SCATTERED FLOCK



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SCATTERED FLOCK

A Speculative Fiction Literary Journal

Press

Scattered Flock Journal: Issue 3

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MASTHEAD

EDITOR IN CHIEF	Annemarie Whitehurst
DESIGNER	Eugenio Minvielle
SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECTOR	Hollie Willis
ASSISTANT EDITORS	Isaac Sage, Amy Kousourou

FOREWORD

Annemarie Whitehurst
Editor in Chief

When we were deciding the theme for this issue, our resident Fantasy Literature PhD candidate and color historian expert, Hollie Willis (who serves as our social media director), discussed the fascinating lore of several natural pigments. One of these was Dragon's Blood, a deep-red powder heavily used throughout medieval Europe for things like medicine, paint, furniture resin, and even alchemy. The origin of this substance is bathed in myth: Peddlers of this otherworldly material claimed that this was the dried blood of elephants and dragons, which fought one another in far-off places like India. The dragon would seek out the elephant for its blood to feed upon, wrapping itself around the beast to subdue it. As the elephant weakened, it would fall, crushing the dragon to death. Their mixed blood produced a magical element.



In reality, this pigment comes from the tree resin of the Dracaena species, which grow in places like the Canary Islands and Socotra.

The flash fiction stories present in this issue were inspired by this fantastical lore, building upon these immortalized concepts of enchanting resins, cursed ink, and metamorphic blood. We hope you enjoy these as much as we do.

To the contributors of Issue 3: Thank you for entrusting us with your work. Each issue, your imagination and artistry leave us in awe. To our readers: Thank you for your continued support of this magazine and the writers it champions. Stories come alive only when they are read, and we are profoundly grateful that you have opened these pages.

~Annemarie

LONG GRASS

Rachelle Erzay

When the grass is long, we do not go into it.

Tall, spindly black reeds shoot up to the sky; war pikes missing their heads. A thin layer of fog winds lazily around their stalks. The sun is not sharp enough to pierce it today.

"Is the Death near?" Beth whispers.

"Do you see the very tips?" I point to the reeds on the other side of the field. They are still as soldiers, tips tinged crimson with unspent scarlet sap. "When the Bleed starts, you'll know."

"Is it safe?"

"Only when they shrivel." I curl my pointer finger down, mimicking the Death.

Beth hisses. "I can't stay here, Alba."

I soothe my thumb across the back of her icy hand. "We'll leave soon. I promise."

She looks at our entwined fingers, a crease between her dark brows. "I don't how long I can wai—"

A twig snaps. We drop our hands. No one dares come to the edge of town before the Death. I lift a finger to my lips. Pull her behind a large oak. Hold my breath.

A moment passes.

Two.



We sigh in relief, breath warm and wet. Our eyes crack like lightning as they meet. Close. Electric. A tawny fox slinks alongside the field. Its black-tipped ears twitch, swivelling in their patrol for prey. Its sunset hide is dusted grey and black, with a shock of white that bursts across its chest and underbelly. Cunning yellow eyes mark us, before darting across the field and back again.

We aren't the only ones who notice. A tendril of fog breaks from the Long Grass, and I go cold. Pray that we're

far enough away. The tendril mutates as it slithers beyond its boundary. A bulbous white bunny blooms from the grey matter, eyes red as sap. It bounds a step, before munching on a blade of grass, jaw grinding rapidly. I already know the fox is lost; buried beneath eyeline, it's deep in stalk, ears flicked forward.

Beth gasps. Too late, my hand covers her mouth. The bunny's nose twitches as it lifts its head, slows its chewing. Its eyes flicker lupine as it finds us, form rippling at the edges, fox forgotten.

Fear shoots through my veins. I scramble for her wrist and shackle her to me. Try to pull her back, away, anywhere, but she's ensnared.

The fox is close now, readying its hind legs, muscles taut.

"Beth." I dig my nails into her skin until half-moons make their mark. She whimpers, turns, tears rimming.

Lure broken, the bunny reconsiders.

A moment passes.

Two.

It begins to chew anew, doe-eyed once more. The perfect prey, it spots the fox too late. Orange blurs as the bunny scampers towards the boundary line.

"Do you see now?" I whisper. Our clasped hands tremble in tandem. "Why we must wait?"

The fox pounces. Now beyond the reeds, the bunny becomes grey matter once more. Fog cloisters like a Venus trap, and yips turn to shrieks turn to silence turns to bones.

Rachelle Erzay lives, works, and writes on Whadjuk Nyungar land. She holds a Creative Writing Honours degree from Curtin University and has had her work published by *Baby Teeth Journal*, *the little journal*, and others. Rachelle founded West Coast Writers in 2023 and currently sits on the board of Night Parrot Press. She can normally be found hoarding paperbacks and spoiling her cat companions, Melisandre and Augustus. Find her online at: rachelleerzay.com.



TIGER WIFE

Evia de Witt

Each night I clean her weeping wounds. While I hang my costume, she sheds hers; her orange mass shifts, reforms from bloodied predator to bleeding woman. Without the stripes, the cuts are stark.

I sit with her among the dust and sew the slashes shut. Push pointed brass through flesh, tug at the edges of skin until they kiss.

Once, her pain would fill the tent. Every hiss a plea I'd tend and swallow, lest it float through the curtain and into the revelry. Now, my wife is still as stone. Her hard, dark gaze cuts through curls of incense, across faded news reviews and torn sleeves. Lingers on lantern flicker while I rub dregs of crimson balm into each suture, over the tiger tattoo at her nape.

The ink beast curls and taunts. *Feel powerful, tiger tamer?*

I suppress the urge to carve it out. Smother it instead with tenderness, a long kiss for the rotten curse. Its heat crackles across my lips. Static thrums through to my fingertips, escapes as she rises and retreats to the cot.

I swap the balm for wax, then move to the whip.

Another gob of red between my fingers. I work my way down the leather, from handle to fall, thumbing each weft and braid. Prop-work wasn't enough. Now I pick at blood stains. Swallow bile. Where it frays, I twist and trim. If we're not careful, the Director will deduct for damages.

He'll be here soon. Spill praise, then amend our pittance. *You're stars*, he'll croon, deducting amenities, levies, publicity. *It takes work to keep you shining.*

My wife's marred back faces me, its scarred lattice shining in the lantern glow. Where fresh lines carve through tattoo, the tiger drips crimson. Sanguinous fluid pools on the sheets beneath her.

When dawn comes, the troupe will make for fresh fields. Lazily, they'll pack the magic away and make for the next horizon. Then, another town over, the tents will bloom once more, a colony of lurid mushrooms, enchanting, toxic.

“How much longer?”

I roll back the rug; the deep stains vanish beneath it. Join her on the cot, bury my face in her soft hair.

“Just a few more shows.”

A deep sigh rumbles through her. The sentiment is as empty as our purse.



Evia de Witt (she/her) is a writer living in Boorloo (Perth), Australia. She is drawn to eerie tenderness and enjoys working odd alchemy with the written form. Her work has been published with fifth wheel press, Night Parrot Press, and *Black Hole News*. Find her on Instagram at @eviadewitt_.



Hot Bluidit

Struan McCorrisken

Ah stood ootside the cave at the crook o the river. A hunner mile lay atween my back an mah hame, whaur bailies skulkit in search o debts passit frae faither tae son.

In front o me, lay the lair o a dragon. A sleekit auld wyrm that nestit oan hoardit treasure an meltit armour. But here, Ah foun there wis nae wyrm.

Raither, a man stood at the mooth o the cave. He wis wrappit in lang robes o heavy claith, tap-tae-toe, wi his face coverit. He gesturit tae me.

"Are ye here fur the dragon?" he quod.

"Aye. Is he near?"

"Near enough," quod the stranger. "The wyrm's a lang time deid. His banes lie within."

Ah curst. Beaten tae it. The stranger didnae move.

"Are ye sure ye cam here fur the dragon?" he spierit.

Ah thocht a moment. "Weel...naw. No really." Ah quod at last, "It's the gowd Ah'm efter."

"Shame. Dragon's gowd's curst, ken? It's no fur ye."

"Syne it's fur yersel?" Ah quod.

He gied an awffy soun that micht hae been a keckle.

"Naw, man. Ah came fur the Dragon, no the gowd." he quod, suddenly animatit, stridin aroon wi his leathery robe flappin an snappin wi ilka movement like enormous wings. "Ah heard the auld Almane sangs o a hero bathit in dragon bluid—grantit power—an soucht it masel. Ah dug the trench, jist as in the sang, an lay in wait. But there wis ane thing that wisnae in they sangs, laddie. Can ye guess whit it wis?"

Ah couldnae.

"Dragon's bluid boils in its veins!" he cryit. "Pulsin throuch its core, aroon the fire inside it. An aw that flowit straicht doon intae the grave Ah'd sae cannily dug masel."

He pausit, but ablow the folds o his robe Ah could see his hauns clenchin an unclenchin, wi a gratin crunch accompanyin the motioun.

"It fillt the trench. Mah mooth. Mah een. Ah lay there, like a bairn in its mithers womb, thrashin, screamin. But...no dyin. That pairt rang true. The instant thon scaldin bluid touchit me," he caed in exultatioun, "Ah wis baptisit—immortal."

He began tae pull aff his robe. Heid-tae-toe his armour wis crustit red. Ilka move he made cam wi crunchin an grindin. The siller plate wis tarnisht intae raw scabs o scarlet metal that ground an gratit wi ilka gesture.

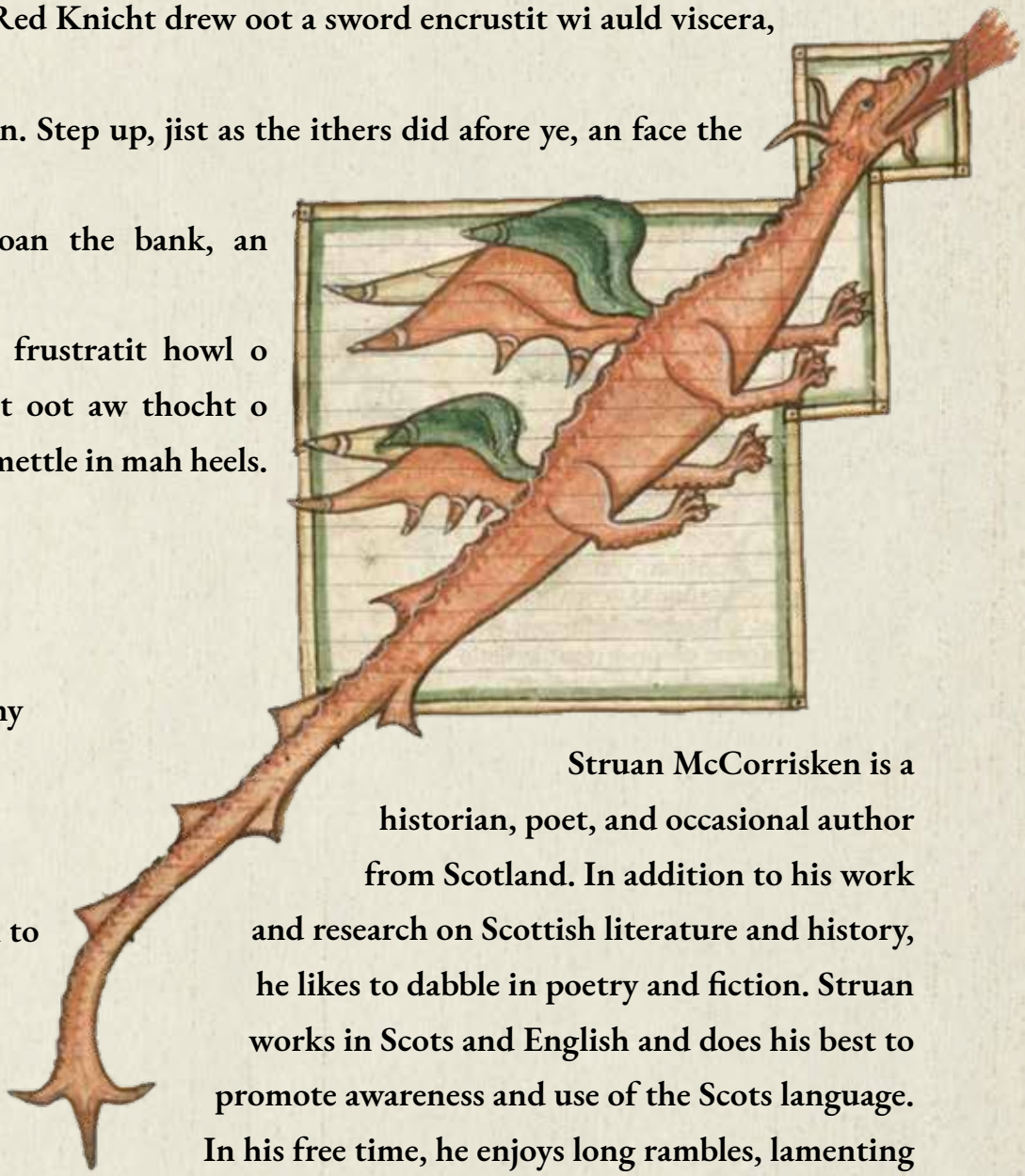
"Forby, there wis somethin in the bluid," he quod distractitly, admirin himsel. "Ah jist cannae bring masel tae leave the gowd. Ach, but why wid Ah? When it draws in sic guid sport..."

Wi a flourish, the Red Knicht drew oot a sword encrustit wi auld viscera, turnin toward me.

"Ah'll be yer dragon. Step up, jist as the ithers did afore ye, an face the beast. Nae—"

Ah wis awready oan the bank, an runnin.

At mah back, the frustratit howl o disappointment droont oot aw thocht o bailies or debts, an pit mettle in mah heels.



Glossary

ablow - below, beneath
Almane - German, Germany
ane - one
bailie - a local official
een - eye(s)
forby - besides, in addition to
gowd - gold
ilka - every, each
keckle - giggle, cackle
mooth - mouth
quod, quo - said, say
speir, spierit - ask, asked

Struan McCorrisken is a historian, poet, and occasional author from Scotland. In addition to his work and research on Scottish literature and history, he likes to dabble in poetry and fiction. Struan works in Scots and English and does his best to promote awareness and use of the Scots language. In his free time, he enjoys long rambles, lamenting the crushing corporate monotony of modern architecture, and lurking in bookshops.

The Vengeance of Rosamund

B.L. Arnold

"I know what you are, witch boy," said King Eadwig, the new King.

The floors where the bard knelt had been scoured of blood in the aftermath of the coup d'etat. The Old King, his Queen, and the Lady, Princess Rosamund of the Bloody Mouth. All beheaded.

So bright as to rival the moon, Rosamund, oh Rosamund. Stricken down on the day of her wedding, the green-eyed, the somber, the lovely Rosamund.

"They say the Devil himself comes to you at night for his pleasure, from whence your bewitchments come. But my wise men have seen through you. They know it is not you who bears power, but the instrument on which you played. We have destroyed the enchanted viol. Even the bow we have destroyed. You are castrated of power. Your gift belongs now to *me*, for the pleasure of my Court."

The bard looked up for one fleeting moment, to the eyes of the King, and then cast down his own again.



Rosamund, the flower of the Old King's Court, so lucid of skin that her lips showed clear through with the color of blood.

"Sire, I am humbled and grateful to you for sparing my life. I am your servant. As you say, my only power now is to please you, I pray, in the halls of your Court."

* * *

In the Court of King Eadwig, at the feast of his coronation, the bard took up his viol, vulgar in the memory of the old heirloom. He drew the length of the new bow across his rosin, the same he had ever used; deep red and fragrant, already it stained the horsehairs of his bow crimson. With beguiling sweetness of voice, he began to sing a ballad of praise to the new King, sending a soft plume of blood-red dust into the air with each draw of the bow.

"King Eadwig the strong, wise of counsel, defeated ruler and magician both, oh, praise his great counsel! Praise his Court, praise his Lady, fair and lovely..."

None who heard him could fail to be moved. The feasting hall filled with the wonder and contentment of victory. The feasters took up a dance of jubilation. Too late did they hear the changing of the song. Too late did they take account of the words of vengeance.

"Those wiz-ards of the King, of great counsel, yea they destroyed the viol and the bow. Yea, they bethought themselves wise. The Dragon's Blood they knew not, the resin of alchemy, the incense of witches."

A choking seized all the Court. An inexorable force propelled their feet in a mad dance. The tang of iron filled their lungs, a suffocation of blood gurgled in their throats.

"Yea, for the death of Rosamund, death in kind! Death, death to the Court of the great King Eadwig!"

They danced a merry hangman's jig until they fell upon the wet flagstones, blood frothing from their lips. A vengeance, a tribute! To Rosamund of the Bloody Mouth.



Beau Arnold is a stay-at-home parent, sci-fantasy enthusiast, and writer. They enjoy writing short stories and poetry to flex the creative muscle after a long day wrassling toddlers. They currently reside in Pennsylvania.

Blood Moon

Hollyn Middleton

The humans call this part of the year the dead of winter. It is after the festivities of the harvest and high holy days when all intelligent creatures have retreated to their dens to outlast the bitter cold. Creatures who lack this instinct have perished, now buried under drifts of icy, muck-filled snow that will not fully diminish until spring has well and truly arrived.

I was once an intelligent creature, or what passed as one. My animalistic desire for more than what my life could ever offer destroyed the person I once was. Now, transformed, I have become a hollow facsimile of a girl. Chasing the desire that gnaws into my flesh through the moors and villages of an unfamiliar time and place. I trick and trap my way into the homely little burrows humans occupy. Most never stray far, nor do they question why—all desire for change left behind with the wildness of youth. These are the places, and they are the prey I stalk in an attempt to satiate myself, gorging on their life.

This time of year is uniquely challenging; the typical rules of hospitality among those who were once my kin have ceased. The larders, which were carefully stocked during the harvest, are now dwindling; there is enough, just enough, if used resourcefully. It may keep those who belong to the pack fed. I do not belong.

Unfortunately, they see me as a blight rather than the boon I truly am. I can ease their suffering. After all, I understand their pain, the jaws of hunger gripping tight into their growling bellies. What is grief when contrasted with one's own survival? Why is what I do to survive seen as worse than slaughtering livestock to satiate the pangs and stay alive through the lean time? All blood runs crimson. In the end, it is the same; everything in nature is eaten by something else. Even once the soul has fled the confines of a body, it remains to fertilize the soil, the decay making way for new life. The moon is full tonight, casting an eerie glow over the rolling gray hills that look unfamiliar because of the ash-coloured, snowy dunes that have transformed

the landscape. If my hunt fails, I fear I will become another feature of the moors until I, too, rot. So, I will carry on; I will be sated. Or at least, I will survive.

The wind—that should have cut through my thin clothing, leaving me frozen and incapacitated—whips through the hills like a low moan, tangling my hair until I look more like a creature than a human. *It too understands what it is to be hungry.* Although the wind has never felt the ooze of iron-rich ichor dripping down a chin as I have. To survive, I will become the wind, to tear through flesh and reap a sanguinary reward. The moors will run scarlet.



Hollyn Middleton (they/she) is a writer, wanderer, and wit based in Indiana. They graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2024. This is her first fiction publication.

The Axe Forgets, the Tree Remembers

Kat Ryan

"Won't."

The Archivist's brow furrowed at the old man brandishing his broom like a spear. "Pardon?"

"Won't," the old man repeated. The soldiers manning the doorway shared a glance. The automaton melded into the back wall and, overgrown with moss, remained silent. She was made of dark, rich wood. The cavity in her chest gleamed with ruby resin, bountiful in thought and wisdom. It glistened, not unlike a wound.

"Master." The Archivist smiled, spreading his hands and nearly brushing the walls. "The Sovereign thanks you for your years of service. Now, the time has come for your ward to fulfil its divine purpose.

The "master" was not a master of anything—he was simply a caretaker, and he did not respond well to flattery. "*Her*," he grunted. "Eve."

The Archivist faltered. "Of course. I'm sure you've grown to care for it—you've certainly been generous with your words. You will be rewarded. But it's time to say goodbye now." His lips quirked. "Well. If you still can."

Behind him the soldiers were reverently unfurling an ornamental red cloth on the floor of the hut, revealing a device with a spiked end and a spigot opposite. A resin tap.

The caretaker stood firm. Impressions of emotions—rage, frustration—touched him, but without the matching words, they were only echoes. So much of himself had been given to her. Arborminds, the repositories made to house the Sovereignty's swathes of knowledge, needed constant feeding to prevent their resin from fossilizing. At first, it had been stories from childhood, factoids, lofty nouns he never needed. Eventually it was words for tools, weather, things he couldn't fathom losing until they'd slipped from his head. The week previous he'd had to give her his name.

All he knew now was that Eve had to be protected. He knew it like the breath in his chest.

"Men," the Archivist sneered. "Remove this pest."

The soldiers swept forward, catching the caretaker under the arms. The point of the tap glinted cruelly in the evening light. Eve was still, seemingly oblivious.

The caretaker screeched, and the resin burned. Eve sprung, quicker than thought, catching the skull of the Archivist in one massive hand. He didn't have time to scream before the thoughts drained from his head, torn away too quickly for him to comprehend what had been taken. Blood dripped from his ears. The resin flooding Eve's body shone. Eventually she released her grip—the Archivist sank to his knees, eyes unseeing.

The caretaker watched on, dumbfounded, as Eve clunked towards him, shedding moss. The soldiers had fled. The automaton extended a hand to where he lay dazed. Crimson welled from her palm.

Drink.

He obeyed, lapping at the resin, distantly noting the sweetness, before reeling at the explosion that ripped through his mind. Words flooded back with such force he had to brace himself against them. *Sanguine. Ichor. Carmine.*

Auden gasped into awareness.

"Eve," he rasped, staring at the comatose man across the room. "What have you done?"

Kat Ryan is a writer and editor from Glasgow. She is a graduate of UofG's MLitt Fantasy Programme (a Starling, for those in the know), a volunteer researcher for *Shoreline of Infinity*'s *SF Caledonia* project, and has edited for *From Glasgow to Saturn*. Her poetry has been published in *From Glasgow to Saturn* and *qmunicate*, with an upcoming prose piece in *Elsewhere*. An abridged draft of her MLitt thesis, examining tabletop roleplaying games as reparative and therapeutic literature in processing grief, is currently being edited for publication by the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. Kat works as a civil servant.

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