Story beats and important character moments are afforded just enough time to hit right, but not too long as to slow down the pace of the action. This balance that Killjoy achieves is an impressive accomplishment and is one of the main reasons the book stays gripping throughout. Even with my admittedly poor concentration skills, my immersion in the story never flagged, my mind never wandered off, while still feeling I had enough time to care about the characters and their motivations.

This, in part, is also due to Killjoy's approach to worldbuilding. There is no exposition dump to explain all the details of the world, but as we follow Danielle's time in Freedom, we learn about the world alongside her, being drip-fed lore and half-answers that give us the engaging balance of knowing enough to understand what we need to, while keeping enough mystery to keep us engrossed with our questions. This is not a new approach by any means, but it is achieved particularly well in *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion*. At no point did I feel I should know more or less than I did in that moment.

The world of *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* is a brilliant example of melding what we know – the real, the mundane, the modern, and the earthly – with the unknown – witchcraft, demons, and strange rituals. For all the familiar trappings of modern life that appear in Killjoy's work, there is the strange and enigmatic woven within. This is crucial to the atmosphere created

in the book – the unsettling air of the story’s world is emphasised by how much of it is realistic, easily believable to us as readers, but interrupted by the disconcerting supernatural. Perhaps more importantly even is where those lines blur. A demon deer that eats the hearts of predators is something far removed from our reality, but mourners in animal masks strolling through the night, or a woman retreating into the woods in her paranoia of evil coming for her – these are not outside the realms of our lives, and they make Killjoy’s world feel all the more real, and all the more disquieting for it.

Another stand-out feature of Killjoy’s work is her writing style. I can’t think of a better way to describe it as honest and unapologetic. It is blunt, raw, and to the point – not dressed up in fanciful coatings but as punk and forceful as its protagonist. It is worth noting I say this as someone who enjoys long sentences and indulgent diction, but they have their place and it is not in *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion*. Killjoy’s style works as well as it does because of how well it fits her story and her characters: in a fast-paced story about punks and anarchists being unapologetically free and revolutionary, it matches perfectly.

Speaking of punks and anarchy, I would be remiss to not touch on *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion*’s central theme – power dynamics. The theme is woven through nearly every facet of the book and its story: Uliksi was summoned to kill a man who took too much power; Danielle speaks about brutality of police on the homeless; Freedom is built as a place for the oppressed to be free from their oppressors without becoming them. Crucially, *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* does not make the mistake many well-meaning stories with strong political messaging and influences do – it is not heavy-handed with its politics. They are organic, important to the story, and they are do not come across as preached. Once again, Killjoy’s talent with finding balance is on display here.

An evocative story about power, anarchy, and community, *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* is as expertly written as it is compelling and engrossing. The balances Killjoy manages to strike are remarkable feats of authorship, made all the better by how earnest and unapologetic the work is. Most importantly though, and perhaps the most vital quality a work of fiction can have – it never stops being a joy to read.

## Poetics Essay

### Identity, Energy, and Writing: A Tapestry

All I write is informed by my identity. The worlds I create, the stories I tell, my impetus to write, my audience – all of it is affected by, sometimes outright determined by, my identity and the energy of that identity. I am a transgender, sapphic, autistic woman. From that comes a particular energy of my lived experience permeating my work as a whole. Everything I create has my identity interwoven into its threads.

In her essay “Aliens”, Jackie Wang puts forward the idea of writing as “ENERGY and CONNECTIVE TISSUE – *a relation*. [That it] is not the textual objects *but the bonds* that matter” (Wang, 325: 2015, italics in original). Writing is composed of energy – multiple interlocking facets that form the cohesive whole. Wang’s description of writing as energy is touched on by many other writers. Charles Olson describes a poem as “energy transferred from where the poet got it” (Olson, 1: 2009). Federico García Lorca speaks about *duende* – “a mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained” (Lorca, 1: 2007). Lorca speaks of this energy, this *duende* that drives us to create, as something we cannot describe but that comes from deep within us (Lorca: 2007). Mxolisi Nyezwa speaks about a concept near identical to *duende* found in isiXhosa culture – *inkenqe* (Nyezwa: 2015). Each of these ideas differ from each other in subtle ways, but they all speak to the same core concept: writing, and the process thereof, as energy – something beyond the textual level. There is so much beyond, but I am especially interested in the energy of identity, both of writer and reader, and how it weaves throughout writing and reading.

Identity informs the work of every writer, whether we realise it or not, whether we even want it to or not. Its influence varies greatly from writer to writer, but it is nevertheless always there. Likewise, it affects what we read, how we read, and how our work is read by others. Bettina Judd writes about this from her perspective as a Black queer woman, stating “I write about race for the same reason people write about God, or nature, or their mother’s wedding dress. It is in and around me like air and it is in my presence of mind and memory.” (Judd, 266: 2015). Though I approach writing from a different identity, Judd’s words resonate deeply within me. I write about transness, queerness, womanhood and neurodivergence because it is my lived experience, and it is fundamentally a part of me. Every aspect of my life is informed by it. My writing is no different – my lived experience is tied into the energy and the impetus both. How

direct of a role it plays differs from piece to piece, but it is nevertheless always there. When I write of outcast practitioners of forbidden magic in ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’, my queerness is present in every line. When I write of ever-shifting forms and the wrath of a stoic church in ‘Daughter’, it is influenced by my transness. My identity is omnipresent, not always directly, not even always intentionally, but it is so nonetheless. To quote Ben Okri: “Every story you write or tell reveals you” (Okri, 1: 2015). It will regardless of if you desire it.

I see this interconnection of writing and identity not only in my own work but in works I read. I think first of Maya Deane’s *Wrath Goddess Sing* and Margaret Killjoy’s *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion*. The former follows a retold story of Achilles, the hero of *The Iliad*, from a new perspective in which she is a trans woman. Deane’s work is informed by her own lived reality as a trans woman, and the theme of trans identity is a core part of her novel. As for Killjoy’s story, transness is not necessarily a core theme of *The Lamb Will Slaughter The Lion* but it nevertheless is informed by Killjoy’s identity: the book takes place in an anarchist community, in which many of the characters are trans and/or queer. Killjoy is herself a trans woman and an anarchist, and so her work is influenced by this. These are but two examples of how much identity is interwoven into our writing, whether those identities are explicit focuses of the work or not. This is of course not limited to marginalised identities – it appears throughout literature. It is merely that some identities are treated broadly as ‘the default’ and as such we often don’t notice the interweaving explicitly without actively looking for it.

“Writing is attached to the body” writes Bettina Judd (265: 2015). She notes that everything she writes is read through her body, whether or not she wants it so (Judd: 2015). This is something I am acutely aware of in my own writing. Not only does my identity inform what I write and how I write, but it also affects how it is perceived. My writing is inseparable from my identity and, for better or worse, the very existence of that identity can and will utterly change how my work is interpreted and received. There can be frustration in this, but at the same time, however, there is something liberating and humanising about how my identity weaves its way throughout my work. I don’t want to separate my transness, my womanhood, my queerness, or my neurodivergence from what I create. I could not even if I wanted to. Intrinsic in each story is an estradiol valerate injection on weekends. Intersecting with my words are the stretch marks on my breasts. My protagonist holds her sword in one hand, and I hold my partner’s hand with the other. My worlds are built through autistic touch. It is all one.

As Cristina Rivera Garza emphasises, “the personal is political” (Garza, 1: 2018). Judd speaks about not wanting to separate her identity from her writing; Garza doesn’t believe it’s even possible. I concur with Garza; the body of the author and their work cannot be separated (Garza: 2018). All writing is thus political. Even the ‘apolitical’ is political. Being able to ignore the political is a privilege, one many of us don’t have, and that itself is political. A writer who never has to think about the politics of identity is themselves taking a political stance. Everything they write, whether they like it or not, is informed by their identity – it is simply that one may not realise it when they are told their identity is ‘the norm’. Garza makes a brilliant point tied to this: how it was accepted for ages that only men were published, but dare an editor only publish women and there is uproar (Garza: 2018). I am confronted always by the fact that my trans identity will make publishing my work more difficult, no matter the subject matter. Garza says brilliantly “our bodies are keys that only open certain doors” (Garza, 1: 2018) and it is all too true. A marginalised writer’s opportunities are, for the most part, limited – irrespective of form or content. In that itself, all writing is political.

I, however, am particularly interested in the politics of a specific kind of writing. Fantasy.

Dambudzo Marechera says that “beneath reality, there is always fantasy” (Marechera, 2: 1988). I want to expand on this: beneath fantasy, there is always reality. Fantasy as a genre is often far removed from our earthly lives, at least on the surface. But, every piece of fantasy is informed by our reality. The Dalish elves of *Dragon Age* have Native American and Romani influences, many of the monsters of Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher* come from Polish and Slavic folklore, the cosmology of *The Lord of the Rings* is informed by Tolkien’s staunch Catholicism. Likewise, my stories deal with themes of ‘the other’, my protagonists are mostly queer women, my magic systems are influenced by my neurodivergence. My fantasy work is determined by my lived reality, and that lived reality is inescapably political.

Fantasy can be a powerful vehicle to explore identity and socio-political issues. I am personally most comfortable writing about identity and politics through the lens of fantasy. I think here of how bell hooks writes in her essay “Narratives of Struggle” that she experienced fear of not being able to “fully articulate [her] experience” as a minority – in her case, as a Black woman. (hooks, 53: 1991). I find myself experiencing a similar struggle from a trans and queer perspective. In every attempt I make to write trans and queer realism, the energy dissipates; it falls flat and loses any ‘spark’. So, I write about it through fantasy, give it a world, give it space, and watch its energy come wondrously alive. Amina Cain touches on this topic in her essay

“Slowness” where she talks about how she feels that “literature that very consciously established itself as political above all else [...] feels too fixed” (31: 2015). This is my feeling too, and I see it reflected not just in my own works, but also in much of what I read. There is often thought to be a certain way to write a story that deals with socio-political issues, but the truth is that such stories are, like any other, only limited by your creativity and your intention.

Tamiko Beyer speaks about writing about identity with an angled approach, drawing on Emily Dickinson’s call to “write it ‘slant’” (Beyer, 246-247: 2015). Fantasy is a method of taking this approach. I see my fantasy work, to varying degrees, as a way of writing about queerness obliquely. Camille Roy describes writing as something that “grinds itself into what’s familiar yet unbearable” (Roy, 179: 2004) and I am captured by this. The lived reality of trans and queer folk, of women, of neurodivergent people, is often indescribable, unbearable, and yet so deeply familiar. We look to find ways to write about it and we cannot always write about it as is, raw and direct. So, we approach from a different angle. For me, that angle is fantasy. For you, it could be anything.

Keeping this in mind, I want to return to the idea of political reality underlying fantasy and intertwine with it the idea of queer existence being in itself radical. I speak about writing fantasy through the lens of identity and body, and there are many ways this can manifest, it needn’t always be the focus. To take examples from my own writing: ‘Transheretical’ has the protagonist’s transness as a central theme of the story, whereas in ‘Our Shadows Know The Way Home’, one of my protagonists is a trans woman, but her transness is not directly a key component of the story – it is merely a part of her existence. I believe the latter is as radical as the former. To simply exist as a queer person is a radical act. So, the same is true in fiction. When I say I write fantasy informed by my identity, when I say I write trans fantasy or queer fantasy, it doesn’t have to mean every plot is directly involved with queerness. It can be as simple as ‘My protagonist happens to be a trans woman’ because in a genre and medium dominated by cis het writers and characters, reflecting my lived experience as a trans woman in a character is in-and-of-itself something radical. Here, once again, we see how political reality informs and underlies the energy of writing. bell hooks powerfully states that “people are more than their pain” (59: 1991) as she speaks about how marginalised writers cannot and should not exclusively write literature that is “a chronicle of pain” (59: 1991) as that can “act to keep in place the existing structures of domination” (59: 1991). I think this is something every marginalised writer needs to grapple with, to absorb and embrace. You are more than your pain.

Your identity reflected in your writing does not need to be “a chronicle of pain” (hooks, 59: 1991). It can simply exist.

This brings me to my next point – the importance of seeing our identities reflected in the fiction we create and consume. Tamiko Beyer in her essay “A Slanty Kind of Racial(ized) Poetics” talks about the importance of poems written by poets of colour that describe experiences of race and racism – “these poems are vital for our survival” (Beyer, 246: 2015). bell hooks speaks in “Narratives of Struggle” about how reading became a place of refuge for her in a world full of oppression (hooks: 1991). Both Beyer and hooks’ words, though coming from a racial perspective where mine comes from a queer perspective, deeply resonate with me. I think of how much Maya Deane’s *Wrath Goddess Sing* has impacted me as a trans person, how it will stay with me forever; or how much the *Dragon Age* franchise helped me survive as a teenager because in it I saw people like myself. There is the energy of relation here that Wang spoke of, how writing transcends the textual level and becomes energy (325: 2015). These works become more to us than the texts themselves – they grow to symbolise something, to impact my life and the lives of others, to help keep our own energy bright and alive.

In a similar vein, writing queer fantasy is a component of keeping me alive. It is necessary for my survival. It is a place of refuge, even when I am using it as a vehicle to tackle social issues. It is home. Kate Bernheimer in her excellent essay “Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale” speaks about fairy tales as a place readers and writers can find a home and how she is “happiest living in the sphere of a story” (Bernheimer, 62: 2010). This, I feel, is something not exclusive to fairy tales, but to fantasy as well, and beyond. Many of us find a home, find belonging, in fantastical worlds when we cannot find those same things in our reality.

Tying into this – into seeing the queer in the fantastical – is a fascinating phenomenon: the draw to the fictional other. Jackie Wang explores the concept of aliens and their connection to the avant-garde. What struck me most about her discussion of the concept was how she spoke about finding a sense of belonging in the concept of aliens. Wang believed herself to be an alien as a child, saying “I like aliens [...] because I am one” (322: 2015). She connects her feeling like an alien to her identity – to her being mixed race and queer (Wang: 2015). Moreover, she connects the appeal of aliens in fiction to “our desire for new forms” (323: 2015). Though my identity and my experiences are different from Wang’s, I nevertheless see so much of myself in her words, as I know many other folks of marginalised identities do too.

Whereas Wang finds a sense of belonging in aliens, your fictional other that you may be drawn to would be specific to you and your identity. For instance, I see a lot of trans people drawn to people with cybernetic augmentations found in science fiction or cyberpunk – often to how due to how they relate to their trans bodies, their changing of form. Aubrey Woods’ *Bang Bang Bodhisattva* – a cyberpunk novel written by a trans writer – comes to mind as an example of this phenomenon. Beyond purely literary circles, I think of how in various *Dungeons & Dungeons* spaces many queer players (myself included) are drawn to tieflings – a person whose bloodline has been infused with devilish or demonic essence, which manifests in physical traits like horns, cloven hooves, and barbed tails. Tieflings are frequently met with distrust and disdain for merely existing – an experience many queer people can relate to being met with distrust or disdain, and so tieflings captivate us – we feel a kinship with them. That draw to the fictional other plays an important role in how we read and write fantasy, science fiction, and similar stories. I am drawn to dryads and elves, mages and witches – and many of my stories feature such characters. Even when my protagonists are human, they have something to make them distinctly unusual, like peculiar magic or mushrooms growing from their flesh. For example, Jadwiga in ‘Daughter’ becomes inhuman through the Mother; the speaker in ‘Unethereal’ laments the loss of her elven nature; Aniktheia in ‘All Is Myth’ is capable of feats beyond human capability. I gravitate to the magical, the otherworldly, the supernatural. This all ties into my own identity as the writer, as so much does. The appeal of the fictional other, this finding a sense of belonging in the unusual, experienced by marginalised readers and writers of fantasy and science fiction is a phenomenon as fascinating as it is under-discussed and under-appreciated.

I have spoken about how our identity informs what we write and what we read, but beyond that identity informs who our readers are. Cristina Rivera Garza states beautifully that “writing is a community-making practice. If we write, we write with others. [...] If we write, we write about others.” (Garza, 1: 2018). There is always connection – that “connective tissue” (Wang, 325: 2015) Wang mentioned – between writer and audience and back to writer again. Knowing this, we must ask ourselves as writers – how, and to what extent, does our audience, or at least our prospective audience, affect our writing? The question is approached variedly across writers. Wang writes of what she calls the paradox of the audience, which is that “the creator is both profoundly limited and animated [...] by the receiver(s)” (Wang, 325: 2015). She advocates that there is care in wanting to make our writing accessible, to be clear (Wang: 2015). Stephen Graham Jones speaks to this side of the argument too, speaking of how phrases like “you just

don't know how to read this'" (Jones, 147) can be used to deflect genuine criticism. On the other hand, we have Amina Cain speaking about how she accepts that her work is accessible to some people and not to others (Cain: 2015), or Velimir Khlebnikov warning against rejecting a work because it isn't accessible to certain readers (Khlebnikov: 1985).

For better or worse, and to varied extents, our work is affected by our audience, and in turn we as readers affect the writers we read. I think a lot about my audience and the accessibility of my work, and this connects back to identity. Much of my audience is likely to be female, queer, trans, and/or neurodivergent – not only because they will see their identities reflected in the stories I tell, but also because there are unfortunately many men who will not read a female writer, many straight people who will not read a queer writer, and so on. I am okay with this. I am not writing for them. It is here I am drawn to Amina Cain's stance: her work is accessible to some and not others. Likewise, my work (and I believe any work of literature) is for some people and not for others – and that's okay. At the same time, however, I want my work to be as accessible as possible within a reasonable range – that is, to be as accessible as possible within my target audience. This, I believe, is the happy middle ground when discussing audience accessibility; and, within this, we find those bonds Wang spoke of that tie writer and audience together. The act of writing and reading is a continuous exchange of energy, and each jolt of energy, each force, is interwoven with who we are as writers, as readers, as people.

Our writing interweaves with ourselves, as we interweave with our writing. From there we interconnect with our readers, and they interconnect with our works. All we write is informed by our identity, as is what we read. In some ways our writing informs our identities as well. There is a constant exchange, a flow of energy within this tapestry formed, with all its threads interwoven together. Every thread of what we create is informed by who we are. It cannot be separated.

## ***Postscript – On Fantasy***

I deem most of what I write to be fantasy. It is a genre I categorise and define my work by often. I consider myself not just a writer but a *fantasy writer* specifically, albeit one that branches out from the conventional genre space occasionally. Even my works that may be thought of as falling outside the boundaries of the genre are nevertheless influenced by it, with threads of fantasy woven into the work. It is not that I feel restricted to fantasy, but rather that all my writing gravitates towards it. Whenever I try to write realism the spark becomes lost somewhere in the process. I do not think explicitly when writing a work that I am aiming to write a work of fantasy and that as such it must tick certain boxes. My work is fantasy because that is what comes naturally to me. It is no prison but the opposite: it is a home.

Fantasy, however, is a broad genre and one that becomes more difficult to define the closer it is examined. What seem like strict borders may blur and fall away and the lines warp and change. How can we recognise fantasy then? What do I mean when I describe my writing as fantasy?

Conventionally, the most essential element of fantasy is magic. Alongside magic are found other common features such as being set in a fictional world or universe, having non-real creatures and peoples such as dragons and elves, and roots in mythology and folklore. Less essential but still common features include aesthetics and technology inspired by or reminiscent of pre-industrial Earth (most often medieval or similar eras of history, but not exclusively), grand and sometimes world-altering plots, and elaborate, in-depth worldbuilding.

The vast majority of fantasy works have most or all of these aspects, and they can confidently be defined as fantasy. Several books that have had a significant impact on my writing over the years, such as the *Dragon Age* novels (by David Gaider, Patrick Weekes, and Liane Merciel) and *The Lord of the Rings* (by J.R.R. Tolkien), have all of these aspects. Much of my writing has most or all of these aspects as well. But there is always more beyond the conventional and the prevalent. Sometimes only one or two of the essential aspects are necessary to be able to categorise a work as fantasy. For example, should a story set on Earth in the modern era with a strong focus on magic be considered fantasy? I'd think so, and I think many others would as well. Urban fantasy is a known and popular subgenre of fantasy after all. What about a story in a fictional world, containing elves, dragons, satyrs, trolls and any number of non-real creatures and peoples common in fantasy, but with no magic system, no mages nor spells? Could this be considered fantasy, without what is conventionally considered its most essential aspect? I'd

argue so, though some may disagree. What about where fantasy meets with other genres? Science fiction is often differentiated from fantasy by its futuristic and scientific elements as opposed to that of fantasy's magical elements, and science fiction is often set in a universe closer to our reality with the existence of the Earth and its history. Sometimes though, the two genres overlap. The first examples that comes to mind for me are not from literature, but I feel they will illustrate my point best. The tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* has a setting called Spelljammer, which is best described as space fantasy. It has all the spacefaring aspects common in popular science fiction media, but with magical systems and fictional species and creatures common to fantasy. Another tabletop role-playing game, *Shadowrun*, is considered science fantasy and is a setting in which science fiction and fantasy meet even more explicitly than Spelljammer: cybernetics and technological enhancement meet elves and orcs and magic spells (perhaps worth noting that *Shadowrun* is set on a fictional Earth whereas Spelljammer has no Earth to speak of). I believe these examples of hypotheticals show that even with only one or two of the conventionally essential aspects, such stories and works can fit into the genre.

Or is it that simple?

Take Joanna Ruocca's *The Mothering Coven*. The book contains magic and the supernatural. Phenomena wildly different to our reality on our Earth (as opposed to the book's version of Earth) occur at great frequency. Yet I would not consider *The Mothering Coven* a work of fantasy. Why? It has magic and it has an internal logic to its world that does not rely on a foundation of our real world's nature, physics, and mechanics (like most fantasy worlds), so why would it not be fantasy? Perhaps it is closer to fairy tale, a genre that shares similarities with fantasy but is still distinct (particularly in terms of form), but I would not consider *The Mothering Coven* to be fairy tale either. I do not know how I would define it. I cannot articulate why it is not fantasy to me, I can merely recognise that it is not, despite ticking some of the boxes.

I think also of Maya Deane's *Wrath Goddess Sing*, a book I have seen referred to as fantasy by some, but a novel I would not consider fantasy myself. *Wrath Goddess Sing* may have magic and references to unreal creatures, but in the way that Greek myth has magic and mythological creatures, which feels distinct to the magic and creatures of fantasy. *Wrath Goddess Sing* is a retelling of a Greek myth after all – that of Achilles – and that is how I would define it, not as a work of fantasy. Interestingly, despite how I would categorise it, *Wrath Goddess Sing* has had

as much of an impact on my fantasy work as any other more conventional fantasy work has, if not more.

Margaret Killjoy's *The Lion Will Slaughter The Lamb* comes to mind too. Unlike the previous two works, if asked to place Killjoy's story into a genre, I would probably say horror fantasy (or fantasy horror). But if you were to ask me to list works of fantasy, it would be far from the first I think of. I don't even really think about it as fantasy until I actively think about how I would categorise it. Perhaps it feels more tied to reality, despite its monsters and magic.

I cannot find a way to adequately articulate why I don't consider the first two fantasy nor why I only think of the third as fantasy when pushed to think about defining it. It is based on feeling, on specific identification separate from the theoretical, and thus difficult to explain. Even without these examples, I have been showing how some works can be considered fantasy because of aspects of the genre they meet, less than defining the genre as a whole beyond what is conventionally considered to fit within it. I believe that beyond the surface level, a broader abstract definition of fantasy as a genre is difficult to achieve.

With this in mind, I will finally answer the second question I posed earlier: What do I mean when I describe my writing as fantasy? I have illustrated how vast the fantasy genre is, how the conventional lines and definitions warp and shift the deeper one goes, but where in that wide open world does my writing fall?

There isn't a quick and simple answer to that either, but it is easier to articulate. I do not create only in one of the multitude of spaces within the genre. Some stories are more conventionally fantasy than others. *Daughter* with its magics both primal and divine, its fictional world and its fictional gods, and its sword-and-sorcery style is such an example. *Our Shadows Know The Way Home* is another, with its witchcraft and blood magic and world separate from our own with its own internal rules and systems. *All Is Myth* combines more conventional fantasy with the more explicitly mythological, working towards a similar space that *Wrath Goddess Sing* inhabits while still remaining distinctly fantasy in a way that *Wrath Goddess Sing* does not. But there are also works of mine such as *Unethereal* and *Wood and Warm Light, A Letter*, neither of which follow a conventional plot the way most fantasy does, but nevertheless contain the elven and arcane. *Transheretical* may be the least conventionally fantasy of all, to the extent some may even argue it isn't fantasy, though it is to me, connected to my other fantasy work through the magic within the story.

I write fantasy because I feel a sense of belonging within the magical and the otherworldly. I feel a connection between fantasy and my identity – that connection to the different, the fictional other – stemming from my lived experience. I gravitate towards fantasy because of my reality, and so I write within it, where I feel that belonging. This connects to another aspect of where my fantasy writing falls. My fantasy writing is queer and it is trans and it is neurodivergent. That identity ties fantasy into something deeply personal to me and is part of what makes my fantasy writing my own. It weaves itself into the magic.

Magic, I feel, is the crux of why I consider my work fantasy. My writing is, above all else, informed by the magical and the unearthly. The magical and unearthly are not always fantasy, but I believe that the way I write them is always fantasy. Even my ‘least fantasy’ works are still influenced by the magic and otherworldliness that permeate my more conventionally fantasy writing. They may not be the same as something like *Our Shadows Know The Way Home* which is explicitly set in an invented world with powerful magic and fictional cultures, but they all come from the same core: the magical, the otherworldly, the unreal. This is what I mean by fantasy. This is what I mean by my writing’s home.

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## Writing In Community Report

As part of the Writing In Community assignment for this course, I held a writing workshop and a reading of my work. I collaborated with the Ink Society in this regard – a community of university students in Makhanda interested in writing. The society gathers weekly, wherein each gathering involves a committee member organising a presentation on one aspect of writing, after which members engage in creating some work of their own. This is then a group of people familiar with writing, but I was still able to bring in something new to base my workshop on – freewriting. Members I spoke to were either unfamiliar with freewriting, or knew about the concept but had never or seldom practiced it. I myself fell into the latter category before this year. Having started practicing freewriting this year, however, I have found it to be profoundly useful. Not only is it a useful tool for getting into a creative headspace, but I'm consistently and pleasantly surprised at the work freewriting can produce, often much more honest and much better than one might expect. It is for this reason that I decided to do my workshop on freewriting, and to do so with other writers in my community who I believed would find it a useful process to learn about – a process they might keep with them even after the workshop.

This is not the only reason I chose to collaborate with the Ink Society, however. I had been exceptionally anxious about this assignment since we received the instructions early in the year. It was not the workshop itself that frightened me, nor the reading of my work – it was the process of approaching a group of people and organising the workshop. I have an anxiety disorder and the thought of having to approach a group of strangers to ask to run a workshop and read some of my work was nerve-wracking. I knew I would be fine once the workshop was underway and I have no qualms reading my work aloud, but getting to that point was the distressing part. This was further complicated by the fact that I am a visibly transgender and queer woman, which makes interacting with people I do not know not only anxiety-inducing, but potentially dangerous. I also do not think my work is appropriate for minors, nor did I want to deal with the possibility of queerphobic parents (I know queer peers who have worked with local schools and endured queerphobia from parents, so it was far from an impossibility), so schools were not an option. All of these factors left me with few options I was aware of. Working with one of the local university student societies seemed like the best and safest option, and I had been a part of the Ink Society a few years prior, so it felt much easier to approach. It was still anxiety-inducing to do so, but it was not debilitatingly so. From that point,

the process became a lot more comfortable, especially thanks to the friendliness of the committee members and their help organising the event.

The workshop was held in early September in the botanical gardens just off the Rhodes University campus. The Ink Society committee members were a massive help in terms of organising the workshop. There were ten participants in total.

The original idea for how the workshop would be structured ended up being significantly changed with guidance from my supervisor, Paul Wessels. He pointed out that I took too forward of a role in my original idea, which he intuited about because of the pressure of it being an assignment (which is exactly the truth – I felt pressured to make things more complex than they needed to be due to this being a university assignment). I had intended to bring in a subtheme of ‘making your writing your own’ in which after a few of the freewrites were done, I would discuss with the participants how freewriting can help you discover your own style because you are forced to let go of insecurities and apprehensions that arise from being told to write a certain way instead of how you want to write. This, however, as my supervisor pointed out, goes too much into the theoretical and would end up having the opposite effect of what I wanted, as participants would be influenced by this instead of writing freely.

So, I removed the discussion of theoretical underpinnings from the plan. The final plan for the workshop was to do four 5-minute freewrites, each with prompts I had designed that increased in complexity with each subsequent freewrite. Participants were also free to ask me to give them a different prompt on the spot if they did not like any of the preset prompts, or to choose their own prompt if they so wished. Neither of these accommodations proved necessary as each participant chose one of the preset prompts. Between each freewrite, participants had an opportunity to share what they had written if they so wished. Not many shared at first, but as the workshop went on, more and more participants shared. At the end of one of the later freewrites, nearly every participant shared – probably my favourite moment of the whole workshop. Seeing the participants become more confident over the course of the workshop and realising the kinds of powerful works freewriting can produce was such a lovely experience.

After the final freewrite, I had planned to do something my supervisor suggested: the participants would split up into groups and choose their favourite pieces produced by each other participant in the group, and then see the difference between what each writer thought was their best freewrite compared to what other participants thought. From this the intention was for a discussion to arise about the process of freewriting, seeing what surprised them, what

they felt about the differences or similarities between the chosen favourites, etc. However, this didn't end up happening for two reasons: the first reason is that we simply ran out of time. The freewrites themselves and the sharing of the freewrites in particular took far longer than I expected. The second reason, however, was (I feel) a better outcome than what was planned. The discussion on the process of freewriting happened organically throughout the workshop, brought up by the participants. The participants spoke about everything I had hoped they would – about how freewriting helped them get into a creative headspace, how they were surprised at the strength of the pieces they created, how it helped them let go of insecurities and apprehensions. It was because of this I felt the workshop had truly succeeded and I felt happy with my facilitation – everything I hoped would come from the workshop did, and more. What I had not consciously expected was how strong a sense of community was present in the workshop. Participants were really encouraging and engaging with each other's work, excited to hear others share and giving insightful feedback. The workshop did not merely go well – it went far better than I had hoped.

After the workshop, I read some of my work to the participants, as was required for the other part of the Writing In Community assignment. I am rather comfortable with reading my work aloud to people, so this did not cause much anxiety. What I had not expected and was pleasantly surprised by was how much positive feedback I received. I read 'Transheretical' and part of 'Daughter', both of which the participants expressed that they enjoyed. What I liked most about this process was the engagement I received. It was not mere kind words, but genuine engagement with my work, in which participants were discussing with me different aspects of the pieces and the writing itself. It was not merely a case of me enjoying the experience because I got positive feedback, but more because I got to have engaging discussions with the participants.

I ended the workshop by asking for people to give short written feedback on their experience of the workshop. All expressed enjoying the workshop and most expressed enjoying freewriting (only one participant expressed freewriting to be a stressful endeavour for them). A few participants mentioned that freewriting had helped them to articulate ideas they had been wanting to work on for a while but hadn't been able to. Several spoke about wanting to return to some of the freewrites to expand them into longer pieces – one participant expressed that they wondered about whether to come back to some pieces or if coming back to them would ruin them and if they should just stand on their own, which I thought to be an interesting conflict. The same participant also expressed that freewriting allowed them to get out of their

comfort zone and explore writing outside of their conventions. Several participants also expressed that the workshop felt like a safe space to create and to share and express themselves – this in particular is something I am very happy about as it means I was able to facilitate a workshop that was both friendly and comfortable. Several of the participants also expressed in their written feedback that they really enjoyed the reading of my works.

Overall, I feel very positive about the experience once past the anxiety of approaching people and setting everything up. That part of the assignment I found to be hellish, but everything about the experience of the workshop itself and the reading was a wonderful experience – I enjoyed it far, far more than I anticipated. I am a lot more confident now in my skills as a facilitator and, to my surprise, think I would like to facilitate more workshops and similar writing events in the future. The highlight was certainly seeing how each participant grew more confident and keener to engage as the workshop went on, and the sense of community that encouraged such. I am grateful that my participants enjoyed the workshop, but equally I am grateful to them for making it such a rewarding experience for me.