

**ERATO'S ARCHIVE:
EDITION - HAUNTED**

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Dear Reader,

2024/2025 saw a big reworking of Erato's Magazine. From a new emphasis on visual works, a new logo and presentation format, as well as a shift away from its own Website to being hosted on the Euphorion Site in the form of Pdf files, we unfortunately have had to leave behind the old site and style.

In an effort to preserve what has already been created, this Pdf is a unstylized compilation of the Autumn 2023 Edition of Erato's Magazine, "Haunted".

We hope you enjoy this Archived version of the old Edition and can draw inspiration for your own works and pieces!

All the best,
Chloe

Commissar of Internal Affairs, Board XVI

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POETRY

A Violent Poem

Trigger Warning for Sexual Violence

“A violent poem”

I have applied to his idiotically soft body the following devices:

guns

fire

a hammer to the head.

My bare fists

my bare teeth

my bare screams.

So when he appeared outside of my memory

I could not understand why he dared to glow like some... baby.

Therefore I think that somewhere,

under his shirt,

on the side of his belly,

or maybe on his hairy thigh

there must be a scar.

Very long, very red.

And it hurts quite a bit, I assume:

something like a very young girl suddenly being made a woman.

Dody Ventura

The ghost of my driving instructor returns

The ghost of my driving instructor returns

When I step in a car

It gets bizarre

My backseat driver won't shut up

Unsolicited advice

Anything but nice

My driving instructor died last week

He died in a car crash

Caused by me

My backseat driver won't shut up

I was happy with my life

Until I went for that drive

His death was not my fault

It was after his lessons

That I broke the asphalt

My backseat driver won't shut up

Such a chatty ghost

Cause I need it most

I have a ghost of a chance

For my driving skills to expand

"Use the BRAKE!!!

Then give it some spirit,"

He will say

For my own merit

My backseat driver won't shut up

I plug my ears when I go

Out on the road

My backseat driver won't shut up

I drove straight into a wall

That didn't help, at all

Teaching me till the dawn of day

He can be damn sure

That I won't pay

My backseat driver won't shut up

I've never had an interest in hell

But now it sounds swell

My backseat driver won't shut up

That eerie entity

The only one who hears him is me

Written by Erika Frieswijk

Haunted by loving

Last Survivor

the roses withered
the roofs collapsed
the alleys came to a dead end
the butterflies sank into the cocoon of death.

it is not heavenly anymore
it is not solar
no smile
bring a candle
close your eyes
come with me to the cemeteries
I am the last survivor...

Kiss

No memory is easily buried
you will remember me;
In the harsh winter,
when death kisses your forehead...

immortal

Your absence chains the memories to my being

time flies
without passing;

love passes
And sadness remains eternal

It hurts the heart
and it slowly digs into my existence.

time flies
without passing;
love passes
and sadness remains eternal...

Airport Funeral

Airport Funeral

The figure stalks down the tarmac,
Weightless, escapes to the highway.
Shuffles through street signs sentences incomplete
As they live fully the aftermath of Babel
And choose to speak nothing at all.
Road acidic in nostalgia
Road kept away from the present
I do not have hope,
Even though,
Even though, Ouroboros is not a palindrome.
So listen,
The silent flag still sways in the wind.
I wait for the Fourth of July's dawn,
And the mowed lawn far away embraces droplets melted by the sun.
With hubris, falsest friend,
Tender enemy,
I ask of you one thing,
To haunt only what is better than me.
Knowing, so certainly, that even if I am an endless continuum,
My time will mean nothing at all.
Yet, as I melt into the cracks between the sanpietrini,
And the scent of smog thrashes my lungs to gray from green,
I beg to celebrate my funeral in the sky,
Then, in shrunken, spiteful vie,
Proclaim the most fitting *Damnatio Memoriae* after I die.

E.M. Colazingari

SHORT STORIES

Dancing Without Music

by Berke Yazan

Here is a short blurb to accompany the work:

In a book I read as a kid, Terry Pratchett said this: “The objection to fairy stories is that they tell children there are dragons. But children have always know there are dragons. Fairy stories tell children that dragons can be killed.” That stuck with me and became the inspiration for this short story. I don’t know if this is a fairy story, or science-fiction, or a weird religious allegory. However, I am certain that this is not for children. Here it is, a man trying to kill his own dragons, and find music. Enjoy.

Dancing without Music

%100, the battery proudly displayed without blinking. He banged his head really hard on it - then again, and again. For nearly a million solar years- or maybe a billion, he was staring at the same three digits over and over. He crawled to the tiny corner of the pod, then cried for a while. After all, he had time. It was morbidly funny; he tried to escape the thing that haunted him, only to be trapped with it forever.

Hertz was adrift in the vastness of space, in a medical pod designed to keep its inhabitant alive in every way possible. With its nearly perfect energy loop, technically, this one-person pod could have lasted forever. This was really unfortunate for Hertz, because he was more a fan of *not* lasting forever. He was in a perpetual cycle of unrelenting horror. Everytime he closed his eyes, he was surrounded by piercing screams and grotesque entities.

He had tried to destroy the pod or himself countless times, each attempt failing miserably. It regenerated everything, organic and inorganic. It also made sleeping impossible, as it didn’t let the body shut down. Yet nightmares, they would surface from every crack they could find. It was hard to be alone forever, but being alone with his own thoughts and fears? That was something else. He had a plan, and was working on it for *some* time. *All stories* he thought, *if continued long enough, end in death. Time for mine.*

He had a simple example: A brain that tries to simulate a three-handed rabbit, on a unicycle, juggling live fireworks. This was exponentially harder than dreaming, as the brain had to calculate everything instead of tricking itself. But this wouldn’t use up the energy he needed. He continued, what about 2 rabbits, or 10, or a trillion? Normally, the brain would get damaged before reaching such a point. He thanked his old friend. The pod would repair any neural connection. But theoretically, it had a limit. If you created something absurdly complex, the pod shouldn’t be able to cope with it. He was going to turn his brain into a supercomputer, to die. He closed his eyes. *Time for some rabbits and fireworks.*

He stood there in the void, amidst absolute darkness. He wasn’t alone, and he wasn’t welcomed. *Let’s do this properly.*

“Let there be light.” He uttered. This was a dance between creator and creation, but he didn’t know how to dance, and there wasn’t any music. *Let’s learn some moves.* He smiled at the unbearable beings.

After an incomprehensible amount of time and excruciating agony, finally, a colorless light emerged. Pushing back the entities, as they retreated into the emptiness. Behind them, they left a back door. He knew what it was, and he knew he wasn't ready yet.

He checked the battery, %100. He believed in the plan.

First came stars; he spread them like glitter. They were illusions rather than celestial bodies. He would finish them later. Then came the soil he was standing on, soft but stable. Burying the vampires of envious hesitations. Then the water, drowning the ghosts of wicked sorrows. He was getting the hang of it, but still, everytime he closed his eyes, horrors were there.

He created different shapes and studied their movement. Circles were the hardest, as he tried to remember what he called *the pi stuff*. He learned them all, mastered the labyrinth of endless doubt, then demolished its walls. Revealed behind them again, a black door. He continued, *not yet*. Somewhere along the line, wheels of the apocalypse started turning as the battery lost its third digit. Ironically, its master didn't notice. He was struggling.

Why was it difficult? Gods handled their demons. What was wrong with him? He knew some dance moves now, so where was the music? He created a cube, gave it two eyes and a smile. *Cute*, He thought. This was His first true creation. Then came oceans and mountains. Dispersing the fumes of lingering apathy. He moved on. Creating life was more challenging, it was harder than galaxies. But He had time. After an indescribable amount of it, this too, was done. Out of the dirt of His anxieties; flowers, trees, and rabbits sprouted. Humans took their time.

He looked upon all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good. Actually, it was dope. He rested, looking down on everything He created. It was raining, painted blonde by the sunrise. A golden shower, a truly beautiful spectacle. It was silent. After this time, He was actually happy.

Then came the fireworks.

He opened His eyes, %31.69. Dread came back. *No, when, how fast? Not now, please.* He panicked. *No, please. I want to live. I changed my mind, I want to live.*

The panic grew larger. Clouds gathered, sky dimmed, beginning of the end was marked. The first act was over, the horrors of the things He *couldn't do*. Now was the time for the things He *did*. Whispers of regret entangled Him, pulling Him towards the door He had been avoiding. *It's now or never then*, He knocked. A woman opened.

"Hey."

"You?" She spat out confused, as her neck tightened. "Is this a sick joke?"

"I don't - *look*, I don't have much time." Ancient trees faded into void.

Grace brushed off, she was really pissed at him. “You know, my grandmother always said to me that the first natural resources to run out on Earth were dateable men with common sense.”

“I know, please don’t start with this again. I know how you feel and I’m - I’m sorry, okay? I’m really extremely sorry. I’m an idiot. I’m objectively a bad person.”

“Oh you are sorry? That solves everything, thanks, goodbye.” The flora and the fauna dissolved into wind.

“Please listen, I thought I had no other choice.”

“And?”

“I’m here for forgiveness.”

“Too late. We could have solved everything, you just had to talk.”

“I *am* talking now.”

“Yeah, it only took you an eternity. Nice.” The oceans spiraled into infinite silence.

“Please, Grace, I didn’t know. Stuff sometimes happens, and you don’t mean that to happen, but it’s something so stupid that fixing it becomes impossible. I know we - I, had communication issues.”

“Go on.”

“I was tr-”

“We were on the same side, you always forgot that. We could have fixed everything together. Sorry, go on.”

“I thoug-”

“What? You thought what? Did you think you were the only one in the galaxy that had problems?”

Silence filled the room. “You are right.” He paused. “I’m here to say that I am going to therapy. Well, it’s actually a horrifically messed up eternal divine struggle, but still. Well, it’s actually now collapsing on itself.” A longer pause. “The main point is, I saw the sunrise, and it was *beautiful*”

“If that’s true, that’s great for you, truly. But it’s a bit late for that.” The mountains eroded to dust.

“I made this cube for you.” He hastily took a cube out of his pocket.

She rotated it in her hands. It was a funny cube. “Why is he smiling?” The nostalgia of good times hit them, the laughter, the *music*. The ground beneath them intensified its tremors, and he struggled to maintain it. Ironically, maybe love wasn’t sustainable for a creator. That would explain certain things.

“It’s his birthday.” He bit His inner lips, refusing to let any tears escape.

“Cute.” She tried to keep her composure, “How old is it?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She wiped her eyes with the top of her nails. “Hertz, it’s cool and all, but I have been dead for an absurdly long time. This is not real, you should know.”

He knew. “I’m tired.” He said slowly. “Really tired.”

Grace wasn’t sorry for *Him*, but she was sorry for *him*. She knew he didn’t mean it.

“Want a hug?” She asked.

Hertz nodded, slowly collapsing on her.

At last, the stars crumbled out of His reality like cookies made of shattered hopes. Not the greatest kind of cookies. One supernova at a time, they created a cosmic applause. The lights were gone, taking the stage with them. Hertz wasn’t able to finish his Divine COmedy. Unfortunately, death didn’t discriminate between the sinners and the saints.

He opened his eyes, a weak *O* illuminated his last breaths. He had time, but not anymore. That time slipped away when, in an impulsive act, he entered this pod, input random coordinates, and fried its console. He only wanted a silent ending in a forgotten corner of the space. He didn’t intend to destroy the rest of their ship. Grace was lost in that metal storm, never to come back.

Hertz cried his life out, alone. No one left to hear.

The pod drifted aimlessly in cosmic solitude. Leaving behind echoes of a troubled life. THose echoes were, sadly, silent. In the end, he had learned how to dance - yet still, there was no music.

City of the Dead

by Fien Hop

I had died four days ago.

A faceless nurse gave me my clothes back, a black military jacket, pants, boots, the whole uniform, while Violet was waiting impatiently for me at the exit. She was stomping her foot. The nurse and she were wearing the same standard dress, worn by nurses all over the country, but Violet's was a more vibrant shade of white.

I ignored her impatiently as I signed my release forms.

Sergeant Lara Bell, the forms read. *Extensive injury due to a gas explosion. Third and second degree burns to arms, upper torso and face.* I only vaguely remembered what happened during the incident. My head was still filled with a cloud of black smoke. I was still way too hazy to be let out on my own like that but the hospital was overcrowded and Violet was watching over me. I looked at her again and saw her staring at my face. I knew in theory that I looked horrible with half my face used as the fire's chew toy, but I hadn't looked yet. No mirrors in the hospital for exactly this reason. Violet made a gesture at me so I'd hurry up.

I was impatient to get out too. Now that I was awake, bandaged and medicated I intended to get away from the cacophony of coughing that filled the halls of the hospital.

I put on my jacket and noticed that it was two sizes too big and not the one I had been wearing when I was carried in. Of course it wasn't. It probably had been burned with all the rest of my belongings. I didn't mind, it covered up some of the burn wounds that were spread out over my body.

I went over to Violet who was still waiting for me at the exit. A patient with a terrible cough walked past her and almost bumped her shoulder. She swerved and let out an annoyed sigh.

'Let's get out of here as soon as possible. It reeks of death in here.'

I nodded.

'Besides. You have a job to do.'

I followed Violet into the dreary outside.

It was as if everything was covered in ash. Maybe it was. Everything, even the grass it seemed, was black and white. The city streets were empty except for a few lone automobiles. The only thing that was still in color was Violet. Despite her paperwhite skin, black hair and gray eyes, she was a rainbow in this nasty subdued world.

'Okay Sergeant Bell, let's go get your honorable discharge check first,' she declared before reaching for my arm. I took a step back, dodging her.

'I thought we were going to see the colonel first?'

'Two birds, one stone.'

'Just seems crude. Coming up there like hey, remember that gas tank explosion and the woman that died in there? I want to see her body and know how she turned up there. Also, can I have money?'

Violet rolled her eyes.

'That does not sound half as crude as you think it does.'

She was right, of course, but I didn't say that. She started walking towards the city hall where the colonel said he would be.

We walked through the empty streets in silence and I felt Violet's horror at the silence surrounding us.

The streets were indeed uncannily empty but as the closer we came to city hall the more silhouettes started appearing next to us. Hollow ghosts of people going to get birth certificates and tax refunds. Violet strided through the doors of the large romanesque building with determined steps. I hobbled halfheartedly after her.

We came into a large hall that was filled to the brim with the hollowed out, desperate faces of those that couldn't leave the gray city for whatever reason.

Violet and I made our way through the crowd, her gliding through the people, effortlessly like water, me bumping into everyone. We eventually found our way to the colonel's office.

Due to budget cuts the whole office was no more than a glorified broom closet in which the colonel sat behind a folding table smoking a cigar. He looked up and immediately winced when he saw me. I remembered that half my face had been eaten away by chemical burns.

'Cuban? in these times?' I said as a way of greeting while nodding at the cigar sticking out from under his salt and pepper mustache. Violet lingered in the corner of the room. She was careful not to push over the large stack of paper defying the laws of gravity next to her.

'Lara, you recovered well,' he lied. 'The cuban was a gift from the mayor.'

I whistled.

'Oooh the mayor.'

'Yeah for putting some poor sap in the dirt,' he shrugged. 'You know, like a real war hero.'

He took another drag from the cigar.

'What are you doing in my office, huh Bell?'

'Just wanna get my share of this world's lifeforce.'

'So money?'

'Yeah, money.'

Violet chuckled nervously in the corner. I decided to get this over with faster than a fire so I could get her away from the throat cancer on legs as soon as possible. The colonel put down his cigar in an ashtray and started looking for his checkbook.

He handed me a number and I whistled.

'You and your old lady can get a nice home for yerselves with that,' he said. 'And ya didn't even have to kill anyone for it.'

I rolled my eyes, trying not to show how annoyed I really was at his comment. You get yourself caught up in a gas explosion and people get angry because it wasn't on the battlefield. Jesus Christ almighty.

Violet, when hearing the colonel refer to her tugged on my arm to remind me of the other thing we had come for.

'Thanks old timer,' I said. 'I actually want to ask you something else too.'

I pulled out the photo from my coat and showed it to the colonel.

'This woman was there at the night of the incident. Was a lot less lucky than I was. Any idea what happened to her body?'

He shook his head.

'Sorry Lara. Nothing but ashes left there.'

'What if I have reason to believe that her body was still somewhere?'

'Then you should go down the hall for the disability check because you would be losing it.'

I sighed and got up.

'It was a long shot anyway,' Violet said as she went over to the door with me.

'Thanks for the check,' I said to the colonel.

'Any time dear,' he said. 'Oh and Lara, please invite yourself and your old lady to dinner some time soon. I'd love to meet the girl that managed to tie sergeant Lara Bell down.'

'Sure will,' I said before Violet and I left the office.

Violet and I left city hall through the back of the building. When we arrived outside the streets seemed even more abandoned than usual. I sat down on the curb and let my head rest in my hands.

'Are you okay, Lar?' Violet asked while sitting down next to me.

'Peachy.'

I pulled out the photo again and looked at it.

Even though it was a black and white photo I could still see the red on Violet's cheeks.

I wanted to hug her but I knew deep down that the moment I reached out to the person sitting next to me she would evaporate in my arms.

I looked into Violet's eyes, once the color of meadows in spring, but now sad and ash colored like everything around us. The last time I saw them like that was when the fire tinged them red and we were surrounded by billowing clouds of smoke. Monsters of soot that devoured everything they came into contact with. I just wanted one more chance to swim in those eyes and imagine myself in the spring fields with her.

Now the ghost sitting in front of me had tears in her eyes.

'I'm so sorry Violet,' I said. 'I don't think I will ever find you.'

'It's okay,' she said. 'You don't need to find me. Just let me go.'

'I'll be all alone.'

'For a while maybe. But then time will move forward.'

I closed my eyes so the tears wouldn't escape. Between the sobs coming from my chest, I felt a warm breeze surround me like a hug. Violet pressed a whisper against my lips and I opened my eyes to see her one last time.

There was no one. No pedestrians crossing the streets or birds in the trees. I was sitting alone on the sidewalk.

Marlov: Metro

by Chloe Broodbank

Based on the WDR Radio-Drama Series of the same Name

A knock on my door - that's how it started. Unusual, because normally they just barge in or kick the door down. I could tell this wasn't a normal visit. Another knock. Obviously this wasn't a visit by Moscow's finest or Andropov's goons. A third knock. Now, my interest was piqued or was it my annoyance from being awoken from lovely cognac induced dreams? I grunted, pulling myself out of my office chair. A pool of drool on my desk showed where my head had lain. Staggering to my feet, I caused a mostly empty bottle to fall over. Damn. Ten rubles lost to a clumsy move. I saved what liquid I could before fastening my loosened belt and stumbling over to the door.

A young lady stood there, arm raised to knock again. Either my sudden appearance, or my appearance in general shocked her into standing there, frozen and rooted to the spot. Only after I spoke did she regain her senses.

"Tovarish Beautiful, what brings you to knocking on my door?"

"Are you Marlov?" "Da, last I checked." "Yevgeni Marlov? The Private Investigator?" "Da, and who is this beauty before me, who knows me, but I do not know her?" "I need your help." "Nyet. Go away, little girl, I'm not interested." "No, wait!"

I started closing the door, but she jammed her foot in the gap before it shut. "Please." "Why?" "Sorry?" "Why my help? Why should I help you? For the good of the Motherland? Grow up." "It's my brother, he's missing." "So go inform the police." "They don't care enough to help." "And you think I do?" "I think you're not the police."

Clever girl, I'll grant her that. I opened the door, and she stepped inside. She grimaced at the smell that greeted her. "Take a seat." I grunted, returning to mine, grabbing a half full bottle of Armenian Cognac and pouring a glass for myself along the way. "Now, start from the beginning." She nodded, eyeing the whiskey. "My brother, Andrej, is a driver for the Metro. We live in the same apartment, and he didn't come home yesterday. I haven't seen or heard from him since." "Don't waste my time. He'll have gone out, met some lovely lady and spent all day in bed with her." "Nyet, he's not like that, he's never not come home after his shifts and when he goes out he always leaves a note." "A paragon of Komsomol values, I see, well he probably just forgot, even soviet citizens make mistakes." "Nyet! You're not listening! I called the Metro when he didn't show this morning. They said he didn't clock out of his shift yesterday. And he always clocks out." "So a metro driver just disappears? What do you want me to do? Find him? Tell you he's fine, just gone on holiday to Leningrad without telling you?" "I want you to find out what happened to him. It's something bad, I know, but I have to know what." "Ahh, of course, but you also know, sweet checks, that my service doesn't just happen. What are you paying?" "500 rubles, plus an extra hundred if you bring him home safe." "Fine."

I saw her out after she gave me the information I needed to start: Full name, place of residence and employment, any friends or partners, etcetera. And so, in the dwindling light of a late November afternoon I left my office for the local Metro depot. The tovarish desk clerk on duty let me in hesitantly once I had explained my reason for being there. He sent me on to talk to the scheduling officer, *Alexandrov*. He was your typical party member, given some lowly post and left to their own devices as long as the quotas were met. They tended to be rather full of themselves.

“Who the hell are you?” “An investigator, mind answering some questions?” “Investigator? Police? I’ll need some ID before I tell you anything.” Great. He was one of those party men. “I am Yevgeni Marlov, Private Investigator.” “Marlov? Sounds vaguely familiar. And a private investigator. In Moscow? Don’t make me laugh.” “I can assure you, tovarish, I have no such intention. But here, my card. If that’s not enough, check the phone book for all I care.” I handed him the bent and worn square of card some might call ID. He took it and grunted. “Wow, a Private Investigator after all. Well then. What do you want?” “I’m here to inquire about a Andrej Ioserovich Obarin. A driver for the Kalininskaya Line. He disappeared recently with no trace. Last he was seen was at work yesterday, from which he supposedly never left.” “Obarin? Yes, I know him. Good lad, always on time, never complains. Disappeared you say?” “Yes. He never clocked out from his shift last evening.” “Last evening? A little soon to go looking for him, no? I’m sure he’ll turn up soon. Probably spent the night with some whore in some brothel somewhere.” “Forgive me, tovarich, but there are no brothels or whores in Moscow, or anywhere in this workers paradise of ours.” “Ah, yes, apologies. A slip of the tongue. I meant to say: spent the night with a girlfriend or something.” “Of course, and yes, it is soon, but my source is concerned enough for me to be here already. Now, what can you tell me?” “Very well then. Let me pull up his file.” The officer rummaged around in one of his desks drawers before pulling out a file. “Da, Obarin. Efficient, reliable, always on time, logged all hours except for last night. Curious..” “What’s curious?” “Says here ‘Took over from driver Smarov at Taganskaya Station for 21:39 to Novogireyevo Station.’” “How is that curious?” “Kalininskaya Line leaves Taganskaya every quarter hour starting at one past.” “So his train was 8 minutes late?” “Nyet, the trains at 31 and 46 both left on time.” “So there was an extra train?” “So it would seem. But I certainly was not made aware of this!” “Does it say which train he was driving?” “Da, train number 81-717-78.1.” “Is it in the depot?” “Da, it’s one of the old models, currently having its undercarriage replaced with the newer design.” “So how could he have driven it yesterday?” “I’m sorry, tovarish, but I have no idea. There must have been some mistake.” “Can you show me this train?” “Certainly, but it makes no sense. I must first go to Sergej. He must check the camera feed for Kalininskaya Line, to see if this was a documentation mistake.” And so he did. Then he led me through the depot’s administrative building to the yard behind it. We picked our way past the stationary trains to the large sheds where repair work was undertaken. We entered through a small door in its side and walk through the many repair bays to the one train -78.1 was housed in. Or at least, where it should have been. “It would seem your train is missing, tovarish.” “So it would, but look, the new undercarriage is there!” “So where’s the train?” We returned to the administrative block, where the desk clerk, Sergej, awaited us. “Tovarish Alexandrov, the film shows a train fitting the class and time of the one you asked for, but it vanishes between Perovo and Novogireyevo Stations.” “Vanished? Explain.” “The train left Perovo Station on time, entering the tunnel. But it never arrives at Novogireyevo. The next train there is the scheduled 21:46 from Taganskaya.” “How can an entire train vanish?” “Are there any sidings or branch tracks between the two?” “None that I’m aware of, sir.” “Any idea how many people were on that train?” “Nyet, sir. The driver, definitely, and at Perovo at least nine people boarded and fifteen exited. Any more would have been in it from previous stations. Shall I review the footage to find a closer number?” “Da, Sergej, do that.” The clerk nodded and left. “So at least ten people just vanished between two stops? How would the higher-ups at the Metro like that?” “Not very much, tovarish Marlov.” “Do you have any plans of that bit of tunnel? Maybe there is a branch line or something not in use?” “I shall have a look, but I doubt it.” “Thank you, tovarish Alexandrov.” “I shall have someone bring it to your office later today, or tomorrow.” And so I left the Metro depot, with more new questions than old ones answered. Typical. But now I had two options. First, scout out the tunnel for anything helpful, or second to follow up on why a train was even running between scheduled ones.

I choose the first option.

Breaking into a tunnel seemed easier than tracing my way through Metro bureaucracy. So, I went to Perovo Station- down to the platform and towards the tunnel opening. Luckily the platform was empty, with no guards or upstanding citizens in sight. I lowered myself down onto the tracks, being careful not to touch the live third rail. I pulled out my pocket light and started into the darkness of the tunnel. I moved my torch in circular motions, illuminating the tunnel's walls as I went. All it did was show me the three tracks stretching into the darkness and the myriad of wires and cables along the sides and ceiling. Every few meters the light hit upon a ring of supportive beams, causing shadows to dance about in its small cone. At regular intervals a little gap appeared on one side or the other, only just big enough for a person to crouch in if a train was coming. I had to squeeze in a number of times. Then, finally, after what felt like hours of walking and searching the tracks split. The main line continued down the tunnel into the darkness. The branch curved off down a small side tunnel that opened in the wall of the main one. This must be where this mystery train had disappeared to. So I stepped off the main tracks and into the branch. I got all of five paces before coming up against a solid steel wall. Scanning it with my light I found no openings or gaps in the metal beyond the parts where the individual sheets of metal were welded or bolted together. The tracks, too, ended a foot or so before the wall. This couldn't be right. This branch was way too small for an entire train, and the wall showed no sign of being either openable or movable. Then, suddenly, the cone of light fell upon a splash of red amongst the gray steel of the tunnel. I stooped down to get a closer look. It was a piece of paper, blood stained. I picked it up and opened it. Written there, in shaky cursive Cyrillic, were a few almost unreadable lines.

'They made me do it....

.... tried to stop th....

Please.... me. I ca... see an...ing.'

I folded the note back up and put it into a pocket. Then I turned back to the wall. Only there was no wall. I looked around, making sure I hadn't turned around accidentally. Behind me was the main line just as I left it. I turned back to the missing wall. My light didn't reach far into the pitch black of the "new" tunnel. Tentatively I started forward into the dark. After a few meters, my torch died. I shook, and hit it, with the result of a few feeble flickers of light before completely giving out. Blyat. I was about to turn around, intending to feel my way back to the main line and then a station when a gust of wind came roaring down the tunnel. I turned to face it. My coat billowed around me. In the gloom I could see two pins of light. They seemed to grow bigger at a rapid pace. Were they growing bigger or closer? Shit, they were getting closer. And fast. Too fast. I couldn't move, and even if I did, where would I go? Closer and closer the lights got. Now I could hear the oncoming train. There was not a sign of braking. Then it hit me. Or rather, it didn't. I felt it go *through* me. At high speed it passed through my body. I could see it, as real as anything, but immaterial. Chills spread through my body from where it intersected with the train. I could make out people inside it, sitting, reading papers or chatting to one another, but all without making a single sound.

And then it was gone. I turned to follow it down the track I had come up. But it wasn't there. No wind, no sound, no nothing. I turned back and the wall was there again. I found myself in the little branch line. But something was different. It seemed longer than before. As if the wall had shifted the handful of meters I had wandered down the dark hidden tunnel. My torch was working again, and I looked around me again. Everything else seemed unchanged. With a shudder I left, heading back the way I came.

I exited Perovo Station and headed for the nearest place I could find vodka. I downed at least a dozen shots before I headed back to my office. There I found my door open and on my desk a slip of crisp white paper. On it was written: "For your discretion". Beneath the note lay a small bundle of rubles. A quick count revealed 600 rubles. There was no signature.

The next day I checked the phone book, both for the address and names given to me by Andrej's sister. None of which existed. So I did the only thing a good, respectable, honest soviet citizen could do: take the money and never say a word to anyone.

And so ends another almost case for the great Yevgeni Marlov. At least this time I got paid for my troubles...

The Stone Circle

by Emmy Swart

A melody accompanied by a dozen singing voices reached the child's ears. It replaced the weeping of the child with a wonder she had never felt before. The child was sitting on a small island surrounded only by water and a few trees. The lake echoed the sounds of the melody even further, and the girl began to wonder where it came from. So much so that she temporarily forgot her grief.

She looked around the islet under the light of the full moon and saw only green grass, a few small trees and on the edge the shadow of a wooden rowing boat. The child could not find the source of the enchanting sound. She looked beyond the islet to the woods that surrounded the lake. A fog was beginning to cloud her vision and she could look no further, not even with the moon shining so bright.

Listening intently, she thought the sounds came from the woods, but now that she could no longer see the trees, the sounds appeared closer. The girl wiped away her tears and stood up. While standing up she saw them. The stones that were laying in a circle around her.

The stones weren't sharp, hard rocks. No, they were smooth and shining. She picked one up and then immediately dropped it. The haunting melody she heard came from these stones! However, the sudden drop made it stop. The child could feel the loss of the melody as the tears started prickling in her eyes again, so she picked up the stone again and put it back down on its original place.

The melody launched again in full swing and the girl could not help but laugh. She put her ears close to the stones and sure enough the melody could best be heard from there. The child watched and listened for quite some time. A warm sensation, like a mother's embrace, surrounded her, and her eyes seemed to lose strength as her eyelids got heavier.

Through the split of her eyes she could spy figures surrounding her. They did not seem human. Maybe it was the fog playing tricks on her because the creatures surrounding her were small, stick-like figures. The ghostly shapes did not seem to have a fixed form and they swayed like fire. An ethereal blue light shone from them, illuminating the island in a blue hue.

Now that she could see the figures, they did not hide from her anymore. The melody came back in full swing and the shapes started dancing and jumping from stone to stone in the circle. It was a marvellous sight and the girl's feet couldn't stop moving. Soon she realised that she was dancing with them as well.

A spin, a jump, some skipping and before she realised her feet had been dancing for hours. She fell on her legs out of breath. *Child, won't you dance with us?* Many eerie voices spoke as one and goosebumps appeared on her arms. "I would love to, but my feet are so tired." *But you are having fun! Don't you?* The child laughed: "Yes, I did have fun. I wish every day and night could be like this!" Laughter came from everywhere at once. *Would you want to stay here with us! We could dance all night long and sleep when the sun rises.* "Really? I can do that?" More laughter. *But of course you can!*

The child glanced at the rowing boat at the side of the islet. The fog had started to swallow it making it near impossible to see. The girl faintly remembered feeling sad about something, or about someone. She couldn't remember.

As if the dancing figures could sense her thoughts they consoled her: *You know we would never abandon you, my child. We would love you forever as we dance under the moon and the stars.* The girl thought it over. She did like to dance, and it was not like she was ever going back from where she came. She wouldn't even know where the place was.

"I want that!" And as if she had lit a fire, the fog disappeared and on each stone in the circle. Solid figures appeared, clad in red robes with white masks, surrounding her completely. But the thing that made it even stranger was that they still didn't have a fixed form. The robes and the mask floating atop them were the only tangible thing. The child could see nothing else.

Child, if you wish to join us, you must drink this water before the sun hits the horizon.

One of the figures rose from their stone and handed her a cup. It was round and shallow, but filled to the brim with liquid. She accepted the cup with both her hands. Shakily, she brought the cup to her lips. But before she took a sip, she asked the figures: "Will I feel better after drinking this?"

Of course you will.

She drank the cup empty in one go. "And what happens now?"

You are one of us now, smiled the figures, for as long as we exist.

A Job That Must Be Done

by Daphne Vetulani

He awoke with a bitter taste in his mouth to the ringtone of his phone. He groaned as he saw the hour on the violently blue screen. Seven o'clock. Ghastly. It was a simple routine for him, really. Shave, fish shirt out of laundry basket, cuss loudly, douse the fabric in deodorant and hang it up in the bathroom, shower, pray that the steam from said shower would sort out the wrinkles in the shirt, run through the house like a maniac looking for black socks and give up by wearing grey socks, royally apply hair gel as if he were some child on Sunday, slurp down yoghurt, brush his teeth, and get on his bike.

He took pleasure in being such a strange appearance on the cold street: a fresh 20-something-year old psychology student in a white shirt, black slacks with a perfect crease down the middle and black dress-shoes on a battered bike. He had the kind of arrogance only a proud young pallbearer like him could have. He was able to recite it perfectly: "Well, it's a job that has to be done by *someone*. It's quite flexible and you don't actually think about the person in question anyway. And of course, it really is a satisfying job. Noble. Nothing like a restaurant, really".

Obviously he hadn't always been so comfortable carrying corpses on his left shoulder. But one gets used to it. You simply cannot emotionally invest yourself in *every* person you bury. A pallbearer has the status of a candle, mere decoration. All personal concerns are lost. The real concern is if your collar is neatly tucked away and to not look anyone in the eye. Pallbearers must always be composed.

Thank god it was a protestant service. No fuss about facing altars and collecting money. Judging by the picture on the condolence card, madam had been a small woman, and together with her bare protestant coffin, this was going to be an easy one. A lady with a very- for lack of better words- *bobbish* blonde bob took the six boys into the kitchen. "Coffee? And you? Right, so 4 coffee, and for you a tea, and are you sure you don't want anything? Please, take as many cookies as you want. Really, it's what they're there for." They did not. After all, pallbearers must always be composed.

She bobbed about the kitchen. She greeted the driver, who enthusiastically gulped down the bitter coffee. She inquired after his wife. "All's well." It was a small village. She sighed. Of course she'd known the deceased. They'd chatted in the store only last week. Well thank god the dear didn't have to suffer much. But just as quickly as these feelings arose, she put them far away again with a simple "Yep. We really shouldn't take anything for granted" and a pat down the sides of her skirt, to check the pleats. From a distance they all heard the familiar Vera Lynn song. The head carrier voiced his familiar "Tallest first", and all the pallbearers gathered for their big moment.

"Gentlemen, turn please. Hands on the casket. One. One." and with every command the boys, as if they were one, lifted the casket to the height of their shoulders, moved their bodies under the coffin with a 90 degree turn and adjusted their hands on the pale wood accordingly. The funeral director gave a small nod and solemnly strode down the pebbled path, lined by faded headstones and trees with dark bark. "Gentlemen, please." The boys followed him. Mechanically, one certain step at a time the boys marched madam to her last resting place. It was quite a beautiful day actually: it was in the stages of autumn where the trees have turned several shades of yellow and orange already but are still holding on to their leaves. The rain that had been pouring in the few days before had made way for a pale yellow sun that didn't provide much warmth, but its suggestion made for a pretty picture all together.

All of a sudden, the psychology student felt a strong pressure on his shoulder. He almost tripped underneath the weight. The padding on his grey overcoat and the black colbert under it didn't provide much help for him: the crushing feeling worked as if it were directly pressing on his naked skin, which now felt warm and pulsing. He was sure he was going to faint. It had nothing to do with the distribution of the weight on the differing heights of their shoulders; in fact, both the colleague opposite him and behind him were taller than him. He would surely have heard their breaths if they too thought it was too heavy.

It was as if everything that mattered had stopped at that very moment: turning his eyes towards the completely white sky, the only thing he heard was the crushing of the stones beneath his feet and those of his colleagues, the uneven step of the man in front of them and his own puffing breaths, making him feel almost as if he had entered a meditative state. All that mattered now was the repeated *crunch-crunch-huff, crunch-crunch-huff* of the stones and his body and his own thoughts scattered throughout this, the words thought exactly in the rhythm of his steps; "how-long-help, oh-god-help, i-can't-puff". Then, just as suddenly as the attack on his whole body started, the casket felt almost weightless once again. He remembered to straighten out the muscles in his face, that had been stuck in an awkward grimace, and to stand up straight and to be, above all, composed. He was being photographed, after all.

The funeral director turned around the corner and walked past the open grave, standing next to the pile of dirt that would completely cover madam in less than half an hour. The family kept their distance: no one really knows where to stand in such a moment. At the "gentlemen, off the shoulders. Turn. On the grave" the almost mindless boys put their feet on the iron grids lining the grave, leaning away from the gaping hole in the ground. The funeral director made them adjust the position slightly to the left, and once the casket stood neatly on the iron chains that were draped over the grave, the familiar "Gentlemen, we give madam a last greeting" sounded and at a perfect 45-degree angle the pallbearers bowed over the grave. They left the cemetery the other way around, so that they wouldn't walk into the visitors, and they were already excited to start their usual chatter on how well it went and that it really wasn't heavy at all. Their sixth, slightly pale colleague didn't really have much to say.

Of course he had noticed the white apparition atop the casket waiting behind them, staring at their general direction as they walked over the pebbled pathway once more, but he only smiled peacefully. For we pallbearers are mere decoration. We are always composed.

Wandering with Cain

by O.D.D

Wandering with Cain

"It has been three years. I still remember everything.

I remember his eyes, deep and dark. How they sparked under the moonlight, how they stared into mine, filled with sorrow and fear. How then they just stared at nothing, filled with nothingness.

I remember his voice, begging for his life, asking for mercy, crying out desperately as if trying to invoke something, anything, to save him.

I remember his blood, dripping down on the dirty floor. A red pool surrounding his lifeless body. How it got bigger and bigger, until it reached my shoes, trying to drown me with him in that crimson sea.

I remember his lips twitching while he prayed in low murmurs, until only God and himself could hear.

I remember his pale skin, turning almost blue. Maybe it was the dry coldness of winter, or perhaps it was Death's sweet embrace.

I remember every detail, every second, every shadow of that night. All I wish now is to forget.

Why did I do it? I keep asking myself, over and over, looking for an answer.

I thought I knew.

Money. Greed, ambition, thirst for glory and fame. For a second chance, to do things right. It seemed a sacrifice reasonable enough to make; a soul for a soul, as it were.

With time I discovered that it was more than that. Or maybe I already knew that deep down. I just hid it in a dark corner, where I wouldn't have to face it.

Envy, resentment, bitterness. He had everything I wanted to have, he *was* everything I wanted to *be*. It wasn't his fault; it was nobody's fault. Only mine.

I know that now.

Maybe I shouldn't have hidden those feelings. I shouldn't have done many things.

But they are done now. I cannot go back; it doesn't work like that. And I don't deserve it anyway, to fix my mistakes.

That's why I'm doing this. I know it's the easy way out, but I don't have the strength to go on knowing what I did, *why* I did it.

There is still some money left. It's hidden under the third wood plank on the right side of the bed, inside a box. Please, make sure it gets to his sister. I know it's not enough to earn her forgiveness, and I don't dare ask for it, but it should be enough for her to live comfortably for the rest of her days.

I do hope that, wherever he is, if he is still somewhere, he can at least get some peace in my misery. For I *have* been miserable; truly, wretchedly and irrevocably miserable, since the second I pulled that trigger.”

After he wrote the last dot and signed it, he carefully folded the letter as if it was made of glass and put it inside an envelope. He closed the envelope slowly, without a rush. He set it in the center of his table and exhaled deeply. For the first time in three years, he felt relieved.

He then opened the second drawer and picked up his pistol and a single bullet. He was only going to need one.

He stood up slowly and walked towards his bed. Grey sheets. He hoped they were easy to clean. He didn't think his landlady could afford new ones. He laid down and put the gun to his head. Suddenly, he got the urge to pray. He hadn't prayed in such a long time, he was almost afraid he had forgotten how to.

He remembered Cain then. Poor old Cain. *I wonder if he's still wandering restlessly. Perhaps I can wander with him.*

The River

by Menno Berga

For as long as we can remember, we have been blessed to live by the Perfect River.

It weaves through our valley with its excellent elegance, guiding us to farm the most flawless fields and settle the most superb cities, where the nymphs lovingly kiss us to life, rather than leave us barren or swallow us whole. This way we have lived, and this way we have thrived; so who denies that this is God's perfect river? Quod erat demonstrandum.

We know that we are blessed, for not everyone in this world was blessed the same way. There is another valley, a valley that one would be pressed to admit was even real; in this wretched desert, the chaotic rapids that they dare call a "river" run rampant. As a result, everything has gone awry! Huts are in places where there ought to be fertile fields, unkempt forests grow in the places where we know there should be homes, and the damned torrent crashes through it all, willy-nilly. They must have been drowning or expiring of thirst by the thousands, the poor sods.

Thankfully, we are a kind people. We gladly carry the burden of lesser nations; does the Perfect River not teach us to carry our fellow men to their rightful places, like travelers on their ships? And so, we built.

With dykes and dams we diverted the damned deluges to resemble the river. God's river, the Perfect River. It worked perfectly, of course; soon enough, their misplaced farmlands fell rightfully dry, their errant homes were washed away by a righteous stream, and those so stubbornly unwise as to remain in place were extinguished.

Ah, those cursed barbarians! After our infinite improvements to their valley, our universal poetry of waterwork, they resent us! They complained of the lives lost in salvation, the lives of those unruly animals. They complained of their numbers we brought with us to the True River, to teach them civilization proper, to help them pay their dues – all we did to help them, and yet they betray us, the brutish creatures!

Now, they have chased us out of our new lands. They came for us with their primitive weapons, that no self-respecting man would wield. Like lemmings, they fell to ours – but with sheer number, they drove us out nonetheless. Then, with the same shovels they had attacked our bodies, they attacked our gifts. Dykes were pierced, dams destroyed, civilization rejected.

We know one thing, however: the River remains. By God's grace, our miraculous copy now carves its own way into the distant valley, a holy Creek sinking into wretched earth. Even without the dams, the water flows nearly perfectly.

Even now, the wretched animals continue their dissent from it, putting up their own dams to redirect the flow, building new homes in old places.

But when it rains, the true pattern emerges yet: the path of the Perfect River.

Blissful Ignorance

by Shaimaa Benmohamed

Blissful Ignorance

The waiting room beams with an unfamiliar cleanliness, a departure from its usual neglected state. The boring brown table stationed by the entrance is decorated with withering flowers. I remember the once vibrant bouquets that used to sit there during the first few appointments. Perhaps the room is cleaner to compensate for the dying flowers in the corner.

The silence envelops me as I sit still, awaiting the call of my name. Amidst the stillness my mind floods with visions of her. I hate her—of that I am sure. She means nothing to me now; we are strangers. She seems distant, a world away, when just yesterday she lived inside my very skin. Now she stomps around in my mind, waving her arms around and taking up space. When I close my eyes, I can see her smile; I can hear the echoes of her laugh ringing in my mind like a funeral bell. It is difficult. Everyone experiences it, but could it possibly feel like this for everyone? The doctor assures me it is a natural reaction, and that the anger will eventually fade. Some columns online suggest that what I am experiencing might be jealousy, a simple explanation.

That can't be it. I am not jealous—no, I am angry! Her laughter echoes in my ears day after day. I don't like her anymore, but I'm not so sure if I like the person I have become either. I feel bitter all the time. When I lick my skin, I can taste it. She isn't me anymore, not really. Uncertain whether to pity or resent her, I wish I could confront her. I wish I could drag her away so that I could have her all to myself and tell her that soon everything would change. Soon her skin would carry a bitter taste, and every little thing that she had ever laughed at, everything she had ever smiled at would come back to haunt her. Night after night, she would feel hopeless. She would feel anger, unlike anything she had ever felt before. She would sit very still and think about what could possibly ever be that funny.

The stark contrast between that time and my current reality is an alien concept, one that fuels the rage burning within me. I wonder what it would be like if I could travel back in time and tell her that everything she cared about would lose all value in a few months. When she was out for drinks with her boyfriend, when she was worrying about what her friends really thought of her, when she would get into stupid fights with her mother..... I hate her. I want to grab her and rip her to shreds. How could she do that? She doesn't know. She doesn't know anything. Mom is gone—vanished, not only from reality but even from the recesses of my mind.

I want to think of her. I want to remember her, but in her place, all that lingers is the spectre of the past, grinning and laughing, oblivious to the impending bitterness. I long to think of my mother, to envision her, yet all that manifests is the image of someone else's joy—she was me, not too long ago. What could possibly be that funny?

My thoughts shatter as my name booms through the clinic—a brutal, insulting interruption. She is truly gone, and I am far from okay. Amidst the stillness, I feel like the withering flowers in the corner. Watching as the world around me moves on. Forgetting and leaving me to fade into the background.

Bright Blue Eyes

by Hugo Wolters

Through the prickly shrubs I made my way. There, on the edge of the woods, the house stands. What once was a passion project turned into too many empty rooms fast. She was standing near the door already, waiting for me to arrive.

She giggled at me, which turned into laughing out loud as I noticed what song she put on. I sighed demonstratively and walked towards the speaker. 'I really don't understand why you like John Mayer so much.' I said. 'Oh, 'cause your taste is so good,' she said mockingly. 'Sometimes you just have to fall in love with the bad. Besides, it's more about the memories for me.' Her bright blue eyes looked at me mischievously. I smiled as I suddenly turned the music louder and started singing along. 'Gravity is working against me! And gravity wants to bring me down!' I yelled. She jumped at me in laughter, joining in a duet.

I have owned the house for a long time now, yet it's still not fully furnished. Only the three bedrooms are, although the master bedroom isn't used. I prefer sleeping in the guestroom. I looked at the clouds above the house: grey skies, as they have been for a while now. Entering the wide veranda, I reached in my pocket for the keys. I dared not look at her standing alongside the door.

I walked through the hall, following the nurse closely. 'What do you mean? Complications?' The nurse did not respond. 'Hello? Please, is she okay?' The nurse now took a left, before opening a door on the right. 'Please, mister Sael. She is inside.' I bolted into the room, and there a second nurse stood, next to a bed. The nurse turned around towards me. 'Mister Sael. I'm afraid she didn't make it. My condolences, sir.' His next words wouldn't reach my ears.

It is as if time stood still from that day on. It ceased its ever existence. I stood there for hours looking at my wife. As Sleeping Beauty she laid in bed, her lower body covered by a blanket. Her slim lips were closed peacefully, on her left cheek two identical birthmarks, her eyelids shut. It was as if she could suddenly wake up from what had only been an awful dream. Then she'd get dressed and come back to the parking lot where our car would be waiting for us. When we would've arrived home, I could've turned on Hozier, or perhaps something slower, Frank Ocean or Cigarettes After Sex. Hell, even John Mayer would've been perfect.

But time didn't continue. What would have been hours of standing at her bed, staring at her, turned into days, which turned into weeks, then months, then years. What would have only been an awful dream turned into an everlasting nightmare. When the nurse had told me the child could be saved, I had only grown more anxious. I remembered how she felt, the weight, the little face, wrapped in a thick warm blanket. How I caressed her head, how she suddenly opened her eyes and how my arm hairs rose.

'Dad!' she said again, nearly yelling. Her words snapped me out of my daydream. 'Can you open the door please?' She looked at me patiently. The words came from two slim lips, above which on the left cheek were two identical birthmarks. 'Of course, sorry dear.' 'It's alright dad.' Two bright blue eyes watched me pull the keys out of my pocket.

Incorrigible Scoundrels by the Sea:

by Dung Ly

Bull shark

Trigger warnings: Violence, racist slurs, cursing, sexism, violence against children, harassment.

The debt to my parents amounts to about twenty million quid. Money for when I was sick or so I could go to school; for stuffed animals, warm blankets and warm food every day, which they cooked themselves for me. But this number also includes money to buy myself a proper house, keep healthy wife and children and to dress up well for the occasion. Good money could be made overseas, but after so long, I realize that even now, I am robbing them of their time with me.

There is only one way to escape debt.

Today the loan shark assigned to Kasih would bring him home in his car for free. Kasih had hardly noticed him for the last year because he was allowed to leave the money in his postal box downstairs. For a time, this was the whole one-thousand quid his parents sent him every few months.

Once his leg had healed from its unfortunate accident though, he immediately volunteered him for jobs as a kitchen aid at four different places, working twelve hours, seven days a week. “I trust in your value, River-man,” he told Kasih, promising to buy him lunch someday to celebrate their harmonious union.

Kasih was rather relieved with the arrangement: Earning 13 quid an hour, he paid four thousand a month, excluding an interest rate of 35 percent to the full value of his original debt. Since he informed his parents of his injury, their contribution had increased as they could, covering the interest, the rent and living expenses.

In turn, Kasih also paid attention to their interest: Kasih sent gifts home as he could every holiday, home or local. He was saving up for a cheap holographic projector screen to replace their television, which was much cheaper here in the League. He could buy it within the decade.

But over the last year the interest on his debt had increased because Kasih needed to buy penicillin for his leg as well as painkillers, as his debtor, who was also his landlady, chose the cheapest and most discrete healthcare for him: his leg might as well go off in the coming decade.

So as Kasih enjoyed the lull in the dishwashing to collect his thoughts, he pretended to be busy by stacking dishracks. “I can’t afford to think of myself as a victim,” he thought as he washed his hands. “The whole situation is my fault to begin with, true, but it’s that hag’s fault for not giving me real work. I am an actual engineer- I didn’t get a degree just to get into debt to a bunch of fish swallows- ”

At this point, his colleague brought up the cart – six crates of dishes. Were he not a cripple, Kasih thought to himself, her brown skin would be wrinkling out at the dishes instead and he would be out front looking pretty, pouring wine for the local mothers and daughters. Should save her from the butt slaps, which he thought disgusted him just as much.

The fantasy went from image to conversation, as he pressed his lips at the sight of the steaming textures meshing together into one dish in the trash bin, the mixed-colour water spilling into his gloves and the cleansing steam of flowing water creeping into his eyes and mouth. He blinked his eyes and did not repeat his daydream as he remembered something more pressing.

At the previous collection, Kasih happened to not have the money to pay loans. "Now, if I could not pay him in full..." Kasih had thought, "...why pay at all?" So over the phone, Kasih told the loan shark his parents had sent him less, which was true, offering to pay an eighth this month thrice and double the next. The loan shark answered with a "fine" and that he would pick Kasih up after work to have that promised celebration.

Kasih used what he kept to buy phone credit, so he could try again for a job as a cheap blasting contractor with a private mine, which had netted him at least 7000 quid a month. He had to renew his work visa in the Admiralty and save up for that nifty holographic TV as well.

An hour before the restaurant closed, the boss called out. "Hey smart man... " she called him because he mentioned his education in his solicitation, "...stock my drinks!"

Kasih was thinking to himself that women have only made him suffer in life when he found one of the serving boys in the back, the mop on the floor by the bucket. A student in a technical program named Hadees was drinking a bottle of expensive beer from his Riverland.

Recalling as well that Hadees made two-thirds of what he did, all pocket change, Kasih imagined any boss would fire boys like him on the spot and consequently have him assume their duties. But Kasih reminded himself he wouldn't be paid more for this until another mooch would inevitably be found.

Hadees noticed him and offered his drink.

"You want me to tell on you?"

"Nah, don't do that, I need this job. I am saving up for some new sneakers- my little brother! It's his birthday soon- next month. " Kasih rolled his eyes and got him on his feet, but did not let go of his shoulders.

"Yeah well, I need money too, little brother. How about it: loan me some of your salary this month, and I'll pay you mine next month, I won't tell the boss."

"Nah man, that sounds fishy. Like, the beer isn't that pricey anyway- you can literally buy it yourself and not lose any money over it."

Kasih stretched his eyebrows. if he couldn't even threaten a teenager, he realised, he doubted the boss would believe him when he snitched. He knelt to get eye level with him. "How about this then: half your salary for six months. I won't tell you were out tasting the goods- ever."

"Are you for real?"

Hadees slobbered the drink in his mouth... and spit in his face, the fluid mixing with the dishwashing fluid on his clothes. "How about you stop drinking huh, shitskin? How about you give me your salary for six months, so I won't tell the boss I found you out drinking?"

"What you fuck? You were here first and-"

"Offering a *minor* to drink- touching and-"

Kasih grabbed him by the collar, crumpling his collar. He looked at his smooth cheeks and then thought of his own flushed cheeks, almost the same colour.

"You listen here-" said Kasih, breathing into his ears. "We are going to the bank today, you are going to give me that money, or else you get to explain how you stumbled into the crates and bloodied your nose."

"You ain't fuckin for real... But fine."

Kasih immediately thought he was lying. Why wouldn't he? They would always believe this shitty teenager over him, a washed-up foreigner who kept saying he was educated and should have a better job.

Kasih let him go and smoothed out his collar. "Nah I ain't... yeah." Kasih put up a smile. "Now go do your job, boss will be checking up on the floors soon." Kasih quickly loaded up his cart and limped away.

"Pussy!"

Kasih imagined he was making an honest attempt at filling the fridges to flush away his shame, but the boss saw the rush job where she expected it to be: she made him do it again and not have leftovers either by giving him the job of mopping the kitchen floors for once. Looking through the dining room and out onto the street, he saw his loan shark waiting in his car- with three other men.

Kasih immediately hid out of view. He glanced at the crew feasting from the table full of leftovers – he was going to miss the ambient laughter – before he made for the back door and stepped out onto the street, the smell of rain suddenly jolting him out of his misery for a bit.

"What am I feeling guilty for?" he said to himself, "...it was my fault anyway. I don't get to feel sorry- and getting beaten like a pussy gets no-one their money."

Nevertheless, Kasih considered that perhaps he should turn to bomb-making again to make his money: but not overseas, but at sea.

Longshoremen need legs, but violence only needs intent, he thought. The Freefleet Admiralties were the beating heart of a violent industry: bodies constantly lost at sea because of cutthroat competition, unbound by national navies- and he went here as a contractor!

Monsoon winds in his back, he limped for the most numerous set of docks, resolving to not pay debts or to inhabit the land of the living and their nations ever again. In his mind he continued his songs: he was dead and damned, a wuss reborn as a kindly demon. The ships would take him- even if it were as a slave, for he was a slave with skills!

“Am I allergic to eating shark?”

COLUMNS

The Hunter and the Haunted

Trigger warning for sexual violence.

The Hunter and the Haunted

With a slight hesitation I've begun writing this column on the topic of "haunted". You see, we melancholy literature students have a natural inclination towards reminiscing the old love or pain that is so dear to our young minds, but so painfully unoriginal when read by others. The truth of the matter is that every single one of us is haunted by small and big things. It is these events or thoughts that build the very identity we try to pick apart in several journals, during conversations over a cup of coffee and those in a psychiatrist's office, and, in my case, through this (almost too) public medium.

I have tried to haunt someone myself, I must admit. I felt so very wicked and sweet when I did. With a piece of chalk I found, I drew a little sun on the closed door of the boy who hurt me just that night before. I then, for a reason I did not yet understand at that time, erased it. He did not deserve a sweet drawing. To cover my tracks I blew some of the chalk dust over the clean streak where my spit sat. I skipped through his books. He had annotated *The Handmaid's Tale* very carefully, and I thought of putting a dot of ink in there. Just something that proved my agency in that tiny grey room. Alas, he got out of the shower and I was finally set free.

I think back on that morning with some bittersweetness. I think I felt that something was off, but did not exactly grasp what just yet. Only a bit later, I started to haunt him in the more traditional way. In my restlessness I would leave the house and keep walking all the way down the street full of cars, only to look up after a bit at the endless red apartment complex. For hours I would walk around his neighbourhood, without a coat, in the midst of winter, unaware of the many colds and infections I was walking myself into. The real haunting started when I decided that I no longer needed to be the wailing ghost I was. This time, it was my turn to be haunted. In fact, I realised that it was I who had been haunted all along.

It has been a year since I picked my clothes off his carpeted floor and made my way home with runs in my tights and pain when I biked, and though the real life man is no threat to me anymore, the thought of him repulses and terrifies me. At least once a day his name flashes through my mind. I do not particularly enjoy walking into a specific building because I know that at one point, over one or two or seven beers and two glasses of wine, he told me what he studied. I go silent when I think I see him and then tell my friends "oh, nothing". You see, I tried to start this column in a nice way, by saying that our good and bad memories shape us, but this is not always positive. I gained nothing from this situation.

What is it then, that I am trying to tell you with this decidedly negative account of my experiences? Go haunt those who dare to haunt you. Walk into that office on international women's day and tell them that on the eighth of november 2022, after the tuesday-night-drinks, something unpleasant happened to you. If needed, walk into the same office three months later and demand that someone else opens the case again because no one bothered to do something about it. Listen with satisfaction when you later hear that he resigns from his beloved environment that is no longer safe to you and, though this part I do not wish to you, continue to be haunted by your memories anyway. However, do not do so passively: make sure you imagine bloodshed. Lots of it. Haunt them right back!

Dody Ventura, November 2023

Haunting Down Humans and their Humanity:

Dracula as a Gothic Novel

by Dilara

The feeling of being “haunted” comes from the internal suspicion or realisation of being relentlessly followed by something, somebody, or the memory of them. This inability to shake away from the hands of haunting memories becomes a nourishing ground for agony, terror, and utter inhumanity. Therefore, such a feature is essential for Gothic Literature to become what it ultimately is and allows for the story to be carried upon the grounds of posthuman and inhumane characters and plots inducing the feeling of the uncanny. These characters and plots add up to the haunting effect of the piece using both the conscious state by directly haunting other characters and parts of the story and the subconscious and unconscious state by indirectly assessing characters of which the representations portray a subconscious and unaware state of being haunted. In his novel *Dracula*, Bram Stoker integrates this feature, using symptoms and depictions of hysteric attacks as well as a tendency to dehumanise and extend his initially mundane character Lucy Westenra, by sustaining her Gothic features along the storyline –even when she isn’t necessarily a part of the Gothic monstrosity yet.

Dracula, being a widely known piece of Gothic literature, uses several features and characters conveying the effect of being and getting haunted, to establish its full potential within its genre characteristics. The posthuman as well as inhumane characters and passages provide for this gothic layer by depicting an overall monstrosity. Such an effect is not only achieved through the literal haunting of characters such as Count Dracula and Jonathan Harker, but also through a subconscious haunting below the surface. This deeper representation can be seen in Harker’s dreams or in his constant terror to be imprisoned by a greater force of monstrosity –Dracula. Moreover, a very graphic and crucial reflection of such mental haunting is conveyed through the character of Lucy Westenra. She suffers from sleepwalking and experiences hysteria-like symptoms even when she has not yet become a vampire herself, delving into the underlying haunted roots of the depiction of Lucy’s hysteric tendency, Freud’s conceptualisation of trauma and hysteria assesses such symptoms as a consequence of “buried reminiscence” (*Professor Freud and Hysteria*, 103). Applying this approach, the experiences of Lucy can be evaluated as a physical response to the “trauma” that has been haunting her down, not in flesh and blood but rather subconsciously. Showing her “go out on roofs of houses and along the edges of cliffs and then get suddenly weakened and fall over with a despairing cry that echoes all over the place” (Stoker 78), resembles a very similar response to an actual attack or assault building up the tendency of the violence. Subsequently, her sleeping is described further upon where “even in her sleep she seems to be watching” (Stoker 79). This creates an understanding of her as if she is never asleep, drawing a parallel to the vampires and Dracula. This parallel continues and expands over the course of the story, where Lucy grows even closer to the inhumanity of the vampires until she finally becomes one, turning her from the haunted character to the haunting one. The ongoing presence of “mysterious forces that continue to frighten readers” (Senf 56), such as this notion of sleepwalking and the subconscious attacking, therefore, keeps her along the lines of Gothic with a continuous layer of horror.

In this sense, Lucy Westenra is a focal point of the Gothic essence of the novel. This accentuates even more when she turns into a vampire and gradually becomes an overly sexualised and dehumanised version of herself. Her conversion to a vampire to an extent becomes a turning point, an exemption of her haunted side that has already been present beforehand. This excursion highlights her previous features by contrasting them with one another,

improving the affect (Rigney 60) of the transition and allowing for the horror of the story to take over. The initial portrayal of Lucy as a soft, Victorian woman turns into something much more violent and inhumane, a “foul Thing” that is only capable of horror “without her soul” (Stoker 202), rather than a human or creature. This thing Lucy has become shows how she has been driven further away from humanity, how she acts “callous as a devil” (Stoker 200) with no maternal instinct left in her, as if she is no longer a part of the cycle of life. She also explicitly others herself from the humans when she calls for her husband to “leave these others” (Stoker 200). This transformation of her personality and character depicts how, since the beginning of the novel, everything that has been haunting her subconsciously has ultimately driven her over the lines of sanity and humanity and made her a monster, a “demon in her shape” (Stoker 202). After her transformation, Lucy contributes for the horror in the novel by haunting her husband, their dreams together, even her old self and the images that are bound to it, and decaying these into darker, monstrous, corrupted versions of themselves. Lucy, therefore, becomes a key element of the Gothic aspect and the deepening point of the novel. She does so by unveiling the layers of humanity, agony, and repression while simultaneously blurring the lines in between them. The fusion of such concepts extends the power of the darker theme surrounding them, enhances the defamiliarization and horrific side of each as well as providing for the layering of the scenes to be read as a Gothic piece.

Lucy, extending and enriching the Gothic basis of the novel, becomes one of the leading characters and the carrier of the Gothic. Instead of Harker or Dracula, who are characters that are strongly bound to explicit sides of humanity and monstrosity, Lucy possesses characteristics from both and reflects upon the borders of these notions –either by blurring or constructing them. Thus, the Freudian assessment of Lucy Westenra enables a deeper understanding of this reflection by elaborating upon her character and her suppressed inhumanity that is present well before she becomes a vampire. This acknowledgement provides a new and rich layer to the perception of haunting and its subjects –both tangible and intangible, conscious, and subconscious. Consequently, the layer of the haunted creates and maintains the horror of the plot, to attain the generic features of the novel where the mundane construction of the characters and events are dominant. This layer of haunting acts as a deeper ground for the unity of the novel. Exploring the lines of morality, violence and horror for the reader and the characters is therefore what ultimately makes *Dracula* a Gothic novel.

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The Spectre of Speech:

a reading of *The Tale of Kiêu*

by Dung Ly

I am oft haunted by what could have been if I had learned the language of my family earlier: Jokes to be made, worries to have shared and advice received and given. Alas, as it was not meant to be and I became a student of literature, becoming only more unintelligible to my family. In recent years I have made more conscious efforts to learn, watching language videos and using a textbook I received as a gift from my brother. My ear is trained from memory as well, by conversations of the older generation at the dinner table and by the Vietnamese television that was always on during the holidays. But as I hadn't spoken the language much in my childhood, I do not expect to learn it now by either practicing with family or from learning from textbooks, in the same way as I learned to speak Dutch.

So I took to a tale my mother recommended to me some time ago, a piece of literature she gave me – albeit non-bilingual. I initially intended to read it as I was learning, but since that was even more intensive than speaking the words before book and screen, I left it for what it was until recently, when I quickly read a bilingual version to write a column for this magazine. Consequently I would like to show that there is something to be said for starting from the literature of a language rather than the grammar and the vocabulary.

I read a bilingual version of *The Tale of Kiêu* with limited knowledge of Vietnamese tones and grammar- perhaps generously described as the essentials. It is an 18th century narrative poem written by Nguyễn Du, who's pronunciation likely eludes you right now. The story is about the cursed destiny that haunts the beautiful and talented Kiêu: a Vietnamese girl who falls in love with a student, only to be whisked away to China because she had to sell herself to a rich man to get her family out of prison. Much of the novel takes place in China with a worldview incorporating both Buddhist and Confucian values.

As you may have noticed, there is a lot of China in this piece of Vietnamese literature. Ostensibly, the author, a Vietnamese diplomat to China, took this obscure Chinese novel back with him and adapted the prose into a narrative poetical form native to Vietnam. Luckily, I knew quite a lot of the references to Chinese culture because I have been reading translations of Chinese works shortly before, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The poetry of Zen*. Of course, all of the works mentioned I can recommend because I greatly enjoy Chinese and Buddhist themed literature for what I call its bold outlook on life but I digress. This brings us to what literature does for learning language: what does it mean to speak Vietnamese?

Speaking Vietnamese can be said to be, at the very least not to speak Chinese or English. If I have learned anything, the first thing you look for when learning a language is not knowledge of it but the feel: by what rhythm and intonation would you like to express yourself in a different languages rather than the words? How do I complain, sound sarcastic or intonate sententiously? Let me take a passage from the story to demonstrate, English first. One nun, known for being a prophet, speaks to another about the protagonist:

2655 The nun replied, "Fortune and misfortune come from the laws of heaven,

but the root cause of it is from a person's heart.

Heaven has a hand, but it also come from us.

Living a moral life is the source of happiness, all passions lead to suffering.

Thúy Kiều is lively and intelligent.

2660 Granted, a sad lot is often reserved for a beautiful woman.

But Kiều kept holding onto man-woman love

and stubbornly enmeshed herself in its web of passions.

Learning a language, I start from two disparate places: learning words to convey things and learning to express myself in the Vietnamese language. This passage would be the voiced as the latter: someone's sympathetic view on another. Even if your circumstances are determined by the world around you, romantic love is not some cure but perhaps a form of escapism for everyday struggles. I like how Kiều's sacrifice as a moral choice (according to Confucian morals that is) is not a set-up for a deserved happy-ending, but was the very stuff of her courage to begin with. Consequently, I was rooting for Kiều not because I was expecting her to find her male saviour, but because the story quite simply started with a choice made by herself and thus ending with one as well.

I suppose the message about romantic love sounds awfully abstinent, but this is where the Buddhist outlook meshes with the Confucian morals. But I haven't yet spoken of the sound of speech yet, the sententious tone of the moralistic narrative, nor how I recognize it to feel like this to me. Here is the Vietnamese passage:

2655. Sự rằng: Phúc họa đạo trời

Cõi nguồn cũng ở lòng người mà ra.

Có trời mà cũng tại ta

Tu là cội phúc, tình là dây oan.

Thúy Kiều sắc sảo khôn ngoan

2660. Vô duyên là phận hồng nhan đã đành

Lại mang lấy một chữ tình

Khư khư mình buộc lấy mình vào trong

You will of course not understand the words or the tonal signification- both of which you may perhaps resolve with google translate and an overview of the six tones of Vietnamese. But I can point at what the sounds are giving shape to. You see, this narrative poem has a particular form that will tell you a lot about the intent behind the words as they are written. Let's start with the meter.

The poetical form is known as the 6-8 form (lục bát). I can count in Vietnamese so I expected it to say sáu-tám rather than lục bát, but it turns out the name is Sino-Vietnamese: Vietnamese words shaped by Literary Chinese, but I digress. As you can see,

The Spectre of Speech: a reading of The Tale of Kiêu

by Dung Ly

this simply points at an alternation of syllables/words every sentence. According to the poet Vuong Thanh, who's translation I read, it is a form of popular folk poetry, tied together by rhymes in very specific places. This creates what one could call a narrative melody, that can go on and on as the story goes.

In my experience, the rhythm of this passage grants me the least headaches. You see, with six tones to juggle during speaking, Vietnamese words are initially a joy to pronounce, but sentences feel like tongue breakers to me. But with a form as consistent as this story, I feel as if I can keep up with the speaking of the story in my head. Once I can do that, I can more easily focus on enjoying the feel of the language, rather than constantly recalling the grammar or the meaning of the words.

Grammar may teach you sentence structure, but poetry helps one find out the differences between the sentences of different languages. It should be obvious which part of the first line is "The nun said[...]". What is more subtle is that even as the following line has a more recognisable sentence structure, the four words in between are only nouns: happiness disaster laws Heaven. Here you see a bit of the Chinese influence on the poetry: a sequence of words to be treated more as Chinese characters rather than a Vietnamese sentence. This is possible because Vietnamese doesn't really do explicit conjunction (or verb conjugation for that matter), just like (Literary) Chinese in my experience.

All these little linguistic observations help me get a feel for the language and defamiliarize myself from Dutch and English. Being familiar with these little ins and outs of the language is like learning fluency before learning the rest of the language. Language learning is always haunted by the nature of fluency, which resides outside knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and perhaps even practice with family. Instead, language learning is haunted by an eventual return to an experience of everyday speech, reducing its use to a nothing special, rather than experiencing speaking one language over another as an achievement.

Finally, here is a short narrative poem in which I imitate the feel of the language in English:

The tale of Dung

Chinese haunts Vietnamese;
Southern-speech haunts this he asleep.
See, Dung had little time,
mind, social drive or rhymes then for
words. Thus skipping his kin,
In poems he found his English.
Until one day he thought:
"Tôi muốn nói chuyện với bạn bây giờ."

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The Chthonic Half

by Sebastiaan Wortelboer

How I wish you would flicker the lights, howl at night, or frighten the dog. Instead, you haunt me with your absence.

At times, I will walk through the hallway at night and catch the faintest hint of your scent. Like the ghostly tendril of some torn, transparent veil, your essence glides over my face, and leaves me forever.

I may lie curled up on the floor, and believe I can hear your footfall in the attic. For just a moment, you exist again. Life, three steps long.

I look at pictures of our wedding, and they look like horror movie posters. Our smiles radiating dramatic irony, your white dress foreshadowing your shroud. A life like the shadow of a cloud. Yet I remain in the sun.

If you are still somewhere, anywhere, show me. Revive me with your presence, so that I may be reborn into heaven. I am carrying a tombstone on my back, while your cross is gone and rotten. You're dead, but not forgotten.

With creaking joints, I pull the blanket off of my body, as though robbing my own grave of myself. My body is worn from a restful night. Inexplicably, I am bleeding. Inexplicably, my blood is flowing still.

I sit alone, and think about you. My Chthonic half, my tonic salve, if nothing else I miss her. My underground elixir. My medicine went the way of Aesclepius, and I lay unrevived. By inner gods reviled. "You should not be alive", spoke Zeus. Perhaps that's why you died. How I wish my Persephone would return, and bring the spring. I think of a joke. "When Death gives you pomegranates, make lemonade." I laugh softly. You would have laughed too. I cry.

Like a child, I find myself afraid of the dark. I hold my breath while turning on the light, expecting to find your corpse again. When instead I am met with a cold empty floor, I am almost disappointed. The void feels so disjointed. There is no emptiness in my life anymore, it is filled by the absence of you. I blink, but the black is not true.

I suppose, vicariously, I am keeping you alive. The possession of my wife. I feel as though you will not truly die, until I forget your name. Until I forget to be haunted by you. I am scared to let you pass away. Perhaps, once I die, it will finally lay you to rest. A grave for possessor, and for possessed.

Final Remarks

Dear Reader,

I hope you have enjoyed this archived version of the *Erato's Magazine Edition: Haunted*. This version may lack the fun designs and stylings of our newer editions, but I have tried my best to emulate the way these pieces were presented on the old Erato's Website and mix it with the newer elements we have introduced over 2024 and early 2025.

Hopefully these works have served to amuse, interest and inspire you and that you feel emboldened to contribute to future Editions of Erato's Magazine!

All the Best,
Chloe

Commissar of Internal Affairs, Board XVI

THANK YOU FOR READING