

# **BIFAN:** Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival

The Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN), first created in 1997, is a representative cultural festival that epitomizes Bucheon – a cultural city that prides itself on change and creativity.

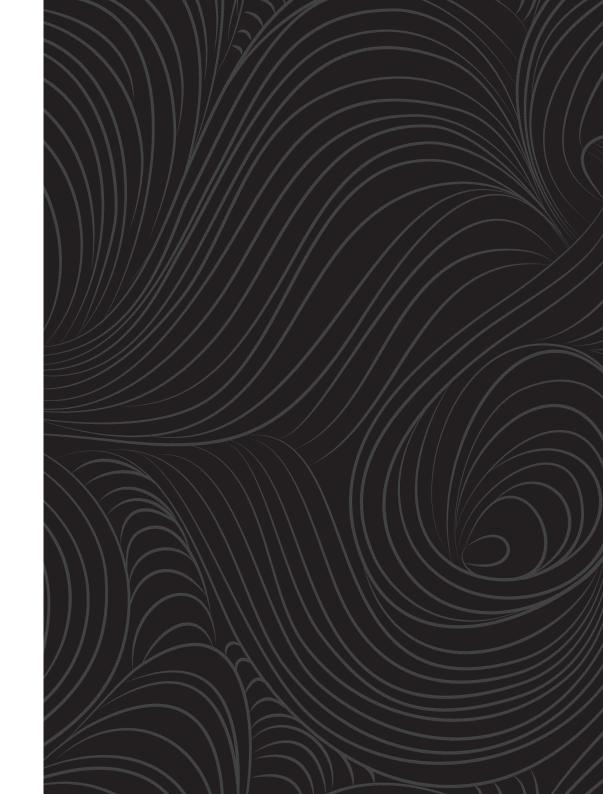
BIFAN has sought to establish a clear identity of what a "fantastic film festival" is through popular, creative, and future-oriented programs. It has also provided fresh, diverse viewpoints regarding new trends in genre films, leading it to receive consistent support from audiences and members of the film industry, both in Korea and abroad.

BIFAN has also continued a deep amity with global fantastic film festivals like the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation (EFFFF) and the Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival, allowing it to be recognized as Asia's largest fantastic film festival.

The BIFAN Industry Gathering (B.I.G.), an industrial program created by BIFAN in 2016, comprises the Network of Asian Fantastic Film (NAFF) Project Market, which started in 2008, "Made in Asia," a program which encourages cooperation and joint production in the Asian film industry, and the NAFF Fantastic Film School, which is focused on the discovery and training of rising film professionals in Asia. B.I.G. has continued to grow as a dynamic and influential business platform since 2019, entering the Cannes Market's "Fantastic 7."

Moreover, BIFAN continues to lead the future of the Korean film industry through projects like "Beyond Reality," Korea's largest XR program, and Goedam Campus, which focuses on the growth and support of rising talents in the video content industry centered around goedam (scary tales).

The 26th BIFAN, with the slogan "Stay Strange," will be held in Bucheon from July 7 to July 17, 2022.





WORLD GOEDAM COLLECTION

#### World Goedam Collection

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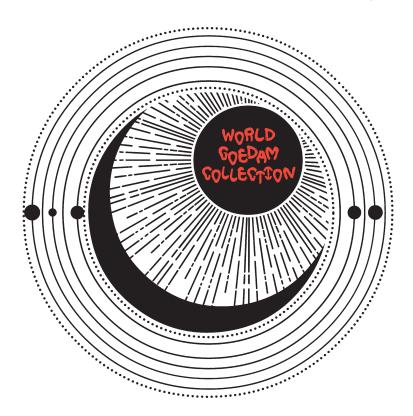
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# SSOS ANCHIOE







Since it took its first step back in 1997, the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN) has introduced the world to mysterious, fantastic and unique films for the past 25 years, and has built up a strong fanbase. With its new, exciting programs and unwavering energy, it has established itself as a leading film festival in Asia.

The Bucheon UNESCO City of Literature has been collaborating with BIFAN since 2020 in order to push forward their "Goedam Campus" project, which involves gathering stories centered on the genre of "goedam" (strange and scary tales), as well as providing support for the creation and production of such stories. Through this, they aim to create a "goedam ecosystem" that nurtures rising talents and encourages a virtuous cycle of films and content.

In a special project this year, they have worked together to publish the World Goedam Collection, which is a collection of stories from 10 other UNESCO Creative Cities of Literature.

Bucheon, as the first East Asian city to become a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) as a City of Literature back in 2017, continues to cooperate with other cities in the network to ensure the sustainable development of cities based on cultural assets and creativity.

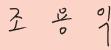
We are excited to see what kind of synergy will arise when our creators meet these extraordinary and original stories that have come from all around the world – from other Cities of Literature that all have distinctive cultural backgrounds.

We would like to extend our warm gratitude to the various secretariats of the Cities of Literature and the participating writers who so willingly responded to our requests and sent us their "goedam". We are honoured to be able to introduce the world to such a diverse range of stories from various Cities of Literature. We hope that the "goedam" in this collection will



spread far and wide, and act as a foundation for helping the video content industry become even more abundant than ever before.

Mayor of Bucheon City, Jo Yong-ik



"Goedam", or strange and scary tales, is already establishing itself as a distinct project that is unique to the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival. The first "season", as it were, of the Goedam Project was marked by the Goedam Archive program, which began in 2020 and focused on finding and collecting goedam, as well as providing production support for goedam short films. The second "season" of the project, which began in 2021, expanded to become the "Goedam Campus" project, which incorporates new enterprises that are focused on supporting creativity. The project includes the Goedam Project Development Camp, which is a development program based on an intensive mentoring system, the Goedam Short Films Production Support program, and a public creative writing school for young students. The Goedam Campus, a project that is structured around Goedam Creation Support, the Goedam Archive, and programs for the public, is now a key part of the

Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival.

In 2020, which is when the Goedam Archive project first started, a total of 9,373 goedam stories were collected from all around the world in an industry-university collaborative effort that involved BIFAN Global Heroes (a global YouTube platform), Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul Women's University, and Sungshin Women's University. 20 stories that had yet to be published were selected from these goedam through a screening process, and published into our first goedam collection. During this project, we also initiated various endeavors that were centered around the issue of copyright for these goedam, including hosting a copyright forum.

In 2021, 30 stories were selected from the book category of the goedam collected in 2020, and were published in a collection called Selected Short Goedam. This project was accomplished due to the cooperative efforts between the publishing companies who published the stories, and the writers. We would like to thank you all again. Selected Short Goedam was not only able to meet other creators through our film festival and Goedam Campus events, but was also able to connect with many members of the public through its distribution in libraries.

This year, our Goedam Archive project, with the help of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, began by gathering goedam from all around the world. 14 writers from 10 cities in 7 countries sent us their work. The World Goedam Collection compiles these various stories together. Having come from culturally distinct cities that have been designated as UNESCO Cities of Literature, the goedam in the collection are full of life and mystery, and some are unafraid to directly face the problems of our modern society. We are excited to see what kind of synergy will arise when these goedam meet those who work and create within the film industry. Moreover, the World Goedam Collection



will be published as an e-book so that many readers and creators from all around the world can access the stories in it.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Bucheon City and other members of staff who worked tirelessly to liaise with representatives of various UNESCO Cities of Literature for the sake of this project. We would also like to warmly thank the cities around the world who so willingly responded to our requests and sent us their goedam. We hope that the stories in the World Goedam Collection will spread far and wide, and become a foundation on which the video content industry can grow and become even more abundant.

Shin Chul, BIFAN Festival Director

UNESCO has reviewed and designated creative cities in the seven fields of Crafts & Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Music, and Media Arts since 2004. 295 cities from 90 countries currently belong to this network, and these cities collaborate towards common goals, such as promoting culture and creativity, and establishing strategies for sustainable urban development.

The Cities of Literature, a smaller part of this network, currently comprises 42 cities, and is a massive network in its own right that spans 6 continents, 31 countries and a combined population of over 60 million. Bucheon was the first city in East Asia to become a UNESCO Creative City of Literature with its designation in November 2017.

A City of Literature designated by UNESCO must share its exemplary cultural projects and successes, support the freedom of the press, nurture the diverse creativity of citizens through

various far-ranging literary projects, and involve themselves with international collaboration.

Bucheon has focused on the potential that culture holds for the past twenty years, establishing a cultural foundation (a first for any lower-level local government in the country) and working to nurture the culture & contents industry by forming a cultural infrastructure for various fields, including comics, animation, movies, music, and libraries. Bucheon continues to strive to fulfill its role as a City of Literature through unique cultural events, such as the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, the Bucheon International Animation Festival, and the Bucheon International Comics Festival, as well as various literary events, including the Bucheon Diaspora Literary Award that champions the spirits of solidarity, hospitality and collaboration through diaspora literature.

The "World Goedam Collection" was published with the

support of UNESCO's City of Literature network. We would like to thank the following cities of the network who collected Goedam(strange tales) from their respective countries, contacted authors, and sometimes even translated the works before sending them to us.

#### List of participating cities

Nottingham (U.K.)

Manchester (U.K.)

Exeter (U.K.)

Edinburgh (U.K.)

Jakarta (Indonesia)

Melbourne (Australia)

Durban (South Africa)

Nanjing (China)

Dunedin (New Zealand)

Bucheon (Republic of Korea)





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#### **Author Darren Simson**

Darren Simpson lives in Nottingham in the UK and is the acclaimed author of *Scavengers, The Memory Thieves* and *Furthermoor*. His books have been nominated for the CILIP Carnegie Medal, shortlisted for multiple regional awards and recommended by UNESCO, World Book Day and the National Literary Trust.

website www.darrensimpsonwrites.co.uk E-mail darrensimpsonauthor@gmail.com

English-Korean translator Yoon Sungjin

'I love you,' he said.

'I luh yoo oo,' she drooled.

The drill began to wail, and darkness took her in.

1

Eliza came slowly around. Consciousness began as a vague throbbing in her head, which bloomed gradually into an ache in her mouth. The ache gained fire as it crept across her face, forcing her to open her eyes. Light flooded in and a silhouette hovered in the glare. It leaned in close – her husband. He smiled gently.

She tried to speak but could only gargle.

'Sshh,' he said. 'Don't speak.'

Eliza took in the room. It looked familiar.

'It's okay,' he said. 'You're home.' He brushed a knuckle

The Adoring Dentist

along her temple. 'The propofol had you out cold. I had to carry you to the car.'

'Ngh,' said Eliza.

'Don't speak,' he repeated, his cheek twitching. 'You'll hurt yourself. Here, look.' He left the edge of the bed and returned with a bunch of chrysanthemums and lilies. 'Happy anniversary, Eliza. Ten impeccable years.' He leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

The stench of lilies turned Eliza's stomach. 'Hrrrm,' she breathed. A string of red saliva pooled on the collar of her nightgown.

'Would you like to see your anniversary present?' Her husband put the flowers into a waiting vase and adjusted them carefully before returning to his wife. 'Here.' He took her elbow to help her out of bed.

He guided her down the stairs, kissing the side of her head as they went. Holding her by the shoulders, he eased her around the corner and into the bathroom.

Eliza peered into the mirror and screamed. Stabs of metallic agony cut into her gums. The face in the mirror screamed back, its huge eyes welling above a mangled mess of mouth. Steel rods protruded from her face, fastened by pins and screws to form a glistening cage around the shrieking wound. The more

Eliza screamed, the more it hurt; and the more it hurt, the more it bled. Chunks of scab cracked and fell away, followed by the blood that flooded her mouth and spilled onto the tiles.

Eliza flailed her fists against her husband while he pulled her out of the room, his expression stoic, motionless, calm. Eliza could only sob while he carried her up the stairs, just as he'd done on their wedding day, ten beautiful years ago.

Three months later, Eliza and her husband were brushing their teeth. He put his palm on the small of her back as they brushed. Eliza leaned away to spit into the sink. She looked with some dismay at the red dashes streaking the foam and – after tonguing her teeth – spat out a gristly clot of blood.

Her husband's spit joined her own in the sink. 'It's okay,' he said. 'It's still healing. It'll take time.'

'How much longer, though? It's still so sore.'

'Keep using the benzydamine. And ibuprofen.'

'It's not just the pain. It's the blood. It just starts coming randomly. People stare at me in the street and I realise my chin's covered in blood.'

Her husband rinsed his toothbrush under the tap. 'It was an

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extensive procedure. You can't have all your teeth removed and replaced without some inconvenience afterwards.'

'I know that, I know.'

He tapped his finger against his lips, silent for a moment. 'Do you regret it?' he finally asked.

'Oh god no, of course not!' Eliza took his hand, kissed his cheek. 'They're wonderful. I'd never go back.' She exposed her teeth to the mirror. 'You know how much I hated my teeth after the accident. I think you were right – about them being bad for...for the way I felt. About myself. I didn't think I'd ever get over that crash. But these are perfect. I'm feeling better already. I mean, just look at them. You'd never know they were false.'

'They're the best money can buy.'

'I can see that. And I'm sorry I didn't have more faith in you when you offered to do this. Thank you for always encouraging me – even when I got so anxious about the procedure. You always know what's best for me. This is so much more than a new set of teeth.' Eliza beamed at her reflection. 'I know I grumble about the pain, but I do love them. I feel like a new person. I don't avoid catching myself in mirrors anymore. I feel like...like I've got myself back.'

Without warning, her husband slipped his finger into her mouth and probed her teeth. 'I think they're exquisite.' His finger

tasted of disinfectant.

'They are,' said Eliza, mumbling around his finger and wincing with pain.

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They sent her to the grave, in the end.

It started – about three years later – with a plunger. Or more specifically, without a plunger. The bath's plughole was blocked. Eliza was certain she'd find the plunger in the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink, but it wasn't there. It wasn't under the stairs or with the toolbox either. But she'd seen it somewhere around the house – and recently, too.

She ended up in the garage, moving heavy boxes and sifting through household debris. She could easily have gone out to buy a new plunger, but instead she heaved and muttered, sweated and cursed. She knew the plunger was somewhere, and she was determined to find it.

She never found the plunger. Instead, she found an unfamiliar satchel, tucked into the bottom of a box beneath some musty bin bags. She didn't recognise the satchel at all, so she dragged it out and peered inside.

Its contents were spread over the coffee table when her husband got home. He looked astonished when he came in

from the hallway and saw them there.

Eliza grinned. 'I didn't know you had all this uni stuff! Just look at these photos!' She giggled. 'You were as handsome then as you are now.'

Her husband cleared his throat, put down his bag and sat beside her. 'Where did you find these?'

'In the garage. Just look at you there. My, my. And all these pretty girls – the way this one's looking at you! Always the charmer.'

'Hmm.' Her husband was frowning.

'And I can't get over this yearbook. I didn't think English universities did this. More of an American thing, isn't it?'

'Five years is a long time to spend with friends at dental school, Eliza. You want something to remember them by.'

'Then why leave it all to rot in the garage? This is wonderful!' Eliza laughed. 'Just look at the state of those clothes! They looked good at the time, I suppose.'

'I suppose,' echoed her husband. He took a deep breath before smiling at his wife. 'What's for dinner?'

×

Eliza stashed the satchel and its contents away after that, in

the cabinet with their photo albums.

It took a few weeks for her to notice the dread. It crept up on her with dark stealth, flitting between the shadows of her mind. As time went by, she found it harder to brush aside – to account it to the weather, to tiredness, to one of those days. She began to get the feeling that she was slipping back, somehow; losing something she'd gained, although she couldn't tell exactly what.

The dread took a firm hold when Eliza realised she was avoiding mirrors again. After three years of a contentment she'd just started to take for granted, she was back to fearing her teeth.

It took courage to confront them. Courage and a stiff drink. Eventually, Eliza stepped into the bathroom and looked squarely into the mirror. Slowly, laboriously, she pulled back her lips. Her teeth shone immaculately at her and the dread became a deep but subtle terror. Eliza burst into tears and ran from the room.

The fear grew with each passing day, but she couldn't put a finger on its cause. She tried to ignore it – or at least to hide it – but it must have shown, for her husband occasionally asked what was wrong. She always insisted she was fine. She insisted again and again, as if she could convince herself too. But she wasn't fine at all, and the fear continued to fester.

In her dreams, she'd get out of bed and go to the kitchen. She'd take the pliers from the toolbox, carry them to the

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bathroom and try to remove her teeth. But they wouldn't come out. She'd wail and blubber as she pulled, but the more she heaved, the more the teeth burrowed into her gums. She'd give up and gape into the bathroom mirror, horrified by the bulges that moved beneath her skin. Her teeth tunnelled up the length of her face, carving tissue as they went.

In later dreams, she was able to pull out her teeth and spit them into the sink. She'd gaze at the blood-streaked porcelain and notice that her teeth were twitching, twinkling like pearls on red silk. Her mouth, ragged and raw, would hang open as the teeth grew needles for legs – as they scuttled out of the sink and up her paralysed thighs.

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The dreams finally led to a revelation.

One night, the teeth in Eliza's dream didn't head up her nightgown. Instead, they paraded out of the bathroom like a line of enamel ants. Eliza followed them through the hallway and into the living room. She switched on the light and saw them heading for the cabinet.

Eliza woke suddenly, knowing without doubt that the root of her fear lay sealed within her husband's satchel. As soon as her husband headed to work the next morning, Eliza went to the cabinet. But the satchel was gone. It may have been months since she'd put it there, but Eliza knew for a fact that she'd never removed it.

She was soon opening every drawer and cupboard in the house, overturning every surface, probing every nook and cranny. Four hours had passed without any hint of a satchel, but still she hunted.

Late that afternoon, Eliza emerged from the garden shed filthy, tired, and triumphant. She clutched her husband's satchel in her hands. It had been sealed in a plastic bag and buried at the bottom of a bucket of gravel, which had been stored beneath a pile of heavy boxes in the furthest corner of the shed.

Eliza staggered into the kitchen, fell to her knees and let the photos spill across the floor. Her eyes scanned the scattered pictures, almost too frightened to focus. But she soon found the photo that confirmed everything she feared.

An hour later, Eliza returned to the shed to fetch a shovel, and dusk found her digging up the grave of Berenice Clemm.

Getting Berenice's name had been easy; she had an entry in the yearbook, and was sat close to her husband in at least a couple of the photos. Eliza saw again how Berenice looked at her husband, and noticed – with a pang in her chest she'd ignored before – the way her husband looked back.

Discovering Berenice's location had taken a little longer – an hour of googling. And when Eliza discovered that Berenice resided in a cemetery and not a home, she moaned and wept and mashed her fists against her gums.

Eliza wept as she dug. She hadn't stopped crying since she'd started the three-hour drive to the cemetery. Her sobs were broken by coughs that sent red mist from her battered mouth.

The sky darkened. It began to rain.

Eliza's shovel finally found wood, and she scraped mud away to reveal the coffin. It took the last of her strength to smash through its lid.

Dropping once more to her knees, Eliza pulled away the splintered wood. After yanking a large chunk away, she saw the skeletal face of Berenice Clemm.

Eliza barely noticed the hollow eye sockets or the shrunken cheeks. Her gaze was fixed on Berenice's grin.

Not a tooth remained in those withered gums.



#### **Author Megan Taylor**

Megan Taylor is the author of four dark novels, *How We Were Lost* (Flame Books, 2007), *The Dawning* (Weathervane Press, 2010), *The Lives of Ghost* (Weathervane Press, 2012) and most recently, *We Wait*, a haunted house novel, released from Eyrie Press in 2019.

In 2014, she had her first short story collection published, *The Woman Under the Ground*, and further short stories have been placed in several competitions and appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including the Dark Lane anthologies, The Invisible Collection (Nightjar Press) and Neon.

Megan has an MA, with Distinction, in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University. She lives in Nottingham, UK, where she has been running her own creative writing courses for many years.

website www.megantaylor.info twitter twitter.com/meganjstaylor

English-Korean translator Yoon Sungjin

The third parcel that you take in for your neighbour is the most impressive so far. It arrives along with your own flimsy packet and is so enormous that it covers the delivery driver's torso when he hefts it, and then half of his wide, hopeful face.

"You'll put another card through their letterbox?" you ask, wrapping both arms around it, and he probably nods, but you don't see it as you stagger back to the sofa to set it down with the rest. It isn't just that it's heavy and awkward; the brown paper feels clammy, disconcertingly warm. But your hands are sweating by the time you've dumped it; it's hard to tell what's what. And when you glance back, the doorway is empty. There's only the path and the gate and the overgrown bushes, a swathe of careless blue sky.

Distracted, you open your own package too quickly, threatening to tear the bright coloured book inside. It's a mindfulness manual sent by your best friend, Harriet, to help with your fresh start, your new job and home - the new, focused, confident you.

×

Later, you wonder if it's mindful or simply indulgent to spend so long staring at your neighbour's uncollected packages, trying to imagine their hidden contents and, more than that, his shadowy life.

The house next door has always been dark when you've popped over. Both times you were nervous, brushing your hair first, and preparing a speech in your head.

'Hi, I've just moved in. You've had some deliveries.... No, please, it's no trouble at all...'

You even smeared on a thin shimmer of lip-gloss -

But surely you're not giving in to ridiculous fantasies of a handsome, life-changing neighbour, your head turned by the sleek, silver car that's sometimes parked outside and the bold artwork you saw through his living room window when you pressed your nose against the dim glass.

You're not really that desperate, or lonely, you keep on reminding yourself; you're just a little bit bored. Obviously, it's madness to keep adding to the daydreams, when all you know

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of this man is his name.

'Mr Fenrir' - sure, it sounds friendly and slightly exotic, but still...

For the umpteenth time, your gaze creeps over the neat address labels handwritten in fountain-pen ink. None of the parcels are box-shaped. Even the first one you took in, which isn't much larger than your fist, has rounded edges bound securely with dark, shining tape. Along with the tape, the others have also been roped in, criss-crossed with grey, knotted string. There's no danger of the brown paper peeling open, no hope of peeking within.

×

The next one to arrive is as long as a walking stick, except it's far fatter than that, generously padded, and, again, it takes up both of your arms. Perhaps it's two or three bubble-wrapped golf clubs? But you doubt if Mr Fenrir is the type to play golf, except maybe ironically – you imagine him to be too dynamic, too trendy for that.

When Harriet phones that evening to check up on you, you find yourself musing aloud about your neighbour's possible hobbies, but you somehow neglect to mention the parcels; it's no wonder she ends up sounding confused. Besides, though she's not sure if it's right to mention it yet, Harriet has some news.

She's seen your ex, not once but twice, in town, holding hands with an attractive, young blonde. She describes the swish of long hair and longer tanned legs, a skimpy vest and fakelooking boobs. And isn't it great you've finally escaped him, moving such a distance away?

"I love your empowerment," Harriet tells you, and you try to feel empowered fetching the whisky the moment you've put down the phone.

And by the third glass, you start feeling better. You manage to grin and then actually laugh as you surf between comedy channels, curled up at the sofa's far end. The packages take up most of its space, but in the TV's flicker, they're soft-looking, companionable. With the fourth whisky you toast them as if they're old friends.

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On Saturday, you wake early and don't do the usual thing of wondering where you are. There's a banging, a hammering, coming through your bedroom wall. Unlike your ex, Mr Fenrir must be the handy, DIY type – but more to the point, he is

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finally home!

And isn't this the perfect opportunity to slide on your new jeans and lip-gloss and nip round there? The packages are too many and bulky to carry in one trip; you'll just have to bring him back here...

But then it occurs to you that there's something about the sounds, their particular rhythm. You picture a solid wooden headboard. You think about rocking – his bed, just the pale wall away –

And of course you're not going anywhere. You pull the duvet up over your face.

×

When the delivery driver rings the doorbell mid-morning, you don't smile at his usual request.

"Are you sure he isn't in?" you ask. "I think I heard him..."

But the driver shakes his head with what seems like unnecessary sadness. "Nobody home," he says.

The package is the most rounded of all, the size and shape of a fat party balloon. But it's as weighty as the others and there's something about it that you don't like. Perhaps it's the smell? A musty, organic odour that seems to be more than brown paper... The parcel rolls over the others when you drop it, before nestling in as if it belongs.

×

When you get home from work on Monday, the smell has grown stronger. It's taken over the whole living room. It's worse than the wet-dog reek of the hairy vintage coat that, in a stupid attempt at empowerment, you decided to wear in the rain. The odour is denser and rawer, ripe in an unsavoury way.

Though not one of the parcels is the right shape to look edible, it strikes you they might contain food – a great wheel of cheese, maybe vacuum packed mutton – perhaps something has started to rot?

It's clear that it's time to take action. These packages, their stink – this cannot go on. But outside, it goes on raining and, next door, there's still no sign of life. Although briefly you think you glimpse something, a movement beyond the glistening windows, but it's only your pale face reflected – your own sodden, shivering ghost.

Predicting Mr Fenrir's absence, you've brought your own calling-card to shove through his letterbox, a hastily scrawled, crumpled note. But with the wet, your words are smearing,

becoming illegible – and perhaps that's not the worst thing? There's no jokey tone to your note; it isn't even well-mannered.

Pick up your packages, you scribbled, there are so many and they've started to smell.

Back home you stand over them, feeling strangely guilty, though you are carefully holding your breath. Here and there, the brown paper is patched dark or speckled, spread with stains you haven't noticed before.

Belatedly, you realise that it's you, that you're dripping – there isn't anything seeping out from inside.

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You dream that your ex and a beautiful blonde have moved in with Mr Fenrir, next door. But at first it is fine, you're not jealous – you're not alone either; there's somebody snuggling close at your side. You reach over to pull them yet closer, but that's when it all falls apart. Your duvet's heaped over nothing but a pile of brown packages. And the balloon-one is propped up on the pillow right next to your head –

And when you wake, you think you hear banging, and, again, you picture flesh heaving – and then the thud of an axe. You sit up quickly, but it's only your heartbeat, the panicked throb of

your half-dreaming pulse.

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On the way out to work, you whip past the packages, feigning disinterest, refusing to give them more than a side-long glance. It's the dream's fault, a memory of bodies and the idea of pieces... And it's not just the smell that's making you queasy; there's an odd twist in your stomach like fear.

But even as you're tugging the door closed, you're too aware of the packages on the sofa behind you. They're huddled together, abandoned, and the ridiculous guilt makes a sneaky return.

You imagine them shifting, the brown paper crackling, the slither and purr of grubby grey string – *don't leave us*, they whisper, *don't go*.

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Coming home a little later than usual, you've made a decision – you're empowered, like Harriet said! And you also might be slightly tipsier than you intended; your new colleagues finally asked you along for a drink after work. But it wasn't desperation

that made you drink so quickly; you were only happy, keen to fit in... And now the Dutch courage is coming in useful. You know exactly what you need to do.

You're going to get rid of the packages – you'll carry them through to the back garden; you're putting them all in the bin.

You have no other option. Your neighbour's house remains shrouded in darkness and not one of the parcels displays a return address. And if your bravery falters out there with the dustbins, then there is always the shed.

You stand, swaying, over the packages, ignoring the way that they're slumped as if sprawling – the loll of the balloon - one on top. You've just grasped it when the banging starts up.

It's not the wall anymore, but your front door, the knocking so hard that it's shaking the frame. And though the bangs stop abruptly, you're also shaking, abruptly sober and goose-bumped with cold.

With the sounds, the temperature's plummeted, though the room's air is thickening too – the reek from the packages is growing, or there's something as soiled beyond...

You can hear ragged breaths through the door's waiting panels and I'm not here, you catch yourself wishing, but it's too late to turn off the light. Besides, you can't move – the parcel's welded to your fingers – until your visitor speaks and it seems to

twitch in response and then falls from your trembling hands.

"What a good neighbour you are..."

The voice is nothing like the one you've been imagining; it's not like any voice that you've ever heard. It's drawn-out and deep, a dense growl with a hiss at the end of each word –

"I believe that you have some things of mine. Please let me in. It's time I took them back home."

You don't glance at the packages. You can only look at the door. Then you're taking a step, but not towards it. You are shuffling backwards, away. Your chilled bones understand what is best for you. Everything about Mr Fenrir is wrong.

"I know you're in there," the voice continues. "You can't have them. I want them. They need me" – a terrible, rasping pause, before – "You bitch. Give them here. Open up."

You slump down to your knees as the hammering starts up again, louder. The door jumps, the chain strains, but it holds.

And then there's just scuffling and rasping, an angry, frustrated sigh. Your nails dig into your sweating palms – but after a moment you hear the click of the gate and a car door slams. An engine snarls into life, but you can't move till it's roaring away.

He has gone; the relief overwhelms you. But you remain tense and listening, and it hits you –

You can still hear that raw, ragged hitching, a breathing that

isn't your own.

You turn around to stare at the packages, at the clear shape they form on the sofa and at the roundest one, on the carpet, resting right there at your side. And has it rolled closer? You reach out, but your hand hovers, frozen –

You watch the brown paper suck in and then slowly puff out.



#### **Author Alison Moore**

Alison Moore is a novelist and short story writer. Her first novel, *The Lighthouse*, was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize and the National Book Awards, and won the McKitterick Prize. She recently published her fifth novel, *The Retreat*, and a trilogy for children, beginning with *Sunny and the Ghosts*. Her short stories have been included in *Best British Short Stories*, *Best British Horror and Best New Horror*, and broadcast on BBC Radio, and are collected in *The Pre-War House and Other Stories*, whose title story won the New Writer Novella Prize, and in *Eastmouth and Other Stories*, which will be published in October 2022. She is an honorary lecturer in the School of English at the University of Nottingham.

website www.alison-moore.com

English-Korean translator Yoon Sungjin

On the day of the protest, Glenda decided to drive out to the retail park to buy weed killer. She was just setting out, getting into third gear, when a pigeon dawdling on the road caused her to brake hard. The pigeon seemed oblivious, even when Glenda's two-tonne car was virtually on top of it. Perhaps the car actually was on top of it, because having stopped dead, Glenda could not see the pigeon anywhere. She was just about to get out to look beneath her wheels when she saw the pigeon wandering to the side of the road. She watched its strangely sluggish progress, and then drove on, towards the edge of the village.

The garden was really Dougie's responsibility, but work was taking it out of him these days. On his day off, he just lay on the sofa, with the cat asleep on top of him, or sometimes the cat fell asleep on the carpet or in the lengthening grass, wherever it

happened to be. Dougie himself did not really sleep, he just lay there, with no energy for Glenda, or for his projects: at the far end of the overgrown garden, a half-dug pond had been abandoned; and the second-hand furniture that he had bought to spruce up was gathering dust in the spare room. The last piece he had done was the little table on which their telephone stood: he had spent weeks sanding and then staining and varnishing it, although Glenda hated the darkness of its wood, and its rickety, skeletal legs.

She had just got onto a faster stretch of road leading out of the village when another pigeon staggered out in front of her car, not even flinching away from the vehicle as she skimmed past. She wondered what was wrong with these pigeons; they were like zombies.

It was not just Dougie; it seemed to be everyone who worked at that factory. They had all lost their pep. No one in the village liked the factory, although the men needed the jobs; it employed hundreds of them. It was an ugly, stony-faced building, ruining what had been a nice stretch of riverside, at a spot where the locals used to swim—some still did, but not many. The women had been worrying about the factory's emissions, about what

exactly was going into the air. Sometimes the smoke that went into the clouds looked yellow. And was anything going into the river, anything that should not be? Dougie used to fish there, but he did not do that anymore. And there was that terrible smell, which had to be coming from the factory.

At the bend, where the road turned away from the river, there was a pigeon, flattened against the tarmac. Its grey wings were splayed around its crushed body. Its underbelly was turned up to face the sky, to face the wheels of the oncoming traffic. These pigeons reminded Glenda of the summer outbreak of flying ants, which did not fly off at the flap of a hand as houseflies did; or they reminded her of the houseflies themselves, the listlessness that came over them at the end of the summer, leaving them too slow to avoid the swatter. But she had never before noticed the phenomenon in birds or in other creatures.

Glenda had written the council a letter, which the other women had signed. The letter asked questions about those emissions; it suggested that the factory might be affecting the health of the workers; it requested a thorough investigation and the suspension of operations pending the results. The men had not signed the letter. The letter had been forwarded to a

secretary who would liaise with the relevant committee; it was then, after somebody's holiday, to be discussed at a forthcoming meeting. Not having heard anything for a while, Glenda had left messages on a council answerphone. In the meantime, the women were going to go on a protest march. "We never used to take things lying down," Glenda had said to the women. "When we were students, we used to march." They used to go down to London, on coaches; they had marched through the capital in their thousands, to force things to change. "We should," the women had said in response. "We should do that." Since then, they had been meeting every Wednesday morning at Fiona's house. Fiona had provided refreshments while they made placards, nailing boards to wooden sticks and painting slogans on them—WE WANT ANSWERS!—slogans that they would shout as they marched. They had photocopied flyers to put through people's letterboxes. They had notified the local paper.

Glenda glanced at the dashboard clock. It was almost noon; they were due to meet to start the protest at one o'clock. They would march down Union Street to the river, right down to the factory. They would stand outside that grim building and stamp their feet and shout, make some noise. Someone would have to respond; something would have to be done.

She pulled into the car park of the Do-It-Yourself store, disturbing a couple of birds, which flapped up into the air and flew away. She parked near the entrance and went inside the store. As she entered the gardening section, she recognised a neighbour who was standing looking at the lawnmowers. Glenda said hello. She could not remember her neighbour's name. The woman continued to stare at a lawnmower, and Glenda thought that she had not heard her, but then the woman said, "I've been here for hours. I just can't decide."

"Are you coming on the protest?" asked Glenda.

"I just can't decide," said the woman.

Glenda turned away and picked up a spray-gun bottle of ready-to-use weed killer. She took it over to the till, where the cashier was sharing a joke with a man who had bought paint in a shade called "Nursery". The colour looked putrid to Glenda. The man turned away and the cashier looked at Glenda and said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Glenda, lifting her free hand and touching her face. "It's just a rash." She handed over the weed killer.

"Two pounds," said the cashier.

Glenda looked at the silver and copper in her purse. She could not be bothered to count out the coins. She handed over a note and waited for her change, and then stood struggling with the zip of her purse. She took her weed killer and moved towards the exit, aware of the cashier watching her as she walked away.

She strapped the weed killer into the passenger seat, as if it were a child. She did not want it sliding around, bursting open, weed killer going everywhere. She drove home slowly, carefully.

It was after one o'clock when she returned to the outskirts of the village, where she found Fiona sitting on the kerb, with a placard on the pavement beside her. Glenda came to a stop and wound down her window. She said to Fiona, "Have they gone already?"

Fiona raised her eyes. "Who?"

"The other women," said Glenda. "Have they started the march?"

"No one else has turned up," said Fiona.

"Oh," said Glenda. "Well, I have to take the car home, then I'm going to walk back down here and join you. Even if it's just the two of us, we can still march down to the factory. We can still make some noise." She drove home, passing a car that was so badly parked it looked as if it had just been abandoned midmanoeuvre, and stopped to move a child's bike that had been left lying across the road. She backed her car into a kerbside space and took the weed killer inside. She put on some sunscreen and checked her appearance in the mirror. She was wearing the olive-green eyeliner that Dougie had once said brought alive her copper-coloured eyes, but now she wondered if it was just making her look a bit ill. She put down some food for the cat. By the time she got back down to the corner with her placard, Fiona was no longer there. Glenda thought about going to the factory anyway, on her own, but she did not really think she had the energy.

When Glenda got home again, she filled a glass with water from the tap, and drank it standing at the sink. It was past lunchtime, but she was not hungry, and there was still food in the cat's bowl from before. She went through to the lounge and sat down in an armchair, next to the second-hand table with the phone on it. She thought she had disliked that table, but now she could not really see what was wrong with it; she did not have any strong feelings about it either way. Next to the phone were her phone numbers. There was the number for the council—she would have to call them again at some point, about that letter she had sent to them. And there was Fiona's number—she ought to call her; she ought to call everyone. The protest would have to be rescheduled. The numbers seemed to blur; she must be tired. She switched on the TV and watched the afternoon programmes. She was still sitting there when Dougie came in from the factory. He lay down on the sofa.

"Have you seen the cat?" asked Glenda.

"Uh-uh," said Dougie.

In between TV programmes, Glenda said, "I'm going to go up to bed," but she did not actually move for a while.

Eventually, she got to the bathroom and picked up her toothbrush. She looked at herself in the mirror. It felt like being stared at by a stranger. Her eyes were the colour of dull pennies.

She left the bathroom and got into bed. She looked at her book but she felt that she just wanted to sleep. She realised that she had somehow not cleaned her teeth after all. She thought about her unbrushed teeth rotting in the night, but she did not get up again; she just left them.

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A week and a half later, Glenda found the cat beneath the back wheel of her car, against the kerb. It must not have moved out of the way when Glenda was parking. She had not been anywhere since the previous weekend, when she had gone to fetch that weed killer.

She stood at the kerb, trying to remember what she had come outside for. There was no point driving over to Fiona's house: the group had dissolved.

Glenda's placard was still propped against the front wall. She picked it up, looking at the faded lettering: WE WANT ANSWERS! Had she written that? It did not sound like her, like something she would say. Perhaps she had got somebody else's placard by mistake. She stood on the pavement, near the kerb.

She could see the factory chimney in the distance, down by the river, belching its mustard smoke into the sky. Dougie would be taking his lunch break soon. She could walk down there and try to see him, see if he was feeling any better. If she found, on the way, that she did not want to keep carrying the placard, which may or may not have been hers, she could just leave it somewhere.

She stepped into the road, with the sign hanging down, the message (WE WANT ANSWERS!) dangling in the gutter. She moved out into the road, slowly, as if she were stepping through the mud at the edge of the river, mud in which Dougie had seen fish lying belly up.

She did have a sense of the size and weight of the vehicle that was coming towards her. She was not oblivious to the juggernaut that was bearing down on her. But it felt more peripheral, more distant, than it was. She was moving forward, looking towards the far side of the road, but with no great sense of urgency.





#### **Author Christine Poulson**

Before Christine Poulson turned to writing fiction, she was an academic with a PhD in History of Art. Her Cassandra James mysteries are set in Cambridge. *Deep Water*, the first in a new series featuring medical researcher Katie Flanagan, appeared in 2016. The second, *Cold, Cold Heart*, set in Antarctica, came out in 2018, and the third, *An Air That Kills*, in 2019. Her short stories have been published in Comma Press anthologies, Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Crime Writers' Association anthologies, the Mammoth Book of Best British Mysteries, and elsewhere. They have been short-listed for the Short Mystery Fiction Derringer, the Margery Allingham Prize, and the CWA Short Story Dagger.

website http://www.christinepoulson.co.uk/ https://commapress.co.uk/authors/christine-poulson E-mail christine@christinepoulson.co.uk

English - Korean translator Suh Eunkyung

Nell woke up with a start. She could hear someone talking.

It was the first time she had been left in charge overnight. She and Polly were alone in the house. So what was Nell hearing? Polly didn't have a TV in her room and she wasn't allowed a mobile phone. She did have an iPad, but it stayed downstairs at night. Matthew, Polly's father, was adamant about that.

Nell sat up in bed and switched her bedside light on. She squinted at her phone. It was one in the morning. She got out of bed and went quietly onto the landing. A low murmur was coming from Polly's room. She trod softly, but one of the floorboards creaked. Instantly, there was silence. She knocked on Polly's door, opened it without waiting for a reply, and switched on the light.

Polly sat up in bed, blinking. She had crinkly red hair, like a girl in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, and the pale skin and pale eyelashes that go with it. Grown-up and with the right make-up,

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she would look stunning, but at eleven, she looked washed out, like an over-exposed photograph.

'I thought I heard voices,' Nell said.

Polly hesitated and Nell thought she was going to deny it. But: 'I was talking to Daisy.' Daisy was Polly's favourite toy, a black and white stuffed dog.

Could that be true? Maybe. Polly still liked to be bolstered in bed by a company of teddy bears, pandas, and other animals.

'It's late,' Nell said. 'You ought to be asleep.'

She tucked Polly in and went back to her own room.

It was hot up here in the eaves of the cottage. She opened the window and leaned out. The soft night air caressed her face and the scent of cut grass rose up from the garden. Fields of ripe wheat stretched away, gleaming under a full yellow moon. The cottage was on the edge of a village in Cambridgeshire. Now and then she could hear the hum of the motorway half a mile away and see the flash of an occasional headlight.

It was the summer of her first year at university, studying English. Her mother worked at the same firm of city bankers as Matthew, and that was how Nell had got the job. It was very well paid – she couldn't believe how much she was getting – but she had to live in. Matthew often worked late entertaining clients, and on those evenings, he stayed at his London flat.

Still, how hard could it be? she'd asked herself. Polly wouldn't need that much looking after. But the job was more full-on than she had expected, because during term-time Polly was at boarding school, so she didn't have any friends locally. And there was Polly herself. She was a nice enough kid, polite and amenable, fell in with everything that Nell suggested – they went shopping, painted their nails, did girlie things together – but she never expressed a preference. There was something withheld about her. She wasn't at all like Nell had been at her age, throwing herself headlong into everything, tearing around the playground, giggling with her friends.

Oh well, it was only for a month. Matthew had made other plans for the rest of the holidays. One week down, three more to go.

Nell got into bed. Wide awake now, she settled down to read *The Turn of the Screw*. It was one of the set books for next term.

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'Oh – hell,' Nell said, just in time managing not to say 'fuck.'
'I've lost a button.'

And it was her favourite shirt too: well, blouse really, a vintage fifties number, red with white polka dots, a tie waist, and square

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mother-of-pearl buttons. It had been a charity shop find. That was where Nell got most of her clothes.

It was the following morning and they'd just got back from a trip to the swimming pool in Cambridge.

'They're such nice buttons, too,' Nell lamented.

'There might be one like it in Mummy's button box,' Polly said.

Nell knew that Polly's mother had died the previous year. An accident, Matthew had told her. She didn't know the details.

'Great,' Nell said. 'Let's do that.'

'I'll get the key,' Polly said with the first show of animation that Nell had seen.

The key?

Nell followed Polly out of the kitchen into the hall and to the door of Matthew's study. Polly went in and came back with a key in her hand. She wasn't meeting Nell's eye.

'Is this the key to the room that's kept locked?' Nell asked.

Matthew had explained that. 'My late wife's belongings – I haven't had time to sort through them. In the meantime, I don't want Polly going in there and rummaging around. Best if she doesn't think too much about her mother.'

'Just to get the button box,' Polly pleaded. 'I don't think Daddy would mind that.'

Nell wasn't so sure. But she did need a button for her blouse... 'All right then. Just for the button box.'

The room was in an extension that had been built onto one side of the cottage. The air was hot and stale as if no-one had been in there for a long time. Dust motes hung in the light that slanted in through the windows. There was a single bed, a sewing machine, and a dressmaker's dummy. A wardrobe stretched along one wall and shelves ran up to the ceiling.

'Mummy was ever so clever,' Polly said. 'She used to make her own clothes.'

She spotted the button box on one of the shelves.

It was just a plain cardboard box, but inside were riches indeed. Nell plunged her hand in and let the buttons stream like pebbles through her fingers. Mother-of-pearl and jet, diamante and glass, buttons covered in silk or linen, humble shirt buttons, tiny little black buttons – were they boot buttons? – and big bold statement buttons. All sorts of shapes – flat ones, globes, domes, squares, oblongs – and wonderful colours: coral, emerald, cerulean blue. It was so poignant, seeing them still here, when the woman who had collected them had gone.

She looked up to see Polly gazing wistfully around. Nell couldn't let her explore further, though she was curious herself. She resolved to take the first opportunity to come back and have

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a proper look round.

'Come on,' she said. 'We'll take these to the kitchen.'

They tipped all the buttons onto the big scrubbed pine table, sifting through them until they found one to match the button Nell had lost.

Can I keep the box in my room?' Polly asked.

But Nell thought they had better put it back.

When they'd done that, they locked the door behind them. Nell followed Polly into Matthew's study to see that she returned the key. And, also, so that she'd know where to find it again.

As Polly closed the desk drawer, she looked at Nell and a look of complicity flashed between them.

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The following day Polly had a two-hour riding lesson, giving Nell some free time. Back at the cottage, she got the key and unlocked the sewing room.

As she stepped over the threshold, she felt a frisson. She was like one of those bold girls in fairy stories: Bluebeard's wife or Goldilocks. Or perhaps it was like *Jane Eyre*... Though Matthew was – sadly – no Mr Rochester. He was fiftyish, overweight, and a smoker too. Nell disapproved, but at least he had the decency

not to smoke around Polly.

There was a door on the other side of the room. A closet? She opened it and saw a small bathroom with a shower, basin and loo, and a cupboard. She opened it and gasped. A row of heads stared at her. They were wig stands, three of them – polystyrene heads with smooth expressionless faces and blind eyes. There were two wigs, one a feathery crop, the other shoulder-length, both a blonde so pale that it was almost silver. One stand was empty, just a shiny bald head. She picked up the nearest stand and took it to the window. The strands of hair weren't all the same colour – there were subtle shifts of tone and some glinted in the light. Surely that meant it was real hair? The thought made her uncomfortable. She put the wig away and went into the sewing room.

She gazed around. She didn't even know the name of the dead woman. She opened the wardrobe door. What a lot of clothes and such lovely clothes too. She took a dress out of the wardrobe and looked at the label – Ghost – a chiffony, floaty affair. So sad... all these clothes left behind.

The alarm went off on Nell's phone. Time to go and collect Polly from the stables. She would come back and have a proper look another day. They cooked spaghetti Bolognese that night.

Nell wasn't expected to do any real cooking. Her job was just to look after Polly. The domestic routine ran like clockwork all on its own. Twice a week a woman came in to clean and take the washing away. A gardener came for an afternoon a week. There was a dishwasher and a freezer full of ready meals. But cooking was a nice thing to do with Polly – better than spending all their time on Netflix or playing 8 Ball Pool on their iPads.

As they chopped onions and fried mince, Nell's thoughts kept drifting back to the wigs. She wondered if Polly's mother had been ill, had lost her hair through chemotherapy. Or perhaps she had one of those diseases where your hair falls out? A girl at Nell's school had actually pulled out her own hair – it was a stress-related thing.

When Matthew came home, they ate at the kitchen table. They'd almost finished when Matthew paused mid-sentence. He ran his tongue round his lips and put his hand to his mouth. 'A hair.' Frowning, he struggled to grasp it. He pulled and it came and came and came like a stream of handkerchiefs from a conjurer's hat. He laid it on the side of his plate and looked at the two girls.

'Not mine,' Nell said. Her hair was just as long, but it was a rich dark brown.

Polly didn't speak, but it clearly wasn't hers. Her hair was a reddish gold and kinked. The hair on the plate was straight and so blonde that it was almost silver.

Where could it have come from? Could Nell have picked it up on her clothes when she had visited the forbidden room? Could it have come from one of the wigs? Matthew didn't say anything, but she thought he looked at her strangely.

The next time Polly went riding, Nell raced back to the cottage.

She let herself into the room, went straight to the bathroom, and opened the cupboard. The faces gazed impassively at her. The hair in Matthew's food couldn't have come from either of these wigs. Neither was long enough.

The sewing room itself was clean, apart from a little dust. She didn't think she had picked up the hair here. She decided to have another look at the clothes. There were one or two labels that she recognised, but most of them seemed to be hand-made. At the back of the wardrobe there was something in a protective

cover. Nell took it out and unzipped it and inside was a long dress in ivory silk. A wedding dress? She slipped it off its padded hanger and held it against her face. It was cool and slippery, and so heavy. Those little pearls on the bodice must have been sewn by hand. She remembered what Polly had said and wondered if Polly's mother had made this herself. There was something strange about the sleeves. They gaped open as if they'd been slit. She looked more closely and received a little shock. The tight-fitting sleeves should have been buttoned up to the elbow. The little loops were still there, but not the buttons. They had been cut off - carelessly, leaving jagged holes in the cloth. She turned the dress over. There should have been buttons down the back from the neckline to below the waist, but those too had been ripped away. One round pearl button remained, dangling from a thread. When she touched the little opalescent globe, it came away in her hand.

She slipped it into the pocket of her jeans, slid the dress back into its sheath and put it back in the wardrobe. She looked round to check that nothing was out of place. As she locked the door behind her, she noticed something that she hadn't seen before: a bolt high up on the outside of the door.

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The vast Fenland fields and the huge empty skies stretched out on either side. Nell was a city girl, born and brought up in London. Driving back from the stables, she felt exposed and vulnerable, like a beetle crawling across a table-cloth. It didn't help that her period was late and she felt bloated and sluggish. And the heat was building. She opened the car window, but even the breeze was hot. It hadn't rained for weeks and they were talking about a drought.

Nell couldn't stop thinking about the ruined dress. The violence was shocking, the desecration of something so beautiful – it could never be repaired – what would make a woman do this to her own wedding dress? But perhaps it hadn't been her? Perhaps it had been Matthew? No wonder he hadn't wanted Polly to see this. Nell wished that she hadn't seen it. And the bolt: she could understand there being one on the inside, but why was there one on the *outside*?

They got stuck behind a farm lorry. It lumbered along the road ahead of them, its load of bales a swaying tower. Specks and stalks of chaff eddied behind it like sparks in the draught of a bonfire. It turned off and a flock of pigeons swooped down to peck at the debris left behind. As Nell's car approached, they scattered. But one, too laggard, misjudged, hit the windscreen with a bang that made the glass vibrate, and was flung off to the

side.

Polly cried out. Nell pulled over and she and Polly stared at each other, aghast. The bird must be dead, Nell thought, but she had to be sure. She got out and, followed by Polly, walked back to where it lay on the verge. She squatted down beside it. It looked uninjured – there was no blood – but the eyes were closed, the body limp. How beautiful it was when you saw it up close, the green iridescence on its neck, the elegant bands of slate grey on the paler grey of the wings and then the pathos of the little legs and claws curled under, useless now. The impact must have killed it instantly. A little life snuffed out in a moment.

Polly's eyes were full of tears and Nell felt like crying too. She put her arm round Polly. Polly leaned into her and put her hand into Nell's.

'Can we take it home and give it a funeral?' Polly asked.

Nell thought about that. Didn't they carry diseases? Fleas or something?

'I don't think we'd better,' she concluded.

They drove home in silence.

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Matthew was home for supper and Nell made a risotto.

Matthew had taken only a few mouthfuls, when: 'What the --' He reached into his mouth and plucked out something with his thumb and forefinger.

'I've cracked a tooth!' He held up a small, white object.

For a few moments Nell thought it was the actual tooth, but when he went over to the sink and rinsed it, she saw that it was a pearl button. He put it down on the edge of the sink.

'How did this get in the food?' he asked.

He didn't raise his voice, but Nell could see that he was coldly furious.

'Polly?' he asked.

Polly shrank back, frightened and mute. She shook her head.

Out of the corner of her eye, Nell caught something. There was a slight slope to the edge of the sink and the pearl button was on the move.

Matthew saw it, too. He shot out a hand, but he was too late.

'Damn! It's gone down the plug-hole.' He spoke sharply. 'I'm asking you again, Nell: do you know how that object got in the food?'

She came to herself. 'What? No, I'm really sorry, no idea. I can't think how that could have happened.'

Matthew grabbed his plate and scrapped the rest of the risotto into the bin. Without a word, he left the kitchen, banging the door behind him. He went down the garden and stood by the pond. He got out a packet of cigarettes and lit up.

Nell and Polly finished their meal in silence. Polly went up to her room as soon as she had finished. Nell stacked the dishwasher and followed her up. As soon as she was alone in her room, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her jeans and felt about for the button. It was no longer there.

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The next day Matthew left early before Polly and Nell got up. He rang later to say that he might be staying in London that night and that he had managed to get an emergency dentist's appointment.

It was still so hot and humid. Nell's period hadn't come and that seemed all of a piece with the thundery weather, the feeling of heaviness and something building up. If only it would rain...

Polly went to the swing and swung lazily backwards and forwards. Nell wandered off down the garden to where a weeping willow hung over the pond, its silvery fronds touching its surface. She sat below the tree and dangled her feet in the cool water. Here, as elsewhere, no expense had been spared. The pond had been stocked with water lilies and other aquatic

plants. Irregular slabs of stone were piled up at one end to make a shallow waterfall. The sound of trickling water lulled Nell and as she gazed into the depths of the pond, her eyes slipped out of focus... Her thoughts drifted... how strange... that plant, billowing out into the water, those thin silvery strands stroking her toes... it was like... yes, it was like hair... it was hair, long blonde hair! Nell jerked her feet away. She looked again. Of course it wasn't hair. It was just pale fronds of water weed waving in the ripples from the waterfall.

Just for a moment she'd thought... after all, there was an empty stand and a missing wig.

Where was that wig now, she wondered? A horrible thought occurred to her. Had Polly's mum been *buried* in it?

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Feeling shaken, Nell went indoors. Polly soon came in, too. They spent the rest of the day lolling around, watching TV with the curtains closed against the sun.

They had a pizza from the freezer for supper and at about nine Polly went up to get ready for bed.

Some time later, a scream brought Nell up the stairs two at a time to find Polly cowering on her bed. The room was full of

movement, a flapping, a blundering in the air. Something swooped towards Nell – a bat! It touched her and for a heart-stopping moment, she thought it was tangled in her hair – but then it was gone, back through the open window, out into the night, swallowed up as if it was a part of the darkness from which it had emerged.

Then Polly was in her arms, and she felt the thin body shuddering.

'Hey, hey, it was only a bat,' she said, trying to cover up her own shock. 'It was just as frightened as we were.'

She went over and closed the window, Polly still clinging to her. 'There, it can't get in again.'

'I'm frightened,' Polly said. 'Can I sleep in your room tonight?'
Nell hesitated. But after all, why not, there were twin beds in her room.

'Come on then.'

Polly picked up Daisy and her pillow. Something slipped out of the pillowcase and landed with a clunk on the floor. She snatched it up, but it was too late. Nell had seen what it was. A mobile phone!

'Give me that, please, Polly.'

Polly handed it over. Guilt was written all over her face.

'Where did this come from?' Nell asked.

Polly's eyes were filling with tears.

'My aunt Jessica gave it to me. So that we can talk to each other'

'You're not supposed to have this, you know that. Was that who you were talking to the other night?'

'I hate Daddy,' Polly burst out. 'She wanted me to go and stay with her and Daddy wouldn't let me. She lives in California.'

'Is she your mum's sister?'

Polly nodded. 'Please don't take the phone away.'

It wasn't so long since Nell had been Polly's age and it all came back in a rush: the awful powerlessness of being a child, the yearning for things that you weren't allowed to have, the knowledge that adults were in control and that there was nothing, nothing you could do.

'Alright,' Nell said. 'But you mustn't let your father find out. I'd get into trouble, too.'

Polly's face lit up. 'Oh, I won't, I won't. I promise.'

Nell saw that a photo had been slipped inside the case. It showed a much younger Polly, five or six, standing between two women, clearly sisters.

'Is one of these your mum?'

Polly nodded. She reached out and put her finger on the photo. 'That's her. And that's Aunt Jess.'

'What's her name? Your mum's name, I mean.'

'Isabel.'

'She's pretty.'

Her hair was long and loose, the colour of the wigs. Her sister was blonde, too, but darker.

How poignant they were, old photos ... It struck Nell for the first time that there were no photos of Isabel around the house. Wasn't that strange?

She gave the photo back to Polly.

'Come on. Let's get you settled.'

They went into Nell's room and Polly got into bed.

Soon Nell joined her, but try as she might, she couldn't get comfortable in her own bed. It wasn't just the heat. The mattress felt lumpy. She got out and threw back the sheet – it was too hot for a duvet. Nothing there, but she could feel that there was something beneath the under sheet, no, actually under the mattress cover. She stripped the bed.

A row of teeth ran like the nodules of a spine down the centre of the mattress.

She gasped and shut her eyes. When she opened them, of course they weren't teeth. They were pearls, pearl buttons, like the ones from the wedding dress.

But how on earth had they got there? The answer came to her

in a flash. Polly! That explained everything. It was all down to Polly – the hair in the pasta, the tooth in the risotto, and now this.

Nell looked over at the other bed.

Polly was sitting up, staring, open-mouthed, wide-eyed. Then her gaze shifted to Nell and she read Nell's thoughts.

'It wasn't me! Really it wasn't!'

'I won't be cross.'

'I didn't! I didn't!' She started to sob.

'Hey.' Nell went and sat on Polly's bed and put her arm round her.

Polly went on insisting that she hadn't put the buttons in Nell's bed. When she had at last fallen asleep, Nell went quietly downstairs, taking the buttons with her. She got the key from Matthew's study and opened the door to the sewing room. There was a figure standing motionless in the moonlight. She gasped and her hand went to her chest. She fumbled for the light switch. It seemed an eternity before the light came on and revealed – the dressmaker's dummy. She let out her breath in a long sigh.

The button box was where they had left it. She put the buttons in it, went out, and locked the door behind her. She zipped the key into an internal pocket in her handbag, where Polly wouldn't find it. Then, feeling foolish, but unable to help

herself, she went round the house and checked that she had locked all the doors and windows.

Sleep was a long time coming. There must be something wrong with Polly. Either she was lying or – even more worrying – she'd put the buttons in the bed, but she didn't know she'd done it. Nell wished she'd never taken the job. She decided to ring her mother the next day.

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Nell did ring her mother, but somehow things seemed different by then and she accepted what her mum said, that it was just a silly joke. She didn't want to leave Polly. She thought of the small hand slipped into hers at the side of the road. Matthew was not an affectionate father. There were no hugs, no 'love you's and when Nell thought of her own ebullient father, she felt sorry for Polly. No wonder the poor kid was a bit disturbed.

By mid-afternoon the cramping pains had begun and at the same time her mood lifted. She felt relaxed and sleepy. The weather was changing too. It was still stiflingly humid, but far away across the fens, clouds were massing. Rain was on its way.

After supper, Polly went up to her room. Nell stayed in the

sitting room to finish *The Turn of the Screw*. She was woozy with painkillers and soon her eyelids began to droop. She fell asleep on the sofa.

She woke up, damp and sweaty with her hair plastered to her face and neck. She pushed it aside, but a hair remained stuck to her lips. She tried to get a grip on it, but it seemed to be actually in her mouth now and she gathered saliva to try to dislodge it. It didn't work. The sensation remained – and a musty taste. She went into the kitchen to see what a glass of water would do.

As she ran the tap, she heard something above the sound of the running water. It had been something familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. She went into the hall and listened. Nothing. She was turning to go back to the kitchen, when her eye was caught by something. The bolt on the sewing room door had been shot. But who could have done that? Polly couldn't reach it. Then the sound came again and she knew what it was this time: the stop-go staccato of an electric sewing machine. It was coming from behind the door to the locked and bolted room. The hairs went up on the back of her neck.

And that was when she really woke up, still on the sofa, shuddering and gasping.

She lay there for a few minutes, letting her breath settle, until she heard a car pulling up outside. The beams of its headlights

flickered across the room. Matthew must be home. She looked at her watch. Only half past eight. She had better slip upstairs and check on Polly.

Polly was in bed and asleep. Nell went to her own room. She was still shaken by the dream and she didn't want to encounter Matthew just yet. Though in fact, she hadn't heard him come in. He had probably gone straight into the garden to have a smoke. She looked out of the window. Yes, there was a pinpoint of light in the gloom and she could just make him out, standing by the pond.

Cool air flowed in through the open window. The storm was surely about to break. The sky was overcast and the sun had set, but a sullen light lingered in the garden, too dim to distinguish more than the shapes of things and making it hard to focus. The trees, the shrubs, seemed to advance and retreat. The figure by the pond seemed almost to flicker, to shift and jerk.

She saw a glowing arc as Matthew flipped the butt of his cigarette into the water. Later she found it hard to describe – even to herself – what happened next. She thought he was turning towards the house, but no, he swung back as if he had been caught by the shoulder. Nell strained to see. He seemed to writhe, as if something were shaking him to and fro – for an instant the scene was illuminated by a flash of lightning – then, a

cry and a splash.

The next half hour was a blur: the dash for a neighbour, the nightmare struggle to drag Matthew's water-logged body out of the pond, the neighbour pulling strands of water weed out of his mouth. All the time the rain fell in sheets. Attempts to revive Mathew were in vain. Amazingly, Polly slept through it all.

The post-mortem found that Matthew had not drowned. He had died of a heart attack that had caused him to pitch headlong into the pond.

Nell wondered if she should tell someone what she had seen. For a split second – stamped on her retina by the flash of lightning – she had seen – or thought she had seen – rising from the pond, a dark mass, all hair and teeth. But who would believe that? She hardly believed it herself.

A couple of months later, she got a text message from Polly with a photo attached. She was standing in the California sun, hand in hand with her smiling aunt. Polly was smiling too.



#### **Author Deborah Ennis**

Deborah Ennis has been writing stories since she was in primary school. She took a degree in Writing, Publishing and Communication Studies at Middlesex University and got involved in community theatre. She stopped writing when life got busy. She has worked as a midwife, including in Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, in 2013, her sister asked her to read a poem at her wedding, and things snowballed from there. She now writes all the time: notes, short stories, poems and the beginnings of novels. She enjoys taking something that triggers her imagination and then watching it unfold onto the page. The sharing part is a bit scary.

English - Korean translator Suh Eunkyung

"What do you want?" asked Elaine, annoyed at the figure that drifted into her line of vision as she was making her bed. She had already sensed its presence. She turned her head to look at the ghostly woman. She noticed the ugly bruising around her neck.

"Did your boyfriend do that to you?" she asked impatiently. She was sick of these women coming to her for help and clogging up her time. Taking revenge when you were a ghost was just pointless.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but what came out sounded so low that Elaine could not hear it. The effort also appeared to make the ghost look more transparent.

Elaine held up her hand to stop her. "Just hang on love, this is not working."

She closed her eyes and started to take long deep breaths until she got to the point where she was starting to feel just a

What can I do for you?

little lightheaded – she concentrated on relaxing her mind, calming her inner spirit, and taking down the mental barriers that she erected to keep the annoying specters out.

When she opened her eyes again, the young woman appeared more solid. She could see other spirits trying to make their way into her peripheral vision. This always happened when she lowered her barriers – the buggers tried to make their way in with their bloody messages.

"Get lost," she shouted at them. She had given up telling them to fuck off years ago; the young ones had kept getting a blast of her profanity once too often. Who knew that ghosts cried real tears.

"Start again," she said, turning her full attention to her unwanted guest. She really could not wait to hear her pitiful story.

"I know that you are angry," the ghost said, apologizing for her appearance. "But you are the strongest around here and I've been trying for weeks to get through to you," she said desperately.

"So how long have you been dead...trapped?" asked Elaine, only partially interested.

"Four months. I'm not even buried. I'm a missing person," she said, her voice beginning to crack.

"Don't cry," said Elaine, shaking her head. "Believe it or not, I do not have tissues that ghosts can use and this is not a counseling service. What do you need?"

The ghost looked taken aback by Elaine's harsh manner. "I just need some help," she said, almost scared to ask.

"Spit it out. I'll warn you now, I'm not in the business of murdering anyone, nor am I bothered about taking revenge. I work full-time, so any help that I give has to kinda fit around that."

"He's doing it again," said the ghost. "He's found himself a new girl..."

"Don't tell me... He's beating up his new girlfriend. Well ain't that a surprise," said Elaine, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "You should have shopped this guy to the police when you were alive."

"I couldn't... I didn't believe that he would." The ghost looked down at the ground. She looked lost. The sadness came off her in waves and Elaine felt the need to take a step back.

"Look, Miss, whatever your name is, my condolences and all that, but what is it that you think I can do?"

"Stop him. He's started the mind games... He does that to make you feel like you're upsetting him, like you're the one making the mistakes, then the punching... the violence... it all

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starts. Then you end up like this." She pointed to the bruising around her throat.

"My help is limited. Only a few of my close friends know that I see ghosts and none of them are police officers. In fact, I don't know any police officers," said Elaine matter-of-factly.

"But you could warn her," said the ghost.

"Where did you live?" asked Elaine. She had to know how much of an effort this mission of mercy was going to take. She sincerely hoped that it was not going to be a long thing.

"Liverpool," she replied.

"That's nearly an hour's drive away from here. Who is paying for the petrol? You ghosts can't see into the future so it's not like you can give me the winning lottery numbers," Elaine moaned.

"Well, I know that you like to play cards, I've seen you," said the ghost tentatively.

"And?" asked Elaine.

"I could help you win a few hands," she said.

"You can only help me win if you can actually play the game. Can you?" asked Elaine, warming to the idea.

"I can hold my own," said the ghost.

"Poker, I mean proper poker, serious poker, not the one you all play drinking games with," said Elaine.

"I know how to play, I used to play with my brothers..." Her

words faltered, unspoken words tumbling into the silence.

"Like I said, I haven't got any ghost tissues," said Elaine, her tone a little less harsh.

"Just help me stop him. I can play, I will help you win," she said, with growing determination.

"It's not a bad deal I suppose," said Elaine. "Then you'll get lost and leave me alone?"

"You have my word. He treated me like rubbish. Now he's dumped my body the same way. I'm not missing. I'm rotting away," she said, becoming angry. "What will be left for my family to bury? I want him locked up!"

"Wow...stop. That type of anger is where poltergeists come from and I don't let any of them nutters near me or my things," she said, indicating to her possessions in the bedroom. "If any of my things start flying around the room, you are gone," she said firmly.

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to be out there anymore, I deserve peace now."

Elaine couldn't argue with that. It was a shit way to go. "Okay, let's make this easy. I'm not going to chase him down. Sorry love, but I do not need my neck to look like yours," said Elaine. She gave her guest a sympathetic look. "It's the 21st century, we can do this remotely. If he likes to play mind games, let's see

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how he likes being on the receiving end." She went over to her chest of drawers to retrieve her laptop. She opened it and went to sit on her freshly made bed. "Now what I need you to do is tell me a long list of things that only you and he would know, I don't care how casual or nasty, I don't embarrass easily, just give me the details. I will write them down. Then you need to give me your email address and password and this neanderthal is going to get one email a day, maybe two depending on what type of day I've had, until one of two things happens," she said looking at her accomplice. "He will either turn into a paranoid lunatic worrying his arse to death or hopefully give himself up. Hi five bitch!" she said, proud of her idea.

"Do you think it will work?" asked the ghost, her features relaxing for the first time.

Elaine shrugged her shoulders. "He might even dig you back up just to make sure you're dead."

"Then you can phone 999 and get them to arrest him," said the ghost excitedly.

"Bitch, you're already dead... What's the rush?" said Elaine absentmindedly as she typed on the keyboard. "Right, now give me details, and I'll type them onto here."

They spent the next ten minutes writing down her list of ammunition, some of which made her ghost blush. Who knew that could happen.

"There. First one's now sent. Let's see how long it takes before he starts to wobble." She looked up to see her guest starting to fade.

"I can't hold it any longer," her guest said, her voice fading.

Elaine shooed her away with her hand and closed her laptop. "Go and tell your friends to stop trying to get through, this is not the Samaritans. They're giving me a bloody headache. And don't forget, be back here for Friday night – it's my turn to win for a change," she shouted, rubbing her hands together before putting away the laptop.

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# **Author Tom Fletcher**

Tom Fletcher is a writer of horror and dark fantasy novels and short fiction. His first three horror novels, *The Leaping, The Thing on the Shore* and *The Ravenglass Eye*, were followed by *Gleam* and *Idle Hands*, the first two books in The Factory Trilogy, his first fantasy series. He has published three short stories with Nightjar Press: 'The Safe Children', 'Field' and 'The Home'. His new novel, *Witch-Bottle*, is a deeply atmospheric modern gothic tale of grief and guilt.

website https://nightjarpress.weebly.com/tom-fletcher.html E-mail writertomfletcher@googlemail.com

English - Korean Translator Suh Eunkyung

I am sitting in an armchair and watching a small screen. A small TV, that is, positioned in the corner of the room.

My wife is on the screen. She is wearing her work clothes – they are smart and black – and is standing on a grey, uneven plain. She looks lost and bewildered. The landscape is blasted and warped, like something that's melted and then resolidified. The sky above is a uniform orange, like some kind of plastic lid. Tears are running down her cheeks. I am hot with nerves and sweating uncontrollably. I wish I knew where she was. I wish I could do something to help her. I wonder if she can see the camera that is filming her. I wonder how the camera is filming her; it seems to move around her, and zoom in and out, and yet she makes no attempt to communicate with the camera-person. Maybe there is no camera-person; maybe she is being filmed by a tiny robot, so small she cannot see it. Or the kind of remotely controlled camera that they use in surgery. There is no guessing

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what devices exist in the world. Modern technology surpassed my imagination a long time ago.

My room is pretty bare. The floor is naked concrete, completely smooth apart from the odd hole where some bubble surfaced and burst as the concrete set. The walls are covered in a cream-coloured flock wallpaper, and there is a framed print of a painting of an old farmhouse hanging near the door. That's about it. The skin of my feet is clammy and I am shivering.

My wife is moving now, struggling up featureless mounds of stone, sliding down the other side, looking for something. Through the TV, I can hear her shouting and crying and swearing. She has no idea how she arrived at this place and she is scared. She is wearing some small slip-on shoes which are totally impractical for this kind of situation. I realise that she is not looking for any object in particular, just anything at all that isn't grey stone.

I watch as she climbs, on all fours, up a particularly steep slope that looks like a blunted, frozen wave. It seems to be the highest point that she can see, and I guess that she is hoping to get her bearings and look for some clue to her location and work out which direction to head in. Maybe she will spot some greenery, or a river, or a distant town. My fists are clenched with such hope that my fingernails almost pierce the skin of my

palms. I want her to be safe.

My wife – I wish I could remember her name – stands tall and turns around, studying the view in every direction. Her hand is shielding her eyes from the remorselessly orange sky. Eventually she sits down on the edge of the wave, her legs dangling over the drop, and screams. The landscape has no edges. It goes on for ever. There is nothing to see.

I don't know how long this period lasts, with her just sitting there and me just sitting here watching her. But it lasts a long time. I fall into a strange state of sleep, in which my eyes are closed but I remain aware of my beating heart and jittery limbs and wound-up nervous system. It is almost not like sleep at all.

When I wake up, my wife is on the move again. She is striding determinedly onwards. I do not know what decision she has made. I want to ask her so many questions, but can't. This one-way form of limited communication is really just not sufficient. Whoever set it up should have been more considerate, more thoughtful, more thorough. I mean, what kind of husbandwife relationship is this?

Something on-screen changes. A small text box fades into existence, overlaid across the image. My wife, obviously, is unaware of this development, as it occurs somewhere between the camera and my TV. The message reads as follows:

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Your wife has entered the further reaches. These further reaches are haunted by a strange, massive, predatory entity known only as 'The Home'.

'Can you give that message to my wife?' I ask. 'Can you pass that same message on to her?' But the text box just fades away. I scurry forwards and thump the side of the TV. Then I whisper into its speakers, dispersing dust which floats down to the concrete floor. 'Turn around,' I whisper, but my wife does not appear to hear me. I shake my head as I watch her moving forwards into what must be the further reaches. And what is this 'Home'? What kind of creature would inspire such a moniker?

Shortly afterwards – or maybe a few hours later – my wife stops moving, and stands stock-still. She looks around, her face panicked. There seems to be some kind of breeze moving her hair. I sit forward, unsure of why she's stopped. But then, in the silence that follows, I hear it too.

Distant footsteps. Not just footsteps, but slow, heavy, thunderous footfalls occurring somewhere far away. It is The Home. I know this, but of course my wife does not. She starts to run. After a few minutes, she stops and listens again. The sound of the footsteps is, if anything, louder. She turns around and runs off in the opposite direction, this time not stopping for what

feels like a long time, and then only stops when she trips and falls. She lands on her elbows and I think one of them breaks. She rolls around. Once she has stopped shouting, the footfalls of The Home are still audible. It seems to be getting faster, and closer, although there is no visible sign of it on the screen, and she does not appear to have seen it herself. She is getting up now, and stumbling off again, her good arm supporting her damaged one. The camera moves round to film her from behind. The footfalls grow yet louder and the barren landscape starts to shake. The image on the TV screen blurs with each step. I start to hear another sound now, a kind of high-pitched sigh, coming from a million throats. I know, though, that it's only coming from one being, really. The Home. It is the voice of The Home. My wife can hear it too, I think; she keeps casting worried glances backwards, towards the camera. The footfalls are still accelerating, still increasing in volume, so that one is now immediately following the last and each one pounds into the ground with what sounds like world-breaking force. I am holding the TV, one hand on either side.

Suddenly my wife is enveloped by shadow, and the footfalls have stopped. My wife has ceased to move. The camera seems to be quite high up, circling her, but never showing much more than her and the spot she stands on. The only sound is that

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never-ending exhalation. Both my wife and I realise, at the same time, that The Home has caught her. There is a split-second of her screaming as she looks up at something, and then the screen goes blank.

I throw the TV to the floor and wait for the emotion to hit me. Before it can, however, the door bursts open and my wife falls through. She is battered and bleeding, but fully conscious. I crouch down over her and cradle her head.

'It's OK,' I say. 'Everything's OK.'

'Who are you?' she asks.

I don't know how to respond to that. I look into her eyes but she evidently has no idea who I am anymore.



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# **Author Beth Howell**

Beth Howell is a part-time heritage worker, writer and artist who lives in Devon. She grew up in Cornwall and has a particular interest in South-Western folk tales.

English - Korean Translator Suh Eunkyung

At the edge of moorland country, where the country paths and the wild heath met, a wrecked ship stood in the midst, resting from years of hard sail. At some point in the late seventies, in a youthful bohemian dream, Aster had decided to transform the hulk into a home.

By the time Lilah was born, the hulk was halfway towards being habitable. As a hallmark of Aster's expressive taste, a giant chandelier cast rainbows through the dimness, rugs were strewn across the floor, and piles of books rested on old chests, in boxes, by doors, on the edge of the stairs. It had driven Cora mad. Cora Carthill was determined and diligent, an environmental activist and dedicated curator and taxidermist of natural history, and was passionately opposed to human interference on the moor. Yet Cora, of the muddied wellies, bitten nails, and slowly unravelling jumpers, was also Lilah and Sonny's mother, who feared the extent to which the books were

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overtaking Aster's life. That level was presented by the captain's quarters, extended, and heightened, which Aster had converted into his study and workshop, and where, most of the time, he remained.

The first woman went missing on the moor when Lilah was six. Cora herself vanished a little later. One misty October morning, not long after another difficult birth, she had risen, long before her young family, to walk her usual moorland path. She did not return.

After six days of waiting, the River Dart delivered a body.

In Death we learn, Cora had often observed. Aster, however, found himself wordless and lost, unknowing of any language that might convey such a tragedy to two young children, and a babe in arms.

Cora's departure marked a change in moorland life. The landscape grew harsher, greyer, clouded by the suspicion of its walkers and once-happy inhabitants. The fear was palpable, the distrust bedded in, not least because, after Cora's disappearance, strange things had begun to happen on the moor. Sheep were let loose, cattle scattered, and, erratically, a hawk, kestrel, or falcon would be found, lifeless but intact, only to disappear again the following day. And, sometimes, in the dead of night, Lilah would hear a determined rattling at the old ship door.

The whispers gathered force, life grew thick with uncertainty, and many moorfolk moved away. One dreadful night, half asleep, Lilah tiptoed to her father's room to find that he too had gone. Feeling that mothers and fathers seemed to be disappearing at an impossible rate these days, she returned sorrowfully to her bed. When dawn broke, however, her father had returned, hair upstanding and eyes red and watery from sleeplessness, and he was pouring cereal into bowls, and read the newspaper hastily before discarding it. His children were not allowed to read the papers, but the terrible truth was that sometimes, on the mistiest mornings, a walker would be found, no longer walking, with a feathered arrow in their heart.

₽¥4

Aged twenty, Lilah drove along the moorland in her faded "reclaimed" car, revelling in the reactions to her unnecessarily rude bumper stickers. Once the disappearances had stopped, people had started walking the moors again, kitted out with boots and bags and walking sticks. It had been so many years now. Lilah left the car and began to walk the old paths, taking in the evening light.

Aster had never left the ship, nor had he made it more of a

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home. The place was full of projects in which he had lost heart. The vessel stood like a time capsule as its inhabitants aged, left, or passed away. Sonny was in America, not-so-little Isaac at university. Lilah was floating. Aster was anchored.

At Lilah's return, Aster descended from the study, ruffling his fingers through his greying hair. At the last step he stopped, smiled softly, and held out his arms. The embrace erased the years.

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Between midnight and morning, somewhere between sleeping and waking, Lilah heard a rattling.

In a half-wakeful state, she walked the ship, moving towards a light still glowing from the study. Determined to put her younger, night-terror-ridden self to bed, she pulled on the trapdoor that let loose the stairs, watched them unfold, and ascended. The light now illuminated an extension of the ship itself: scattered books, overflowing boxes, a cluttered worktop and discarded projects littered the peripheries. Behind the central table, at the top of a stack of shelves, stood a large chest, not quite resting shut. She hesitated a moment, but an unquiet thread of curiosity compelled her on. She stretched to reach the

container.

The chest collapsed. Out of it rose a flurry of birds: falcons, hawks, kestrels. Feathers flew and mingled with clouds of dust. In the fusty and oppressive air, Lilah shielded herself and screamed. Silence fell. Terrified, shaking, she opened her eyes and her arms to see the birds littering the floor... dead.

Amongst the violence of the blows, Lilah realised her soul had taken its own flight during the course of the night. With a transparent hand, she pulled a feathered arrow from the centre of her heart.

₽¥4

In the sound and the shock, Aster approached. Dishevelled, sleep-deprived, on his boots, moorland mud, in his hand, a dead falcon, he came face to face with the haunting image of his eldest child.

"Standing in the light you look exactly like your mother."

He smiled sadly. Lilah could not return it.

"You have your mother's inquisitiveness, her brilliance and her failing, her tendency to walk down paths better resisted. Just before her disappearance, Cora was becoming troubled by her research. The walkers, she said, were unbearable. My craft alone

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could hardly support four of us, never mind five, and in our fear, we were losing one another. One day I met Simone buying wood at a market. She was a sculptor, careful, kind, and supportive. Neither of us dreamed of what would follow..."

"You have always sleepwalked, sweetheart. Normally I would be here to look after you because your mother needed her sleep. She worked so intently even when she was heavily pregnant, you know. Remarkably capable, your mother."

"But one night I stole away. A storm had been brewing for some days. I had gone to visit Simone, and by five, the road began to flood with rain. I rang from the phone box to tell Cora I would be late. A job overran, some excuse. In the middle of the night, she found you at the foot of the study stairs. She soon resettled you, but not before finding a tiny sculpture in your hands. I found her distraught, in the midst of the study, ransacked and disarrayed, holding Simone's wooden bird in one horrified hand. I have rarely left the door open since."

Slowly and deliberately, he drew a small wooden dove from his pocket, a smooth contrast to the feathered falcon tied to his right wrist.

"Every time a walker is lost, I search for the moor-bird. The police stopped considering them as evidence early on, but they were your mother's area of expertise. Did you know mercury was used in early taxidermy? Cora was working with such specimens when she disappeared, with increasing disregard for own health, I might add. She said they were necessary to something- some key to environmental disruption on the moor. I am not sure whether her work was driving her mad, or if it was me, Lilah, but I have kept every specimen. The question will haunt me always. Everything else has stopped."

He gestured to the strewn half-finished projects, layering them with new meaning.

"There was, I admit, a likeness between Cora and Simone. The night they fatefully met on the moor, I think your mother saw her younger self, the potential lost and spent on a feckless -and reckless- husband. Drowning obscures many defining features. A deeply unfortunate thing."

"I loved your mother, Lilah, but I loved Simone too, and she simply saw me in a way that Cora never had. I was a terrible husband. I have been a terrible father, too. But I did try to protect you. All of you. Even when my Simone was delivered from the Dart."

In the ache of revelation, only one question seemed to be keeping Lilah anchored:

But tonight, why the bird? The women have not been disappearing for years.

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"I failed, Lilah. Because she saw you strolling down the path today. She found you sleeping in her little girl's bed. She remembers her six-year-old but fears a stranger of twenty. Time is lost to her now; she only understands threat."

The bird was now held by a surprisingly tender hand. Out of the darkness, Cora had come.

Trembling, watchful, like a songbird poised for flight, she rested her head on Aster's shoulder.

"Yes, sweetheart. Another falcon. We can work on it together. It will keep you occupied for some days here, I hope."

"A peregrine. Yes. Are the children safely asleep?"

Aster nodded, shaking his tears, and the vision of his ghostly daughter, from his eyes.



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### **Author Gavin Inglis**

Gavin Inglis works at the intersection of story and games, from the undead-next-door mayhem of *Neighbourhood Necromancer* to the award-winning DJ story, *The Reader Remix*. He has credits on *Fallen London, Zombies, Run!* and *Call of Cthulhu*.

Gavin also creates gentler, health-related work, such as the interactive web story *Hana Feels*, and the graphic novel *Not There*, which highlights Functional Neurological Disorder. He is known for his compelling live spoken word, often set to music, and he teaches creative writing at Edinburgh University.

'Soulmates' by Gavin Inglis was first published in *Haunted Voices*: An Anthology of Gothic Storytelling from Scotland, published by Haunt Publishing in 2019.

E-mail info@gavininglis.com

website http://www.gavininglis.com/about/

English - Korean translator Suh Eunkyung

He was sitting in Greyfriars Kirkyard at sunrise, watching mud creep up the cover of Descartes' *Passions of the Soul* and wondering if it would be too much of a cliché to throw himself off North Bridge. She came past in clumpy boots and a velvet skirt, took her headphones off and yelled at him for letting a library book get stained. After that, they were friends.

Turned out she was in the year above him in philosophy class and he was just a bit blocked on the separation of soul and body. She took him through a chemical argument against free will, told him to draw the six principal passions on paper like the colour wheel in art, and then he got it.

They started hanging out together. He made her a mixtape of the Cramps and she took him to the Monday Club and one night they crashed together in his single bed and sort of ended up kissing. It went further and in the morning they both blinked at the mirror with panda eyes and decided it hadn't spoiled

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anything and after that they were officially in a relationship.

They stuck with the goth scene for years, moving from group to group, keeping separate friends so they never became one of those trophy couples who wore matching outfits, sickened everybody and broke up after six weeks. Then club politics and the bitching got too much and they stopped going out, and moved in together. They didn't weed out the duplicates from their music collection but he did CDs and she preferred vinyl anyway.

It was only a few months before domestic bliss got boring and they realised they needed some other outlet besides the weekly late-night horror movie run. So, they took eight cans of Strongbow and a half bottle of blackcurrant cordial back down to Greyfriars, where they sat on a wall and got quietly smashed. A couple came by and the woman had the guy's trousers half down, right in front of them, before she noticed the black-clad figures perched in the shadows and shrieked. The guy went after her, trying to run and pull up his trousers at the same time. They finished their booze, put the empties in a bag to keep the graveyard clean, and afterwards agreed it had been their best night out in six months.

So, they started doing it properly. They went to Armstrong's and sorted out full Victorian outfits. He got a frock coat, top hat,

a wing-collared shirt and a waistcoat that was cheap because moths had snacked on it. With a little corset work she got into full mourning, with a veil and a lace-edged parasol handmade in Chichester.

He splashed out for some decent white face paint and she showed him how to set it with powder. They slipped into the kirkyard after dusk and spent their time checking visibility and setting up ghostly moves. It took three nights before they had the choreography nailed: the synchronised turn and the unhurried drift behind one of the high walls.

Tour groups were great, as they'd be on their way back from Covenanters' Prison and the attentions of the Mackenzie poltergeist. Some screamed. Some ran. They were pretty sure a couple of teenagers wet themselves. The guides recognised the resident ghosts, of course; their office was right beside the gate and the couple went in and out in civvies. But they provided an extra attraction, and asked for nothing in return. So, the tour company kept their secret.

At first, they hid in a sepulchre or tomb; later, he found a viable exit over the west wall and she practised until she could mount the ledge in heels and a full skirt. Not many people followed them anyway, but those times were the best, listening to groups freak out when they came through and found the

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West Yard deserted. Some early mornings, just to mix it up, they gazed through George Heriot's gate at half-asleep schoolkids arriving for rugby or hockey trips.

Over time they wound it down: every couple of weeks, then once a month. Often, she felt too tired. They tried it one night in the winding closes of the Royal Mile, but the yuppie bistros and tartan shops seemed to take the romance out of it. So, they saved their act for special occasions.

Three or four times he suggested the trip and she couldn't face it. Then a couple of other things happened and she got the blood tests and there it was on the paper, Adult Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. They talked about starting chemo immediately, but they took more samples and it was in her spine, in her brain. The doctors were kind, told her to go home, and they had a few more sunny weekends together and then, one morning, she was gone.

He didn't go out for a few days, and when he did, it was to ask about a plot in Greyfriars Kirkyard. The minister was very gentle but explained that there were to be no new burials in the yard. If it would be a comfort, he could scatter her ashes there, on the consecrated ground. The funeral was a family affair, not very goth, and he got the plastic container the next day, and was surprised by how heavy it was in his hands.

Weeks passed, a long sequence of nights and harsh sunlight, and her ashes sat in a cupboard until the moment felt right. Then he showered, moisturised and applied and set the face paint, like she had taught him. He pulled on the shirt, its collar looser than he remembered, donned the frock coat and settled the top hat on his head. It was 4.30am. He slipped through the deserted streets, scaled the wall and walked the familiar paths, leaving a little of her behind with every step.

In the following weeks, he was there every night, a solitary figure lingering by the gate or searching for something in the shadow of a tomb. The tour groups shrieked a little louder, and ran a little faster, at the hollow expression on that pale, shrouded face. Few followed him now, and even the tour guides hurried away to their shuttered office.

Then, one night, she was standing beside him again.

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# **Author Ruwi Meita**

Ruwi Meita is a writer of thriller and horror stories from Indonesia. She has been labeled as the Indonesian version of Agatha Christie by her readers. She has written dozens of novels both in print and online. Her two novels, The Mystery of the Salt Sculpture (Misteri Patung Garam) and The Beehive (Rumah Lebah), are about to be adapted into films.

Indonesian - English translator Ima Gusti

Ima Gusti is a Cultural Anthropology final-year student at Universitas Gadjah Mada, and is currently battling with her research and thesis. Traveling under the pretense of research fieldwork is her hobby.

English - Korean translator Suh Eunkyung

The television in front of me sounded like a mumbling person because of its low volume. In this office, the 32-inch television was merely decorative and was rarely watched. However, when the television was switched off, the atmosphere in the office felt strangely awkward. The television was something that had merged with the nonstop, jumbled sound of the keyboard that permeated the office every day.

"It has not yet been proven whether PT Urip Urup has cheated in the tender for the track construction in Ancol. PT Urip Urup has been subjected to numerous inspections and clarifications. The KPK<sup>1</sup>, on the other hand, is still looking into PT Urip Urup about a tender for the building of an overpass..."

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**<sup>1</sup> KPK**: KPK is an Indonesian government agency established to prevent and fight corruption in the country.

I glanced at Sugi who turned up the television volume. "It's incredible that news like this makes the gossip pages. Perhaps no one would be interested if the owner was not Sriti Dewi."

"Bang," you interviewed her, right?" Sugi asked as he turned to face me.

"Yes, for the December profile last year," I said lightly. "So what?"

"Guardian angel. Please, don't you think the nickname is a bit much?"

"Depends on how you see Sriti Dewi. I suppose that everyone has a different point of view, and that each point of view has its own truth."

Sriti Dewi was a well-known businesswoman who had devoted her life to ending violence against women. In Jakarta, she had created dozens of shelters to protect women escaping abusive husbands, boyfriends, relatives, and even their parents. On the other hand, Sriti Dewi was also famous in the entertainment world because of her closeness with several top artists who had brought her to fame. As a result, she had followers from all areas of life. It was only natural that her acts

**2 Bang**: A term for an older brother in Indonesian

would make headlines in both general and entertainment news.

"What are your thoughts, Bang Ratno?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. What matters right now is where is your news? I've been waiting for it for a long time."

"Oh damn, I'm still not used to *Bang* Ratno hanging out at the office. Usually, even chasing his tail is difficult."

It had been a month since I had stopped being a field journalist running here and there to chase criminal news.

"Dasar wedbus"," I cursed. Sugi chuckled as he turned down the volume of the television and backed away with a mumble that I could still hear, "Keep forgetting that he's the editor now."

I could only shake my head as I opened my emails to check which news report I needed to edit. No one had submitted anything yet. As I scrolled down my emails, I noticed an email that I had missed before. It had been delivered yesterday morning. The email's subject was extremely intriguing. *Sriti Dewi, who is she?* My pupils narrowed. Was this some odd coincidence? We had just been discussing the businesswoman. My head turned left and then right. It was like I had just received an anonymous letter. Sugi was still engrossed at his desk, while

<sup>3</sup> Dasar wedhus: Javanese curse words

two other reporters had just left for fieldwork. An OB handed Sugi a package. He frequently shopped on the internet and intentionally had his packages delivered to his office so that his wife wouldn't know.

I clicked on the email and began reading.

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Mas Ratno, how are you doing? We met when Mas Ratno visited the Depok branch of Sriti's shelter. Mas Ratno was gathering information for Mrs. Sriti Dewi's profile at the time. I hope Mas Ratno still remembers me.

My name is Wulan, but I go by the nickname Inyong because I'm from Purwokerto and we live in the same neighborhood. I'm an example of someone who has failed to eradicate my obvious dialect in this capital. I have gathered the confidence to write this email to *Mas* Ratno because you are a journalist.

I am still volunteering at Sriti's safe-center house, but not at the Depok branch. Mrs. Sriti bought a home in the Pondok Indah region as other branches began to get to busy. There are

4 Inyong: Means 'l' or 'me' in ngapak-apak dialect.

Dea, from the Depok branch, is here with her nine-month-old baby, Doni. She ran away from her abusive husband. Her son was covered in bruises the first time they stopped by. She has no relatives in Jakarta and is afraid to return since her husband will track her down. The other four women are from various other safe center branches and have similar stories to tell. *Mbak* Widya and Yeyen fled their violent husbands as well. Kiki, who is the same age as me, is a unique case since she ran away from her stepfather, who fell in love with her and grew possessive. She didn't dare to ask her birth mother—who was in love with her stepfather—for aid. Similarly, *Mbak* Lina escaped from her lesbian partner who tried to destroy her entire life just because *Mbak* Lina asked to break up. She was held captive for three days before finally managing to escape.

At first, we were all quite amazed because we got a safecenter house that was luxurious. Although the house could accommodate more than six people, no more people joined us

**<sup>5</sup> Mbak**: A term for young women. (literally "older sister" in Javanese) sometimes applied to one's actual older sister, and sometimes applied to a female friend or colleague of a similar or older age.

for some reason, despite the fact that the other branches were still very full. Furthermore, I was the only one who had been named as the house's caretaker and manager. Because the location was closer to my boarding house, I had accepted the offer. Moreover, I get a proper salary as I was hired as a permanent employee.

*Mbak* Dea and her son chose to stay upstairs so that her child's cries would not bother others. She was accompanied by *Mbak* Yeyen. However, *Mbak* Lina, *Mbak* Widya, and Kiki live downstairs. There are still two security personnel outside who alternate shifts. I only work till five o'clock in the afternoon and have never stayed overnight. On some occasions I work overtime, but I always return to my boarding house.

It all started with a joke that we all used to chuckle at. *Mbak* Yeyen and *Mbak* Widya had just returned from some morning shopping and had brought back stories from the vegetable seller. Apparently, this house had been a quiet home for a loving family in 1983. But it had all come crashing down in one night. The house had been ransacked by robbers, who had slaughtered the entire family, as well as their servants. The case still has not been solved. In the shadow of the bloodshed in this house, the robbers still seem to breathe freely. Since then, the house has been rented out multiple times, but none have lasted long.

After *Mbak* Widya finished telling the story, there was an uncomfortable pause. *Mbak* Dea, on the other hand, abruptly broke the ice with a statement that sounded pathetic.

"Nothing in this house will be as scary as my husband – he's someone who could torture me to death. If I had to pick between living here and being discovered by my husband, I would choose the former. Is there anything more terrifying than being discovered by a true monster?" *Mbak* Lina responded with a sharp laugh that made us all laugh. I'm not sure if the laughter was intended to cheer them up or if they were just laughing at their unfortunate fates.

There was nothing exciting for the following week. Everything was as usual. We had forgotten the terrifying story without even realizing it. Until one day, *Mbak* Dea complained that she couldn't find the doll that belonged to Doni, her son. The doll was a boy dressed in slacks and a beret. Its legs were longer than its body and were made from flannel stuffed with dacron fabric. She had been looking for it all night but still hadn't found it. She kept telling me that she was desperately searching for it. Doni slept more easily with the doll at his side. Just as I was about to leave, we heard Kiki's scream. We all ran to her room and found her slumped over the window, pointing. Doni's doll hung there in an unusual shape. Its hands and feet had vanished,

and had been replaced by forked wooden branches. When I approached it, I noticed that it wasn't the doll's body.

"That's my stuffed pig," Kiki faltered. Who would act out such a cruel joke? The question was sharply ingrained in our minds. Since then, I've felt many suspicious gazes in this house. *Mbak* Dea was the only person I knew who came from the Depok branch. She wasn't the type of person who cracked jokes like this. She was a serious person, and incidents like this made her much more tense than usual.

I tried to calm all the residents of the house as best I could. Even though they didn't say much, they were already acting normal again. One day, *Mbak* Yeyen and I arranged a lunch that would bring us all closer together. I had also made the decision to leave later than usual. Even though *Mbak* Lina arrived late because of her Korean language class, all the residents managed to attend the lunch. *Mbak* Lina only had a month left until she would travel to Korea to become a successful migrant worker and leave her chaotic life behind. Mrs. Sriti Dewi also assisted survivors who wished to work overseas to become Indonesian migrant workers. Many people have managed to work abroad because of her. In around two months, *Mbak* Yeyen and *Mbak* Widya will also move to Hong Kong to work. In essence, these survivors will only be able to survive if they can be useful. Mrs.

Sriti continuously emphasizes this, thus she gives the survivors numerous opportunities. The title Guardian Angel was given to her for a reason.

Mbak Yeven prepared traditional Lamongan dishes, and I fried the famed Purwokerto tempe mendoan. In the front garden, we were busy eating. The security guard joined us as well. Our simple lunch was able to dispel past suspicions and tensions. Good food can indeed help heal moods as well as the stomach. We chatted intimately until Mbak Lina came. She mingled with us straight away, but her face looked tired. It was also pale, and she didn't say anything. She simply nodded at our conversation. We cleaned up all of our tableware and put it in the kitchen after we finished dining. Just as I was about to return to the front garden, I noticed Mbak Lina going to the bathroom. So imagine my surprise when I saw *Mbak* Lina entering from the front door. She approached right away and apologized for being late. She had to take care of some paperwork after her class and had missed the train. When she saw that my body was trembling, her expression changed. I dashed to the bathroom

**<sup>6</sup> tempe mendoan**: A type of fried food originating from Purwokerto, Central Java. Tempe is made from soybeans that undergo a fermentation process.

and flung open the door. *Mbak* Lina followed me, perplexed. My legs became numb. There was nobody inside. I had never seen *Mbak* Lina in a skirt or a dress during her time here. But the *Mbak* Lina who had dined with us, had been dressed in a flaming crimson gown. When I had regained control over my emotions, I asked *Mbak* Lina to speak quietly. I begged *Mbak* Lina to keep this incident secret since I didn't want to stir up any more conflict in the house. *Mbak* Lina merely nodded, despite the fact that her pupils were quivering with fright.

I couldn't get the incident out of my mind, even in my dreams. I made every effort to continue working as usual. Fortunately, I was busy with preparing some files for the Pondok Indah safecenter house residents, so I was able to ignore my fear. Unfortunately, I discovered something that made me feel much worse. Kiki and I shared the same birthday. It signified that we had the same *weton*, *Selasa kliwon*. I set out to also find out the other residents' *weton*. I ended up regretting this. Except for Doni, all of our weton were the same. I tried to think of it as a

**7 weton**: In Javanese culture, weton is a count of a person's birthday which is used as a benchmark to designate certain predictions

8 Selasa kliwon: One weton form

coincidence even though I knew that it was another strange occurrence in this house.

Kiki was irritable the next morning since she woke up late. She claimed that she hadn't been able to sleep since *Mbak* Dea's son had been fussing all night. *Mbak* Dea denied that Doni had been cranky, claiming that the baby had slept from nine o'clock the night before, all the way until the next morning.

Three days later I saw another strange thing. The residents were all sleeping in *Mbak* Widya's room, the largest room. When I questioned as to why they slept in the same room, they remained silent, as if they were unwilling to discuss what had occurred. They all looked pale. *Mbak* Dea's attitude had dramatically shifted as well. She wasn't speaking and had seemed to have lost her focus. Once, Doni had almost fallen down the stairs because she was daydreaming. I was lucky enough to catch Doni before he slipped down the stairs. When I had handed Doni back to *Mbak* Dea, she hadn't even reacted. "It will be here in a minute," she had said as she accepted Doni with her eyes fixed on the wall.

Someone arrived in the afternoon. The unexpected visit caught me off guard. It was Sriti Dewi, accompanied by an old woman with a gloomy expression. *Budhe* Yuni was her name.

She explained that *Budhe* Yuni was going to assist me with cleaning the house. I was surprised, because, despite her busy schedule, Mrs. Sriti Dewi had brought her to this residence herself.

Unfortunately, *Budhe* Yuni was not good at doing household chores. She frequently disappeared during times when she should have been working. I frequently caught her whispering to someone on the phone. I used to think that Mrs. Sriti had only given *Budhe* Yuni this job to help because she felt sorry for her. In fact, her presence made me feel uneasy. The house has had an odd odor since she arrived. I came from a village so I knew precisely what this smell was. The scent of castor leaves. I could also occasionally smell the aroma of magnolia flowers when I returned home in the evening even though there were no magnolia trees in this area.

My attention, however, had been drawn away from the unusual odor by the massive changes in the residents. They now wanted to just be alone in a room. They did nothing but sit pensively and stare blankly. *Mbak* Lina, who had been quite enthusiastic about her Korean classes, had lost her passion as

**9** Budhe: A term for parents' older sister or older woman

well. She sat in front of the television all day, but her gaze was not focused. Instead, she doodled on sketch paper. The drawing style resembled those of a child. Childish.

While in the kitchen, *Mbak* Yeyen attempted some strange things. She had tried to boil a dead rat from the backyard. I'm not sure what would have happened if I hadn't caught her. Meanwhile, I discovered bruises on *Mbak* Widya and Kiki's feet and hands. When I asked them about it separately, they gave the same answer: "It's because they're coming."

Mbak Dea had gone through the most dramatic physical transformation. Her cheeks had shrunk and were sunken. How could a person lose that much weight in such a short period of time? Her mental condition was as concerning as her physical condition. Mbak Dea always let Doni cry and didn't try to soothe him. The nine-month-old baby was difficult to calm. Every time I handed Doni over to Mbak Dea, the baby pulled me in and embraced me fiercely. I finally got to a point where I was done looking after Doni for her. I approached the management center about providing survivors with psychological treatment, but they explained that it was not necessary at this time. They didn't seem to believe all of the strange things I told them. Yet, when I had volunteered at the house in Depok, they had been constantly responsive to the survivors' needs.

When I saw that Doni was getting neglected, I was firm with *Mbak* Dea. But she simply glanced at me, then smirked and laughed out loud as if I had just told a joke. Not only that, but her laughing appeared to spread to the other residents. Kiki, *Mbak* Yeyen, *Mbak* Lina, and *Mbak* Widya could all be heard laughing loudly from their own rooms. Their laughter sounded unpleasant. There was hysteria in their overlapping voices, which echoed through the walls of this magnificent house. I quickly carried Doni out of the room. The strange events didn't end there. Once, *Budhe* Yuni was burying something in the backyard when I arrived. Her phone rang unexpectedly, and she answered it right away.

"Everything is in order. That's correct. Exactly the fortieth day," she said.

The scent of castor leaves was intensifying. I was so terrified that my knees buckled. Fortunately, she didn't notice me. I dashed out the door into the front yard. In my arms, Doni's body was trembling. I tried to calm him down, but I didn't feel calm myself. I felt like I was being watched. When I looked up to the upper balcony, I noticed them standing there with piercing glances but smirking lips.

I was becoming agitated, but I didn't know who to talk to. My emotions were out of control. I kept thinking about *Budhe* 

Yuni's words till I came to a realization. Tomorrow would be our fortieth day of being in that house. My suspicions keep leading me to Mrs. Sriti Dewi and *Budhe* Yuni. I've tried to shake these suspicions off desperately, but they have become increasingly entrenched in me. Who are they? What's the deal with this place?

I need to get the survivors out of here. I need to convince them. That is why I am staying tonight. If I fail, I will hand over this truth to *Mas* Ratno.

₽**₩** 

After reading the e-mail, I could only breathe a sigh of relief. It was suffocating.

I remembered Wulan, of course. Despite the fact that she had lived in Jakarta for a long time, her accent remained distinct. When people chatted to her, they always held back their laughs. She wasn't the type of person to be forgotten easily.

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was ten o'clock. My gaze was drawn to the still-muttering television. I was amused by the text that was showing on the screen. "The KPK have not found any wrongdoings in the tender for the overpass project, which was won by PT Urip Urup..."

I hurriedly grabbed my coat and walked away.

"Where are you going?" Sugi exclaimed. I ignored him.

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When I got to the front of the safe-center house, I heard loud shouting.

"Please open the door! Mbak Yeyen! Mbak Wid!"

A man, dressed in security guard uniform, was shouting as he banged on the front door.

"What's the problem, sir?" I asked as I approached him.

The security guard grimaced when he saw me.

"I'm Wulan's friend, and I'm here to look for her."

"I've been knocking on the door for a while now, but no one has answered. I have the key, but the door is locked on the inside."

According to Wulan, the safe-center house door had a hook on the inside. It provided the survivors a sense of security.

"Have you just arrived?" I asked.

"I was given permission to enter for half a day because something urgent came up. My companion had to work at another safe center branch last night as well."

I sniffed at something in the air.

"Smells like gas," I exclaimed. The security guard started to panic.

"What should we do?"

"Sir, let's break down the door together."

"I'll get a crowbar first, just a moment."

We broke down the door as soon as the security guard returned. It took some time and effort before the door finally opened. As we walked in, the smell of gas grew stronger. We both coughed. While I pushed my way in and checked every room, the security guard opened all the windows. No one. Their belongings were also still there. There were no signs that they had left

"Masha Allah!" screamed the security guard. I dashed towards the scream. He was standing in the kitchen with a deathly pale face. His finger was pointing to a huge pot on the stove. I approached it slowly and peeked inside. My heart felt like it had stopped beating. My stomach twisted. I could see small hands in the murky water.

The smell of gas gradually changed into the scent of castor leaves.

Jakarta has many well-known urban legends that have been adapted into fiction and films. The house in the Pondok Indah

neighborhood is one of them. The house has a dark backstory associated with it. In 1983, a gang of robbers killed all the people in the house - a family and their maid. The house was rented out several times after that, but the residents were never able to stay in it for a long period of time. In 2006, the story of this house was adapted into a film, which became extremely famous. Unfortunately, this house was demolished in 2008, leaving just a vacant site overgrown with trees.



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### **Author Alison Evans**

Alison Evans is the award-winning author of three young adult novels: *Euphoria Kids, Highway Bodies and Ida.* Her shorter works have appeared in the anthologies *Hometown Haunts: #LoveOzYA Horror Tales and Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories.* She works as a children's specialist bookseller and lives on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri People.

English - Korean translator Suh Eunkyung

'You know this happened overseas,' my cousin Dylan says. 'And the whole city fell in.'

'I think the ground is just a little dry,' I reply, but the darkness of the big crack in the ground keeps drawing my eyes. 'This happens every summer.'

'This deep though?' Dylan says. 'Nah. This is end-of-the-world shit.'

'Shut up.' I push her. 'It's not.'

She's right though. It's wider than it ever has been. As we keep looking at that slice of dark, I swear I hear something. A whisper, so low it's barely there. I look over at Dylan, but she doesn't give any indication that she can hear it.

Mum calls us in for dinner and we scamper back inside. We watch TV and nothing unusual happens. Dylan gets my bed because she's the guest, and she just goes on her phone as soon as the light's out. Even though I'm the same age as Dylan, I'm

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not allowed a phone, so I look up at the ceiling, awake alone, and try not to think about the crack.

When we're outside the next day, sun beating down on us, I try to convince Dylan we should go down the gully for a walk instead of hanging around the actual backyard.

'I don't wanna keep putting on sunscreen.'

'You're scared of the crack,' she says. 'Aren't you used to like spiders and snakes and stuff?'

I don't say that though I live in the bush, I've never seen a snake this close to the house, and spiders aren't scary anyway. I pick at some grass, brown and prickly from the sun.

'I just reckon it'd be more fun to go look at the gully.'

'You said there were leeches there.' She mimes spewing.

'That's where they live.' I shrug like it's not a big deal, but they freak me out. The first time I saw a leech, it was bloated with my blood and hanging off the back of my knee. I couldn't see it properly and that had made it worse.

I can't help but stare at the crack while she's talking, and realise that after a while, I'm not listening. The crack's saying something but I can't figure it out. It's like there's cotton wool in my ears, or the crack's full of something. I need to get closer.

When I look back at Dylan, she's still talking, like I'm not

even here. I guess I'm not, not really. I wonder what it'd be like to just stick my hand in the crack and I move forward just a little bit. Want blossoms in my chest, and I yank my hand away. The crack whispers something that the wind snatches away.

'I gotta wee, I'll be a sec,' I say and go sit inside on the toilet, just sitting. I lean my head sideways so it rests on the mudbrick wall, and I breathe in its dusty smell. When I close my eyes, I can hear the whispers from the crack. I put my fingers in my ears but the noise is the same.

That night, Dylan's snoring and the moon's up. The whispering outside hasn't stopped since this morning and though I put my head under the covers and stick my fingers in my ears, I can still hear it.

I sit up and grab my torch, but I don't turn it on. Not til I'm outside and Mum won't see the light. If I can just look at the crack, know that Dylan can't hear anything, then maybe I'll be able to sleep. I creep over to my bed and poke Dylan's shoulder a few times. She doesn't stir, so I shake her gently.

'Get lost,' she mumbles at me, trying to bat me away. She turns over.

'Do you reckon it's true?'

Dylan sits up, opening her eyes to peer at me in the dark.

'What?'

'The crack! The crack outside in the ground. That one that swallowed a whole town'

'I literally just made it up, Jones. Go back to sleep.' She sighs. 'I don't get why you're so obsessed.'

'I'm going out to investigate.'

'What, now?'

I don't say anything, just pull on my big coat.

'Jones,' she hisses. 'It's dark outside.'

'I know what night is,' I shoot back.

So I open the front door, quiet as I can, and the whisperings are louder, faster. They're not in English, I can hear that now. I turn the torch on; Mum's room is on the other side of the house so she won't see the light.

As I step away from the house, I realise this is the first time I've been outside in the dark alone. I swallow. Nothing out here's gonna hurt me. It's just trees and possums and bats and stuff. And they're there all the time, not just at night. That's what I keep repeating to myself but it doesn't help my heart beat any slower. It feels like it's gonna climb up my throat but if I can just get to the crack, then it'll be okay.

When I get to the crack, my heart slows, and the urgency that's been building vanishes. It's okay now. I bend and my knees touch the cold, hard ground. I place my hands flat on the ground, fingertips a centimetre away from the lip of the crack. It's bigger. Now, I could almost fit my whole head inside if I wanted to.

'What are you doing?'

I don't startle at Dylan's sudden appearance like I normally would. I close my eyes, letting my head lean forward so it touches the ground. 'Feels right.'

Dylan makes a weird noise. 'Let's go back inside.'

I don't want to. I want to sink my hands down into the crack, let them be swallowed up by the darkness.

I start to move closer until my head's right above the crack. It's so dark it doesn't look real and I don't know if I'm looking at nothing or infinity. And then Dylan yanks me backwards and I fall on my bum. Her hair's everywhere and she looks panicked, taking deep breaths.

'Come on,' she says, and this time she doesn't wait for an answer, just drags me back inside the house, her white-knuckled grip aching, cutting off my circulation.

I look down and see I've not got any shoes on and my feet are covered in dirt and are freezing.

'Dylan?'

She doesn't look at me until we're inside. 'That was weird.

Don't do it again.'

'Okay.' My voice trembles a bit, but not as much as hers. I don't sleep and I don't know if she does either.

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'If you come here wearing like jeans or whatever, get your socks above the end of your pants,' I say to Dylan as we start getting into leech territory the next day in the gully. 'Leeches can't climb up under your pants then.'

'If we're wearing shorts though—'

'We'll see them if they try,' I say. 'We'll be right.'

Dylan's eyes are wide as I clap my hands together. 'Let's go.'

There's a dirt path carved into the side of the hill so getting down to the gully is easy and soon we're under the tree ferns and the stringybarks. It's colder here, wetter, and usually the place where I can just forget about everything else. But every time I close my eyes, I can see the crack. It widens in my mind, and I feel the earth tremble a little under my feet. I flex my fingers, thinking about how I was so close to the edge, how I could've just slipped right inside under the stars.

We cross a little stream and I can still hear the whispering. 'Jones!' Dylan shrieks. I frown and look at her. She's pointing at my leg, jumping from foot to foot as she flaps her hands.

There's a leech. When I was little, my dad used to scare them off with a lighter. But right now, I don't care. The crack would tell me if I needed to care. I keep on walking, but Dylan stops me.

'Shouldn't you take it off?'

'Hmm.' I don't move for a few moments, watching the leech slowly expand as it sucks. I slowly slide a fingernail under its mouth and hope that no teeth get stuck.

'That was rank as, I'm going back.'

As we go back to the house, Dylan leads the way and we go around the long way to avoid seeing the crack. Anger fizzles in me but I don't say anything. I clench my fists. I'll just go later, without her. At night again, when the noise is the purest.

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'What are you doing?' I hear Dylan ask, but she's not really talking to me. I'm just walking, one foot in front of the other. I open the door and I hear her close it behind me and she pulls on some shoes. My bare feet sting from the rocks on the path, but it's okay. I know where to go.

'Jones, you're really starting to freak me out,' she says.

The whispering gets louder as we get closer and I can feel it now—the words are so close, just under the skin, they just need to get out. Dylan grabs my arm and her skin burns. I shrug her off and she says my name again and again. I keep going. The bats overhead chirp, louder than I've ever heard them, and the way my footsteps are pounding in my ears makes it feel like I'm an earthquake.

I can see the crack now and I feel tears prick my eyes. The moonlight is shining down on the ground but it doesn't light up the crack at all. It's still pitch in there.

'Jones stop,' Dylan says, and she wraps both her arms around me this time, trying to bear hug me to the ground like we'd do sometimes playing footy.

I wriggle, twisting my body like a snake so I'll slip out but she's holding on really tight. 'Let me go,' I say and my voice sounds far away. Like I've got something in my throat. No, not quite. Like there's something missing. There's a big void. A vacuum.

Though she's still holding me, I manage to drag us both closer to the crack and when we're close enough, when the sound is loud enough, Dylan stops saying my name. Her arms loosen.

'You can hear it can't you?' I say, her face still so close to

mine.

She lets me go. 'What is it?'

I don't reply because I don't know. As we both stare at it, the crack widens, the darkness impenetrable as a deep rumbling noise begins, the earth shuddering as the crack widens and widens, my bones shuddering inside my flesh. Dylan knocks into me as we're both on our hands and knees beside the crack.

'This isn't right,' Dylan says.

But I move forward. I put my legs in first, like I'm about to slip into a swimming pool, and I let them dangle as I look up at the sky, eyes wide to the stars for the last time. My legs are warm, warm and soft, held. The whispering happens in layers now, voices overlapping again and again. Waves on the beach.

'Jones,' Dylan says. 'Whatever it's telling you, they're lies.'

I take her hand. 'Listen.'

And so she does—her face relaxes and she sits next to me. We sit there for a while, listening, and I start to lower my body down, the warmth spreading up my body as I slip into the dark.

As Dylan does the same, I see her look up at the stars. She smiles at me, her head swaying side to side, and the warmth of the dark constricts turns to ice; I squeal, try to wriggle away from it, but I'm too far in now.

'Dylan, stop,' I say to her, but she just keeps smiling. My

breath is short and hard as I try to haul myself back up, out of the darkness, but its grip on me is too tight. 'Please,' I scream at her, slapping her leg. 'You were right.'

She shakes her head, her eyes clear, and she screams. 'Jones!'

She wrenches her feet out of the crack and gets in front of
me. We monkey grip and she tries to pull me out, but the
darkness is too firm. I sink further and further, and she keeps
trying but my arms ache, the sockets too stretched.

'Let go.'

'No.' She's crying, snot dribbling down her face, and her hair's a mess. I try to pull away from her and one hand gets free. 'I'm not letting you go,' she says fiercely.

'I'm so tired,' I say. The crack is warm again, safe.

'Climb up,' she instructs. She gets her grip under my armpits this time, and to haul me up she starts standing, screaming with the effort. I close my eyes, tell the crack to let me go. I look up at the stars and I don't want to die.

Let me go, let me go, let me go, I chant over and over in my head. And all at once, the darkness releases me and Dylan and I are sprawled on the ground. Her nose is bleeding, and my legs are covered in bruises.

I turn back towards the crack.

'Jones!' She grabs my arm.

'This is different,' I say. 'Promise.' She lets me go and I lean down to the crack and whisper, 'You can let go.'

The crack shudders, widens, I take Dylan's hand and we watch as darkness spews forth into the sky, singing now. A huge mass of void clouds above us starts to drift away on the wind and my body loosens and I feel like I can breathe properly for the first time in days.

I look at Dylan, Dylan looks at me. We laugh at it all, tired and covered in dirt and sweat and blood.

'This is the worst summer holidays ever,' she says.

When I look at the ground, the crack looks like it used to last summer – narrow, just made of dirt.





### **Author Angelina N. Sithebe**

Angelina N. Sithebe is a current Penguin Random House author based in Durban, South Africa. She was born in Soweto, Johannesburg. She graduated as a Geologist at the City University of New York at Brooklyn College through a UNESCO scholarship. She has worked in various fields, including geotechnical engineering, mining and communications. She began writing in 2005, with Penguin South Africa making an offer for her first two novels. In 2007, Umuzi (Random House) published her third novel, the critically acclaimed *Holy Hill*, which was nominated by the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards, amongst others.

Her *Target Life*, a series of five short stories, was published by Amazon's Shorts program. Recently, she has contributed these short stories: "Happiness Delayed", Leeuwarden UNESCO City of Literature (2022); "A City As A Writer's Workspace", Ulyanovsk UNESCO City of Literature (2020); "Stories For Wuhan", Lahore UNESCO City of Literature (2020).

English - Koran translator Suh Eunkyung

Tick-tock. Thula heard the gong of the clock on the wall rhyming with Gogo's (grandmother's) loud snores through her sleep. In her dreams, she fought with the demons of the night of her death. She was back in the muddy grave in Lesotho, where she vacillated between life and death. A long encircling serpent wrapped her body in a soft, silky, smooth, and powerful embrace. She recognised him as Khanyisa, her ancestral guardian. He was rocking her back and forth on the donkey cart where they were disguised as mealie sacks and covered in blankets like the dead.

When the tremors continued even when her eyes were wide open, she realised they were real. The earth-shattering force of the August wind brought her Mkhulu's (grandfather's) yesteryear's after-death visits to her memory, when he had swept into the home with the wind. She recognised the whistling howling gale she imagined must have been like the

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first night her grandparents spent in their home in Rejoice in August 1936.

Terrified witless, Thula called on the same ancestors to shield them from Mkhulu. Then, just like in the past, his presence was confirmed by a palpable force field that permeated every corner of the house. Raw claws scratched on the window panes so that the screech gnawed inside her jaws and reached deep into her eardrums. The racket of pots in the kitchen that he forcibly threw on the hard floor followed. Crashing enamel plates with porcelain cups and saucers joined the vibrating timber into a ghostly orchestra of life gone past. The eerie musical echoes accompanied his thundering footsteps, which were like horse hooves, into Gogo's bedroom.

With the blanket over her ears, Thula regressed into a terrified child and tried to peek through closed eyes. She could only imagine his ghoulish appearance. His vicious struggle with Gogo dragged into a few prolonged minutes. In that time, valour didn't appear to fulfil Thula's wish to help Gogo. Even when her ears were filled with Gogo's blood-curdling screams that always echoed deep inside her chest, she remained frozen. "Get out, Thomas Malumo! You're dead!" She heard Gogo fighting for dear life.

As in the past, he did not speak. Thula wished he would say

something so that they would know what he wanted. An instantaneous silence followed, and from experience, Thula knew he was gone. For two hours, she remained awake, standing at the window to escape the dark shadows of the night hovering inside. Just after sunrise, Thula left her place under the window when she heard Gogo getting up to prepare for her Sunday ritual of umuthi (medicine) gathering. Then she drifted into a restless sleep.

In her waking dreams, Thula heard Gogo's receding chants to the ancestral spirits asking them to direct her on what she would need to gather for healing. "I come to you pure in body, mind and spirit. It is I who salutes you, Ngwenyas. Who protects and guides us? Alas! You, who are below!"

Later, Thula feigned sleep, even though the pungent odour of the foamy brown liquid of imbiza and intelezi, Gogo's primary cures for all illnesses, still had the power to wake her. Birds were busy with life, chirping and singing for a new day. She could see holes of sunlight streaming through the curtains. She sank deeper into the blanket, the springs of the old bed creaking.

"Sanibonani." It was Gogo who greeted. "How did you sleep, Thula?"

The flicker of concern on her face quickly disappeared. Thula

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thought she had imagined it. "I slept well, Gogo. I heard you..." Her eyes questioned.

Gogo smiled with satisfaction. "I'm already back from the mountain."

"I heard you. I'm glad you didn't pull my blankets off, chastising like you used to." She imitated Gogo's voice, "A girl should never let the sun get into her anus. Hawu, hawu, hawu. You'll be lazy." Then Thula whispered, "He's still here?"

Gogo laughed, "Hawu Thula! You're still dreaming violent dreams after all these years."

"My mind remembers everything." Thula smiled with respect, and when she saw the dread in Gogo's eyes, she averted hers in respect of Gogo's seniority.

Gogo's mouth pinched the emotion before she said gaily, "I know what you heard. It's those naughty cats that come in through my window. You know I can't sleep with the heat." Her twitching left eye betrayed her lies and Thula saw her hide her trembling hand in her apron pocket. She thought it would have been easy to believe Gogo. In the bright sunny morning, Mkhulu's visits did seem to be just nightmares. Life would be normal again until his next visit.



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### **Author YU Yiming**

A member of China Writers Association and the Vice President of Nanjing Writers Association, YU Yiming has published literary works of around 2 million words. He is now the author of 15 collections of novels and short stories.

Major literary awards received: LIANG Bin Novel Award in 2020, Nanjing Purple Mountain Literary Award for three sessions, People's Literary Award in 2012, Novel of the Year 2011 by Selected Novels magazine, and Novel of the Year 2011 by People's Literature magazine.

#### Chinese - English translator Luisetta Mudie

A freelance Chinese-to-English translator living near London and a member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, Luisetta Mudie graduated from the University of Leeds with a degree in Modern Chinese Studies in 1990. She has worked as a journalist in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Beijing, including for the Financial Times, Reuters, AFP, and the BBC World Service in London. She was the winner of the 2nd Bai Meigui Translation Competition in 2016, which is a competition run by the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing at Leeds University, and Read Paper Republic.

English - Korean translator Kim Yeojin

Lei Fengjing ate lunch in a state of distraction, constantly checking the time. His third cousin, Lei Fengguang, the deputy head of the family's ancestral village, had done him enough honor already, coming in person to visit this cousin with whom he didn't even share a great-grandfather, and who was now a schoolmaster in the big city. He had even invited him to have lunch back at the ancestral village. Best not to slight these village chieftains, Fengjing thought, or they would think he was lording it over them after moving so far away, and forgetting his roots there, which went back eight generations. You may have got yourself a civil service job and made big bucks, but they're not going to roll out the red carpet for you, he told himself. You are still nothing in the eyes of the villagers, he told himself.

He had heard it said that rural officials would wake up in the morning, rub the sleep from their eyes, and head to the restaurant to spend the day drinking, until the sleep started

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gumming up their eyes again, at which point they would stumble off in search of their beds. They often ended up in the wrong ones. Fengjing thought that this was probably an urban myth. After all, Fengguang's face was fresh and clean, and his teeth looked like an advertisement for toothpaste. They were drinking red wine, which he did with dapper elegance, holding the wineglass gracefully by the stem in the correct manner and taking delicate sips.

There was something forced about this display, Fengjing thought, which would really only fool some young girl, or a green businessman from out of town. His true colors really showed when it came to eating, in the way he turned over all the pieces of chicken on the plate, looking for the wings, as if to imprint each one with a seal of approval in the form of his saliva, like a favor bestowed on the common folk by an emperor. But the thing Fengjing really couldn't stand about him was his self-important ramblings, as if it wasn't enough to show off his manners by eating and drinking, and looking after his guests. His talk ranged from national and international developments to his bombastic vision of the glorious achievements and bright future of his village, the sort of boastful rhetoric that was now an essential skill for rural officials.

Fengjing had described himself as a schoolmaster, but he was

just being modest. He was, in fact, the deputy head of a top high school in the provincial capital, a post that carried the equivalent rank to that of a deputy head of a department in a municipal government education bureau. He was an outstanding teacher, but he had no talent for public speaking outside the classroom. He praised the eloquence of his school principal when he accompanied him to social engagements. He wasn't just trying to pay his boss compliments; he genuinely meant it. Whether he was subtly alluding to a subject, or using simple words that contained deeper meanings, or carrying all before him with the sheer force of his rhetoric, Fengjing's boss always left people with a sense of exhilaration. His cousin, the deputy village chief, on the other hand, loved to show off, but his talk contained no surprises, and always came back to the same old stuff about Banpo village, where he had his first posting as a grassroots cadre. Having the gift of gab was one thing, but saying things that other people hadn't thought of before, now that was real talent.

Fengjing had no choice but to listen patiently, however; the village secretary and the clan elders were also present, and so he forced himself to smile in all the right places. The village government put on an annual banquet to celebrate the Chinese New Year, inviting anyone of note, officials and businesspeople,

who hailed from the village. Fengjing had never made the guest list yet, because Fengguang and his cronies had never seen fit to recognise his status as a deputy department head. So what was today about?

It wasn't that cold outside, but the food left in the dishes had already started to get cold, and was covered now with a thin white film of coagulated cooking lard, giving Fengjing pause. He put his chopsticks down. The clock, which was accurate, was nearly at 3.00 p.m., and he hurried to check the stock market on his smartphone. It was rising, so he tapped open a few individual share prices. They were rising too. He couldn't help giving a big grin. This was the time when countless shareholders across the country would be anxiously checking the markets to see who were the winners and the losers of that day's trading. Fengguang grinned conspiratorially, giving him a big thumbs-up. Fengjing called his wife, stepping outside the private room in the restaurant where they were eating.

"Hey, Mr. Lei, they went up. All our shares went up," Yunxiu said, excitedly.

"Really?" Fengjing pretended not to have seen it. "You're kidding me. You'll have to treat your mahjong friends tonight; let them share in our good fortune," he told her.

"No! No! No!" she protested. "You've jinxed it now, and I'll

lose money!"

Fengjing hurriedly apologized, thinking nonetheless that Yunxiu seemed in a pretty good mood. Shares and mahjong were two of life's pleasures, and could take a woman's mind off a lot of things.

He went back to his seat.

"So, did you clean up today, big brother?" Fengguang asked.

In truth, Fengjing hadn't even noticed how much he had made, nor did he care. The main thing for him was that his wife was in a good mood. As long as the share index kept rising, things would be fine.

Fengjing's boss had hinted a while back that he wanted him to have his job when he retired, and that he should start getting cosy with the officials at the city's education bureau. Fengjing had thanked the principal and said that it would be up to fate to decide whether he got the top job. The principal hadn't said much at this, just patted him on the shoulder with a sigh.

Fengjing didn't answer his cousin's question. It seemed to him that saying he didn't care in this company would fall awkwardly somewhere between a joke and a boast. So he just smiled and said nothing.

When they'd all had enough to eat and drink, Fengguang offered to take Fengjing to see his grandmother. "Don't forget, I

call her Grandma too," he said.

Fengjing demurred. "You're in charge of a whole village," he said. "You shouldn't waste time that should be spent on official business on me. I've already taken up more than half your day."

"It's not every day that big-shot intellectuals get to go back to their ancestral home," Fengguang countered. "I'm just doing my job as a local landlord in shepherding you around. If I'm honest, you are my official business today."

So Fengjing had to go along with it.

His boss had once been his classmate in college, and they had grown close while working alongside each other as classroom teachers. When he had landed the principal's job, he had promoted Fengjing too. The first time they had a meal after a meeting of the school leadership team, many of the middle and higher-ranking managers made a point of toasting the boss, spewing all kinds of blatant flattery to try to get on his good side. Even some of the best teachers in the school, who had previously won Fengjing's respect, did this. Their fawning behavior made him feel sick. Fengjing said nothing at the time, but later, he asked his boss in disgust:

"How could you stomach your food?"

"It's a bit of an acquired taste," his boss admitted. "Maybe one day I'll get so used to it that I won't be able to eat if they suddenly stop saying those things!"

Fengjing was pretty sure that Fengguang sang his bosses' praises to their faces in a manner that was sweeter than any musician, too. But Fengjing wasn't his boss. And as deputy head of a school in the far-off provincial capital, he too had people willing to flatter him, mainly in order to get their child a place at his school. Fengguang had said earlier that his kid was still in kindergarten. If any of his friends or relatives needed a school place in the provincial capital, the time to bring it up would be at the dinner table, usually under the influence of alcohol. Fengjing still wasn't quite sure what the deal was.

Ten years ago, Banpo village had relocated to the foot of the mountain, creating a rural community along the lines of a garden city, with the old village left high and dry up on the hill above, its houses empty, its streets devoid of people. But one person still hung on there; Fengjing's octogenarian grandmother, who grew her own vegetables and cooked her own food. She was a hale and hearty old lady, except for her deafness. Actually, Fengjing's father always said that she could hear perfectly well, except when he or the village chief told her to move down off the mountain. Then she became as deaf as a post.

"When I call you, she immediately asks if I am bad-mouthing her to you, and demands to be given the phone," his father had

said.

His father would usually call Fengjing when he made the trip up the mountain to deliver her rice and oil, so he could chat to his grandmother and ask her how she was. His father was probably right about her, Fengjing thought, because she always seemed to hear perfectly well during those brief exchanges. His father had even tried to trick her into leaving her home on the hill, by sending her to visit Fengjing in the city for a few days, and moving the entire contents of her home into the new place once he had enticed her out of her lair. But as soon as she got back, Grandma had insisted on moving back up the hill, come hell or high water. She was adamant, and so his father had complied, moving all of her belongings back up to the old house like the dutiful son he was.

Whenever Fengjing went back home for the annual tombsweeping festival in April, he went to mourn the dead, but he mostly went to check on his grandmother, because it was she who had taken care of him single-handedly when his parents were drafted into collective farm labor during the pre-reform era. He had a closer relationship with her than he did with them.

"When we get there, let's leave your little car at the bottom of the hill and take my four-by-four; the road to the village is pretty hilly, and it hasn't been resurfaced in years," Fengguang said. "You can just relax and enjoy the ride: I'll be your chauffeur."

Fengjing felt unable to rebuff such goodwill, so he fetched his luggage and transferred it to his cousin's car. He knew that mountain road pretty well, having walked up and down it every day to get to school. But he'd been back less and less often in recent years, because his father would use his visits as an excuse to get his grandmother down from the mountain for a few days. He was determined to visit her in the old village this time, however. He thought he would feel easier in his mind if he could see how she actually lived.

Deputy village chief Lei drove somewhat wildly, with a constant popping sound of small stones hitting the chassis. Startled birds shot from the bushes as they passed. He didn't sound his horn on any of the many bends in the road, as if he was wary of scaring the trees.

"Careful," Fengjing warned him.

His cousin laughed. "No need," he said. "I had this road built when I was head of the old village. I know it better than I know my own intestines. I could drive it with my eyes shut, no pussy-footing on the bends."

He pointed to a mirror installed on a bend to allow a view of oncoming traffic.

"Look at that," he said. "All those years, and not a spot of rust.

There's a mirror on each one of the 18 bends along this road. I flagged them all from the powers that be. I couldn't have imagined in my wildest dreams that Banpo village would wind up at the foot of the mountain in the blink of an eye."

Fengjing too felt a sudden pang of nostalgia at the suddenness of this change.

"Maybe it wasn't a waste of time and money, fixing up this road," Fengguang mused. "Maybe one day, we'll all move back up to the old village again. All we'll need to do is resurface and widen it."

But Fengjing wasn't paying attention. He was too busy watching the road.

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Fengjing had seen photos online of what the earth would look like if humans disappeared, with the trees and grass taking over cities of concrete and steel. Apparently, 50 years is all it would take for those cities to return to the jungle. Fengjing was doubtful about that. After all, this road was already overgrown after just 10 years, although he could still feel the firm base of the road through the gravel as the tyres gripped it. The plants hadn't yet managed to pierce the road surface to any degree. But

when they got to the village, Fengjing thought at first that his cousin had brought them to the wrong place. The open area where they had once threshed grain seemed to have disappeared, as had the main street, both completely swallowed up by grass and weeds. Both the main thoroughfare and the threshing floor had been concrete; the latter was the size of two basketball courts, and had been built during the collective farming era. Back then, concrete was hard to come by. The locals called it yanghui, or "foreign dust". It was a non-slip surface that stopped the road becoming a quagmire in rainy weather. The concrete threshing floor had once been clean and shiny, like a jade ornament at the mountain's waist, and everyone in the village would vie with each other for space to dry their grain come harvest time.

"Hard to believe your own eyes, isn't it?" Fengguang broke in.

"Grandma smashed up all the concrete and threw all the pieces down the mountain."

Grandma was the only person left in the village now. That was just typical of a tough old bird like her.

"Your dad and the others couldn't stop her. She said there were plant spirits underneath that couldn't breathe with the concrete weighing down on them, and she felt sorry for them," Fengguang said. "She wanted to play savior and allow them the

chance to grow again."

Fengjing heard the derision in his tone, but he wasn't about to argue with this paternalistic official who was so sure he was right. He had read in a book somewhere that there was a species of cicada somewhere in the Americas that had remained underground for 17 years. So who knew what sort of life might be lurking under the ground after 70 years? He thought with compassion of his grandmother's aging, wrinkled hands wielding a hammer, smashing up all that concrete bit by bit. How long must it have taken her?

Grandma was sitting outside the ancestral home, sunning herself. Her face creased into a mass of wrinkles when she saw Fengjing: "So, did you bring me something to eat? I really fancy some green bean paste!"

This 80-year-old woman sounded like an eight-year-old child at times. Every time Fengjing came to visit, she wanted him to bring her some snack food, but only one kind.

"People are insatiable," she would say. "You shouldn't have too much of a good thing all in one go, or you might use up your allotted lifespan."

He took her by the hand, which was rough and dry to the touch, and tough as an acacia branch in winter.

"Did you take up all the concrete on the road and the

threshing floor all by yourself?" he asked her.

"Is that what the officials told you? And you believed them?" she said. "No, of course not, how could I have done? It took the whole village six months or more, working together."

"That's right, Grandma, Fengjing's an official too," Fengguang told her. "He's half a grade higher in rank than me, as well."

Grandma pointed to her ear, and Fengguang whispered: "You see, she's pretending to be deaf again."

He rattled the car keys in Fengjing'sdirection. "Give me a call when you're ready to go back down," he said. "I'll drive you."

Fengjing was planning to stay a couple of days with Grandma in the old village. The moment Fengguang had gone, Grandma said:

"Great, he's gone. I don't like him. His eyes have a shifty look, and he's got a head full of evil plans."

Maybe Fengguang didn't have it so easy as an official after all, Fengjing thought. He had certainly got under the skin of this old lady, probably because he had tried to force her down from the mountain. He changed the subject:

"Grandma, you're the only person left here in the old village," he said. "Did the people come up from the new village to help you smash up the concrete?"

"Who said I was the only person left?" she said. "Didn't you

see all those people lounging about under the trees, smoking and gossiping, when you came in? You mean you made a beeline straight for me without giving them the time of day? People will be saying behind your back that you're putting on airs now that you live in the big city."

Fengjing didn't know whether he was losing his grip, or she was. He thrust a pack of cigarettes into his pocket and walked back towards the entrance of the village. The spring grass always took slightly longer to come through up on the mountain than it did down below, and the grass was still dry and yellowed from the winter. But, if you looked carefully, small green shoots could be seen pushing up from the earth under the stalks. There were even some tender young leaves, pushing forth like small green ears, eavesdropping on an alien world. There was a big, old pine tree near the entrance of the village, its evergreen branches evoking Fengjing's childhood, although they looked somewhat wilder than before. Under it, some figures were seated at the stone table and benches. As he got closer, Fengjing saw that they were made of straw.

He put the packet of cigarettes back in his pocket and took a closer look at them. They didn't look like the scarecrows that were put out in fields to scare off birds. They had been lovingly crafted, with clothing woven from grass stalks, and faces made

from golden wheat straw. They had been well-made and carefully positioned in standing and squatting positions. Grandma's inner child was clearly alive and kicking. Fengjing couldn't help but smile, the first time he had smiled in a natural, unforced way for two years. He wondered what they were talking about. Perhaps you could only hear them on a moonlit night with a fair wind.

"Offer them a cigarette," Grandma said. "It'll stop any gossip that might come out of their mouths."

"I can't tell who they are," he said.

"All that book-learning has made you stupid," she told him. "The one standing up, that's Fifth Grandpa from behind the mountain, the old gossip who gets everyone's back up. The ones sitting down are Third Uncle who lives up on the hill, and the barefoot doctor who comes to buy herbs. Those two play chess whenever they meet."

As she spoke, Fengjing was able to match up the straw figures with the figures in his memory, and he saw them for who they really were.

"There's method in a fool's madness," Grandma was saying.

"Do you remember the tricks you learned as a kid? How you got the rice down when your parents couldn't afford any other dishes? You'd chew it slowly. Then you'd find that plain boiled

rice does actually taste of something when you've nothing to eat it with. It's the same with this. You have to stare at the straw people's faces for a long time, and then you start to see their eyes. Keep looking, and you'll even be able to see the pores of their skin, clear as anything. When you were little, you used to see people's faces in the clouds, and in the gnarled and pockmarked bark of the trees. Now that you're so busy all the time, you can't see them anymore. Your thoughts are all over the place."

He thought what she said sounded sensible. It was as if she had lived her life backwards, and now was reaching back not just into her childhood, but to the very dawn of human culture. There was a time, he had heard, before humankind became the lords of all creation, when they could be attacked at any time by their own kind, or by wild beasts, especially at night. Hypervigilant, they would constantly scan the undergrowth for human, animal or insect faces. This was so entrenched that even today, we still see a face when we look at the front of a vehicle, or an electrical socket.

So how did Grandma make the straw people?

Inside, her house looked like a factory. The first thing she did was to pound the rice or wheat stalks flat with a large wooden mallet, getting rid of the dried outer layers of vegetation, and leaving them soft and pliable. The next stage was to plait the stalks using a grass loom, one that Fengjing remembered well. It had been bought to make sacking for sandbags, which were sold to the flood prevention brigade to shore up the dams and dykes, and which had brought in a few extra cents to the household. It needed one person to stack it with straw, and another to push the crosspiece. He used to be very skilled at it, but it seemed that Grandma was doing both jobs by herself now. The third stage was to sew up the matting onto a human-shaped frame, using thin grass twine, so that it formed the clothing worn by the straw men, almost like the thick skin of a rhinoceros, or the armor of an ancient warrior. Fengjing picked up some of the pieces of bamboo and wooden sticks used to make the frames; they were rotten at one end, and Grandma cut that part off with a vegetable chopper.

"I'm making good use of your father's precious things," she told him.

He remembered that polytunnels were very common in rural areas back then, because people could grow out-of-season vegetables in them, and how his father had put them on a few plots of land. Grandma hadn't raised any overt objection to this, but privately she had told him that she thought his father had lost his senses. If you harvested a year's worth of vegetables in a

single season, then what were people supposed to do for the other three seasons? People were meant to live through the year, one season at a time, eating the vegetables that were appropriate to each season, otherwise they wouldn't live as long. Instead, she said, humankind was hurtling towards its own destruction.

"I'm not lonely, you know, Fengjing," Grandma broke in on his thoughts. "I'm here, and all the people from the old village are here with me."

They ate a simple supper, then Fengjing said he would take a stroll around the old village.

"Wait until tomorrow," Grandma told him. "It's dark, and there's no electric light. I kept Hehe's room for him. You can go and sit in there for a while."

Fengjing didn't dare look at her. Suddenly, there were tears all over his face.

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There were a lot of empty rooms in the ancestral home, and Grandma had set one aside for Hehe that faced south. The moonlight spilled in through the latticework on the windows as Fengjing opened the door. The first thing he saw was the back of Hehe's head as he sat at the small table by the window,

reading. He felt reflexively for the light switch.

"There's no electricity, and no bulb," Grandma said. Fengjing drew back his hand.

"The people of the old village have no use for lights, and neither do I or Hehe."

She left him in the room with Hehe. His desk was right next to the window, with his bookcase to the left of it, and his single bed to the right. The bed head faced south, with one side of the bed along the wall. There was a motto stuck to the wall above the bookcase, and a daily study timetable at the head of Hehe's bed. Posters of footballers were on the wall above the bed, arranged in the shape of a fan. Fengjing couldn't remember their names, only that his wife had argued with Hehe about the pictures.

The posters had finally been allowed to stay following impassioned pleas and promises from the boy. The room was laid out in exactly the same way as Hehe's room back home in the city, with the same furnishings, except that the desk, bed and bookcase were all made of straw in this version, so there was no need to clean them. And the occupant of this room was still in it. Fengjing took a few steps towards the window. He wanted to put his hands on his son's shoulders, to feel his thin, narrow collarbones under his hands. But he hung back, afraid of

frightening the boy; afraid of frightening himself awake.

He went back into the main living area. Grandma stopped her work at the grass loom. It was so dark that he could barely see his own hand in front of his face. Grandma must be so practised at this work that she didn't need to see what she was doing. The room suddenly got quiet, and the dark grew even deeper. Fengjing realised he had been in Hehe's room for a very long time.

"When you get back, tell Yunxiu that Hehe is being really good here, just getting on quietly with his studies," Grandma said. Yunxiu was the name of Fengjing's wife.

It seemed that Grandma was turning out to be some kind of genius in her old age. She had only visited them in the provincial capital on one occasion, and she hadn't stayed any longer than a week. Hehe had been busy with his studies the whole time, shut up in his room by his mother every night to do his homework. She couldn't have caught more than a glimpse or two of her great-grandson's room while she was there, yet she had remembered every detail, and with such clarity. For the past few years, Fengjing had always made these visits home alone. He'd been unable to conceal the truth from his parents, but he had hoped to conceal it from Grandma.

It was 9.00 p.m. Time to call Song Yunxiu. Ever since Hehe's

accident, he had worried about leaving her at home alone when he was away, and would call her at exactly the same time every day. Swallowing his pain, he would explain jokingly to others that his wife was always checking up on him.

Song Yunxiu taught maths in the same school where Fengjing was deputy head. There was an old cliche that if the child of teachers gets bad grades, then the parents will have failed not just as parents, but as teachers, too. This pressure had overwhelmed their son, and it had overwhelmed Song Yunxiu.

After Hehe's death, she could no more face her colleagues than she could her classes. After a semester off work, the school transferred her to a different job in the teachers' reading room. Fengjing had heard her crying in Hehe's room in the middle of the night a number of times, when she thought he was fast asleep. He felt unable to sleep deeply after that.

In school, Song Yunxiu often made a spectacle of herself, especially in the eyes of her colleagues. On days when there were meetings, the usually dowdy Ms. Song would dress herself up to the nines. When people greeted her, she would trill out a sudden, tinkling schoolgirl's laugh, and simper as she spoke, wiggling her hips as she walked. She told Fengjing that she wanted to conquer her pain with happiness, now that her life was in ruins. Her words brought him excruciating pain. He

wondered what sort of happiness could be gained by faking it. But it was too late. Song Yunxiu had been swallowed up by her grief, and could no longer play a normal role in society.

So Fengjing spent every spare minute he could with his wife, even dragging her out to make a new circle of friends who spent most of their time eating dinner together, playing mahjong and the stock market. The thing these friends all had in common was that they had no children, either because they had never become parents, or because their kids had died. So nobody brought up the subject.

"Don't you worry, Principal Lei, Mr. High-Performing Teacher, Big Daddy," Yunxiu told him coquettishly on the phone. "We girls have all had dinner; we got a take-out, and we're on our third round of mahjong!"

She liked to shower him with high-sounding titles when she was in a good mood. She even sent him a photo of the three women she was playing mahjong with via WeChat, "as a special treat."

So he didn't need to worry about her. He could enjoy a good night's sleep. Fengjing didn't want to take over his grandmother's bed, so he slept in a guest-room she had made up for him. The old village was nestled halfway up the mountain, where the air was moist and soft. Grandma had converted a huge pile of

woven straw matting into a big, solid bed, using a folded grass mat in place of a pillow. Fengjing went to lie down, and she actually tucked him in under the quilt. He slept soundly and warmly, enveloped from head to foot in the familiar sweet scent of old straw.

The family had been poor when he was growing up, and they had always used straw to pad the bed frames in winter. Once it had been pressed flat in the beds, it would be fed into the maw of the straw-loom, and replaced with new, fragrant straw that had been dried outside in the sun. Without Yunxiu here, he could go to bed without brushing his teeth, washing his face or changing his underwear and socks. Fengjing felt as if he had really come back to his old home; to his childhood.

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There was an old shop behind the house that was once kept by Ninth Uncle. It was the most inviting place of his childhood years. It had a large wooden counter facing the door, so that you couldn't see the kind of goods that were on sale from the outside. Ranged along the top of the counter were several glass jars filled with cellophane-wrapped sweets, both hard and soft. These jars were the focal point for the children of the village,

who cast longing looks at them when they were sent to the shop on errands for their parents to buy oil, salt, soy sauce and vinegar. Cooking wine, soy sauce and vinegar were dispensed from large earthenware jugs under the roof beams. Ninth Uncle would stand by the jugs, bamboo measuring scoops in hand. There were two scoops; one for a pound and one for half a pound. He used the same scoops for the cooking wine as he did for the soy sauce, so the soy sauce bottle in Fengjing's house often smelled of wine. He had often heard banter between Ninth Uncle and the people who came to his shop, to the effect that the measuring scoops must have had special powers from being dipped into so many different flavors. It wasn't until he grew up that Fengjing realised this was actually a sly reference to Ninth Uncle's many girlfriends.

Looking in from the street, he could see Ninth Uncle now, standing tall and straight, looking younger than he had done when Fengjing was a boy. This puzzled him for a while, until he realised. Of course, he thought to himself, that's Ninth Uncle as Grandma remembers him!

Unlike the new village at the foot of the mountain, there were cowpens at the centre of the old village, home to the ploughoxen, an indispensable tool for the local people. There were many wild animals up here on the hill. The pens were encircled

on all sides by houses, to guard against possible attacks.

During the 1980s, when the time came to fix farm output quotas, a single ox would be allocated to several households, and the children of those households would take turns cutting grass for them, until winter, when they would feed them hay and straw instead.

The oxen had gone to live with new owners now, but the cowpens were still there, with each animal standing guard over its individual stake and manger. As the sun came out, he saw that the oxen were lazily eating straw by the fence. There was an old one chewing the cud, and a calf trying to suckle from its mother. Everything was as it used to be. The only difference was the grass that was now growing across the earthen wall of the cowpens, where they used to dry out the dung.

Those seeds were actually already in the dung all those years ago, and now their descendants are still clinging onto this old earthen wall, Fengjing thought to himself.

He patted one of the oxen on the back. It seemed to recognise him, and made a long, drawn-out lowing sound, flicking its tail.

There was a patch of waste ground behind Banpo village that was used as a small playground for the village primary school. The school itself consisted of four rooms, three of which were

classrooms. The other room was a staff dormitory. The teachers would arrive full of zeal and hard work, and then leave again soon afterwards; it was hard to retain staff deep in the mountains.

The classes were mixed-grade teaching, with first, second, and third-year students all sitting together. While the teacher was teaching the students of one grade, the others would be told to study by themselves, or complete homework tasks. Once you got to the fourth year, you had to go to the bigger primary school at the bottom of the mountain. Fengjing had finished all three grades in one year and had gone straight through to fourth grade in the school down the mountain – an unexpected bonus.

The kids were chasing each other around the playground, making a huge noise.

"Where's your teacher? Who's your teacher?" Fengjing asked them.

They couldn't stop in time to answer him, so he went on into the classroom. The desks were the same ones, made from the wood of pine trees felled just behind the village. They just looked a bit older. The children didn't look right, though, because the older ones should have gone to high school by now, while the younger ones were barely old enough for kindergarten. They were all staring intently at the teacher on the dais, who was holding an infant in her arms.

"Fengjing, my brother! You're back!" she said. "Do you remember me? I'm Xiaojing."

Of course he remembered her. He had been approaching manhood by the time he had left to go to university, and she had been the prettiest girl in the village. Later, he heard that she had gotten married to Fengguang, so she was a cadre's wife now.

"Of course I remember you," he told her. "You're my sister-inlaw. It was Fengguang who drove me up here yesterday. Has the guy been so crazily busy that he hasn't even stepped over here to see you?"

"He wouldn't come and see me anyway," Xiaojing replied. "He's got a new woman now. Our baby Doudou was stolen by someone on the roadside. All I had was Doudou. Being a government official, he had wanted to set a good example in the birth-control campaign, so he had made me get sterilized after the baby was born. I can't have another one now. He doesn't want me any more, and I couldn't leave Doudou, so I went looking for him everywhere, and finally tracked him down here," she said. "All of the lost children from Banpo village are here. I refused to leave, so here I am."

She turned back to face her class.

"Who else needs milk?" she said. "Come up here."

Fengjing hadn't realised she had been breastfeeding the infant in her arms until that point. She folded back the edge of her shirt to reveal a full breast, with small bumps rising in a ring around her erect nipple, pulled into a wonderful oval shape where it had been held in the baby's mouth. The women of Banpo village had never hidden their breast-feeding from the men, but Fengjing was easily embarrassed, and he left in a hurry.

Later, as they ate their evening meal, Fengjing told Grandma he would stay a few days next time, and bring Yunxiu with him. When 9.00 p.m. came around, Yunxiu was still ensconced at the mahjong table. The three women who had been there yesterday had stayed overnight, and they'd resumed battle again the next day. They'd been playing since the afternoon, she told him. Fengjing was on the verge of telling her, "Hehe is here with Grandma," but he stopped himself. He didn't have the courage to mention their son's name to his wife. That would have to wait until she came to the old village and saw for herself.

That night, he lay on the straw mat, feeling itchy and feverish all over, as if the spring sap had entered into his every pore. He was reaching down to caress his inflamed skin when his hand met abruptly with an obstruction. He and Yunxiu hadn't made love since their son's death. In the early days, there had been a

pressing, physical need. But Yunxiu had refused him outright, saying: "Dream on! I'm not going to give you a second child!" and the thing had usually foundered amid the sound of his wife's loud sobbing. Even the best swords cannot be left idle for long, without the rust setting in and blunting the edge.

He hadn't expected this new lease of life, this readiness for action, on a trip to his childhood home. He woke from his dreams that night tense and happy, as if from the first wet dream of his youth. He tried hard to recall the young woman who had visited him. But to his surprise, it wasn't Yunxiu's face that he conjured up. It was Xiaojing's.

**₽** 

It was time to leave. He called Fengguang and asked for a ride back down the mountain.

"Well, brother, you've had an eye-opener, haven't you?" deputy village chief Lei said on the phone. "Your Grandma's a creative one; her creativity knows no bounds."

"Was that Fengguang?" Grandma asked when he had hung up. "You should keep your distance from him."

She was right, of course, and Fengjing no longer believed that she was deaf. He gave her the thumbs-up, saying: "The village

chief was just saying how great you are."

"Ha! That's like the fox wishing the hen a Happy New Year!" she said contemptuously, adding: "There's no good in that one."

She was right about that, too. No sooner had they got into the car when Fengguang said:

"Brother, I'd like to ask you a favor. I want to buy up all of Grandma's straw people and all the other things she's made with straw, and turn the old village into a tourist attraction," he said. "It's just that I can't persuade Grandma to go along with it. Could you have a word with her for me?"

Fengjing shook his head. "No, I couldn't."

They headed back down the mountain in the four-by-four. Neither said a word for a while, until Fengjing broke the silence.

"It's not just Grandma who lives up in the old village. My son Hehe is there as well," he said. "I don't want him disturbed."

"You what? What do you mean, your son's there?"

"Your son Doudou and your ex-wife Xiaojing are living up in the old village as well," Fengjing continued. "Xiaojing's working as a teacher in the village school. She even wrote me a list of books she wants me to buy for her," he added.

Fengguang slammed on the brakes.

"Fengjing, brother. Please stop this," he said. "You're scaring me. We are all atheists, materialists, right? Doudou disappeared when he was two years old, and Xiaojing has been dead for years."

Fengjing struggled for a while to pull the list of books out of his pocket, but it had disappeared. Only a few fragments of straw remained.

"You've succumbed to the demon, haven't you?" Fengguang said. "You've got sucked into those ghost stories that Ninth Uncle used to tell."

"It's not the same," Fengjing dissembled, scattering the pieces of straw out of the jeep window. "Don't you remember? Ninth Uncle used to tell a story where the guy gets lost, and the ghosts invite him back to their house, and feed him steamed pork buns and noodles. Then, when he wakes up the next morning, he's lying on somebody's tomb, the pork buns have turned into toads, and he is spitting earthworms out of his mouth. But there's nothing at all left in my pocket."

Fengguang started up the engine: "Listen, brother, if you don't want to help me, then let's just leave it. But don't go cooking up this ghost nonsense. I've been deputy village chief for years now. I never had much of a track record, and now I'm just hanging on until retirement. I just don't want to fall behind my colleagues, or end up being the butt of other people's jokes."

Fengguang had directed the building of that road, so he

should have known that mountain roads hug the hillside closely, and that while a straight line may be the fastest route between two points, it is also the quickest route to death. But he drove the jeep off the road like an aircraft, before Fengjing had time to do any more than shout in surprise. Luckily for them, the vehicle got stuck in a tree. Fengjing was thrown from the vehicle. He didn't fare too badly, with only an injured leg to show for it. He staggered back towards the jeep, dragging his mangled leg behind him, to where Fengguang was still trying to struggle free, one leg trapped under the wreckage. Fengjing's mobile phone was still working, so he dialed the police, trying to reassure Fengguang at the same time.

"Hang in there," he told him.

Fengguang was as white as a sheet, and his eyes were starting to get dull.

"Brother," he managed to say. "I saw Xiaojing's face in one of the roadside mirrors."

"You're confused because of the fall, Fengguang," Fengjing said. "I'll level with you. The Xiaojing that I saw was made of straw."

They had a long wait for the ambulance. A gentle breeze blew, rustling the leaves. Fengguang spoke again.

"Brother, it's not that I'm obsessed with being an official. It's

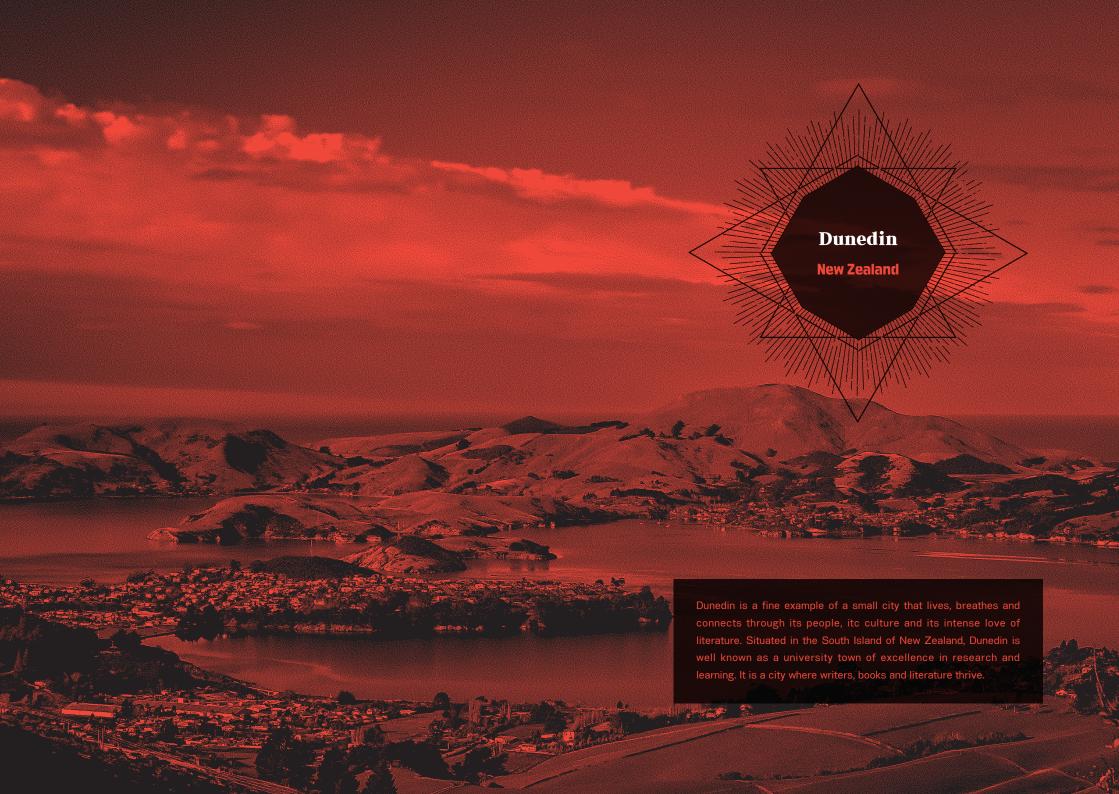
just that, with both of them gone, I daren't sit still and think about things. All I can do is keep working. It's the only way to get through the days. It's as if I'm being pursued by a snake, and I have to keep moving the whole time."

Fengjing held his cousin's shoulders, trying to help him shift to a more comfortable position. But he must have wrenched something inadvertently, because Fengguang suddenly said:

"Brother, it hurts."

Fengjing stopped immediately, the tears streaming down his face. He suddenly forgave this rural village official, this distant cousin, whose blood ran in his own veins, and who, like him, was a hollow man of straw.

"Dad, it hurts," had been Hehe's last words to him, as he had picked up his dazed and bloodied son from the ground.





## **Author Claire Lacey**

Claire Lacey is a Canadian author who lives and writes in Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her first poetry collection, *Twin Tongues*, won the Robert Kroetsch Award for Innovative Poetry. Her second book, *Selkie*, is a graphic novel collaboration with artist Sachie Ogawa. Claire is currently working on a book of poetry about brain injury, which was the subject of her PhD thesis at the University of Otago.

website clairelacey.ca twitter twitter.com/poetactics

English - Korean translator Choi Sengwoo

Tail curls around kelp locks tight against tidepull.

We don't swim well that's the joke Poseidon's steeds shrunk to centimetres: elegant, delicate, slow

and so adapted to anchor each eye independent like a chameleon's

to watch a wide periphery
see danger approaching
from two directions
at speed that exceeds escape.

We wait to be prey to the grasping crabclaw or a current that shakes us loose, sweeps us to shore to choke and desiccate.

We envy the loch horse, large and lethal, which drags unsuspecting women below the waterline and devours them.

We wish to be so ungentled.

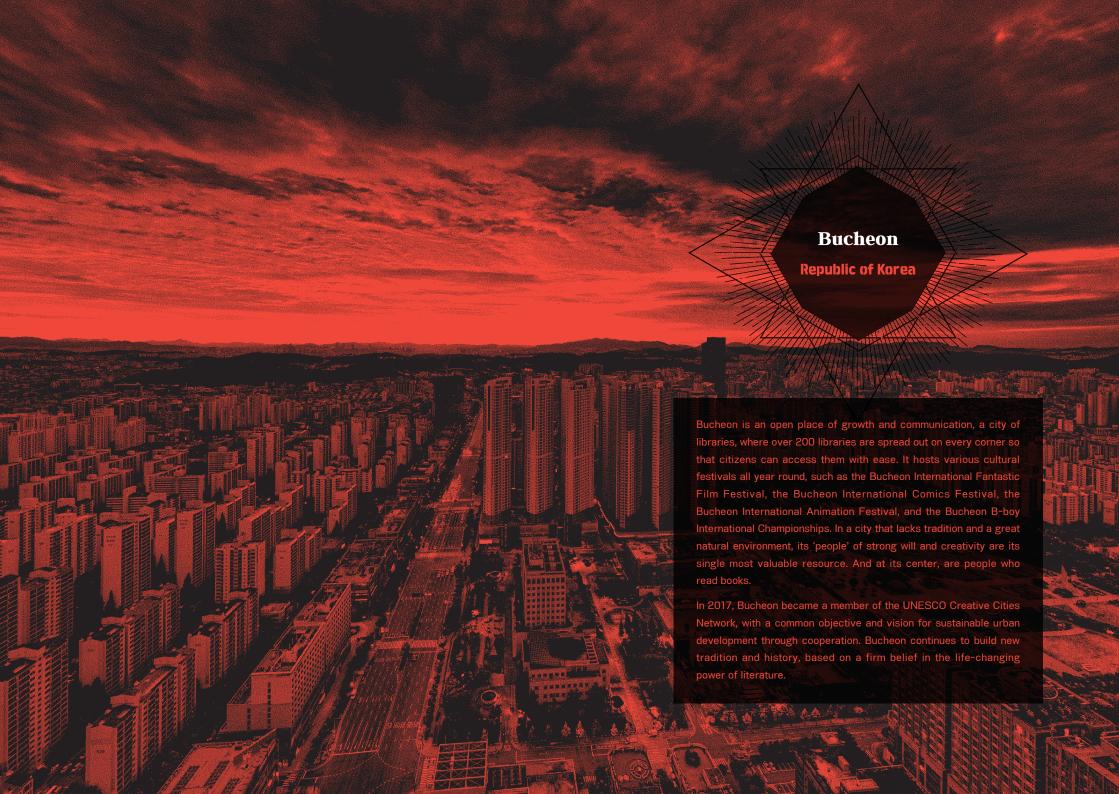
Nervy and shy, wide-eyed
and snorting, caught between
flight and freeze, reduced
to hope that today
is your turn, not mine.

- 'hippocampus' by Claire Lacey, Landfall 239, Otago

University Press, Autumn 2020



198 World Goedam Collection





### **Author Lee ShinJoo**

2018 3rd Korean Science Fiction Awards Grand Prize (short story/mid-length novel) 2022 2nd Moon Yun-Sung Science Fiction Award Grand Prize (short story/mid-length novel)

How bold of me to introduce myself with cookie-cutter work experience where you cannot find a single hint of originality. As a person who prefers watching black and white films in a 4:3 ratio starring dead people dressed in alligator man suits to enjoying billion-dollar productions armed with the latest computer graphics and great actors, I am honored to participate in even a small role at the famous Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival. I hope you enjoy watching the films and reading goedam while you're here. I am very grateful that your interest lingered on the profile of this unknown yet undoubted author.

#### Publisher Arzak

Arzak is Korea's leading science fiction publisher. Starting with Cory Doctorow's (Little Brother)(2015), we are actively introducing many masterpiece SFs from foreign classics to new works. In recent years, publishing novels by outstanding domestic SF writers such as Kim Bo-young, Jeong Se-rang, Shim Neoul, Cheon Seon-ran, Moon Mok-ha and etc, Arzak has been playing a huge role in discovering various new writers and laying the foundation for SF literature. At the end of 2021, Arzak founded Korea's first SF quarterly magazine (The Earthian Tales), and in 2022, Jeong Bora's (Cursed Bunny), which was published 5 years ago, has become the finalist for the International Booker Prize.

Instead of only pursuing profits as a company, we try to continue active attempts with affection to expand and revitalize the entire Korean SF field.

Korean - English translator Kim Yongran

A simple coincidence was all it was. Fate is a fickle friend, always changing directions. Its volatile nature produces thousands of mosaic pieces that come together to form our 'independent' lives. Neither God nor the devil could escape the blame. There are endless cases in which one baby is at a fortune-telling ritual dressed in clean silk while another is barely surviving on muddy water. Cursing your destiny won't change anything and there is no one you can hold accountable for your fate. I was like that too. The day I fell deep into the bottomless pit, fate came to seal my ending.

A South African culture expedition sounds quite fancy, but if anything, it was just a light scratching of the surface. The school was known for its generous funding of the humanities. Even students studying South African Folklore such as myself could enjoy the financial benefits. This level of support enabled me to go on an expedition to a remote piece of land over ten thousand

The Grootslang's Piano 203

kilometers away.

I knew it was an entirely different place from Korea the minute I landed at the airport. The scent of restless leaves and the relaxed swaying of the ceiling fan. Heated air greeted me as I stepped outdoors. A rush of excitement came over me as though I had already accomplished something even though the journey was yet to begin. This I am still thankful for, despite the tragic way it ended.

Before I knew it, the trip was coming to an end. There was a thicket near my hotel quite unlike the tropical rainforest you would expect of Africa. Just beyond the bushes standing at the height of a man, I could hear grass bugs singing and exotic birds flapping their wings. It suddenly dawned on me that while I was in Africa, I never really got to spend any personal time. I was so busy trying to keep up with my schedule the entire time. It wasn't that I wanted to visit a souvenir store or buy a latex pillow. But the air was so gentle that particular nightI began to think that somehow, poisonous insects and fearsome beasts would kindly mind their own business. So I headed outside, stumbling on fate's whim and falling into a crack of loosened reality.

I wandered in that pit for five hours and twenty minutes when at last I met the Grootslang. My luminous digital watch was slightly cracked but still performing fine. To say that I couldn't believe my eyes sounds so lame but it was true. It was no easy feat to face something that wasn't supposed to be there or anywhere in the world for that matter. It took a while for me to realize, but the creature in front of me was nothing like a terrifying delusion. It wasn't some intense fatigue-induced hallucination either.

Its enormous mouth could easily swallow a truck; its fangs could crush humans like insects. The body was densely covered with precisely arranged coarse scales and the sheer size of its torso made tree trunks look like toothpicks. Its heated breath was like a running steam engine. Thunder pounded my ears as the Grootslang approached. Rocks the size of houses crumbled into pieces with every slither.

The Grootslang resembles a snake mixed with an elephant, but it differs from other hybrid monsters such as the Chimaera. The Chimaera had Bellerophon but there is no such heroic figure in the myths concerning the Grootslang. According to

legend, when the gods created the Grootslang, they realized they had made the mistake of creating the most powerful and cunning creature in the world. To rectify their mistake, they split every Grootslang into pieces which became the ancestors of elephants and snakes. There was one, however, that had escaped death, dug an enormous pit somewhere, and ate the unlucky animals that fell in.

I dropped to the floor. I wasn't aware that I had until I realized the Grootslang was speaking to me. Its forked tongue was flicking like a snake but I noticed the tongue was thicker than my waist, the fangs longer than my arms. A shallow hell looked down at me from within. Pale, poisonous saliva dripped in silence.

## "I have not seen a living human in quite some time."

If there was a sound to an icicle piercing through lungs, this might've been it. My hands and feet froze up. My back stiffened and my vision blurred. Fear-stricken blood began to gather in a scratch I got wandering the cave. The Grootslang's voice

**10 Bellerophon**: The hero who killed the Chimaera.

weighed heavily on the cave walls. His words, however, bore no sign of anger. I was merely an insignificant creature unworthy of his attention

"If you knew about me you would not have come empty-handed. Show me what you brought should you wish to live."

Like most mythical beasts, the Grootslang had a brutal temper. But he had a fondness for precious items and sometimes let humans go when offered something of great value. My most valuable possessions were my plane ticket, visa, and wallet, all of which were no use sitting in my hotel room.

## "Am I to receive another diamond?"

The Grootslang must have gotten bored as he watched me shiver, speechless. He went on, voice lowered.

"What good is a hard stone? Show me something of greater value or you shall not leave this place alive."

There's an old saying that you can survive even in a tiger's

den if you stay calm, but I would have preferred facing a tiger to this. This merciful creature offered me a way to save my life, but I was an undergrad student barely out of my pajamas and had absolutely nothing on me to draw his interest.

"I see your silence is not a matter of inability to speak, but rather, a lack of wit."

The Grootslang blinked a few times. The fallen farside of the celestial sphere, a world of unrisen stars resided in those eyes.

"You're soul…"

"Wa- Wait. I have something for you."

What on earth was I thinking? I'll never know. I guess I sensed my death looming and blurted something out in desperation. The Grootslang paused in his sentence, still looking disgruntled. Had he already detected the emptiness of my words? I think so.

"I'll give you a piano."

The piano I saw in the hotel lobby came to mind, an old grand piano made of paulownia wood. It's odd now that I think back on it, even considering the circumstances. Busy as I was

with no spare time to shop for souvenirs, that piano was the most valuable thing I had seen during the entire trip. It wasn't some common instrument for the average home, but a high-end piano used in orchestras, with gold strings glimmering under the slanted lid. I was already regretting the offer because it seemed a bad choice even though it was my idea. The only thing left for me now was to be chopped into pieces with those fangs or to be swallowed alive.

# "What is a 'piano'?"

They say you can survive in a tiger's den as long as you stay calm. That saying never meant so much to me until then and never will again. I do not remember much of what happened next. All I know is that I did some serious convincing and the Grootslang let me go. As I became aware of the pale moonlight on my face, I turned to look back.

There was a long trace of something as though a big log swept past and alongside was a wide-open bottomless pit. Faint as I was, I would and could not pass out. I stumbled out of the murky dreamlike world to the hotel and hurried into my room feeling as though my blood was drying up. As the early morning sunlight skimmed my head, I collapsed.

All was quiet afterward. Had my clothes not been smeared with dirt and turned into rags, I would've shrugged the whole thing off as an unfortunate incident caused by a fever from Africa's humidity. To my surprise, I soon forgot about what happened with the Grootslang. Forgot? More like avoided. I did jump once or twice when I saw the piano quietly keeping its place under a red cover. Eventually, I became comfortable and was able to go in and out of the lobby just as I would in a Korean alleyway. Everything was back to normal.

The day came for me to go back to Korea. I was already through immigration and seated on the plane. I must confess that until the direct plane from South Africa to Incheon took off, my childish imagination expected something wild to happen, similar to scenes from monster films. Realizing that he was fooled, the Grootslang terrorizes the airport and gets contained or something like that.

After getting good sleep on a very long flight, I awoke feeling like a completely different person. The moment I stepped out the gate, crisp morning air filled my body with sweetness. My poor withered mind suddenly lit up and shined brightly. At the time, I assumed it was just homesickness, but apparently, there was something else. A deep resentment for the frightful incident in Africa.

I had forgotten about my deal with the Grootslang for some time. That was until I came upon some international news while mindlessly surfing TV channels. The news introduced people whose homes were destroyed by an unexpected flood. The name of the town written in the lower section seemed familiar to me. I still think of it from time to time. Would I have thought differently if I didn't realize it then? That was where I went for the expedition, where I met the Grootslang.

Once familiar streets appeared on the screen. The place was devastated by the flood, now rotting under layers of mud. Buildings were torn down to barely recognizable shapes. The news was over, followed by a detergent commercial. I tried to quiet the irritating music by turning the TV off, to no effect. I had a stuffy feeling like being wrapped inside a big pouch. I soon came to notice that the feeling came emanating from my chest.

I pressed my ribs painfully as I pulled out my phone. I needed to find someone who had a clear explanation for this. It had to be just an unfortunate natural disaster, a mechanical work of nature. I wanted someone on the other end of the line to tell me that the hotel was fine, or that there weren't that many casualties considering the scale of the disaster. Anything vaguely similar would have been fine.

I stood staring at the screen. Where should I call? The weather

center? The hotel? A scholar who studies mythical folklores of South Africa? I would still be there pondering if the professor who arranged the expedition to South Africa hadn't called just then.

Unfortunately, the flood had completely devastated the region. They had difficulty finding human limbs, let alone a piano. The professor shared unnecessary details about how it wasn't even the local rainy season and how there hadn't been any warning signs for what happened. I have no idea why he had to tell me disturbing stories about how bodies weren't surfacing. I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from asking about the piano and if it was found in the debris or simply disappeared.

I made a promise to the Grootslang. I had conveniently forgotten all about but the monster had no intention of letting it go. The Grootslang flooded the area and took the item himself. He drowned everyone in sight, bringing them to the bottom of the river, searching for my face. My thoughts came to a halt. My racing mind slowly calmed. I stroked the arm of the sofa. Its cozy touch took me from a forest in Africa back to a concrete building in Korea. So the Grootslang knows that I left. But what could be do about it?

I was sitting on the living room sofa in my house, in a city on a small peninsula far from Africa. Could he perhaps cross the Indian Ocean looking for me? Giving up trips to Africa wasn't so hard to do. The flood was unfortunate, but there was nothing the Grootslang could do to me now. Just like the happy endings in folklore, I shall happily live here and the Grootslang, being cheated by a human, will sulk in his dark cave.

Is it magic or super strength? Surely you've heard stories about people who can walk barefoot on fire, chew and eat glass, or swallow knives. Generally, they use clever deceptions or train their bodies, but tricks of this kind are similar to those practiced during war ceremonies in African tradition. Unlike what's shown in modern circus, war rituals were performed by the tribe's greatest traditional healers. Before going to war with enemy tribes, important ceremonies were held to display their power over the unknown with practices surpassing the physical limitations of the human body.

I brought this up because of what happened a few days after I heard about the flood.

There was a knock on the door. I don't know why I decided to open it, but I suppose the true meaning of free will died with my encounter with the Grootslang. I couldn't say for sure that I wasn't being controlled like a puppet on strings, like in a dream where logic and reason didn't work hand in hand. The

Grootslang may have even foreseen my future as I walked away.

A woman who I had never met before stood there. Legs limp, her body shook like a pendulum to stay balanced. Her sagging mouth was drooling heavily. Glass bottles of different sizes were lined up by her feet. I could see the starless world in her eyes. She picked up a soju bottle with the label peeling off.

She crushed the neck of the bottle with her front teeth, took a few bites, and began to chew with her mouth closed. Shattered glass made grating sounds as they clashed, while a soft, wet sound filled in the gaps. Scarlet bubbles formed between her lips and liquid poured out in a color that shouldn't have been. Her eyes were still empty. The stream of blood grew thicker as she continued to chew.

The smell of blood filled my nostrils. The woman stopped moving her jaws. The seemingly endless river of blood grew thinner. Slowly, she stood up tall. She gazed up towards the sky with unblinking eyes. Then she threw her head back to swallow what was in her mouth. Glass powder whispered excitedly as she moved her neck. I could see the enormous lump moving through her throat. Her shredded lips and cheeks spasmed, struggling to return to their places. The woman grabbed another bottle. It was quiet. There were just the two of us standing there. Or should I say, three?

She gobbled up a series of bottles for a while. Then belched as though she finished a tasty meal. A gush of powder spouted onto my chest along with hers.

"Did you think you could escape by running off to a different continent?"

Dark energy crawled out of her mouth as it opened.

"A puny human dare cheat me and expect to get away with it? I will not allow it."

The woman collapsed as she finished her sentence. I suddenly heard the noisy surroundings as though curtains were drawn. I assume I passed out soon after.

I opened my eyes at the hospital, of course. The person who found us must have gotten a real shock. A pool of blood on the floor where a man and a woman lay flopped upon one another. Wearing handcuffs was expected considering the circumstances. I was soon visited by detectives who intensely interrogated me. Thankfully, the surveillance camera footage proved that I did not force feed 2 bottles of soju, 2 bottles of perilla oil, 4 bottles of

domestic beer, 7 bottles of energy drinks, 6 bottles of imported beer, and one bottle of wine to a woman I had never met before in my life. No allegations were made against me and I was soon able to return home.

But I didn't want to go home. Being interrogated by the police while handcuffed in the hospital made me feel secure, which led me to tears. This chain of events made me realize that I felt safer in the protection of the civilized administrative system than in the woods of South Africa, facing the wrath of the Grootslang.

I came back home. My body began to shiver as I approached the alley and cold sweat broke out as I pressed the password on the door lock. It felt like the fluids in my brain were seeping through my forehead. My dried-up tongue gave off a horrible stink. Off came my shoes and my head felt pressure from every angle. Pain coursed through my whole body. Falling into the bed made no difference. Thin needles kept flowing through my veins. My mind was blank. My body was in agony, and that was it.

What do you do when you have hellish dreams with your eyes wide open? I was trapped in a living nightmare when a simple piano tune woke my molten mind. I do not know the name of it. There was a freshness in the continuous flow of scales and clear expression of chords, contrary to my situation. I

opened my eyes only to meet the burning pain of sun rays in the back of my eyeballs. My eyes swelled up with tears but they could not remove the paulownia piano that appeared in my room.

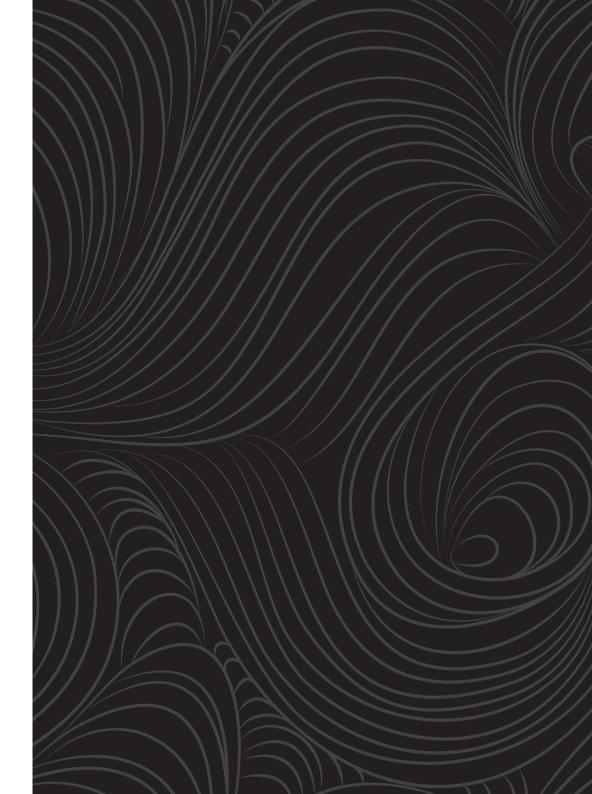
The piano was playing by itself, moving the keys and strings to play a tune without a performer of any kind. I had no thoughts on this. It was meaningless to point out what a bizarre thing it was. I tried to get up on my feet but retched instead. Yellow fluid scorched my throat. The floor was getting wet. I flung my body as though about to collapse.

And here I am now.

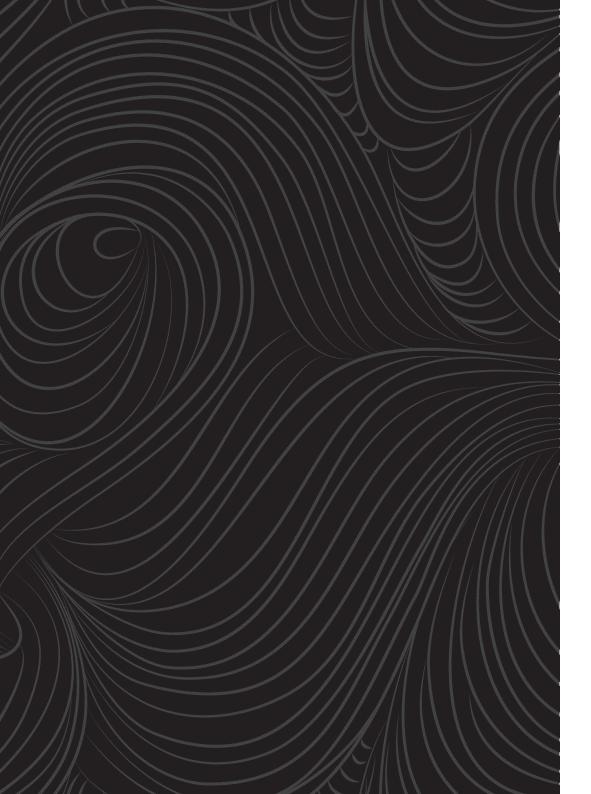
I wonder how long it's been since I left this bed. Lying in bed with a high fever, I am regularly greeted with writhing muscle pain and extreme weakness. Plunged in a dream-like state, I am no longer aware of the passing of time. It may have been one minute or one hour since I laid down. The only thing clear to me is the chilling music coming from the piano. The neverending tune binds me with its long echoes like clotting tar. Illusions of musical notes running amok on their sheets swoop down on me. I lose myself to them and sink.

I guess there are no happy endings in folk tales. You can certainly survive in a tiger's den if you keep calm, but the old saying doesn't mention what happened later to the person who

got away. Every time a cough spikes up, I withdraw myself. Slowly, I shrink. Wet lumps are sticking to my hands. I cannot say for sure that it is not blood. I do not know for certain if what flows from my eyes, what fills my mouth, or what seeps through my now translucent skin is not blood. I become smaller as I cough out little bits of myself. My shrinking body sinks. Deep into the lament of the Grootslang's piano.



218 World Goedam Collection



# **GOEDAM PROJECT 2022**

2022 Strange Tales Campus a.k.a. "Goedam" Campus 2022

The Goedam Project, jointly begun in 2020 by BIFAN (Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival) and the city of Bucheon—a UNESCO City of Literature—has been given a new name as it enters its third year: "Goedam Campus."

Goedam Campus comprises the Goedam Archives, used to collect and record goedam, the Goedam Creation Support program, which provides support for the creation of video content based on goedam, and a public creative writing school for young students.

The short films selected for the Goedam Short Films Production Support program will be unveiled at next year's BIFAN. Projects developed through the Goedam Project Development Camp will be pitched to investment and production partners for a chance at production. In partnership with B.I.G.'s project market, post-production support, and distribution support, the Goedam Campus aims to create a "goedam ecosystem" that forms a virtuous cycle of films and content with goedam at its center.







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