

Daisuke & Liz's
Special Issue of
Speculative Fiction
by Queer and Trans
Writers of Color

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by Queer and Trans Writers of Color
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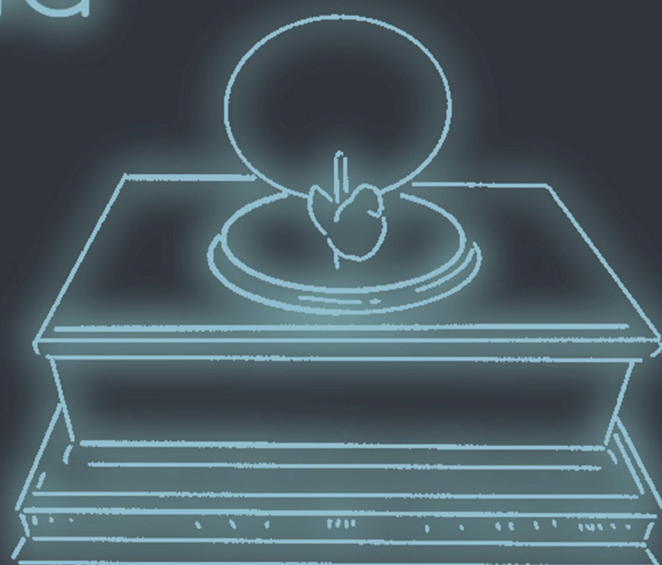
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ON BUILDING A NEST

STELLA LEI



ON BUILDING A NEST

by Stella Lei

My mother's house always looked halfway to collapse. She had paid copious amounts of money to build it this way—its perpetually slouching walls, its staircases that jerked into corners before snarling to the next floor. This was because she preferred things that existed between one state and another. Her philosophy was as follows: you cannot determine something's worth before it is finished, and most everything finished is bad—corrupted by greed, or rust, or the general incompetence of its maker. And so the house lurched across a river like a lopsided Fallingwater, its unending rush lulling her to the edge of sleep. When she awoke, she stood in the middle of one of her precarious staircases, fingers to her lips, surveying the distance between her body and the floor.

As a child, I bumped into buckled walls and tripped over uneven floorboards. Cuts rusted down my legs in slashes of bronze, and my mother wiped them clean, warning me to be careful with the currency of my blood.

“You see this?” She held up the towel, stained through and sour with disinfectant, “You let all this go. Gone. Wasted.” She believed blood was metal metabolized. Gold lining our veins. “That’s why it tastes like pennies,” she said, and I swiped my finger across the wound, bringing it to my lips to check.

Our ancestors thought drinking gold—untarnishable light—could

instill them with youth. Their organs would never rust into disuse, polished instead with health. What they didn't know, my mother said, was that we were born with gold bottled in our veins. She smoothed a Band-Aid across my knee. "So the real secret to youth is to avoid bleeding. To seam your skin and keep the gold inside."

For years, I was careful not to bleed. I tiptoed around corners and walls. Climbed the stairs while gripping the banister, unpainted wood strangled in my fist. I weaned my legs off running, teaching them to slide slowly across the floor's hardwood swells.

My mother said the world was a pipe bomb, people just fuses ready to light. When she was young, her father exploded in her face—fists clenched to grenades—and left her blue as the sea. That was why I was forbidden from going out alone, my flash-paper bones too easily expended into smoke. And so I stayed home, insulated from flames and men, replacing school with the encyclopedias lining the office shelves.

I worked my way through the books in alphabetical order, repeating each word to myself, sculpting my breath against the sound. *A* for *aviation*. *B* for *beak*. *C* for *critical period: the period of time in which young animals are most likely to acquire learned behavior; when imprinting occurs*.

The period of time in which a baby bird's song crystallizes like rust on steel, its voice molding to that of its parents. The period beyond which the bird can no longer learn to sing, its notes fracturing like a face in warped glass.

I was twelve when the bleeding started. It woke me in a pool of sour warmth, wet against my legs, sticky in my joints. I shouted for my mother, certain my tissues were dissolving, my organs churning

to pulp. She scowled as she changed the sheets and soaked them in cold water, but told me I wasn't dying. What had happened, she said, was I became too close to fully formed—transitioning into a woman who could eventually smoke, and drink, and leave her behind. The solution was to regress to my halfway point. To freeze my body in time so gold would lie snugly in my veins, youth unable to escape.

That evening, when I asked about dinner, she told me if I went long enough without food, I could shrink my stomach into a fist. Exorcise the years from my body, leave only purity. Bone. Calcium scaffolding my shins like pillars of salt. How I could reverse my flesh within myself, surviving off nothing but smooth planes of skin.

From then on, she fed me only feathers so my years could take flight and leave me clean. She boiled them soft and piled them on my plate in quivering puffs of down.

"The body follows a clock of its own," she said, "You just have to wind it in reverse. Close the hourglass's waist. Look at each bird through its mouth."

When I told her I didn't know what she meant, that all the birds I'd seen were mouthless, roasted in the oven or strewn across my plate in ragged plumes, she pointed out the window and said "Those birds, there. See how each note matures in their throat before they sing it? That's where it all starts. The throat."

I flipped through the *Tencyclopedia* until I got to *throat*. Esophagus. Trachea. Larynx. I traced my finger down the diagrams and taught the page to swallow. Air digested into air.

In the bathroom, I opened my mouth in the mirror and peered inside. My throat was a cavern of darkness rippled with heat—something pulsing and alive. I clawed my fingers in to see if I could retrieve the half-formed notes in my vocal cords, cup their soft vibration in my palms. I retched into the sink, but my stomach had hardened to a pit, too empty to expel anything but breath. Feathers clotted against my teeth.

The bleeding eventually stopped, my uterus rewound into a state that didn't know time, years resorbed into my body. When I looked in the mirror, my collarbones were arrowheads grafted to skin.

In place of blood, cold permeated through me like a haunting on loop. I wrapped myself in sweaters and coats—molted in reverse—and stood with my mother at the staircase's head. We held hands and peered down the house's narrow throat, too scared to fly.

My mother's New Year's gift to me was a music box, gilded gold, a lark perched on its crown. An heirloom passed down by her mother by her mother by hers, carried through generations like our coarse hair and heat-shriveled eyes. She wrapped my hands in her own and showed me how to wind it up. How to coax a bird to sing. We cranked the key as far as it would go, the lark shuddering in the anticipation of dance. I tightened my fingers around the knob as it pushed against my palm, fighting to unspool its song—to fly free. The notes stuttered out, slow, splintered into shards.

FULL OF HOLES

LUZ ROSALES



FULL OF HOLES

by Luz Rosales

Kylie fingers Martina under the bleachers after school. Martina is warm, and moist, and slippery, and when she cums against Kylie's palm, she moans so loudly that Kylie thinks everyone on campus must have heard. She hopes this is true.

"I'm so proud of myself," she says, and Martina laughs her scratchy laugh.

Martina doesn't come to school the next day, doesn't answer Kylie's texts. The day after that, she's found floating down a river in pieces.

Several of their classmates attend her funeral. They crowd together in the church, sniffing, and holding each other, and pretending to cry. None of them were friends with Martina. Some had been the very ones who bullied her and Kylie. They stalked them in the halls, pelted them with water balloons and milk cartons, hurled insults such as "dykes" and "lesbos."

Kylie hates them all.

She sits near the back, sandwiched between her parents. Her father keeps his hand on her shoulder, though the effect is more suffocating than comforting. She feels like she's breaking, splintering. The casket is closed. She can't comprehend that her best friend's body is in there, wants to demand that they open it so that everyone can

see it isn't Martina, it's a doll, it's an impostor.

They had been friends since the first grade, back when they were shy little girls who felt comfortable only around each other, and they grew into awkward teenagers together. They'd known each other for so long their identities had become intertwined. Kylie can't imagine a Martina-less world, nor can she imagine a Martina-less Kylie. Who is she now? What is she supposed to do?

Martina's mother, Ms. Aguilar, finds her after the service. She's scowling, and Kylie is reminded of the last time she stayed at Martina's house, how they hid under the blankets and tried to block out the sounds of her parents fighting.

"This is *your* fault," her mother spits. "I wanted her to stop hanging out with you."

"How is it *my* fault?" Kylie demands. It's the fault of whoever killed her, they deserve to rot in Hell, except no one knows who did it. The medical examiner said it didn't look like the work of a human, nor that of an animal. There were no wounds at all, no blood, it was as if her body unraveled spontaneously, as if she simply couldn't stay in one piece anymore.

Within a few weeks Ms. Aguilar will be gone, moved to another city.

Aguilar will be gone, moved to another city.

At night Kylie tries to hold onto everything she can remember about Martina: her voice, the smoothness of her skin, the texture of the scar on her arm, the way her tongue felt between her legs.

She sucks on her fingers and pretends she can still taste Martina's wetness, then rubs the part of her shoulder where Martina had given her a hickey once.

In the morning she finds a tiny, pinprick-sized hole on her shoulder. Her mother doesn't see any hole, says she must be imagining it, but Kylie knows it's real. She can't stop thinking about the hole, can't stop touching it, rubbing and rubbing until it's wide enough for her to insert the tip of her finger. When she does the pain is so intense she almost screams, but there's something satisfying about it.

Eventually a gray fluid starts leaking from the hole.

Eventually, other holes appear.

Kylie comes to school covered in seeping black holes. Everyone stares at her. They're shocked, disgusted, even enraged that she showed up like this and is forcing them all to see it.

In class, she does nothing but touch her holes. She leaves stains on the floor and on her desk.

The teacher asks her to leave. "You're distracting the other students," he says. He looks at her the way you'd would look at a bug. She definitely feels less than human as she plods out of the room. Why is she so heavy all of a sudden? She can barely keep herself upright.

During nutrition she's accosted by a group of girls who say they want to know more about her. They've never seen anything like that, they say, meaning her holes. She tells them to fuck off, but they grab her arms, and the next thing she knows they're shoving their fingers into her, prying her open further. It hurts so bad. She

screams and screams and thrashes and suddenly they let her go. Their mouths are wide open, they're backing away from her.

Kylie doesn't know what they're reacting to. She doesn't care.

She turns around and runs.

She heads to Martina's house, climbs in through the window. It's not Martina's house anymore, she knows, though a part of her still expects that she'll come if she cries loud enough.

The walls are bare. There is no furniture, no remnants of the people who used to live here. Still she goes to what used to be Martina's room and collapses.

Time goes by. It could be minutes, it could be hours. She spends it all on her side, lying in a puddle of her own filth. She's mostly hole now. It's almost peaceful. She could live like this, she thinks, as a giant hole, no longer a girl.

Right after she has this thought, her hand moves on its own, forming a fist. A few seconds later she's clawing herself violently, she's shaking, and crying, and bleeding, and she keeps saying, "Martina," saying it like a prayer.

Then.

It stops.

Everything stops.

There is darkness and silence, a black void. This lasts only an instant.

Once it's over, she's back in Martina's bedroom. She feels different now, stronger but heavier. Slowly she stands and realizes something is attached to her shin.

She reaches down and touches it: there's hair, and ... is that a nose?
Are those eyes?

"I..."

That voice. It can't be.

"Martina?"

It is.

Martina is back, and she's alive, and her head is a part of Kylie now,
fused to her leg.

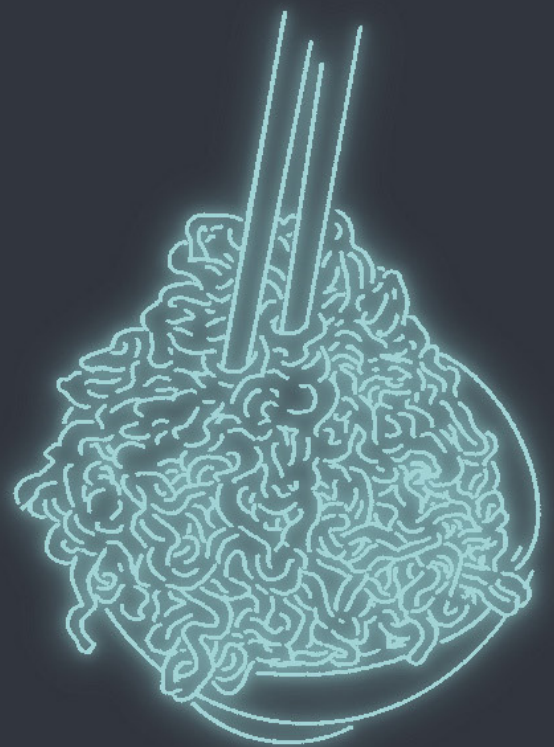
"Kylie," Martina whispers.

Hearing her say her name brings tears to Kylie's eyes. "What is it?"

"I feel fantastic."

SPEECH
CAPABLE

ELIAS CHEN



SPEECH CAPABLE

by Elias Chen

Changliu and her sister were huddled over the kitchen counter. Between them lay an unopened bowl of instant ramen, shrink wrap intact, the container propped upright on a folded kitchen towel. Changliu and her sister looked directly into the smiling face of the man printed on the lid. The image was animate, blinking, shifting his shoulders, his lips parting now and again like he was about to speak but waiting for a cue. It was their idol, Xiao Tan.

What was supposed to happen? After they opened the package, Xiao Tan was supposed to launch into a ninety-second monologue from the lid of the ramen bowl. Something along these generic cadences: thanks for buying, felicitations, please enjoy your meal. But most importantly, after that, you could talk to him freeform during the final thirty seconds. You'd ask questions and the tiny, animate Xiao Tan would respond, provided the answer wasn't explicitly NSFW. In order to do this, to answer your questions, the print Xiao Tan was imbued with a bare-bones version of the living Xiao Tan's personality. Even more crucial, this simulated personality held a selection of the person's memories. It knew what Xiao Tan did.

Changliu held her phone over the packaged ramen. Several pop-up windows flashed on the screen, glowing windows superimposed over the live camera image of Xiao Tan on the lid. There were rapidly changing rows of letters, numbers, lines, and numerals. Changliu's first task was to override Xiao Tan's initial 90-second dialogue, and then ease the parameters of his Q&A script. All of this made it possible for her sister to spend two entire minutes just asking him questions.

Now here was a specific endeavor. Changliu, her sister, and hundreds of other sisters all around the country had bought every single ramen bowl in this particular batch just to do this exact procedure with each one of them. Citing production errors, the manufacturer had issued a recall, but between when the announcement was made and when supermarkets had begun to pull stock from the shelves, someone had figured out this hack. It was a miracle. In less than twelve hours, the sisters had mobilized, and they'd bought almost every unit of the defective batch before they were confiscated.

After consulting the experts among themselves, the sisters had collectively engineered the most straightforward way to jailbreak the ramen bowls in order to ask Xiao Tan their questions. The questioning would be done in pairs or in groups, with one sister responsible for jailbreaking the bowls and another sister responsible for asking the questions. The entire session would be recorded for later transcription and analysis.

The questions had been workshopped. Each group of sisters was

responsible for asking a specific set of questions, so none of their efforts were redundant. The goal of this vast endeavor was a common, vital sisterly interest. Changliu and her sisters were going to figure out whether their ship, a pairing of the male idol actors Xiao Tan / Gang Yinbo—they were going to figure out whether it was real.

“Are you ready?” her sister asked.

“Thirty seconds,” replied Changliu.

Changliu tapped the screen of her phone. The shifting rows of letters and numbers began to cohere into legible sequences. They flickered once and then they stopped. On the lid of the bowl, Xiao Tan’s pupils froze in their sockets.

“Five seconds,” said Changliu. She, her sister, and Xiao Tan all blinked in unison, and then her sister tore the shrink wrap away from the bowl. She started asking their questions.

Were you in X place at Y time? Were all the actors housed on the same floor of the hotel when you shot Z drama? How often would you eat dinner with your co-star, Gang Yinbo? Did you become familiar with your co-star’s eating habits? How familiar were you with your co-star’s personal behaviors? Were you generally aware of how much he slept? When he went to bed? Did he prefer the room bright or dark? What was the first thing he did upon waking

up?

Xiao Tan answered with the direct concision of a student getting quizzed before their class. But as he spoke, Changliu felt cold dismay settle in her stomach. His replies were single words or phrases, and while knowing the answers was good, the constellation of information they formed seemed almost incoherent. There were any number of reasons why Xiao Tan might know that Gang Yinbo ate one slice of whole grain toast and a hard-boiled egg every morning. When Xiao Tan professed not to know his co-star's sleeping habits, Changliu remembered an interview where Xiao Tan had said their chaotic filming schedule meant that almost no one slept regular hours. It'd be incredible, delicious, and incendiary if he did know when, where, and how Gang Yinbo slept, but that he didn't know meant very little. There was no conclusion to draw.

Changliu tried to imagine: summer in Hengdian, where the drama was filmed, the air stifling and close, the heat of the season undissipated even long after midnight. The hotel's air conditioning would stick clothes to damp skin, the sharp chill only getting worse between the lobby and the elevator.

"Comrade Gang," Xiao Tan might say, slouching against the elevator's chrome handrail, staring at Gang Yinbo with vaguely bloodshot eyes. "I know it's already two, but we're not filming until later tomorrow. You only have that interview around lunch, so how about coming to my room to look over the script now? We could practice our lines before bed."

Changliu imagined Gang Yinbo leaning back, one hand raised to push the hair out of his eyes. She imagined him asking, brows lifted: “Are you sure?”

He’d rake his fingers through his hair. Xiao Tan would grin, and then—

Changliu realized the kitchen was silent. Her sister was looking at her, tense and slightly lost. She was done asking their assigned questions. Changliu glanced at the timer. There were twenty seconds left.

The animate Xiao Tan looked at them with pleasant expectation. Acutely aware of the effort they’d gone through, of the moments sliding past, a single question rushed out of Changliu’s mouth: “You—do you love Gang Yinbo?”

For the first time, Xiao Tan smiled. Changliu’s scalp went numb, and sweat broke out on her temples.

“Of course I do,” Xiao Tan replied. “I also love Rei-brand Ramen! Remember, just add water, wait two minutes, and it’s ready to enjoy. Thanks for buying! I look forward to seeing you soon~”

With that, Xiao Tan settled back into print, the fine-grain twitches of his animation slowing down until he was an image on the lid.

His mouth still curved with the trace of a smile.

Changliu and her sister looked at each other. Without speaking, her sister went over and turned on the kettle. She unsealed the ramen, and once the water was boiled, she poured it inside. They waited two minutes, just like Xiao Tan had said. Afterward, sharing the same bowl, they ate together in deep, persistent silence.

Once they were finished, Changliu indicated that, if she wanted, her sister could drink the broth. Her sister raised the bowl to her lips. A trickle of soup leaked out of her mouth, dripping down to stain her collar with a vivid, orange-y bloom.

Changliu's sister slammed the bowl onto the table. She coughed twice, eyes watering, and yelled, "Surely this life is cursed! What the hell did he mean?"

"I know," said Changliu. "I know."

Monologue of a pirate ship
that doesn't have a figurehead,
or maybe it did, long ago, but it's
hard to tell now because its bow
is encrusted with these ossified
clam shells and barnacles, which,
during a storm, scuttle about and
open up and scream, as though
they had mouths.

Jiaqi Kang



**MONOLOGUE OF A PIRATE SHIP THAT DOESN'T
HAVE A FIGUREHEAD, OR MAYBE IT DID, LONG
AGO, BUT IT'S HARD TO TELL NOW BECAUSE
ITS BOW IS ENCRUSTED WITH THESE OSSIFIED
CLAM SHELLS AND BARNACLES, WHICH, DURING
A STORM, SCUTTLE ABOUT AND OPEN UP AND
SCREAM, AS THOUGH THEY HAD MOUTHS.**

by Jiaqi Kang

I only ever wanted to know how it felt to have the wind beneath your feet, eager to hoist you up to where you needed to be, hands outstretched, palms faced upwards and fingers laced together, inviting. As a sapling, I watched children do that, paying special attention to the one at the bottom who was always getting a faceful of leg, ass, and hand as his friends used him to clamber over the wall. I was friends with the wall. My roots were entwined with the bricks at its foundation. We'd come up around the same time, the wall erected where before there was only common. When the time came for me to leave, it was difficult for them to cut me down. Like the wall was holding on to me, trying to keep me there. They had to smash some of the stone to tear me out, and dig their heels into the mud and pull and pull.

Afterwards, they stripped my bark and made me smooth. Made me bend and curve the way they wanted. The wall stayed put and did its job, which was to enclose, and forgot me. Part of me

became the holster for a sail, and when the wind blew across the water and filled my puffed-out cheeks, I learned that nothing is as good as you think it'll be when you're lying on your back on a common that no longer exists while your mother rubs your belly in comforting circles. I learned that you can miss stomachaches, and the sky when it's placid, and children who snap your branches and tuck their garbage into the crooks of your trunk. I learned that you can get seasick.

The sea was so wide the first time. The sky was empty. I crossed them and crossed them and didn't leave so much as a mark. The water held no imprint. It took me years to realise that the waves lapping against me wanted nothing from me, and had nothing to say to me either.

My captain sings to me when he thinks only I can hear. My captain shares his rum with me and sometimes falls out of his bed so I can feel his skin. My captain saw my run-down husk and replaced each and every one of my planks, some himself, some by others under his orders. When I first met my captain, he was only a child. He reminded me of myself at that age: supple, wicked, with conniving thoughts. I watched him shed his skirts and cut his hair. I watched him kill his masters with a cleaver he pocketed from the kitchens. I was there when he lost his leg and gave him a part of me to use as peg, and it was like how he used to run a finger across the coarse grain of my body to see if I'd splinter him; that hiss of pain and prick of blood always such a thrill, as though in that moment, he understood me. The splinters always pushed themselves out some

days later but when he received the peg, it was mine for him to keep. His.

My name is Shen. It means deep. It means God. It means aunt. It means that I live in the gap beneath your bed and only come out to call you down to mealtimes. No, it doesn't. My kidnappers only thought it would be an easy name to use for when they needed me to wade into the water on their behalf. Sometimes, I drop my anchor into the sands in the dark and wonder if I'll fall in love with whatever I find next. There was a particular ripple that passed through me once and made me wonder whether that's what it feels like, when it happens—as though something has moved through you, has made use of you in that moment as some kind of transit or vessel, and now all you want to do is to follow it wherever it goes so that it may use you again. I think it was made of sound, the ripple, though I don't know what it sounds like.

Here's what I do know: I know that aunts are meant to look like dads, all square faces and round eyes, lips clicking around pistachio shells. I know the sound of my captain's footsteps, the drag of him across the floor. I know that the color purple exists, though I have never seen it. I know that the common is gone. I know that my captain's parrot did not die of an accident, that the first mate poisoned it, that he will use the same poison to kill my captain. I know that I will not let them throw my captain's body into the ocean after they kill him. I will not even let them touch his body, which only I have felt, his breasts tucked between his chest and the straw mattress when he sleeps, his scarred and mottled arms,

the snail that lives in his hair, the sound of his snoring. I would sooner sink myself and every soul that has carved a space for itself inside my brig than let my captain's crew dispose of him like some aging widow too old to sweep an alehouse floor.

They think because I am an aged, creaking thing, because I am ugly and damp, that I cannot fight back. What they don't know is that my captain loves me for what he sees of me. I'd always hoped I'd die by fire, but if I am to drown for my captain, I'd be glad, I'd be honored, I wouldn't cry. Let the breeze take the pieces of me to some faraway shore, with enough wood to start anew.



MISSIONS

ALI RAZ

MISSIONS

by Ali Raz

Mission 1

We weren't in any particularly good place, just a parking lot without any cars. Part of the lot had been flooded and now resembled a pond. It was only a matter of time until A, high on soda, stripped out of his clothes and plunged in. The others encouraged him with maniacal hoots of laughter. I ducked over to untie my shoelaces, squeezed a tube of explosives from inside of one, and proceeded to attach it to the underside of A's Toyota.

I waited for two hours to be out of sight before I dialed The Number from a phone booth. Two hours beforehand, A had started his car and burned to a crisp.

"It's done," I said into the payphone. This was difficult; the most difficult part of the whole operation. Each of us were questioned by the police, but nothing came of it. Of course it didn't. They were incompetent fools.

Surveillance structures in Looptown (not a name; a homonym) are designed with sightlines in mind. This sounds obvious when

thus stated, yet one would be surprised by how commonly it is overlooked—in other cities. The whole of Looptown is the work of a single architect. This has given the township a coherence of design rare in modern cities. Looptown is distinctive in other senses, too, being the brainchild of bureaucrats who gathered in parliament one afternoon and decided en masse that a new city was necessary. The king was pleased. Preparations began forthwith. An engineering competition was launched—anyway, not to go on. The point is, there was a *point* in Looptown's emergence. Unlike the mass of historical cities, it was not formed through the step-wise action of historical time. It burst upon the planet all at once, complete and fully formed, much like Mr. Bean's fall from the sky (for the careful observer, that show—and no other—has predicted the future in other ways, too).

Of all of Looptown's many noteworthy architectural features, none is more immediately striking than the design of its surveillance structures: police station, prison, courthouse, post office, grocery store, and bank. Observed from aerial view, Looptown is a cube. Each structure is situated in a way that allows it complete and unobstructed sightlines over each of the cube's six faces. The task was *impossible*—which is exactly why I had been given it; I, and not my dear eliminated A, had been the intended eliminee. In executing the mission, I had evaded my own death, switching it out with A's. Would it matter? I hoped that it would not. Which is why, filled with hope, I made the circuitous trek out of the police station and walked with my back to their expanding glass wall, always aware of the 100 eyes upon my back, until the moment I occupied the vertex where the domain of the police station ends and

the post office begins. It wasn't a blind spot. It was an interference zone. Policemen and postal workers dried out their eyes in staring contests as I, meanwhile, picked up the receiver and dialed The Infernal Number.

Mission 2

Men have no regard for each other.

For example:

In Wes Craven's B-movie extravaganza *The Hills Have Eyes*, two families have a stand-off. One is a normal family. One is a cannibal family. The Normals bust a tire and run out of gas in the middle of an endless desert. Soft sand and dry heat form mountains of grit that run a ring around the horizon. These hills have iron in them. The iron scuppers the radio reception, meaning they're good and truly stuck. Really cooked—as both families know. Have known, each independent of the other, from the moment they stopped at a gas station and encountered a strange old man, saw a bloody handprint on a door, listened to warnings they'd no mind of heeding. Each of the six holds this knowledge within themselves while maintaining a false exterior for the others. They each of them front. Which is why, as families do, they will each of them rot, burn, and lose their minds, sustain bullet wounds and be stabbed to death, in a single night lose everything that they hold dear. The seventh, a baby named Catherine, meanwhile, had no idea any of this was happening, or that she lived with such utter fools.

The film doesn't end. It only stops running. The last frame is of Doug Wood, the golden boy. Unable to pull the wool over his eyes any more, Doug plunges a knife into the cannibal father the way one plunges a clogged toilet bowl. Beneath him, out of frame, the father cannibal experiences ecstatic death. It's hard growing up in a desert. It's hard living with animals like an animal. It's hard being ugly, maimed, malformed. It's hard to be spurned, scorned, denied, expunged. It's hard to eat baby Catherine, but it's easier than the alternative, which is to starve.

Mission 3

*Iron has magnetic properties. QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQA3333 and it will,
and it will lead me to the true North.*

“Melissa,” I said to the spider, who turned in her web and wagged her face at me. “Do you think it would be wise or unwise for someone—not myself, of course—but someone else, to respond to radio messages not intended for them?”

The coffee pot pinged and I poured a large cup. I drank it in the living room with Melissa.

The telephone rang around noon: six hours too late. “You’re too

late,” I intoned into the phone. Behind me, Melissa started up her mezzo-soprano scales and I cupped a hand over the mouthpiece to keep my interlocutor from overhearing. “It’s already over.”

Hardly had I said this when a fist pounded on the front door. Melissa’s voice broke on a note. I curled a hand over the pistol in my waistband and moved softly towards the door. The silhouette was a woman’s. I tucked myself flat against the wall and asked the stranger what she wanted.

She told me she needed to make a phone call. Her car had broken down—looking out the kitchen window later, I’d indeed see a Beetle with smoke rising from the hood—and she needed a mechanic. A breathless moment passed. Then I slipped the pistol back into my pants, yanked aside the chain, and welcomed the stranger into my house. Highly irregular behavior from a serviceman, but I had had queasy dreams the night before. Queasy dreams, whenever I have them, make me act queasy until the feeling goes away.

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked her when she had made the call. “Cereal? A sandwich?”

The woman politely declined each of these. She said I was very kind, but she had to be going. At the door she paused, perhaps pitied me, turned to kiss me a little on the lips. Her tongue had darted into my mouth before I had time to react, and then she was gone.

“Wow,” I said aloud, and spat out the pellet she had deposited against the inside of my cheek. When I’d unrolled the tight little paper tube and dried it out, I saw that there was an address on it. The address was my own.

“Melissa,” I asked Melissa. “Do you think I ought to take a shower or a bath?”

So I stood under warm flowing water and moved a loofah around me, trying to get clean. Melissa had picked my outfit for the day. She’d gone all out. Lime-green suit, bowler hat, stovepipe socks and brogues. The last time I’d worn all that I’d been getting married.

Which was fitting.

I hid the bomb in the cake. This was easy. A ten-layered wedding cake, to arrive intact at an event, has to be assembled on the premises. A team of bakers ferry the individual layers to the venue in a trademark iced truck and, when the time is right, carefully and with bated breath, stand each layer atop the other. Frosting and icing are added along with decorative bits and bobs.

I hung around the bakers and snatched a moment when their attention was diverted to slide the pipe bomb into the side of the vanilla cake. I covered the point of insertion with icing and, with my work having been accomplished, wandered further into the

party. I was enjoying canapes and champagne in a far corner of the garden when the bride and groom cut into the wedding cake and sprayed blood and marzipan all over the place.

“It’s done,” I said into the payphone, and hung up. Then I was on the ground and vomiting, really heaving, my whole gut was in my mouth. The shadow of the man who had poisoned—of course, poisoned!—the precise canape that was served to me fell over the ground, and then I blacked out.

Phones were ringing off the hook. One phone would be answered, and another would start ringing and mixed up in it all were the murmurs of male voices. Low and officious—that is how the men sounded, as consciousness slowly returned to me. I couldn’t see the men, and this is how I knew there was a hood over my head. There was no feeling in my hands and feet. My butt was hurting on a hard metal chair. Leather straps kept me pressed to it.

“He’s awake.”

“Light him up.”

A set of floodlights blazed on in my face and the hood was yanked off by a wire. I know that I screamed because there was the taste of blood in my throat; I’d bitten down on my tongue in the shock of the lights. There was a gibbering sound like turkeys at play.

“We have you. F__ Gott__, you are under arrest!” A voice spoke into a mic. I know that he was using a mic because there was a lot of feedback. Especially when he raised his voice and got all excited, and the mic exploded in a chainsaw of artifacts. Someone

got him a new one.

He read me out my list of crimes. Everything I'd ever done, and some things that I hadn't. While they had me, they must have thought, might as well pin some loose ends on me. It was policework, plain and simple. I didn't hold any grudges on that account.

"Who sold me out?" I asked, when the recitation had ended and my cop captors asked if I'd any questions. A universal tittering went up.

"It was Melissa," the man boomed into the mic.

Melissa, Melissa, Melissa, the others echoed.

Melissa

Melissa

Melissa

Someone threw the switch and the straps fell off from around me. Immediately, I teetered, lost balance, fell thirty feet into an ice bath of piranhas.

Melissa

Melissa

Melissa

NOSEBLEED WEATHER

MARILYN HOPE



NOSEBLEED WEATHER

by Marilyn Hope

Twelve-year-old Tibby Wallace takes the winter with him when he dies, but it's an act of rage. Summer scrapes through the valley overnight. Pollens convulse, lakes flood. Hundreds of snowshoe hares wear their December-whites in the sudden verdure; easy prey for owls, foxes, Mazzie Mako's feral cats. Soft, torn bodies everywhere. Tibby evokes eight-foot-tall stalks of hogweed from every ribcage, furious and toxic to the touch. But it's the yarrow that spells murder to me and Cricket.

"Never seen anything natural grow in such straight lines," Cricket says, studying the row of rusty blossoms that slit across the town limits like papercuts. "Earth don't plant in processions."

"Speaking of processions," I say, nodding to the single-lane road. Mrs. Wallace is driving back from the cemetery in far-off Stanton in her battered station wagon, heading the autocade at a crawl. Everyone's still got their winter tires on. Wallace rolls down her window, melting snow clinging to the tulle veil of her fascinator: she must've stood graveside for a very long time.

"What's all this?" Wallace asks. "Hemlock?"

"Yarrows," says Cricket. "Also known as 'soldier's woundworts' or 'sanguinaries.'"

"All right, Policegirl Posy. What they mean?"

“Mean he’s angry.” Cricket’s thick black hair hangs heavy with sweat and rain. Tibby has been tantruming short storms and grueling sun in turn across the 5.80 square miles of our town all day. “Mean there’s something else he wants us to see.”

“Always got to have the final word, my boy,” says Wallace. She and Tibby lived in a small house full of fatigue. They were hard-eyed but shy, both of them better hidiers than seekers. Mrs. Wallace’s hands are all knuckle as she tightens them around the steering wheel, so hard that the old leather cracks. “We following through or not?”

Cricket and I get back into the squad car and hit the siren. We’re in haphazard plainclothes for today’s mercurial weather. I’m wearing a denim romper and snow boots. Cricket’s in a sage-colored button-down, men’s trousers, and a disposable rain poncho. Badges on ball chains circle our necks.

“Seen this before,” Cricket tells me, dodging hogweed as we drive. “My neighbor’s daughter in Cheongsando went missing one spring. Found the body surrounded by endangered musk deer, the kind that live in the boreal forest, right there in the island green. They died so quickly. Fangs everywhere, like punctuation marks. But for a spell, they brought the taiga with them. Jezo spruce and bog rosemary and fireweed—”

“You know your plants,” I say, startled.

“I know everything that’s got a place,” says Cricket. “And I know a pointed finger when I see one. That girl laid dahurian larch all around the house of the man who killed her. I didn’t have the seniority to convict him then, but I’ve got the numbers and the shadows to back me here. Not that I think Tibby’ll have left much

for us to fingerprint. If this sun is any indication.”

Sweat slips down our temples. Cricket pokes the AC vents open.

“Hell-hot,” she says.

By the time we reach the house at the end of the yarrow, tiny red petals have swallowed the doctor entirely—a woman’s silhouette tethered to the ground by a net of stems. Cricket and I draw closer on our tiptoes, seesawing as we try not to step on the flowers’ open faces. So many and so close, the copper clusters of florets smell full and peppery, like someone’s cooking. Spindly white spider lilies canopy her expression, rising from her eyes and nostrils and mouth, as if in censorship.

Cricket presses one hand to the doctor’s wrist for a pulse, then pulls it back with her middle finger raised toward the ceiling.

“Oh, boss, don’t pout,” I say. “Let the boy have his revenge.”

“And what pretty revenge it is,” says Cricket, sullen. “Just wish the achillea came with answers.”

But it doesn’t. Tibby had been back in the phlebotomy chair the last afternoon we spoke. I asked what they were testing for this time, and he replied in that voice of his, dry as dust: “Toxins. The really-hard-to-find ones.”

He liked us—Cricket’s terse concern and thin mouth, my cheerful banter, the silly things I could do with my eyebrows. The way we believed him when he said someone was poisoning him. “I wanted to do what you two do”, he said, the doctor tapping gently at his inner elbow. “I wanted to keep listening after everyone else gives up.”

There was nothing we could say to that, his resignation, our failure.

I watched the test tubes fill one after the other, his tiny veins bulging with blood. Almost beautiful.

“Like branches,” I said.

“Like roots,” Tibby replied.

Outside, Mrs. Wallace honks her horn twice. She and the funeral cortege are pulling up to see the damage. I can address the grief in her expression—there are enough ways to say “I’m sorry” and “I know you loved him”—but I can think of no acceptable reply to the fury and shame that twist her mouth when she sees where the flowers are leading her.

Cricket and I walk to the front porch and stand shoulder-to-shoulder, shivering. Now that we’ve found the body, Tibby has released the weather again, fast as a snap of the fingers. Not far beyond the final car, it’s beginning to snow, winter creeping up on the mourners like a slow, slender needle.

YANG
LIANTING
REDUX

CELESTE CHEN



Content warning: castration, mention of piss, some sexual content, typical wuxia violence.

YANG LIANTING REDUX

by Celeste Chen

after Dongfang Bubai

The last time we met, she cleaved off my arm and I castrated her, took her balls and tucked them into my robes. For safekeeping, I told her, and she nodded. We'd always had an understanding, Dongfang Bubai and I. She wanted to swallow the world and I wanted to ruin it, but the Jade Emperor had had enough and told us to give up. *You've grown too great together. Either stay and change, or leave with nothing and start again*, he said, and so we decided to leave and start over. She fucked me and I fucked her, and then we made a plan. *Your arm for safekeeping*, she told me, sucking my fingers, and when she nodded, I shoved them down her throat till they bouqueted around her breath. Her drool dried briny around my wrist, ringing it. For a moment, I wished for it to dry red—just like that string of fate— but then her incisors clamped down to meet my lifeline. *Fuck*, I spat, and she gurgle-laughed till I drew out my fingers, my hand, my wrist. *Fuck*, I said again, and she echoed me. *Fuck*.

That's when we did it. She pressed her blade, the one she'd found mountainside, monk-blessed and gleaming, right where my arm socketed into shoulder. She rubbed at the spot, thumbing the bowl of cartilage and bone. She leaned in close. *My love*, she breathed. 阿亭。 She told me to count to three:

一、二、三—

—but I blinked on the 三。

And so I missed how she did it, how she sliced on the exhale, ripping away my arm in a single arc—the way a man’s head rolls forwards, never backwards, when you slice from behind the jugular. Once, she and I had fought together, cheeks facing where the Ru River swirls into the Huai. We’d killed men, hordes of them, by counting: 一、二、三—

—then nothing. Then heads stolen from bodies, riders stolen from their saddles.

What happened to us? The centuries, maybe. Immortality plays tricks on the mind. After Dongfang Bubai took my arm, she made me reach between her legs. Gave me a dagger and told me to unseam her there. *Why?*

Power. I choose power, she whispered. Don’t you want to master the needle arts too?

I shook my head. No. I tired of destruction. All those years of carnage. Maybe I wanted to wander. Maybe I was frightened of what it’d mean to be powerful. I could already see Dongfang Bubai stretching through time, arcing away from me, from us. She’d always been the more ambitious one, with dreams of a world greater than ours.

Do it. Please, she said.

Dongfang Bubai didn't cry when I sank the dagger between her thighs. She only cried when it was over, when I patted the freshly knit skin, tight and full like the bottom of a rich man's purse. *Please*, she cried, and so I nudged aside a knee and dipped my head down, where I flicked what remained with my tongue. I kissed her. I gifted her my blade, pressing her fingers into the hilt where we once notched our names.

We parted afterwards. Where did she go? I don't know. I felt lost without her. Without my blade, I shriveled. I became a wet flag of a wuxia, a ghost of my original self, and I roamed through the years. When I couldn't take it anymore, I lay down in the desert until my body fell off my skeleton. Out of pity, or perhaps out of shame, the Jade Emperor fashioned me a new body. Did he make it out of clay? No. I'm sand-limbed. Memory-glued. The Jade Emperor jigsawed together images of a life I'd thrown away until I became a pocket of a person, memory and painted skin woven around a howling emptiness.

It hurt.

It hurt and it hurt and it didn't stop hurting.
Why had I set out alone?
Why had I been so frightened of power?
After all, it'd fed us for so long.
So I set out once more.

I wade through a shifting landscape, tipping my head into the air and willing my new feet and knees and hips towards the memory of her. When I find Dongfang Bubai, I almost laugh. Aisle 8. Butter, yogurt, ice cream. Fat, sour, and sweet. She's gripping the handle of the freezer door, one wrist bathed in the glow of modern convenience, like milk running down a bruise. She turns toward me as I blink.

「阿亭？」 Her face curls around my name. In this century, she's glossed her lips and she purses them for me to see. I stare. She looks like every other woman at the supermarket, but I can smell her killing intent—still so familiar to me, after all this time. And besides, her shadow has always liked me. It tugs at me now, pooling across the tiled floor and nipping at my robes.

Should I reach out? I do.

She shudders when I rest my palm along the swoop of her cheek. Maybe she's thinking about the way her teeth had felt long ago. Could these be the same teeth that had once punched moons into my skin? They look softer now, as if she's ground them down. My lifeline itches. My heartline is quiet.

Come back with me, she says, and I nod. How could I not? She lives a block away, right above an osteopathy clinic. *Osteopathy?*

Yes, osteopathy. Bone-setting. She grins, her shadow nudging mine as we climb up one flight of stairs, then another. The air chases us with the sound of wronged bones being righted.

Her flat is nondescript. Small. Bowed with dampness, the walls

hug the ceiling. The kitchen is dark, and I watch as she glides across its pebbled floor, reaching for the kettle. Slowly, I recall her hunger, how we drooled as she steeped and boiled it, then let it spill over. That vast hunger for the world.

My hips buckle when she tells me to sit; my neck tingles when she offers me tea—red as the Ru River. Strong as the Huai. Still, I say yes. My mouth can't help but make that shape for her. Yes. She hands me a cup and brims it with bitterness. When our fingers brush, her nails sliver along my wrist, drawing blood. I begin to sob, but the sound comes out strange and misshapen, like a horse halved from its gallop.

She leans in close, her thighs touching mine. Her mouth is wide like a ditch and I tell her that I can still love her with my tongue if she wants. I whisper that I still have her balls, but she probably doesn't need them, right? I can tell from her hands that she's mastered the needle arts.

Suddenly, I ache to learn. Maybe I, too, want to swallow the world, rub my belly against her own, full and warm and stitched with red. Maybe I, too, want power. *Can you show me too?*

Ah, you only had to ask. Come here. She brings me to the bedroom, and there on her bed rest the needles. Rests my blade. I see the bones of the arm from a body that's no longer mine, and I lie down like I did in the desert: palms bald and beholden to the sky, eyelids folded. She cradles my head and kisses me, long and slow. Do it, I say, blinking away my nervousness. *You can even do it slowly.*

After the first time we fucked, she pissed on me. A whim. It had felt sacred, hot and vicious, and we'd laughed as the piss slid down

onto my waiting tongue. That's what it feels like right now. She finds my mouth as she guides my blade into the realm of me. She gutters me, in-in-in. She strokes my face the entire time. *My world*, she whispers, 阿亭、 and we laugh. I think about all those years I wasted, alone and wandering, as I sink into her mouth. *My whole world. You've always been my world.* The room cracks. Our bones set.

CONTRIBUTORS

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