

A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 7

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Cover Image – ‘Seaside’ by L. M. Grant

Self-identifying as a neurodivergent, two-spirit, elder storyteller and contrarian deeply rooted in the lore and roar that's become Portlandia of The Left Coast, they attribute success and survival (if not salvation) to superlative supports, mindfulness practice, and daily creative expression in words, sounds, and images.

Their art is currently represented by [SIY Gallery of San Francisco](#), CA. USA

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Foreword**Page 5****Fourth of July by L.M. Camiolo****Page 7***An uncanny moment surrounding death*

L.M. Camiolo is a writer and editor from Philadelphia whose interests include horror, hauntology, and antiquing for oddities. She is co-founder of Impostor, a poetry journal. You can find more of her work at lmcamiolo.wordpress.com, or connect on Instagram [@shoresofpluto](https://www.instagram.com/shoresofpluto).

They by Augustine Okam**Page 8***The suppression of love*

Augustine Okam lives in Abakaliki, one of the hot parts of Southeastern Nigeria. He is currently in his third year in Medical school. He comes from a slightly strict Christian family. He loves love. He hopes to spend most of his life writing sad heartbreaking stories that are both beautiful and disturbing.

Tidbits From A Not Person by Sara Watkins**Page 10***When physical disability and mental illness overlap, you get weird*

Sara Watkins (she/her) is an editor, author, UCTD-haver, and editor-in-chief of [Spoonie Press](http://SpooniePress.com), which is devoted to publishing work by chronically ill, disabled, and neurodivergent creators. Her writing explores themes of disability and autonomy using wry surrealism and general weirdness to champion the idea that, despite our differences, we are not alone. She is the winner of the 2022 MASKS Literary Magazine Story Award. Recent publications include work in Wordgathering, Vast Chasm, and Bitchin' Kitsch. Contact: www.sarawatkins.net or @saranadebooks on [Twitter](https://www.twitter.com/saranadebooks) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/saranadebooks).

Burnt Orange by Busayo Akinmoju**Page 11***A strange and oppressive moment in time*

Busayo Akinmoju is a writer and a student. Her work has been published in Popula, the Kalahari review, the Republic among others. She likes to read, and to relax on long walks. You can find more of her work here on [her website](http://herwebsite.com)

In Labour by Sofia Tantonio

Page 19

An ancient Huichol birthing ritual brings more pain than expected

Sofia Tantonio is a writer and curator based in Indonesia whose works have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of literary magazines, such as Samjoko, Neuro Magazine and Counter-Narratives. She also writes for Glides, the magazine of her university's English department. Sofia can be found on Instagram [@sofias.writing](#) and her blog sofiatantonio.wordpress.com.

Green Things On Concrete by Em Harriett

Page 22

You journey east to the remains of a city, finding peace with yourself.

Em (she/they) is a queer agender author and illustrator from New England. She enjoys writing speculative fiction when she isn't knitting or making another cup of tea. You can find Em on twitter [@em_harriett](#) or at emharriett.com

Foreword -

This issue, the forest's voices are preoccupied with death. A strange coincidence that all the stories involve it somehow or other.

Death is a universal human experience with the potential to bring us together. We all die. We all lose people we love. And indeed, in some cultures, death is seen as a transition, a passing through, a path to somewhere else, a change in being. The person is gone but not completely. They exist, just in a way we cannot conceive. Other cultures, though, especially western culture, treat death as something to be feared. We avoid acknowledging it lest it comes for us in the night with its sharpened scythe and flowing black garments. Don't tempt fate. Don't court death. Yet we also have a strange fascination with it. True crime documentaries reveal the gruesome details of the victim's final moments. Horror films glorify and explore the macabre. Crime is one of the most popular genres for novels and TV shows. We love to look at death, read about it, and write about it, but when it comes to deaths close to us, we hide and shrink in denial.

I've always found this strange. Death can be celebratory because it is a reflection of a person's life. We should celebrate the person who has departed, be glad they existed despite the billion odds against it. We forget the odds of life and how they are stacked against us; we shouldn't, by all logic, exist. Yet here we are, living, breathing and dying. Ask a physicist about death, and they will tell you energy and matter do not stop. We keep going, just not in the way we were.

Of course, death is happening all the time, all around us, and much of it is utterly needless. Bombs going off, lunatics with guns, murder, suicide, addiction, homelessness – the list goes on and on. This kind of death makes us furious; we shake our fists at the sky and those who can prevent it. This kind of death should not be celebrated but learnt from and

given meaning. The world at the moment is a terrifying place. We are on the brink and past the brink of so much death. War, famine, conquest and death, all the horsemen and their beasts seem to have set up shop around the globe and are busier than ever. This scares us, making death terrifying and unnatural to us. So, in many ways, it's not surprising at all that death is on our minds.

It certainly is on our writers' minds, each of their stories touched by themes of death. Missing those who are absent, wishing you'd had more of a grasp of what they meant to you – 'lover' too reductive, 'friend' not nearly large enough to hold the complexities of a soul-deep bond. A loss so profound it makes even the most excruciating pain you've ever felt seem like a feather kissing your skin. Running from death in the past, knowing there is no escape as you sense it in the future. Walking in and out of a dream – what is real, what isn't – as death looms at the edges. A post-apocalyptic landscape where death and a dog are your only companions. Your own body disappears on you, disintegrating around you. Even our cover has a desolate feel, a searching question, and a lonely road to an unknown destination.

As you step into the forest this issue, please be reminded that even though death comes to us all – *death comes to us all* – we are in this life together. Grief, sadness, loss and aching absences are things we all have in common. So reach out, take a hand and follow a soft, feathered wing to the centre of our forest; we will be waiting there with outstretched arms, even as the end comes...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Fourth of July

by L.M. Camiolo

Content Warnings: Death, insects.

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

An older boy crushes a firefly against a tree, smears still-glowing segments across rough bark. It makes her deeply sad and suddenly afraid, as if he's part of larger darkness she's yet to see. Across the yard, adults scrape burgers from the grill—a perfect excuse to flee. Mid-run across the grass, she inhales a gnat, gags and *coughs* as it halts her. It sticks in her throat, no matter what she does. She imagines it stuck there forever, feels panic clouding as she sprints to the cooler, seeking Sprite to wash it down. Behind her, death still glows. Radiant.

They

by Augustine Okam

Content Warnings: Loss.

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

They ask me what we are, and I am indecisive about my answer. Brothers? Friends? Soulmates? Two flowers caught in a vase? Bromance?

‘I don’t know,’ I say because I don’t know. Because I know you too closely, too intimately, too much soul-linking that I never bothered to put a name to it. Because it is hard to know, to attempt to know, to think to attempt to know what is going through the artist’s mind as he paints, when you are inside the painting.

They ask how we met, and I am about to go full five-hundred-page novel mode until they ask, more clearly, ‘How did you meet the first time?’ I smile before I answer. I tell them it was, *is*, the best day of my life, stressing the *is* so they know that nothing has changed for me, that no memory has ever come close. But I tell them the first time wasn’t the first time. It wasn’t even the tenth time. Before the first time, I saw you here and there, like the way you find your chest hairs everywhere after a deep, satisfying sleep. The first time we talked, you did most of the talking, and I did most of the smiling and laughing; the real first time, a Tuesday.

It was the first paper of our second MBBS examination – Human Anatomy. Everyone was panicking because everyone believed it was going to be difficult; because everyone was telling everyone to be scared. I was holding Inderbir Singh’s textbook on human embryology, trying to panic-memorise the third week of development. ‘It won’t help,’ you said, not looking at me, not looking like the other students. Your hands were folded, casual. And I envied your calmness. I said nothing to you because I thought you had the blackest hair, and I was still trying to figure out how that was possible.

‘Have you heard Nicki Minaj’s new song with Drake, from her new album?’ you asked, with enough enthusiasm that I thought, somehow, you must think we were about to write an exam on Nicki Minaj, not human anatomy. I smiled into the examination hall that

day, out of the hall, and into my room.

‘That was the first time,’ I tell them. ‘The real first time.’

‘Were you lovers?’ they ask, tentatively, their voice suddenly lower than before, on the brink of apologising. And I laugh. I laugh because I find the question funny. Then I stop laughing because I find the question unfunny.

‘No,’ I say, too fast, meaning it. ‘No,’ I say again, this time unsure of the answer myself. ‘Not really.’ I am quiet for a second. ‘Maybe. Not like that.’ I shrug. ‘I don’t know. It’s not something we ever talked about. We are not lovers, but we are kinda close.’ But we are not ‘kinda’ close; we are closer than I considered humanly possible, so close that, here in the one-room apartment we share in Calabar, I feel the jolts of the bus driving you to Enugu to visit your family.

‘Do you want to spend your entire life with him?’ they ask. I don’t like where these questions are going. They are getting more intrusive, trying to force me to say things I did not plan to say.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Casually. You know, keeping in touch and all that,’ I say and know, immediately the words leave my mouth, they are lies. I don’t want casual, whatever that means. How do you link souls with someone, join roots, allow those roots to intermingle and dance with each other, and then settle for the falling leaves? It’s so unreasonable it can only be stupid. But I don’t tell them this. Now, I am not sure I want to answer any more questions from them.

‘Do you love him?’ they ask now, too bold, accusingly. I suck my teeth with the tip of my tongue and pretend they said nothing. I am beginning to find them very annoying because it seems they are simply looking for different ways to ask the same question – *Lovers? Love? Spend the whole of eternity creating mind-blowing adventures?* What is the difference? It is the kind of tautology that irritates you, that makes you furrow your eyebrows and turn your face to a ‘Who’s this one?’ expression. I choose not to answer this particular question because of you, because you would have hated it. I am doing this for you. This silence.

A car rushes past me, pushing the cool evening air onto my face, and I am reminded that I am alone in an open street. Dark, empty street. Dark, lonely, empty street. There are no *they*; *they* are the voices in my head. *They* are trying to figure out why your absence affects me so much.

Tidbits From A Not Person

by Sara Watkins

Content Warnings: Derealization/depersonalization.

Not your thing? Skip to page 11 for the next story.

Today, the tongue in my mouth felt like it was someone else's tongue inside my mouth.

I bit it hard. I bit the shit out of it (just to test if it was really mine) and was scared to find the results were inconclusive. There wasn't as much pain as there should have been.

Then, I rubbed my arm, and it felt like someone else was rubbing someone else's arm.

I lost all sense of direction and orientation and perspective underneath three blankets for hours, and I couldn't even cry about it because I didn't have any eyeballs.

Burnt Orange

by Busayo Akinmoju

Content Warnings: Unreality, imprisonment.

Not your thing? Skip to page 19 for the next story.

The people in the town streamed into the street.

They walked all together, on towards the building that had been newly painted blue that day.

At the intersection in front of it, they stopped. And like they had woken into a nightmare, like landing on their feet into a run, and like being able to think, to suddenly rethink, they turned their backs and ran away. That bright blue building, snuggled along a row of unpainted others, had acted like a siren, a whining gas of colour that repelled them.

And so they moved in all directions, ungainly and thoughtless. On that sunny day, the corner of the town that could be seen from the blue building's veranda was thickly covered by people, who then spread off everywhere, watched over by Tara. The person who'd peered over the bannisters from the moment the people had walked together until they hadn't anymore.

And she was relieved when she saw it.

'They've gone,' she said to Bolu.

On that day, Tara and Bolu were scared. But Bolu was even more so; she wasn't from this town. She lay on a mat they had found in a corner of the empty room the veranda led into. It was also painted blue; all of the building was that colour, inside and out. And neither of them could sleep with all the light that bounced through the bare spaces within that room, and how all the emptiness lay heavy and suffocated.

Because of this, and because the people had gone from the streets, they decided to leave and end their hiding. Bolu did not think it was a good idea as they went down the stairs, but because she knew things, Tara won and led in front; she ran her hands over the plastic feel of the new paint, pausing to scrape off a small bulge that had formed from the painter's

poor workmanship, and underneath it was the paint's astringent smell. And dry, crumbly, grey cement. She didn't say anything about it.

Like this story, in all of its pretending to be fair, even and moving with equanimity, we see these two girls walk backwards out of that room and out of the day's new sunlight into the night and dream of the streets out below.

Those same streets, the veranda could see nothing on till 6.30 pm when the streetlights came on.

*

Tara knew things. Like, the town in this story had lived in one continuous day for years. For years and years, things had remained the same, with only small shifts in the weather, in how people moved and felt to keep up the disguise. No one had been born, no one had aged enough for it to matter or to show. No one had even left the town, and no one had died. To leave the town, one had to fall off of it. Fall out of existence to it, to remembering, to the family one had, out of one's heritage. Only the Fikesi – ruler, traditional and elected spokesperson – could veto it, make an exception. No one living there had noticed these things.

Bolu had not been told any of it before the trip. Nor when she was made to look through the car's window because of the shadow cast by the tall arc that led into the town. It only said WELCOME, did not mention where to. But when the clean, grey streets opened out calmly, she forgot about oddness and did not even notice that late evening had suddenly set on them.

What she knew were the things Tara had told her. Like how the Fikesi was Tara's uncle, so her friend was related to royalty, or that the town was magical, which Tara had said to tempt Bolu into coming over with her. It was her first trip after a few years of not visiting. She had told Bolu about all of the sights, this and that.

'I'll take you there with me,' she'd said. 'Just come, it will be fun.'

Bolu had wanted to go.

'And we can stay at my uncle's place. It's actually a palace, and it's very nice. It has a swimming pool and all.'

So she had. She'd packed clothes for a few days and got into the car. What she'd expected was a greeting fit for a princess and her guest. Something like an excited town,

drums singing their praises, and a crowd of faces squishing to see who they were as the car passed through.

But as the car turned into a street lined on both sides by trees, the trees became denser and turned into forest. Bolu sat up straighter and turned to Tara.

‘Ah, are you scared?’ Tara asked when she noticed Bolu’s apprehension. But Tara was concerned too and asked the driver where he was taking them.

‘This is not the way to the palace now, oga.’ Tara said.

The driver seemed surprised to hear them speak but reassured them that the Fikesi had asked they be brought to meet him where he was precisely. And it was at an old secondary school at the edge of the town.

‘Omo’ba ni yin, I cannot even do you like that. Don’t worry, we will soon get there. Let’s say in the next five minutes.’

When they got to the school, the Fikesi had his back turned to them, standing with a few other people on a sandy driveway in front of a green bungalow. He was talking and gesturing with his right hand as if asking them to take the whole place in; it was then that he turned and saw them. Tara was smiling with so much pride.

He nodded to acknowledge them but turned to fully end his talk with the people. He shook their hands, each of them, a group of two women and three men, and they left.

Then he turned to them again, and this time he laughed. His laugh was unselfconscious, the sort that eliminated that firm border between the young and the already grown and established. Tara got a tight hug from him, giggling through it all. The Fikesi looked at Bolu with his big laugh dancing in his chest, and Bolu simply could not. She was repulsed.

She stretched out her hand to shake his and planned to add a good nod to be respectful. The way he had looked at them and laughed, without that inhibition, made Bolu think about Father Christmas, dressed up in fake clothes and a big bobbing belly and not wearing his adult manners, so he was constantly pulling up his trousers.

The Fikesi shook her hand, and the laugh in him did not dim, except in his eyes.

‘This is your friend abi, Tara?’ he said. ‘It is very nice to meet you. This is your first time here, right?’

Bolu said, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Ah, which one is sir? There is no need for that. Tara, you did not tell her about me, ni?’

Tara narrowed her eyes almost playfully at Bolu.

One of the things Tara did not know was how time worked in this story, in this town that she and Bolu had started being absorbed into slowly. Maybe she would have started to run if she had known. She knew of time in the sense that one moment happened after the next; the previous moment happened before this one. She and her friend existed within this moment happening now. But the Fikesi had started his trickery on them. He liked that she thought this way.

Even if she had heard about time happening in a different way – perhaps in a circle of déjà vus, cyclically re-happening – he would still have trapped her in a moment that ran up and up, skipped a few thoughts and instances, and went around and up and down again. That was how he got people.

He said to Bolu, ‘You know that I am like the architect of this whole town. *I made everything.*’ He said the last sentence like he was singing. ‘But I am still very jovial.’

And then that laugh again.

Bolu quietly shook her head. Tara watched her, unsmiling, from the corner of her eye.

She asked Tara what her uncle meant by that, and Tara was about to reply with something vaguely snippy when the Fikesi saw them talking and asked what was wrong. Bolu answered that she was only asking what kind of architect he was. She said this a little loudly, to further upset Tara, and in that short time she spoke, the Fikesi’s countenance was a stunned one. Like he was surprised she could talk.

But he answered her gently, like she was a well-behaved but inquisitive child.

‘I was getting to that. Definitely, I am an architect. Fully trained and qualified.’ He spoke about some of the work he had done around the town: the bank, another school, and particularly about a building that had been a house owned by a former chief. He wanted the town to repossess it, fix it up and rent it to a telecom company. But it seemed the people were giving him a little trouble at the council house.

‘It will provide people with more jobs, so I don’t understand why they are against it,’ he said.

There was a short silence before he looked to Tara and said, ‘Anyway, you really should have told your friend more about the town before coming, especially about me. I am not old school at all.

‘This is not like all those former people, please. Me, I know my work, I am inside and outside the government, and I know what I am doing.’

Neither of them could understand why, but that laugh happened again.

And this time, Tara's face contorted into something, maybe confusion. But as always, Bolu felt it worse. In the days they spent after that, she would remember it like a ringing in her elbows, a zap of electricity in her sternum, like echoing. The days got dimmer and dimmer and stopped happening one after the other.

*

'What time is it? It looks like we woke up too early, oh,' Tara joked.

'No, that is just how the weather is here,' the Fikesi said around a mouthful of food, clinking his cutlery on the plate.

It was the morning after they met the Fikesi, and they were in one of the little bungalow lodges on the school's premises. His mood had changed, they noticed. They looked at each other silently and began to eat.

After a while, he asked, 'How long will you be staying?'

'Oh, just a few days,' Tara answered.

'Six weeks,' he said.

They were alarmed. 'Sir...' Tara began.

He stopped his eating and cutlery clinking. 'I said you and your friend should stop calling me sir.'

Then he picked up his spoon and continued, 'Anyway,' and he informed them about their plans for the day. He would drop them off at the bank, come back to pick them up in an hour, then take them to spend the rest of their stay with Tara's aunt, a person she had not visited in years.

'You can't stay here with me again. I am busy and pre-occupied with so many things. But you don't have to worry, she is your dad's sister, your aunt. You know her, right? Tara?'

Tara nodded.

'Good, then finish your food and get dressed so we can start going.'

*

By the time the girls got to the bank hall, Bolu was still feeling ill, and Tara was remembering how much she hated banks and that she did not know what the Fikesi had even asked her to do there. Time had shattered for them in this moment. All of the pieces that had formed that

disc were held up and suspended. Some were closer to the centre, to how it used to be. Some were held further on, different from everything.

But from then, time and presence and existence dazzled, as light does refracted through a kaleidoscope, alternating between a resolute grey and an almost-real, too-colourful dream.

Unlike what Tara believed – or remembered as the things outside of time began to shatter too – it was not when they met the Fikesi outside the bank that she had been gotten, incorporated into the same trickery the Fikesi had suspended the town in. It had started the moment they arrived in the town.

The Fikesi came to the bank with his red, embroidered shirt ringing bright with emblems and frightening symbols. And Tara didn't know this, but it was not this moment, or his displeasure that she was empty-handed that made the sky overcast, threatening rain.

Because all through the time they were in the town, it never rained. There was a drip-drip heard through the large glass pane of her aunt's second-floor parlour, but the few days Tara and Bolu spent there, the grey just hung like a threat. Never raining. Bolu's elbows continued to startle her at odd times.

But Tara's aunt would ignore their silence and brooding. She would drink from a cup at the kitchen table and talk like all of the other townspeople did about the Fikesi. They loved him; he was doing well for them.

Tara asked her one day, 'Wouldn't you earn more as a teacher if you moved to a different town, where you would be more appreciated?'

Her aunt put the cup down.

'See this thing, if I go to a different town now, all of the extra money that I earn, I will be using it to pay for things that the government already provides me for free. And I will be nobody there, no one will know me. No family or friends, nothing!'

Then she added, 'This town is working for me. I like it.'

This time, Tara was the one that shook her head. Bolu saw her and placed a hand on hers to get her attention. The silence that had grown between them since they met the Fikesi might have ended here.

Because, out of necessity, they bloomed a rich thought. Textured was their plan. Like an artisan's clay-wet hands had moulded a fine ceramic flower from a mound that had never been touched or considered before. There they were in that kitchen, with that thought as real and as definite as a thing that had already happened, like a thing that already was.

They devised a means to escape the town, the Fikesi, the grey-and-kaleidoscope dream they were being submerged into.

So, they went to the town's bus park.

At the park, a yellow flower caught Bolu's eye. Bolu saw it through the fever of her thoughts, its petals as big as a bed for sleeping, and she needed to sleep. But the glow around it was what struck her; it had a bioluminescence that could only shine in night-time, with those flakes of pollen like stars nested in a cloud.

'It is night,' Bolu said as the bus they got into started moving. She said it firmly, like an unshakeable realisation.

Tara said, 'What?' but did not wait for an answer. As the bus rounded out of the park, in the middle of a small crowd at the gate, she saw the Fikesi talking and trying to placate the people. She might have locked eyes with him; she hoped not.

She turned back to Bolu and asked her what she had said. Bolu said it again. 'It is night.'

Then she told Tara about the flower she had seen.

'I know that flower from my botany textbook – it only opens its petals at night,' Bolu insisted.

'So what are you saying? You think that is the source of his power?'

'No!'

Then they spoke for a while as the bus moved. Dragged inferences together. Tara looked up at the yellow flower Bolu pointed to, like a star in the sky with its own patch of white surrounding it, and seeing this, they concluded. It had indeed been night time, all this while.

In this story, the girls got off that bus, just as the people decided to get off of the Fikesi's dream, trudge together to the town's centre to end the man. Except the girls alighted several streets before the one with the building and all of its blue noise and brightness. They simply got down and kept walking backwards, down the street they'd got off. Out of sight to hide, maybe out of existence too.

And as they did, they foiled the Fikesi's grand work by simply knowing. And by simply spreading that on to the people, like oil that touched one finger moving to the next.

They discovered that his power lay in getting the people to feel comfortable. To be content in the way a moment is fixed to a spot, pampered with certainty and illusions. And to ignore the possibility of progress out of fear, or doubt, or mediocrity. Or, as the Fikesi said in his defence, out of the need to protect pride and heritage, to work for his people.

The girls walked and wove out of the dream. Broke the townspeople out of their sleep and showed them the texture of colours under real light. Under a real star, an equanimity and fairness this story is unwilling to give.

In Labour

by Sofia Tantonio

Content Warnings: Death, blood, pregnancy and self-inflicted pain of a ritualistic nature.

Not your thing? Skip to page 22 for the next story.

After his balls were tied, Taiyari climbed the house's supports, deft as a gecko, and perched himself on the rafters.

No, this wasn't some weird alternative to a vasectomy, which Taiyari's people didn't even do. Let the Europeans have that, along with all their strange and incomprehensible ways. Although, I do wonder what he would've thought of the procedure if someone had explained it to him.

Once he got as comfortable as was possible while squatting on a wooden beam, Taiyari blinked rapidly and steadied himself. Sweat formed like dew on his palms and back with every strained thump of his heart, making Taiyari's grip hot and his back more slippery than the edge of a cliff after a bout of rain. It wasn't the height that made him dizzy – he was used to going up much greater ones. For the first time in his life, Taiyari was afraid of falling.

He didn't know why what was coming made him so nervous. Not only was it a ritual that hung over the days of every Huichol bachelor and boy, but he had also seen it for himself. And while it was true he'd clutched his nuts in sympathetic, solidarity-induced pain for the whole of his father's participation in the birth of his little sister, Taiyari had thought knowledge plus maturity would be a hunter's bow and arrow for when his time came. At least, he had a few days ago.

From his vantage point, he could see Nakawé squatting over the bare floor with the midwife by her side. They looked so small from here, like odd little rodents. Any distinguishing features that told him who these women were had been warped by the distance, while the opposite was true for every individual piece of straw making up their house's roof. Once a blurry collective, each strand now sang out its uniqueness to Taiyari, proclaiming itself as straight or bent, shorter or longer, sturdy or worn away by time. This

study of perspective lured him away from identifying the flora coalescing in the sharp, rough-earthly smell of herbal smoke that covered his face and the space like a heavy veil. But maybe Taiyari wouldn't have been able to pick them out, reverie or no reverie – anxiety does muddle your brain.

That first contraction only strained Nakawé's body, at least directly. But the scream came from both of them. Those two soundwaves, each as loud and strained as the wail of the whole world, mixed and mingled in the air like lovers. Taiyari's throat was raw from his howl, rawer than if he'd drunk a cup of hot melted steel.

Nakawé had taken her first tug at one of the ropes tied to Taiyari's scrotum, and the force of it almost convinced him that his testicles were going to be ripped off right that second. The pain was like nothing he had ever been through physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Worse, it wasn't some sharp yet momentary sting but a pain that shot through every nerve and racked his whole body, from the top of his head to the tips of his desperate, eagle-talon toes. It was like being hurled into the sun or cast into the hell those Spaniards were always trying to get his people to be afraid of, flames gnawing off your melting skin. Actually, never mind; it was a thousand times worse than either of those, a sensation that can't be described in Wixárika, Spanish or English.

Yet there was enough kindness in the gods for them to allow Taiyari a few moments of respite. When Nakawé wasn't having contractions, she didn't pull on his ropes. Sometimes, these periods of recuperation lasted a few hours, which put it in Taiyari's head that maybe the gods had been struck by sudden remembrances of his faithfulness.

The missionaries told his people that pain in childbirth was one of the curses God heaped on Eve because she ate the forbidden fruit, but they didn't say much about Adam, except for his having to toil for food. As far as Taiyari was concerned, He had distributed the birthing curse more equally than that.

An especially hard pull, however, left Taiyari no time for theological musings. Instead, he wondered whether his testicles were still firmly attached or if they were dangling by some final, thin strips of skin, ready to drop like fruit once the next yank came.

All crescendos are followed by a hanging stillness. Likewise, Taiyari felt, after that sudden jerk, a slight loosening of the ropes, as if they weren't being gripped anymore. The difference between this and a swelling musical number, though, is that swelling musical numbers usually start up again.

Taiyari opened his eyes, which had been tightly shut all this time for pain, and gawked at the scene below like a blind man newly restored of sight. Nakawé lay pale on the

ground, her wet black hair a messy pool under her head and an evil swamp of blood forming between her spread legs. The baby was nowhere to be seen. The midwife chanted at the sky a dirge whose words crashed and tumbled into and onto each other as they invaded Taiyari's ears, coloniser-like. If anyone had told him yesterday that there existed a greater pain than your testicles being tugged at, he wouldn't have believed it.

Green Things On Concrete

by Em Harriett

Content Warnings: Dystopia, death.

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

Day 1

You remember falling asleep.

The stars were white and hollow in their tapestry, a constellation of noise deep in space. On the dry earth, the only sounds the night held for you were a symphony of crickets and your own breath as it passed through your lungs. You blink and remember:

The burial.

The grave.

The asters you plucked from the next mound over, transplanting them like a surgeon so that your dead lover could have a bit of beauty in his rest.

You took the survival kit off its hook in the kitchen without checking its contents first. Leaving the door unlocked, you marched into the empty fields behind your house without a backwards glance.

Wheatgrass whispered in your passing like ghosts.

Day 2

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Day 3

But that house has nothing for you now.

Day 4

You fish a bluegill from the river and spear it over a fire, plucking pin bones from its flesh and tossing them into the embers. Your water filter will last three weeks. You know you

will last longer. In your head, there is a map, but it is frayed with aged inaccuracies, and you know there is a city to the east filled with steel and echoes of the past.

You decide to walk there, but not to ogle memory. You have memory in spades within you: sun-warmed kisses, meals scraped together in a salvaged pot, just the two of you in your bit of land among the wheat sea. For twenty years, that was happiness – that was home.

Now, you don't know what to do. You figure trekking to the city is as good a use of your time as any.

You finish your fish and scrape dirt over the fire, burying the bones. Animals have not bothered you, but you know better than to leave scraps for coyotes. At night you hear them yap and yowl from miles away. Their shrill voices make the stars shake.

You rest and rise with the sun. You hear your lover's voice on the wind, urging you to some new horizon.

You march on.

Day 7

The land undulates like water-soaked paper. Cornfields wave in patches across the plains, grown wild from untended farms. Limbless trees hung with dead power lines and birds' nests dot the landscape like sentinels. Lightning has scoured many of them with thick strips of char; they stand inert when you pass beneath them. Their shadows point the way east.

You wonder if the city is real after all or if it's a fabrication, the promise of a heaven that does not exist. It's been years since you've spoken to another human who did not live with you. Whatever you needed to survive, you and your lover grew from the land itself, tending your respectable garden and minding a few chickens that had wandered into your yard. The one time you saw a caravan, it was a pod of wagons at the edge of the field, its habitants journeying to some greener pasture.

You wonder if such a place exists.

You wonder if you deserve it.

At night, you deny the stars and close your eyes, your mind adrift to your house and the memories you thought would last forever there. Your lover's face appears like a shade.

Every morning, his features burn against the back of your eyes.

Day 13

You find a dog.

It is not your dog. Your dog is buried beside your lover, sharing the same plot of land behind the house. The asters you'd planted there sprouted pink and purple and blue, a riot of colour, and your lover used to say it was your dog's spirit that made the flowers bloom so bright.

If that was true, then you hope the asters over your lover's grave outshine the stars.

But back to the dog that is not your dog. It is a mongrel, a pedigree of miscellany, and its fur sticks up in all the wrong places. Its coat is steel wool dipped in white-and-brown dye. Its ears prick up when it sees you, and it trots to greet you with a wagging tail and promises of friendship.

You ignore it. You keep walking.

The dog that is not your dog follows you through the fields, silent and desperate for love.

Day 18

You sleep in the shells of old houses when you find them. Nothing remains except the outlines of concrete foundations, but even a few inches of solid wall against the wind is better than sleeping in the open. A hollow, rusted carapace of a car rests next to your current shelter. Golden grass brushes the metal with gentle strokes.

The dog that is not your dog sleeps closer and closer each night. You give up trying to dissuade it. The heart of a dog only knows how to love, and in your condition, you'd be cruel to ignore it any longer.

You let the animal's small body curl against your own. The balm soothes your loneliness even if you did not wish it.

Day 21

You know you're on the right track when you find a long, straight path like a canal through the fields. Long ago, it was a highway, but now the asphalt is cracked and half dirt, coated in windswept dust. It leads east with the rising sun and wears holes in the soles of your shoes.

Your clothes are sun-baked and wind-worn, clinging to you like a second skin. You've long grown accustomed to your own smell. It's not like there are other people around to judge you, and the dog that is not your dog keeps its tiny mouth shut.

Your water filter ran out. The creeks you've found this far from your old home are muddy and slow-moving. When you cup the water in your hands, silt settles in your palms.

You grimace but swallow anyway. The dog that is not your dog laps from the creek beside you, and you swear it makes the same face you do at the water's taste.

You return to the road and follow it one resolute step at a time. You can't name the thing that drives you – hope, fear, denial, acceptance – but you've long since become the passenger on your own journey.

Day 23

The dog that is not your dog knows how to fetch. It brings sticks you throw back to you, running regardless of the distance. When it is exhausted, its pink tongue flops out of its jaws and it rolls onto its back, splaying its paws in the air.

You laugh. It is the first sound you've made since you left your home behind.

Your lover would be proud.

Day 26

You see it.

Day 27

It is a man-made mountain range looming out of the horizon, crenulations of black against the blue sky, and it stirs something inside you like the flutter of a bird's wing. It's real. The city is real after all, and it is large and dense and filled with mystery.

You wish your lover was here to see it with you. You think of how you'd describe it to him, and your imaginary conversation sustains you even as you realise you've had nothing to eat for two days.

You pick up your pace. The dog that was not your dog trots beside you, its paw pads calloused and strong.

Day 30

You hurt your leg scavenging for supplies. It was a stupid mistake, really, something you would have scolded yourself for had you any scrap of anger in your chest.

The foundation was unsafe. You fell, gashed your leg against a rusted metal sheet on the way down, and landed in a heap of mud and dirt in someone's old basement. The dog that was not your dog barked his head off until you dragged yourself out of the hole to his side. He licked your face with a rough tongue and whined the rest of the day, his scruffy coat pressed against your body every chance he had.

Your painkillers are expired. You clean your wound as best you can with your meagre supplies. But, like all events that turn the stomach with their importance, you know:

Your days are numbered.

Day 33

The aches come first. Your leg lags stiff as you walk, dragging your feet over cracked asphalt. Wheatgrass spreads rumours about you in the wind. You try not to care.

The dog that was not your dog keeps pace beside you, stealing glances up at you as if to check that you're still there. His scruffy face is worried, his tail wagging so fiercely it could power a generator. You smile at him and scratch his ears. He whines. He does not want to lose you.

Asters grow atop the graves of your two loves. You think you will turn to asters, too.

Day 36

Your skin blisters. Every breeze is a blade. Every night is ice.

You don't know how much longer you can keep walking.

Day 39

Why do the stars look so unfeeling?

Day 40

Why do you care so much?

Day 42

You reach the city. At least, it *was* a city, long before the buildings crumbled under Nature's weight and let her run her fingers through what remained. Greenery clings to every concrete surface. Trees grope with their roots over crumbled sidewalks and hollow steel beams.

If there are bones here, you pretend you do not see them.

Your steps slow. The dog that is now your dog trots beside you, his tongue lolling pink and luscious from his small jaws. Sunlight at your back throws your shadow far ahead of you over cracked pavement and the weeds that flourish there.

Your chest aches. Your leg throbs. Thirst drags its claws down your throat.

You lie down in the shade of an old storefront, its walls half-fallen and covered with ivy. The dog that is now your dog curls up beside you and rests his head against the curve of your neck. His wet nose is a balm against your burning skin. You sigh and run your fingers through his stiff fur.

Leaves rustle in the wind. Crickets sing in a language you cannot parse. The wheatgrass murmurs the story of your life from blade to blade and out into the fields, over the long golden plains and towards the people scattered like seeds in the wind.

You look up into the yawning sky and see white stars peer through the sunset. Their tapestry is no longer noise. When the trees susurrate, the stars speak with their unfeeling wisdom:

Green things on concrete.

Life after death.

You close your eyes and sleep for the final time.