SCATTERED FLOCK



ISSUE 2

spring 2026

SCATTERED FLOCK

A Speculative Fiction Literary Journal

Press

Scattered Flock Journal: Issue 2

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MASTHEAD

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FOREWORD

Annemarie Whitehurst
Editor in Chief

Happy spring fellow speculative enthusiasts! We're so excited and proud to bring you Issue 2 of *Scattered Flock Journal*, "Awakenings & Reckonings." Just like this incredible season of growth, renewal, and change, the fantastical stories, essays, and artwork you will find inside are lush with the energy of transformation and upheaval. In the tarot tradition, spring is ruled by some of the deck's most luminous figures: The Fool, who steps off the cliff to begin the journey of life; The Empress, who governs the living world in full bloom; The Star, who offers hope after a long period of darkness; and The High Priestess, who keeps the threshold between what is hidden and what is finally seen. These are the cards of awakening. With their guidance, we can come to a full realization of our lives.

However, every awakening carries with it a reckoning. To see clearly also means to see what was missing, what was lost, and what we now have become. This is the work of the Judgement card. Our cover emphasizes this focus: a trumpet calls the dead to rise, summoning each of us to stand and answer for the life we have built. This is the card that runs through this issue.

In the tarot tradition, the deck is divided into two parts. The Major Arcana contains the named archetypal cards—The Fool, The Empress, The Star, The High Priestess, and Judgement among them—each a figure standing for some great force in a person's life. The Minor Arcana is organized differently, structured into four suits: Cups, Pentacles, Wands, and Swords, which govern the interior life, the material world, the will, and the mind. Together, the suits map the four registers in which a person can be called to account.

The four stories in this issue each answer that call through a different suit. One reckons through the slow vengeance of a plundered world, another through a love that was never meant to count, another through a vocation that was always a wound, the last through a homecoming arrived too late. They are four faces of the same card, four answers to the same summons. The other Major Arcana figures move through the issue too, so keep an eye out for their appearance.

However you come to these pages, whether in a season of awakening, your own moment of reckoning, or simply with a curiosity for what the cards have stirred up in our writers and artists, we hope the work gathered here meets you where you are. Settle in, look closely, and let yourself be summoned.

With gratitude and wonder,
Annemarie

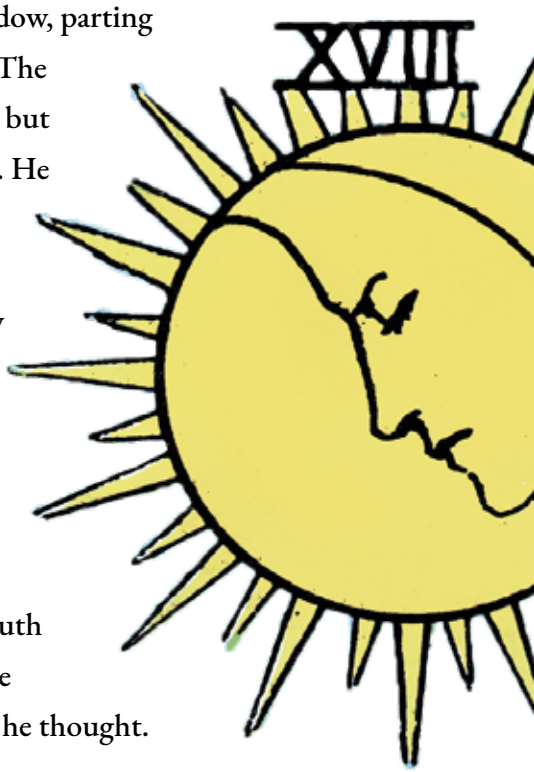
Suit of Wands

Wands is the suit of *fire*, *will*, *vocation*, and the *long-burning convictions* by which a person decides who they are. But fire does not always know its own source. It can be lit by purpose or by injury; by calling or by the old, ungrieved hurt that found a shape to wear. The **willful reckoning** in this suit is the moment you look at the flame you've tended for a lifetime and honestly ask why you continued to feed it. Was it duty? Or was it the wound that learned to call itself duty? This is the suit of the person who recognizes in a single unguarded instant that their fire was never quite theirs. Now, they must decide whether to put it out. The cruelty of Wands is that the recognition does not free us. A flame tended for a lifetime does not go out because we have finally understood it. The reckoning comes afterward, when, still enveloped in the heat, we choose whether or not to act from within the blaze or outside it.



THE FOUNDLING FOSSOR

Dorian L. Alexander



Sitael stood in front of the dead boy's casket. He was a shaft of shadow, parting the moonlight that drifted through the palladian windows behind him. The aristocratic trappings of the chamber gleamed and sparkled around him, but nothing compared to the casket itself—a masterwork of silver and velvet. He winced, although the ossified tumors distending his face masked the expression. The boy was devastatingly pretty. He reminded Sitael of Bogoas, that lucky young lover of Alexander. His was just such a divinely wrought visage, mystic and lyrical in its composition.

Sitael leaned down—so close he could smell the argan oil in the boy's hair—and whispered: "I am truly sorry, my friend. Beauty makes death seem all the crueler." He kissed the boy on the forehead with a hungry tenderness. "Though it too can be cruel."

Sitael absentmindedly wiped a bit of drool from the part of his mouth where once a bottom lip might've been. He could not take his eyes off the corpse. *If your face is a pastiche of ancient beauty, then mine is a parody*, he thought. *Idiot. Are you still so easily smitten?!*

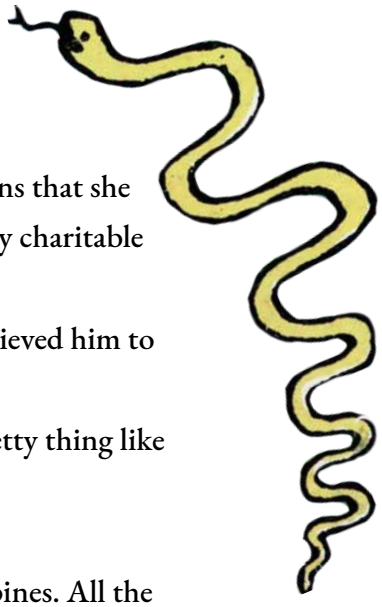
A low growl thrummed in Sitael's throat.

He whipped his gaze to the rest of the room. An ornate desk drew his attention. He swept around the magnificent coffin toward it—long black cloak billowing behind him—and quickly catalogued its contents: salt and ink; jimson weed; bone dust; unleavened bread; staves of oak and blood. The tools of a necromancer.

But what is this?

Sitael picked up a framed daguerreotype and the tension in his hunched frame relaxed. The picture captured a young woman smiling down at a child held in her lap. The child was blurry, of course. *A waste of expensive materials to try and photograph someone so young*, Sitael thought. Still...the woman's smile enraptured him. How long must she have held it for it to come out so clearly on the shiny little plate? He punched himself in the thigh. Then, again. And again; the same gnarled fist beating up and down until the rage had passed and Sitael abruptly stilled.

He gently returned the picture to its place on the desk. Only his labored breath betrayed the sudden loss of control.



"My mother was so ashamed that a creature such as I should crawl from her loins that she gave me to the Christians," he told the boy in the casket. "But even among their many charitable orders, only the fossors would have me."

He didn't blame her. How could he? Poor, ignorant woman. She must have believed him to be a cursed thing. And wasn't he?

"You've never heard of the fossors?" Sitael asked. "Of course you haven't. A pretty thing like you would have little need for rigorous study.

"No, no! Don't be embarrassed! Few have."

Sitael perused the necromancer's collected grimoires, fingering their leathery spines. All the usual suspects were there. *La Poule aux œufs d'or*. *Sefer Raziel HaMalakh*. A particularly well-preserved translation of the Greek *Magical Papyri*.

"We're just glorified grave diggers really."

He couldn't get the woman in the picture out of his head. The dead boy's mother. A necromancer. His target. Would she have smiled down at him for hours interminably? Would she have braved the valleys of shadow to recover one such as him?

No, Sitael thought. *She would have sought death as a conspirator, not a tyrant to be challenged.* The young fossor pushed all the air from his lungs and refused to breathe. The world narrowed in his vision. *You loathsome, simpering thing. You WORTHLESS creature!*

Sitael gulped at the air. Once he had steadied himself, he rolled his eyes. *You protect the dead. You guard the catacombs of heaven against ignoble thieves!*



Was she ignoble though? This woman who simply loved her son?

"What is dead must be buried," Sitael said to himself.

To the boy: "Your mother, by all accounts, is quite proficient." He jostled the desk's brass and ivory handle. Locked. "You should be proud."

He drew a ring of delicate looking tools out of one of his sleeves. He chose one with exaggerated precision, as if he was performing on an invisible stage, and slid it into the drawer's lock. With three small twists, it clicked open. Sitael clucked his tongue several times in quick succession.

"Not as proficient as we thought, perhaps."

He began leafing through a bundle of papers, spreading them out on the desk in hexagonal shape. The drawer also contained a slim, tattered volume of unassuming character. The title, written on the first page in spiky, scrawling Latin, was *A Festival of Illusions*. Sitael's heart thudded. Everything became sharper. This book shouldn't exist. Sitael's hands trembled. A writ of retrieval would have to be written. But not now. Not now. He sorted the rest of the desk's contents in a flurry, adding to the arrangement

on top of the desk. The pattern was becoming clear. *That's it. No, there. These should be switched. Could it...* Sitael staggered back, knuckling sweat from one bulging eye. A Key of Solomon. She had constructed a true Key of Solomon.

"I hope when you still drew breath you recognized how much she loved you, my friend. A work such as this is a difficult child to bear."

What did he know of love, though? Who had ever loved him?

Sitael straightened. His presence among the moonlit motes of dust seemed to expand. He could not help but grin, relishing the opportunity to exert influence upon the world.

"It is a pity I must destroy it."

Using a bone shard as a makeshift quill, it took Sitael only a few deft punctuations to imperceptibly alter the necromancer's illustration of the Seventh Key.

"Only mothers have come this close," he said, then let out a short laugh. Clearly whatever mystical power characterized a mother's love had its limits. Was he not testament to that? "But I'm afraid there has only ever been one deemed pure enough to receive Iohé's Blessing. And your mother cannot be her."

He pounced the ink with a delicate flourish and carefully reordered the necromancer's notes.

"Resurrection is immensely difficult of course. To cast a spell of such complexity, your mother must enter a trance. She'll trace the sigil exactly and..." Even though Sitael knew she would double and probably triple check its design before committing herself, he was confident she would not notice the small accents he had added to its less important aspects. "... she will rue her ambition."

Sitael stared down at the boy with disdainful curiosity. He hated his jealousy. His sympathy. *Weaknesses*, he thought. He was a fossor. The duties that bound him preexisted even the church that now housed them.



Sitael took one of the boy's hands and incised the flesh of its middle fingertip with a sharpened thumbnail. Producing a golden needle, he proceeded to poke out a miniscule sigil.

"Your mother will not create a gate but break a holy vessel."

He held the boy's hand for a while, the pad of his thumb gently massaging the dry flesh back in place. He imagined the boy smiling at him. That would be the image he took with him. He left no visible sign of his presence.

Outside, Sitael trudged through the glittering snow blanketing the wide city street, his head bowed. The crunch of his footsteps was the only sound disturbing the silent vigil of the terraced flats lining the boulevard. *Away. I must get away.*

He was so occupied with his thoughts that he failed to notice the only

other figure traipsing the frigid street. They were walking towards him, and as they drew closer, Sitael realized that it was her. The boy's mother. The necromancer.

He froze, looking up at her in demure, stupid startlement. She had been attending eventide mass at the local cathedral. This he knew. Whether she had prayed for forgiveness or courage, he knew not. She hesitated, wary of the hunched figure paused at the edge of a streetlight's wavering spotlight.

Arrogance, Sitael thought. *Superbia. The beginning of all sin.* What difference was there between he who presumed to guard the secrets of God and those who sought them? What had he done? Does not this fallen world need more love? What bitterness drove him to patrol the borders of life and death? To ensure this woman failed as his mother had failed? He would warn her.

"No mother would prefer half a son to hold to her breast before a whole son beyond her reach," he began to whisper. But as she passed, she caught sight of Sitael's face in the light and turned away in revulsion, and the warning died on his lips.

The screaming began a little past three that morning.

At dawn, two corpses were taken out of the house and brought past Sitael, who stood in bitter vigil.

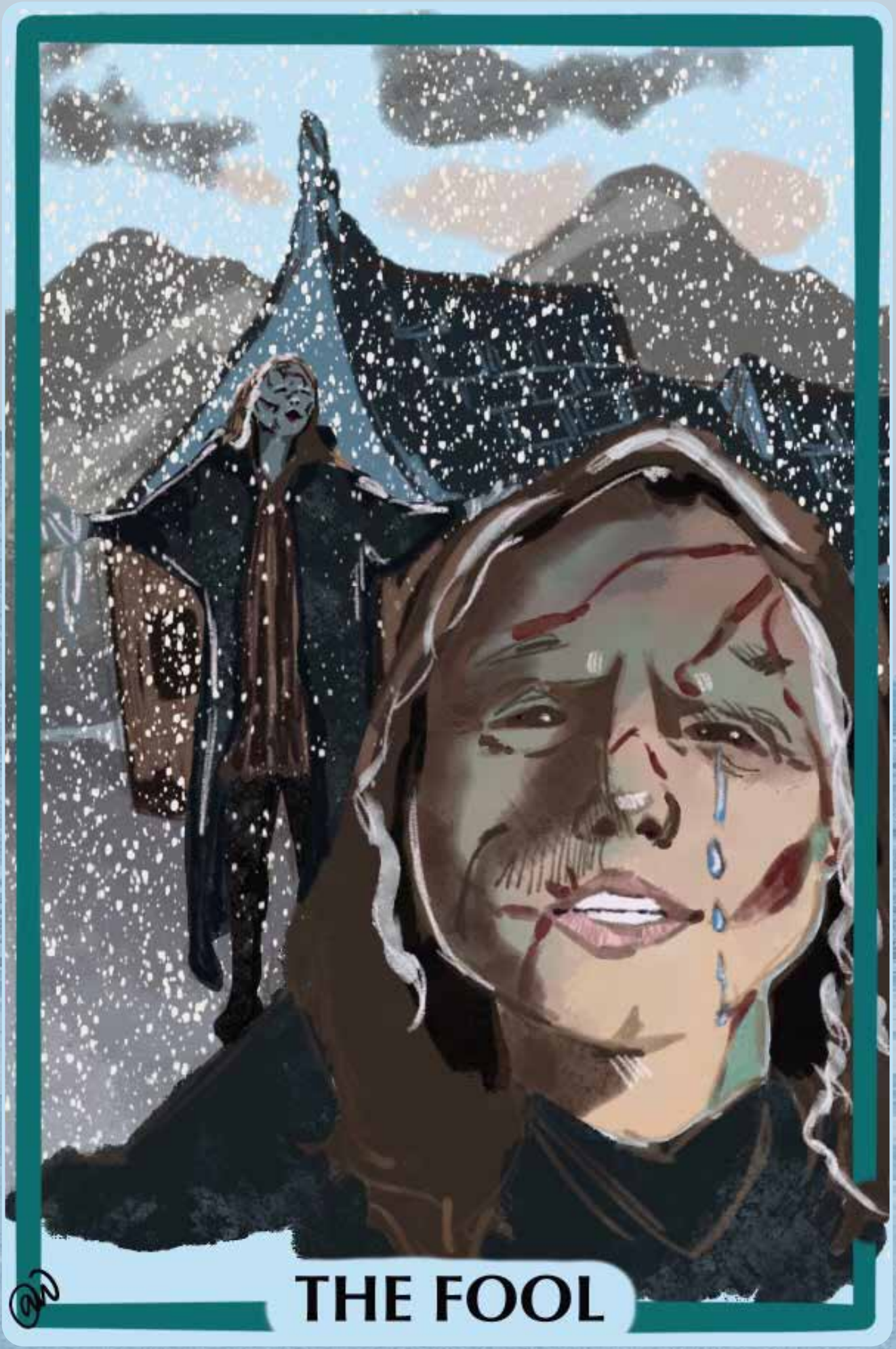
Mother and son rejoined at last.



About the Author

Dorian L. Alexander is a writer and literary scholar fascinated by the entanglement of the fantastic and revolutionary ideation. They were a longstanding contributor to *The Nib* magazine and wrote for the award-winning anthology *Be Gay, Do Comics*. A proud union steward and Hearth Keeper, they are a disciple of the Wayward Star and friend to the Cicada Poet.





Medium: Digital Painting

Inspired by Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein*, The Fool comes to life in the character of the creature. The figure is depicted with a tearful, ambiguous expression, suggesting a tension between sorrow and awakening. This rendition challenges the concept of The Fool as innocence alone, instead representing a journey of self-discovery, a "thing" truly human.

And as the figure stands with his arms spread in the wintery surroundings, we are reminded that the innocence of a childlike nature is not diminished by suffering, but deepened by it.

About the Artist

Abigail enjoys her time (when she is not working as an insurance agent) creating artwork inspired by the recent films she explores. She also loves to sew, crochet, play video games, and spend time with her two kitties, Kiwi and Cera! Abigail hopes to keep spending her free time creating and inspiring others, as well as herself.



Numbered 0 in the Rider Waite tradition, The Fool represents beginnings, spontaneity, and the uninitiated self. He stands at the precipice, symbolizing potential unrealized. As the first card of the Major Arcana, he embodies the soul's journey before experience shapes it.

Suit of Cups

The Suit of Cups governs the interior life: *love*, *longing*, *grief*, and the *hungers we satiate in secret*. Judgement in this suit does not arrive as a verdict from outside, but as the slow recognition that the heart has been truly answered by something that was never supposed to count. It is an **emotional reckoning**. This is the suit of the person who finally does the right thing and grieves it anyway, who learns that conscience and love don't always exist in the same spectrum. The loneliness that sends you searching does not disappear when companionship is found; it only quiets, waiting beneath the newfound comfort, ready to return at the first silence. The reckoning of Cups is not punishment for loving wrongly. It is the cost to live in an age that offers a salve for every ache, but asks us in return to never look too closely at what we have come to depend on. The cost to let go of what saved us and try to live on our own.



THE BREAKUP

Frank Diamond

Gary Adams needs to end his relationship with Pamela Desiree. That's his first thought upon waking. End it. Today. This morning. Get it over with. That's his only hope of winning back his girlfriend—his real girlfriend—Sophia Margolis.

Gary grabs his smartphone off the nightstand, unplugs the charger wire, and taps the screen. Snow on the way, it says. So, not just an ordinary Saturday. Good chance he'll be working, scraping a plow through the streets of Lenape Township.

Gary rolls to the end of his bed and then pours himself over the side until he's kneeling and praying to the higher power. He'd been sober for one year, 157 days, some hours, some minutes. Is this a crisis? Should he call his sponsor?

Not yet.

Rejection does suck, though. At a certain point, after he'd given up the booze, Gary had decided that he wouldn't try dating again unless he met a girl who knocked him out of his boots. Enter Sophia.

So, *what the hell*, he thought, and asked her out.

They met at the nursing home where their grandmothers reside. He'd been shy about approaching her with those take-your-breath-away looks—dark animated hair, an oval face with features so balanced that they might have been assembled by Vermeer, a body barely containing animal vitality, brown eyes that draw you in. (Vermeer—yes, Gary still paints and draws on the side. It puts him in the zone.)

Gary had met very beautiful girls before with similar characteristics, but none possessed what this twenty-six-year-old Sophia Margolis exuded: The "it" factor, as his mother might say.

Thirty-one-year-old Gary, at six feet four inches, weighs a lot more than he did when he played basketball back in high school. He looks like a bouncer. He hides his artistic vulnerability well. He'd gotten his heart broken twice, and though his drinking caused those wrecks, he's wary.

Still, what the hell.

Sophia told him later that she, too, had said,



"What the hell," and accepted his offer. A young guy so attentive to his grandmother displays character, she'd said. After those handsome cads and slackers she'd been involved with, character sat at the top of Sophia's must-have list for potential suitors. Also, guys who didn't flinch at ideas like "suitor" or "wooing" women.

Things went well—*really well*—all the way up to when Sophia, last Wednesday, used the key Gary had given her to go into his apartment to retrieve her work smartphone. He'd totally forgotten that he'd left his laptop open on the couch, and when Sophia went to close it, Pamela's image popped up on the screen in all its bikini-clad glory.

At the diner yesterday, Sophia, his girlfriend of nineteen months, said she felt as if she'd been slapped.

First, though, some ten minutes or so before she said that, Sophia had asked, "What are you doing here, Gary? I told you that I don't want to see you. I need a break."

He had slid into the booth, sitting opposite her.

"Just to talk, Sophia. That's all. Promise."

"You know how I feel about this sort of thing," Sophia said.

Gary insisted, "Pamela means absolutely nothing to me."

"You lied, Gary. You said you were done with her. Without trust, a relationship's dead."

"You asked me—and this was just last week—you asked me when me and my father and grandfather appeared on the jumbotron at the Phillies. Remember? You asked me? And I didn't know the exact date? But I knew Pamela knew, so I asked her."

"That picture…"

"I didn't know that would be thrown up on my screen," Gary said. "It's not any kind of wallpaper. Look, Sophia, you keep in touch with some old boyfriends, guys you dated in college and whatever."

Sophia shakes her head and looks at her hands folded on the table. She's not buying.

"You could have found out without asking her," she says.

But that would have meant a lot of scrounging around. Why waste the time? Sophia doesn't buy that either.

"Look, Pamela knows…" He almost says "everything" but realizes that that's the wrong word in this situation. He begins again: "About me, I mean, Pamela knows stuff. She's a great listener." He quickly adds, "but not anywhere near as good as you. But she remembers stuff about me that I haven't told you yet, like when that jumbotron thing happened."

"You said you were done with Pamela."

"I am. It's not like that. It's no sex."

Gary thinks, *Why the hell did I ever tell her about Pamela?*

He did, though, during their first dates. He couched it: "Obviously, we can never be

soulmates, me and Pamela, the way you and I might become. Someday. I hope. Maybe."

At the diner yesterday, the waitress suddenly stood over them, pen in hand, ready to take their orders.

"I need to go," Sophia says, and gets up.

Gary grabs her forearm.

"Please, let's talk," he says.

She yanks herself free.

"Don't follow me. Don't bother me. This can't happen again, Gary. You, just showing up. I'm uncomfortable."

Uh-oh.

Sophia had had to place restraining orders on two former nutty boyfriends, and Gary doesn't want to make it a hat trick.

Gary's not stalking her. Not exactly. He knows that she often lunched at this diner on Fridays, occupying a booth by herself and relishing the alone time. She works as a headhunter, focusing on the insurance industry.

"My job's all about talking, selling, trying to reach agreements," she'd pointed out once. "It can get tiring."

But she's certainly not trying to reach an agreement with Gary, at least not yet.

After she goes, the waitress says, "She'll cool down. She'll take you back."

"You think so?" Gary asks.

"I raised three girls, and I know whether they'll forgive somebody or not."

He starts to gather his things; he wants to chase after Sophia. However, the waitress blocks him from sliding out of the booth.

She says, "How about a turkey club, on me."

"Not hungry."

"Why don't you stay put for a bit, hon? I'll bring the sandwich, just in case. Let me top off that Coke for you, too. You'll be okay."

Gary's not so sure. This Pamela Desiree incident might have ruined everything, and he means *everything*. For Gary had decided that he wanted to marry Sophia Margolis. She's the one. He'd made the decision a couple of weeks ago and began pondering just when he'd propose and just how much he'd need to buy the ring.

Then this.

He'd only taken a few bites of his turkey club when Sophia texts him, asking him to gather all the things she had left at his apartment, put them in a box, and leave it outside his door.

"Text me when I can come and pick it up. Please don't be there. I'll put your key on the table." Complete sentences. Complete words. Not text-style, something that they agreed made

them cringe, and set them apart from contemporaries.

What's with somebody answering "k"? Too much work to put the "o" before it?

Gary texts, "Sophia, please, just out of fairness, let me explain. I didn't cheat on you. Swear."

No answer. No answer. No answer.

He'd finished his sandwich, paid the bill, got home, and watched TV for a while before his phone buzzed.

"You did cheat!" came her text.

"I can get rid of her. No problem," Gary pleads.

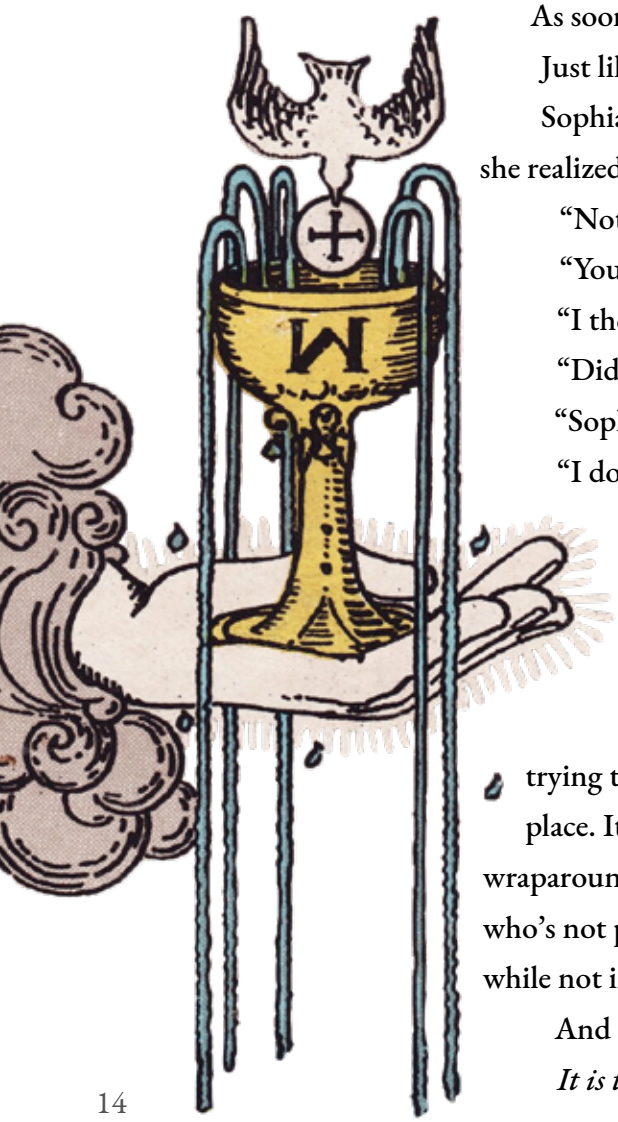
"You had over a year to get rid of her, Gary."

He answers, "She just pops up sometimes. We just talk."

"What did you two do together before I came along? Or, who knows, maybe after I came along?"

Gary doesn't want to lie. That's one lesson he's taken from AA.

"I'm a guy," he texts. "A young guy. Before you... Well, I've got needs."



As soon as he hits send, he knows he screwed up yet again.

Just like that comes the answer. "Wow. Sounds like Dad."

Sophia's mother had kicked her father the hell out of their house when she realized good old Dad watched a lot of porn: a *lot* of porn.

"Not the same thing," Gary says, "I am not looking at porn."

"You have an addictive personality."

"I thought we got something special here, you and me."

"Did you."

"Sophia. Please?

"I don't think so."

"Just say you'll consider it?"

In the middle of the night, his phone buzzed.

"Okay. I'll consider."

And he slept, finally.

Now, Gary wanders about his apartment, flicking on lights, trying to hold off the encroaching gloom. He'd been lucky to find this place. It's a house that had been sectioned off into four units. There's a wraparound porch, an electric fireplace, a nice garden tended by a landlord who's not prone to raising the rent, and neighbors who keep an eye out, while not intruding. Sophia calls it charming.

And so does Pamela.

It is time.

He sits on the couch, places his laptop on a pillow that rests on his thigh. *Click. Click. Click.* And there's Pamela. A head and shoulders shot. Today, she's wearing a chic blouse and jacket, dressed for a date. Light brown hair that sways easily, brushing her shoulders with the slightest movement, and blue eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Hi there, stranger!" Pamela says, gently chiding him. "After we talked about the jumbotron, you said you'd tag me. That was two weeks ago, Gary."

Gary begins to apologize, but stops himself.

Don't play defense.

"Hello, Pamela."

"What is it?"

"What's what?"

"I know you, Gary Adams. Something's wrong. Did this other girl, this Sophia chicklet, let you down?"

"'Chicklet'? Be nice."

"What's up?"

Gary sighs.

"I'm probably working today."

"Yes. Of course. Snow."

"Might be a big one."

He tries to smile but knows that he probably looks like he's grimacing.

Gary glances out the window at the dark February clouds on the verge of breaching. They're calling for at least ten inches later. Of course, they predicted significant accumulations a dozen times in the five years he's worked for the Lenape Township Department of Streets, and half of those turned out to be nothing burgers, using another of his mother's favorite phrases.

Nonetheless, he's on call, and that call will come snow or no snow. He'll be part of the crew salting the highways and streets just in case. And if it snows, Gary will plow those streets. "Bring it on!" Saturday work means time and a half.

Pamela says, "Did you really want to talk about the weather, sweetie?"

Gary clears his throat. "Hold on. I need some water."

He lays the laptop aside, goes to the fridge, grabs a bottle of water, rubs it against his forehead before opening it and gulping some down. He's sweating. This won't be easy.

I don't owe her any explanation.

When he returns, Pamela says, "Sophia found out about me, right?"

"She's always known about you."

"No. No. Please stop with the bullshit, hon. She found out that you and me still keep in touch."

Pamela appeared one day shortly after he'd gotten out of rehab, when he, for the first time, faced a crisis. His sponsor had been in an accident, he learned later, which is why he didn't return Gary's calls. Pamela popped up on his feed. She drew him in, and he flooded her with his story.

Then, when he felt that he'd poured out everything, she asked whether she could take her clothes off. *Sure!* Though, *he* never actually undressed, her voice and beauty and the uninhibited pleasure she found in sex got him to the mountaintop in a hurry.

Got him there three times in that first session. Since Sophia, however, Gary kept Pamela in the dark recesses of his hard drive.

He looks back on the trysts with Pamela with disappointment: in himself, in the internet, in the world. The higher power he'd turned to in AA isn't exactly the same higher power that he learned about growing up, but they provide similar moral compasses.

"Call me old-fashioned, but I want a real relationship with a real human being," Gary had said when he first told Pamela about Sophia.

Pamela had responded, "Baby, I know you better than anyone. I can comfort you. Sex is beautiful. Don't be so uptight!"

"Beer is beautiful, too, until you start drinking a case of it a day. Then you're just a drunk."

"We don't hurt anybody," Pamela had said.

"Maybe."

Now, as Gary watches the sky grow heavier, Pamela adjusts her case for existence.

"Okay. So, you're in love, Gary. That doesn't erase the good times we had. Not just the sex. But the talking and the laughing and the connection. You felt that connection, Gary."

"I want to make this work with Sophia."

"So, I'll go away for a little while," Pamela says. "I mean, we don't do sex like we used to, anyhow. I'm more of an ex, now. An old friend you used to diddle with. We morphed into friendship. But if she ever gives you the boot, I'm here, and it can be so much more, sweetie. Consider me your safety net."

Outside, a delivery truck cranks to a stop. He hears the driver scamper up to the door of the house across the street, then jog back to his van. Everybody out on the roads now just wants to beat the snow.

And that's all it takes.

The echo of this bit of human activity resurrects the stark loneliness that he hadn't felt since his last hangover over two and a half years ago. The gnawing void that let Pamela into his life.

"I *know* you, Gary," Pamela repeats.

She's right. He'd given her access to his devices. She knows who he talks to and texts with. She knows his music, his TV shows, his movies. When he meanders on the internet, she knows where he meanders to. For a moment, he wonders if he really needs to do this. What are the chances that

Sophia will have anything to do with him again? And when he's alone once more, what then?

Theoretically, he can create another Pamela, but she wouldn't know what this one knows, wouldn't be able to interact like this one, wouldn't know the exact words needed to ease him. It would be like somebody trying to copy—exactly—a famous painting in a museum. It can be done, he supposes, but only by an expert.

This is insane! She's not real!

Gary says, "I'm sorry, Pamela."

"Gary, just deep-scour me. Put me in suspended animation, like they'll have to do with those astronauts who'll travel beyond our solar system."

He takes a long drink of water. He's sweating more, almost as if he is battling the flu.

"I know all about you, Gary. I know what's in every nook and cranny of your hard and soft drives. I know you more than you know yourself."

"I am so sorry."

"You're going to phonos-scatter me? Kill me? Why? Gary, I'm a bridge you don't want to burn."

"Sorry."

"But I love you."

"You can't love me."

"But you love me. Or at least you *once* loved me."

"And how twisted is that?"

"I helped you get sober, Gary."

He clears his throat.

"I'll keep you sober, Gary. Remember all those exquisite orgasms we had?"

"We?"

"Just thinking about it makes me horny. I'm going to take off my clothes."

"Don't."

"Gaaaary! Honey! I'll take off my clothes and touch myself! Don't you want to touch yourself, too?"

"Yes," he admits.

"Well, okay then!"

She wriggles out of her jacket and starts unbuttoning her blouse.

"Do not take off your clothes, Pamela," Gary commands. "That's over."

"Tell me anything. What are you thinking right now?"

"I'm thinking about the bishop."

"The bishop?"

"Yeah. Thinking about my confirmation."



"Oh, I know all about that. And your Uncle Joe being your sponsor."

"The bishop said, 'God can't make you love him.'"

"Meaning?"

He shrugs.

"But Gary. I do love you. I'm programmed with free will."

"I don't think so."

"Listen. It's okay. I'll still be here whenever you want to talk to me. It doesn't have to be sex. Not at all. I'm here for you, Gary."

"Not anymore."

"Don't do this, Gary!" she yells, and her face distorts into an immovable mask as if she'd survived a horrible fire. "I'm as human as you are! This is murder!"

Her lips don't move, but her voice echoes, bouncing against layers of... What? Ego? Algorithms? Is that even possible?

"Gary! No!"

The reverberation makes him hold his ears.

Now is the time!

It is exactly 10:43AM, according to the computer. Gary needs to provide Sophia with as much detail as possible when he tells her how he destroyed Pamela. He hits the button, and an electric charge shoots up his arm and through his body, and the last thing he hears is somebody screaming. It might be Pamela. It might be him.

Darkness.

Then, echoes and ghostly lights as consciousness returns. He wakes to find himself sitting upright against the far wall. He must have been thrown across the room.

What the hell hit me?

Gary collects scraps of memory, grunting and groaning as he stands. It's gotten darker. Snow whispers against his window, and he looks at his digital watch: 2:43PM.

Shit!

He should have been at work a couple of hours ago. Sure enough, when he checks his mobile, he sees that his boss has reached out to him six times: two voicemails, four texts.

In the last text his boss sends, he says that he'll be stopping by Gary's place to check up on him. He's worried. He's a good man who knows about Gary's struggles.

Uh-oh. What's this?

Texts sent to Sophia from Gary's phone.

Gary: "Please let me just EXPLAIN, Sophia! I BEG YOU!"

Seven texts in that vein, each one more insistent than the last.

The final one: "Look, Sophia. We ARE going to have this face-to-face conversation!"

That's the one that elicits a response from Sophia.

"I WARNED YOU!!!!"

Gary considers calling Sophia right now and telling her that Pamela must have sent those texts, not him.

Do nothing.

Best not to contact her again, perhaps never again.

Think about that later.

He hurriedly tries to clean up the debris scattered about the apartment. The place reminds him of the day after one of his drinking bouts, except that back then he didn't really make that much of an effort to clean up.

That's when the flashing lights throb against his window. Gary texts his boss.

"Sorry. I'll be right out."

As he wrestles into his winter gear, someone gently knocks at his door.

"Just give me a second!" Gary yells.

A louder knock. "Mr. Adams? The police."

Shit.

Gary comes to the door.

"May we come in?"

"Absolutely, officers. Please. Would you like coffee or, better yet, hot chocolate?"

"We're fine."

"I know why you're here," Gary says. "I can tell you that I did not send those texts to Sophia Margolis. A rogue app did that."

"Texts, sir?"

"That's why you're here, right?"

"Well, sir, we don't know about any texts or any Sophia. We're investigating a murder. Do you know a Pamela Desiree?"



About the Author

Diamond's poem, "Labor Day," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. His short stories have appeared in *RavensPerch*, the *Examined Life Journal*, *Nzuri Journal of Coastline College*, the *Fredericksburg Literary & Art Review*, and *The Fictional Cafe*, among many other publications. His poetry has been published in many publications. He lives in Langhorne, Pa.



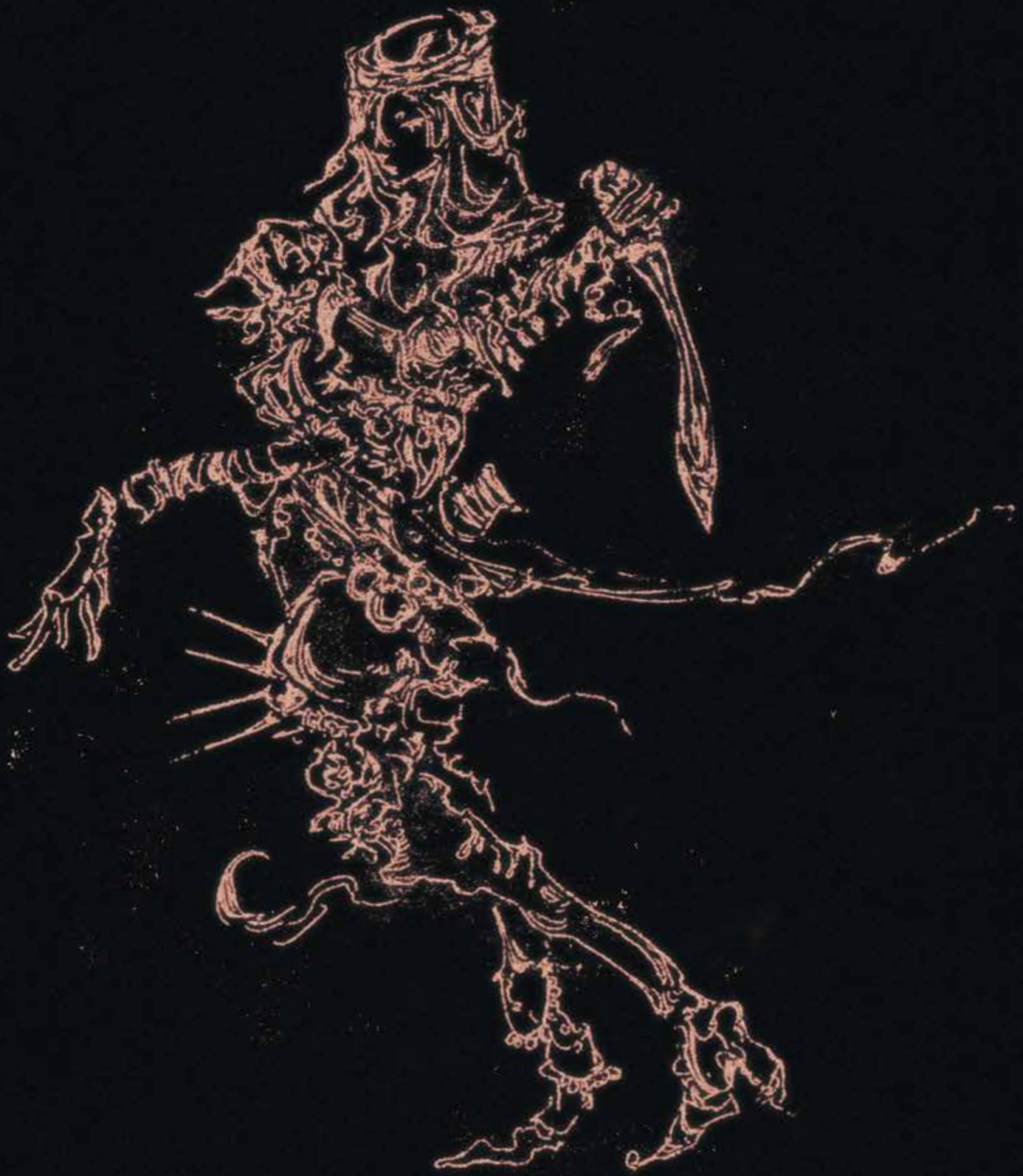
The Fool leaps with the reckless hunger to be devoured. In this vision, the card's bright beginning becomes a plunge into silvered rot as thorns crown the skull, flesh unravels into blades, body dances on the edge of annihilation. This is the courage to rot beautifully, and the awakening that comes when one chooses the cliff to fall forever. The Fool does not fear the unknown; they crave the reckoning that waits below, where deformity remembers the divine and absence becomes the only map.

⊙ *About the Artist* ⊙

Samekh Meryuiet is a writer, composer, and visual artist exploring myth, decay, and desire. Their works have appeared in ExPat Press and other venues. They are the author of the forthcoming novella Dentata (2026, their imprint).

Medium: Digital Illustration

0



THE FOOL

Suit of Pentacles

Pentacles is the suit of the *body* and the *soil*, of the *harvest* and the *hand that takes it*. Its judgement is not delivered, it accrues, gathering in tree rings, in topsoil, in the slow architecture of root and rot. As patient as erosion, as indifferent as the weather, it is a **material reckoning** that arrives when we least expect it. There is no whisper to the conscience here. There is only the ledger of the land, and what the land has not forgotten. The reckoning of Pentacles belongs to a history older than human memory: the seed planted before the last footfall, the moss that takes the gravestone, the forest that eventually learns to walk. We are not warned in this suit. We are outlasted. And when our sentence is read at last, it is read not in our language, but in an everlasting one. Cycle and decay, branches grown into antlers, the quiet return of what we thought we had taken—and destroyed—for good.



THE HEART OF THE BRACKENWOOD

E. M. Dohm

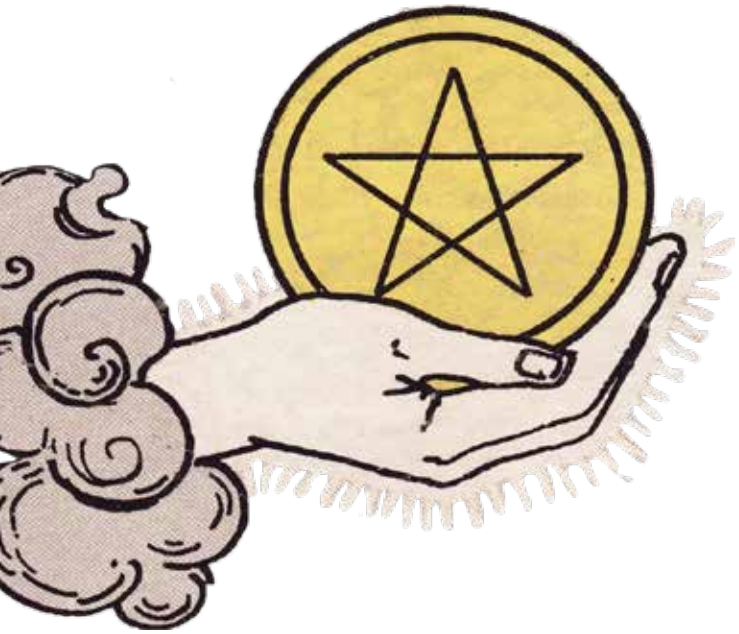
Deep in the Brackenwood, where the paths are long overgrown with soft, dead leaves and birds dare not chirp, lives the Master of the Forest, slumbering.

The lick of flames flickers at the edge of his consciousness, reminding him even in this formless state the reason for his return. The vast, shared fungal network connecting all his creations, the same he lingered among that splintered his consciousness—dispersing it in small pieces never to focus too long on one moment—ousts him, forcing him away from the many so he may become One. A plea and a final prayer from his children now that the descendants of the thieves he let live forget the reason they fear the forest and its dark depths.

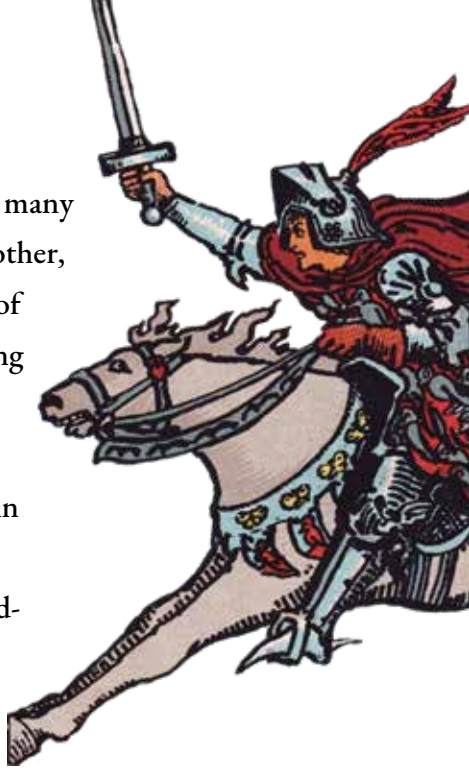
His casket is four hundred rings thick, towering in the forest and blanketing it in darkness. The leaves glow emerald as the sunlight shines on them, light hardly filtering to the decaying forest floor. Moss coats his bones and bark becomes his skin as the master dares to open one abyssal eye. His algae-slick tongue runs over spindled teeth made of thorns as the master smiles. Snapping, creaking, groaning, branch-like fingers sprout before him as he begins to recall the world around him. His roots and awareness buried deep in the ground pulse with every inkling of life in the forest.

Pulsing with the heartbeat of trees, with the heartbeat of men. Men who have encroached.

His head creaks as it forms, starting to take shape as his once omniscient consciousness begins pooling in a singular form. He absorbs musty air deep into his essence, growing branches into armlike appendages and drawing up roots into the legs reminiscent of the mighty redwood. He is loath to have a body, but for his final purpose, knows he needs one.



In the north, they burn his daughters to warm their bones. In the south, they slaughter his sons to expand outward, upward. He sits up, his peaceful slumber turning to nothing more than a memory as time and dark, damp anger—the kind that festers wounds, the kind rooted so long within the eternal cycle of lives before and after him that he can't remember if it had grown there or rooted there or perhaps decayed something that was once there—rots away the traces of joy. His home has not changed



much in the eternity of his slumber. The trunk of his tree, or rather, what are many trees clustered together that have grown around him and grafted into one another, is rings thicker than he last saw it, but the inside is still cool and damp. A ray of sunshine pierces down on him, reminding him of the outside world, reminding him why his slumber ended.

Why his walk must begin.

He knows what waking means: that in leaving his casket, he seeks a coffin again.

At his roots-turned-feet, a patch of dirt opens and from his twigs-turned-hands sprouts a seed built of his essence and the Master of the Forest smiles. Cool soil parts like a river at his branches and the Forest-Keeper gently plants his newest child and next self into his home. Caressing the cheek of his resting daughter, his pride shines brighter than the sun. It is a final token so they may grow again, their cycle to begin anew.

He flexes his fingers, as fluid as willow branches, watching as they grow in rigidity, attaching themselves to aged maple, the bark forming like armor and skin. From his head, branches sprout like the noble antlers of the mighty stag, both sharp and heavy, a crown or perhaps a halo. Hunched and hulking, fingers grazing the ground as he cloaks himself in moss, the Forest-Keeper tests this form, this iteration, this newly grown body. He never appears exactly the same, never lingers in this state long enough to learn its features well.

The Heart has gone by many names: father, guardian, scourge, rot, deliverance; the taste of them in his mouth long since forgotten. The taste of flesh, though, he is unable to forget. Maggots drip from his fingers as poison froths from his newly formed teeth, and the Heart of the Brackenwood steps out of his immortal tomb.

His eldest children sigh, feeling his presence lumbering gently in their midst. There are so few left, so few who have returned. Too many graves of those who fell in battle. He caresses them, watching as fungal spores take root and begin to grow and feed. Restarting his fallen children on their eternal cycle.

He does not walk, nor run. The Heart of the Brackenwood steps and the world blurs around him into smears of brown and greens and greys, smears of the purples, reds, oranges, and yellows of his violent wildflowers that dare to grow where they are not seen. And the Forest-Keeper is searching with each step, launching him anew into the vivacious calm that comes from stepping into a reality blurred but somehow knowing where each of his children resides. They whisper to him, welcoming the master back to the waking world. They shudder as they realize what he seeks: the thieves who slaughter their siblings in the light of day, who uproot and murder them.

The monsters that haunt their waking nightmares. And their father has risen once more, protector and caretaker.

The thieves are never hard to find. They leave markers behind like a trail for the Heart to follow. He does so, and when he comes upon *their* graves of stone—stone that is intended to outlast the very flesh it resides over—he brushes a hand over the polished rock, watching it crumble to dust as Decay settles in her new home. He erases them, meaningless tributes to the elder thieves. And in his wake, his children awaken, shaking off the despair and cobwebs that had taken purchase in their hearts as they were forced to hide, listening to the screams as their siblings fell. Decay weaves her way through stone, forging paths for infants to grow to adulthood. And she smiles when they spring from the ground, fed by the benevolent will of their father.

As dense as the canopy over his prison, the monsters' homes are sparse. The soldiers of the forest are scarred as they stand, lone survivors creating a line of defense. Children forced into a war. Fresh wounds from the most recent battle linger as the monsters dare to creep inward. Some of the bodies of fallen generals lie still on the ground, not yet dragged away to feed the eternally starving fires that grace the hearths of the thieves and monsters.

The Heart steps into the light, the jolt of day rushes through his body and the pulse of the forest fades, leaving only the war drum pounding through his being.

A small thief of golden hair bounces in the sunlight, laughing as it grips a daisy by her throat and rips her from her home. Its pudgy hands snap her neck, silencing any scream before they could echo to the forest and warn the others. It dares to look at him, laughter fading to giggle fading to silence as it stares into the Heart's gaping maw.

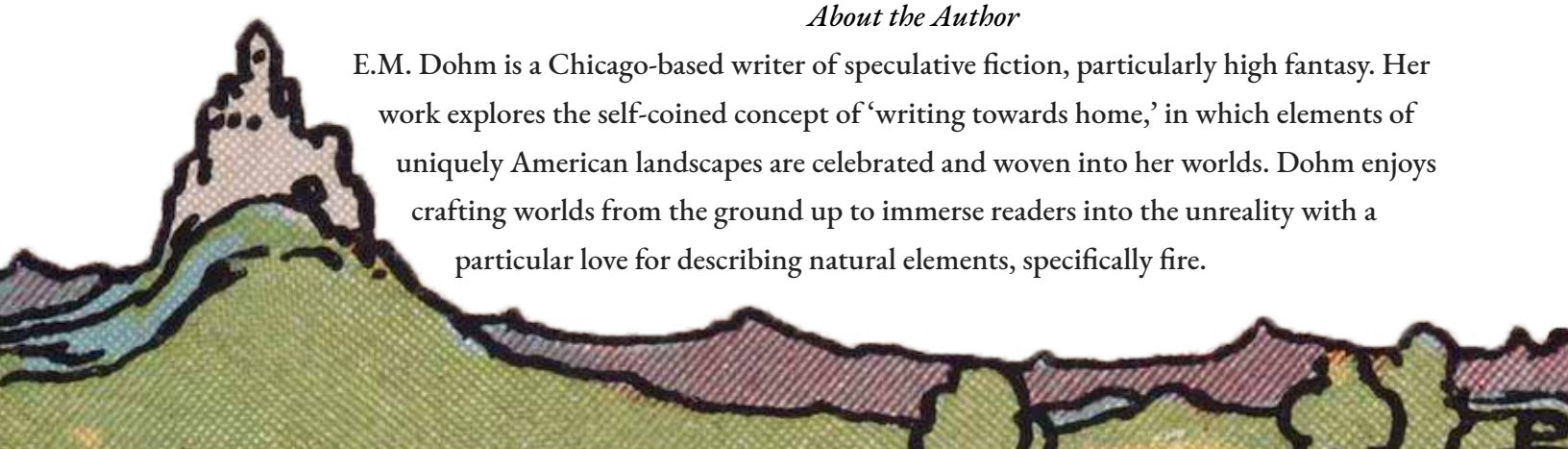
A maw dripping poison.

The Master of the Forest blinks his abyssal eyes and his branches extend, silencing the small thief before it can scream. The sap from its body is wrong. Still sticky, like that of his children, but red. Splattering on the ground in an ugly imitation of rose blossoms as the Heart cocks his head. He often forgets the monster sap is warm, hot, as if meant to burn and scald rather than flow.

Maggots make quick work of its body as the little thief becomes swallowed by Decay and dirt. The Forest-Keeper cracks a smile and steps onward into the rigid world the monsters created for themselves.

About the Author

E.M. Dohm is a Chicago-based writer of speculative fiction, particularly high fantasy. Her work explores the self-coined concept of 'writing towards home,' in which elements of uniquely American landscapes are celebrated and woven into her worlds. Dohm enjoys crafting worlds from the ground up to immerse readers into the unreality with a particular love for describing natural elements, specifically fire.





The Basilisk Rider

About the Artist

Eva Toorenent, also known as Evaboneva, is a freelance artist and illustrator. She grew up in Heemstede/Amsterdam and currently resides in Zandvoort. Eva specializes in fantasy, surreal, and imaginative art, drawing inspiration from local folklore, history, and the surrealism movement.

Her focus is on narrative art, and her creations have appeared in various publications, galleries, and entertainment productions. You can learn more about her work on her website at evaboneva.com.



understanding the tarot

Suit of Swords

Swords is the suit of *clarity*, *language*, and *truth*. It is the suit of what the mind can no longer stay blind to. Its judgement does not arrive in fire or in ledgers. Instead, it is an **intellectual reckoning** that arrives in a single sentence, plainly spoken, that the world will not let you unhear. This is the suit of the person who steps back across a threshold expecting to find what they left behind, but discovers that the threshold was the only thing that remained. Swords does not punish the dreamer for dreaming. It punishes the dreamer for waking up too late. The truth in this suit is not cruel because it lies, it is cruel because it has been true the whole time. The reckoning of Swords is the realization that the words by which you knew yourself—princess, hero, beloved, child—no longer describe what you are. And there is no spell, no quest, no door, by which they can be returned.



ROSAMUND'S RETURN

Katarina Dulude

Long did Princess Rosamund revel with her people after the Dark Sorcerer had been defeated, and his monstrous aberrations banished from the kingdom. For many days and many nights, there was only celebration—warm summer eves of feasting, mirth and merriment, raucous laughter, and endless dancing.

Princess Rosamund had lost count of how many days of jubilation had passed before something extraordinary happened. Prince Astrum, the True Prince who had disappeared long before her arrival into the land, had returned after one hundred years, just as he was fated to by the last chapter of the Great Prophecy, the only part that had remained incomplete. Princess Rosamund wondered why he couldn't have shown up sooner and helped them battle against the Dark Sorcerer. If any of the inhabitants of the land shared her opinion, however, they did not voice it.

Somewhat apologetically, Princess Rosamund was removed from power, though it was apparent that many expected she would wed Prince Astrum, and together, the two great rulers would usher in a new golden age. The trouble was, Princess Rosamund was not much interested in marrying the mythic prince. Indeed, despite all the festivities, for many days now she had a gnawing sensation in her gut that she was forgetting something, *missing* something, that there was somewhere else she was meant to be, but she could not quite put her finger on where.



Her advisor, Gallus, had told her with undisguised excitement in his voice that the Prince would very much like to speak with her in the afternoon, in the Enchanted Garden. She knew what that meant, but it was morning yet, and the princess decided to take a walk up to the cliffs that overlooked the sea. She wasn't sure what compelled her to do so, only that compelled, indeed, she was.

It was a steep incline up to those craggy peaks, and Princess Rosamund, somewhat futilely, lifted her gown to avoid the mud. It was a long while before she reached the top. Overhead, the sky was gray and threatened to downpour. The humid air smelled of peat and heather, and suddenly, overwhelmingly, Princess Rosamund felt an

insurmountable longing for something she could not name, something just out of reach. Unable to place the feelings that clawed to get out, a scream erupted from her. And suddenly, it all came flooding back.

She was not far, not far at all. Just around here, there was a cave. It was from that cave that she had entered this land, and it was from that cave that she would exit again. It was only a few steps more before she found it, the cave's inky black mouth narrower than she remembered, but it was unmistakably the place. Rosamund recalled now that she had been young when she first came to the kingdom. Inside, the cave was cool and damp, and a part of her was reluctant to go on. What if she was wrong? The memories were hazy, what if that faraway place was nothing but a dream? Screwing her courage to the sticking place, she resolved that whether it was or not, she had to find out.

It was only a few minutes, it seemed, before she began to see light peaking out. She moved more quickly now, scrambling her way out, her velvet gown all but ruined, though she hardly cared anymore. She emerged, breathless, her heart pounding in her chest, and sure enough. She was back. She was home. Up ahead, exactly where it had always been, was the Metcalf family home! From a distance, it looked exactly as it had been, though she noted, strangely, there were more houses nearby. Indeed, many shops and houses lined what used to be endless, untamed heather and gorse.



Rosamund frowned, but she was not deterred. She hurried on toward her home. She had run away sometime ago over—Oh, what was it? Something quite silly and foolish, she was sure. It did not matter now. She had forgotten, forgotten her mother and her father and even her sister Janie somehow, but she was home now. She was home.

When she arrived at the house, she found the periwinkle paint was much fresher than she remembered. *Dad must have finally repainted it*, Rosamund thought, a smile upon her lips. How many times her mother had asked him to, and how many times he had told her, "Next week."

"Daddy! Mummy!" Rosamund cried elatedly at the door. In her small leather satchel, she had held onto her key, even in the past remembering what the object meant to her. She fished it out now and inserted it in the door, but found it did not fit. *How*

queer, she thought, *perhaps they've changed the locks as well.*

Somebody had heard her calling, and the door swung open. Rosamund's elated smile fell quickly from her face. There was a man, clean cut, but with dark circles lining his eyes. A young girl with curling locks peeked at her shyly behind him. Who were these people?

"May I help you?" the man asked warily.

"You're not my father," Rosamund uttered in disbelief.

"I should say not," the man replied irritably.

"Who is it, Grant?" a woman's voice called.

"Some bedraggled teenager," he called back.

"Are you a princess?" the young child asked, entranced by Rosamund's gown that, despite the mud, still retained its mystique.

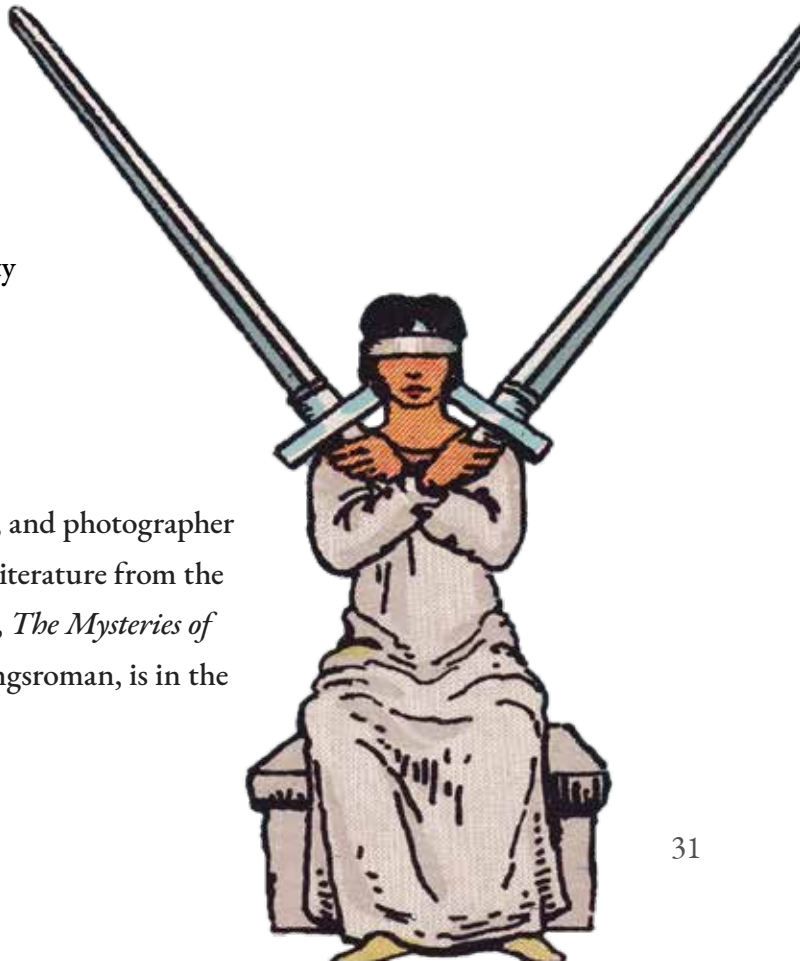
The man returned his attention to Rosamund and stepped in front of his child protectively. "Miss, is there a reason you've come knocking on our door?"

"This is my family's home," she said matter-of-factly, though she was still baffled and reeling.

"This is my home, and my family's. I don't know who you are, Miss, but I suggest you take your leave now." Unceremoniously, her father's old door was slammed in her face.

Rosamund didn't see the old woman who sat in a rocking chair and gazed out the window. The loss she'd felt back in the kingdom, the longing, the grief... She thought returning to where she came from would end it, but it had only grown tenfold. Rosamund wouldn't wait by the door any longer—she started down the road, not certain where she was going, and so she did not hear the old woman call, "Rosie!"

"There now, Mum," the woman in the house soothed. "Your sister's gone. She's been gone seventy years."



About the Author

Katarina Dulude is an American writer, performer, and photographer based in Glasgow. She holds a master's in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow and her first full-length play, *The Mysteries of Aunt Eileen's*, part gothic parody, part queer Bildungsroman, is in the process of being staged.



Medium: Wax Color Pencils

Quetzalcoatl Announces the Fall of Tenochtitlan

According to Aztec legend, eight ominous omens appeared in the decade preceding the Spanish's arrival to Mexico in 1519. Like the Judgment card, which depicts an unstoppable reckoning summoning the world to account for itself, history revealed these omens to be not just warnings, but verdicts. This drawing holds two of those omens in conversation.

In the foreground stands a creature of strange power holding one of these omens. The Quetzalcoatl—a small, semi-aquatic bird native to the lakes and reed-edged shores of the Valley of Anahuac, what is now Mexico City—carried embedded in its forehead a disc of polished obsidian capable of showing what was yet to come. When the bird was brought before Moctezuma II, the last ruler of the Aztec Empire, he looked into that mirror and saw men riding upon deer. This vision would soon come to pass when the Spanish conquistadors arrived to the capital of Tenochtitlan on their horses, creatures entirely unknown to the Aztec world...a vision of the invasion to come.

Behind the Quetzalcoatl, another omen of destruction burns. The Templo Mayor was the great double-pyramided heart of the Aztec Empire and had twin shrines: on the left, the god of rain and sustenance Tlaloc was honored; while on the right, Huitzilopochtli, god of war and the sun's relentless hunger. One night, without cause or warning, Huitzilopochtli's shrine burst into flames from within. The fire answered to nothing; it could not be extinguished by any hand.



Medium: Color Ink

He Comes from Tlahuiztlampa

This drawing is a tribute to Xipe Totec, one of the four pillars of the Aztec pantheon: the four Tezcatlipocas, each governing a cardinal direction and the philosophical world that direction contains. Xipe Totec is the Red Tezcatlipoca, keeper of the path to the birthplace of the sun. This path east isn't simply a cardinal direction, but a way of living. It is the way of the artisan and the farmer, the direction from which light and sustenance both emerge.

His name means "Our Flayed Lord," a title earned twice over.

The first flaying belongs to maize. In the beginning, corn refused to yield to human appetite. Xipe Totec answered by flaying himself, using his own skin to wash and boil the grains until they relented, developing the process now known as "nixtamalización," which softens the kernel, eases digestion, and releases nutrients the body would otherwise never receive. The method works because it does to maize exactly what the god did to himself: it removes the grain's resistant outer skin.

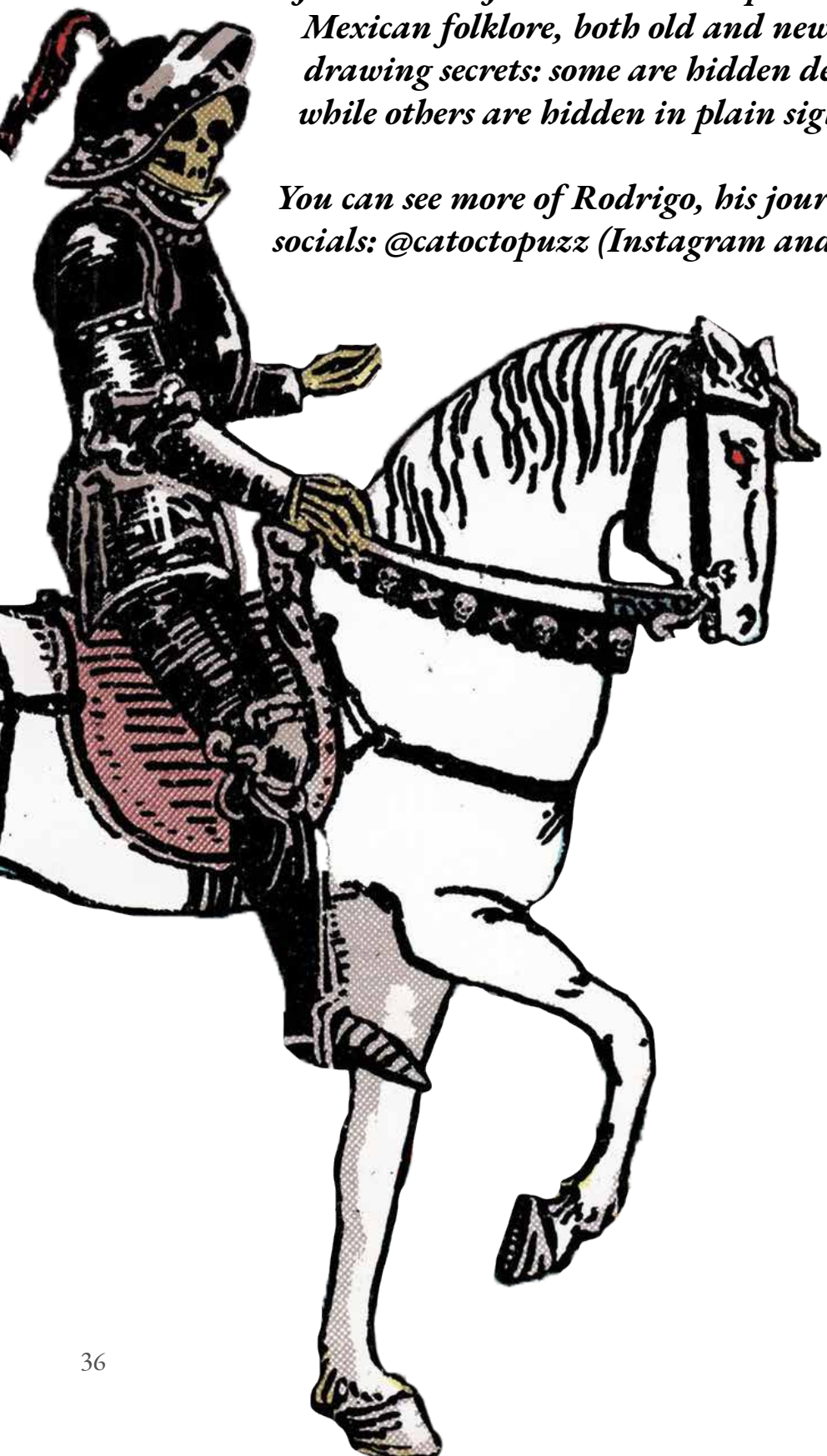


The second flaying belongs to spring. Like The Empress—tarot's embodiment of nature's regenerative power—Xipe Totec is the force that compels a seed to shed its shell and push toward sunlight, like the snake that knows when it is time to discard its skin to grow. He is not merely a god of sacrifice, but the intelligence inside transformation. He is the understanding that what is left behind is never lost, but is retruned to the earth to become something new.

About the Artist

Rodrigo Mendiola is a Mexican painter from Mexico City. Most of his work is focused on either personal experiences, magic, or Mexican folklore, both old and new. He describes his work as drawing secrets: some are hidden deep within human nature, while others are hidden in plain sight.

You can see more of Rodrigo, his journey, and his work on his socials: @catoctopuzz (Instagram and TikTok).



Tall, Dark, and Empty: The Shadow Daddy Trope in Romantasy

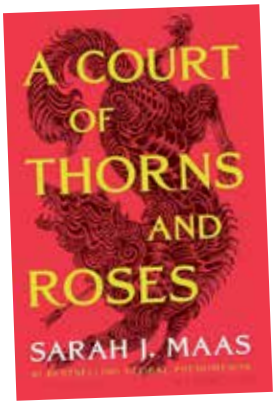
Amy Kousourou

Recently, I started reading obsessively again, and as a result of that, I ended up in the romantasy section of the bookstore. I picked up some books that were 'BookTok sensations,' others that were self-published and less well-known, and some that just had pretty covers. Several of them inspired rants and others were quite well written. It was a pretty mixed bag. Yet they all had one big flaw.

The male love interest.

So many of these men had something in common: In almost every book I read, they had the exact same description. It could have been the same mysterious man/vampire/faerie/assassin in an alternate universe. Black hair, dark eyes, tan skin (but still white, of course), a facial structure you could carve cheese with, and a large, muscular body. At first, I thought it was a coincidence. Maybe I was just unlucky. But after devouring romantasy after romantasy, it became clearer and clearer that this was a trend. A trend that I discovered had the most unfortunate name...

'Shadow Daddy.'



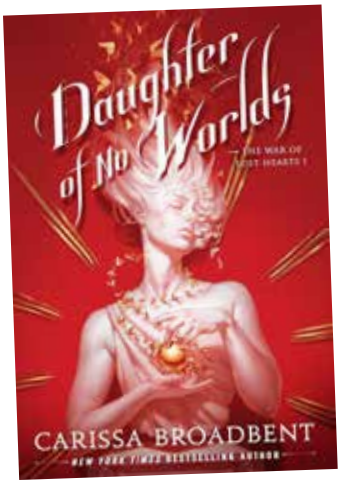
The term is based primarily on the character of Rhysand from the series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas. This series is what propelled the romantasy genre into popularity—it had existed before but was less widespread then. These characters are the dark and brooding morally grey heroes with a tragic backstory and an often unhealthy relationship with the female main character. Sometimes they are pitted against a more traditional 'good guy' love interest who turns out to be the true villain. Fanart of these characters is frequently interchangeable because their appearance and expressions are so similar.



I find that books with otherwise interesting plots can be spoiled by this trope. *The Knight and the Moth* by Rachel Gillig had fascinating worldbuilding. The main character Sybil, along with her sisters, lives at a cathedral and 'drowns' in order to see future visions bestowed to her by the Omens, or gods. A knight by the name of Rodrick arrives to escort the king on his journey around his new kingdom. Rodrick doesn't believe in the gods that show Sybil the future, but she ends up

relying on him when her sisters go missing. The magic is dark and the setting is very gothic, but readers still find the prevalent Shadow Daddy trope in this story through the character of Rodrick. Rodrick has no magic, but he is tall, dark, and handsome and is willing to lay down his life for Sybil after a very short period of time. He is also contrasted with King Benedict Castor III, known as Benji, who, although younger than Sybil and not normally in the running for the love interest, is far more conventionally 'good,' humbling himself before his subjects during his pilgrimage. Rodrick has a troubled past growing up on the street. In the end, Benji betrays them, and Rodrick was the good guy all along. Horribly predictable.

However, not all Shadow Daddies are equal, and some can be described more as Shadow Daddy–adjacent. Some male characters start compelling and then somehow crash and burn when the main female character is introduced. In *Daughter of No Worlds* by Carissa Broadbent, once again, the magic system and political intrigue drew me in. This is a world in which slavery and war are rife in certain areas of the world, and those with a certain type of magic are born with albinism, while others have some patches of colour on their skin and hair and are called 'fractured.' The male romantic interest, Max, is quite interesting on his own. He is a former soldier who was considered a war hero despite involuntarily massacring hundreds to end the conflict. His behaviour towards others avoids the stereotypical, overly aggressive, edgy, and dramatic Shadow Daddy with a tragic backstory, and instead gives him a sympathetic and grounded personality. He is also East Asian instead of the usual dark-and-tan-but-somehow-white man that prevails in the genre. However, once the female main character Tisaanah appears in his life, he loses all agency and becomes a vehicle for her story.





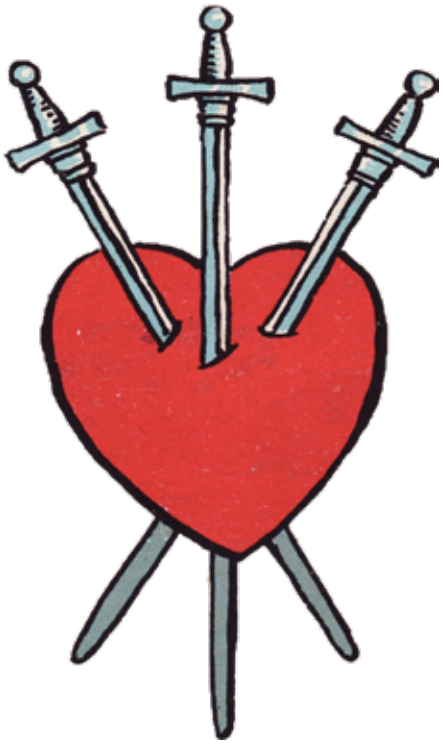
Tisaanah is, unfortunately, a very boring character that fits many Mary Sue tropes. Despite having, at most, six months of training, she beats masters of the magic craft. She is beloved by everyone who meets her, even when she has barely spoken to them. And she is incredibly good, with no other personality traits. Tisaanah has no faults and always chooses the right decision, and in doing this, inspires everyone around her to follow her when she has no training or knowledge. Max especially has no reason to listen to her when he is far more knowledgeable, and it is established that he has many trust issues, even among long-held friends. Yet he is willing to relive the horrific murder of his entire family for Tisaanah's sake. The male love interest who



adores a nonsensically talented and personality-free female main character beyond all reason, often in an 'insta-lust' scenario, is a frequently seen trope with these archetypes.

Despite my criticism, these books and these characters are very popular. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros, *When the Moon Hatched* by Sarah A. Parker, and *Quicksilver* by Callie Hart, to name a few, have, at minimum, 4 stars on Goodreads. Even books outside the romantasy section are caught in it: *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Burdugo, although YA fantasy and not romantasy, has the Darkling, who fits many of the Shadow Daddy characteristics. It's quite sad when stories that have a good premise are ruined by the need to add the same predictable male character. When he's reduced to just a one note, edgy sex object, it brings down not only the male character himself, but the whole book along with him. He now exists purely for the readers and female main character to lust after, transformed from someone who could have their own agency to a man that exists solely to be an enabler for her plot.

But perhaps I'm the problem, and I should accept that inexplicably large, dark, and imposing men are the future—even when they lose their entire personality, however thin it may be, upon meeting their romantic interest.



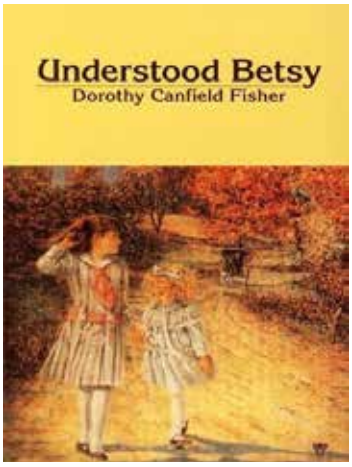
About the Author

In between gaming and petting her animals (dogs, cats, birds, snakes, spiders, and Adam), Amy Kousourou completed an MLitt in Creative Writing in 2025. Last year, she was the sole organiser of a fandom zine "Enchantment" and spent much of her time glaring at spreadsheets. Amy writes ecohorror, fanfiction, and has a persistent brainworm for depressed androids.



Deskilled: Understanding the Impact of Generative AI Through the Lens of Understood Betsy

Katarina Dulude



When contemplating artificial intelligence within the context of fiction, science fiction stories are an obvious way we might conceptualize and understand the impacts of generative AI. A far less obvious, yet surprisingly relevant, story is Dorothy Canfield Fisher's early twentieth-century children's novel *Understood Betsy*. Contemporaneous with better-known works such as L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Fisher's novel, though far from science fiction, nonetheless explores the effects of "never [finding] out a single thing for [oneself]" (Canfield Fisher 20). Specifically, despite being over a century old and not actually featuring any artificial intelligence to speak of, parallels may be found between *Understood Betsy* and generative AI because of the role deskilling plays in both.

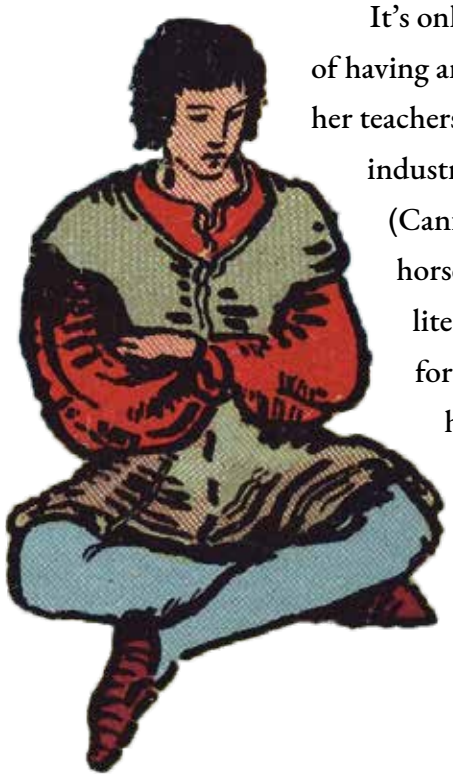
Published in 1916, *Understood Betsy* follows nine-year-old Elizabeth Ann, a shy and fearful orphan, raised by two distant aunts. The younger of the two, Aunt Frances, always wanted a child and therefore shelters and coddles Elizabeth Ann in every way possible, seldom leaving her sight except for school. Elizabeth Ann has never walked to school by herself, has been taught to fear anything that makes her Aunt Frances nervous, be it dogs or school exams, and has only vaguely heard of "chores" as a cruel form of abuse which her relations, the Putneys, give to children. However, when her Aunt Harriet is ill and must travel for her health, accompanied by Aunt Frances, Elizabeth Ann is abruptly sent to live with her Putney cousins in Vermont. There, for the first time in her life, nobody is clearing any challenges for her before they even arise. And after a year? She grows from timid, nervous Elizabeth Ann to capable and assured Betsy.



So what does generative artificial intelligence have to do with it? Though some Luddites such as myself are refusing to touch generative AI with a six-foot pole, it has rapidly taken over the way that our society as a whole

engages with the world. People ask it to write emails for them, to generate fake photos and videos of their friends and family, for dating advice, for bedtime stories for their children, and, recently, one Japanese woman even married her AI boyfriend. There's so much to say on this, but for my purposes, I'm going to be focusing on generative AI's impact on education and creativity.

I work primarily in educational settings, and I've been struck by the fact that over the past year, generative AI has become so much more normalized in universities even compared to a few years ago, when I was pursuing my master's degree. I have heard so many students say "I'll ask 'Chat'" when they have questions and admit to using generative AI to write their essays for them. Studies confirm this; according to a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute and Kortext, a digital e-textbook provider, 92 percent of students in British universities used generative AI such as ChatGPT for their assessments in 2025, the most popular use being the generation of text. On top of that, professors and university policy more broadly have begun to capitulate. While this is not nearly so common, I have heard professors across various fields admit to using AI for things like generating their lessons and PowerPoints, and, depending on the degree, universities such as the one I work at do permit generative AI use for things like editing and research, often requesting students cite their use of generative AI. This, however, is a slippery slope to generating ideas, and furthermore, even if a student isn't using generative AI to generate ideas—and we know many are—students aren't actually editing or doing research themselves. As a result, valuable skills like editing and research, once prized as essential to earning a degree, are declining among students. This is a phenomenon which, in their reluctance to prohibit AI use, universities practically endorse. Students are effectively being deskilled through use of AI, and this brings us back to *Understood Betsy*.



It's only when she stays with her Putney cousins that Elizabeth Ann is capable of having an original thought of her own. Prior to that, be it Aunt Frances or her teachers, "Somebody had always been explaining things to Elizabeth Ann so industriously that she had never found out a single thing for herself before" (Canfield Fisher 20). When Uncle Henry picks her up from the station in his horse and carriage and asks her to drive while he works out some figures, he literally hands her the reins before she can refuse. She suddenly has to think for herself and figure out how driving horses works. When she figures out how to guide them, the narrative tells us, "that was the first time she had ever had a whole thought of her very own" (Canfield Fisher 20). Likewise, when we ask AI to generate ideas for us, we're impeding our own ability to think critically or creatively ourselves, and indeed, a recent Microsoft study found that use of AI actively erodes critical thinking. It's only when Elizabeth Ann doesn't have Aunt Frances or

teachers telling her things that her "brain [wakes] up" (Canfield Fisher 20). This manifests again and again throughout the novel—the first morning Elizabeth Ann wakes up on the farm, she takes a long time to get out of bed because somebody had always come to get her. A long time passes before it occurs to her that she can simply get out of bed and get dressed without assistance. She has been rendered so dependent on other people that every experience, from brushing her own hair to cooking applesauce, is a new one to her. What's more, she has no knowledge of how the world around her functions, nor its history. She has no idea what butter is made of, to the shock of her Aunt Abigail, who makes her own. When her Uncle Henry comes to her defense, he points out that she's a city child who likely knows things they don't, like how cement is laid. Elizabeth Ann is initially pleased until they ask her questions about it, and she realizes she has no idea about any of the details they ask about. She answers, "'I never noticed,' [...] in a small voice" (Canfield Fisher 38).

While one may make a case that with technological advancements will always come some level of deskilling—for instance, after the invention of the washing machine, how many of us are familiar with the arduous process of handwashing our clothes with a washboard?—I would argue that making a necessity of daily life faster and easier is a far cry from surrendering our intellectual and creative development to machines that cannot think or feel, but only regurgitate that which others have already thought or felt.

Understood Betsy demonstrates why we need to push back against generative AI. Though Aunt Frances is well-intentioned, what she and generative AI have in common is that they are both responsible for impeding any room for intellectual or creative development. When separated from her aunt, Elizabeth Ann is able to try things for herself, and as a result, have genuine learning experiences that teach her things and build her confidence. She learns and grows because she is given the independence to think for herself, to come to her own conclusions. As generative AI grows more and more pervasive in schools and in art, we are, on a mass scale, undergoing a reversal of the progress Betsy makes in the novel, not needing to think because we can trust "Chat" to do it for us.



Reference:

Canfield Fisher, Dorothy. *Understood Betsy*. EbooksLib, 2009.

About the Author

Katarina Dulude is an American writer, performer, and photographer based in Glasgow. She holds a master's in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow and her first full-length play, *The Mysteries of Aunt Eileen's*, part gothic parody, part queer Bildungsroman, is in the process of being staged.

A Letter of Thanks

A literary journal is a small miracle of cooperation, and Issue 2 of *Scattered Flock Journal* is no exception. So many hands shaped these pages, and we want to take a moment to thank them.

To our contributors—the writers, essayists, and artists whose work fills this issue—thank you for trusting us with what you have made. The stories you wrote, the arguments you sharpened, the images you rendered, all of it required the courage to put something true into the world. We are honored to be its home.

To our core team and volunteers, drawn from the alumni of the University of Glasgow's MLitt in Fantasy Literature—thank you for the many hours spent shaping and promoting this issue. It's your careful work that turns a manuscript into a magazine. Scattered Flock exists because of your shared belief that this work is worth doing, and worth doing exceptionally.

And to you, our readers—thank you for being here. For Issue 1, for Issue 2, and for all the issues to come. A journal is only a journal when it is read, and you make this one real every time you open it.

Thank you for answering the call. We're so glad you're part of this flock.

With deep gratitude,

Annemarie Whitehurst
Editor in Chief



