

The Perceptions and Portrayals of Para-Presences in Literary Genre

Creative Writing Senior Composition

Arabella K. Graff

Allegheny College

English major, emphasis in Creative Writing

Advisor: Dr. Christopher Bakken

Second Reader: Dr. Alexis Hart

The Perception and Portrayal of Para-Presences in Literary Genre

By Arabella K. Graff

A Senior Comprehensive Project in Creative Writing

Submitted to the Department of English at Allegheny College

By Arabella K. Graff

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree

April 21, 2023

Dr. Christopher Bakken [Advisor] _____

Dr. Alexis Hart [Second Reader] _____

**I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and maintain the
integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.**

Arabella K. Graff

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Introduction.....	1
Case Studies and Research.....	3
The Marvelous Macabre.....	10
Para-Presences and Mortality.....	20
The Stone Playground.....	22
Salt and Cloves.....	29
The Talisman.....	43
Pick Your Poison.....	58
Acknowledgements.....	76
Sources.....	77

Introduction

At the base of Japan's Mount Fuji lies a vast forest so dense that swaying tree branches mimic the sound of soft crashing waves of the sea. Caves and streams carve out spaces between moss-covered roots. The volcanic rock of its foundation infuses soil with iron levels so high that it interferes with cellular and GPS devices, and absorbs sound so well that there are moments of complete silence.¹ Every park ranger and wooden sign warns hikers to stay on the path.

It is easy to get lost here.

Bones and personal paraphernalia litter the forest floor, cold hands next to pill bottles in dark caves, lines of thread stopping dead as though someone ran out or decided they wouldn't be turning back anyway. Aokigahara, the "Sea of Trees", is notorious not only for its ethereal landscape, but for the tragedies that take place there which have earned it the name "Suicide Forest". Signs that mark the trails plead with visitors to think of their loved ones, to call someone for help, while security cameras guard the entrances to watch for those who get lost or do not return. It is said that the spirits of these violent deaths—shinigami—wander the forest and lure others who are suffering to join them, distant soft screams piercing the stillness..

Each story in this project is based on a real case of para-presencial activity, interpreted in fiction to bring life and detail to cases of tragedy and mystery. This project uses short stories to explore the paranormal in reality and in fictional genres such as horror and magical realism, specifically exploring the dynamics of life, death, and the mystique of what lies between. In this project, I specify "para-presences" in addition to "paranormal", in order to more precisely identify the spiritual presences or specters that operate outside of and go beyond or above the known physical laws of nature or normal scientific understanding to designate them from the amorphous definition of the "paranormal". My story "The Talisman" follows a desperate

¹ National Geographic, "Aokigahara: An Ethereal Forest Where Japanese Commit Suicide."

woman's journey to find her long-lost wife, whose spirit she is reunited with in Aokigahara. Two more stories, "The Stone Playground" and "Salt and Cloves", are based on personal testimonies of para-presencial encounters, while the final story "Pick Your Poison" explores treatment of the human body and soul as separate yet entangled entities, based on court cases addressing necrophilia. I address these specific cases in the section entitled "Case Studies and Research". I continue into the topic of my own writing process and the experience of organizing this project in the next section, "The Marvelous Macabre", which includes the authors and stories from whom I drew inspiration and learned from. The final section "Para-presences and Mortality" discusses the ways in which para-presences are treated in the genres I traverse, in addition to the realities they mirror or influence, and how I treat them in my own stories.

While these stories are fictional, I believe them to be based in reality; no case of personal testimony or legal action is trivialized nor treated as though the experience itself is fictional. I myself believe in the reality of para-presences and the paranormal, and that the stories we tell of them are reflective of our own fears, desires, and deepest unknown limits of our humanity. These stories are not meant to serve as evidence themselves, or to speak over the voices of the dead nor the living who have shared their experiences. Through this project, I simply wish to understand, and expand upon what I increasingly do— that there is much more to the physical world than science credits it for, and that humans have acknowledged and recognized this for centuries, which is evidenced in potentially macabre genres such as folklore, horror, and magical realism. This project explores the definitions of "living" and "dead", and what it means to be either or neither.

It is important to note that these narrative explorations, while based in research and real experiences, take creative liberties and do not serve as testimonials themselves. All real names,

dates, and locations not directly relevant to the research a story is based on have been changed so as not to confuse the story I weave with the story/ case/ experiences it is influenced by.

Case Studies and Research

Each story in this project is based on a specific case study; two testimonies, one collective cultural experience, and a collection of court cases. In this section, I will address each case and the research I did to supplement them, and how each one influenced the story that bloomed from it. The first story in this project, "The Stone Playground", is based on the short testimony of one of my professors. In class one day, he recalled bringing his young children to one of the several scenic cemeteries in town for a walk and letting them roam within sight. After the outing, his children "wouldn't stop talking about ghosts" for a week. When he finally asked them where they learned about ghosts, they said that the ghosts had told them.

While it is unsurprising to me that children may be more receptive to spiritual influences that they have not yet learned to be afraid of, I wanted to understand whether this was a repeated phenomenon—children becoming aware of para-presences while adults remain oblivious. Do the ghosts choose who they reveal themselves to? If so, why children? Or is it, perhaps, that adults simply choose not to see them? Or could all of this be simply chalked up to the imaginative mind of a six-year-old? While the easiest and more generally accepted option may be to excuse the childrens' encounter as an active imagination, opening ourselves up to wonder about the nature of para-presences in a place where the dead are meant to be at rest is far more interesting. In my story "The Stone Playground", I approach these questions with inspiration from Neil Gaiman's novel *The Graveyard Book*. The way the dead function and interact beyond the grave in my story, the graveyard acting as a community center for those not ready to move on, was inspired

by the interactions between the ghosts in *The Graveyard Book*. Like Gaiman's ghosts, mine do not need to move on in order to be at peace; this idea mimics the common motif within ghost stories in folklore that a ghost may be unable or unwilling to "move on" if they have unfinished business.² The groundskeeper of the cemetery in my story cannot move on after he dies because he feels that it is still his job to care for the dead even after he enters their realm; his business is a business of heart, and will never be finished. My ghosts in this story simply exist or even choose to remain in an in-between space. My ghosts and spirits serve different purposes in each story, and refer to different motifs common to ghost stories in folklore or spirits in mythology.

In dualist Catholic tradition, purgatory is the realm between the realms of Heaven and Hell, the three places the human soul can go after the body dies; it is the in-between of in-betweens. When a soul goes to purgatory, they may spend any amount of time there cleansing their soul as a second chance to get into Heaven to be with God in eternal peace. Catholics and Protestants often debate their religious worldviews and the existence of purgatory by using the existence or nonexistence of ghosts to justify their claims. In the novel *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, Bennet is quoted explaining these heated debates, noting that,

"If ghosts existed then so must purgatory, but if ghosts did not exist, then there was no evidence that purgatory did either. If, as the new Protestantism taught, the souls of the dead went straight to heaven or straight to hell, then there was no such thing as ghosts, for the blessed would not want to leave heaven and the damned would not be allowed to leave hell".³

In my story "Salt and Cloves", a catholic priest wrestles with his doubt in God and placates this with his firm belief in para-presences such as ghosts (the souls of dead humans) and demons (entities originating from Hell). His doubt is met with a newfound sense of purpose in guiding

² Goldstein, Diane E, et al. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* p. 38

³ *Haunting Experiences* p. 17

his friend and mentee Rosa through putting the ghost of a child that haunts her house to rest. In this story, I explore mother-daughter relationships and the relationships between a religious leader and the God he doubts, and the paranormal he cannot deny. This story is the second based on a personal testimony, the testimony of my friend who has lived in a haunted house much of her life. For the purposes of anonymity, I will refer to her as "A.G.". When I visited her family in January 2023, she confided in me that the ghost of a little girl has haunted their house as long as she's lived there—a ghost that looks so similar to herself that every member of the family has had an encounter with the ghost believing it to be A.G. The ghost of this little girl has never attempted contact, and the family have never contacted her beyond mistaking her for A.G. For two decades, family members and visitors alike have had moments where they mistook this silent girl for A.G., calling her name to no response and to find that A.G. was either not home or in another room. The girl has been sighted sitting alone in the dark, or as A.G.'s ex witnessed, hiding between kitchen chairs as though hiding from him or attempting to play hide-and-seek. Although she has never spoken, she has remained peaceful and simply exists within the household and appears at random times, sighted for only a moment or even spoken directly to with the lights on. Every family member reports having seen her at least once.

While A.G. herself is fascinated by her and open to discussing her experiences, her two brothers were reluctant to share their own. A.G.'s reports that her ex, who used to live in the house but did not grow accustomed to the girl's presence, remarked several times in the middle of the night that he could feel someone watching him in an empty room. I suspect that the malevolent presence he felt is the same presence that causes items to disappear, move and violently throw objects throughout the house, but it is possible that it is the girl and he was afraid of her not because she was dangerous, but because he did not want to believe in para-presences.

A.G. also reports having seen a person's shadow in the kitchen, only to turn the corner and see no one there. Family members consistently hear wandering footsteps that do not resemble the footsteps of those in the house. I suspect, as do A.G. and her brothers, that there are two entities haunting the house; the malevolent, violent poltergeist, and the apparition of the little girl. There is a chance that they could be the same being, but the anger, intent, and threatening energy of the poltergeist does not match the energy of the wandering girl. A.G. and I agree that it sounds like she is lost and simply wants to feel part of a family, and has no reason to act out against those in the house. Attempting contact, however, could be dangerous because it risks contact with the poltergeist if there are in fact two separate para-presences. There is uncertainty around the type of entity the poltergeist is, especially considering the fact that all three siblings report having terrible nightmares their entire lives in the house; its influence on the human subconscious casts doubt on its humanity.

The girl, on the other hand, appears and acts human, and is most likely a lost human child in search of her family, possibly believing A.G.'s family to be her own. Maintaining fresh salt lines on the inside of all house thresholds keeps both entities from appearing, but on my tenth day of staying in the house, A.G.'s parents mentioned hearing footsteps mimicking my own during an hour of the night that I had not been awake, in a room of the house I had not been in. The salt lines had been re-applied shortly before I arrived, and I wonder if they begin to weaken after a certain amount of time. I wonder, too, if this instance was the girl communicating that she knew I was there, or if it had been a warning from the poltergeist that it, too, knew I was present. I believe that the girl has no specific motivations keeping her tied to this plane, but cannot know without attempting contact. An inhuman entity, however, has power and full consciousness/awareness of its actions in this plane. While thinking about weaving this account into a fictional

story, I wondered what it could mean for the little girl and the poltergeist to be one and the same, the violent side of her almost representative of a degeneration of the human soul the longer it remains in-between and without rest. In the story "Salt and Cloves", I combined the reported actions of the two para-presences into one character, the ghost of the little girl, who in the story has forgotten her life and believes the family she haunts to be her own; this causes tension between her and the mother of the family, Rosa, whom she believes to be her own mother turning against her because Rosa does not show her the affection she remembers based on the only memory she has left: her mother comforting her after a traumatic event in a way unusual to her mother, further cementing the memory as precious to the girl, and defining her idea of a mother figure. Although I am familiar with certain Christian traditions and worldviews, I was unfamiliar with the traditions and worldviews of Catholic Christianity and supplemented the story with light research. This research helped me to flesh out Rosa and Father Louis's characters and the actions they take in adherence to and outside of their faiths, in addition to their differing practices of the same religion.

My third story, "The Talisman" is based on the Aokiahgara forest in Japan, more famously regarded as "suicide forest" due to the high number of suicides committed within the forest each year. Statistically, the 50 to 59-year age group has consistently had the highest suicide rates of all other age groups, males of that age group being at particular risk. Japan's already high suicide rate (above the U.S., U.K., and Italy)⁴ peaked in 2009 after the country experienced the worst recession it had seen since WWII, with "25.7 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants and almost 33,000 victims in total".⁵ As of 2022, the suicide rates have steadily declined since the recession, but remain high, with the highest risk age group averaging a 23.4 victims per 100,000

⁴ "Inside Japan's 'Suicide Forest'." *CNN*

⁵ National Police Agency (Japan). "Number of Suicides per 100,000 Inhabitants in Japan in 2022, by Age Group." Statista

inhabitants.⁶ Between 2013 and 2015, more than 100 people not from the surrounding towns committed suicide in Aokigahara, but its dark reputation has been around for decades, perpetuated by media such as novels and films, causing more people to choose the forest as their final destination so that they wouldn't "die alone".⁷ It is no surprise, then, that this forest also gained the reputation of being haunted.

"The Talisman" required the most research of all of my stories, because I did not have a background in understanding Japanese language and cultural norms. This helped me to paint a better picture of the main character, Kazumi Omata, and the town she and her wife have lived in all their lives.

If a forest full of suicides wasn't gruesome enough, my last story "Pick Your Poison" is based on court cases attempting to address necrophilia, or the sexual attraction to human corpses. Oftentimes, necrophiliacs are males attracted to female human corpses due to its inability to give or retract consent;⁸ to the necrophiliac, the corpse is viewed as similar to a sex doll—and its ambiguity before the law often acts in the criminal's favor.⁹ While cases are rare, in the U.S, if one is caught attempting to exhume a grave for sexual purposes or is caught engaging sexually with a corpse, the necrophile cannot be prosecuted by law in most states due to a loophole that necrophilia specifically is not prohibited by law. Furthermore,

The state laws that do exist are sometimes extremely vague in their wording and can be easily circumvented by legal counsel... the states that actually possess necrophilia laws vary widely as to how sexual acts with dead bodies are defined and what kind of penalty should be administered for committing necrophilic acts.¹⁰

⁶ "Number of Suicides per 100,000 Inhabitants", Statista

⁷ "Inside Japan's 'Suicide Forest'." *CNN*

⁸ Rosman JP, Resnick PJ. Sexual attraction to corpses: a psychiatric review of necrophilia

⁹ John Troyer PhD (2008) Abuse of a corpse: A brief history and re-theorization of necrophilia laws in the USA, *Mortality* p. 140

¹⁰ Abuse of a corpse

This is due to the indecision of courts as to whether a corpse is legally considered an inanimate object or a person; if an object, then the corpse must receive the legal rights of an object; If a person, the corpse must receive the legal rights of a person. However, a corpse is unable to testify in court, nor is it able to be a witness, so it is difficult for courts to consider giving the dead body the same rights as the living because the dead body cannot do anything.¹¹ Therefore, many cases of necrophilic acts result in the prosecuted being charged with property theft or damage rather than rape or assault, because "as in the Wisconsin case, the term 'victim' requires a living person and, unless the language used to write law makes these qualitative distinctions clear, prosecutors are left with few options".¹²

While normally we tend to view the human corpse with respect and resignation, and perhaps with fear as it reminds us of our own mortality and the mortality of those we love, before the law the human corpse becomes an ambiguous "quasi-subject" that is neither person nor object, law-abiding nor law-defying, property nor free of will, subject to the indifference of the law and those who defend it. The approach I took to writing the story "Pick Your Poison" was to use the corpses' in-between state, similar to the state of the soul in the form of a ghost, in order to tell the story of a community who relies on a man who also navigates this space in-between, known only impersonally as the necromancer. He is urged to shed his cold indifference by his mentor and adoptive mother, yet relies on it to complete his work and maintain an income. In the story, he begins to question his own lack of empathy after two encounters that exhume past trauma and begins a journey into vulnerability with the dead whom he normally ignores and refuses to acknowledge the wishes of.

¹¹ Abuse of a corpse p. 145

¹² Abuse of a corpse p. 144

These cases have been important in not only developing the stories within this project, but in understanding the literature I read to supplement my writing and to understand genres that address, incorporate, or normalize the macabre.

The Marvelous Macabre

The stories within this project were difficult to write due to the nature of the cases they were based on. Heavily personal and real, I had to weave each character and story carefully, respectfully, and intentionally in order to honor the original content with my fiction. One testimonial case, the testimony of A.G., was particularly difficult to weave into a fictional story. The struggle was in finding the balance between fiction and reality; how much of the testimony and those involved to incorporate into the story, and how much to weave myself. The character Father Louis, for example, was never a part of the original testimony, and became a gateway character into fleshing out the story I wanted to tell while incorporating A.G.'s experiences throughout to drive the plot and actions of the surrounding characters, who are not necessarily part of her testimony either, but rather used as a tool to further convey the nameless ghost's desire for a full and loving family that is not her own.

My writing process was not only a process of balancing the portrayals of para-presences of reality in my fiction, but in creating worlds in my stories that suspend the readers' disbelief and allow the macabre *paranormal* to function instead as something *normal*. For this project, I read magical realist authors Jorge Louis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, in addition to dark fantasy and horror author Neil Gaiman. Their stories helped shape my narratives and create worlds in which the macabre is normal and expected, in addition to incorporating the magical

realist "attitude towards reality"¹³, or the marvelous real. I was drawn to magical realism due to this concept that is not a literary mode or technique, but a way of writing that reflects a view of the world itself; the marvelous real as an attitude towards reality allows the magical realist writer the freedom to view the mundane as inherently magical and the paranormal or supernatural to simply be a part of that reality. In an essay, Amaryll Chanady quotes a definition of magical realism from Leal which supplements this:

The magical realist writer "does not need to justify the mysterious nature of events, as the writer of fantastic stories has to. In fantastic literature the supernatural invades a world ruled by reason".¹⁴

The way that magical realism functions, then, inherently makes room for not only for the marvelous mundane, but the marvelous macabre as well. In my writing, the macabre is treated with the same normalcy of the treatment of a man being dreamed into being in Borges' "The Circular Ruins", or the natural existence of demons and beautiful children surviving deadly diseases in Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons*. My stories explore the nature of in-between states and traverse between genres; they take a magical realist approach to the macabre with influences of horror, combining the styles of Borges, Márquez, and Gaiman into prose of my own.

My story "The Talisman", for example, was influenced by Borges' "The Circular Ruins". In this short story, the main character remains a mystery but has a goal that bleeds through his every action: to dream of a man and impose him onto reality. The stranger spends all of his time and energy on this singular goal, presumably for years, having given up his life and identity for this purpose. One has to wonder why: why give up his life, his community, his identity, his time, his energy, for this use of magic? At the end of the story, it is revealed that the stranger, too, is

¹³ Chanady, Amaryll. "The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* p. 131-132

¹⁴ Chanady essay p. 131-132

being dreamed himself, and through this revelation it can be assumed that his entire community is possibly being dreamed, that there is a chain of dreamers, that they trace back to a man somewhere in the mountains with magic so powerful he could surround himself with people he created through the use of his mind. Perhaps it is an itch all his dreamed have; to use the magic of their creator, to create as he did; an itch that caused the stranger to abandon all he's ever known for the chance to dream a person into existence.

Borges masterfully sculpts each sentence of his story, just as the stranger meticulously sculpts each hair and nail of his dreamed man. Each sentence and paragraph pushes the story forward and reveals just enough for the reader to understand but leaves room for mystery. It is the introduction to the stranger in particular that I am interested in:

No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sink into the sacred mud, but in a few days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man came from the South and that his home had been one of those numberless villages upstream in the deeply cleft side of the mountain, where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is infrequent. What is certain is that the grey man kissed the mud, climbed up the bank without pushing aside (probably, without feeling) the blades which were lacerating his flesh, and crawled, nauseated and bloodstained, up to the circular enclosure crowned with a stone tiger or horse, which sometimes was the color of flame and now was that of ashes. This circle was a temple which had been devoured by ancient fires, profaned by the miasmal jungle, and whose god no longer received the homage of men. The stranger stretched himself out beneath the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high overhead. He was not astonished to find that his wounds had healed; he closed his pallid eyes and slept, not through weakness of flesh but through determination of will.¹⁵

While an introduction itself, the opening page of the story never actually introduces the audience to the main character due to the fact that even he does not know who he is; and it never once matters. The story functions solely on successfully making the audience believe that the

¹⁵ Borges, Jorge Luis, and Anthony Bonner. "The Circular Ruins." *Ficciones* p. 57

stranger's magic is capable of creating a person through dreams as much as the stranger believes himself able to do so; this begins from the moment we meet the stranger emerging from the reeds, "pushing aside (probably, without feeling) the blades which were lacerating his flesh". This small detail foreshadows the stranger's later revelation that he, too, was created by dream magic, and engages the reader from the start in a narrative that will defy expectation and may not necessarily adhere to the rules and laws of reality as we know it. The marvelous real in "The Circular Ruins" is the power and mystery of dreams which explores the boundary between the mind and the physical; the marvelous real in my story "The Talisman" is the love between Kazumi and Doi which transcends death and acts as a guide when Kazumi becomes lost in her own grief, the boundaries between life and death uncertain at best. This boundary is first crossed when Kazumi has reached her lowest point.

Up until this point, Kazumi has been continuously re-living her last day alive in the spirit realm, in denial of her own death and the death of her wife whom she is not prepared to be without. In this scene she is visited by her wife in two forms: the form of a shinigami spirit desiring to consume her soul by using the image of Doi to trick her, and Doi's actual spirit protecting her from the shinigami. This is where reality as Kazumi has constructed it begins to fracture and her journey to accept her own and her wife's deaths truly begins:

An eerie hum slowly filled the room, like a memory lingering in space. I didn't dare move or shift my focus away from the tea, for fear I might scare the voice away, and it grew softer, more defined, more real, and when I saw movement from the corner of my eye my heart pounded; with fear or with hope I didn't know. I risked a glance. Doi sat on a cushion on the floor, just as she was when I last saw her. Her short dark hair was tucked behind one ear, and fell forward in her face on the other side. She wore a long skirt and t-shirt, with a large sweater. She absentmindedly hummed the familiar tune that I could never pin a song to. She sat casually, comfortably, reading a physics book, as though she

had never been gone. I stared. She hadn't seemed to notice me. I looked slowly back at the tea that I hadn't made.

My heart pounded. Why? It's Doi. I shouldn't be afraid. I should be celebrating.

"Kazumi no kimi," she said, as though she'd just seen me this morning, "Could you please bring me my tea?"

After seven months of searching for her wife, once finally facing her, Kazumi feels fear before anything else because she knows, deep down, that her wife is dead and that this woman, however desperately she wants her to be, is not Doi. This moment is meant to be the reunion she'd been imagining for months, but rather than hopeful it is twisted into something more chilling and concerning. Kazumi's instinctual fear in this scene—deep fears that she cannot yet admit to herself—emerges in the form of general unease when facing the spirit that takes on the form of Doi, uncertain as to whether she should accept this as reality or fight it. This sets up her later ability to face these fears and break the narrative she's been forcing herself to relive in favor of finally reuniting with her wife.

I used Borges's story as a guide in nuance, as well as a guide in threading details throughout the story in a way that makes the ending the natural point the story would lead to, as well as an ending that adds to the rest of the narrative upon the second read. Here the nuance is in Kazumi's instinctive unease when facing what used to be a mundane, every-day occurrence: Seeing her wife reading and bringing her tea.

Techniques from Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons* were useful in writing "Salt and Cloves", which uses multiple perspectives to convey the tragedy of the ghost child haunting Rosa's family. Márquez's use of beautiful words to describe his settings and scenes was an essential guide in how to construct my own scenes while navigating the magical realist perspective. His novel doesn't feel like it has a plot or a specific story he is trying to progress through his scenes; he simply weaves a life around the characters he creates and gives the readers

a glimpse into these lives without a specific beginning, middle, and end. I attempted to emulate this in "Salt and Cloves" with the three characters' perspectives and different ways of being; A ghost child with memory loss, a Catholic priest who doubts God, and a mother devoted more to her children than religion or God are all going to view the same moments in their lives in very different ways, which I feel I succeeded in portraying at the end of the story in their three perspectives of the attempt to banish the ghost child (an ending that remains uncertain, because it is never confirmed whether or not that banishment succeeded). Márquez's scenes flourish with detail. For example, this moment from the Marquis's perspective as he confronts the choice of sending his daughter to a convent of nuns:

The Marquis saw her motionless and pale, and wondered if he preferred to see her dead or suffering the torment of rabies. He adjusted the mosquito netting so the bats would not drain her blood, he covered her so she would not cough, and he kept watch next to the bed, feeling the new joy of knowing he loved her as he had never loved in this world. Then he made the decision of his life without consulting God or anyone else. At four in the morning, when Sierva María opened her eyes, she saw him sitting next to her bed... The Marquis helped her dress for the occasion. He looked in the chest for velvet slippers so the stiff counter of her boot would not chafe her ankle, and happened to find a ball gown that had belonged to his mother when she was a girl. The dress was faded and stained with age, but clearly had not been worn twice. Now, almost a century later, the Marquis put it on Sierva María, over her Santeria necklaces and baptism scapular. In the chest he also found a hat with colored ribbons that had nothing to do with the dress. The fit was perfect. Then he packed a small valise with a nightgown, a comb narrow enough to root out lice eggs, and her grandmother's small breviary with gold hinges and mother-of-pearl covers.¹⁶

Márquez uses flowery descriptive language in this scene not only as an important moment for the Marquis and Sierva María, but he uses this level of description throughout the entire story, no matter how mundane the event. This fully encapsulates the magical realist "mindset" approach to

¹⁶ Márquez, Gabriel García. *Of Love and Other Demons*. Translated by Edith Grossman p. 59

writing the genre. Márquez does not have to justify his dramatic beauty or tragedy in the character's lives; it's simply the way they exist in this world. I employ this approach in each character's perspective. The ghost child, for example, oscillates between re-living her last memory and existing in the present with no explanation as to how or why, such as in this moment:

Mama looks between me and the girl. The girl looks exactly like me, long dark hair cascading around her face, wearing pajamas too big for her.

"Elena?"

The girl stares at me, and Mama looks between us in confusion. They turn back to me but I am already leaving, the darkness folding around me like dough, back on the bathroom floor with Mama's lips on my cheeks.

The ghost child exists in an in-between of in-betweens; not only is she between life and death, but she is suspended between the past she can't remember and the present she doesn't recognize. She retreats, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, back into her last memory of her mother which influences the way she interprets the present and the family she haunts. None of this is explained with reason, nor is there any attempt on my part to make the reader want one, just as Márquez flourishes each moment without need for a reason to.

While Neil Gaiman is not explicitly known as a magical realist author like Borges and Márquez, his writing takes a magical realist approach in order to suspend his reader's disbelief and submerge them in the worlds of his stories which can be, at times, completely absurd or horrifying in their contents. I found his novel *The Graveyard Book* after drafting my story "The Stone Playground" and found that they were similar in concept, so I incorporated the idea of the ghost community from his story into my own. *The Graveyard Book* focuses on a young boy whose family is murdered and is then raised by ghosts and the caretaker of the cemetery, who is not quite human and not quite dead. Nobody Owens navigates these in-betweens with a blessing

called "Freedom of the Graveyard", which allows him to walk the worlds of the living, the dead, and other entities he learns of such as ghouls. This ability is similar to the ability of the gardeners in my story, who care for not only the grounds but interact with the community of ghosts as well, and maintain their ability to see them as they grow older. I based this story on a testimony of young children being able to see and speak with ghosts while the adults in their lives could not (mentioned in the previous section, "Case Studies and Research"). Gaiman's story focusing on children navigating the realms of the living and the dead was therefore a perfect model to guide my portrayal of children in the story, as well as the caretakers who choose to walk in-between rather than "...try to separate it all. 'Real' and 'not real'," as the gardener says in my story.

My story is short and succinct, told by the gardener as though he is telling the story of his line of caretakers to someone newly deceased. He speaks of his adoptive father, the previous gardener; himself; and meeting who would later become his apprentice, adoptive son, then gardener of the cemetery after the narrator dies. The narrator's death is celebrated, rather than mourned, the spectral community he has cared for for decades embracing him as family, mimicking how I believe Nobody Owens' own spectral community would embrace him. Gaiman's characters served as a model to write individuals navigating a world filled with para-presences, and as such were helpful in writing believable characters who were each distinct in action and voice. "The Stone Playground" is the shortest of my stories, and acts as a sort of soft introduction to the other three which deal with heavier case material and emotional investment in characters' lives and actions.

Neil Gaiman is a master of folklore, and spins it subtly into his horror and fantasy. In one horror short story, "The White Road," Gaiman spins a tale of a man named Mister Fox who embodies the French and English folktales of Bluebeard, and Mr. Fox, respectively. In the story,

A young woman referred to only as the narrator's "intended" tells a story of a nightmare she had to a room of strangers staying at an inn. She tells a tale in which she dreamed of Mister Fox inviting her to his manor, far up the white road, which he makes a path for her to follow with a trail of pig's blood. Within the manor she finds gruesome displays of women Mister Fox had murdered, and watches as he slaughters another one he lured there to add to his collection of butchered trophies. The woman reveals at the end of her story, after horrifying her audience, that it was not a nightmare, but reality, and presents proof:

All honest farmers, fox-hunting men.
They are stamping their boots, their black boots.
"—before that, Mister Fox,
I seized, from the floor, from the bloody floor,
her hand, Mister Fox. The hand of the woman
you hacked apart before my eyes."

"It is not so—"

"It was no dream. You Creature. You Bluebeard."

"It was not so—"

"You Gilles-de-Rais. You monster."

... She smiles now, lacking mirth or warmth.
The brown hair curls around her face,
roses twining about a bower.¹⁷

Gaiman explicitly references several folkloric figures within this story, turning the horror story into something connected much deeper and more intimately to a greater literary foil that has been used and referenced in media since the origins of the "Bluebeard" folktale, theoretically

¹⁷ Gaiman, Neil. "The White Road." *Smoke and Mirrors* p. 119

the 15th-century convicted serial killer Gilles-de-Rais¹⁸. Both of these names are referenced in this dialogue, directly naming the narrator as antagonist and murderer—yet Gaiman's positioning of the readers in the gilded perspective of Mister Fox taints our view of his actions and the actions taken against him. I employ this technique in my story "Pick Your Poison", in which a necromancer is confronted with the moral consequences of his use of magic against the will of the dead. As explained in the section "Case Studies and Research", the story emerged from court disputes over what legal rights a dead human body is afforded in cases of necrophilic desecration. The story explores the implications of what happens when the only person who can be the voice of the dead remains indifferent to them and prefers profit over moral responsibility. The story follows the necromancer's perspective in third person, the narrator as distant from him as he is from himself and his community. The story creates empathy for the necromancer despite clearly outlining his degenerative actions; enabling necrophilia and legal loopholes around it, denying the wishes of the dead who wish to remain so, all culminating in the simple refusal to speak with the dead and ask their consent to perform magic on their bodies. It takes the resurfacing of past trauma and a curse to force the necromancer into seeing the immorality of his actions. In one scene, the necromancer, who operates neither against nor within the law, is summoned to a hospital to ressurect a DNR patient. The patient's ghost attempts contacting him several times, yet the necromancer continues to ignore him in favor of payment for the job.

The couple sat in the rigid visitor's chairs and nervously watched him spread his salts around the body and place drops of a blue potion on the man's tongue. As he stood with the resurrection potion, that icy hand gripped his shoulder again like a vice. He could feel the old man's ghost breathing in his ear. The necromancer closed his eyes and imagined his magical barriers, tall thick walls of Jericho isolating him. After a moment the hand was gone. He performed the spell, the mist fell in tiers and dissipated. The heart monitor began beeping again, the red line dancing in a rhythm.

¹⁸ "Bluebeard." *Wikipedia*

The necromancer acts as the legal foil to the necrophile in the law of our reality; as I stated in the section Case Studies and Research, "[the corpses'] ambiguity before the law often acts in the criminal's favor... the human corpse becomes... neither person nor object, law-abiding nor law-defying, property nor free of will...", which the necromancer abuses in his status of being outside of the law; however, my story pushes the notion that even if one such as a necrophile is outside of or immune to the decisions of the law, he is never outside of morality and human reverence for the dead we mourn. The necromancer's consequence is one the law could never administer in reality; he is essentially castrated, made completely incapable of violating the will of the dead with his magic, forcing him to see the perspective of those he has violated.

This story employs the perspective of the criminal and references to outside works, just as Gaiman does in his story "The White Road". I also employ the magical realist attitude in my worldbuilding, conscious of the real-life implications of the necromancer's use of magic on his jobs. Each of my stories employs techniques and an attitude towards reality that allows me to write not only the marvelous mundane, but the marvelous macabre, not in spite of the explicitness and uncomfortability of some of my subjects but working with said explicitness and uncomfortability.

Para-Presences and Mortality

Para-presences act as not only in-between life and death, but in between genres. I have felt completely capable of writing in a mixed horror- magical realist genre and feel that each of my stories display a knowledge of employing each genre and working outside of it when it suits the content of my writing. In this way, not only do I write stories about para-presences, but my stories navigate the in-between just as para-presences do.

Borges, Márquez, and Gaiman employ the magical realist attitude toward reality in their own distinct artistic ways in order to shape the marvelous real in their stories. Using their stories and techniques as guides helped me to navigate my individual artistic rendering of the marvelous real in stories of my own. Borges approaches para-presences as entirely human, and makes them question their own existence when met with the possibility that they are not what they thought they were; Márquez's para-presences are demons, entities heavily steeped in religious rhetoric, intending harm and yet shown mercy and curiosity by a priest meant to banish them; Gaiman's para-presences are ghosts and ghouls, presented as just as capable of everything the living are, from the deepest love and devotion to the most cunning of crimes.

My para-presences, just as these authors' para-presences are, are foils of the living. Through this project I have come to understand that para-presences (both the horrifying and the familiar) are deeply meaningful to those who truly encounter them, and those who write about them; that which reminds us of our own mortality and the unknowns beyond our flesh, while frightening and humbling, is impossible to separate from our experience as not-yet-deceased. I have come to the conclusion that para-presences, in both reality and literature, will always reflect the full spectrum of our humanity: the stories we tell of them are reflective of our own fears, desires, and deepest unknown limits of our souls.

The Stone Playground

On the edge of an old cemetery, whose gates closed some twenty-odd years ago, lived a solitary caretaker who smelled of earth and grease. He tended the gardens for sixty years, leaving me, his only living family, in his place when he died. When I first met the gardener—that's what he called himself—I'd thought he was a ghost, watching me in the mist of a rainy day as I played with Matchbox cars in the mud of my parents' joint grave. He watched me come and go for weeks, a month, before approaching me reading, leaning against the headstone. He sat beside me and wordlessly offered me a slice of mulberry pie. I was seven years old when he adopted me. At eight he began teaching me everything he knew, so that I could become a gardener, too.

We tended to the grasses and granite, mosses and marble, souls and slate.

I felt alone, at times, but most of my days were filled with work, which never felt like work. I was a gardener, and was never truly alone in the garden of the dead. I never wanted to go anywhere else. The liveliest people I've ever met are here in the garden, bodies six feet below but spirits higher than many of the living I've known.

There's a stereotype that all ghosts are depressed, hollow creatures. I have to disagree. Of course, we have many who isolate themselves in their caskets or mausoleums, some who wander aimlessly as a result of their tragic death. In reality, not much changes. Some are simply better at accepting the change than others. I find that the children are the best at accepting the change, all of eternity at their fingertips to play, explore, and learn. The children have always been my favorite, for that reason among many. Though I cared for each plot well, I always found myself spending more time cleaning dirt from the carvings in the graves with lambs on them. I wanted their names bold, for everyone to see, for the children to hear their names as the living passed and spoke the carvings, for they did not get long to hear it in life.

My first encounter with the grief of a parent was on my second shift as an official apprentice of the gardener. A young woman visited in moth-eaten grieving clothes, and knelt before a granite lamb not far from where I was raking leaves. I watched her from the corner of my eye. She buried her hands in the still-fresh dirt, and brought fistfulls to her chest. The funeral couldn't have been more than three days ago. And here she was, hoping for a revival. I pitied her, and gave her the privacy to curse such that sparrows scattered. As I bagged the leaves into burlap sacks, I saw someone in front of her, a small child no older than six who looked like fog, trying to shake the mother's shoulder. The woman appeared unphased. As I stepped closer, the child looked up at me almost hopefully. I was shocked that her own mother could not see her. Not a word passed between us.

My boots crunched the gravel path as I approached the woman, at this point seemingly attempting to bury herself with her daughter.

"Excuse me, miss," I said, voice cracking. She looked up at me as though I'd buried the child myself. Dirt covered her dress and hands, dusted her face like ash. I knelt next to her. I produced a pouch of seeds from my coat pocket. I placed a few in her hands, then softly dug a shallow hole in the grave. She stared at them. The child watched her stare at them.

"What was her name?" I asked, watching her hands ponder the seeds. I already knew the child's name, as it was clearly engraved on the small lamb headstone. I'd helped my father install it.

"Agatha." The woman sounded raspy and parched. The child perked up like a puppy upon hearing her name.

"How old was she?" Again, I already knew.

The woman's chin quivered. "Five," she said.

We sat together, the three of us, until the woman heaved a heavy sigh and placed the seeds in the hole. She swaddled them with dirt, then stood. Agatha didn't try to follow her; she merely watched her mother leave in silence. From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw her smile. But when I looked back at her, she was gone.

At night, I would chase the spectral children in a game of tag between gravestones, unsettling older couples sitting in picnic blankets of moss growing thick over their plots. During the day, as I grew older, I hoped to see families reunited, between the living and the dead. But like Agatha's mother so long ago, no one seemed to take notice of the community they stepped into upon entering my garden.

But every once in a while, a child came along. Sometimes chaperoned by an older family member, or even rarer, with a young group of friends. Cemeteries weren't the first place people thought to take their children for an outing, I suppose. But I noticed that when the children came, one by one, the younger they were, the more they seemed to notice. They saw the garden as I saw, the specters I saw every day. I felt a bit warmer inside on those days, when the spectral children would receive a wave from the living who looked their age.

As time passed for me, Agatha and her friends did not age. I looked in the mirror one day shortly after the gardener had passed and been buried near our home, sighing into the hill beside the cemetery gates. I looked old enough to be her father, old enough to be the father of every child in the garden. I suppose in a way I was. . Though technically I was hardly ten years older than her and many of the other children, I found myself caring for them the way my adoptive father cared for me.

Some visitors look at me with pity. Some smile, grateful it isn't their hands in the dirt replanting bushes and clearing weeds from the edges of granite, marble, slate. Repairing cracked

stones and taming wild ivies. But the children smile with joy, content to run between stones with their friends, spectral and much older than they. I distinctly remember once, as I was repairing a cracked and fallen eighteenth-century wall surrounding the plots of a wealthy family who'd long-since chosen sleep over life in the garden, a hard object thumped the back of my head and startled me. I dropped my trowel and rubbed the sore spot, spinning to see a young lad in a striped sweater frozen in fear.

"Is this yours, son?" I asked, the offending walnut in my open palm. The boy put his hands in his pockets and quickly walked over to take it. I remained knelt on one knee, and the boy looked down at my clothes, already dirty from the morning's tasks.

"Sorry, sir... I... wanted to make sure you were real," he admitted sheepishly.

"Real?" I asked, curious. "Now why wouldn't I be real?"

He looked around at the graves. "Well I always see you here. I thought you might, you know...live here."

"I do, in that house right on the hill, past the Fennell mausoleum."

The lad looked to where I gestured.

"Everything here is real. Are you here with someone?Are you lost?"

The boy glanced around again, as though looking for someone.

"I can't find my friend," he said. "Can you help me find her?"

I smiled and stood. "Of course. What's your name?"

"Lorie,"

"Alright, Lorie, we'll find your friend. What's your friend's name?"

To my surprise, he described Agatha, down to the details of the delicate lace trimming her burial dress. He seemed uncertain if the person he was looking for was living or dead. I led

him to her grave, waving and smiling to spectral neighbors taking walks and chatting. Lorie seemed confused, but followed dutifully between graves towards the slowly aging cluster of lambs. The seeds Agatha's mother had planted over a decade ago had grown into a mulberry bush. I cared for it every season, and every season it yielded the most delicious harvest. I would bake pies to eat while talking with Agatha, her friends, and our neighbors in my off-time. Out of habit, Ms. Norris always asked me to lend her the recipe, despite her inability to bake or eat a pie. I patiently described the entire process every time she asks, anyway.

I plucked some berries off the bush and gave them to Lorie. After watching me eat a few, he tried one, then shoved the whole handful into his mouth.

"So where is she?" he asked, munching, mouth already stained red.

On que, Agatha crawled out of the bush and smiled at me, then beamed at Lorie. I hadn't known she'd made a friend, and wondered what that said about me as a gardener and parental figure.

I looked between the two of them, expecting a reunion. Lorie raised his eyebrows at me, still waiting for an answer.

"You can't see her, son?"

Lorie looked behind me and all around almost desperately. "No, but you can? How come I can't?"

I popped another berry into my mouth. Out of curiosity, I asked, "How old are you, Lorie?"

"Fourteen, why?"

Agatha and I glanced at one another and nodded sagely.

"Tell me, son... When was the last time you saw your friend?"

Lorie shrugged. "I dunno, I was like... ten? I don't know."

He looked at the ground, the grave, the bush. "This was stupid... sorry for bothering you, sir."

He began to storm off, hands in his pockets, but I stopped him.

"Now hold on there, lad." I held out another fistfull of berries. He came back and held out his hand.

"If you want to see her," I said, looking Lorie in the eyes, "Just..."

I tried to remember what my father had told me a long time ago, when I asked why we were the only ones who could see the dead. He'd struggled with his words, then, too.

"People don't always want to see these things, kid," I said. "Usually as they grow up, they try to separate it all. 'Real' and 'not real', I mean. But it's not that simple. Just... remember her. You'll see her if you want to. She's right here."

Lorie stared blankly. I gave him the berries. He stayed and thought for a long moment. Agatha and I waited. Leaves danced in spirals on the gravel path. When Lorie finally looked back up, he looked between the two of us and stared with wide eyes.

"I knew it!" he said.

I couldn't help a small knowing smile, slowly eating the mulberries in my hand. She and the other children had grown accustomed to losing living friends as they aged, and no longer believed in things like ghosts beyond those in sheets on Halloween.

"Do you remember the groundhog holes?" she asked. Lorie nodded. "Want to see some new ones I found?"

Lorie followed her between graves, and I heard him ask, "How come he can see you? He's like... super old."

"He's my dad," Agatha said. Then the two went off to explore. I smiled to myself and returned to repairing the Reyes' stone wall.

Years passed, and Lorie remained a regular visitor. He met Agatha's friends and others in the garden who called each other family. Eventually, Lorie asked to be my apprentice. We became the only two in the garden besides the trees for whom time passed. I watched with pride as Lorie would draw a crowd, telling them of the things he's learned in school, and swapping stories by the light of vigil candles left for the new arrivals. On rare and special occasions, Sr. Ortiz and Mr. Bailey weaved stories about the constellations, each riveting and bursting with detail and adventure, as long as the Iliad. They were long accustomed to telling time only by the slow swaying of aging tree branches.

I heard two of their tales before the day I was lowered six feet below, next to my father, who'd long since chosen rest over the garden. I understood, in a way,. But in another the garden was—and is—my home. No one grieved me. The first thing I did was run to Agatha and hug her tightly. It is strange, sometimes, to look at Agatha, five years old and wizened with age, and at Lorie, my youngest, appearing four decades her senior.

I still tend to the garden in my own way, though the ways have changed. Lorie tends to the grasses and granite, the mosses and marble, the souls and slate, as I used to, as my father before me did, despite the closed gates. I now tend to the lively souls and the resting, wanting for nothing but perhaps to eat my father's mulberry pie once more.

Salt and Cloves

Mama reached out with a damp cloth to wipe dried mud off my face. I protested, but inwardly celebrated this rare proximity to her, her hands on my skin, and her face near my face, gently cleansing my jaw of gravel and hardened mud. She helped me remove my heavily brown-blood stained dress and undergarments without a word; her hands often did the talking for her. Mama removed her own clothes, too, and we stepped into the warm bathwater. She cleaned my scrapes and bruises, unbraided my long hair, which pooled around her knees as I sat between her legs. She scrubbed my skin, my scalp, under my nails, and I closed my eyes to let her touch heal me. Warm water was scooped over my head, colliding loudly with the shallow water.

The water was deep brown when she finished with me, and I stepped out to cocoon myself in a towel. I sat on the floor, watching her. I had never seen her tattoos before, but now I could see names gripping her hips, letters in calligraphy curled around her left, a strange symbol between her breasts. She rinsed herself with the dirty water, leaving her hair dry. She took the towel from me and dried both of us. Mama knelt in front of me and paused, the towel around my shoulders a cascading shawl. Her long dark hair, just like mine, was clipped high on her head in a pile, and deep brown eyes gazed on me for a long while. Though sometimes I questioned whether she sees what she sees, her focus often distant, I felt distinctly that she saw me, in this moment. And then she kissed the angry red skin on my cheek, filling my heart with light cotton candy clouds.

I drift between the bathroom with mama and another place, where mama is different, where my siblings treat me like a stranger. It looks like home, or a version of it, but somehow feels as though I've been painted over like the old yellow walls in the hallway that are now blue.

This place is loud and happy, with deep shadowy corners, and I recognize the hallways and popcorn ceiling. I wander after nightfall cataloging all the new ways my home has transformed. Paint that was once beige is now soft greens and deep blues. Paintings and ornate crosses hang on the walls, and a tapestry hangs proudly in the living room, every wall more decorated than I'd ever seen it before. The symbols of words I don't know strike sharp curves and soft angles on decorations. The same symbols appear on the bottom of the screen of the television in the corner, and when the parents and children speak, their words cling together soft and flowing like braided yarn. I wonder why I can't understand the letters, why my family doesn't try to teach me, but I know I will learn in time.

I sit at the new kitchen table in the shadows, admiring porcelain nic-nacs and family portraits. Mama pads into the kitchen in a nightgown, long graying hair braided in two. She squints at me in the dark.

"Elena?" she said. It must have been my name, which I realized in that moment that I couldn't remember. Then she said something I didn't understand. I stare at her blankly. Surely she understands I am still learning? Mama steps closer, snapping her fingers.

She repeats the phrase, and I still don't understand.

I shake my head. Before she can speak again, a girl steps from the hallway rubbing sleep from her face.

"Mama?" She asks a question in mama's language.

Mama looks between me and the girl. The girl looks exactly like me, long dark hair cascading around her face, wearing pajamas too big for her.

"Elena?"

The girl stares at me, and Mama looks between us in confusion. They turn back to me but I am already leaving, the darkness folding around me like dough, back on the bathroom floor with Mama's lips on my cheeks.

† † † †

The girl in the dark looked just like her daughter. Rosa looked between the two of them, bewildered, but before she could decide how to understand the encounter the girl was gone, as though she'd melted into the darkness itself.

"Mama, who was that?" Elena asked.

"It was nothing, sweetie. Now get some milk and go back to bed."

Rosa patted her head as she shuffled away. She hoped she was sleepy enough that in the morning she would remember this only as a strange dream, if she remembered it at all. When Elena was back in bed, Rosa searched under the kitchen table for the girl. She searched under the chairs, opened the cabinets, checked under blankets in the living room. She couldn't help but feel like this was a twisted game of hide-and-seek, and she waited for the ghost of a giggle to reveal her hiding place. No sound came. The living room curtains swayed in front of an open window, and Rosa rushed to close it. Had she opened it? She couldn't remember. Had the girl crawled in and made herself at home? Or had she opened it herself, coming and going like the breeze? The idea that she had let herself in through the window was more comforting than the idea that she had let herself in through the very shadows she'd melted into.

Rosa believed in ghosts her entire life, and took comfort knowing that the souls of her loved ones were waiting for her in some unknowable plane. Rosa had hoped that they would visit

her, that they would give her a sign that they were still with her. But to appear to Rosa would mean that they are not at peace, and after no visits from them, she accepted that they were at rest.

Or so she thought.

Rosa double checked to ensure every window and door was locked before going back to bed, and that the children were safe in their beds. She didn't sleep.

† † † †

One of the lights above the sink flickered.

Mama's soft, rare affections swirled in my chest, my heart as light as cotton candy, and she continued to kiss each scrape and bruise before applying bandages, pulling my nightgown over my head, then kissing my hair, too. I wondered what had brought on this sudden burst of affection, the attention cementing itself in my skin, but I decided to only think of her, who refrained from touching anyone, whose hands never held mine like other mothers and children I saw on TV, whose embrace I'd only felt through blankets and thick coats, whose own old scrapes and bruises had no mother to clean them or to kiss them, whose voice only emerged in whispers and soft mumbles, whose hands braided my hair every night, and now as she did so she sniffled, eyes glistening.

Mama is in pain from touching me? The thought flooded me with guilt and I took the damp towel and wrapped it around her shoulders, careful not to touch her skin lest I caused her to crack and bleed. She hugged me close. I couldn't remember if that was the first time I'd heard her heartbeat. It swelled in my ears, a drum beat blanketing my brain. It sounded the same as my own.

I stand next to a bed that must have been mine and my new sister's, but someone else slept where I should have. I watch my brothers sleeping, listen to the clock ticking. I prefer them when they're asleep. They seem easier to understand. I wonder if my brothers would tell me why everyone left me out, why they wouldn't teach me the words they knew.

I watch my brothers sleeping, listen to the clock ticking. They look vulnerable. I hug myself tightly. The dark is scary. One of my brothers opens his eyes and he stares at me.

Me?

He's afraid of me?

My brother continues to stare at me as though I'd appeared out of a dream or a nightmare. He doesn't ask me questions, doesn't offer me a hug, the way I think he should have. His little sister is scared. Why is he scared too? He remains frozen in fear, so I leave him, letting the darkness hold me instead.

† † † †

After several appearances of the girl, Rosa came to suspect that she was without a doubt a ghost, rather than a break-in. She tried praying. She tried splashing holy water in the places she appeared. She tried leaving the windows open for her to leave. She tried burning sage. Nothing worked. The girl refused to leave, and when Rosa heard the sound of dishes breaking only to turn the corner to see an untouched kitchen and a shadow fleeing the scene, she decided it was time to seek help.

Early one morning Rosa ventured out to consult a trusted friend. Father Louis led her in a prayer from his side of the confession booth, his rugged welcoming face hidden by the woven slats between them, his voice alone soothing and organizing her distraught thoughts.

"So. What brings you here on a Thursday?" he asked. Rosa knew she wouldn't have to explain why she needed to see him; breaking her devotion to her strict schedule to consult him was reason enough for him to know it was serious.

"There is a ghost in my house, Father. And I don't know what to do. I'm afraid of what it might do to my kids."

"A ghost?" he asks, curious.

"Yes. I've seen it, and two of my children have seen it. It takes the form of a young girl, maybe nine or ten... and it looks exactly like my daughter."

Father Louis paused, as he often did to gather his thoughts. It was why Rosa and so many others trusted him, confided in him; he never dismissed someone's experiences, and gave genuine consideration to people's concerns.

"I see," he says gravely. "How does this spirit act?"

"I don't know... like a child? It never speaks. It just watches us and disappears. My son said he woke up to it watching him sleep, and it left after he caught it watching him."

"I see... Well, there are different types of spirits, in my experience. Let's try to narrow it down. Does this spirit look or act like it could be someone close to you who died?"

"No. She looks like Elena. But Elena's alive." Rosa said.

"Does it wander, sort of aimless?"

"No... it looks at me like it knows me." The thought sent a chill down Rosa's spine.

"Is it violent?"

Rosa paused, wondering what may be considered violent for a spirit. Is an intent violent? Is it just being a child? She couldn't tell.

"Yes," she answered.

"I see," Father Louis said. "I hope that this isn't the case... but there's always the chance that it could be from the enemy. It may even be taking the form of Elena to deceive you. You've done the right thing. I'd like to try and help you, so I need you to write this down."

After Rosa left, Father Louis remained in the soft light of the booth with only the dust in the sunbeams for company. He wondered if his past was coming back to haunt him through Rosa, through this spirit that took the form of her young daughter. For a moment he heard the ghosts of soft sobs of a battered young woman in the booth next to him, and he prayed for strength, as he did every day, to bear the weight of the suffering who rely so heavily on him.

† † † †

Father Louis had his first encounter with a ghost as a young man fresh out of seminary with his father fresh in the grave. His father had been a salesman by trade, but a carpenter at heart. He'd built the kitchen and garage in his family's first home, built porches and fixed walls and rafters for neighbors, carved little wooden birds and owls for his wife to paint, and eventually, when she suffered a fall and became paralyzed, he build ramps all throughout the house and her favorite stores in town so she would never feel incapable. He was a stranger to no one, and a friend to everyone.

When Father Louis returned home from seminary, he was greeted by his parents with open arms and warm food on the kitchen table, still sturdy even decades after they first built it in

a musty unfinished kitchen. Father Louis felt connected to everyone and everything; he'd studied, prayed, followed all of the laws and commandments as best to his modern ability, and preached with a confidence that God Himself was standing beside his shoulder.

Then his father suffered a heart attack while in the garage one day. When the ambulance arrived he still clutched the 12-grit sandpaper in his hand, sawdust settling on his clothes.

That night, Father Louis helped his mother to bed and they prayed together. He turned off her light, and made sure the bell on her bedside table was within reach if she needed him. After hours of mentally adding up funeral costs, he fell asleep. Just before dawn, he was awakened by a gruff voice.

"Louie," the voice said. Father Louis sat up. Only his father called him that anymore. At the foot of his bed, his father stood in the green button-up and jeans he'd been in when he died. He still held sandpaper in his left hand.

"Pa?"

"Your ma can't reach the spice cabinet, Louie. That spice turner I was working on, in the garage, is for her."

"Oh. Do you want me to finish it for you?"

"Use the walnut stain so it matches the cabinets."

Father Louis leapt from his bed to the door. "Let me get ma, she'll want to see you," he said.

But when he looked back no one was there. A piece of 12-grit sandpaper lay on the floor in his place. Father Louis knelt to inspect it, feeling its rough edges, the dust still clinging to it. He thought he'd been dreaming. But when his mother rang for him across the hall, and he helped her to the bathroom and made breakfast and spent hours on the phone organizing the funeral, he

had no choice but to accept it. He began to question, then. At the funeral he spoke his father's rites. The words fell empty on his own ears. He researched the afterlife, ghosts, purgatory, God. He came to the conclusion that ghosts were proof of purgatory, that his father's visit only confirmed his faith. But if his father was in purgatory then there truly was no godly grace in the world—for what wrongs did he have to atone? If his father was not admitted into Heaven, then who could be? So Father Louis doubted; but in his doubts, found faith elsewhere.

Decades passed. Father Louis welcomed all into his congregation and spoke with confidence most days, but on others with anger that his congregants merely wanted someone to follow blindly; they did not want his doubts, did not want his questions, did not want his answers that defied tradition—until a young woman with a tattoo on her chest made a bee-line for the confession booth. Father Louis followed.

"Forgive me, Father," she said, so softly Father Louis had to lean closer to the thin wall between them.

"It is not me who can forgive you," Father Louis said. "But I promise God is listening. What's on your mind?"

It took all his focus to catch her words. She told him of horrors he'd never repeat, even without his vow of confidentiality. She told him she was scared of what would happen to her after what she'd done. Father Louis wondered about his own father, barred from Heaven. He wondered about this young woman's soul, and where it may go in the next life. Would God deny her peace, after all she's been through? Offer forgiveness after what she'd done? He thought again of his father. He thought of Christ, whose rough dust-covered hands helped neighbors and was stranger to no one. What would his father have done?

"You're right," Father Louis told her. "The law won't take kindly to you, even though your intentions were good. What you've done is a sin."

She sobbed. "Please, please, I just want another chance."

She sounded so young. What would his father have done?

"Listen carefully," he said. "I need you to write this down."

Father Louis promised to help her, and he did not wonder what it would cost his soul. He didn't believe God kept track, anymore.

† † † †

One of the lights flickers. Mama kisses my cheeks and my heart floats as light as cotton candy. Her hands tremble as she holds the towel around my shoulders. She holds me close, her heartbeat echoes, echoes, echoes, a metronome of safety. I think she's crying. She loves me, she loves me, she loves me so much it breaks her.

† † † †

Father Louis's recommendation had surprised Rosa. He'd instructed her to write down a recipe for protection salt, which she'd had only heard used in superstitious folk magic. She'd asked him if it was Catholic. He'd said no, but that for most of earth's history, people weren't. He'd had a point, Rosa thought, and she trusted him more than anyone else.

She had all the ingredients in her spice cabinet: rosemary, sea salt, cloves, bay leaves, black pepper, and cinnamon. Rosa ground them together into a fine dust with her mortar and pestle, sat down at the kitchen table with the bowl of salt and waited.

She supposed this only would work if she knew where the girl was, which could leave her waiting for days. The kids were at their uncle's for the weekend, so Rosa hoped that the girl would appear when she knew for certain that she wasn't accidentally sprinkling salt around her own daughter. Rosa felt slight shame knowing that it was difficult for her to tell the difference between the two, but if Father Louis was right, then perhaps that was the point. Perhaps this was an evil spirit looking to gain Rosa's trust through the face of her daughter, the smile of her daughter, the long hair that her daughter braided in two to look like her mother. Was the girl a scheming demon, set out to harm Rosa's family? To bring nightmares and terror? To throw broken shards of ceramic and glass at them like in the movies?

Or worse, was she an omen? A warning that Rosa's own daughter would soon die?

Rosa considered all of this and couldn't allow it either way. Demon or otherwise, it should leave the living be. Elena herself didn't appear to be afraid of it. Rosa had even caught her trying to write letters to the girl, whom she'd come to think of as a sister. It surprised and terrified Rosa all at once. She'd kindly reminded her that the girl might not know how to read, because she's never spoken. Rosa was grateful that Elena wasn't home for whatever happened next.

She heard creaking coming from the office down the hall. Rosa stood and listened closely; it was the sound of the office chair that she always forgot to oil. It continued as she kept in her sweatpants and socks with the bowl of salt. The office door was wide open, and there, spinning in circles in the office chair, was the girl. It appeared quite entertained and hadn't noticed Rosa as she watched it. It seemed harmless, like this—just a kid spinning in a chair.

Something Rosa's own kids did all the time. The bowl weighed heavy in her hands. Rosa felt as though she were betraying her own daughter, as though by not loving this child she wasn't loving her own.

But Rosa forces herself to consider the tears in her son's eyes as he tried to be strong, describing the figure in the corner watching him. She considered the sound of dishes crashing, and imagined plates falling on the head of someone who might cross the demon. It hadn't shown its true self yet, but Rosa wouldn't wait long enough to allow it to. Rosa loves her children too much for that; She reminds herself that this is not a child. This is a monster. She does this because she loves them.

"Elena," Rosa says, internally recoiling to call this thing her girl's name.

She loves them, she loves them so much it breaks her.

† † † †

I sit in a chair that spins in circles, and I entertain myself for a long time spinning slowly in different directions in the darkness of a room lined with bookshelves and a desk. The street light glows orange through the window's white slat blinds.

"Elena," mama says from the door. I spin around to see her, and smile. She enters the room and almost embraces me, but moves behind me to lay something on the windowsill. Then she kneels on the ground outside the room and carefully lays a line of fine dust from a bowl along the doorway. Then she stands and watches me. I open my arms to receive her, for her to kiss my cheeks and my hair.

She closes the door.

I go to follow her, but the door doesn't open. I tug on the handle, but it doesn't budge.

"Mama?"

I knock on the door. No response. Is this a game? I like games. I go to the window, where another dust line has been carefully laid. I try the door again.

Again.

Again.

"Mama?" I call, panic creeping into my voice. The dark corners of the room are too dark, and the door and window repel me as though the room itself were filled with my terror.

"Mama!" I pound on the door. Where is she? Why did she leave me?

"Mama!" I crumple onto my knees, fists pounding on the door again and again and again. But she doesn't respond. Daylight streams through the window slats, catching dust in the air. The light fades again into an orange lamplight. I crawl under the desk and hug my knees to my chest.

Where is she?

Why did she leave me?

Doesn't she love me?

No cotton candy kisses come to comfort me.

† † † †

Father Louis hadn't been to Rosa's home since that week he wished he could forget, since before her family moved in. Outside of mass, the two only got together for the occasional lunch outing or meditation at the church. He'd had his suspicions after her confession, but didn't want to jump to conclusions. After all, it was a long time ago. This spirit could very well be the enemy

attempting to get close to the family in order to harm them; a rare case, but it wouldn't be the first time in his decades of work that he had to cleanse a home of entities with harmful intentions. But when Rosa opened the door in a too-familiar hallway, to a small office room with a too-familiar slatted window, to a too-familiar little girl in a nightgown cowering beneath the desk trapped by salt lines, Father Louis knew he'd been wrong. This spirit wasn't evil at all. He knelt on the other side of the salt line at the door to look at her more closely. Yes, this girl looked a lot like Elena, but when he looked at her all Father Louis saw was her photograph on a small wooden box of ashes, a funeral service of one attendant with a shovel, her mother far, far away. And he heard her mother's small voice, a voice he'd had to strain to hear in the confession booth, admitting to plunging her daughter into the water herself, holding her under as she cried, unable to bear the weight of her daughter living through the same horrors that she'd been through.

Father Louis had told her that she was forgiven, if she chose to repent. He was the good Father to her, the wise priest she expected when she walked into a confession booth for the first time; in private, he'd cried and questioned his faith. But he'd kept his vow of secrecy. Honored the confidentiality of confession. Told no one. Father Louis did not tell Rosa now—all she needed was the peace of mind that a ghost would be removed from her home.

In the hallway, Father Louis stood and straightened his collar, pulling a small Bible from his pocket and flipping to the page bookmarked with a thin red ribbon. He held out a crucifix on a chain in his weathered hand and recited the verses. In between the lines Father Louis prayed for the girl's soul to know the peace her mother wanted for her all those years ago, prayed that she not be held at arm's length from God's love, prayed that this be the act of mercy that sends her to some warm place where children are kissed on their cheeks and know not the pain of death, nor the bruises of life.

The Talisman

"Good morning," I said for the third time to the young man typing at the front desk. Yet again, he ignored me. I glanced around the room for anyone else who could help me, but he was the only one there this early in the morning. Why only him? Wasn't crime more common at night? I cleared my throat loudly.

"Young man, I need to check on a missing persons report."

The man continued typing. His blue uniform had an obvious stain on the collar that he either hadn't noticed, or hadn't cared to clean.

"I'm here to check—"

"Yeah, yeah, a missing persons report, I know. You're here every day, Omata. Go home."

"There is no home to return to without my wife." I clenched and unclenched my fists at my sides and stood my ground in the empty police station. The front desk man looked up at me lazily. I stared him down with what I hoped was a steely gaze. In truth, I was growing desperate, and was no more confident in the help of the police than I would have been in carrier pigeons.

"Sit down and wait. My shift ends in an hour, someone else will help you."

"Arigatou."

I sat down and smoothed my pants, fidgeted with my necklace, glanced at the clock. I would be late for work again. But tardiness was of no concern to me if I could get answers. I knew that one day I would walk into this police station and be greeted by the chief, who would say with a smile, holding a cup of fresh steaming coffee,

"Omata-san, good morning! I was just about to call you. Your wife was found late yesterday and is being cared for by a social worker. She's safe and healthy, and can go home with you this afternoon after answering a few questions."

I would thank him at his feet and insist that I was in his debt, to which he would humbly reply that he was only doing his job and that his only payment should be the guarantee of Doi and I's happiness.

I'd played this scenario out in my mind every time I'd been late to work, to remind myself why I'm doing this to begin with. I am not late because of laziness, or neglect, of forgetfulness. I am late because Doi and her safety is all that matters. Because one morning I'll wake up and she'll be home again, making tea and humming softly. Playing games with our friends. Helping me in every way she can to make our humble life easier, less of a burden, more vibrant. My boss has been very understanding and sympathetic, even offering me time off. Naturally I refused.

I think about her every day. I wonder if she's eaten. If she's safe. I tell myself she has, and she is. The alternative would be too much to bear.

"Omawarisan! That old lady is here to see you again," the desk officer yelled. Then he was gone. He should've been fired by now, since this kind of blatant disrespect wasn't out of character for him the past few times I've seen him on shift. I briefly wondered if I looked older than I was, but quickly brushed it aside. The chief came around to the desk with a cup of coffee. It wasn't steaming. I stood to greet him. There was a sadness in his eyes, and he refused to meet mine.

"We haven't found your wife yet, Omata-san. Please accept my sincerest condolences."

I looked around for anyone to refute him, but there was no one else besides the janitor sweeping the stairs out front, illuminated by the orange buzzing street light.

"She's not dead," I said.

The chief took a sip of his coffee. Then he gestured for me to follow him.

He led me to his office, where he pulled a chair from in front of his desk to rest next to his so that I could sit and see his desktop screen. He had two picture frames on his desk: one contained a photo of himself and who I presumed to be his wife and daughter standing on the rocky shore of a lake. The second looked like a random wolf photograph he'd printed from online.

He logged into his computer and quickly pulled up a folder on the screen.

"I know that this is sensitive, Omata-san, so I will try to break this to you lightly. I understand what you're feeling, and I grieve with you. Losing family is never easy... even though many times everyone pretends that it is. We wake up, we make breakfast, we move on. You know how it is. "

The chief looked at me sincerely, a pain nestled in the deep-set wrinkles around his eyes. He had been spending the past seven months dedicated to helping me find Doi, enduring my stubbornness, indulging my hope. Now, it felt like he'd given up. I expected him to say that he was closing the case, that he would no longer help me. It was time for me to go home. Instead, he said,

"I lost my daughter when she was ten. She would have turned eighteen three weeks ago."

I wanted to cover his hand with mine. I tightened my hands around each other instead.

"She was always sick, from the moment she was born. We'd thought she was getting better, but then something changed when she was seven and she only got worse and worse... eventually my wife and I decided to try this treatment the doctors recommended. They said it wouldn't cure her, but it would make living easier. It gave us hope. It was expensive — very expensive. We worked hard though, and the smile on her face was worth every yen. But it ate us

up like locusts, and when we couldn't afford it anymore, no one helped us. She just... faded away.

"I don't want you to think of the worst. I really don't. But it's been almost eight months."

"Maybe she's on a business trip," I said quietly.

"Kazumi..."

The chief finally pulled up the file folder on his computer. They were all missing persons cases.

"These are cases that were reported around the same time as yours. These aren't all, but... they're most. Nine of them were found dead in Aokigahara, and four in their own homes. We both know your wife wouldn't leave without telling you."

"She wouldn't hang herself in the woods either," I said.

"Given your family history, it's very possible that she did," The chief said.

"Don't bring them into this. Doi has no reason to, she's not like them."

The chief looked at me with that defeat in his eyes. I found myself despising it. She was all I had left, and he knew that; yet still, he told me to go home and grieve. But I could not afford myself defeat, nor the guilt of not having tried. I thanked him for his time and left the station. Fresh cool air strengthened me just enough to maintain my composure for the day ahead, the sky just a shade lighter than night, the streets quiet as people slept peacefully with their families under safe roofs. She's alright, I told myself. Doi is alright, and we'll be together again soon.

My bike tires sped smoothly over the empty streets. Closed storefronts and occasional lit windows, angular streetlamps cast an artificial honey glow on my path ahead; Dogs barked in the distance, voices jumped over the mountains and buildings; green bushes and flora lined compact

homes and a single pink flowering vine crept up a powerline pole; my phone rang in two-tone, vibrating my back through my bag.

I stopped in the middle of the street under a streetlamp that lightly flickered and fumbled to answer it.

"Omata-san! I apologize for the short notice, but buchou says not to come in to work today," my coworker, Kenji, says.

"Oh? Did something happen? I'm on my way right now."

"No, no, just you, he says. He needs your position available to hire someone else. He sent you an email about an hour ago."

"Oh. I see."

"I'm sorry. You should sue him, honestly. It's just not right."

Movement around a metal barrel on the sidewalk ahead caught my eye. What appeared to be a small gray dog silently circled it. It looked up and met my eyes piercingly. My coworker continued talking but his words faded into the background. I watched the dog trot to the middle of the street under the next street lamp and sit down, watching me. I squinted to make sure I was seeing what I thought I saw — a wolf. Wolves were supposed to be extinct in Japan, and no one I know has ever seen one. The sky lightened with dawn, and the street lights shut off. A car sped past me from behind, beeping incessantly and I lost my balance, sending my bike and I to the asphalt. I picked myself up slowly and gathered the things that fell out of my bag.

"Hello? Hello? You still there?" Kenji asked on the line. I hung up. I looked back to find the wolf, but he was gone.

I pedaled home under the new dawn in a daze, unable to shake the wolf's magnetic gaze.

† † † †

The early morning light warmed our apartment in an eerie glow. I didn't know what to do with myself. No family. No job. No more help from the chief. No one to talk to, trust. I entered Doi and I's room and stood there, staring at the floor. I decided to change out of my work clothes, just for something to do. I settled on loose pants and one of Doi's soft, thick, half-zip sweaters that she always wore on our outings. It smelled like years of earthy sweat and pine sap.

I decided next to make tea, to keep my hands busy, my senses busy, so that I didn't think about what my next options were. I didn't want to think about how short the list would be, next to the list of problems that seemed ever-growing. But when I entered the kitchen, there was already a mug of fresh tea steaming on the counter under the window. I held my breath, listening for whoever it was that made it. An eerie hum slowly filled the room, like a memory lingering in space. I didn't dare move or shift my focus away from the tea, for fear I might scare the voice away, and it grew softer, more defined, more real, and when I saw movement from the corner of my eye my heart pounded; with fear or with hope I didn't know. I risked a glance. Doi sat on a cushion on the floor, just as she was when I last saw her. Her short dark hair was tucked behind one ear, and fell forward in her face on the other side. She wore a long skirt and t-shirt, with a large sweater. She absentmindedly hummed the familiar tune that I could never pin a song to. She sat casually, comfortably, reading a physics book, as though she had never been gone. I stared. She hadn't seemed to notice me. I looked slowly back at the tea that I hadn't made.

My heart pounded. Why? It's Doi. I shouldn't be afraid. I should be celebrating.

"Kazumi no kimi," she said, as though she'd just seen me this morning, "Could you please bring me my tea?"

I picked up the tea carefully, as though I were lifting a mirage, and carried it to our sitting table, where she had shifted the blanket over her lap. I knelt in front of her and placed her tea on the table.

"Doi?" I whispered. "Is it really you?"

"Who else would I be?"

I wanted to touch her, but I found myself afraid that she would turn into a pile of delicate flower petals and drift away on the breeze, out the window, never to be seen again. I didn't want to breathe, afraid she would become dust blown into the sunbeams.

"You've been gone for so long," I said. "Please, tell me where you were."

"Kazumi, I never left," she said.

"You did, you were gone forever... I thought... I thought you were dead."

Doi put her book down and turned her body towards me, concerned. "I did go out for a short hike this morning, but I was back before you got home."

She scooted over and lifted the blanket, inviting me closer. I studied her face. The soft curve of her jaw, the fine lines under her eyes, the two small moles on her neck under her left ear. I wanted to reach out and tuck her hair behind her other ear, but I remained frozen, just soaking her in. A soft, low rumbling echoed somewhere behind me, but I ignored it.

"I've been all out of sorts," I laughed anxiously. "I'm sorry... what matters is that you're here now."

"Yes," she said. "Stay with me?"

The low rumbling grew into what sounded like a wild growl, interrupting my answer.

Doi didn't move. She stared past me, as if she could hear the growling too. It was louder now, vicious, and I realized something probably got in the open window. I looked behind me, but

there was nothing there and the growling stopped. I turned back to Doi. She'd vanished as quickly as she appeared. I stumbled back, and searched the apartment for any trace of her, calling her name, but there was nothing, not even the tea or her book, so I just stood in the middle of the tiny kitchen confused and afraid. I held my pendant close, a gift from my father that had always given me comfort, counted and controlled my breathing until I could think. He had given it to me when I was young, a howling wolf's head hand-carved by his father and tied with a worn leather band. I hadn't taken it off since he died.

I breathed deeply and rubbed my face with the sleeve of my sweater. I wondered if that had been her spirit visiting me. I had heard of spirits of the living leaving their bodies, finding loved ones, in moments of distress or trouble. Which meant that there was a chance she was still alive, still out there, needing to be found. If the police had given up, then I would have to find her myself.

With new resolve, I threw an extra coat, a change of clothes, trail-friendly curry packs, bread, and small jams into my hiking bag and closed the window, hoping against hope that Doi's spirit had left a trail.

† † † †

I pedaled down the streets on my bike with no clear destination in mind. I had never followed a spirit before. I hoped that Doi's spirit visiting me was a call for help, and not a goodbye. I rode through all the old familiar streets from our youth, all the new ones that were already well-worn and traveled. The streets were notably empty, not a car or cyclist in sight. As I turned down street and alley, I found flowers sprouting from bricks and lone young vines

creeping up the bases of metal poles, open storefronts with no one inside, empty sidewalks normally bustling with activity like a bee hive this time of the day. A dog howled somewhere in the distance, his voice carried by the silence. Out of curiosity, I followed the sound. My heart led my feet, which pedaled and guided my wheels towards the sound. With the streets empty, I took my time, weaving around leaves. I smiled, feeling like a young girl again. I looked up and quickly braked, lunging forward over the handlebars, stopping just before hitting a woman who stood like stone under a streetlamp. She smiled down at me, head tilted to the side, hair falling over one of her eyes. I felt the familiar desire to tuck it behind her ear.

"Doi, don't scare me like that! What are you doing out here, I almost hit you!"

Doi had changed into the layered dress and ornate white hat she'd worn on our wedding day. I stared at her. She looked beautiful, yes, and I remembered that day as clearly as though it were yesterday. But our wedding outfits had been lost to time, lost to desperation when we'd sold them to pay for groceries years ago. There was no way for her to have acquired it after all these years, after the unknown hands it had passed through. I sat back slowly, cautiously.

"Who are you?"

"Who else would I be?" She asked, still smiling. It didn't reach her eyes.

"I don't know," I said. "But whoever you are, you know too much. So who are you, then? Some sick... some twisted person who wants to play with my head?"

Doi's smile dropped. I watched, feet frozen to the pavement, as Doi walked around my handlebars with a mesmerizing gracefulness. She trailed her fingertips across my hands slowly, and I followed their trickle up my arm as she moved close beside me and gently held my chin, tilting my face up to hers.

"Don't I look beautiful, Kazumi?"

My heart raced. She terrified and enamored me all at once.

"Yes," I said.

"Then why don't you want me?" I could feel Doi's breath on my lips. Her hold on my chin moved into a tight grip on my pulse point, her soft hands vice-like. She looked ravenous, eyes so close to me trailing down my face and shoulders as though she were deciding whether to eat me alive — and not in the way I would have wanted her to.

"I want my wife," I said, kicking her away with all my strength and speeding down the street. A violent, inhuman screech tore from her body. I didn't dare look behind me. Whatever that thing was, it wasn't Doi, and it would not offer me mercy. I tried to control my breathing, to pedal faster, but my knees and lungs weren't what they used to be, and I knew that once I reached the inclining streets I'd be done for. She screeched louder, quickly getting closer, and let out a high-pitched wail that made me want to cover my ears and curl inward but I kept going against the protest of my bleeding eardrums. I reached a short bridge that left town and led into the countryside farms, my tires dashing across the wood. I stopped, coughing and heaving for air, dizzy and faint. The creature's screeching echoed over the mountains and buildings, closer now, sending birds scattering into the spring breeze. I closed my eyes, accepting that I could not outrun it.

A low growling began behind and moved beside me. I looked to see the elegant gray wolf that I'd seen under the streetlamp. I thought I'd imagined him. But he was very real, ears flattened and lips curled up in a vicious snarl, creeping closer to the creature that was now approaching the bridge, floating like a phantom. Its face had no flesh on it, just skin stretched over bone, dressed in torn flowing black robes. A dirty white cloth covered its eyes, and when it opened its mouth to shriek the skin tore open revealing rows of sharp teeth.

"Shinigami!" I gasped in disbelief. Looking at it now, bile rose in my throat and burned my chest at the thought that it had successfully fooled my aching heart... had almost eaten it.

The wolf snarled wildly, and the creature, which I'd only heard of in myths, stepped back. It opened its mouth again and the wolf howled, loud, clear, and echoing. Shinigami were spirits born starving, victims of violent suicide who only hungered for others to join their pain; but they were supposed to be just that: myth.

The shinigami screeched once more before sulking away back into town. I wondered if it had a list of victims, or if it simply found opportunities for meals. The wolf turned to me, panting proudly. I smiled at him and reached my hand out to him.

"It's okay," I said. "You're a very good boy. Arigatou."

The wolf trotted over to me and shoved his face into mine, panting happily. I petted him with surprise, wondering if he was even a wolf at all. But he didn't look like any dog I'd seen before, and his fur shone just a little too bright. Growing up, my father had had wolf imagery and talismans in every doorway of our family home. He and his parents believed them to be protectors, wise sages who favored the family. He had never met one, but he said that when he was a child he could hear their voices echoing over the mountains and buildings before they were hunted and poisoned to extinction. He'd given me his necklace a long time ago to keep me safe. I suppose in a way it had; I was the only one in my family left alive.

"So am I in the spirit realm, then?" I asked the wolf. He comforted me in a deep way that I hadn't felt in a long time, and it felt natural. The wolf licked my hands in response. I smiled, scratching behind his ears. He circled around me and started down the road that led out of town. I picked up my bike and walked behind him. I wondered if my family had felt protected in the moments before death, or if it was all just superstition. But I trusted that this wolf knew me,

somehow, as though we'd met before in another life. I trusted that wherever he led, I would be safe.

† † † †

The wolf stopped and sat next to a worn wooden sign at the entrance to Aokihgahara. The forest was famous for the violent deaths of the many who'd taken their own lives there; Japanese men and women, young and old; locals and foreigners; the uncertain and the terrified, all swallowed by some sorrowful silent beauty of the place. The large sign pleaded in bold white paint for those entering to consider those who love them, to reach out for help if they are struggling. More signs lead down the trail, with phone numbers to call and messages of hope.

"No," I told the wolf, setting my bike down in the bushes. "Doi isn't in there."

The wolf stared at me. I stared back a long time before he turned his gaze to the path that led deep into the forest. Everyone knew of the forest's reputation of death; people who hiked or volunteered often said that it was so silent, the forest absorbed your footsteps. As though the trees themselves held a vigil for those who'd taken their lives there.

Standing next to my guide, it didn't sound so quiet to me, distant shrieks finding my ears. I didn't want to believe that Doi was here, or the implications that it carried. I couldn't bear the thought that Doi might have been struggling and didn't tell me. I didn't want to find a body, surely cold bones by now, knowing I'd once felt her warmth every day and night. And yet, I felt that she was close — closer than I'd felt her in seven months. I looked down at the wolf, who stared at me sharply. Reluctantly, I gestured for him to lead me. I had to trust that I would be safe, and that Doi and I would be together again soon.

The wolf padded over branches and leaves on the path like a ghost. We crossed over small bridges and trickling creeks. The treetops swayed gently in a breeze above that I couldn't feel, but tasted, crisp cool air refreshing. I wanted to pretend I was just on another hike, to put fear out of mind until we reached our destination. But I swiveled constantly, feeling as though hungry eyes were burning into me from all sides. Shrieks called from the trees, and when I looked up, decayed corpses hung from rope, their shinigami hungry and vicious. The wolf did not take pause, though, and I kept my head down after that, following his tail.

We hiked for what felt like days, though the daylight seemed to dim slightly once in a while. We turned and left the path, the wolf expertly leading me through fallen branches and brambles. He radiated confidence, not once looking back at me to check I was following, not once reacting to the isolated spirits of a thousand violent deaths. He stopped when we smelled blood. I covered my nose and mouth, the scent so thick it was as though it stained my lips, like I was drinking liquid rust hot and fresh. He turned to look at me once and followed the scent that wound through trees and overpowered the freshness of the leaves and pine. Dusk slowly approached as we tracked, but the wolf carried on, unafraid of the closing darkness.

At last the silver wolf stopped and sat beside a fallen tree branch, where a woman had appeared to have fallen beside it. I rushed to her side, tripping over roots. I knelt beside her. She was not my Doi. Doi wore her hair extremely short, cropped similar to a boys', and wore skirts more often than not. This woman had long hair that was messily clipped up and wore baggy cargo pants, a thick sweater. The body had been there a week at least, already crawling with maggots and flies. Her face was swollen and plants around her were already black with rot. The moss thrived. I expected the flies to be louder, but their wings fell silent. I looked at the wolf, who looked down his nose at me as he whined over the woman's head.

"This isn't Doi. Why did you bring me here?" I said. The woman had a bag identical to my own. I searched for her ID. I didn't need it, because I knew the contents of the bag before my hands could find each item. I stood, stumbling away from the woman and the wolf, who watched me.

"This isn't right," I said to the wolf. "This isn't right! You were supposed to protect me! What is this, then? You were supposed to protect us. But where were you!" I yelled now, frantic, desperate, as though the wolf could change the past. I knew he could not. The forest absorbed my anger, my pain, like it did all else.

"Where were you during the earthquake? Where were you when my family died? Where were you when my mother slit her wrists without even a thought of her children having to clean up her blood! Nowhere! We respected you, my father worshiped you. What's this worth if all you do is lead me to death?" I ripped my father's talisman from around my neck and threw it at the wolf.

"Take me home! Take me to Doi! I won't... I won't go..." I trailed off and roughly wiped tears and snot from my face.

More wolves emerged from the dense trees. The darkness thickened, but their glimmering pelts parted it like curtains.

"Take me home," I begged them. "Please."

The pack of wolves encircled us, closing in. I stepped back and tripped, falling onto a bed of moss and leaves next to my decaying body. The wolf who guided me stepped close, his nose almost touching mine. His gray fur ruffled out around his ears. He dropped the talisman gently from his mouth into my lap. Then he sniffed my face, tracing my tears with his wet nose. After licking them, he rested his head against mine. From the corner of my eye I could see the other

wolves forming a tight circle around us, shoulder to shoulder. An eerie shriek pierced the air in the distance, but I had no fear. No anger. No pain. I only felt the wolf, and his cool, clear, comfort, calm like shallow creeks and streams. I closed my eyes and buried my hands in his fur. The shrieks continued, closer, but the wolves did not move. My guide showed me images of my own past, of memories I held close to my heart. He showed me the day Doi and I had met, at a calm stream deep in the woods, far from these woods of death, where we both had thought nobody would find us. We had talked and laughed and built towers of stones. For the first time, I was seeing this memory through Doi's eyes, observing my younger self, nervous and bold. I smiled and held tighter to the wolf's scruff. And though the wolf had not spoken, I understood that she and the others could not protect my body, or our families' bodies. But she had protected my soul from the shrieking shinigami who sought to trick and trap me. She, my Doi, had guided me home, to my body; home, to my family. All this she told me, not through words, but with what felt like ripples made by water spiders in a calm spring.

The thick darkness slowly lifted as my eyes changed, adapting to the dark. The moonlight illuminated the wolves' pelts like stars. I recognized all of them at once, and I didn't know how I hadn't known before. My limbs became nimble and strong, and my lungs breathed newborn air. Doi licked my face and I licked hers, and we circled each other with joy. The pack howled and we joined in, our chorus mingling with the desperate shrieks of souls who had not been guided, who had never known rest and never would. The other wolves drew closer, and I brushed against the spirit of my father, my mother, my siblings, those I'd never met. Then we bounded over brambles and roots and curling ferns, leaving my body behind, talisman in her rotting hand. Together, we were free and safe in the moonlit sea of trees, our voices jumping and echoing over the mountains and buildings.

Pick Your Poison

Heavy boots crunched up the gravel path to St. Nosferatu's cemetery on an early spring evening. A man in a weathered leather trench coat and sheriff's hat followed the sound of secretive voices near the fresh grave of a woman whose funeral he'd attended only days earlier. Most hadn't seemed to notice him, but he'd caught several thinly-veiled disgusted looks thrown his way. No one had wanted his services then, but now it seemed someone had changed their mind. By the time he reached the source of the voices, the three young men had already exhumed the grave and opened the casket. The man sighed heavily and stepped behind them, casting a shadow.

"And what do you boys think you're doing?" he asked.

The three exchanged terrified glances, no one explaining themselves. The stranger thought he recognized them from the funeral. The tall one said,

"We're—we're sorry, officer, we didn't mean any—"

"Now I ain't no officer, and I asked you a question. Somebody answer me."

"It was Cam's idea," said another, wearing a puffer vest. "She's his cousin."

The man nodded and moved closer to the casket to observe the corpse. The woman was young. Died tragically, by the looks of the stitches on her wrists. He leaned forward and sniffed the air around her. The boys looked at each other, unsure of whether to be terrified or disgusted by the stranger.

"Are you... the necromancer?" Cam asked. "Look, we don't want any trouble, sir. We don't need your help."

"Really?" The necromancer said. "You look pretty underprepared to me, for someone who doesn't need my help."

"Look, we'll pay you. That's what you're looking for, right? A job? We'll pay you, just leave," Cam said. The other two nodded. The necromancer raised his eyebrows at them, then looked between the boys and the corpse.

"... sir?" Cam added.

They were filthy from digging in the dirt, and seemed to only have brought shovels with them. The woman wore a simple white nightgown, as though they'd wanted her to look asleep. Corpses never look asleep. He held out his hand and gestured for them to be quick. The three wrestled some crumpled bills from their pockets and piled them into his hand. The necromancer flattened them out and folded them into his pocket.

"So what now?" The necromancer asked.

"Well... we paid you. So now you leave." Cam said. "That was the deal."

The necromancer shook his head, sprinkling a salt mixture around the woman's body. "I didn't agree to that," he said.

He snapped his fingers over the corpse, and felt a flash of heat behind his ears as some of his life transferred to the woman. "You start a job, you finish it," he said, looking pointedly at the boys. They looked between each other, uncertain of what they were supposed to do now and wanting to be rid of him. The necromancer left them with the slowly reviving woman, with dusk on his heels.

† † † †

The necromancer sauntered into the rickety warmth of the bar and took a seat with a heavy sigh. He ordered his usual, a bubbling red cocktail with the highest alcohol content, and

placed his sheriff's hat on the counter. Mama Ashtoreth, the barkeep and owner, glared at him. She mixed the drink loudly. He placed a few crumpled bills in front of her. She took them and clunked the foaming glass in front of him. He rolled his eyes at her and took a swig.

"Where were you this time?" She asked, cleaning a glass roughly.

"Car crash," he said.

"Age?"

"Fifty-three."

"Hmph."

The necromancer traced the rim of the glass with his dirty fingertips. He could feel the other customers' wary gazes on him.

"Why don't you leave it, Ashtoreth? It's my job. Certainly keeps you in business, eh?"

She jabbed a rag at him. "You meddle with life. Such a disgraceful magic." She drifted to serve the next customer.

"What, and yours is better?"

She raised her eyebrows at him, both teasing and warning him. Mama Ashtoreth had been in Echo Creek as long as anyone could remember. Even the oldest townsfolk recall her as the local cryptid haunting their childhoods, colorful puffs of smoke lighting her windows. Despite their differences, the necromancer welcomed her company. His was a notoriously messy job. Less notorious was the loneliness of it.

Mama Ashtoreth returned to mix him another drink. He toasted her gratefully.

"I'm saying," she continued, sweet as arsenic, "That you need some regulation. It's not right, just resurrecting anyone and everyone all willy-nilly — and I bet you never ask permission, do you?"

The necromancer sipped his drink without comment. He considered himself a simple man. He does a job, he gets paid, the person who hired him deals with everything else. Everyone has to make a living. There was no point in getting personal when being brought back from the dead should be the best- case scenario in anyone's books. If Jesus can do it and it's a miracle, why can't he do it and have people feel the same?

Mama Ashtoreth leaned closer. "Do you even care about them?" She whispered. "Or is every corpse just cash to you?"

He sighed heavily into his glass. He really didn't feel like arguing this again. Then a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and stayed there. The necromancer didn't have to turn around to smell the sour, blood-and-bile scent of death clinging to him. Mama didn't seem to notice him. Glad for the excuse to leave the conversation, the necromancer stood and popped the collar of his coat, shrugging the hand off his shoulder, and donned his sheriff's hat. He made a point not to look at the apparition that had somehow been strong enough—or desperate enough—to break through his barriers.

"Swing by and check on the cat later, will ya?" Mama Ashtoreth called. The necromancer gave her a thumbs-up on his way out the door.

† † † †

The job was an hour drive to the city. Not long after the unnerving spectral summons, he'd received a phone call and simply been given an address and a room number. The necromancer parked his motorcycle in the hospital's guest lot and made his way to the fourth floor. As he scanned the room numbers, he felt the skin on the back of his neck go cold as an

icy spectral hand reached up and gripped his shoulder again. He kept walking, unsure of how this man was breaking his barriers. He refused to acknowledge him, but allowed him to guide his way to the room at the end of the hall.

The room was packed full with an old man, presumably in his seventies, limp in the hospital bed, the scent of death lingering on his skin; a man and woman who the necromancer assumed to be the man's adult children; and a nurse, who was arguing tersely with both of them.

"— don't know what's best for him!" The daughter was saying.

"I am his nurse," the nurse said calmly. "He's a DNR. Again—It's not my choice, it's his."

"He's senile, he doesn't know what he wants either!"

The necromancer stood off to the side, only noticed by the silent son in the chair holding the old man's hand. He joined in the conversation, too.

"Doesn't know what he wants? Carlee, he's the only one who knows what he wants, let it go."

Carlee turned to her brother to argue and the nurse noticed the stranger in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, sir, but visiting hours are for family only," she said.

"Carlee called me," the necromancer said.

The siblings and the nurse stared awkwardly between each other before Carlee asked the nurse to give the three of them a moment alone. The nurse begrudgingly left, but not without pausing at the necromancer's side to whisper,

"Please make her see reason."

Her scrubs swished as she retreated up the hall. The necromancer inspected the body, which, besides its state of being dead, looked remarkably healthy for a man in his seventies. He

picked up the clipboard and reviewed the man's medical charts. The siblings watched him closely.

"So?" Carlee asked, arms crossed, foot tapping impatiently.

"So what?" The necromancer said.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes," he said. "But I'll need to charge you extra for the commute."

"Yeah, anything."

The brother raised his hand as if to remind them of his presence. "Question... who are you and what is she paying you to do, exactly?"

"Your sister is paying me to resurrect your father."

"Sister? I'm her husband."

The necromancer put down the medical charts he was pretending to read. "Well that makes this easier," the necromancer sighed, pulling out his salts and potions from the satchel strapped to his thigh.

"Easier?"

"You won't be a legal obstacle. Now both of you shut up, I need complete silence."

The couple sat in the rigid visitor's chairs and watched him spread his salts around the body and place drops of a blue potion on the man's tongue. As he stood with the resurrection potion, that icy hand gripped his shoulder again like a vice. He could feel the old man breathing in his ear. The necromancer closed his eyes and imagined his magical barriers, tall thick walls of Jericho isolating him. After a moment the hand was gone. He performed the spell, the mist fell in tiers and dissipated. The heart monitor began beeping again, the red line dancing in a rhythm. Carlee beamed and held her father's hand, becoming warm with blood flow. The necromancer

held out his hand over the bed, palm up. Carlee passed him a fat envelope and quicker than a viper the old man's hand shot up and gripped his wrist.

"I thought..." he wheezed, the action costing him great effort, "you'd help me."

The necromancer slowly pulled the man's clammy hand off his wrist and pocketed the envelope. "I did."

He left the way he came, pockets fattened. He thought he heard the sound of a flatline heart monitor on his way out, but he didn't stop to check.

† † † †

Later that night, his loud motorcycle rumbled through the fog to Mama Ashtoreth's bar. He needed a drink. The job had gone well, but the necromancer couldn't forget the old man. He'd put up a fight. Normally, the ones with families are the easiest to resurrect, but this one... The necromancer had sensed something was off about the situation. Perhaps if he'd asked the daughter, he'd have understood better. Mama Ashtoreth's words rang annoyingly in his head.

"... and I bet you never ask permission, do you?"

He shook the thought away. He'd done the job. He'd gotten paid.

The necromancer used the bar's unlocked back door. He could barely make out the outlines of furniture in the dark, stuffy upstairs apartment. Fur rubbed against his boot. He picked up the old white cat.

"Where's Mama?" he asked.

The cat squirmed free and jumped to the floor, leading him to the small kitchen. The room was dimly lit by the orange light emitted by several small cauldrons on the floor. Mama

Ashtoreth was limp on the tile next to them. The necromancer felt the warped air of death immediately. He frantically cleared space around her and set up his candles and salts, preparing for the spell. His heart pounded. She had a piece of paper in her hand. The necromancer snatched it up. It read,

*Will you acquire my consent to join the living? Raise me by my say,
or leave me to decay —*

There was another line, but he didn't read it, crumpling it and tossing it away. She seriously committed fucking suicide just to prove a fucking point?

The necromancer finished his preparations, popping some pills down her throat so she'd vomit whatever she'd taken when she woke up. He pulled a vial from his belt, chanting the spell over Mama Ashtoreth's body. Smoke swirled down from the vial, circling in wide tiers until it entered her mouth. The necromancer felt his own energy waning, filling Mama Ashtoreth with life. When the last of the smoke had dissipated, the necromancer swayed on his feet. He leaned on the wall for support. Three resurrections in one night — maybe a bit much. He slowly knelt to check her pulse. Blood pummeled his brain. Her heart barely beat. She took her first new breath and immediately started laughing. Laughing! It began as a snicker, then escalated and rolled into a truly bemused cackle. The necromancer sat back on his feet.

"You finished, bitch?"

She laughed breathlessly, rolling on the floor, knocking over a few candles. She vomited in the corner. He snatched the candles away from her and brought her a towel, cleaning up her mess. The necromancer clenched his jaw.

"What the hell, Ashtoreth?"

She sat up, a malicious twinge to her smile. She took deep breaths, collecting herself. "I curse you, foolish boy."

The necromancer stared incredulously. "What?"

She paid him no attention, now in a trance. A smile still played on her lips. "*Thy insolence hast consequences.*" Her voice echoed eerily, like water dripping from stalactites in an ancient cave. It struck the necromancer, then, just how old she must be.

The necromancer raised a hand to slap sense into the old crone. An invisible force stopped it mid-air. She slowly lifted her eyes to his — sickly yellow and bloodshot. The necromancer's heart raced. He'd only felt this once before, when he was twelve, his magic young and uncontrolled, his emotions awry, as he'd awakened one morning to his half-decayed dog covered in dirt and rot, laying next to his face in bed; it had dug itself from the grave to comfort him. Its eyes were murky with yellowed cataracts, whining raspily through a hole in its neck. He'd screamed.

Now he ran.

Mama Ashtoreth's low, cool laugh followed him out the back door. He ran past his motorcycle in the parking lot. He ran down the darkened streets, past sleeping houses, past trees and bushes, past forest groves. He cut through the abandoned cemetery to get home. The wind carried a crow's cackle, and mistaking it for an ancient witch, he braved a glance over his shoulder then tripped and hit his head on a gravestone.

† † † †

The throbbing of his head mingled with a soft song. A young woman was singing with a high voice like windchimes. She sounded close. The necromancer sat up to find the source. He groaned and clutched his head, squeezed his eyes shut. She continued her sad lullaby.

"Shut up, shut up," he mumbled. "Please... Ugh."

The singing stopped. The necromancer sighed heavily.

"You can hear me?" The voice said.

"Course I can. You're standing right next to me."

"But I'm dead."

The necromancer looked up slowly, squinting in the afternoon light filtering through the pines. The young woman was translucent, and he could see the shapes of other graves through her. It'd been a long, long time since he'd seen a ghost.

Her dark hair was braided up short and practical, and she wore an ancient, long, lacy wedding dress. It was stained with blood across the chest. The necromancer glanced at the stone he'd hit his head on. The engravings were all but worn away, dandelions and long grasses taking up residence around it.

"How is it you can hear me?" she asked.

"I'm a necromancer. It's part of the job description."

"Hm." Her expression was stony, but her eyes begged for conversation. The necromancer wondered how long she'd been singing her lonesome song with no one around to hear. He didn't know why, but he indulged her with a heavy sigh. He took a swig of a healing potion from the satchel strapped to his thigh.

He stayed and listened to her talk for a long time. Afternoon bled into evening. He usually blocked out the ghosts; they screamed, they cried, they rambled. They surrounded him,

begged for attention, begged him to carry out their final wishes, or for simple conversation. They were annoying. And none of them were who he wanted them to be.

The singing woman, Hazel, asked if he often had conversations like this. He'd told her no. She asked why. He didn't know why, but he heard himself respond,

"I think... if I opened myself to everyone... I'm not sure there would be any me left?"

Hazel simply nodded.

Evening faded into dusk. Hazel looked up to the first stars glittering. She had been quite the astronomer in life. The necromancer imagined she was naming them in her head as they appeared.

"The night was like this," she said. "When we died."

Hazel glowed a glittering blue in the moonlight.

"It was our wedding day... sadly not official, of course, but... we had a picnic under the stars. Said our vows."

She gazed past the necromancer longingly, at something he couldn't see.

"We were walking ...walking home... and some robbers, or misfits of a sort, snuck up and stabbed Mary... Then I heard a pistol, and the last thing I remember is her face — the fear. And leaves. The scent of leaves around us."

The necromancer turned a pill bottle in his coat pocket. "You really miss her."

Hazel nodded.

"Is she here?"

"She's buried here, yes." She gestured to the east end of the cemetery. "With her family."

The necromancer said, "I could help," so softly, that he surprised himself. He hadn't even given it a thought. He had nothing to gain from offering to do the job. He was under a curse. He

could lose his magic forever. He didn't even know why he was confiding in this woman, talking with her. But something about Hazel felt familiar, like a comfortable sort of pain.

Hazel gleaned his meaning. "But I've no money," she said. "I'm dead."

"Obviously," the necromancer said. "But I'm offering anyway."

Hazel eyed him suspiciously. She glanced between far away plots and the necromancer.

"Really?"

The necromancer nodded. Hazel pursed her lips, mulling over the offer. A second chance.

The necromancer stood with a heavy sigh. "I'll leave you to think it over."

"Wait! You'll come back, won't you?"

"Promise," he said.

† † † †

The necromancer opened the screen door to his trailer home, kicked off his boots and collapsed on the couch with a heavy sigh. He knew he should take some medicine for his throbbing head, but didn't have the energy to get it from his mixed cabinet of potions and pills. He placed his hat over his face, hoping to catch some sleep. The old couch was soft and inviting.

He couldn't shake Hazel and her windchime song from his mind. As she'd looked at the stars, he found himself in another time, when someone else had named the constellations to him. He didn't remember their names, but he remembered her voice and excitement over clear night skies. He thought of Hazel as he drifted into sleep, the woman he couldn't save taking her place in his dreams.

He was twelve years old, and hadn't become "The Necromancer" yet. There had been signs from a young age that he possessed a natural gift for learning the art of sorcery, but only one sorcerer lived in Echo Creek who could have apprenticed him: a woman with wild, unruly hair and tattoos covering her arms who, had made herself untouchable and unapproachable. The necromancer had been fascinated by her as a child, but his mother always told him when they passed her in town,

"Ashtoreth is as old as the rocks, and would beat you with one if you look her in the eye."

Watching her load her groceries onto a modified broomstick hovering in a parking space, he had never understood why Ashtoreth had built her entire life around magic, either; until he needed it himself.

He and his mother lived alone together on a busy street. They'd had a dog who brought them joy and company for many years, a loyal smiling pit-bull named Mango, who had recently passed and was buried under a patch of daffodils in the yard. Mango had been his best friend as a child, and followed him everywhere like a shadow.

One day, the street was unusually quiet, so he had decided to go outside and draw on the asphalt with chalk while his mother tended to their window boxes of herbs. A truck roared up the hill and his mother ran to him, pushing him out of the way. The truck hadn't stopped, and that was the end of her. They'd dressed her in a simple white nightgown at the funeral, as though they'd wanted her to look asleep. He'd snuck away from the funeral to the one person he thought could help.

Ashtoreth swung open the door to her trailer home tucked away in the woods past an overgrown cemetery. Smoke that smelled like black pepper billowed out behind her. He'd begged

for her help, and though she didn't hit him with a rock like he thought she would, she slammed the door closed in his face without a word. So he resolved to help himself.

He returned to his mother's fresh grave later that night with a bag of library books and supplies, and a shovel that was taller than him. He dug for a long time, the endeavor made easier by the loose dirt. He jumped into the grave, opened the casket and his books, and followed the instructions exactly. The books contained warnings on every page, warnings of the changes made to the soul when practicing necromancy, the changes made to the body if done wrong. But he ignored them, and wrong it went. He watched, hopeful, as his mother's hands twitched, then in horror as she writhed, as though contained in a straight-jacket, and made muffled sounds of protest, trapped within her broken body with eyes forced closed and jaw wired shut—to make her look asleep, the mortician had said. He closed the casket.

The second time Ashtoreth found him on her doorstep, she'd taken one look at him, covered in mud, spellbook still in his hand, and invited him in. That night, plagued by voices of the dead, he wanted his old friend Mango more than ever. He'd awakened to his dog, half-decayed and covered in dirt and rot, laying next to his face in bed, whining raspily through a hole in her neck. He'd screamed.

Now the necromancer sat up on the couch in the old trailer Mama Ashtoreth had taken him into many years ago, rubbed his face and took an aspirin.

He stared for a long time at his cabinet of potions and pills. He hadn't planned on returning to Hazel, or even thinking about her. He was under a curse; he didn't even know what the old crone had meant. He left before she could finish. But he was sure she'd take his magic away, having hated the way he's used it for decades. He tried to imagine a life without it after building his entire identity around it. The necromancer sighed heavily.

"Fuck it," he said, taking another pill for good measure.

† † † †

He returned to Hazel's grave two nights later with a shovel and half a bottle of gin. His shovel speared hard into the overgrown ground, and he knew he was going to be here longer than his gin would last him. He dug for hours by the light of the crescent moon. Unburying Mary and Hazel was the most difficult part of his plan, but the most essential; they'd suffocate, buried alive, if he didn't unearth their bodies. He hadn't actually exhumed a grave since that day when he was twelve; he hoped his two decades of expertise would make this job go smoother than that one had. Hazel watched him, perched on her gravestone. Not a word passed between them.

The necromancer dragged Hazel's damp, wooden coffin to Mary's gravesite. He polished off the last drop of his drink and tossed the bottle aside. Digging up Mary took longer, his body tired and muscles protesting. He finally heaved up Mary's coffin as the day's first light scattered in the clouds.

The necromancer moved the coffins flush against one another and spread his salts, powders, and candles around the two. Mama Ashtoreth's magic was strong and immensely complex. He knew he couldn't outwit her curse, and he didn't know how much time he had before she took away his magic for good.

The small flames danced. Hazel stared, mesmerized. He removed the coffin covers and mended their fatal wounds. They were buried a long time ago; he'd need to restore their bodies as well.

Then he took out a vial of his strongest potion. He looked to Hazel, awaiting her approval. She nodded, then dissipated. The necromancer sighed heavily. He began the incantations. Smoke swirled in wide tiers around the women, slowly making its way into their lungs where it would teach them to breathe again. He could feel his energy bleeding into their bodies, the usual feverish heat around his ears now a hot iron poker puncturing his brain. He had never raised two at once before. But he had no other choice, not wanting to risk his magic being taken away with one wife still six feet under, cold and alone, leaving the other warm, but lonelier than the grave ever would have been. He knew what it was to be alone. Mama Ashtoreth had never understood his way of being, and he didn't blame her. She hadn't always been an approachable person, but neither was he. He'd made sure of that. But something just didn't sit right with him, letting others mourn when they didn't have to.

The necromancer swayed on his feet. He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't breathe. His sweater was damp with sweat, and he reached a hand under it as he felt his lungs filling with fluid. He coughed into his hand. It came back red. His vision swam, blurred into vague shapes as he lost his balance and felt, falling, the ground collide with his shoulder and dirt rain on his face. Above, he heard a windchime voice echo over him. In his fading vision, the woman looking down in the grave looked like his mother, so far away in memory he couldn't have remembered her face if he tried.

† † † †

The necromancer felt a tugging at the edge of his mind, like a hand reaching out to help him to his feet. It wasn't insistent, nor was it forcing; it was merely an offer that he could accept

or deny. He took the hand on the edge between his consciousness and his body, where mind met muscle and soul met skin, and he sat up in the grave gasping for air. Crows cawed overhead.

"Are you okay?" Hazel knelt over him, hand on his temple as though to check for fever, a potion bottle in her hand. She wore not a bloodied wedding dress, but a robin-egg blue edwardian day dress. The necromancer shuffled in the dirt. He was surrounded by salt.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You brought me back, and I returned the favor. Thank you."

"How? Were you a necromancer?"

"No, not before... but when I woke up I just felt all this energy... and when I saw you needed help I just... somehow knew what to do. Were you dead?"

The necromancer rubbed his dirty face with dirty hands. He didn't know the answer.

"And Mary?" he asked.

Hazel smiled sadly. "She didn't want to come. But she said I should, if it's what I wanted."

"You spoke with her?"

"Yes, with this energy you gave me. Thank you. I got to say goodbye."

The necromancer realized, then, Ashtoreth's intent. He wondered what Hazel would do with his magic. He wondered what he would do without it; he wasn't a necromancer anymore.

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. What will you do?"

Hazel stood and wiped dirt from her dress, short hair bouncing around her face.

"Live, I suppose?" she said. "You?"

He shrugged and stood, cupping his hands for her to reach the ledge of the grave.

Necromancy had been his life for twenty years. It felt strange, being the one leaving the grave,

for once. He thought he should have been more grateful than he was—was this how his jobs felt, to the dead he forced to live? He'd thought there were many jobs in which he'd helped people. But he thought back on the old man gripping his wrist. There were many before him he'd chosen to ignore.

When they'd helped each other out, they buried Mary again, whose eyes had long since been consumed by writhing worms, flesh peeling like old paint. They sat in silence, Hazel watching the clouds, the necromancer-no-longer resting with his sheriff's hat over his face.

"So I'm a necromancer now," Hazel said.

"Seems so."

"So... what are you?"

"Don't know. Might have to start using my name again."

Hazel said he didn't look like he had a name. He could barely remember it. He wondered if he deserved one. He didn't know why he continued to trust her, but he decided to give her his name, which he hadn't used since before he'd met Ashtoreth. She laughed, and it sounded like crows cackling in the pines. Lloyd sighed, longing for a bottle of gin.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my COMP group, Alexis Jolly and Dylan Hoover, for their feedback and support during the process of this project, and Dr. Christopher Bakken for his critique and encouragement; this project would have been absurdly difficult to do alone, and I appreciate this community of writers to have had the opportunity and the pleasure of working alongside—Alexis, in particular, whose company and encouragement was essential to the outcome of this project and maintaining my motivation. Thank you to those who gave their testimonies for me to work with; I value your experiences and willingness to share them with me, and hope that I honored them with my fiction. I would also like to thank all my family, friends, and colleagues who said they liked the concept of this project and what it would be exploring; I hope all who read it enjoy it. Thank you to my parents and all my professors and mentors who have supported, advised, and taught me these four years of my academic career; I have more to thank you for than I have words or room on this page to express.

Lastly, I would like to thank my cat, Pippin Maple Galadriel Moonshine; and the Meadville Therapy Dogs for keeping me sane this semester.

Sources

- “Bluebeard.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Apr. 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bluebeard>.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, and Anthony Bonner. “The Circular Ruins.” *Ficciones*, Grove Press, New York, NY, 1962, pp. 57–63.
- Chanady, Amaryll. “The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms.” *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 125–144.
- Gaiman, Neil. *The Graveyard Book*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.
- Gaiman, Neil. “The White Road.” *Smoke and Mirrors*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1998, pp. 109–120.
- Goldstein, Diane E, et al. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*. Utah State University Press, 2007.
- John Troyer PhD (2008) Abuse of a corpse: A brief history and re-theorization of necrophilia laws in the USA, *Mortality*, 13:2, 132-152, DOI: 10.1080/13576270801954518
- Keefe, Alexa. “Aokigahara: An Ethereal Forest Where Japanese Commit Suicide.” *Photography*, National Geographic, 4 May 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/article/aokigahara-jukai-suicide-forest>.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. *Of Love and Other Demons*. Translated by Edith Grossman, Vintage Books, 1995.
- National Police Agency (Japan). "Number of Suicides per 100,000 Inhabitants in Japan in 2022, by Age Group." Statista, Statista Inc., 14 Mar 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/622984/number-of-suicides-per-100-000-inhabitants-japan-age/>
- Nedelman, Michael. “Inside Japan's 'Suicide Forest'.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 4 Jan. 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/03/health/japan-suicide-forest-intl/index.html>.
- Rosman JP, Resnick PJ. Sexual attraction to corpses: a psychiatric review of necrophilia. *Bull Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. 1989;17(2):153-63. PMID: 2667656.