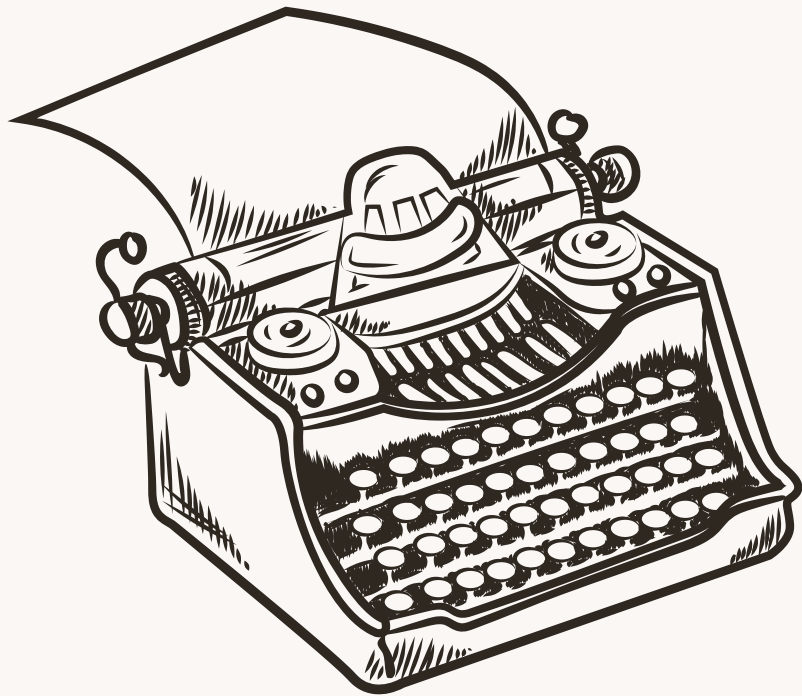




lowercase



SPRING 2025



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— Tarah Elliott
President of Sigma Tau Delta

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Poetry



Why Am I Writing This?

by Anna Hooker

Why am I writing this
When so few are likely to
Read it?

That's just it -
I do not write so that
Others may read but
So that I may have reprieve.

My soul is made of words.
With every breath I breathe
A story forms inside of me
Begging to be released.

And whether the ramblings
Of my soul are ever gazed on
By another human being -
Or simply by me,
I will be happy
Because they are free.

Pleurer dans le Café

by Melanie Dugas

Dans un café, Elle est assise seule
Son ordinateur, un sanctuaire voilé,
L'odeur réconfortante du café
Est nié par sa tempête de brassage

Des larmes chuchotées tombent dans sa tasse
Mélange comme des nuages de crème
Couvert par le son des tasses qui claquent

Seul dans un étourdi à java
Vue de la paix
Le monde bouge
Mais elle trouve le calme dans ses gorrées

Pleurer dans le café
Une thérapie inattendue
Un petit grain de café
Défais ses soucis

Crying in the Coffee Shop

by Melanie Dugas

Sitting in the secluded nook
Her laptop is a veiled sanctuary
The smell of roasted comfort
Is denied by her brewing storm

Whispered tears fall into her cup
Mixing like the clouds of creamer
Covered by the sound of clattering cups

Alone in a Java daze
A glimpse of peace
The world moves around
But she finds quiet in her sips

Crying in the coffee shop
An unexpected therapy
A small coffee bean
Defeats her worries

Peppermint Wind

by Samantha Ray

She scrambles in
at the day's end,
copper curls wild, face wind-bitten.

She kicks off wet boots,
sheds her coat,
rips off pink hat and mittens.

For now, she rests
where the warm light glows,
but in her dreams, off she goes—

Running about,
tongue stretched out,
catching flakes as they descend.

Wide eyes as blue as the skies
and cherry-red cheeks
kissed by the peppermint wind.

Ode-*ipus*

by Dr. Garrett Jeter

Oh, blessed, cursed king of Theban myth fame
Who graced his people with such intellect,
A man of fortune and misfortune to his royal name,
His noble self his noble city to protect.

Oh, proud fugitive from thy parents' home
Obeying the workings of some fated plan,
Preordained outcast so thus to roam
As a blessed and cursed example to man.

Until he come forth to Thebes as a stranger
And thwarts with an answer the Sphinx's dark plan,
A destroyer, a liberator from her cruel danger,
He frees all Thebes with one answer: "Man."

Now, with plague a great riddle he doth find
An answer that leads to his fated cruel doom,
A destiny that cometh to the Great King's own mind:
His own mother's and wife's cursed womb

Now, blessed cursed, oh, now, proud King,
Cursed, once blessed, again fated to roam,
Now over ages the voices of myth do sing
Of a man who won and lost his home.

A Melancholy Hum

by Carson Oliver

There's a knock on the door
A whisper outside
I've heard it before
So I step back and hide
It knows where I am
Why bother to run?
A soft but forceful hand
A melancholy hum

The tune is green and fresh
With hints of days gone past
A song of peace and rest
A reminder that nights don't last
The notes and rhythm grow louder
As raindrops blur my vision
I give into the power
I close my eyes and listen

"I know what breaks your heart
I bear your every burden
Alone and set apart
A sudden rush of hurting
A storm might brew above
And waves may rear their head
But watch the morning dove
Who wears the marks of red."

Ceramics

by Morgan Clark

I sit at the potter's wheel of my life,
already finished with wedging and kneading
the clay of formal education,
which removed air bubbles of inexperience.

I am ready to shape myself
into a tall cup of a professional or perhaps a wide
bowl of a mother, carving
stretch marks on my body before it is fired
in the kiln of old age
and glazed in beliefs and habits.

Before

by Samantha Ray

Before the constant connection.

Before virtual affection.

Before the internet became a cloak.

Before everyone knew you had coffee or a Coke.

Before the publicized hate and shame.

Before we were criticized for a little weight gain.

Before anyone in the world could search or slam your name.

Before every move became vulnerable.

Before discipline became deplorable.

Before, when children went outside to play.

Before, when home was safe, a getaway.

Before, when we wrote notes if we'd something to say.

Before every thought became an online post.

Before we were so quick to whine, bash, and boast.

Before, when we had boxes of family pictures.

Before we were told: "There are more than two genders."

Before, when we had to meet up to speak or chat.

Before—today, they don't know about that.

Before, when we had no reason for a rant like this.

Before is a time that I truly miss.

Rage of the Feminine

by Anna Hooker

I am a woman.

"You choose to cis-identify."

No, I am a woman.

"Yes, and so am I."

Truth is no longer truth,
Now made slant by society's lies.

*"You can be whatever
You wish to be!"*

Yes, but why can't I?

They are allowed to be *anything*
While I am forced to live with their lies.
Hated for refusing to acknowledge them.
Mocked by their incessant cries.

Has Reason been so deeply suppressed
That Reality has died its worst death?

I refuse to comply.
I refuse to feed their lies.
I will not let Reason entirely die.



Fiction



After Life

by Tarah Elliott

Pre-dawn light became red and green and yellow as it filtered through the incredible stained glass mosaics of the cathedral. Citizens passing in front of the giant windows caused the multi-colored light to dance over wooden pews, where no parishioners sat. Pink chased orange light around the sharp edges of the broken pulpit, toppled and split into crumbling chunks of stone on the steps leading up to the dais.

The rising light revealed the blood flung in an arterial spray over the left side of the small, square stage, blood smashed into the shape of footprints all across the front of the cathedral, and blood still dripping off of the glass left in the shattered window on the second floor. It was dried around the mouth of an imperial soldier, his back broken over a pew, body slumped. He had continued to breathe for an hour while Lapin watched helplessly, but now his chest lay still, and in the morning light his face was as grey as his uniform.

Lapin was sitting quietly on the floor in front of the first row of pews when Theo came crashing through the wooden doors at the back of the cathedral. "Lapin!" he screamed, banishing the mournful stillness that Lapin had been sitting in for hours.

"You dolt," Lapin said tiredly, and couldn't bring himself to finish his insult.

"Chancellor Lapin!" Theo shouted again, unable to see him from where he was. He ran up the aisle, heavy armor clanking.

"I'm right here. No need to shout."

Theo reached the front of the cathedral and swung his head wildly. His face crumpled, tears springing to his eyes when he saw Lapin.

Theo dropped to his knees, awkward and slow in his armor. He pulled Lapin into his arms, cradling him as gently as a man in full plate and chainmail could. "Oh, Lapin, no. No, this can't—" He could not continue. Tears ran thickly into his mustache and clogged up his throat.

Lapin sat next to his own dead body and watched the man in charge of protecting him grieve.

Theo desperately tried to wipe the blood from Lapin's face—Lapin shuddering and looking away—as he sought for some sign of life. The blood didn't slide off, smooth as icing off a hot cake, as it had hours ago. It had congealed in the crevasses of his face, forming thick crusts around his eyes and in his ears. Lapin shook his head as Theo pressed shaky fingers to the neck.

He'd gotten used to the sight of his own dead body in the dark morning hours, but it was different now, seeing Theo handle it. Theo, who had never had a kind word for him, who'd always eyed him with suspicion around the royal family, who had accused him of ill intent at every turn, now weeping unashamedly in the still church.

Lapin stood shakily and limped a few steps away to the front pew, gathering his church robes up to move more freely. He fell more than sat, wheezing a little.

"Ah, I'm old," he groaned. Even in the hazy, translucent state of death he found himself in, his joints found a way to creak and pop. Theo, having finally realized Lapin was far beyond saving, held the bloody face to his chest and bent over it, bawling.

"Oh, stop your crying, you fool. Life will go on. Get up—where are the princesses?" Lapin smoothed his collar a little obsessively, though of course his robes, slowly drifting mist upward, didn't change. "I do care about them, you know, often as they slip out of my lessons. You're all they've got now."

Theo, slowly stilling in his weeping, lowered the body back to the floor and began to arrange it precisely.

"Really, *Lord Commander*, you'd think you'd have a better battle sense than this. Clearly I was ambushed as I came in to do my nightly prayers. You're in danger, idiot! You all are!"

Was the mist getting thicker, above him? It was hard to think, with that man being so infuriating. The rising sunlight, turned purple through a depiction of the Saint, danced in geometric shapes over his armor and face. The dust kicked up by his movement swirled, and for a moment, a trick of moving light, it seemed lit as a halo behind his head.

Outside the chapel, shadows moved in as bystanders crowded close about the sides, where only stained glass with gentle depictions of holy saints and relics separated them from seeing the carnage inside. The dark shapes no longer flitted by, but were pressed forward toward the church as the crowd grew behind them. No doubt they were being kept back by some of Sir Theo's guards. Lapin smirked a little bit, thinking about their serious faces under those bobbing plumes.

"Of course they came to you first," Lapin said. "As soon as they recognized one of the dead men as not only the chancellor of this fine church—" he gestured around to all of his ruined work: the windows, so carefully polished, speckled with brain matter, the pews he had sanded himself, now splintered, and of course the pulpit, where he had preached from nearly every week for the last thirty years, lying smashed on top of a Ryiran mercenary on the steps. "—but also the royal princesses' tutor. Your protectee, I might add, and where were you?"

Theo carefully closed the eyes of the dead body, and Lapin had to look away again. "You should have protected me," he said, only whining a little bit. Because he was too old to whine properly, not because he wouldn't do it. Sometimes you had to talk to children in children's language, after all. "But since you didn't, why don't you get your head on straight and go protect the royal family? This is clearly an attack on them!"

Lapin huffed in exasperation, folding his arms—ow. Those pesky cracked ribs had followed him into death somehow. Couldn't he get a little bit of peace? First the Ryirans, and now he had to watch the Lord Commander that he'd been trying to weasel out of the way for as long as they'd both been with the royal family pretend to mourn him. The incorporeality of his current state didn't bother him so much—he'd never stoop to something as base as *slapping* the fool—but his inability to be heard took away his greatest weapon.

"You win in the end, Sir Theo," he sighed. "I'm dead, and the king's ear is yours."

A knight trekked up the aisle in clanking armor. "Oh, Sir Theo. Oh no, is that the chancellor?" The knight took off his helmet hastily, tucking it under his arm and accidentally creasing the red and white plume. *Really, you'd think Theo, with his no-fun-allowed sour attitude, would have cut those things off on his first day. Must be his immutable commitment to "the rules,"* Lapin mused.

"Bring a burial shroud," Theo commanded, voice thick. His mustache had begun to take on the appearance of a rat who'd been chased by predators all day and then fallen in a river. It was strange to not see him smoothing it every two seconds. "And inform the King. I want double security on the royal family, Henry, and no one enters or leaves the castle." Theo cast a hateful glare over his shoulder at the other bodies—Lapin's own priests, mostly, but they'd managed to take a few of their killers with them during those hopeless minutes in the night.

"The—royal family, my Lord Commander? But—"

"This had nothing to do with the church, Henry. They came here for L— for the Chancellor. It was a test of security. My security. And I failed."

Henry looked around the cathedral and clearly failed to arrive at the same conclusion that Theo had seen almost instantly. The priests and various church workers, cut down while fleeing to prevent an alarm being raised, fallen forward on their faces. A few mercenaries, dragged a few feet toward the exit, but ultimately abandoned by their comrades so they could flee quickly. And the two imperial soldiers, dead within five feet of Lapin on both sides of him. Protecting him. *Uselessly,* Lapin thought. *If Theo had been here, he wouldn't have died protecting me. He'd have actually protected me.* Theo had clocked it almost immediately, even while running up the aisle. All of the violence was centered around Lapin. The attack itself, centered on Lapin.

"You should be with them," Lapin said, still slumped on the front pew. "Don't just send your man Henry. I'm dead, you've failed, so go make sure it doesn't happen again. Go to the princesses!"

"A burial shroud," Theo said to Henry again. "And the King. Go, and keep everyone else out."

The knight gave a quick salute, and when his clanking footsteps left the chapel, they were in silence again. A prim white handkerchief fluttered off the back pew in the wind of the door slamming and lighted on the floor, where it was almost instantly soaked in mercenary blood. Lapin looked away with a sigh—that had been one of his favorites. It was so soft to cry into.

Lapin sniffed dryly. "Never in my life have I met a more incompetent buffoon than you, Theodore Cambrai. Of my well-lived life, I regret only that I could never bend the ear of the king to have you out on the doorstep with your armor in a sack. I cannot believe the utter-sentimentality!—of you! You have a job to do, Lord Commander, and it doesn't involve giving yourself early arthritis on a cold stone floor—you're no spring chicken yourself—for a man you were constantly sniping at! You questioned my loyalties at every turn, you called me liar, and you were always undermining my instruction of the princesses. So you don't get to sit there and cry about it!"

"I was wrong about you," Theo whispered, no longer holding the body in his arms but looking down at the eyes he'd closed, the peaceful pose he'd arranged. Peaceful as it could be, ribs concaved by a mace blow and skull cracked in two. "I was so wrong about you."

"Well, of course you were. You're wrong about everything."

"And I wish..." Theo sniffed heavily, head low. "I wish I could have said that to you." Theo took the gauntlet off his right arm, wiping tears with his bare hand. "Lapin, you were so...frustrating. And we weren't friends, but God, I knew you for thirty years, and..." Theo sniffled, and was silent for a long time.

"It's not going to be the same without you, is what I mean. The princesses will miss you. Even though they always snuck out of your lectures. I don't know what you expected, trying to teach ten-year-olds about the political machinations of the Haven War." Theo pressed his bared hand to his forehead, face crumpling. "Oh God, I'm insulting you, and you're dead. What am I doing?"

Lapin chuckled softly.

"I just...I don't know, Lapin. It's not easy, ever, to apologize to a corpse. Did my fair share of that in the war. And you know what? You don't make it easy." Theo took a deep, shuddering breath and powered through. "What should I expect? You never made anything easy. But I was wrong about you. You were loyal. You were always loyal, and we were just two fools, blinded by hatred, trying to put knives in each other's backs."

Lapin crossed his arms. "I'll have you know I never fueled that petty rivalry at all. I wasn't putting knives anywhere. What a brute you are, Sir Theo."

Theo was quiet then, for a long time. Long enough for his eyes to dry red. Some of his knights lingered around the door of the cathedral, whispering to each other, but they didn't come in. Lapin shifted against the high back of the wooden pew, wishing for his warm bed. If he'd known a few hours ago that it would be his last time in it, he wouldn't have been so punctual to his nightly prayers. And wasn't it so unfair that he had to deal with the aches and pains of eighty years of life even though sunlight shone through his translucent form? The mist seemed to be rising from his skin faster, growing denser above him, mixing with the light that flickered all colors of the rainbow through the windows as the sun rose higher.

Abruptly Theo stood, groaning a bit as his knees straightened.

"I told you," Lapin said. "You shouldn't be kneeling."

"I'm sorry I didn't protect you, Chancellor Lapin. But I swear it, by the seven stars and the seven seas, I will find who did this and I will kill them."

"An impressive promise," Lapin said. "Congratulations, you gave another dramatic speech. Should I clap now?"

"We served the king in our own ways. I never recognized that before. I'm sorry it took your death. Lapin, I never liked you, and I won't lie. Not even death can soften my memories of your dull, droning voice and acidic comments. But I did respect you, and..." Theo raised one fist to his breast in salute. "I won't forget you, and I won't let you lie unavenged. You encouraged the king to strike back at his enemies, and all I could think about was the pain of the last war we went through. Now you've gone and gotten killed, just like you warned us about. You were right, Lapin, and I won't try to hold the king back anymore. The Ryirans need to be dealt with."

The mist grew ever thicker, and Lapin saw the world through a haze as the man he hated—well, maybe just disliked—swore to carry out his life's work to the end. He sunk against the pew, head tilted back in relief as his pains finally disappeared.

"Well, how about that?" Lapin asked softly. "Looks like you're good for something, you old buffoon."

The Great Outdoors

by Clara Hall

Office Greg did not know anything about camping. The mere concept of it alarmed him. The woods were dirty and unpredictable, with too many shades of green, greasy hair, and gnats. His slate-grey job at his slate-grey office was comfortable and rhythmic, like the mindless chatter of fingers typing away behind cubicle cells. At work, Office Greg felt sure. He felt sure of the tasteful tie he would tighten each morning beneath a freshly shaven chin. He felt sure of the stack of paperwork on his desk, enough to keep him busy yet not too much to overwhelm. He felt sure that his coworkers would exchange small talk with him at the coffee machine, friendly nothings that would never attempt to scratch the surface of his failing marriage. Yes, that was right—he also felt sure that his marriage was undeniably, irrevocably, broken.

Only one coworker had seemed suspicious—his name was Burt. Peering over the top of his cubicle, he had squinted past his bushy eyebrows down at Office Greg's desk. "Where's that lovely photo of you and your wife?" Burt had asked in a nasally drone, shoving his glasses where they had begun to slip down his nose. He had never married, due to the fact that he was insufferable.

"The frame broke," Office Greg said, swiveling in his desk chair uncomfortably.

The only photo on his desk now was one of Avery as a baby. Her blue eyes, somehow just as big now, stared at him plaintively. He felt guilty for his immediate urge to look away. Glancing up furtively to make sure Burt wasn't pressing his double-chin over the cubicle wall, Office Greg turned around his "NUMBER ONE DAD" mug so that the front was hidden. He scooted it in front of the picture of Avery, so that the cluster of pens sticking out of the mug covered her face. The most he could see was one eye, peering out from behind the pens like an animal in the forest.

Outdoors Greg lived for his wife, and his daughter, and nature. He was not intimidated by the wide-open wilderness, nor did he long to crawl back to an oppressive cubicle. Outdoors Greg refused to let his marriage die. He took his wife Lydia on breathtaking trips to the Grand Canyon, keeping their love alive and strong as the rock itself. He was the kind of man who shot woodland creatures indiscriminately for sport, a skill Lydia appreciated as she fried up sizzling game-meat every night. He kept his family fed by the sweat of his brow, not the papercuts on his fingers. Avery, because of her father's rugged outdoorsmanship, found him an ideal role model. Outdoors Greg did not throw Avery into the local Wilderness Scouts troop just to absolve himself from the terrifying responsibility of entertaining a nine-year-old—he was thrilled to teach her wilderness survival skills himself. Under her father's instruction, Avery learned to fish, and whittle, and start a campfire. In turn, he was not so perplexed by her youthful femininity, but instead bonded with her over the roasting of chemical-laden hotdogs around a campfire.

The trouble was, Outdoors Greg did not exist—only Office Greg.

No sign had yet emerged of this Davey Crockett-esque alter-ego, though Office Greg held out hope for his midlife crisis. Just because Outdoors Greg hadn't shown up didn't mean there wasn't a chance. Office Greg needed him right about now.

Greg picked Avery up from the house. Though the divorce was not yet final, Greg had taken the high road by moving into an apartment. The tension was just not bearable anymore. First, he had moved to the opposite side of the house, but even that was not enough distance. Lydia despised his apathy, and he couldn't withstand her cutting comments, sharp as the garden spade she so deftly wielded. Plus, Avery's room was between where Greg and Lydia slept, and sometimes he thought he could hear her crying at night. The sharp icepick of guilt that drove into his chest was too much—it froze him and could not be endured.

"How would you like to go camping this weekend, Avery?" Greg said, awkwardly clapping his arm around his daughter's shoulders after they stepped into his apartment. She shrugged out of his grip, double braids mussed and laden with bits of leaves. The apartment was sleek and modern, cleaner than their rambling cottage had ever been. A pine needle wafted down from Avery's shirtsleeve and landed on the floor.

"Camping? With you?" she said skeptically, digging dirt out from under her fingernails, no doubt the result of planting flowers with her mother earlier in the day. Avery was her mother's daughter, mouth just as quick and hands just as messy. Greg was a simple man, good at things like stocks and statistics. Lydia was the queen of hobbies and had raised her daughter the same way. Along with the everyday gardening and reading, she had put Avery in gymnastics and dance, but neither had stuck. While Lydia had done the heavy lifting of child-rearing, Greg could take credit for one interest. He had initiated the Wilderness Scout phase, regardless of his motives. After sullenly agreeing to attend the first meeting (she was more of a lone wolf) Avery had fallen in love with Wilderness Scouts. It suited her better than any other activity she had been a part of. She collected each badge with the ferocity of a wild animal. She could recite the Wilderness Scout pledge by heart, backwards and forwards. Whatever her outfit choice of the day, she always wore her sash covered in colorful badges.

"Yes, I love camping!" Greg lied through his teeth. "Didn't I help you get one of your wilderness badges?"

"The endangered animal badge? The one where we sat at a computer for three hours and did research on the Mississippi gopher frog?" she said flatly.

"Erm yes, that one. We glued it on your sash together! Why aren't you wearing it today?" Greg felt proud of himself for his keen observation skills—there was no sash slung over Avery's yellow shirt. Also, Greg realized, she had come wearing no shoes.

"I left it at home," said Avery, running her big toe along a groove in the tile floor.

"Why?"

"I didn't want to wear it here."

"Why?"

"I don't like wearing it here."

Oh no, Greg thought. Now was truly not the time for Avery to deny her affinity for the outdoors. He had three different tents in his Amazon cart (all with reviews affirming their rain-and-bug-proofness).

"Well, this weekend you'd better bring your sash. We can work on your Wilderness Scout challenges, and go fishing, and hike a trail or two, and have a campfire both nights. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"What about mom?" Avery said.

Greg took a breath. "We talked about what divorce means, honey. It means we each get special, one-on-one time with you now. She can spend a weekend with her friends. And I sure need some time with my favorite daughter."

"I'm your only kid," said Avery.

"Right. Oh, did I mention there will be a campfire?"

Avery, despite her best attempts, could not help but look slightly interested. "Can we make smores?"

Greg made himself a mental note to google what ingredients one needed for s'mores.

"Of course."

The three tents came in and, after close examination, Greg decided to go with the one with the most intimidating looking poles. Those things looked like they could impale a woodland menace. Greg struggled into a thick camouflage jacket, lacing up a stiff new pair of hiking boots that gave him blisters within five minutes of packing the car. Not to be hindered by a bit of toe pain, he kept cramming camping gear into the mid-sized SUV, checking each item off his list: one tent, two fishing poles (they would pick up worms wherever worms were sold), two cheap plastic ponchos in case of rain, a can of toxin-laden bug spray, a tube of toxin-laden sunscreen, two sleeping bags (with inflatable pillows), one high-powered lantern, two hotdog/marshmallow roasters, a lighter, and one hatchet for chopping firewood. Oh yes, he thought with a foot-related grimace. One box of Band-Aids.

Greg hobbled back into the apartment to check on Avery's progress in the kitchen, where she was unenthusiastically packing up the food supplies. Overstuffed grocery bags slumped queasily on the counter, spilling forth every sort of camping-related necessity. Greg had gone on an uncharacteristic buying spree that morning, purchasing foods he had never had the desire to ingest. Nevertheless, he checked off each item Avery tossed into either the ice chest or plastic box: one suspicious can of Vienna sausage, plenty of Little Debbie snack cakes, a pack of hotdogs (the red ones that look like sticks of dynamite), hotdog buns, marshmallows, chocolate, graham crackers, hot cocoa mix, deli meat, bread, sodas, water, paper plates, napkins, and a box of assorted cutlery. Greg gave her a thumbs up and limped back to the car, where he realized he needed to clear a space for the food. After she had crammed in the last item in the ice chest, Avery lugged it out to the car like an animal dragging its prey.

After only one unfortunate incident (an ice chest pulled over somebody's already blistered toe) the car was packed (and unpacked and packed again) from top to bottom. Father and daughter set off from civilization and, after tracing winding roads into the forest, came to their campsite. It looked like what Greg had seen on the website—vaguely pretty if you thought about it, situated next to a lake, a patch of small pebbles next to a charred firepit. Everything was eerily quiet, except for the crickets scraping their wings together and the bullfrogs belching in unison down by the water. Greg remembered that he had, for whatever reason, packed the tent first. He and Avery together unearthed the flimsy structure outdoorsmen defined as “shelter” from the trunk of the car.

“I think I know how to set up a tent,” said Avery.

Greg had out the instructions and was arranging tent poles on the ground in order of length. “This is easy,” he said. “Why don't you go explore a little and check out the lake? Just stay where I can see you.”

Avery shrugged, kicked off her sandals, and meandered off. Feeling confident and rugged, Greg laid down a tarp on the ground and began attaching tent poles together. His toe pain forgotten, he felt like life was looking up. Despite the daunting prospect of peeing outside for two days, camping didn't seem too terrible. *If Lydia could see me now...* he thought. Greg followed each tent-raising instruction with fervor, happy to glance toward the lake and see Avery cradling some kind of creature, a wildflower sticking out of her hair.

Carefully threading the tent poles into the slots in the tent fabric, Greg guided the tent into a new plane of existence. Before he knew it, the dome was taking shape, until -RIIPPPP. A tent pole, a gloriously sturdy tent pole (worthy of the "World's Most Impressive Tent Pole" award) had pierced through the tent fabric. It was not a small tear. The tent, the pitifully frail tent (worthy of the "World's Most Pathetic Tent" award), now suffered a gaping hole along a split seam. The hole leered at him like a mocking mouth.

"But the Amazon reviews were so stellar!" Greg said, kicking at the structure angrily. It folded in on itself like a dying flower, poles clattering to the ground.

"What happened, Dad?" said Avery as she ran up to him, cheeks flushed.

Greg massaged his temples and took a deep breath.

"Looks like we'll be sleeping under the stars."

A discontented rumble sounded from above.

Glancing up, Greg realized the sky had shifted from a pale blue to an ominous grey while he had been too busy tent-building to notice. At the growling thunder, small raindrops began pelting down unapologetically. Greg stood slack-jawed at their appalling luck. Avery held up her cupped hands, as if to welcome the downpour. Then Greg realized she was holding a small toad. It crouched, wide-eyed, as the rain soaked into its mottled skin.

"What are we gonna do?" said Avery, toad pressed to her chest.

Greg was at a loss, his hopes of being the perfect outdoor dad dashed. He looked at his daughter and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Avery. This weekend seems like a bust. Let's head on home."

He expected Avery to acquiesce, grateful for an escape back to her mother. Even a Wilderness Scout wouldn't choose to camp in dismal weather with a tent torn to shreds. Instead, Avery had the look on her face that was much like Lydia's when she was scheming. Greg knew that look well, along with the fact that it usually ended with disaster.

"I have an idea," said Avery.

Greg settled into his proverbial coonskin cap. He was not about to tell his daughter no, not after everything she had been through with the divorce. He braced himself for a long night.

Following Avery's instructions, the pair began gathering up the tent and the tarp before they were totally soaked. "Quick, bring it over between these two trees!" Avery said. Greg walked over, arms full of fabric and tent poles poking him in the gut. Together, the two rigged up a shelter, using the trees, tent poles, tarp, and what of the tent was salvageable. Layering the material so that rain couldn't leak in, they staked the poles into the ground to support the structure, the two trees on either side acting as sturdy walls. Avery had a certain knack that impressed her father. For a moment he considered patting himself on the back for enrolling her in the Wilderness Scouts, but then remembered she had always been clever.

That's my girl, he thought as she demonstrated remarkable engineering prowess. For once, Greg was the brawn and not the brains. He used his dad-strength to pound the poles into the ground and carry over what supplies were still useful. They had given up the idea of a fire, but plenty of the snacks would make do just fine. By the time the job was done, it was a sight to behold. Airtight? No. Bug-proof? Absolutely not. But their sleeping bags lay on a flat, dry patch of ground, sheltered from the wind and rain. Avery's eyes shone with excitement over her creation, and she didn't even pull away when her dad gave her a big wet bear hug. She hugged him back.

Later that night, after a bit of exploring in the rainy woods, Greg and Avery curled up in their sleeping bags under the tarp. They had taken turns changing into dry clothes in the SUV. The sun was just going down, and though it was chilly, it was not intolerable. Between their sleeping bags on the ground sat the electric lantern, which cast a cozy glow. The sound of rain pattering down on the tarp was soothing, really. Greg told himself to stop imagining that somehow a spider had crawled into the foot of his sleeping bag. He pulled the snack box towards him and rummaged through until he found the smore supplies.

"Raw smores, anyone?" he said,

Avery laughed as he handed her a square of cool chocolate and marshmallow balancing precariously on a graham cracker. "Yum," she said, wolfing it down in a bite and spraying crumbs.

Greg looked fondly over at his daughter in the dusk light. "Good job today. I never could have built all this. You deserve a badge."

Unzipping her duffle bag, Avery pulled out her sash and held it close to the lantern so he could see. She pointed to a colorful circle with a tent embroidered on it. "I already got the survival badge, but we never made anything as cool as this."

"You should get the 'built-awesome-shelter-in-the-rain' badge," Greg said.

"Or the 'saved-dad-from-camping-fail' badge," Avery said.

"Hey! Or 'smells-like-a-wet-dog' badge," he said, reaching over to poke her. She wiggled away from him in her sleeping bag like a caterpillar. Laughing with his daughter, Greg realized he was almost *enjoying* camping. And he definitely enjoyed spending time with Avery.

Once the two had stopped laughing, they lay quietly. The rain had slowed enough that they could hear the crickets and frogs picking back up their medley. Greg, growing sleepy and content, felt a slow wave of regret build up and crash over him. Why was it taking him a divorce and a boatload of guilt to spend time with the most perfect daughter ever to exist?

He rolled over and looked at Avery to see if she was asleep. "I'm sorry for how everything is turning out," he whispered. "I'm sorry for not being a good dad." He wished that somehow his choices didn't affect her so much. He thought about how unfair it is that adult's problems inevitably hurt their kids.

At first, he thought she did not hear him, but then Avery rolled over to face him. "It's okay," she said. She looked so much like Lydia it was scary. Greg reminded himself not to be so scared all the time.

"Thanks for camping with me, Dad. I didn't know you were fun like this."

"Me neither," said Greg.

That Monday at the office, Greg came in carrying a cardboard box. He set it down on his desk with a purposeful thud.

"What's that?" Burt squawked from over the cubicle wall, causing Greg to jump. Burt's chins quivered with anticipation as Greg took each intriguing item out of the box. First came a picture of Avery from her Wilderness Scouts initiation earlier that year. She was beaming and wearing a sash yet badge-less. Greg felt proud to think of how many it had now, and excited to help Avery add more. Next, he pulled from the box several offerings his daughter had given him over the years, items he had previously tucked away without much thought. A rock shaped like a heart. A marvelously large pinecone. A small piece of wood she had attempted to whittle. These Greg placed in the previously empty corner of his desk, next to the baby picture of Avery he had covered with the mug. Shifting it over back to its rightful spot, Greg felt his heart lighten.

"NUMBER ONE DAD," Burt blurted out. "Sure looks like it, pal."

"Hardly," laughed Greg. He wasn't sure if he would ever be number one at anything—certainly not at mastering the outdoors. The days of dreaming about mythical Outdoors Greg were over. Greg was okay with that. He wasn't sure about a lot when it came to life outside the office, but he was sure about one thing—he had a daughter who he would face bugs bites and bears and broken tents for. Of that he was sure.

The Case Files of Ebon Kanzanki:

Beginner's Luck

by Benjamin Cox

The air was cold and bit at Noah's nose the evening that she encountered her very first ogre. With the experience came an understanding that there was more to the world she knew than met the eye. There was loads more: everything she thought she knew was abnormal suddenly becoming oddly familiar, everything that appeared supernatural suddenly becoming easy and relatable. And normal. With her very first ogre came her very first step into the world most people have ignored, that most people have forgotten about. Of course, with her first ogre came her very first paranormal investigator. She never considered such an occupation existing before, but after seeing him at work, her first paranormal investigator, she had to admit, there was use for the job after all.

Private investigator and missing persons detective Noah Teresa Kelly Solvang rubbed her crimson nostrils again after turning into the driveway of the family she was sent to meet with by the private agency she worked for. Half of her focus was spent on the agency and working as a private investigator when she parked in the driveway of the family who held her latest case. She's not been a part of official investigative business in over two years. Her privatization was met with scrutiny by her peers and harsh analysis by her superiors, much to her indifference. She didn't care what the coworkers thought of her for doing her job. But working private meant she could actually help people. Or so she thought.

Going private saw her being recruited by (more like showing interest and then being invited to) a private investigative contracting agency. The agency accepted cases that they would assign investigators to and pay them according to the case, some would go to the investigator, some would go to the agency. But you were only paid the handsome cash if you were given a job. She was not given any. So far, she'd been paid by receiving errands to run, which the agency compensated her on.

She was upset by this. She was licensed, went to college for criminal justice, graduated the Arlington Police Academy and rose to detective after years of street cop work. She knew what she was doing. But she was never given the chance to show what she knew. Frustrating. But she was finally given a chance to show her mettle with a missing persons case. She started the morning she received the case with an added spring in her step.

The morning she took the missing persons case of William Jason Tudor saw a great icy wind breeze through, bringing frost and cold where the temperature was once comfortably around 65° Fahrenheit. She pulled her coat tight around her body as she stepped out of her vehicle into the frigid air in front of the Tudor residence. It was a quaint house for a quaint neighborhood in the throes of suburbia. She noted the clutch of trees that shivered and rustled about in the wind, a little spat of nature in this otherwise quaint place. She noticed someone walking down the street toward the thicket, his trench coat black as night and loose, flying behind him as he strode against the wind. He turned instinctively toward her and stared until she looked away so as not to annoy him. She watched a little longer as he wandered down the street, stood a moment, then spun back around as if he had forgotten something. His eyes were to the ground though, like he was looking for something. *Didn't know homeless people came out this far.*

She ignored him. There were more important things to worry about. She approached the door and stood four inches from the threshold before knocking. Footsteps told her someone heard her knock. The door was pulled open by a man of medium height and a head of black, curly hair standing beside a woman an inch shorter than him

"Mister and Missus Tudor?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes ma'am?" the man replied.

"My name is Detective Noah Solvang. I'm here about your son, William."

This is a waste. This is a dirty, rotten waste. What a way to waste a day.

Her interrogation (more like interview) of the Tudor family only seemed to excite more questions in her mind than fill the ones she already had with answers. She was thorough, unsubtle, she wanted the kid found and returned safe and sound to his family. That meant asking good questions. And the best questions to ask are often the ones that paint the greatest of Man as the lowest of creatures. She asked William's parents a bevy of questions related to his academics, his social life, any extracurricular activities, any hobbies. She needed an outline of this kid's entire day so she could determine where exactly to start searching. From the initial interaction, she determined that poor William had fled from him to escape nagging parents about his grades and academics, probably to be with a girl. His parents did not seem to appreciate her mentioning this theory.

"Our son would never!" his mother had protested.

"Unless he wanted to. Kids his age are getting used to puberty and at that point, if she's pretty enough, bravery becomes second nature." She had already closed her notepad and was headed out the door to visit his school to interview William's teachers and principal.

"Our son tells us everything. He's a very honest kid!" Mrs. Tudor had started to show a general disliking of Noah, especially after her line of questioning about if William enjoyed liquor or drugs. This recent question, if William had a girlfriend, seemed to have pushed her across the line.

She had left shortly after. That was twelve hours ago. The rest of her day was spent driving around searching for someone with even a modicum of information on where this poor kid had gone off to. His teachers were oblivious to the disappearance as far as empathy, having little to say about where he could have gone. His math teacher was most helpful, identifying key figures in his life he might try to run away with, but unsure if he had a girlfriend or any love interest at all. Noah visited the principal for insight into his academics, which were astonishing. William had potential, but from the curve of his grades, he was only improving and not declining as he would if he were hooked on something. She visited his friends next, or at least the kids he was seen most frequently with. They had nothing for her either and they were not hiding anything, even after a faculty member threatened suspension should they not assist Noah. One of them seemed like he was carrying something illegal on school campuses but she never checked.

She returned to the neighborhood in the evening after wasting the day asking poignant questions to people with no answers, thoroughly perplexed as to where this kid could have gone. The likelihood of kidnap was nigh impossible; it would have to have been a spontaneous event, meaning the kidnappers did not plan for the event, and that only happens in Hollywood. William's family was not rich, not important, not influential. Kidnap was out of the question. She pulled in at the Tudor residence, stepping out preparing herself for the harsh treatment she would face when she asked if William had any enemies, when the gunshot happened.

The gunshot caught her attention instantly, straightening at the sudden splitting crack. An unmistakable sound. It came from the thickets. Having been through academy training, she knew what a .357 magnum round sounded like when discharged. She hesitated reacting, thinking it might have been her imagination. But after the second, third, fourth, and fifth gunshots she understood this was not her imagination. She drew her sidearm and started for the trees. A .357 magnum round was a big cartridge that wasn't fired for kicks and giggles. Someone wanted someone else dead. It was her law enforcement training that pulled her toward the source of the gunfire.

Visibility was difficult traveling under the canopy, the moonlight only piercing the leaves overhead in beams of silver light every so often. She took out her flashlight and held it under her firing hand to light her way as she moved through the underbrush. Every crack and rustle made by her fearsome footfalls caused her heart to jump a beat. She could not see very far in front of her and did not know where exactly those gunshots came from. If anything, she probably was walking up on a drug deal gone wrong. A gangster could fit a few .357 magnum rounds to his criminal pension, certainly. Then she tripped over something.

Her foot clipped it while she was cresting a borough of shrubs but did not fall over it. She thought it a log at first, but saw the sallow features and paling complexion and realized it was a body. A dead body. She dropped over it immediately, probing the throat for a pulse and feeling the face for warmth. She felt neither. Fresh blood spilled from two bullet wounds as big as dimes, gushing blood.

She was too late to save this one. The tall features and large frame demoted this guy was male, but his figure was sort of rigid and rough to the touch, and he rattled a little when she moved him, like chains. She flooded the area in artificial light and noticed the chain shirt the body wore, the bullets having perfectly cut through them, and now blood was rusting into the shirt. *Chainmail? Was there a Renaissance Faire around here?* As she searched the surrounding environs, a little sparkle appeared. Two more bodies.

These new cadavers were just as dead as the first she found (more like stumbled upon). They also had chainmail, but one of them was shot in the head, just above the left eye, and the other was shot in the throat twice, tearing apart his laryngeal arteries. And there were no exit wounds. She breathed out an anxious sigh and took out her phone for photographic identification. The police would handle murder, she had a missing teen to find. The flash from her cellphone illuminated the grass and shrubs around her, brightening the first man's ash blonde hair and revealing the length of his ears. She blinked at the sight and held her flashlight up to the side of body's face. The sunken, angled features of the corpse's face was unsettling enough, but the abnormal length of its ears was astronomically more horrifying. She's never seen such abnormal growth to the ears on a person before, sharp and pointed at the tips. The lobes had been pierced, golden circles hanging from the holes in the ears, gorgeous golden chains decorated the lobe. *Who were these guys?*

She stood as another gust of wind pulled through the trees, ruffling the canopy and shaking the branches. But she heard the twig crack just as well. Her light was up as she darted from left to right, scanning the surrounding shadows for shapes that did not match the trees. As she turned around, the light fell on a bump in the grass with a mossy, cracked enamel substance to its surface. There were five of them. She looked closer as the large creature loomed over her, yellow eyes glaring down into hers. She was half its size—whatever it was—but its skin was heather green and it had two short, yellowish tusks protruding from its lower lip. It exhaled, like breathing out a low, deep, grumbling growl. Its breath was hot; she did not see it raise its arm.

Something sprinted up to her, she had just enough time to see the figure leap onto her as the giant creature swung down with its fist. The strike missed her thanks to whatever pounced on her. She felt two arms wrap around her and a warm body tackled her down. The stranger got off as soon as she was on the ground. She fumbled upright as the stranger moved off of her. He raised the revolver in his palm and shot once at the creature's chest. The darkness was driven back with a sudden burst of white light. The gunshot broke the silence. Then she felt his hand hold her arm and hoist her upright as he stood up.

"MOVE!"

She took off after him as whatever that thing was behind them howled in anger at the wound in its body, like some ten-foot tall animal. After they had sprinted a good distance away, she found she could not keep her questions to herself any longer. "What was that thing? What is it?"

"Ogre," the stranger said. He offered no other explanation. Just kept running.

"A what?!"

"An ogre. Now hush and keep running."

She followed him for another dozen paces before deciding to take matters into her own hands. After stopping near a tree, she took out her standard issue and stood stiff in the darkness. She had dropped her flashlight and was now effectively blind. Except for the harsh movements of the giant creature (the stranger called it an "ogre," whatever that meant). It stomped after them in a bounding rush of movement that shook the bushes from its size. She raised her sidearm and fired at it twice, thrice, five times, but that did not stop it. Two more, much louder, gunshots rang out from behind her and the giant thing reeled back in pain. She felt something pull her hand. The stranger had taken her wrist and was pulling her away from the creature.

"Why didn't my bullets kill it? I shot it five times!"

He slowed down his pace a little so she could keep up.

"Your bullets are made out of lead?"

"Yes. Why?"

He nodded knowingly. "Don't shoot it again. Now start running." He dashed away without her. She had to run fast to catch up to him.

What is that thing? she thought. He called it an ogre. *Why did he call it an ogre? Ogres don't exist. They're the monsters of fairy stories, the villains of TV shows. They are not real.*

Right?

After what felt like another two miles of sprinting through shadows and natural shrubbery, the stranger slowed down and she managed to catch up to him. She found him sitting almost flat against the bottom of an oak tree, his back pressing hard into the bark, his revolver up like he was ready to use it. He flicked out the chamber and pulled out two spent shells from the cylinder, pocketed them in his trench coat pocket, and pushed in two fresh unspent casings to replace them. When he was done he closed the chamber with a quick flick of his hand. He watched her approach, sort of shifted to the side to allow her room to hide beside him. After catching her breath she started her line of questioning.

"What is that thing—what is it really? Don't tell me it's something from a fairy tale"—she dared not speak louder than a whisper—"and don't try to lie to me!"

"Okay, I won't," he replied, matching her quiet whisper. "It's an ogre."

She almost struck him in anger at his blatant deception. She chose not to since he was a stranger. "Ogres aren't real! What is it, really?"

"Ogres are real and *that* is an ogre." He had gestured to the woods behind them when he spoke of it. His voice was low, set in a whisper, so it was difficult for Noah to place any accent or drawl. But his trench coat. *Black as night...*

"You're that guy from this morning. You were in the neighborhood. Weren't you?"

He eased to the side to scan the forest where the ogre should be and then eased back, satisfied with his search. "I was in a neighborhood this morning. What of it?"

"Do you have anything to do with William Tudor's disappearance?"

"I should hope not." He did not say another word after that.

She was fuming. She did not know what was chasing them, she did not know where William was, and all of it suddenly swelled up into her and turned to anger. She mastered it easily and exhaled the fumes of her wrath. "If you're going to lie, at least do it professionally."

Without looking at her, he scoffed and said, "Sweetheart, I'm the most professional liar this side of the Mississippi, and if I wanted to deceive you, you'd have no idea the thought even crossed my mind. Are you wearing perfume tonight?"

She was about to demand he answer her question when she was caught off guard by his perfume query. "Yes. Why?"

"Do you know its ingredients?"

"No. What's the problem?"

He was on his feet in one motion and sprinting fast into the darkness. She was on her feet a second later but she lost sight of him the moment she stood. He left me, she thought. Her eyes darted from left to right. He wore black—straight, cold black—and in this darkness he could be standing two feet in front of her and she still would miss him. He distracted her with questions of her perfume so he could escape and leave her behind. *Perfect, she thought, I'm being hunted by some giant thing and my only friend in this mess just abandoned me. I'm so dead.*

The crack of twigs and leaves forced her flat against the tree to hide. She felt her throat tighten like she was upset, her lungs started heaving air like she just ran a marathon. *Being scared sucks*, she thought. The rustling footfalls slowed down as they approached the tree. Noah dared not move for fear it could hear her, she even stifled her heavy breathing to a near silent whisper. Whatever it was started heaving in breaths through its nose, big drags of air, like a hog in the food trough. She then realized why the stranger asked about her perfume.

Its arm flew around the tree before she could dodge like a snake, grabbed her legs like she was a lobster, and pulled her toward it. Seeing it now made her stomach roll in disgust. A horrid visage of angled, bony features colored this hideous, deep heathery green, like the Incredible Hulk but a few shades darker. Its tusks were sharp to a mouth that had an ugly underbite. She was most horrified by its smile, or some close resemblance to a smile. She raised her handgun as it lifted her upside down, legs above her head, and fired a shot into its face. It reeled in pain did a moment, then grabbed her arms in one hand to pull her tight as a bow's string. Then it opened its mouth and put her close to its teeth. It was going to take a bite out of her.

Her attempts to free herself were made in vain. It was much stronger than her. Noah would have never considered she would meet her by being eaten like corn on the cob. *I would've at least liked to die fighting*, she thought. She didn't even know what it was. And she never found William. She suddenly became aware of the many regrets she had. She wanted to help a few more people before she died, change the way female detectives and investigators were seen by the public eye, maybe even make a name for herself. But those regrets came and went. Her trance was broken when the gunshot rattled her mind.

The giant creature winced as something entered its head. She gasped. Another gunshot made her jump and sent whatever it was that was going to eat her fall to its knees. Two head shots, clean, going through the temples. It dropped backward, releasing her limbs and sending her falling into the dried leaves and grass around the tree she was hiding behind. She was suddenly aware of how sweaty she had become, the thrum of her heartbeat loud in her ears like a snare drum line. Some of what she thought was sweat was tears falling from the corners of her eyes. A near death experience on her first case shook her more than she anticipated.

The stranger approached her while she still lay shaken on the ground, shellshocked from almost being bitten in half by whatever that thing was. He called it an ogre. Somehow, after that more-than-personal encounter, she was inclined to believe him, that he knew what he was talking about.

"You okay?" he said, looming over her.

She sat up and wiped the sweat from her face to hide her tears and nodded. She couldn't possibly speak after what just happened. But she found her voice and replied with, "Yeah I'm fine." She stared at it, the ogre's body, watching the ooze from its head stain the leaves and twigs on the forest floor, unsure if it was red, black, or some other color. He was staring at its corpse, too. His eyes seemed to find the body quicker than hers. She wanted to know. "An ogre, huh?"

He nodded. "I didn't expect them to bring an ogre." He took a knee beside her huddled form. "Nasty things, really. Very little intelligence in them. They're like bears but much less predictable."

His words bounced around in her head. She sniffed again. "Why didn't my bullets kill it?" She cleared her throat, quite irritated that her emotions were making her sound like a scared little girl.

He was now sitting beside her, ankles crossed, knees close together, arms around his knees, imitating her huddled form. For some reason, she was not offended by his imitation. "Your bullets are lead capped, you said?" She nodded. He had asked her before but she did not know why.

He nodded at her. "Lead bullets won't work on ogres, they're technically faeries. That makes their skin highly impervious to artificial materials." He held up his revolver. "My bullets are made of cold iron."

Cold iron? Technically fairies? These things made no sense to her. *And who is 'they?'* The questions piled up in her mind, but she was stuck on one, the very first question she wanted answered, and asked it. "Who are you?"

He stood up in one motion without using his hands that made it seem he wasn't truly sitting at all. "Sorry about that, I was working, so I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Ebon Kanzaki, private paranormal investigator and private missing persons detective. I also do investigative consulting work from time to time." He extended his hand as if to shake hers, but when she took it, he hoisted her back to her feet. "Pleasure."

She was still thinking about his occupation. "You're a what?"

"Private paranormal investigator, the only openly practicing paranormal investigator in the state and the best in the country. I invented the job."

She took a moment to process the information before speaking again. "So, you deal with ghosts and stuff?"

His brow furrowed at her question. "Not explicitly, I try to leave the ghostly things for the exorcists. I handle the broader sense of the paranormal."

Broader sense? What did that mean? She caught herself staring and looked back at the body to make it seem she wasn't judging him too harshly.

He changed the subject for a bit. "Tell me your name."

She turned back to him. "Noah." She was caught off guard by his statement that she replied without thinking, "Noah Solvang." She should have added *detective*, but she was too late and forgot to add the title.

"Noah." He nodded to himself. "Good name."

She took her sidearm and checked her ammo count, then asked him his business. "What are you doing here? I saw you in the neighborhood this morning. Why?"

His eyes widened as if he was struck by some epiphany. "Thank you for reminding me." He shoved his revolver into his holster and turned northward. "Get home safe. If you hear buzzing or whirring or see blue lights or sparkles, ignore them, don't go towards them, and get out as fast as you can." He started down the way he was facing and did not look back.

"Wait." Noah protested. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"Away."

That didn't answer my question. She caught up and found it difficult to match his pace without fast-walking after him. "What are you doing here? How did you know what that was back there? What do you mean by *sparkles, blue lights and buzzing?*"

When Ebon didn't answer and he didn't slow down, Noah lapsed back to being serious and kept chasing after him. She ran up to him and reached for his arm. She was tired of him, she wanted him out of her way, she wanted him to answer the questions she was asking, and she wanted him gone. This was *her* investigation and he was a civilian in the matter as far as she was concerned. "You are interfering with an official investigation. Either answer my questions or I will be forced to subdue you."

When her hand touched his shoulder, before she could even grab hold of him, he turned on her. He was quick and she was oblivious, that was how she later decided he had taken her down. He started by twisting her arm outwardly, spinning her around him, and bringing her to the ground in a quick judo throw that left her with leaves and grass in her face. She blinked as he grabbed her, then felt wind on her face, then leaves in her teeth. When she raised her head, Ebon was gone. She didn't know where he went either. It was like he were a shadow in the darkness—vanished. But she certainly knew where he would be headed. She started down the way he was moving, going north, chasing after him in intervals of sprints and jogs. After sprinting for about three minutes, he reappeared, and not in the friendliest of manners.

He lunged at her from the shadows and wrapped an arm around her neck, pulling her close to him. Before she could protest he held a gloved hand over her mouth. "Calm down and listen. And don't scream." She tried to break his grip but he just tightened it. It was humiliating to be top of her class in the academy only to be disarmed and incapacitated by a civilian playing at fairy tales.

Against her better judgment, half because she could not shake him off her, she listened. Once she calmed down, he spoke. "So long as you do not panic, show no signs of confusion, and you do not make any sounds, I have no issue with you being here. But make a sound that is even a decibel above a whisper and I will knock you out here and now to keep you out of the way. You have no idea how devastatingly serious this case is for both of us. Am I clear?"

She didn't make any move to acknowledge his words. He did not let go. She tried to pull away again, which caused him to continue. "I don't have time to explain how this is keeping you safe but it is. This isn't about you, it's about someone else. And to keep that someone safe, I need you to *stay calm*. I don't want to hurt you, but to finish this case, I will if you won't listen. You seem like a food person, so I'd hate for anything bad to happen to you. But good people get in my way, too."

For lack of a better response, she grunted an affirmation and he let her go finally. He started back the way they ran from the ogre. After catching her breath, she followed. He led her to the clearing she saw when she found those bodies. He crouched in the bushes and started a rather rapid scan of the environs, like he was searching for more ogres. Much later, she would wonder if there really were any more in these woods with them. What she did notice in the clearing was something sparkly sitting in the middle of the field. After studying the field of the clearing for a moment, he stood and started forward.

"Stay here. I won't be long." He pointed her to the tree behind them. She crouched down and watched him wander out into the clearing. Towards the line of sparkles.

The crooked bark held her frigid body as she watched him. She could not quite see what it was that he was doing with them, but the sparkles began to accumulate around him like bees to a hive. From the occasional vague gestures he would give with his hands or fingers, he seemed to be speaking with them. *But what about? What even was he speaking to?* She was not certain.

The blue light had caught her off guard as she was watching the so-called paranormal investigator communicate with a trail of airborne glitter. She pivoted and flattened her back against the tree bark, suddenly afraid, hoping that whatever light was on her would pass. *Another ogre?* She would not be surprised. Her night was going from bad to strange and everything forced her to be skeptical of her own sanity. *Too many late nights on the job? Not enough time off?* She had been pushing herself rather hard these past few days. But the blue light was not an ogre, unless ogres are also small flying globes of blue fire.

It was the size of a softball. There was about two yards between it and the ground. It seemed to be hovering, like a drone with no propellers that was on fire. She knew it was looking at her. Somehow. Instead of pointing her gun at it like her gut told her to, she waited a moment, feeding her curious side for a time. *What is this thing?* She's never seen anything like it. It could be some side effect of being out in the cold, stressed from work, restless from no sleep in the past few days. But as it moved closer, she became acutely mesmerized by its appearance. It was a lovely little thing. Kind of cute, too. *Grab it.* Blue flames were supposed to be greater in temperature than regular orange flames, but this burning ball of fire was cold as it drew near to her. *Touch it.* Despite how cold it was as it hovered up to her, she felt the warmth that it offered. *Reach out to it.* She raised her hand out to the burning blue sphere. *Hold onto it tight. Don't let go.*

The bag fell from the shadows around her over the blue flaming orb and suddenly the warmth she felt was gone. Ebon stood over her, glaring at the bag. "Talk to me, Noah Solvang."

The sudden appearance of the paranormal investigator interrupted the warmth she was feeling as it spoke to her. *It was speaking to me?* How she knew it spoke to her was beyond her comprehension. *Tonight is getting weirder and weirder.* Ebon took her by the shoulders, seeming rather panicked by her unresponsiveness. "NOAH!"

She blinked at him. "I'm alright, I'm alright."

"How many ears do ten rabbits have together?"

"What?"

"Answer the question."

It took her a moment, mostly because of how stupefying the question was, but after some simple calculations, she answered. "Twenty."

"Good. You're fine." He held up the bag in front of him and put a bullet through it with his revolver.

The gunshot made her jump. She was on her feet now, acutely aware the warmth she felt was dead now. She looked at the bag in disbelief, fixing the canvas outside in a hard, blank stare of shock. "It was warm . . ."

"No it wasn't, it was conductive."

"What was it?"

"Will-o'-the-wisp. Another faerie."

The word struck her again. He'd used that word before. "What do you mean by fairies?"

"Are you here for William?"

The name forced her toward him, like he had just given her a bag of money. "Yes. Where is he?"

"Come with me. It's not safe for you alone out here anyways."

He led her into the clearing, her instincts compelling her after him since he seemed the professional about all these curious things going on. He returned quietly, barely making a sound in the bushes as he left the forest. She followed after him curiously, tracking his every move, just to be sure he would not throw her into the ground again, or to be ready if he tried. As they wandered to the middle of the clearing, Noah recognized the trail of sparkles she noticed before had become small people that hovered on the air. Small people.

Tiny people. Hovering in the air. She found no words to describe how utterly confused and astonished she was. She kept her confusion to herself though, since the Ebon had warned her to not be confused.

"I've returned," Ebon said to the hovering tiny people. "Apologies for the delay."

They were all tiny, no taller than eight inches in height, the size of most action figures. One of them had bright baby blue hair, another had a shiny silver mullet, the third one had a light green mohawk, and the fourth one kept her silvery-pink hair long and braided into three braids. They all had tiny gossamer wings, like butterflies or dragonflies, but with weird shapes that were hard to describe since they were flittering so quickly, and all of their clothes were green and leafy.

The way they were floating was the same way hummingbirds float up to feeders in the summertime. The one with baby blue hair had a silver ring of light hovering above his head, like an angel's halo or something. It took her a moment to realize what they looked like to her, and when she did, she realized why Ebon had taken such initiative and priority in keeping her out of the way.

These were fairies. Real, bona fide, actual fairies.

"You should not have involved her," the haloed fairy said. "This was not a part of the deal."

"Hand over the kid and then we can renegotiate." Ebon's face was unreadable. There was not an ounce of emotion on his features, nothing she could glean his thoughts off of. It fascinated her.

The pink-haired fairy flittered up to Noah. It looked like a girl, a really tiny girl, with dragonfly wings and a dress made of tiny leaves and brambles. She started flying around her, head to toe, inspecting everything about her. "You seem lost, troubled, tired, stressed," the fairy said. She was taken aback by how high-pitched yet soothing the fairy sounded. "I think you work too much. You should relax sometime. Do you like warm water?"

She turned to Ebon but he didn't turn to her. He was in conversation with the haloed fairy and his lackeys. She felt impressed to stay quiet, so she did, initially.

The pink-haired fairy flittered up to her eyes, hovering a few inches away from her face, lounging on nothing like the air was a cushion supporting her tiny presence. "You must really want to help this kid if you braved the forest in all this darkness to rescue him. Would you like to see where he is?"

Her eyes widened at the mention of the kid's location. "Where? Tell me."

The pink-haired fairy smiled. "He's right over there, just beyond the tree line."

She turned away from the fairy to study the distant trees for shapes that looked like a young boy with glasses and curly hair. She felt a hand on her wrist and a soft tug at her arm. Ebon had grabbed her during his conversation with the other fairies. He was glaring viciously at the fairy with pink hair.

"Your tricks are old and lack precision and mischief, Tiff." He turned back to the haloed fairy. "Give us the boy."

The haloed one flittered up to Ebon. "Pay your Tithe and your debts can be settled. You're the reason they found us to begin with. And we do not bargain with unsettled matters or those who instigate them."

"My Tithe has nothing to do with this. Release the boy, close the Way, then I'll be gone."

"Your Tithe must be paid in full! We shall not cooperate with you, Blackthorn, until you pay what is meant to be paid."

"I answer to Titania before I answer to you, Flick."

"You answer to the Seelie Sidhe and so shall answer to me."

Ebon's hand was quick. She didn't even realize what was going on around her. She was so absorbed in this moment she didn't realize the pink-haired fairy had sneaked behind her and tried to stab her with a long thistle. Ebon had snatched her out of the air and held her in front of him, his fingers tight around her body.

"Unhand her!" the haloed fairy demanded. He drew a tiny blade from his side made of a thin strip of metal, a tiny rapier. His lackeys drew blades as well. Ebon responded by drawing his revolver and stuffing the fairy's face against the muzzle.

"If you recall, Flick," his eyes went from the pink-haired fairy to the haloed one. "Tis not should fae give creed deceive, nor shall the boon of lies bereave of Man

The blue-haired fairy's pale complexion drained of color, though Noah did not know why. He flittered away from Ebon, the pink-haired one still struggling to escape his grip around her body, and spoke with the other two fairies. They spoke in whispers for some time before the blue-haired one returned, cleared his throat, and said, "In accordance to the Shiller-Vey, the stumble scullor tuck and weys, so as to vow in other ways is cordial, truthful, smither, and shay. We accept the given codes with ease and let the child go in peace to not be touched by them or me or any other fae who please. As long as Tiff Tiff Torley is left released."

Ebon nodded even though the words meant nonsense to Noah and took the fairy away from his muzzle and looked her dead in the eyes. *"Déan é sin arís agus maróidh mé thú, maróidh mé thú má dhéanann tú é sin arís."* He stared at her with furious eyes, his irises small with what she could only discern as rage. "I know your name now, Tiff. Do not forget that."

She shuddered in fear as he released her to fly back to her friends. The green-haired fairy reached out to her and embraced her as she returned. She stuck her tongue out at Ebon, then vanished with the green-haired fairy.

The blue-haired fairy said something in a weird series of words that sung with hard consonants and rough vowels that Ebon nodded to and agreed with, words Noah did not follow at all. Strange, twisting syllables; harsh, guttural vowels; long, heaving sentences on matters left unspoken except by this strange vernacular. Then, without any other words, the fairies clapped their hands and vanished into a puff of silver smoke and sparkles. In the moments that followed, Ebon stepped over the part of the clearing where the fairies flittered over and pulled up some of the grass before sprinkling it into a circle around him. He did not say anything the entire time, leaving Noah to her troubled thoughts. *Fairies are real. Ogres are real. Are mermaids real? Are vampires real? Werewolves, trolls, unicorns?* She started to panic over the strain of her revelations, suddenly anxious at the idea that everything she thought was a fairytale was real, when suddenly Ebon stepped out of the circle and gave her a hug. It was a quick hug. He stepped up to her, wrapped both arms around her, held her tight for a moment, said some kind words, then let go. Why he did so she would not know until later. At the moment, she was just confused. But regardless of the reason, it was exactly what she needed.

"Good job, Noah. You did good." He let her go after the quick embrace. "Sorry for almost getting you spirited away. Stupid of me to think they'd behave themselves. I thought they had learned their lesson."

She blinked at him. "What lesson?"

"To not test my patience."

A very good lesson, that one. She replayed the image of him almost shooting off that little fairy's entire upper body. *Poor thing was literally staring down his gun barrel.* "What did you mean by 'spirited away'?"

He slipped his hand inside his trench coat. "You have no charms." He produced a handful of beautifully verdant four-leaved clovers. "I should have given you a few. Without these, they could have lured you into Faerieland. Like Wendy in Peter Pan."

Her eyes widened at the revelation. It sounded so preposterous, so asinine and fictitious. But with everything going on, all she's seen this evening, she would be foolish to call him a liar now. She didn't even ridicule the fact he was carrying around the most four-leaved clovers she's ever seen in one place. *I almost got kidnapped by fairies.* The thought itself sounded so fantastically unreal.

He turned back around to the circle he created and clapped his hands thrice, then made a complaint about the wind taking too long. "Get a move on, Eurus, Zephyrus," he uttered under his breath.

A moment later, a string of sparkles started to fall from the clouds in loose, open patterns. Then, as they fell into the circle, they began to clump together quickly and then popped into great clusters of light. Noah looked away at the sudden flashes and when she looked back, there was a teenager standing in the circle. William Tudor wore a dirty and ragged school uniform belonging to his high school, albeit without his shoes and only one sock, and he was missing his glasses. No doubt the fairies had taken these things from him. *How do you prosecute a fairy for kidnapping?* she thought. *This is going to be so difficult to report to the agency.*

Ebon approached the kid with a forced smile on his face. "Hey there, kid," he said, brimming with joy. "Enjoy your time in Faerieland?"

The kid stood up and brushed himself off, his already dirty hands both scraping off the dirt from his clothes while adding to the assembly on his shirt. He looked up at Ebon, his eyes wide and keen, like he wanted to reply with some profound discovery, some philosophical revelation about morality or ethics, some realization to the purpose of the cosmos, but before he could say a word, he fell backward into the soft grass with a little *thump* and started snoring.

"He will never remember the adventures he had, unfortunately," said Ebon, "but will eventually replace the memories of the faeries with memories of his time being at a friend's house to escape his parents' harsh treatment of his mental state."

Noah was surprised at the accuracy and precision of Ebon's description of why William was sleeping. And here she thought he was just hyper-narcoleptic. She wanted to ask how Ebon knew the things he did about William, how it was he knew everything about what was happening that night, but somehow mastered herself and refrained from asking anything. She was tired. She wanted to go home. She wanted to forget tonight, but had a creeping suspicion that this wish was impossible.

Ebon hoisted the kid over his shoulders and told Noah to lead him back to her vehicle. It was a long and silent journey through the dark woods. She wanted to ask him so many questions. She wanted to see what he knew, how much he knew, why he knew what he knew. She wanted him to reveal the nature of the world to her, to expose the purpose of all reality, to explain the reason for all of the weird things that go bump in the night. But she never did. Not yet, at least. He asked for her.

"You have questions," he said after they cleared the woods. The moon illuminated their way now, they were a few dozen yards from the neighborhood now. "Ogres, faeries, will-o'-the-wisps. Your world is getting turned upside and flipped inside out. I get it." They wandered a few yards closer to the neighborhood. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in all this. I try to keep the ignorant out of my affairs."

She turned to him as they started walking on asphalt instead of grass. "Don't be."

"I've got all night."

"What?"

"For your questions. I have all night."

His relative acceptance to answer her questions was concerning at first, but she was too taken with curiosity and expunged every question she had on her mind. She started at the very beginning. "Why are you here?"

"For the kid."

She glanced at the teenager in his arms. "His parents hired you?"

"Yes. As you might recall, I'm also a missing persons investigator. They wanted me to find their son. When they couldn't give me enough info, I told them that their son may have been taken to Faerieland. They didn't believe me, so I sneaked into his room."

"How did you get into the kid's room? The parents turned me away immediately at even hinting I needed to see his personal things."

"I broke in while they were sleeping."

She stopped walking, staring hard at him. He stopped and turned and looked at her. She must have made a pretty shocked expression because he seemed genuinely fixed on it.

"That's a crime."

He shrugged. "I know people on high. Won't be an issue even if someone finds out."

"How did you get past their dogs?"

"One of my magic powers."

She turned to him sharply. "Really?"

"I just gave them a pound of beef with knock-out drugs laced in it."

She looked at him in disbelief. "So you *really* do whatever it takes to find these missing kids."

"The best part about working for yourself is that the only person you need to listen to is you."

Their journey carefully descended into what seemed like a parent interviewing a child about his or her dreams and imaginary adventures. But the sheer accuracy of his language when he answered made her line of questioning seem intelligent, almost philosophical. He answered everything she asked him.

"Elves?"

"Yes. Wyld elves, specifically. They were here because they wanted to hunt the faeries in these woods. So I killed them to keep the ones that had the kid happy so they would give me the kid."

She nodded. It took her another couple seconds to formulate a new series of questions. And she certainly asked them all. And Ebon withheld and censored nothing. Ogres and giants, vampires and werewolves, elves, dwarves, gnomes, unicorns, ghosts, zombies, and most of all faeries (pronounce fey-rees, which she found interesting).

"Pixies?"

"Yeah," he said. They had gotten to her vehicle up the road parked a distance from the Tudor residence since she couldn't fit her car in the already taken driveway. "Faeries is the species, like humans with dark skin and humans with light skin. They're both considered humans. Pixies are a type of faerie. Same as the elves you found. They're faeries, too, technically."

"And Wyldfae are different than Summerfae and Winterfae? And ogres are technically faeries but also giants, like trolls?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't elves supposed to be serene and peaceful?"

"Only in Tolkien's books," he replied.

She nodded. "And are pixies always so . . . backstabbing?"

"No. A few of them can be really nice. Those pixies targeted you because you weren't warded."

"Weren't warded?"

"Defenseless, essentially." When she drew her sidearm to disprove his claim, he rolled his eyes and continued. "Mystically defenseless. You don't carry cold iron weapons and you have no anti-faerie charms. Remember what I said about charms?" He dipped a hand into his coat and took out a few clovers. "Like this."

She holstered her pistol (she had been toting it since her encounter with the faeries) and raised an eyebrow. "You can't be serious. That's enough to keep faeries away from you?"

He put the clovers back in his pocket. "Can you really put it past me?"

She bounced around all of his answers to her questions in her head for a few moments. She needed to get the kid home before too long, but at the same he wanted to stay and ask him more questions, since he seemed so readily available and willing to answer them. But she had one more she wanted to ask him. "Why do you do this?"

"Hm?"

"Why do you do this? Why did you decide to be a paranormal investigator?"

His faint smile faded. He stared up into the moonlight, pondering. His answer was quick. "I didn't."

An unexpected answer. But he seemed morose of the subject and so she didn't push it. "Then why do you keep doing this?"

"To destroy all magic in this world and destroy the monsters that do not belong."

He spoke so confidently, as if he had been working at that goal for a while now. "You want to destroy the faeries?"

He shook his head. "This world does not belong to the things that terrorize it. The magic of the faeries is not welcome here. Neither is the magic of the Otherworld and the Faerielands. I want to evict the faeries, the monsters, and their magic. Permanently."

She thought on his words for a moment. It was a difficult thing to understand, despite how truthful he may have been with his answers, and even though he explained everything he gave answers to she did not fully understand it. He watched moonlight for a little longer then tilted his forward until he was looking at the ground. She glanced at William sleeping in her back seat. Ebon had turned to her after pulling out his wallet.

"Hold still for me, don't look away." He pulled something out his wallet. It was a card with a fancy symbol on the face. "This won't hurt at all. Just relax. Forgive me."

She swatted away the card before he could place it against her forehead. "Don't," she said, stern and serious, "don't."

He was taken aback by her reaction. When his eyes went to the card lying flat on the pavement, Noah placed her foot on it and ran it into the road until it was torn apart. He scoffed and looked back at her.

"That was harsh."

"You were going to wipe my memories like William. I wouldn't remember anything I've seen tonight." The realization hit her as finished that thought. "That's why you answered all my questions. Because I wouldn't remember the answers."

He gave a faint smile at her. It vanished as soon as she noticed it. "I need to wipe these memories. You're uninitiated. Ever read H. P. Lovecraft?"

"What does that matter?"

"If you don't know how to correlate everything you come across on a night like tonight, your mind will try to comprehend what it is not meant to comprehend. Then you'll go insane. Really insane. And no drugs, no therapy, not even a lobotomy can ever bring you back."

"So what? Better to die knowing the truth than live knowing nothing at all, right?"

He stiffened at her retort. His faint smile returned. "In that case, let me give you something different." He produced a smaller card from his wallet and presented it to her.

She eyed the card skeptically. "What is this?"

"A business card."

She rolled her eyes. "I know that, but why'd you give it to me?"

"So you know where to find me." She raised an eyebrow so he elaborated. "I want you to work with me."

"Why should I work with you?"

"Because you're a reliable, trustworthy, hardworking young woman who's lived a good life so far, had a good childhood, lives alone and independently, has the experience and knack for private investigation work despite working at an agency—I mean, you're a certified detective for crying out loud—and otherwise need a reliable place to work."

She fixed him in a curious stare marked with the deep feeling of shock at his rather accurate description of her. The more she thought about what he said the more she wanted to know what he meant. It took her seven seconds to finally muster the courage. "How did you know I was a detective? And that I was working for an agency? How did you know I was single? How do you know I live alone and had a good childhood, and what do you mean by...settled? How'd you know all that? And don't try to B-S me with any of your *magic powers* nonsense."

Ebon sighed hard, not caring how subtle he was with his exasperation. "You really want to know?"

She nodded. He rolled his eyes, clearly irritated. "Alright. Answers, in order. You work for an agency because I've never heard of you before. Had I known who you were, you'd be working privately like me. I know all of the private investigators in the state by name. But I haven't heard of you so that means you work for an agency that does not give you the time of day to make a name for yourself. You're not wearing a ring which means you either aren't married or you don't like to get it dirty while on the job. There's no tattoos on your ring fingers either, meaning if you are married you're traditional. You'd want a gold band on your hand. But you're not married. Your left ring finger is far too plump, meaning you have yet to wear one on that finger long enough to be considered taken.

Beginner's Luck "You look after yourself. You faced that ogre even after your bullets didn't work. You're independent. You took this job on your own with no backup. You also like working alone. That tells me you'd prefer the single life. Besides that, your body is very healthy and young. Even with that coat on I can tell you've not had kids. This means you're single and living alone, not divorced, not taking time off, not swinging, nothing. Just you. Odds are you live by yourself, away from parents, and with no roommates or friends. Your independent nature told me that. You're okay taking hugs which means you haven't been abused, enjoy being touched lovingly, and have no qualms trusting strangers to be in close proximity to you. Your childhood was good. That means you had a good family. You're not a foster kid, you trust men in black coats giving you hugs.

"On top of that, you don't live in luxury but certainly far away from poverty. Your vehicle is old but still runs, meaning you probably have the cash to afford repairs or spare parts, but you definitely take care of it. Your clothes are worn, you don't care if they get dirty, and you trust them. Not the behavior of a rich kid. That's what I meant by *settled*. You need money, hence why you're still at this agency. You hope to make a sudden breakthrough, become noticed someday. Today was that day, maybe, or perhaps it was weeks ago and you've been on this case ever since because you're stubborn. I know you're stubborn because you act in charge a lot.

"But all that to say, Noah Solvang, that you are a reliable, trustworthy, hardworking young woman who's lived a good life so far, has the experience and knack for this kind of work, and otherwise need a reliable place to work. So take the card and I'll see you tomorrow."

She was stunned. There were no words she could say in response to describe how awestruck she was this man. But she found one. "Amazing."

He fixed her in a curious look. "Come again?"

She blinked at him to break her trance and said, "Oh, I just...I never knew someone like you could exist. I've read about savant syndrome, but...you're different."

He shrugged. "If you say so."

Benjamin Cox

She took the card in his hand and read the printed letters carefully. The only reason she took it from him was because instead of trying to stick it into her forehead, he was handing it to her like a letter. And he had flattered her, so she was more relaxed about taking it. She scanned her eye over the printed black ink on the front. It read in a fine, almost manuscript cursive flow: "Ebon Kanzaki, Private Paranormal Investigator; Missing Persons, Cold Cases, Investigative Consultant . . . No Case Too Small; *no undercover or assassinations.*" There was an address and a single phone number, but no email or other contact information. It was a pretty boring business card.

"Be at my office tomorrow at ten o'clock, no later. If you don't show, I will find you myself. And I'm terribly good at finding things." He turned away and started for the road. "Take the kid to his worried parents. And, even if you don't show tomorrow, I imagine you and I will see each other again." He continued walking away.

She watched him wander off into the darkness for a moment longer before she saddled up to take William home to his parents. It was a short drive up the street. His parents were not in bed yet. They were grateful for his return, and they were equally as shocked at Noah's fake story about where she had found him. It was difficult making up a story about their lost son, she had been working on it the whole drive to the house, but she knew that the truth would be ignored if she spoke it. She wondered if Ebon would have done the same thing.

She was paid well for her efforts. She felt bad that Ebon was not. When she left, she noted the trees in the distance near the edge of the suburban neighborhood. The trees were different. They felt different. Those trees had faeries and ogres in them. Those woods had elf corpses and pixies inside. Maybe it still had ogres in it, maybe it still had faeries in it, maybe there were worse creatures than ogres and faeries in it. Still, she had a new way to see the world and a new reason to see more of it. She did not know this at the time, but she would begin working with Ebon Kanzaki. She would become his most trusted companion, even if she didn't want to be at the time.

Despite the events of the night, she did not worry about it. Instead, she kept looking at the shadows, wondering if there would be something there. Because now, those things that went bump in the night were not just paranoid imaginings. They were real.

She wondered how she survived her first encounter with faeries and ogres, how she survived so long without encountering faeries in all her life. How often did faeries kidnap kids? How often did ogres attack people? What was the possibility elves were living amongst normal people? She did not know. Maybe it was just beginner's luck, but later, much later, it wouldn't be the luck of a beginner.

The Case Files of Ebon Kanzanki:

Death Road

by Benjamin Cox

There are plenty of reasons why you should never drive faster than the speed limit on the interstate. Personal safety, the safety of those around you, keeping your vehicle in top shape, public image, and obedience to the law are all very good reasons to avoid speeding. Nobody likes it when the kid with the muscle car floors it to get ahead of traffic.

But a really good reason to drive faster than the speed limit on the interstate is when a crazy necromancer sorcerer is chasing you.

My hands were glued to the steering wheel, my foot pressing the accelerator almost to the point of breaking into the engine block, eyes glancing from rearview mirror to road in rapid glances from one to the other. He was close.

I watched a crackling yellow bolt of necrotic energy zip past my car and hit the pickup truck that I had just sped past. Its fender aged about fifty years and crumbled into a thousand specks of rust, dust, and ash. *Too close.* You'd think that metal doesn't die, but necrotic energies are mystical and lack distinct explanations. Magic can do anything from peel your banana for you to pulverize the likes of your worst enemy. Crazy stuff, I tell you.

"Watch the road!"

I flicked my eyes back to the road with just enough time to zoom around another white SUV before it was flipped over itself, rolling bumper over bumper, after being blasted up the tailpipe with a bolt of eldritch energy. *Getting closer.*

"Who's driving again?" I shot back at the woman in the passenger seat.

"I said I was fine driving." My partner was the kind of woman to say one thing and mean something else, as was typical of most women I knew. But she was different than the typical woman. Oftentimes, she was the only person I could trust, which is why she, and only she, tagged along for this case. She was also, currently, the only person who I could rely on to help me kill a necromancer.

In summation, because I hate long explanations, I got a call about a crazed sorcerous mage who dabbled in necromancy, had to do with him pulling something big off just outside of town. Naturally, I had to investigate. I took my partner with me. She needed the field experience, or so she told me. I was planning on bringing her anyway, she just did not realize. We followed the tip to a cemetery where our necromancer was reading off a grimoire.

Nasty things, grimoires. They're essentially a concentrated source of mystical information, like a dictionary, and all one has to do to tap into such mystics is read the grimoire like a book. Because it is a book. He was using the grimoire to raise a horde of undead. So, my partner distracted him and I snagged the grimoire. But he wasn't so reliant on the grimoire as I had initially thought he was. Now, we're on the run, with said necromancer plus his undead entourage hot on our heels and closing in fast.

"How far back is he, Noah?" I asked my partner.

She leaned away from the dash and scanned the road behind us. "About eighty yards, seventy-three meters." Another eldritch death ray flew over us. "It's incredible how precise he is with his spellcasting."

"What did I tell you about complimenting the enemy?"

We flew past another sports car and eased into the right lane, praying that our mutual enemy had given up. He hadn't. I merged left and managed to pass up a semi, but not before getting a few indecent, loosely offensive gestures from the driver. Some people.

I drive a grey 2010 Mazda four-door liftback, my third vehicle that I've had to purchase thanks to the dangers of my occupation. I really appreciated the vehicle and wanted nothing more than for it to survive this recent case. Its tires squealed and screeched on the pavement of the highway as we rounded another smooth corner and kept going. Noah and I had been driving away from our pursuer for the past twenty miles, seeming to only gain a breath of distance away from him before he re-emerged. Man, I hate wizards.

"Maybe if we give him back his magic book, he'll let us live long enough for us to steal it from him again, with a better plan in mind." Noah would occasionally let the gates to her optimism open a little to let a few specks of it bleed through her. It often suffocated her snarky nature that I knew her best by.

"I doubt he'd even let us think about our last words before pulverizing us into space dust." I swerved around a minivan and barely merged in front of them when the truck in front of us caught a lightning bolt up the tailpipe. "Hang onto something."

Before Noah could grab anything, I pulled us out of the truck's swerving, spiraling crash and continued flooring it.

"We have to stop him. He's wreaking havoc." She peered behind us at the burning pickup. "And he's going to cause more trouble unless we stop him."

"I'm not concerned about stopping him right now."

She glanced behind us again. "Then what are we doing? Just running?"

"Never said that." I merged into the left lane and took us over ninety miles-per-hour.

"Then what are we doing?"

"Just running away. There, now I said it." Man, I hate playing the coward.

"Just running away?!" She sounded angry.

I swerved as she howled. "Well, technically we're driving away, but I know you hate semantics."

Another caustic line of destructive magic flew into the street and left a crack in the pavement. The frequency of bystanders and other vehicles decreased as we trailblazed the highway, dodging more and more of the necromancer's attack spells. He really wanted this grimoire back. It made me wonder what his agendas were. Wizards and grimoires are similar to people and phonebooks; a wizard can memorize as much spellcraft as his mind can store, but they keep a grimoire around to store the other spellcraft that they don't memorize.

In layman's terms, we just stole that guy's phonebook and he had to make a call and did not know the number. That may not sound so bad, but the phone number he's trying to call may very well have been every dead body within a ten-mile radius of that first cemetery. Essentially, he's making recruitment calls for his undead marching band, and if he gets this grimoire back, the phone numbers he'll be calling will always pick up. Or, in this case, rise up.

"Truck."

I swerved around the semi-truck at twenty miles over the speed limit, almost passing it on two wheels. Noah checked on our necromancer again. "He's gaining on us." A line of necrotic lightning proved her right. "He still has his zombies, too."

I flicked my eyes to the rear-view mirror. "I can see that."

"How long are we going to run away from him?"

"Long enough for me to figure out how best to deal with him."

She turned to me sharply. "What?!"

I jumped in my skin and swerved as she snapped at me. I could sense her scowl without having to look at her face.

"Okay, so maybe I'm a little fuzzy on how best to kill a wizard whose whole hobby is reversing death. No big deal."

"No big deal?! I thought you said that you knew what you were doing."

"That was before we saw him bring up that entire cemetery without any help from his grimoire. This book is going to fuel his zombie-raising antics and we need to figure out the best way to dispose of it and then dispose of him." I tapped the brakes and drove around a passenger bus. "Not exactly in that order. But if we kill him before breaking the book, there's a chance the book will just bring him back, I've seen it happen before. Our best chance at stopping him is destroying the book first."

"What's stopping us from burning the blasted thing?"

"Oh yeah, hadn't thought of that, let me just get my lighter—which I left at the office—and gasoline—that we don't have—so we can burn the grimoire inside of a moving vehicle." If I hadn't been driving, I would have been rolling my eyes at her. "Trust me, the first thing you do with evil dictionaries is feed them to fire. The only reason we *haven't* is because we *can't*. We need as much distance as we can manage between us and him before we can even *think* about maybe possibly burning the grimoire."

"Why'd you leave your lighter at the office—I thought you always brought your lighter with you."

"No-one told me he had a grimoire with him when we accepted this case. I thought we wouldn't need it."

She pinched her fingers over her nasal bridge at my facetious remarks. "Have you ever *dealt* with a necromancer before?"

"No. Not a necromancer. This is kind of my first time."

She looked down at the book in her lap and started thinking. I could tell by the scowl on her face she was thinking very hard and very fast about this. Her eyebrows furrow really deep when she's focusing hard or taking something seriously.

"What's stopping us from just shooting through it?"

"Arcane glyphs and text are generally scribed in special ink and paper that repairs itself over time. Any mark that you make on that book that doesn't involve fire, acid, holy water, or cold iron is gonna repair over time." Another string of eldritch lightning bolts zipped past the liftback. I swerved to avoid the next barrage of death rays. When I stopped swerving, I continued. "Besides, I would never let you discharge a firearm inside my car."

Noah thought some more. "What about silver?"

"The book's not a vampire."

"Gold?"

"The book's also not a dragon."

"Iron."

"Possibly, but the book is also not a faerie. The substance used to scratch the book would have to have its arcane circuitry activated before any damage could be done." I swerved as a bolt of fiery magic impacted the side of the road and then merged back into the right lane.

"Then why don't we just try to throw the book into one of his lightning bolts?"

"Wizards are not that reckless. Most of the time."

"What about dropping it into a lake? Would flat freshwater be enough to destroy it?"

"Maybe if the lake had been blessed by the Pope. Unless..."

Every so often, Noah will ask a question or state a fact that will excite the creative energy in my head. This makes her invaluable to me. Whenever she's spit-firing random questions, she is the most intelligent woman I may ever know personally. "Noah, you're a genius."

She didn't have time to respond before I jolted out into the left lane in front of a muscle car. There was maybe forty feet between us and the angry death mage, so I had to act fast and precisely. "Noah, I need you to take my phone and remove the battery."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you need your phone battery for?"

"Lithium-ion batteries create a small explosion when water is introduced to them. I need you to take my phone's battery, place it onto the grimoire, pour water onto the battery, then wait five seconds before throwing the book out the window."

I was never certain how, but just as we were getting to the destruction of this magic treatise, a tire blew. Maybe it was our necromancer, maybe it was my severe powers with misfortune, but whatever the case we lost a tire. I managed to pull the car into the median and out of the road. We swerved for a time before the car actually stopped moving. Now we had nowhere else to go.

Alright, I thought to myself, *time for a little improvisation.*

I took my phone and the grimoire, quickly unhooked the battery, and slipped it into the fold of the pages. "Noah, stay in the car. He wants me, not you."

"Don't you dare. We're a team now. We do this together."

"You're right. But I don't put partners in danger."

"That isn't your call to make, Kanzaki."

I chewed on her response in my head for a moment before the necromancer found us and called out to me from the highway median. "Come and face me, Mage Slayer!"

I turned to Noah. "Sorry, I've got to take this call."

I stepped out of the car with the bottle of water in my hand and the book under my arm. He was a young man with a thick goatee trimmed to retain a sharp appearance. I mean that his goatee looked like spears, not that he looked good with it on. If anything, it only enhanced how evil and punchable his face was. His cowl was drawn up over his head, but his eyes glowed green with the sweeping necromantic energies bubbling in his subjects around him. His friends were all dead—well, undead, technically. Mostly skeletons, with their ribcages swollen with a net of mystic energy twisting and burning inside of them, their spines and skulls bursting and flowing with the very definition of black magic. It was unsettling to look directly into their eyes, which were just orbs of green necromantic energy rolling around in their dry and dusty eye sockets.

The death wizard hopped off his undead horse. I wanted to ask him where he had raised it from, but I was too focused. "Now, if you would be so kind as to return my grimoire to me."

I kept a smile on my face the entire time. "Sure thing."

I set the book onto the ground as my off hand unscrewed the cap to the water bottle. Before I took a step away, I poured a little water onto the battery. I think he saw me do that, because he laughed and said, "A bottle of water? And here I was told the great investigator Evan Kanzaki had the world's greatest mind of mystic knowledge."

He said my name wrong, but I never corrected him. "You'd be surprised."

I jumped back just as the lithium started cooking. When lithium is graced with the soft, caressing touch of water, or is otherwise submerged in it, it sparks a chemical reaction that causes a little lick of fire to start. I didn't pour too much, just enough to chemically manufacture a small, contained explosion. Enough of an explosion to spark a fire that was big enough to catch the other pages aflame. It all worked perfectly. A happy little grimoire fire.

The necromancer watched in expressive horror as his grimoire—his mystic phone book—went up in flames, burning every spell inside to ash, and undoing whatever evil plot he may have been breeding. No more phone calls for him. The skeletons and zombified undead bodies that stood around him started to wither away, the necromantic energies keeping them reanimated dispersing rapidly, their bones becoming cinders, as the magic holding them together burned up whatever was reanimating them. Suddenly, the death wizard was by himself in the highway median, staring down at the ashes of his grimoire, the ashes of his army, and the gun barrel of his latest and greatest enemy.

I offered him no preamble to his demise. I have an official (maybe best to call it unofficial) license to slay mages, compliments of the High Arcane Council, the very most official (yet unofficial) government of archmages and high wizards. I holstered my revolver, turned back to the liftback, and slipped back into the driver's seat. I found Noah watching silently in the front passenger seat.

"You okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "I didn't think it would work. The lithium battery thing, I mean."

I nodded knowingly. "Me neither."

She glanced at me in disbelief mixed with disbelief.

I cocked a half smile and said, "I'll need to borrow you phone. I've gotta make a call to the Boss Woman about this mess."

"Fine." She tossed her cell over to me.

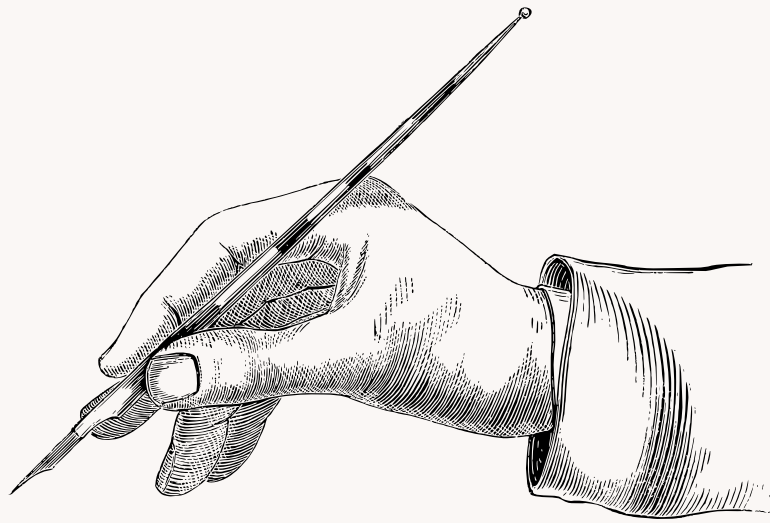
I palmed it and turned back to her. "Wanna grab something at Dino's?"

Noah looked to the ceiling, juggling the thought around in her head. "Only if you pay."

I scoffed. "When are you going to start buying your own food?"

"When you stop being so reckless."

Instead of arguing like a rational person, I accepted the decent description of my most enduring habits and said, "Fine. Now come on, we've got to change a tire first."



Essays



Whitman: Transcendentalism Without Unitarianism

by Tarah Elliott

When intellectualism has run its course, and men have grown tired of reason and rationality, they begin to return to their emotions and put off the mind to favor the heart. In the beginning of the 1800s, in New England, this shift is best characterized by the interactions between the Unitarians, a sect of Christianity popular at that time and in that area that emphasized finding answers through reason and rationalism, and the Transcendentalists, a group of people who wanted to find their own answers—but without the rationalism. Strangely, the majority of these Transcendentalists were once Unitarians. It can easily be said that the strongest influence on the majority of Transcendentalists was their roots in Unitarianism. However, there was one prominent Transcendentalist of the time that does not exemplify this. Whitman's poems, such as "Song of Myself" and "To Thee, Old Cause," contain anti-religious themes more radical than the general mistrust of organized religion and science seen in other Transcendental works. Walt Whitman's lack of Unitarian background sets him apart from other prominent Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. For example, Lawrence Buell records in "Unitarian Aesthetics and Emerson's Poet-Priest" that Ralph Waldo Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian minister before dropping out to pursue Transcendentalism, and he inspired other ministers and congregants to do the same (Buell 1). But Walt Whitman was raised mostly Deist; though an argument could be made for a small Quaker influence. His disconnect from the Unitarianism that plagues other Transcendentalists, especially the forerunners of the movement, made him far more innovative, and his writings truly embodied the ideals for which other Transcendentalists' works strived.

There were two main beliefs that set Unitarianism apart from other denominations; that it was non-trinitarian, and that it was anti-divinity-of-Christ. Thomas Bremer, in his description of Unitarianism in *Formed From This Soil: An Introduction to the Diverse History of Religion in America*, says "Unitarian theology...included a critique of the traditional Christian theology of the Trinity" (Bremer 235). That is, because they believed in Jesus as a moral teacher who did not perform miracles and was not God, therefore all nuances and questions of the exact nature of the Trinity could be discarded for a view of unity. Unitarians saw themselves as too reasonable to believe in miracles or anything that could not be explained by science. They lauded the scientific method, specifically its focus on determining facts through that which is observed by the senses.

In the 1830s, Transcendentalism originated out of a debate between the "New Lights," who wanted religion to be more of an emotional experience, and the "Old Lights," who thought reason was far more important. It was this obsession with reason that drove away the men who would become the forerunners of the Transcendentalist movement. Bremer describes this new movement as "a religious, philosophical, and aesthetic movement emphasizing the transcendent nature of the human soul" (Bremer 236). Transcendentalists rejected the Unitarian belief that all that could be known was known through the senses, and instead believed that everyone had some innate knowledge about themselves and the world around them that 'transcended' what they can know from their senses. This was sometimes referred to as the "Oversoul," a term that Ralph Waldo Emerson popularized.

While this is the main belief of Transcendentalism, there is more to it than just a rejection of Unitarianism. It was the beginning, but Transcendentalism grew beyond Unitarianism. Transcendentalists believe that their transcendental knowledge comes through intuition or imagination, not the senses and definitely not logic. The natural conclusion of this assumption is that people are their own authority on morality and the state of the world. Transcendentalists also believed that giving up the "world of facts" and even common sense would enhance people's lives by elevating the soul. It would help people slough off their troubles and struggles and rise to true understanding of freedom. Another main tenet of Transcendentalism was the belief in equality of all.

Everyone, and everything, has a soul (and transcendent knowledge) and is therefore equally priceless because a soul is priceless.

But Transcendentalism could not completely throw off the chains of Unitarianism. For all their supposed intellectual differences, Transcendentalism and Unitarianism shared a lot of the same members. Phillip Gura records in his book *American Transcendentalism: A History*, "Despite its attempts to separate itself from Unitarianism, Transcendentalist meetings were constantly attended by practicing unitarians, notably, the great unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing, as well as James Walker, editor of the *Christian Examiner*" (Gura 70). Unitarians enjoyed the refreshing pace of Transcendentalism from time to time. And the Transcendentalists loved debating those high-standing Unitarians in their weekly meetings. In his essay "The Oversoul", Emerson recorded "And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were" (Emerson 2). The Transcendentalists still employed reason quite often as a result of their failure to separate from the Unitarians. As Thomas Bremer records, Transcendentalism was "Dominated by Unitarians, or, like Emerson, ex-Unitarians" (Bremer 236). Through the Transcendental Club meetings, the two theologies remained close.

Doctrinally, the two movements never really moved far apart. In "The North American Review" Francis Underwood claimed that "nearly every noted poet, historian, scholar, and statesman in New England and in the North has been indebted to the influence of Channing [a prominent Unitarian pastor] and his associates" (Underwood 482). Transcendentalists certainly emphasized their own kind of unity; instead of the unity of the trinity, they focused on the supposed unity of all the world, a unity that could be sensed within. Strangely, despite their rejection of the authority of science, the Transcendentalists also did not believe in the divinity of Jesus or the credibility of his miracles. Besides the two's fierce debate over the what and how and why of reasoning, they remained surprisingly close and contained many of the same doctrines and members.

Whitman, however, had no religious background when he came into Transcendentalism, and he never attended the Transcendental Club meetings that kept Transcendentalism so close to Unitarianism. David Kuebrich records in his commentary "Religion" that "Whitman never joined a church, and there is no evidence that he ever subscribed to a Christian world view" (Kuebrich 2). It might be because of this that Whitman managed to embody the ideals of Transcendentalism, specifically in the matter of searching out the new instead of just repeating the old. The most obvious demonstration of this is his use of free verse, a type of poem that lacks organized rhythm and rhyme. In the Transcendental Club, Transcendentalism never managed to move past its religious origins. Whitman, however, was not raised religious, and remained Deist his whole life. Whitman did not come into Transcendentalism through Unitarianism like the other major Transcendental writers, and that allows him to perfect the Transcendental ideal of individuality.

It is clear from his works that Whitman was a Transcendentalist, despite pedantic opposition. Some, like Roger Asselineau, made the argument that Walt Whitman cannot be considered a Transcendentalist. He writes, "Properly speaking, for geographical and social reasons, Walt Whitman was not a transcendentalist, since transcendentalism was a New England phenomenon affecting American scholars and clergymen's relatives" (Asselineau 1). Since, as this essay has previously established, Transcendentalism sprung nearly fully-formed from the New Light Unitarians, it becomes slightly harder to make the argument that Whitman is a Transcendentalist, because he was not Unitarian, or even really religious. But that is a pedantic argument; Whitman's work contained much Transcendentalism. Asselineau himself acknowledged this when he said "the fact remains that there are striking similarities between the main themes of *Leaves of Grass* and the basic tenets of New England transcendentalism" (Asselineau 1). Whitman's works can prove his Transcendentalism where his history lacks. Richard Gummere also tried to separate Whitman from Transcendentalism by saying he was too unique to be tied down by such a label. His essay "Walt Whitman and His Reaction to the Classics" compares Whitman to Homer with the claim that both are revolutionary. Whitman is different than his

Transcendentalist peers. But instead of claiming that Whitman is drawing inspiration from Homer (something Whitman himself disputed, claiming he had never read him) the difference from the other Transcendentalists can more clearly be seen as a matter of his lack of Unitarian background, not that he is not a Transcendentalist. Whitman himself said "I am never pleased with such comparisons," (Gummere 1) and referred to himself as a Transcendentalist. If Whitman considered himself a Transcendentalist, why shouldn't readers today?

The Transcendentalist themes can easily be seen with an examination of perhaps the most famous work in *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself." Riu Liu records in "Whitman's Transcendentalism: An Analysis of 'Song of Myself' by Comparing with Emersonian Thought" that "Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (1855) is riddled with transcendentalist imageries echoing Emerson's emphasis on the power of nature and individuality" (Liu 1). The first section of the poem contains quintessential themes and ideas of Transcendentalism. Just the opening lines "I celebrate myself, and sing myself/And what I assume you shall assume/For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," (Whitman 52) hit two of the top three—the celebration of individuality and the unity of all mankind. And the last major theme of Transcendentalist writings, the connection to nature, appears in the majority of Whitman's earlier works, specifically "Song of Myself" sections 1 and 52. In the first poem he describes, "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air" (52), showing his belief in his body's connection to nature. In section 52, he records "The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering/I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable" (Whitman 104). Whitman compares himself to a piece of nature, the hawk, in that neither of them can be defined or predicted by reason. This rejection of reason is central to Transcendentalist philosophy, but even more telling is his comparison to, and thus, claim of equality with, an animal.

But there are differences between Whitman's Transcendentalist ideas and other common themes of Transcendentalism—differences caused by not having come into Transcendentalism from Unitarianism. In "Song of Myself," we see the main difference between Whitman and Emerson. Riu Liu

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This claim is dramatically more antithetical to Christianity than the traditional Transcendentalist claim of divinity of the soul. The majority of denominations can agree on the immortality of the soul, if nothing else, and all that Emerson said about the body was closely tied to his thoughts on the soul, such that he really only mentioned the body in that it was a vessel for the soul. As recorded in John Michael Corrigan's *The Metempsychotic Mind: Emerson and Consciousness*, Emerson said "The soul is an emanation of the Divinity...It comes from without into the human body, as into a momentary abode. It goes out of it anew...it passes into other habitations for the soul is immortal" (Corrigan 6). This is also a claim of reincarnation that is not theologically aligned with Christianity, but it is focusing on the soul. Whitman's bold claim shows his deviation from common Transcendentalism into uncharted territory. It also shows how he truly threw off the set ways of thinking, unlike so many of his peers who were educated by and still surrounded by Unitarians.

The beginning of this poem is also a slap in the face to Unitarianism. It begins with a child asking a question, and the speaker of the poem, supposedly an adult with education, confesses to the readers that he knows nothing more than the child. Whitman seems to be saying that no one can reason anything out any more than a child could; and the Unitarians of the time focused on the idea that everything had an explanation. This part of the poem is quite in line with other Transcendentalists, but in a markedly different way. In chapter five of Emerson's *Nature*, he defines reason so:

Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul, he calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason. That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER. (Emerson 28)

From this we can see the major differences. Emerson is essentially defining reason as the things our senses can perceive from nature, and connecting this back to Christianity. Whitman is denying reason altogether!

In another of Whitman's poems, "To Thee, Old Cause," beyond simple rejection of Christianity stirs bitter resentment. Margaret H. Dugar records in her criticism of the piece that the specific term, "good old cause," was commonly used at the time to refer to the Puritan movement to gain more power in Parliament (Dugar 1). The poem begins by appearing to laude the "good old cause," before swiftly turning to berate it as the cause of many wars and fanatical actions. Whitman records "I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be really fought, for thee" (Whitman 19). He denounces Christian radicalism as the cause of *all* war when he says "Around the idea of thee the war revolving" (19). His clear anger at Christianity is a remarkable departure from his Transcendentalist peers' involvement with Unitarianism and frequent writings about Christianity.

Whitman was, without a doubt, a Transcendentalist, in everything from his eschewing of rationality to his exaltation of nature. But for a group that lauded finding their own things to say instead of just repeating the wisdom of others, none but Whitman achieved it to such a level. The majority of Transcendentalists, especially those who regularly attended the Transcendental Club, were reluctant to really cast off the old, especially many of the things they had learned while attending Unitarian Seminary. For Whitman, that was never a problem.

Whitman's unique form of Transcendentalism is undoubtedly a result of his disconnect from his formerly-Unitarian peers, and his distaste for Christianity overall. He forged his own path. It is obvious, between Emerson, who wrote essays, and Whitman, who wrote poems, who was truly throwing off rationalism. In "Walt Whitman: A Dialogue," George Santanya describes him as "the voice of nature crying in the wilderness of convention" (Santanya 4). Whitman's work stands out because of his ability to break the religious bonds constraining Transcendentalists.

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Antigone: A Woman's Role in Moral and Political Revolution

by Anna Hooker

Antigone, by Sophocles, is one example of innately powerful literature; it was transformative when it was written, and it remains so today. Composed in the Golden Age of Classical Greece, the play centers on Antigone, a woman so devoted to her family and the authority of the gods that she acts in disobedience to the polis, meeting her end and thereby cementing her in the literary genre as a tragic hero. Interpretations of the play vary, some claiming that it was intended solely as political commentary firing back at events of the time; others assert that it is a testament to something more significant—a morality that the playwright seems to suggest has been lost. In actuality, the play bears both political and moral significance. Antigone is one of Sophocles' most prominent works; the playwright builds upon Antigone's womanly characteristics and her isolationist nature, using them both to highlight her actions and shield himself from criticism. He creates through her a tale of unwavering resolve that would have invited his Classical viewers to question the balance of politics and morality in their society.

Sophocles was a model citizen of Classical Athens and a renowned playwright with a distinct style of writing. Prior to his sixty-year career in tragic drama, Sophocles served as a citizen-soldier and held political office in Athens (Martin 168). Many allege that it is because of his experiences as a soldier and politician that he wrote Antigone. Nevertheless, Sophocles was renowned. He competed nearly thirty times in the dramatic festival, never finishing with less than second place (Martin 171). Sophocles was incredibly popular, particularly for his works on heroism. He is considered "the playwright of heroism," his Antigone being "the first female character in drama to be a hero in the full sense of the word" (McDonald 46). Sophoclean heroism is distinct.

Marianne McDonald phrases this distinction best in her academic journal when she claims, "...it is difficult to feel empathy toward a Sophoclean hero, who is both alienated and alienating, but one has to admire the single-minded pursuit of goals which so often entail self-destruction along with the destruction of others" (46). Although bleak, this style of heroism makes Sophocles' works even more riveting—particularly in his *Antigone*. As McDonald claimed, *Antigone*'s resolve leads her to isolation and, eventually, her destruction. Nevertheless, it is admirable how Sophoclean characters so fervently pursue their goals.

Sophocles was writing during the Golden Age of Greece; while it was a time of prosperity, it was also a time of turmoil that may have been reflected in his work. *Antigone* is believed to have been produced for the first time in 441 BC (Martin 159). During this time, Classical Athens was experiencing an age of great prosperity. In his history of Ancient Greece, Thomas R. Martin writes, "The result was a mix of innovation and continuity that created tensions that sometimes proved productive and sometimes detrimental" (173). Athens experienced numerous innovations during this period; however, some aspects of life remained stagnant, which created tension. This tension was reflected in tragic drama. Martin unveils, "Tragic drama developed as a publicly supported art form performed before mass audiences, which explored troubling ethical issues relevant both to the life of individuals and of the community" (158). *Antigone*, then, was likely written as commentary on ethical issues prevalent in Classical Athenian life. Just what issues were Sophocles bringing to light? One theory is that Sophocles wrote *Antigone* as an allusion to Pericles. In his article titled "Sophocles, Pericles, and Creon," C.G. Thomas writes, "...Sophocles was actively engaged in the political life of his city even if he were regarded as little more than a 'useful figure-head' by Pericles. From *Antigone*...we can infer that he disapproved of Periclean politics" (121). Thomas proposes that in *Antigone*, Sophocles sheds a negative light on Periclean policies. His use of the name Creon, after all, would have invoked some conflicting images in the minds of his audience. On the one hand, another Creon of old—a real figure in Athenian history—had been the first annual archon when decennial archonship was replaced by an annual system (Thomas 122).

Thus, he had been the first ruler limited by tenure of office. On the other hand, Sophocles' Creon "called to mind a king with sole authority in his state" (Thomas 122). The two figures represent either limited authority or absolute control over the state. Thomas theorizes, "...Sophocles' audience was led to consider...the nature of leadership as exercised by Pericles; and the question...must have been, 'Which Creon does Pericles emulate?'" (122). In other words, Sophocles may have been inviting his audience to consider the nature of Pericles' rule. If, indeed, he was using Antigone to question the authority of those in power over the polis, it would have put him in a dangerous position.

Sophocles capitalizes on Antigone's womanly nature, creating a character who embraces her femininity and acts; however, he does not do this in a feminist way. William Robert explains in his journal on "Antigone's Nature," "Antigone speaks and acts in the polis as a sister, and therefore as a woman, who does not renounce her allegiance to the oikos, the female domain of blood relations" (414). Antigone is spurred by her obligation to her family. Readers may conclude because of this that the playwright was ahead of his time: he makes a woman his hero and portrays her as being interruptive in the political sphere, a male-dominated realm. To understand the full significance of this, one must first understand the historical role of women in Classical Athens. In his history of Ancient Greece, Thomas R. Martin writes, "Greek drama sometimes emphasized the areas in which Athenian women most obviously and publicly contributed to the polis: by acting as priestesses, by bearing and raising legitimate children to be future citizens of the city-state, and by serving as managers of their household's property" (172). Women were seen as beholden to the home and their children. David Pritchard, in his journal, explains more clearly, "In popular culture and social practice it was the norm for the wives and daughters of citizens to have no part in either politics or the secular affairs of Athenian democracy" (177). Women had no part in politics; their sole purpose, if anything, seemed to be for marriage and childbearing. Pritchard explains further, "At the onset of menstruation, which seems to have occurred around fourteen years of age, a girl would be married" (179). In the play, Antigone laments over dying unwed. Her tomb is referred to as her bridal chamber (Sophocles 805). Later, the messenger to Creon says,

"Then, still conscious, [Haemon] pulled the girl into the curve / Of his sagging embrace...Then he was dead. His body lay with hers; / They'd brought their marriage off at last in the house / of Death" (Sophocles 1237-1242). Still here, Antigone is referred to as Haemon's bride in death. Is Sophocles, then, a feminist advocate? Hardly. Antigone is markedly different as a character, but she is also markedly feminine in her ways.

Sophocles' portrayal of Antigone is certainly unique from the rest of her gender; he uses Ismene, Antigone's sister in the play, as her foil. In lines 61-68 of the play, Ismene asserts, "We have to keep this fact in mind: / We are women and we do not fight with men. We're subject to them because they're stronger, / And we must obey this order...And I'll obey the men in charge. My mind / Will never aim too high, too far" (Sophocles). Here, Ismene insinuates that her gender is a weakness. She claims that they are only women, and as such, they should not quarrel with men—inadvertently, the law. Antigone responds, "...I wouldn't even let / You help me if you had a change of heart. / Go on and be the way you choose to be..." (Sophocles 69-71). Antigone is repulsed by her sister's reasoning. In contrasting her with her sister, who would be considered a traditional Greek woman, Sophocles makes Antigone's actions stand out even more. She is a woman with feminine motivations, but she is different from traditional women.

While he uses it to make her stand out, Sophocles also uses Antigone's femininity to ground her. When confronted by Antigone's disobedience, Creon claims, "And there must be no surrender to a woman. / No! If we fall, better a man should take us down. / Never say that a woman bested us!" (Sophocles 678-680). Here, Creon seems more upset by the fact that Antigone is a woman disobeying him. This idea would have reverberated in the minds of Sophocles' mostly male audience. While he is the most prominent, Creon is not the only character that dismisses Antigone because of her femininity. The Chorus does as well. In lines 471-472, it is written, "Now we see this girl's as wild by birth as her father. / She has no idea how to bow her head to trouble" (Sophocles). Here, the Chorus characterizes Antigone as a wild maiden by birth with a stubborn nature. Could it be that this characterization of Antigone provides Sophocles with security should his message be ill-received?

Antigone would have been striking to Sophocles' Classical audience because of her boldness and rebellion against authority. Nevertheless, her status as a woman would have obscured her actions in the political sphere.

Although it is key, Antigone's femininity is not the only thing that sets her apart as a tragic heroine; it is also her isolationist nature. It is important to note that while the name most associated with Antigone is Sophocles, the legend predates him. The conflict of Antigone was originally portrayed by Aeschylus in his *Seven Against Thebes*. Sophocles simply picked up where Aeschylus left off. However, there are some key differences between the two portrayals. In the final lines of *Seven Against Thebes*, Antigone argues with the herald, claiming, "I will bury him. Put an end to your big talk" (Aeschylus 1057). She is resolved to bury her brother. The Chorus later affirms her decision, saying, "We, at all events, will go and / bury him with her, following the funeral procession. For this grief is shared by all our race..." (Aeschylus 1074-75). This is significant because in Aeschylus's portrayal of events Antigone is joined by the Chorus, who claims their race is unified by grief at Creon's decree. This is vastly different from what happens in Sophocles' version of the story. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the Chorus says, "You have one kind of reverence. / But a man whose job it is to rule / Will never let you trample on his power. / You chose anger, and anger destroyed you" (872-875). This set of lines presents an entirely different tone. Here, the Chorus insinuates that Antigone's fate is the result of her actions; they do not offer to join her in burying her brother but claim the law must prevail. Thus, Antigone acts in isolation—a theme that is prominent throughout the rest of the play.

Antigone's isolation is no mere tragic ploy; on Sophocles' end, it is a necessary part of highlighting the significance of her actions—and protecting himself. In her journal entitled "*Antigone's Disobedience*," Susan Wiltshire claims that people engaged in civil disobedience may experience solitude during the act itself but usually feel solidarity with other individuals (30). However, Antigone does not experience any solidarity. Instead, her actions increasingly sever her relationship with others and lead to her being completely alone at the time of her death (Wiltshire 30).

Wiltshire's conclusion is that Antigone is no mere civil activist, and while the play may be of some political significance, that is not its main goal. Instead, Sophocles uses her isolation to highlight her determination to do what she deems is right—even as this results in her being more and more secluded. Charles Paul Segul communicates a similar idea in his journal when he writes, "She can assert what she is only by staking her entire being, her life. It is by this extreme defense of her beliefs that she rises to heroic and deeply tragic stature; and, simultaneously, by the same gesture she makes herself incomprehensible to the other actors, Creon, Ismene, the chorus" (47-48). Segul sheds further light on this topic of isolation by claiming that Antigone's acting alone is the only way she can validate what she believes. Susan Wiltshire wraps up this idea beautifully in her journal when she says, "...we see in [Antigone] a haunting expression of a total integrity and freedom and of the importance for our human history of those rare moments in which one's beliefs are pursued without compromise to their ultimate conclusion" (34). Antigone's tale is one of great tragedy, yet it also serves as a reminder of the importance of pursuing what one believes in—a message that Sophocles no doubt intended. Her isolation, then, serves a dual purpose. Not only does it validate the moral message she communicates, but—as with her gender—it provides Sophocles with some security should his message come across as conflicting. Antigone was a woman, and she acted alone.

Antigone is a powerful character in that she is willing to fight for what she believes in with little regard to the consequences—but what is it, exactly, that she is fighting for? Many modern readers look at Antigone and critique the heroine, claiming she is too stubborn. Why is she willing to put her life on the line just to ensure that her brother, an enemy of the city, is granted proper burial rites? To understand the full nature of this conflict, one must return to history and women's roles in Classical Athenian society. Antigone's resolve to bury her brother and defy Creon's edict may seem hard to comprehend—but in the context of what was expected of Athenian women, it makes sense. David M. Pritchard sheds light on this topic in his journal "The Position of Attic Women in Democratic Times." Women had a key role when it came to the dead and orchestrating their burial rites:

The performance of services and rituals for the dead was another important aspect of women's religious activities. The classical Athenians believed that the burial of the dead was a common custom of the Greeks which was sanctioned by the gods...The Athenians took a dim view of anyone who failed to pay these honours to the dead...Athenians relied on women to carry out these customary honours. Indeed, the mothers, sisters, and daughters of the dead were thought to be deeply committed to ensuring their burial and the visiting of their graves. (Pritchard 191)

Antigone's determination to bury her brother, then, does not seem so outlandish. Women were responsible for carrying out honors for the dead. Creon's edict also goes against the basic Athenian belief of paying honors to the dead—something sanctioned by the gods. This transitions readers into the higher level of conflict in the play. In fighting to bury her brother, Antigone is really fighting for something much larger—the precedence of divine law over human law, or that of the polis. Efimia D. Karakantza summarizes this idea precisely in her journal on polis anatomy when she writes, "...we understand Creon, as the leader of Thebes, represents political power and human laws, whereas Antigone's position is based on the eternal divine laws...on the one hand, the decree of the political leader must be respected or there is danger of anarchy in the polis, on the other, the gods of the underworld ordain that all dead should be buried" (38). Creon is the political leader of the polis; therefore, his decree ought to be obeyed. Antigone, on the other hand, sees that his decree violates not only morality, but the laws of the gods, and chooses to adhere to that law. Which character is more in the right? What are the flaws in both characters' ideas? Sophocles uses Antigone to ask his audience some difficult questions with even more difficult answers in terms of politics and morality in their society.

After decades of being investigated, Sophocles' purpose in writing *Antigone* remains debated. Although researchers tend to lean on different sides of the spectrum regarding whether it was written with political or moral intentions, it was likely written with a blend of both. Certainly, *Antigone* has political ramifications.

The entirety of the play denotes a power struggle between the divine, the polis, and the individual. Members of Sophocles' Classical Athenian audience would have been invited to reconsider the leaders of the polis and whether divine law warranted disobedience to human law. Moreover, the play communicates a lesson in morality—although there are some who argue that certain acts on Antigone's part belay the possibility. The most cited instance is in lines 905-907 of the play where Antigone delivers an oration on her reasoning for burying Polyneices, "I would not do it for a child, were I a mother, / Not for a husband either. Let them lie, putrefied, dead; / I would not defy the city at such cost for their sake" (Sophocles). Certainly, taken out of context, this statement made by Antigone seems insensitive. Although she stands for loyalty to the family, she gives greater credence to her brother than she would her own husband and child. However, a past account of this same situation reveals it is not so insensitive as modern readers may think. In Herodotus' Histories, he records an event where a woman delivers a similar response regarding her brother:

Darius was astonished... 'Woman, the king would know for what reason you pass over your husband and your children and choose rather to save the life of your brother.' 'O king,' she answered, 'another husband I may get...and other children...but my father and mother are dead, and so I can by no means get another brother...' Darius was pleased, and thought the reason good; he delivered to the woman him for whose life she had asked... (Herodotus)

Herodotus was not likely present at the time this woman delivered her oration to King Darius; however, his writing reflects Greek attitudes and values of the time. The woman begs for the life of her brother over her husband and children, claiming they may be replaced; she cannot, however, gain another brother. The king is pleased with her reasoning and delivers him to her. Certainly, this concept is difficult for modern readers to grasp, but it does not negate the fact that Antigone communicates a powerful moral message. Not only does she demonstrate the beauty of pursuing what one believes in, but her story reveals that human beings are not without fault. Creon lost everything—his son, his wife, and his respect as a leader—because he refused to consider that he was in the wrong.

Even Antigone herself possessed fault. She was narrow-minded in her own way, refusing to think about how her actions might impact others. Both she and Creon suffered from extreme pride, and both characters were met with tragedy. Sophocles reveals the idea that real strength lies in recognizing one's faults before it is too late.

In conclusion, *Antigone*, by Sophocles, is an innately powerful piece of literature. Sophocles, using his own distinctive writing style, created a tale in which viewers are invited to critique their surroundings. There are many theories surrounding the play and its purpose. Some suggest that it provided commentary on Pericles' level of authority in the polis and whether he may have resembled Creon. If so, Sophocles' use of *Antigone* would have likely shielded him from any harsh repercussions. While he portrays her as a bold heroine who embraces her nature, he uses that same nature to undermine her claims. Certainly, she presents revolutionary moral and political ideals, but she is a woman speaking in a male-dominated sphere—what real harm can she do? Furthermore, Sophocles has her act in isolation. This distinction serves a dual purpose: it heightens her actions, but it also provides the playwright with a deeper safeguard. She was an unconventional woman, and she acted alone. Regardless of the playwright's true intentions, *Antigone* is a strong character who illustrates the power of pursuing what one believes in to the end. She is a reminder that courage, well placed, can be a light in the darkest of nights.

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Thank You!

