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Sample file

Sample file

Introduction:

Welcome to the mouth of the dragon's cave.

To the west lies a town overshadowed by darkness. To the right lies a shining glass city with strange alien species. In front of you the entrance to the old worlds of magic. Behind you the mundane world you have left, if only for a while, so that you can free your mind to explore the fantastical worlds you are about to discover.

The lines between fantasy, horror, and science fiction have always been blurry at best. A monster is a monster, after all. And it doesn't matter if the monster is a mythical dragon, a supernatural serial killer, or an alien intelligence. A hero is a hero, whether wielding a sword, a gun, or a futuristic laser rifle. Some refer to these genres collectively as "speculative fiction" for this very reason.

These selections represent the best of the 2005 Bards and Sages Writing Competition. With over 200 entries representing writers from 11 countries, this collection typifies the incredible range of speculative fiction. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did putting it together for you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie Dawson". The signature is written in a cursive style and includes a small smiley face above the letter 'i' in "Julie".

Julie Ann Dawson, editor

Winter of the Gods

By Elena Clark



The men riding behind Kira Svetliyevna were not Mersians. Even from a distance Yana could tell that. They were not from the Tribes, either. This gave Yana a bad feeling.

“Galya,” she said to the girl next to her, “what do you see?”

“Kira Svetliyevna and some strange men, Aunt Yana,” Galya answered promptly.

“Run back to the cloister and tell Mother Yevdoksiya what you see,” Yana commanded her.

“Warn her that I think they may be Beinens. Tell her I will stay here and meet them, if they are in fact riding to speak with us.”

“And if...What if...” The girl’s face had gone very white,

making the red hair that had fallen forward out of the shawl over her head appear the color of drying blood.

“If they meant to attack us they would not have brought Kira Svetliyevna,” Yana told her sharply. “Now! Quickly!” The girl ran off obediently.

Yana waited patiently for the riders to come up to her. She was standing in the pathway, making no attempt to hide. She was still in the woods, but right at the edge, where she could see the fields. It was not yet time to plant, but even when it was, these fields would lie fallow. The Sisterhood of the Wolf preferred to have plenty of space around them. Kira Svetliyevna was their closest neighbor, and she must have started out before first light to reach the Wolf’s Wood by midday.

The wind was cold. Yana put her fur hat back on. When setting off early that morning she had chosen to take the hat but leave her fur coat behind. Early spring was a time when one always needed one or the other, but rarely both. A few snowflakes started to fall. Yana pulled her shawls up around her chin. She looked across the muddy path, the bare field, and the leafless birch saplings that were retaking the once-plowed land for the woods,

and was cheered by the bleakness of the prize the Beinens had won for themselves.

Yana stood in the middle of the path without moving or speaking until Kira Svetliyevna and her men rode up to her and came to a halt. One of the men said something brusquely in a foreign language and gestured for Yana to move aside.

“Strange guests you bring us, Kira Svetliyevna,” she said.

“Did you receive word of our coming, Sister Yana?” asked Kira Svetliyevna. She was dressed in her finest riding clothes, but she looked tired, and her voice was that of a person who wished she were somewhere else. It was a voice many Mersians had, these days.

“The wolves told Mother Yevdoksiya that strangers were riding on our lands,” replied Yana. “She sent me out to investigate.”

“I bring a message for your Mother, and a delegation of Beinens,” said Kira. “Are the wolves close by?”

“Only if I call them,” Yana told her. “Should I? They can kill the Beinens, and leave you unharmed.”

“No! I have news for Mother Yevdoksiya. Will you take me to her, Sister Yana?” Kira trembled slightly as she spoke.

Yana cocked her head and eyed the men one by one. She had never seen a Beinen close up before. They were obviously foreign, not just in dress but in the cast of their faces and the way they looked boldly back at Yana, which no Mersian man would have done. The fact that they were light-skinned and light-haired like Mersians made them seem even stranger.

“Give me a ride back to the cloister,” Yana said. “We will make better time that way.”

Kira said a few halting words in Beinen to the men, and then rode over to a log to allow Yana to climb up behind her onto her horse's back. They began walking down the path, into the forest. Yana put her arms around Kira's waist and rested her head on her shoulder. Kira was shaking slightly, and her hair, usually so well-kempt, had not been washed or perfumed in days. If Kira was bringing the news that Yana suspected she was, they would invite her and her family to live in the cloister, Yana decided. They would be safe there. Wolves cared little who proclaimed herself mistress over the land.

The men behind them talked, first loudly, and then, as they rode deeper into the woods, in quieter and quieter voices. They left the birches behind and came amongst the evergreens. The tall tops of the trees blocked out the gray sky, and snow lingered under the long sweeping bottom boughs. The men began glancing nervously from side to side.

“Stop,” ordered Yana. “Tell the men that they must not draw their weapons. They must not harm the wolves.”

Turning to face them, Kira did as instructed. The man who appeared to be in charge said something back.

“He says that we cannot give him orders, and asks why he should not harm the wolves,” whispered Kira.

“Tell him the wolves are hungry in springtime,” answered Yana mildly. “Tell him they will kill him.”

Kira must have conveyed her message, for there was much muttering among the Beinens.

They rode up to the cloister in early afternoon. It was a large wooden building inside a stockade, situated in a clearing that was just large enough so that no tree branches touched the fence. The tops of the fence boards were pointed and had wolves’ heads carved on them. The two towers of the cloister building were visible above the stockade. The towers were crowned by square-edged domes built of wood shingles. The point of one dome was decorated with a wolf’s skull, the other with a human skull, there to keep a lookout. Both were looking directly at Yana and her party as they rode up to the gate. She waved to them. The gate unbolted and opened.

“The archway is too low to ride under, and the yard is slippery,” said Yana. “We should dismount here.”

The men were unhappy about it, but as there was no way for them to fit through the gate while mounted, they were forced to give in.

“Girls!” Yana called as soon as she was inside the stockade. “The horses!” A dozen young women came cautiously out of the stable, which was at the back of the main building.

“Guests for our Mother have arrived,” announced Yana. “Do not speak to them or harm them. Take good care of their horses. That is all.” The girls hurried forward to take the horses from Kira and the men. The Beinens seemed dubious about letting go of their mounts, but relinquished them eventually. They followed Yana, their muddy boots slipping on the boards that paved all of the yard except the vegetable gardens, and entered the building.

“Tell them they must remove their boots and put on house slippers,” said Yana, who was doing just that. Kira explained it to them, mostly with actions. The men balked. Several were smirking and laughing to each other.

“They are saying that they must be in a house of women,” whispered Kira, slipping on her house shoes. “They don’t want to be bossed around by a bunch of Mersian women.”

“Why do they have no women with them?” asked Yana. “I know that many Beinen women are soldiers.” She gave no indication of what she thought of women who had sunk down to doing men’s work.

Kira shrugged. “How should I know? I think they do not trust their women around us.”

The Beinens were watching Yana. She remained sitting on the bench in the entrance room, and gestured at the row of house slippers under the bench against the other wall.

“Perhaps we should...let them in without house slippers?” suggested Kira half-fearfully.

“No,” said Yana, still mild. “No one tracks mud on our floors. And they must learn who is mistress here.”

“Yana,” said Kira, upset, “I think, I think that...that maybe we are no longer mistress here in Mers. The Beinens...They...”

“Kira, the Beinens have been trying to add Mers to their empire for fifty years now. They may be under the impression that they have finally succeeded, unless I am badly mistaken as to what this visit means. But the woods will never be theirs.” She leaned back against the wall and watched the men. They were beginning to mill impatiently. One of them said something to Kira. She answered slowly and uncomfortably; he responded quickly and angrily.

“He—his name is Anders Derrenson, and he is their commander—does not like being kept waiting, and he demands that we bring him to someone in charge,” Kira told Yana miserably. “He says that you are too young to be giving him orders.”

Yana eyed Anders Derrenson with interest. She guessed he was about thirty-five, or ten years older than she was. He was short and stocky, with short wheat-blond hair and a square face that was turning redder and redder.

“This is my cloister, not his,” she observed. “I am old enough.”

After a furious outburst from Anders Derrenson, and some menacing looks from the other men, they began reluctantly removing their boots and putting on the borrowed house slippers.

“Excellent,” Yana said briskly when they were finished. “Follow me.” She led them down a corridor to the Great Hall. They seemed to be having difficulty managing their slippers, which was unsurprising, considering that the slippers were mostly sized for women.

The long delay in the entrance hall had given the girls plenty of time to arrange the benches in the Great Hall. The long tables had been pushed back to the sides and two benches had been set up in front of the Mother’s chair on the dais at the far end of the Hall, so that her visitors could sit there before her.

“Mother Yevdoksiya,” said Yana as she came up to her. She bowed very low three times. So did Kira Svetliyevna. The men, Yana noticed, looked faintly contemptuous.

“Come stand beside me, Yana,” ordered Mother Yevdoksiya. She was dressed warmly, in protection against the Great Hall’s drafts. Her silver hair was covered by a dark unpatterned shawl, which draped over her back and shoulders. Her wool dress was a color somewhere between charcoal and black, without embroidery. Mother Yevdoksiya did not believe in excess

adornment. Sitting up straight, she was tall enough that her head reached Yana's shoulder. Yana was not very tall. Mother Yevdoksiya's dark eyes examined the men standing before her. None of the lines on her face moved; she did not seem surprised or shocked to see them.

"What news do you have for me, Kira Svetliyevna?" she asked, her voice carrying strongly across the Hall. "Who are these visitors?" She did not sound alarmed.

"Mother," began Kira hesitantly, her voice quavering. "I have...I have the gravest of news." She stopped.

"Tell me," commanded Mother Yevdoksiya, when it became apparent that Kira was not about to continue.

"The Empress...The Empress has surrendered!" The words came bursting out from Kira, and she began to shake visibly.

"Control yourself in front of the foreigners, Kira Svetliyevna," said Mother Yevdoksiya. "So, Raisa Nadezhdovna has surrendered to the Beinens? Tell me everything." She did not seem to be much shaken by the news. Yana, who had guessed what had happened, was able to keep her face impassive, as was appropriate for someone standing to the left of the Mother of the Sisterhood of the Wolf, although she could feel her face and neck flush from agitation.

"It happened a week ago," said Kira weakly. "The Beinens...They closed in on Krasnograd ten days ago, and took the outskirts of the capital. They had already taken the borders...And so many of our villages were destroyed...And the army is in pieces...There was no other course for the Empress to take. She surrendered. Mers is to become just a part of the Beinen Empire."

"A rather large part," observed Mother Yevdoksiya with a faint smile, "since it is considerably bigger than all the rest of their empire taken together. What will happen to Raisa Nadezhdovna?"

"She is no longer Empress, but will be titled the Lady of Mers, in the Beinen style," answered Kira, choking slightly. "She will still be ruler of our country, but one appointed by the Beinen king, and responsible to him. There will a garrison of Beinens stationed in Krasnograd, and perhaps more across the country. And she says...The Empress says...If she is no longer Empress, then she is nothing. She has declared she and all her descendants will dress as peasants, and there is no longer any magic in their blood."

Kira looked ready to cry. "But...Oh, Mother...That is not the worst. That is not the worst!" Now she did begin to cry.

"What is the worst, child?" asked Mother Yevdoksiya calmly.

Kira took a deep breath and then began speaking very quickly, as if hoping her words could outrun her tears.

"The Beinens say...Their king has decreed...That we must all become Erbensalmities. That the old ways are forbidden, magic is not to be

practiced, and the cloisters are to be closed.” Tears started running silently down Kira’s face again.

Mother Yevdoksiya sat back in her chair. She did not appear shocked, or frightened, or hysterical, but rather as if someone had suddenly set her a difficult riddle.

“That is why these men are here, then?” she asked. “To tell me to shut down my cloister, abandon my girls, and take up a foreign religion?”

“You have two days,” Kira answered dispiritedly.

“I want to hear him say it,” said Mother Yevdoksiya. “I want this man to look me in the eyes and tell me why he is here.”

The man called Anders Derrenson stood up at Kira’s request and began talking at length in Beinen. To Yana’s eyes and ears he did not seem especially cruel, or stupid, or vicious, or gloating in his victory over the Mersians, but just a man who had a job to do. Yana found little comfort in this. She guessed that the sisters were not in danger of being molested or assaulted, but she also guessed that his air of competence was not a bluff, and if he had come to disband the Sisterhood, it would be disbanded. She felt no hatred toward him, but she felt no desire to cooperate with him, either. He was too alien.

When he had finished speaking, Kira said, “He mentions that if you refuse his orders, he will close the cloister by force and bring you to Krasnograd for judgment.”

“Will he?” remarked Mother Yevdoksiya dryly. “Well, Kira Svetliyevna, please inform him that he and his men are our guests for the night. They will be furnished with lodging and food. I will give him my decision in the morning. ~~Can~~, please summon some girls to show these men to their quarters.”

Yana obediently crossed the Great Hall to the kitchen and told the girls there to show the Beinens to the Men’s Tower. “They will not harm you,” she assured them. “They will take no action till they hear our Mother’s decision tomorrow morning. They must be fed later; they can eat in the Men’s Tower.”

“Why are they here, Aunt Yana?” asked the youngest girl, who was thirteen. As an adult, a full-fledged priestess, and assistant to Mother Yevdoksiya, Yana was called Aunt by the girls, not Sister.

“The Empress has surrendered and the Beinens have taken Mers,” answered Yana, who did not believe in lying, or softening a hard truth that was unlikely to go away. “Now girls, be calm, and be polite to our guests. Remember, they must see that you are wolves.”

With that bit of wisdom she led them into the Great Hall, where they escorted the Beinens off to the Men’s Tower and Kira Svetliyevna to the Guests’ Tower.

“We have much to do, Yana,” said Mother Yevdoksiya as soon as the Great Hall was empty.

“Yes,” agreed Yana.

“We could kill these men, but more would be sent,” Mother Yevdoksiya continued. “The Beinens have spent fifty years trying to take Mers, and they will no doubt spend fifty more trying to take this forest if we resist them.”

“So you mean to do as they bid you, then?” Yana’s voice was even and noncommittal.

“There are many methods of resistance,” said Mother Yevdoksiya, smiling a little, but not happily. “Yana, I have already passed my seventieth year. I do not have the time, nor, to be honest, the strength for what must be done. And appearances must be maintained. The Beinens must be made to believe that they have gained our compliance. So the task of resistance must fall on you.”

“I am ready,” Yana answered calmly.

“Yana, as you know, the gods have seasons, just as we do. But theirs last so much longer. For years now it has been their autumn. Magic is ebbing in the earth, the gods’ voices are falling silent, leshayas walk these woods but rarely. We are entering wintertime for the gods. We cannot stand against these foreigners with soldiers, and we cannot stand against them by other means either. But that will change. Someday—many years from now, perhaps, when you are an old woman—it will be springtime for the gods, and Mers will awake. Then you will be ready. The Sisterhood will survive.”

“How will I know when it is time?” asked Yana.

“You will know. As the gods awake, the woods will no longer be so empty. And people’s hearts will begin to burn. When you see that fire, you will know that the time has come.”

“And what shall I do until then?”

Mother Yevdoksiya shrugged. “Wait. Live in the woods. Speak with the wolves. Prepare yourself for whatever may come.” She thought for a moment. “There is an abandoned cottage near the Eastward Road. Walk to the road and go west about five miles. You can live there, at least for the time being.”

“I will do so,” said Yana.

“You must leave tonight,” Mother Yevdoksiya went on. “When people ask for you, I will tell them that you killed yourself rather than give up the Sisterhood. We will kill a pig and make it look like you. Now go, pack, and meet me in the pigsty when you are ready.”

Yana walked unhurriedly out of the Great Hall, in case anyone was watching, and climbed the stairs to her room on the second floor. It was small and dark. Its windows showed the gate to the stockade, and a small bit of woods. Yana set the burning candle she had taken from the Great Hall on her

windowsill and began to pack. She placed a large sack on the floor, and surveyed the contents of her room, trying to decide how much she could bring with her. Any kind of bedding would be too bulky and heavy. She would have to sleep in her clothes. She placed her sheepskin coat, two plain wool shawls, one woven and one that was knitted and fuzzy, in the bottom of the sack. On top of that she put an unembroidered brown linen dress and a matching blouse, then a pair of fuzzy wool stockings, underclothing, and a pair of mittens. The felt boots would have to be left behind, she decided, because she could not carry both them and her book. The book was a record of everything of significance she had done since joining the Sisterhood: every salve and potion, every time she had spoken with the wolves, every encounter with a god, spirit, or leshaya, every answered prayer for magic. She wrapped it up in another shawl (Yana was of the opinion that it was impossible to have too many shawls), stuffed a small jar of ink and two quills into a fuzzy wool hat, and put both things in the sack. Last of all she added a hatchet, flint and iron, and two bowstrings, and tied the sack shut.

She hefted it experimentally. Heavy, but if she fastened it on the end of her walking staff and balanced it over her shoulder, it would not be any worse than carrying home game from a hunt, or a large pair of skis. Yana spared a moment of keen regret for her skis, which her father had made for her, but there was nothing to be done; they were too heavy, and it would look peculiar if a supposed suicide made off with all her prize possessions. Yana hoped that no one would think to search her room too thoroughly.

She would have to go to the entrance to retrieve her fur hat and her boots, and to the kitchen to get food. She took up her sack and staff, looked out her door in case anyone was coming, and, seeing the corridor was deserted, began hurrying down it. The second-floor corridor was rarely used, and so luckily she met no one as she went halfway around the building. She made two stops, the first at the entrance, where she went down the narrow stairs and exchanged her house slippers for her boots and hat, and the second at the kitchen, where she took two loaves of bread and three pies. She ended up at the back of the building, and climbed down into the storerooms. From there she took some cured meat, several wizened apples, and as many turnips and beets as she thought she could carry. The storerooms being connected to the barns, she was able to sneak fairly easily to the pigsty without being seen. Mother Yevdoksiya was waiting for her there.

“Are you ready, Yana?” she asked. Yana nodded.

“Are you frightened?”

“No,” answered Yana truthfully. In fact, she felt very calm. When she had heard what the Beinens were planning to do she had felt a little shaky, as if her knees and elbows didn’t quite work, but now that she had a plan she felt fine, ready to do whatever needed to be done. She wished she could tell Mother Yevdoksiya that she was glad to be the one who was running into

hiding, and sorry that she might not see any of the sisters again, but she couldn't quite say the words. Yana had been working on keeping her mouth shut for years now, and the habit of reticence was too strong in her.

"Which pig shall we use?" she asked instead.

"Spots." Mother Yevdoksiya pointed to a black-and-white pig standing slightly apart from two pink pigs. She sighed. "I am sorry to kill her like this. We should take her into the woods, it will work better that way."

Spots docilely allowed Mother Yevdoksiya to put a rope around her neck and lead her out of the sty, through the small back gate of the stockade, and into the woods—animals normally did what Mother Yevdoksiya wanted. Yana followed silently, carrying her sack.

She, too, was sorry to be killing Spots like this, but as she saw no better choice, she closed off her heart to that regret, just as she did every time she had to slaughter an animal.

They walked along a narrow path until they were out of sight of the stockade and had reached a clearing filled with logs with faces carved on them.

"The gods are already falling into their slumber," said Mother Yevdoksiya. "But they should still be able to hear us here."

"Mother?" asked Yana, to whom a question had suddenly occurred. "When the gods are sleeping, will we still be able to do magic? Will they still heed our prayers? Or will we have to steal it from them, as the goddess do?"

"That I do not know. That will be a task for you, to observe whether your prayers are answered. Now, Spots..." Mother Yevdoksiya and Yana had both slaughtered animals before, and they had spent far too much time with wolves to be squeamish about necessary killing, but neither of them took any pleasure from it, either. Yana had to separate her thoughts from her hands as she slit Spots's throat with her belt knife, and was uncomfortably aware that in that mood it would not be much more difficult for her to slit a person's throat. She knew that when someone has trained herself to overcome distaste, there is very little she is not capable of.

Once Spots was dead, Mother Yevdoksiya took a flask of vodka out of her dress pocket and sprinkled its contents over Spots. She and Yana knelt down and began to pray out loud to the gods of the forest to change Spots's body to Yana's. No spirits or gods appeared, but gradually Spots took on Yana's form and face, a slow, almost imperceptible change, like winter sunrise.

"You must cut her throat again," said Mother Yevdoksiya said when the transformation was complete. "Otherwise people will be suspicious." Yana did so, surprised at how calm she was about cutting what was, to all appearances, her own throat.

"Now, Yana," said Mother Yevdoksiya when it was done. She took a deep breath. "Good luck. I doubt...I doubt very much that we shall ever see

each other again. I intend to give in completely to the Beinens' demands, disband the cloister, and send all our girls home. If the chance comes to reform the Sisterhood during my lifetime I will, of course, do so. I may charge some of the other girls with preserving the Sisterhood, if it is possible. But you may be the only one, Yana, so if you think it safe, take on a girl or two and train them in our ways. I would advise you to stay hidden in the woods for the most part, but go amongst people from time to time, to find out what is happening. And...And...That is all, I suppose. I trust in you, Yana. Do the best you can. You'd better go now, before it gets too late."

Yana was unsure whether bowing was appropriate at such a time, but she decided it was better to do so than not, so she bowed deeply and said, "thank you, Mother. I will do all I can to justify your trust." Mother Yevdoksiya caught her up and hugged her hard.

"Don't lose hope, my Yanochka," she whispered. "Don't lose hope! Now go!"

They turned away from each other and set off in their different directions: Mother Yevdoksiya back to the cloister, and Yana towards the Eastward Road. It was now mid-afternoon and she figured she had about ten miles to cover to reach the road, and then another five to get to the cottage, providing the cottage was still there and inhabitable. Somewhat grimly, she resigned herself to a night spent out in the woods. She was capable of it, of course, but early spring was no time to be leaving shelter lightly. A few snowflakes began drifting down again.

There was a very faint path leading from the gods' place towards the Eastward Road, although the bottom boughs of the firs and pines reached across it, almost closing it. There were still drifts of old snow under them. Yana walked steadily forward, pushing aside or stepping over the branches, watching out for icy patches, and switching her bundle from shoulder to shoulder.

It had not been very bright all day, but soon the darkness began to gather. There was not enough sun and too many trees for there to be shadows, but there was a definite feeling that the sun was sinking and darkness was rising. If a person were to be afraid of being out alone in the woods, now would be the time for it, but Yana was accustomed to the forest, and she was not in the habit of being afraid, anyway. She was tired, though, and so she stopped before it became full dark.

Sitting on some cut pine boughs spread with a shawl, she ate two of the pies and part of a loaf of bread. She had chosen to stop at a wide spot on the path, near a stream, so she had both room to lie down, and water. She put on her coat, her mittens, and both her hats, wrapped herself in all her remaining shawls, and lay down on her uncomfortable bed. Her supper had not been very satisfying. But there was nothing she could do about that easily, so she tried not to think about it. She wondered instead when Spots's

body would be found, and what would happen when it was, and whether the Beinens would be fooled and therefore not send out a search party for her. Even if they did think she had run away, how much would they care? She had no idea how serious they were about closing all the cloisters and converting everyone to Erbensalmism. She supposed she would find out. Eventually she fell asleep.

She was awakened by the sound of something heavy moving through the woods. She lay perfectly still, listening hard. The only thing that could possibly be that heavy would be an elk, unless... It stepped out of the trees and started splashing down the stream, clearly walking on two legs. Yana got up.

"Mother Leshaya," she called softly, standing on the stream bank. Something like a pine tree was walking towards her. Its eyes shone very faintly.

"Woman," it breathed, sounding like the wind blowing through pine needles.

Yana bowed three times so deeply her nose nearly touched her boots. "I am honored, Mother Leshaya," she said respectfully.

There was another wind-in-the-trees sound, this one from the leshaya inhaling. "You are the one," it said, after a long silence. "The one the forest is speaking of." Yana bowed again.

"I am honored," repeated Yana. She had come across leshayas before, but this was the first time she had spoken at any length with her.

"There are strangers in the woods," continued the leshaya. Yana thought of it as female, although of course leshayas, like trees, were normally neither male nor female but would be whatever gender one wished to ascribe to them. This one had not objected to being called "mother."

"I know, Mother Leshaya," said Yana. "I have seen them."

"They are unfriendly," said the leshaya.

"They would seek to turn us away from our gods to theirs," Yana told it.

Leshayas' faces had no expression, but when it next spoke, it sounded sad. "We leshayas are sometimes at odds with you humans," it said, "but to the gods we are sisters. They created leshayas as their first companions, to have friends among the trees, and then they made women, because they loved us leshayas so, and wished to have something like us among the animals. We must not turn away from the gods, wolfwoman."

"I know," said Yana. "That is why I ran away from the strangers. So that I can continue to serve our gods, not theirs."

"Even as we are preparing for spring, the gods are preparing for winter," said the leshaya. "Soon they will settle into their sleep, and be unable to protect us against the foreign gods. That is why they have asked me to help you. They have heard many prayers on this subject, and have decided to answer them."

Yana bowed again, her heart beating hard. She had always believed in the gods, but in the same way she believed in the Empress—everyone said that she was there, and occasionally decrees would come out, giving apparent proof of her existence, but Yana had never laid eyes on her, nor did she expect to. She had chosen the Sisterhood of the Wolf precisely because wolves were unarguably tangible. Now the Empress was no more, and the gods were acting directly for Yana.

“I will carry you,” said the leshaya. “Gather up your things and climb into my branches.”

Yana hastily re-formed her bundle. The leshaya obligingly came out of the stream so that Yana wouldn’t have to get wet. It was about twice as tall as Yana, with the basic shape of a pine tree, but bifurcated, with roots for toes. It did not appear to have hands or arms, but it was able to move its branches in a way that allowed Yana to climb up into them easily. She settled on a good sturdy branch about five or six feet off the ground and leaned against the trunk, gripping her sack firmly with one hand and the leshaya with the other. It had a nice piney scent, and its bark was rough against Yana’s cheek. It began to walk quickly down the path, carrying Yana in the direction she wanted to go. It did not seem to be particularly burdened by Yana’s weight. It did not speak throughout the entire walk.

Yana held onto it tightly, and tried to experience what was happening as clearly as possible, so that she would never forget, and could bring up the memory if ever there was any doubt that magic and leshayas existed. She did not bother trying to speculate where the leshaya was taking her, or what she would see when she got there, or whether or not she was safe. It was very dark in the woods. For a long time Yana was unable to see very much, or hear anything other than the rustling of the leshaya’s movement. Then it seemed to Yana that there was a voice in her head that did not belong to her. She relaxed and let it grow louder. It was not words, exactly, but rather a call, telling her “here I am. This way, this way, this way.” It gradually grew stronger, and then suddenly it began to come towards Yana very fast. She could hear the noise of something large running through the woods.

“A wolf,” she said to the leshaya. “A wolf is coming.” The leshaya said nothing in response, but stopped, as if waiting. The wolf came bursting out of the trees and onto the path in front of Yana. It was the size of a large pony, much larger than a real wolf.

“Gray Wolf!” she exclaimed. “You have come for me!” The tales said that Gray Wolf waited in the woods for those who were desperate, helping those of pure heart, and dealing death to those filled with evil.

“Climb onto my back, Yana my love,” he said to her.

Delighted, Yana swung herself and her possessions down from the leshaya, bowed to it, and climbed onto Gray Wolf, who had knelt down to make it easier for her.

“I’m not too heavy for you?” she asked anxiously.

“I can carry whatever must be carried,” he answered. “Now hold tight.” Yana pressed her legs against his sides and sank her hands into his thick fur, and they were off. It was like riding a horse, only not: his run was different from a horse’s gallop, and despite his size he felt lighter and less bony underneath her. Yana couldn’t tell how long they ran, although it was long, or how fast they were going, although it was fast. She ducked low over Gray Wolf’s neck, holding onto her bundle and his fur, and was very happy. They passed out of the pinewoods into birch trees. A wind picked up, blowing away the clouds and revealing the moon, which shown brightly on the white birch trunks. They came to a stream and followed it till it ended in a lake.

“Set down your bundle, Yana my love,” the wolf told her. She did so, and then nearly shrieked in surprise as Gray Wolf waded into the water and began swimming rapidly across the lake. The cold of the water on Yana’s legs was so shockingly painful that for a moment she was afraid she was going to be sick. She forced herself to breathe, and soon regained control of her senses. She looked around her.

To the right were fields on low hills. To the left the lake gradually became a swamp. Yana was relieved to see they were not swimming that way. Here and there the tops of dead trees stuck out above the surface of the water. As they swam by one, Yana instinctively shrank away from it, shuddering slightly at the thought of a whole submerged world existing ghostlike, fathoms below them.

Ahead of them the shoreline was completely flat at first, and then rose sharply. There were small pine and fir trees on the flat part, and very tall ones on the hillside. As they drew closer, the flat ground appeared to rock and move slightly. Yana suddenly knew why it was so flat.

“We’re not going...under that, are we?” she asked apprehensively.

“Of course not,” the wolf answered, to Yana’s tremendous relief. “We’re going to climb on top of it,” he finished, which was only slightly better.

What looked from a distance to be flat shoreline was in fact a floating island of moss, merging on one side with the real shoreline. It was about a foot thick, and had small trees growing on it.

“This is our destination?” she asked the wolf, when he stopped next to it.

“I would crawl on my belly for a ways before standing up,” he said by way of a reply. “You wouldn’t want the edge to break off under you, or to plunge through.”

Miserably, Yana threw herself belly-first onto the moss, disentangled herself from the wolf, and began slithering toward a more secure resting place. Once she was a safe distance from the edge, Gray Wolf clambered up

onto the island and followed her cautiously. The ground, if it could be called that, undulated alarmingly. Yana had always thought that these moss islands were creepy, and nothing was happening to disabuse her of that notion, although thankfully she had not gone through yet. She was unhappily aware that her boots were not only wet but filled with water, and her clothes were sodden. Not only would she sink like a stone if she fell into the water, but even moving she was so cold she was shivering uncontrollably, and her head ached and her stomach was a cold hard knot. Her blood made icy lines through her body as it flowed from her skin inwards.

“Stop,” Gray Wolf commanded when they had reached the middle of the island. “Cuddle up against me,” he ordered, and Yana gratefully obeyed. Once he had shaken himself off, he was almost dry, and very warm.

“They will come soon,” he told her.

“The gods?”

“Yes.”

“Gray Wolf?” asked Yana, “are you a god?”

“No, Yanochka my love, I am not. The gods can make both life and magic; I can only use it, like humans.

Once I was an ordinary wolf pup, until the gods changed me. Much as I suspect they are going to change you.”

“Will they make me bigger?” asked Yana curiously, trying to imagine being twice the size of an ordinary woman.

He laughed, a deep rumble in his chest. “I doubt it,” he said, “because you will not need to be bigger. The gods know that they are falling asleep just as enemies are coming into their land, and they are arming themselves with guards and soldiers against this threat. They created me as a fighter. You, I think, will be something else.”

“Are you immortal? Will I be?”

“I will not live forever, and neither will you, but I, and probably you too, will stay alive until our task is done. How long that will be, not even the gods can tell. They are coming.”

The island rocked, sending waves splashing out across the lake. Yana had the sudden impression of a presence, and realized that there were...things surrounding her. At one moment it seemed as if the trees were crowding around her, then the next as if the air were filled with faces, both animal and human.

“Woman,” said the voices. “Daughter of our past. Preserve our future. Do you accept our charge?”

“Yes,” whispered Yana. She felt as if she had been crouching down for a long time and then had stood up suddenly, so that her head reeled and spots swam in front of her eyes. The only thing she could feel for certain was Gray Wolf’s fur pressing against her back.

“The bargain has been struck,” said the voices, and there was a rush, and Yana felt as if the...things were clustering all around her, or as if she were standing against a strong wind, or caught in a swift-running stream, and then everything was pouring into her...

She and the wolf were alone on the island, which was lying still, with no trace of any other presence on it. Yana supposed she must have fallen asleep or passed out. She sat up, and a tingle ran through her body. The only time she had felt anything similar had been the time she had been with a man and everything had worked out the way it was supposed to, and afterwards she had felt little shocks and shudders when he had touched her shoulder. This time was much stronger, though. She grinned to herself, and decided not to share that story with Gray Wolf.

“What have they done to me?” she asked him instead.

“Given you what you need to carry out your task,” he told her.

“Given you all the magic you will ever need, most likely.”

“Fair enough,” she said. The tingling was abating.

“Dawn will come soon,” the wolf told her. “I will take you to where you need to go, if you have a destination.”

She told him about the cottage off the Eastward Road. He said he knew of it, and could take her there. When they swam back across the lake, the water felt pleasantly cool, not shockingly cold. Yana was very aware of her own heartbeat, but it was reassuring, not annoying the way that sensation usually was. She could also sense Gray Wolf's heart and blood, and more faintly, that of other animals in the nearby woods.

They stopped at the side of the lake to pick up Yana's bundle, and then Gray Wolf began to run, with Yana on his back. They ran as the woods slowly changed from black to gray to the flush of dawn. They joined the Eastward Road and ran down it, heading west.

Suddenly, Gray Wolf darted off the road and down a side trail that Yana had not even noticed until they were on it. He came to an abrupt halt in front of a tiny run-down wooden cottage.

“Here we are,” he announced.

Yana looked over the place that was to be her home, at least for a little while. It had no fence, no garden, nor a stable or barn. All it had were four wooden walls, each with a shuttered window, and a shingle roof. There was no carving or fretwork on the eaves, no paint, or anything else that would make it attractive.

“Well, the walls are upright,” she said. “Who lived here last?”

“Trappers, when they were setting their traps,” the wolf told her.

“Yana, my heart, this is where I will leave you. Are you prepared for what you must do? The wait may be long.”

“Will I grow old?” asked Yana.

“All things fade and pass away,” answered the wolf, “even those that have been touched by the gods. But your time here may be longer that of normal women. Be warned, Yanochka: what has been done to you cannot be undone, what you have sworn cannot be unsworn. You may come to regret the promise you have made, but nothing can be done about it.”

“All actions can bring sorrow,” Yana said evenly. “I will regret my decision no more than any other, and less than most.”

“I must go now.”

“Will we see each other again?”

“We are the guardians of the gods now, Yana, bound to them and to each other. This is not the first time we will say farewell, you and I. Watch now, and wait: that is your task. The gods will reawaken.”

Then he was gone.

Sample file

REFLEXIONS

By Deanna Marie Emmerson

I FRAGMENT: AMARINTH AND MAGNOLIA

I{Amarinth}

Amarinth stands
at the edge of the perfect circle
perfectly beautiful
beautifully complete.
The perfect circle
black-ice/glass pond,
water,
as frozen as her blood and the darkest thing

amidst miles of snow-white powder
powder-white snow,
her eyes of icicles and cream flesh
and a tear-grey sky.

The darkest thing except, perhaps,
for her shadow-shaded hair
in this place where no shadows fall.

II

Something mars the perfect ice
something white and unknown.
Amarinth's tentative hand
stretches towards this enigma;

her almost nude body
kneels in the snow.

She feels no cold
she leaves no mark
as she glides onto the ice
to take the unidentified
lying object

and there is no time for questions before another new thing.

Beaneath the barrier,
pummelling the glassy margin
trying to scream for help--

in horrified recoil, silent Amarith
is certain of only one thing:
never before now has her reflection tried to escape.

She wonders wordlessly what is happening.
She looks bewildered at the flower she holds, brittle and white,
wondering what it is.

When she dares to peer towards the ice once more,
her reflection is mimicking her as it should.

III{Magnolia}

Magnolia runs,
flees in terror from the beast.
The only light in this forsaken place
is dim and far from her.

It is towards this light she races
for perhaps she can outrun the monster--
within the light escape or at least confront it
or even, feel less fear--
anything.

The light swells brighter as she approaches:
she is near.
Near enough to see a pale hand, stretched out towards her like a
promise,
and holding a paler flower.

Towards the blossom she now races
and almost, it is within her grasp.

She nearly registers something odd,
something wrong,
something bizarre about the face behind the promise.

But then she is upon the egress,
and then, unbelievably, she is hammering upon glass

(and this glass is cold, so cold--)
and then finally, the beast is upon her
and mercifully, she awakens.

IV

"I had the dream again"
"With the monster?" asks
the friend
slowly sipping a cup.
"The beast, yes.
but something, this time, was different.
This time, I saw
something strange."

"You saw the monster?"

Magnolia's friend
is curious, a practitioner of the Craft
a child of psychology and mythology
and dreams. A student of magics
and meanings, and other
worlds.

But this is about Magnolia, not her friend
and Magnolia says no.

"I saw-- a light. I saw an escape.
Yet still I could not get away.
I saw a pale hand,"

she looks at her own pale hands

"and a flower, a rose.
The light, it was so bright.
But I couldn't reach the place from whence it came.
Friend, tell me true.
What does it mean? What does it mean?"

Magnolias friend looks at her own hands,
colour of cappuccino,
contemplatively,
thinking of all of the things she could say to this pale, bewildered,
ink-haired girl

with eyes like icicles
if only they were not friends.

Words about allowing one's self
enlightenment
something about how
flowers, even roses,
do not remain beautiful
and something of beasts in the dark.

A mention of how we build our own dreams
words on dooming one's self.

Instead she looks up
with a smiling shrug.
"Just a nightmare
don't worry
Just a dream."

They look out windows silently sipping,
pretending that words help
that they could be true.

V
Nighttime.
Magnolia and her friend
(who perhaps is of import after all)
pass a cemetery, a library
and other old sanctuaries
on their way to Magnolia's house.

They pass also, fast food restaurants
shopping mall, arcade--
some things are perhaps
less significant than they seem.

The two walk hand in hand
they are not more than friends, with the love of friends, though
sometimes if the wind is
especially lonely
or the moon is just sweet enough

Or one has a sadness trying to drown her heart

they will hold close.

And confessed it must be,
that on a lonely night, maybe,
they might come so close as for lip to brush lip
and perhaps closer
not parting 'till morning

They stay together some nights
to ward off bad dreams and sad-sickness.

On this cold night, neither
could wish to be alone.

VI {Amarinth}

Amarinth sprawls, discarded upon ice-glass
for the first time wondering
what lays beyond

Her reflection mocks her every movement
no matter how quick.
She stops trying to fool it
and sits up to examine
that which she found before.

She doesn't know how long before,
she doesn't wonder.
Here, where nothing changes
there is no time.

VII

She tries to decide
what this phenomenon is made of.

It is not ice.
Ice is black.

It is not snow.
Snow is powder.

It is not dress.
Dress is flimsy and pliable.

And it cannot be Amaranth.
For she is Amaranth.
And this object is not she.

It has pale thin pieces at the end
of a slender, long thing
that has several small bits running along it.

She touches one of these and
it s a new sensation.
Firmly she presses her finger against it
until she has to pull away,
shocked
in realization that she dislikes the unfamiliar sensation.

Dimly, in the back of her mind, the word for it awaits her.
She closes her eyes to seek it
and finally thinks
pain.

She opens her eyes again to her finger
and baffled, her mouth falls agape.

This is something she has no word for
(a trail of blood runs down her finger).
Afraid,
Amarinth does not know what to do.

Never before has she felt a pain
never has she known red.

VIII

Amarinth knows about blood.
How could she not, when
time to time, too many times to name, she will
be, perhaps, walking through the snow
and feel a trickling tickle
on the insides of her thighs.

When she looks,
blood stains her soft and incorruptible flesh.

Always, her blood is a thin, sticky grey
and always, in time, it goes away.
This is not like that.

IX

Magnolia dreams a place
where a clear sweet river rambles.
And drinking from the river,
her mind is gradually
set free of thought.

When again she drinks,
taste of clear, deep truth
brushes against her realm of thought.

She longs for more.

Kneeling at the waters
submerging her head far beneath the surface
the liquid pours right through her ears
directly onto her mind.
Her parched and questioning brain is quieted and quenched
with tickling trickles of comprehension.

As the pulsing waves
soothe her conceptions
her racing heart slows
she begins to feel peace.

Eyes coming open,
she perceives
the beautiful dimension beneath the waves.
Curious creatures she does not
recognize
approach her gently
touching tenderly her uncertain face.

She longs to be like them.
All that is required
is understanding--
this can be granted
only by the waves.

Magnolia's instincts begin to alarm her
telling her she needs to breathe.
Telling her to pull up her head
telling her to leave.

The lovely creatures kiss her sweetly,
mournfully
they desire that she should stay.
Yet she is certain that she cannot.

She lifts her head from the stream.

All of the beings,
each imbued with love and grace
hold hands for safety and
comfort
and swim so far below that she cannot see them.

She intakes deeply of the
hot, dry air
and her lungs thank her.
But her soul already becoming dry and dusty
and crumbling away...

Magnolia rolls in her sleep,
tears chasing her unaware face.
A friend, with love,
holds her closely
knowing of this dream
knowing of the need.

She cannot tell Magnolia.
Magnolia must learn on her own,
or spend lifetimes trying.
This has always been the way.

Magnolia's friend whispers secret,
old words
for peaceful,
good sleep
and closes her own eyes.
She dreams nothing

nothing at all.

X

Daytime, and Magnolia's companion must leave.

She thinks:
I wish I could cast protection for you
delicate one.

But it is impossible to protect
anyone from their own mind.

The two will meet again when the time is right.

Soon, Magnolia
leaves the uncertain
safety of her home,
for in the waking world
money still matters
and the rule is,
seek enlightenment on your own time.

Magnolia forgets her dreams for the
sake of a two-dimensional
reality.
There is an illicit
relief in monotony
for life does, indeed, go on.

XI

Amarinth too, sleeps and dreams
dreams of places and people
she never knew
that she could imagine.

She dreams loud things
and colours so sharp
that behind closed lids her eyes ache.

She sees cemeteries and libraries
cars houses and fast-food chains

and churches old as the paved-over hills.

She dreams of smells of cities
and a girl with cappuccino flesh
and when Amaranth awakens,
all is forgotten.

XII

This is not her story
already, this we know.

Yet perhaps, nonetheless,
Magnolia's friend dreams too.

Perhaps she is beneath those
clear, sweet waves
floating on her back utterly submerged
beneath a liquid so pure
it cannot be explained
like water, only--
more.

She does not float to the top
because she was once there
and needs that security no longer.

She does not sink to the bottom because
she is not yet ready
to go that deep.

She is surrounded by drifting,
seeping figures, almost
liquid themselves
yet discernable entities each one.

They swim and float around her
pleased that she is within their midst.
They whisper in her ears
into her neck and the
palms of her hands
with tiny, intangible kisses
and caresses more gentle than the waves themselves.
Her entire body absorbs the secrets

one swell of knowing after another
rising into the core of her being
turning it into a core of understanding
such beautiful understanding.
Yet she has not yet been completely taken
soon she will be ready.

The lithe and phantasmagoric creatures
are friends, always
their streaming hair
and elongated, sinuous bodies
tickling and touching when they brush by.

And then, something in the waters changes
a collective anticipation,
rising up from the aura of each being.

A single being swims from the depths
sending currents of comprehension before her.
She is the collected, concentrated essence
of the powerful pleasure, the wise knowing
of all the others combined.
Every creature stares in awe and opens
in love
the epitome of themselves.

Magnolia's friend awaits
throbbing with anticipation.

The shimmering being swims up, slowly,
gracefully, lovingly
between the woman's legs
and most tenderly,
privately, whispers
the final secret
to the cappuccino girl
reverberating the truth into the core of her body
and following with delicious kisses of meaning.

As enlightenment finally,
ecstatically
explodes through the girl
she transforms.

Soon she is one of them
not a girl but a sweet awareness,
incarnate
and like shadows
they slide together towards the deep.

XIII

Magnolia sits at a table
trying to break through
trying to write.
Trying
to get a moment
of being psychic,
of knowing what is happening
in another universe.

A universe she has created-
that in bits and flashes
she drags through into this world.

But she cannot push through
to understand another reality.

She stops trying
and gradually, it comes...
an image, so faint,
of dove sky and miles
of unblemished snow
a circle of black and a pale finger
stained with blood.

As she puts her pen to paper
the image fades
taking every shred of meaning with it.

Something aches deep inside her
she knows not why
she rests her head upon her arms
she does not cry.

XIV

Sample file

The beast chases Magnolia
once more.
Through the ferocious dark she flees.
Yet this time, something is different.
She slips,
landing in water.
As her skin soaks in the moisture
she realizes it is the liquid
enlightenment
that she had encountered before.

How could it be
in this dark, vile place?
She doesn't care, knowing that
the beast cannot hurt her here.

She swims down.
A few of the friendly beings
that had loved her so well before
reach out to her.
They tell her something of the nature's beast.
Before she has a chance
to grasp this gift
she awakens,
alone.

XV

Amarinth dreams of a hideous beast.
Never have tender eyes beheld
such a splendor of ugliness.
Because she has not before seen
such a thing
she does not know to fear.

She croons softly to it,
nonsensical kindness with no meaning.

It lays its heavy, hideous head
upon her bare white feet
and silent tears slip from its jaundiced eyes.
Gently, it licks at her bare toes
and still tearing

Sample file

clamps broken teeth upon her tender flesh.

Amarinth is too shocked to scream
instead, her whole world becomes black.
When she opens her eyes once more,
she is sprawled upon black ice
surrounded by familiar grey
her foot thrown upon painfully sharp
(thorns?).

The ice is streaked with red
and she does not know if waking hurts
any less than sleeping dreams.
Her shoulder begin to quake.

Broken, helpless, lost
she weeps
and cries, and cries, and cries.

XVII

Very well.

The beast.

What does it dream?
What does it cry?

His teeth are crusted and rusted, brown and red with old blood
the thick stench of decay
rests heavy in the back of his throat.
Bile rises in his stomach, and sleeping,
He chokes. He dies.

This is mercy, twisted,
and not any true release
for it does not matter that the thing dies.

Another day, he will be forced back into existence
to stain his lips and his
tongue with gentle,
undeserving flesh.

Sample file

His joy is destruction
his punishment, to loathe his own existence
his eternal life to die and then relive
over and over.
For now at least.

He comforts himself with the fantasy
that eternities can change
although sometimes, it would seem they never do.

The reek rises into his mouth;
he expires once more.

XVII

Amarinth
lies fallen in the snow
as silent grey tears
tiptoe along her temple

because she doesn't understand
because she is afraid.

She stays away from the ice
she does not touch the flower
and hopes that the
--red--
blood has been released, forever,
from her veins.

She longs to become as she was
innocent, and empty as the skies
and she awaits, not knowing what to do.

Her emptiness has been stolen away
replaced by something for which she has no name,
no meaning,
no comprehension.

And so she does nothing,
with no help from whatever
caused this to happen.

Amarinth just continues to exist
more or less like she always has done.

XVIII

Magnolia seeks release
Begging the gods and devils,
all possible powers for help.

For a sense of absolution, of peace.
She knows something is missing,
something simple
and almost within her grasp.
What is the answer-- what is the question
?

XIX

Amarinth dreams haunting melodies
and a beast: a monster-thing
cruel, yet compelled, and perpetually heartbroken
and because of this
much, much more horrific,
for it is less than a monster, after all.

It only exists in dreams, but
what is the difference, if the waking world sleeps?
Amarinth almost understands
and she wants it, the sense of owning
of knowing, to be thrust upon her.

Something she can hold,
not to let go.

But she knows not the answer, nor even the question.

2 FRAGMENT: TRANSGRESSIONS {BOUNDARIES OF FREEDOM}

There have been two worlds.
One has, and desires release.
One has not, and seeks possession.

Each world the mirror of the other
each seeking to achieve that which rests between them

and neither truly
understanding for what they long.

Niether understand from what they run, to what they run
or that running only plants them
more firmly in place.

None understand that to release,
one must firmly grasp
and to possess one must let go.
Possessed by ideals of freedom
it is hard to acknowledge.

Yet to escape, one must first be bound
And it is impossible to be bound if free.

On rare occasions, some reach comprehension
which, forever,
alters them
making a beast or a sweet sea-creature
hide alone in the dark
or come together in the deep.

And either of these can create more
more of themselves, or more of each other
in their extreme of
sanity
or create nothing, nothing at all.

3 FRAGMENT: BEASTS AND CREATURES

I.

I remember
my first taste of blood
which is every

I recall
my final taste of flesh
which is each.

I remember running through the
Dark

to chase the scent of blood
and fear
the scent of something
truly lost.

Rare is the odor
of complete despair
the aroma of the truly lost.

Yet this human I trailed
tempted and teased
with that
undeniable scent
driving me on
with an uncontrollable
compulsion to destroy

I hate my need to kill
but I cannot escape
and my only comfort is to know
when the hunt is done,
and I cower, quivering in my cave
I will be hunted by sweet predator each
time and time again.

Perhaps some day
I will create more than destruction
and thankfully, mercifully,
never be born again.

II

We reside beneath the waves of truth
and know nothing, nothing at all, but this:
that we live within
the waters so pure
and know nothing, nothing at all.

We understand all, moving
on the pulse of the universe
we ebb and flow, flow and ebb
on and on into eternity
and know nothing for certain. Nothing at all.

A whisper, that the universe
alters but cannot change.
For the universe is the rhythm
and in this deep, the rhythm doesn't change
and splash becomes displaced
into the perpetual
ebb and flow
so nothing really changes
and we still have no knowledge:
know nothing at all.

III

I am the darkness
and sometimes the safest place to hide
for unlike light
I cast no shadows
and within my embrace,
all are equal.

As the womb or the tomb,
you are safe in me.

Within my protection,
any could believe
that their course of action
is the only right one.

Whether to flee or chase or wait,
perfectly still,
waiting to be transformed into the escape for which they long
waiting for someone to dive in
and shatter their illusions
and piece them back together
to become more or less
than another's reflected dreams.

Come to me,
do not fear.
True, I hide monsters
but beauty also lurks
within my depths.

Sample file

4 FRAGMENT: CHANGES

I
Amarinth stares
uncomprehending
into a mirror.
She does not know what has happened
Is this reality or a dream?

Perhaps an illusion
a figment
of a fractured imagination.

Amarinth has never seen a mirror
or a wall.
This world, she somehow knows
is not her world.

Her realm is a realm of grey vagueness
and endless bland expanses
her world is a single black
circle of ice
and the reflection beneath it.

Yet this place where she stands is
sharp borders and defined edges
how does she know that
here, the grey that overcomes everything
does not belong?

There is nothing in the mirror
not her reflection,
nor that of her unfamiliar surroundings;
there is no image at all.
Just black.

She stares into the sharp-edged
square
and slowly,
horror creeps up on her
beginning to devour her
like a soulless beast,

eating her whole.

II

Magnolia treads with
trepidation
towards the pond of ice
her hand clenching
someone else's white rose.

Her aching and tormented feet
leave a trail of blood behind her.
The weight of her body bears down
on the once-unmarred skin
of the snow
leaving indentations
(scars. tattoos.)
The memory of her presence
stains the white.

Magnolia is cold
sore and afraid of something
but she does not know what.

Finally she reaches the ice and
stands upon it
looking not down but around her self
at the magnificent and horizon less sky.

And although she has never before been in this place
she knows that what happens
has never before.

The sky fills with reds
-the red of blood on her skin,
or blood on the snow,
and multitudes of others
which she cannot name-
has never seen.

This is the first sunrise that has ever been
in a desolate and unchanging land.

Unbidden, a lone word
floats
into the atmosphere of her mind.
A word for which there is no comparison
no definition, other than itself

No certain use, other than
the bloody, unfamiliar, painful scene
surrounding.

Beautiful.

III

The mirror cracks

IV

The ice cracks

V

Within the depths of the waters of enlightenment,
all the creatures gather
holding each other,
encircling a place of power.

Closing their eyes
they seek with open minds
the worlds of Magnolia
and Amaranth,
seeking to watch
and wish them well
and send all the blessings there are.

The being that was once
Magnolia's special friend
watches especially closely
giving all of her love
for that solemn, uncertain girl
not knowing this love
will change everything
not knowing it will keep the girls safe.

VI

Soon.

VII

Magnolia crouches,
staring into a cracking pond of ice
as it implodes

Amarinth leans,
gazing into a cracking mirror
as it explodes.

5 FRAGMENT: LINKED

Magnolia and Amaranith are nowhere
where there are no discernable borders
nor dimensions.

Yet clearly this nowhere
is not endless
as Amaranith's homeland
nor confined as Magnolia's was

The darkness is broken
by dim, shifting images
and constantly changing colours.

The muted shades surround them
and though they stand on no surface
above and below them also
reign the meaningless expanse of everything.

None of this matters
as they take no heed of their environs
yet only gaze at one another.

One has hair loose and flowing dress
bare of foot and unadorned
the other bound by hair
and clothes, and tightly shod
yet one face precisely mirrors the other

Sample file

without a single flaw.

When four floating hands find their partners
and the two girls are irrevocably linked
the constant shifting backgrounds disappear
replaced by a blinding light-

or is it darkness?

They are falling into each other
each other's eyes
each other's minds
neither do they
know
nor care for darkness and light.

And what is meant to be
what has been destined
finally comes to pass

The two kiss

and the entire universe collapses

FINALE

Utterly forgotten within the void
where the universe once was
a white rose pulses gently
no longer stiff, but supple and soft.

Yet the thorns remain harder than rock
and somehow resemble the fangs of a beast
stained by the red blood
of uncertain infinity.

This blossom cannot exist,
for nothing exists
yet alone and unknown in an un-(I)-verse
it blooms on beautifully, heedless.

The Cat Lady

By Melissa Herman

“Ok. Here’s the deal. You gotta walk all the way up to the porch steps. Do that and you can join the club.” Jimmy looks around at his buddies and grins. They wait to see if the new kid bites.

“Just to the steps? I mean, I don’t have to go up onto the porch do I?” Mark’s family just moved to Cottonwood a month ago, but he’s heard enough stories about the “cat lady” to know that this dare scares the hell out of him.

“Nah. I won’t make you go up the steps. But, you have to walk. You run and it doesn’t count.” The two boys crouch in the azalea bushes that hide the gated yard of Canary Lane’s most infamous resident, Miss Marjorie Hammond AKA the “Cat Lady.” For years, Miss Margie’s been the subject of many a camp-fire ghost story. After all, everyone in town knows she’s a witch.

“Ok.” Summoning up all the courage a boy of twelve has, Mark leaves the cover of the azalea bushes and follows the sidewalk to the wrought iron gate. He eyes the spiky tops of the fence. They remind him of the spears the gladiators fought with in that movie his brother rented last weekend. They sliced right through a body like butter. He shakes off the image and grasps the latch to the gate. It squeals and moans as he pulls it open. I must be crazy, he thinks as he crosses the threshold and into the cat lady’s yard.

The yard is overgrown with more azaleas and two enormous magnolia trees canopy the walk-way. Mark’s eyes dart from one area to the next trying to anticipate an ambush from the old witch. His neck prickles- he knows there’s something in the bush to his left watching him. Probably just a cat, he thinks. Keep going- nice and slow.

By now, his brow is sweating and he really has to pee. But, the end is in sight. Only a few more steps and he’ll be at the porch. He wonders if any of his new friends have ever done this.

Mark lets out his breath in one whoosh as he reaches the base of the steps. He didn’t even realize he’d been holding it. He turns to face them with a triumphant smile and sees fear dawning on their faces. That’s when he hears the creak of a screen door and the yeow of a million cats.

He looks over his shoulder and the old hag is coming out on to the porch. He sees probably twenty cats swarming all around her. The scariest thing is the old lady though. She lurches towards him with her arms stretched out like a mummy from some cheesy old horror movie.

“Holy shit!” Mark takes off at a run and leaps over the gate. He turns in time to see that the old lady is down on the walk-way now. She’s grunting and grabbing for him.

His buddies take off as soon as they see her. But, from the safety of the sidewalk, Mark takes a moment to look at the cat lady. Her wrinkled old face is so pale, it seems transparent. Skin hangs on her bones like a sheer drape and milky white eyes stare but don’t seem to see anything.

The cats slither in and out of her legs as she lurches toward the gate. One cat catches Mark’s eye and holds it. It sits regal like at the top of the porch steps as if observing the commotion. It’s jet-black and has long fur, but the most intriguing feature is its electric green eyes. Even in broad daylight, they seemed to be glowing.

The old lady is almost to the gate and Mark shakes off the weird feeling. He turns and races up the sidewalk to catch up with the other guys. Behind, he can still hear the grunting and shuffling of the old lady and the rattle of the gate. He knows she won’t come after him though because she never leaves the yard. Everyone says the cats go out and do her bidding.

Watching the boys speed off down the street, Margie sighs, disappointed by her failure to reach the boy, and goes back into the house followed by her entourage. She spies Kali perched on the table in the foyer. Kali was her first cat. She clearly remembers the day she found the beautiful cat in the alley behind the library. Kali was scavenging in the dumpster. The cat was well groomed though so it didn’t appear to be a throw-away.

The bright green eyes compelled Margie to take her home anyway. She’d just watch for “lost” posters or ads in the paper. This was also the same day her aunt passed away and the last time Margie ever left the house. But, her family grew anyway. Now, she has more than thirty cats depending on her to care for them. She’s tired, so very tired.

She sits at the kitchen table with a glass of milk. With all the stealth expected of a cat, Kali appears at her elbow and shares the glass with her. Margie stares into Kali’s eyes and nods. She gets a pen and paper from the desk in the hallway and starts to write.

Two weeks later, Margie gets a lone letter in the box. Being a recluse, she doesn’t get much mail. Her great-niece, surprised to hear from her, agrees to come out and go over Margie’s options concerning her health. “Perhaps there’s a nice retirement village we can move you in to,” she writes. The letter states that Mary Ann will arrive on the 7th, tomorrow. Margie’s heart quickens as she realizes that it’s almost over. She feels a small twinge of guilt, but there’s nothing she can do about it. Someone has to help.

The next day, Mary Ann drives in from Birmingham in her little BMW convertible. She's never been to her great-aunt's house, so she stops at the little general store on the corner of the main road.

A little bell jingles her arrival. She feels like she's stepped in to the past as she looks around at the soda fountain and the wooden floors. The place doesn't seem to have changed since the forties.

"Can I help you?" A young man, his name tag says "Brad," stands behind the counter ready to whip up an actual cherry coke if that's her pleasure.

"I'm looking for Marjorie Hammond's place. Can you give me directions?"

Brad snorts out a laugh and says, "Are you kidding me? Don't you know the cat lady's a witch?"

"That's enough Brad. Now go stock those shelves like I asked you to this morning." The manager turns to Mary Ann and offers her an apologetic smile.

"Well, you know it's true. She'll curse you if you go near her." He mumbles to himself, shrugs and heads to the back of the store.

"Sorry about Brad. He's just spouting off little kids campfire stories." He extends his hand to Mary Ann and says, "I'm Hank, the manager here. So, you're looking for old Margie?"

"I'm Mary Ann, Margie is my great-aunt. She wrote to me asking for some help because her health is failing. To tell you the truth, I was surprised to find out she was still alive."

"Well, Margie does keep to herself- and those cats of hers. Yep, I hope you like cats!"

"Ah, that probably explains why the kids think she's a witch huh? That's alright, we had a "town witch" when I was growing up too." They share a laugh, though Hank's is more of a nervous chuckle.

"Well, when I was a kid I was scared of her too. And I don't want to offend you, but she is pretty creepy- never leaving the house and those cats. She must have twenty or thirty of 'em now." Just thinking of all the cats, Hank shivers. He's never been a cat person himself and doesn't really understand the attraction. All the cats he's ever met have been obnoxious and moody. Now a dog, there's a pet, he thinks.

"Great. So, I guess I'll need to find homes for them too." Mary Ann starts to wonder if she's committed herself to a job bigger than she wants to handle. She thought the hard part would be convincing Aunt Margie to move. Now, finding homes for all those cats will be the biggest chore.

"So, who helps her out around here? I mean, you said she never leaves the house so how does she get her food and stuff?"

"Well, she's got a standing order once a week of food and necessities- mostly tuna and milk, oh, and litter of course. The boy, Brad, delivers it to her

gate and there's always an envelope of money waiting for him." The manager frowns. "I never thought about it really. We've been doing it for so long- long before I took over here."

Remembering what he'd been told, Hank continues, "The story goes that the store received a letter from Margie just two days after her aunt's death. The letter detailed the arrangement for groceries and such. It was weird. I think everyone in town decided she had lost it after finding her aunt dead. When they came to take the body, she was distraught and incoherent. I think that was the last time anyone has been in to that house until now. I guess you'll get to see what Margie's been up to all these years."

Not looking forward to that, Mary Ann thinks. "Same stuff every week huh? I don't suppose a bottle of wine or some steaks are on the list." Mary Ann dreads more than ever the visit to Aunt Margie's. She just knows they'll dine on tuna and milk tonight. Peculiar order, but Mary Ann figures she shares with the cats.

Eager to get the whole thing over with, Mary Ann gets the directions to Canary Lane. She grabs a few snacks on her way out too.

It's a small town, so Mary Ann quickly finds Canary Lane and her aunt's old Victorian house. She spots a gang of boys following her on bicycles. She smiles and shakes her head at the silly myth that's grown about her aunt.

She opens the iron gate, her heels click on the stone path. Over her shoulder, she hears the rustling bushes and the whispers of the boys who followed her. Mary Ann catches snippets of their conversation.

"...she's crazy..."

"...cat lady..."

"...a witch...bet she's a witch too..."

Mary Ann stops and turns around. She hears gasps from the bushes and then the sound of sneakers slapping the pavement.

She hurries up the porch steps and rings the bell. Nothing. She tries the knob and it's unlocked, so she lets herself in. She staggers back as the acidic odor of urine and litter hits her. Great! Even if I can get her to move out, this house is going to be impossible to sell, she thinks. From the smell, Mary Ann doubts the boxes have been changed recently. Everything is covered in litter dust. She knows the walls and carpets must be permeated with the odor and dust as well. Taking one last deep breath of fresh air, she steps back into the house.

"Aunt Margie? It's Mary Ann." Several cats greet Mary Ann in the foyer. Well, they certainly look healthy, she thinks.

"Hi, kitties." She kneels down to pet a large orange tabby. A growl rumbles deep in its throat and it flashes its sharp teeth, ears plastered to its head. Mary Ann snatches her hand back before the tabby takes off a couple of her fingers.

“Ok. Don’t like me. I get it. I’m a dog a person anyway.” She backs away and calls out again, “Aunt Margie!” Even if she answered, Mary Ann doubts she’d hear her. The din of the cats, milling around in the foyer is distracting. They almost seem to be talking to each other as opposed to begging for attention from the new human in the room. Each one has a unique sound. Mary Ann laughs at a large calico with a puny meow- it sounds much too sweet for the at least 20 pound cat.

Mary Ann passes through the archway to the living room. She lets out a scream as she comes to the edge of the couch. Sitting with an eternal smile on her face is Aunt Margie. Mary Ann reaches out to touch the body just to be sure and it’s still a little warm- almost as if she just died.

Getting over her shock, Mary Ann notices how peaceful she looks. “You seem to be ok with passing on,” she says to her aunt.

Finally, she notices a cat is sitting in Aunt Margie’s lap. It’s a beautiful cat- long black fur and bright green eyes and a delicate purr. Mary Ann begins to feel uneasy under the stare of this particular feline, but she can’t look away. She must be seeing things. But the eyes seem to be flashing like a strobe light.

Suddenly, Mary Ann is aware of voices in the room. Dozens of different voices, chattering, but nothing she can understand.

“What in the world?” Mary Ann staggers back from the couch and tries to pull her eyes from the cat she’s decided is the “queen cat.”

A velvety smooth female voice stands out in her head now- seducing her.

“I sent for you, Mary Ann. Margie called me Kali. Her mind was rotting and it was time for her to go. You will be our guardian now.”

“No...no.” Mary Ann continues to back away from Kali, but the voice is in her head. She can’t block it out.

“This isn’t happening.” She looks over her shoulder to find the path to the door blocked by dozens of cats, including the orange tabby and the calico she laughed at. They all weigh at a minimum of 20 pounds. Must be the tuna, she thinks to herself. A madwoman’s laugh escapes her lips as she feels her hold on reality slipping.

“Yes, Mary Ann. This is indeed real. There’s just one last thing we need to do.” Kali’s still lounging in the old woman’s lap. She glances to the curio cabinet at the end of the couch.

Mary Ann follows her gaze and her body freezes with fear. She hadn’t noticed the huge gray cat looming just above her. He’s as big as a puma, she thinks. His amber and green eyes flash as he yawns, showing off his great fangs.

“What has to be done?” She asks, but she knows she doesn’t really want to know.

At that moment his eyes dilate and he leaps from his perch, slamming into Mary Ann's chest and knocking her to the ground. She screams and at the last second, she realizes that was a big mistake.

“Now that all this ugliness is behind us, shall we discuss your responsibilities?” Kali is now sitting on Mary Ann's chest. She primly bathes herself, a light purr rumbles in her throat. Kali is clearly pleased with herself. Blood runs from the corners of Mary Ann's mouth and down her cheeks, mingling with her tears. She cries and whimpers- her eyes wide with fear.

“What's the matter, Mary Ann? Cat got your tongue?”

Aunt Margie's death smile is clear to her now.

Sample file

The Face She Remembers

By Swapna Kishore

Ignoring amber swirls in her crystal goblet, Shafira stares at the entrance, terrified.

"Picture he who should kiss you awake. Hurry; the Beast comes," whispers faithful Asma. The Beast's heavy steps and clinking armor grow louder as the air thickens with dread.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Shafira raises the goblet and pictures her handsome Alafa instead. But as the potion trickles down her throat, Asma screams. Shafira's eyes jerk open. Asma's head is rolling in a pool of blood; her face, contorted in agony, haunts Shafira as she slips into eternal slumber.

Sample file

The New Guy
By Ashley Tamerline

Russell straightened his tie for the third time. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck. Why was he so nervous? It was just a mortal.

His supervisor wouldn't have sent him to purchase the guy's soul if he hadn't passed all the tests. Still, it was his first sales pitch, so maybe he had a right to be a little on edge.

Russell straightened his tie again and looked at his watch. What was taking his prospect so long? He took a deep breath and remembered the first lesson: be patient. If you appear to ~~anxious~~, you can scare the prospect off and send him flying to the local church.

The door finally opened and out came his prospect...with Sylvia? She was fixing her hair and adjusting her too high skirt. "Sorry, kid," she said as she walked by him, shoving a contract in her red leather briefcase. "I got a quota to meet."

Perhaps this whole soul-purchasing agent gig was gonna be harder than he thought.
