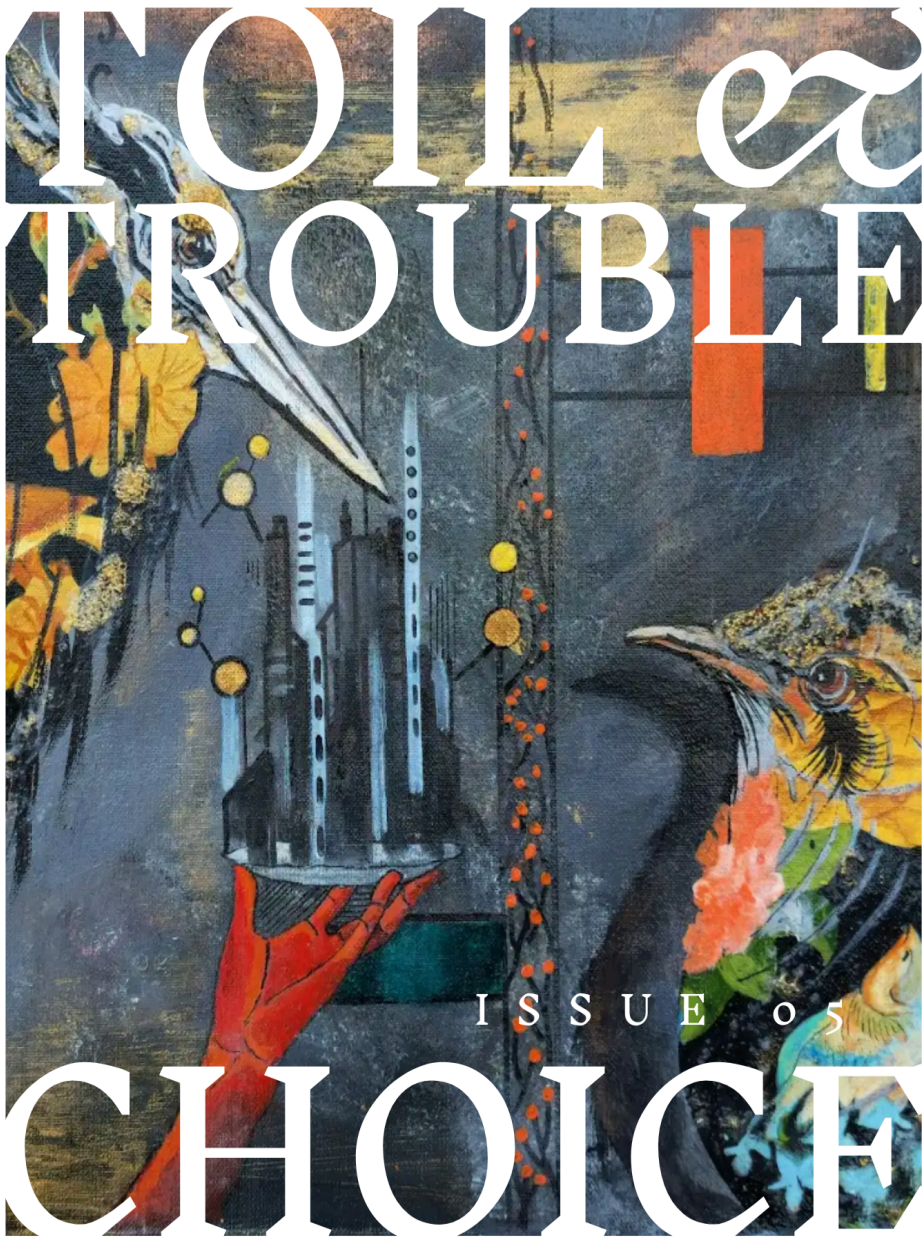


A WITCH - RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE



ISSUE 05

ALAN HARDY · AURORE PHIPPS · BROOKE BOVEE · DAITHÍ KEARNEY ·  
JULIA RAJAGOPALAN · KARA KAUFFMAN · L. BEE · NATASHA MIHELL ·  
RIAYN GREY · SHAWN SCOTT SMITH · SOPHIE MARLOWE · TERRY  
TROWBRIDGE · UMENYI CHISOMAGA · VALERIE HUNTER · ZAHRA ZOGHI



## Issue 5

ISSN: 2753-491X

All rights reserved by individual creators of written and/or visual pieces. Third parties may not reproduce any work published in this issue without permission from the individual creator(s). Toil & Trouble Literary Magazine is not responsible for any plagiarism committed by its contributors.

TOIL & TROUBLE LOGO: Laila Godwin  
COVER ART: *Progress or Else* by Zahra Zoghi  
DESIGN AND TYPESET: Daniel Redford  
VARIOUS ILLUSTRATIONS: Shutterstock

# EDITOR'S LETTER

OCTOBER 2025

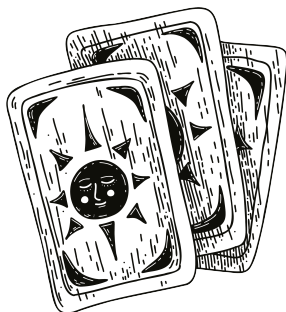
Craft is all about choice.

Whether you are creating a poem, story, painting or photograph, writers and artists make imaginative and unforeseen choices at every point in their process. Each word, each brushstroke, each angle is purposeful. And when something in that process is not deliberate — an inconsistent character, dripping paint, a blur — you choose whether to fix or embrace the problem. Sometimes the piece becomes something you never imagined it to be, and sometimes you choose to start again. Either way, each step takes you higher and higher towards achieving a finished piece of work.

Once all these minute decisions eventually become a whole that is ready to be showcased, then it is your audience's turn to make a choice of their own: do they like it? My answer to all pieces in this issue was, of course, yes!

Now it is your turn to make a choice too. From a poem about the pain of a vasectomy to a short story about a girl seeking the help of Baba Yaga, from an art piece that asks you to choose your favourite spoon to a poem about a strange woman with only her chickens for company, which will be your favourite?

*Happy Reading,*  
MILLIE GODWIN



# CONTENTS

*Progress or Else*  
ZAHRA ZOGHI ..... 1

*Vocabulary Lessons*  
BROOKE BOVEE ..... 2

*indecisive hauntings*  
SOPHIE MARLOWE ..... 22

*A Light in the Woods*  
KARA KAUFFMAN ..... 3

*She Chose and I Chose*  
ALAN HARDY ..... 23

*Get it done on Friday*  
TERRY TROWBRIDGE ..... 8

*Surprise*  
DAITHÍ KEARNEY ..... 24

*A Familiar Story*  
VALERIE HUNTER ..... 9

*The Bones of Our Mother*  
JULIA RAJAPOLAN ..... 25

*Confetti Grenades*  
UMENYI CHISOMAGA ..... 11

*Choose One*  
RIAYN GREY ..... 30

*Journal Entries of an Old Soul*  
L. BEE ..... 16

*The Highway*  
SHAWN SCOTT SMITH ..... 31

*Autumn death-poem for a  
sometime lover*  
NATASHA MIHELL ..... 21

*The Bureau of Cosmic  
Misfortune*  
AURORE PHIPPS ..... 32



# Progress or Else

ART BY ZAHRA ZOGHI

In *Progress or Else*, two birds stand on the edge of transformation. Their bodies are adorned with elements of the classic Persian “flower and bird” motif—an iconic form of traditional art that speaks to beauty, memory, and heritage. These motifs represent more than aesthetics; they are vessels of ancestral wisdom, emotional depth, and collective identity. But these birds are not flying—they are pausing, observing, perhaps negotiating.

Between them, a hand offers a structured city—a symbol of modernity, systematisation, and a future defined by human ambition. This offering is not benign; it is a choice. The birds, bound to a cultural past and standing in a fractured,

industrialised environment, must confront the terms of progress.

Around them, the visual language shifts. Unlike the soft lyricism of the birds’ floral coverings, the background and cityscape are rendered in sharp geometry, modern lines, and coded abstraction. This tension of styles mirrors the philosophical dilemma: if they refuse to evolve, they risk obsolescence. But to adapt may also mean erasure—of tradition, of self, of something irreplaceable.

This painting is not a critique nor a celebration. It is a quiet confrontation with inevitability. *Progress or Else* asks what we carry forward, what we sacrifice, and whether transformation always comes at a cost—even when it feels necessary.



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Zahra Zoghi (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Tehran. With a Master’s in Art Research and over three decades of creative practice, her work explores identity, memory, and transformation through textured, symbolic forms—often featuring birds as emotional and cultural messengers. Her art has been featured on covers and in journals across North America and Europe.

# Vocabulary Lessons

POEM BY BROOKE BOVEE

*"I could've been one of these things first."* –Nick Drake

Grandma D explained a philanthropist is  
*a rich person who gives all their money away.*

This from the same strong woman who said I looked like  
a prostitute, *and did I know what a prostitute was?*

trying on for her and my mom  
my new purple outfit  
with the ruffles on the back of the skirt  
and the ruching at the breastbone

and Mom, who always asked  
*Do you see any career possibilities here?*  
any time we met a woman  
mechanic or helicopter pilot,

did not follow up on whether  
I'd like to be a sex worker  
or a philanthropist.  
Let's be serious.

I could be anything I wanted to be,  
from an optometrist  
to a pharmacist.

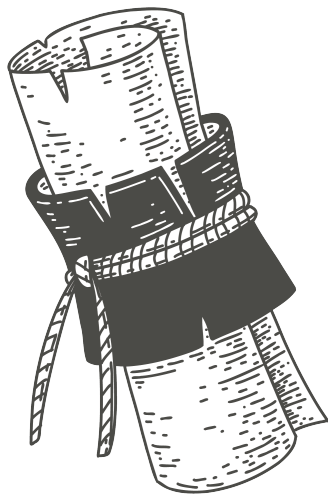
And I, who had never shown an interest  
in pharmacy or optometry or  
aviation or automechanics,

I, who was denied a real-time definition  
of *prostitute* but who treasured the dictionary,  
imagined I could be one

one who loves humanity

one who tenders  
her treasure

one who works every day in her  
love language.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Bovee grew up in Michigan and pursued higher education in Colorado, California, Michigan, and Florida. Her poetry has appeared in *SWWIM Every Day*, *Exsolutas Press*, and *The Quarter(ly) Journal*, among others. She lives in Miami, where she teaches composition and literature at Miami Dade College.

# A Light in the Woods

PROSE BY KARA KAUFFMAN

Willow West and her mother Marigold lived in a butter-yellow brick house at the edge of the woods that skirted the edge of a small town. Marigold taught part-time at the local college. Willow was a smart girl in the fifth grade with an overactive imagination and a penchant for seeing magic in ordinary things. Every weekend, they would trek into the forest and collect little treasures, a green glass bottle, half of a pale blue robin's eggshell, a muddy stick shaped like a trident.

Willow kept her favourite treasures on a shelf below the stained-glass windowpanes in their mudroom, above where her and Marigold's well-worn wellies leaned haphazardly against one another. Whenever her friends would come over, she would take great pride in showing them this self-made museum of their lives together in the little yellow house by the woods.

One crisp October day when they were out walking Marigold thought about how peaceful life was as she watched Willow weave and jump along in her pale-yellow dress with her wild hair escaping her ponytail, a whimsical song on her lips. Willow was searching the path for the break in the trees where she had spotted a faint and glowing light from her bedroom window the night before.

"It was just up ahead, come on, Mom!" She raced ahead around a curve in the path, out of sight.

When Marigold rounded the bend, Willow had vanished.

A slight hiccup drummed in her throat as she scanned the dense landscape for a hint of her daughter but all she could see were the trees. She tried to breath slow and steady as she called out,

"Will, you silly girl – where are you hiding?"

All that called back was birdsong high in the canopy.

She began to jog up the path, and her breath could no longer come slow. She called out for Willow, and just as she was about to truly fall off the edge into panic, she rounded another bend in the forest and there was her daughter, talking with a strange woman.

She was tall, but bent over towards the young girl, who was speaking quite animatedly about the strange occurrence of the lights at night in this part of the woods. The woman seemed to be listening intently. She wore a dark, homespun dress covered by an olive-green sweater that looked thick and well-loved. Atop her head perched a

dull-brown English rain-hat, to which she had pinned several bits of applique floral prints. Her features were fine and elfin, with an upturned nose and wide mouth, and two soft shells for ears poked out almost sideways below the brim of her hat.

“Hullo there, you must be Marigold,” the woman said, and her voice had an unplaceable accent, and a rasp that sent shivers through Marigold’s spine, but she smiled, wide and gracious.

“Young Willow here has been telling me tall tales of UFOs in the forest, what an imagination on this little one!” She laughed, and it was the sound of old rusty bells, and it was pleasant and unpleasant all at once. This was how they met Ms. O.

The woman had moved here recently, upon the death of a loved one, but she wouldn’t speak of it. She bought the little house on the other side of the woods. Willow was besotted with her eccentricity and solitary countenance. To a young girl obsessed with all things mythical, this was the lovely old witch who could teach her about the secrets to power she wanted but didn’t have. Marigold remembered that feeling well and allowed her daughter to make the trek over to Ms. O’s after school a few days a week.

Willow would return with reports of learning to help tend a beautiful garden full of bright flowers and circles of shining rocks, and tea laden with sweet cream with delicious crumbly cookies to dunk. Ms. O loved music and had a variety of wooden pan-flutes and was teaching Willow how to play them.



One day in December, Marigold lost track of time in the cradle of her favourite armchair while grading final papers, and as the sun was dipping low in the sky, Willow still hadn’t appeared from the footpath into the woods.

She walked to the old woman’s house at dusk. Marigold stepped over the line of granite rocks piled up near the garden and envied the progress the woman had made in the short time she had been here. Must be nice to be childless and retired. Her breath fogged up the glass as she peered into the house, her curiosity begrudgingly peaked. To hear Willow tell it, Ms. O’s house was a whimsical dream, resplendent with bright, jewel-toned tapestries and soft, low lights and plush blankets.

Quick steps sounded from inside the house and Ms. O appeared, glowering out into the cold dark, but her stern, weathered face

melted into a warm smile when she spotted Marigold, and she quickly unlocked the door and ushered her in.

“Oh, Marigold, I apologise, it’s getting late, isn’t it?” She said in her strange and melodic accent. Willow was clanking away at a grand old piano in the den.

“It’s okay,” Marigold acquiesced, “It’s just a school night.”

Willow still hadn’t looked up from her clumsy composition.

“Of course,” Ms. O said, annoying in her ingratiating way, and then, “Willow-wisp, dear, your mother says it’s time to go.”

Willow clanged her tiny pale hands down on a minor key and threw a glare over her shoulder. Marigold was taken aback at the feral fury that flashed in her daughter’s eyes, but it was gone in an instant, and she jumped up from the piano bench and grabbed her pink raincoat from a chair and was smiling as she said goodnight to Ms. O and followed her mother out the door into the night.

They spent a tense holiday season with Marigold’s stepmother, the only family she had left, and Willow’s moods growing darker the longer she spent away from their home and from Ms. O.

Marigold began to worry. Willow had become sullen and angry and was falling behind in school. As the world came out of winter’s gloom, and the trees developed their early spring buds, all she seemed to want to do was help Ms. O in the garden, constructing her stone circles and picking bouquets of flowers to tie to trees in the forest. At night she would call out, as if having a nightmare, and when Marigold would run to her daughter’s room, she would be standing and staring out into the forest from her window.

“Don’t you see the lights, Mama?” She would ask, her voice garbled and small, and as hard as Marigold squinted into the black night, she could never see them. What had seemed a fantasy cooked up in a young girl’s imagination was becoming very concerning.



On the first night of May, Marigold woke up with a start at just past midnight. She had dreamed of walking through her house, but it was empty. Shelves, drawers, closets, all bare. Big, blank rooms and windows without curtains showed her a face she didn’t recognise in their dark reflection. She was stricken with an intense feeling of unassigned grief upon waking. She pounded down the draughty hallway on instinct and threw open Willow’s door. She saw an empty bed and open window, cold wind blowing the leaves piled high on the



slanted roof up into the room in a maelstrom, and the room glowed from a light emanating in the dark beyond.

She tore down her back staircase to the mudroom, past all the collected treasures and through the stained-glass panes, she saw another flash of glowing light. She shoved her bare feet into cold wellies and sprinted to the path in the woods.

She thought she heard a girl's laughter, so she tore after it, ignoring the gripping clutches of the brambles and thistles and rocks as they tried to slow her down. Up around the curve in the path, right where she and Willow had discovered Ms. O for the first time, she caught a glimpse of Willow's wild hair, whipping in the cold night air, running fast along the path towards the flashing lights still ahead.

She called out to her, but the wind swallowed it and flung it up into the sky.

The lights had now focused into a warm glow, oozing out from the large front windows of Ms. O's little house on the other side of the woods. The woman stood out on her porch, wrapped up in that thick green shawl, her gnarled old hands beckoning. Marigold realised her daughter was running towards her, and she let loose a guttural howl, and for the barest moment the little girl hesitated and tipped her head, but then resumed her sprint to the edge, as though her mother's cry wasn't enough to pierce whatever symphony filled her head.

Marigold was now frantic to reach her. She was nearly to the cylindrical outcropping of smooth, pale stones that bordered Ms. O's impeccable garden, made terrifying in the scarce moonlight that filtered to the forest floor; the flowers blood red in the dark and looming over the small child racing towards them, and she did not know how she knew, but she knew – Willow would cross that granite threshold and be gone forever. She would be left, alone, in that empty house, staring at a stranger.

Marigold stretched out her hands desperately to grasp at her daughter's thin nightgown, but she tripped over one of the sharp stones, and her and Willow crashed into the circle in a heap, her ears ringing with the girl's shout of anger and wild laugh at being caught, as if this were all a twisted game of hide and seek.

Marigold West lives alone in a small, butter-yellow brick house on the edge of some woods in a small, sleepy college town on the coast. She is a tenured professor at the nearby university, with some prominent published works in her field. She surveys her garden. It is just beginning to bloom, and she can tell this will be a fantastic year for her rhododendrons and tulips. She has an unspoken feud with the old woman on the opposite edge of the woods behind her house, whose garden is impressive, terrifying, and in Marigold's opinion, ugly. Just like the smug smirk the lady gives her when she walks by in the mornings, as if she has something special.

Sometimes she dreams that her house is different, that it has extra rooms. One is a mudroom with a shelf full of odd items from the woods, a broken green-glass bottle, a stick with three points, a small rock that could maybe be an arrowhead. She hears the wind outside, and it sounds strangely like a little girl's laughter. As soon as she leaves the house her heart pounds like she has lost something precious but can't remember what it is.

She often thinks about how peaceful life is, in the Springtime, just as everything is about to come to life, when the pollen drifts through the soft, dewy air, still cool in the mornings and evenings, but pleasantly warm during the afternoon when she did the bulk of her weeding. All is still and quiet, just waiting to burst into being, all is as it should be.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kara Kauffman is currently enrolled in University of Baltimore's MFA in Creative Writing and Publishing. In her spare time, she likes to read and journal (particularly in parks around her adopted city of Baltimore), go on adventures locally and abroad, and she loves a good statue to pose with. This is her first publication.

# Get it done on Friday

POEM BY TERRY TROWBRIDGE

Do not shower after your vasectomy.  
If you think getting shampoo in your eyes stings,  
well then man...

It's not quite the same as Hans Moleman's opus  
"Man Getting Hit By Football"  
but boy did my left leg kick.

Market research is a fool's game.  
Before the procedure I informally polled 4 men who had it done.  
One said, "I had it done on a Friday and by Monday I was skiing again."  
One said, "My urologist's name was Dr. Love  
and he made me say his name and the procedure  
before he would let me sign off on it."

They all laughed,  
"Pfft you'll be fine. *Two days*, tops."

"Pfft you'll be *fine*. Two days, tops."

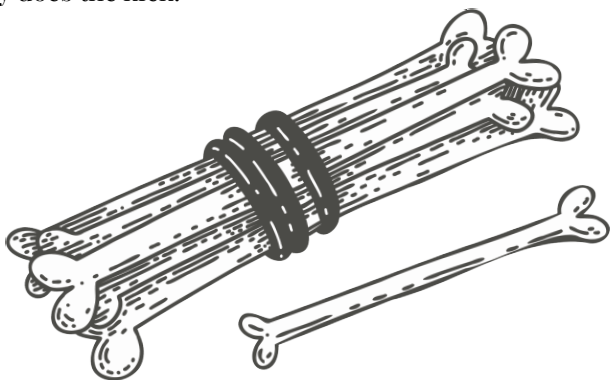
"Pfft *you'll* be fine. Two days, tops."

"Pfft you'll *be* fine. Two days, *tops*."

And only one of the men saw me the day after.

"Did you do the kick?" he asked, laughing again,

"Everybody does the kick."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Trowbridge is a farmer, researcher, and writer living on the shore of Lake Ontario, in Canada. He is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for writing grants during the polycrisis.

# A Familiar Story

POEM BY VALERIE HUNTER

It didn't do to be too strange,  
especially not when you were a spinster,  
had no husband to attest to your worth,  
but Ruth could only be who she was,  
had never found the knack for hiding her true self.  
So she potted along,  
a strange woman in a little house  
with only her chickens for company.

It was a neighbour who reported her,  
whether from genuine concern  
or greed for her land, one cannot say,  
but once that word—

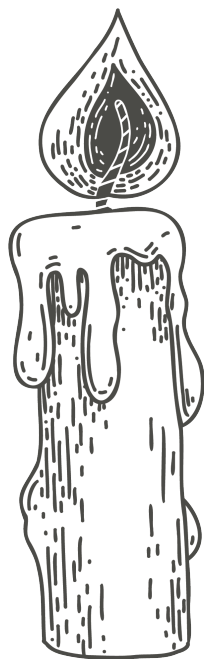
*witch*—

was bandied about,  
there was no going back:  
she had to be dealt with.

Ruth denied it, of course, but  
the chickens clustered around her  
as though feeding off her distress,  
the strangest sight anyone had ever seen,  
and Clothilde, Ruth's prize layer,  
perched on her lap, ruffling  
herself up to appear larger  
and glaring at the intruders as though  
memorising every detail of their faces.  
"What's it doing?" they asked nervously,  
and Ruth stroked the feathered creature  
like a cat and said she didn't know,  
repeated it several times till they were convinced  
she must be lying.

“She is a witch,”  
the magistrate proclaimed,  
(continues on next page/ same stanza)  
“and that chicken is her familiar.”  
What happened next, however, is unclear.  
The official records say Ruth was drowned,  
her chickens slaughtered,  
evil vanquished—Huzzah!  
But a different story claims  
that Ruth vanished in the blink  
of a chicken’s eye,  
Clothilde spiriting her away  
to somewhere an odd old spinster  
was free to be herself,  
while the rest of the flock  
pecked the eyes out of the magistrate  
and his posse before flying off  
to join their mistress.

You can choose to believe  
either story, and maybe  
this act of believing  
solidifies one into fact  
and the other into  
nothing more than  
a terrible nightmare.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Valerie Hunter teaches high school English, and writes in an attempt to make sense of the world. Her poems have appeared in publications including ‘Wizards in Space’, ‘Silkworm’, ‘Room’, and ‘Other Voices’.

# Confetti Grenades

PROSE BY UMENYI CHISOMAGA

If I have learnt anything in twenty years, it was this: people rarely wanted the truth. They wanted efficiency at work, loyalty at home, and silence everywhere else.

Silence was the grease that kept families together, that kept jobs secure, that kept everyone pretending the world was less crooked than it truly was. It was the polite fiction we told ourselves as we tripped over unpaid bills, overdue exams, unreturned debts, and marriages that were a series of silent agreements, punctuated by shouting. Silence, I realised, was the gift you gave to liars and cheats so they could continue practising their craft undisturbed.

My boss wanted silence the most. Dr. Prescott had perfected a kind of true man's quiet authority: thin lips pressed together as if words were beneath him, pale hands arranging papers as though they were pieces of a sacred ritual. If you sat across from him long enough, you began to doubt your own voice. "Efficiency, Elena," he liked to say. "Efficiency keeps the hospital alive."

Alive. That word had a smell—metallic, desperate, like the tang of blood in the emergency ward. I worked in a place where patients died in narrow beds with broken rails while Prescott signed invoices for machines that never arrived. The other nurses had learned to look away. I had, too. Until the night I found the falsified files: patient charts rewritten to justify inflated orders, signatures forged with lazy arrogance, the kind of forgery that bore the indifference of someone who believed consequences were for others.

That was the week my sister told me she was pregnant.

Lucia had a talent for throwing grenades into my life and calling them confetti. She came home late, smelling faintly of perfume and cigarettes, and said it casually, as though she were asking me to pass the salt. "I'm pregnant."

I stared. She yawned.

"Don't look at me like that," she said, settling into the couch as though pregnancy were a nap.

It wasn't the end of the world, no. But it was the end of hers, though she didn't see it yet. Lucia was twenty-five and still believed in miracles disguised as married men. The father lived in another



city, with another family, but according to her, he would “fix things.” I said nothing. Silence was easier.

Mother, however, never chose silence when scolding was available. “Family first, Elena,” she told me over the phone, her voice a blunt weapon. “Your sister needs you. She is still a child.”

Lucia was not a child. She was a woman who had perfected the art of soft irresponsibility, of borrowing without returning, of failing without consequence. But in our family, recklessness was romanticised if you were charming enough. And Lucia was nothing if not charming.

I had always been the opposite: the careful one, the provider, the one who remembered to pay the water bill, who kept small secrets from Mother so she would not explode. Responsibility clung to me the way perfume clings to fabric: invisible but inescapable.

That week, though, I could not stop thinking about the forged files. About the patients whose deaths had been rewritten into financial opportunity. I told myself I was weighing options—silence or risk, paycheck or principle—but the truth was smaller, meaner. I was simply tired. Tired of swallowing words until they soured inside me. Tired of the invisible labour of keeping everything afloat while others walked on unbothered.

At night, I lay awake listening to Lucia snoring. Our apartment walls were thin; I overheard her trips to the bathroom, her hushed phone calls to the married man who promised nothing. I imagined the fetus swelling inside her, leeching from her body the way everyone seemed to leech from mine. I thought of Dr. Prescott’s polished shoes clicking on the linoleum floor, a metronome for silence, each step a pulse reminding me of what I had learned to ignore.

Something bloomed inside me in those sleepless nights. Not rage. Something sharper. The hunger to refuse. A hunger that tasted of iron and ash, of nights spent cleaning up after mistakes that weren’t mine, of words unspoken that had accumulated into a small, urgent fire.

That Tuesday, everything started to crack. I was discharging a woman who had lost her baby at thirty-two weeks. She stared at the wall while her husband held her limp hand as though clinging could anchor her to the earth. I knew her file would soon be doctored to justify equipment purchases. I could not bear it.

I went into the staff room, printed copies of the falsified records, and slipped them into my bag. My fingers shook, but I felt oddly calm. Like someone walking across a bridge already burning behind her.

The calm was not relief; it was recognition. Recognition that I had spent too long living in quiet, unnoticed defiance, that this—finally—was the audible crack of my own agency. And as I left the hospital, I noticed something absurd: Dr. Prescott had left his coffee cup on the counter, fingerprints circling the rim like tiny whorls of guilt. I almost laughed. One small human mess in a cathedral of corporate corruption.

The hospital itself seemed to participate in the dark comedy. A nurse fainted over a bin of untouched syringes while the matron muttered about “unprofessional theatrics,” and a delivery room door swung open to reveal a doctor arguing with a janitor over whether mop water counted as biohazard. The absurdity of life and death, bureaucracy and incompetence, made me want to laugh until my lungs ached—but I held it in.

When I got home, Lucia was sprawled on the couch, an empty plate beside her. “You’re late,” she said.

“I stayed behind.”

“For what?”

I didn’t answer. She wouldn’t understand. To her, my work was a nuisance that interrupted her demands.

That night, I drafted an anonymous letter to the local paper. I enclosed the records. I signed no name. But my handwriting curved like fingerprints; I knew it betrayed me. I wondered if anyone would read between the lines and see not only the corruption but also the exhaustion, the long accumulation of careful observation and quiet rage that had led to this act.

For days, I waited. Prescott clicked his shoes up and down the hall. Colleagues kept their practised silence. At home, Lucia vomited in the mornings and cried in the bathroom at night, loud enough for me to hear. One morning, she left a bottle of cough syrup open on the table, with a half-eaten packet of biscuits, and a note: “For the busy one.” I stared at it for five minutes, realising that in her own way, she was mocking me. Dark humour, I thought. The kind only family can summon.

Then the story broke.

**CORRUPTION AT ST. MARGARET'S HOSPITAL.** Prescott's name in bold type. Money siphoned, patients exploited, trust destroyed.

The hospital buzzed with fear. Investigators arrived. Nurses whispered in corners. Some looked at me with new respect, others with irritation. My silence had cracked, and everyone heard the sound.

At home, Mother called. "You've caused trouble again," she said. "Why must you always make life difficult? Think of your sister. She needs stability."

Stability. Another word with a smell. Dust in a locked room.

Lucia stopped speaking to me. When she did, her words cut like blades. "Do you know what you've done? You'll lose your job. How do you expect to support us now?"

Us. Her debts, her pregnancy, her chaos—communal property for me to shoulder. Yet in the quiet spaces between her accusations, I felt alive. For once, my silence was not the thing holding me together but the thing I had broken open.

One evening, after hours of interrogation, I returned home to find Lucia gone. Her room was empty, her clothes vanished. On the kitchen table, a note. "I can't stay here. I'll figure it out. Don't try to find me."

I sat down, staring at the crooked handwriting. For the first time in years, the apartment was silent. No dirty dishes, no sighs, no sharp words flung like stones. Just silence—pure, unbroken.

And I thought of the word "choice." The way it never seemed to belong to people like us.

We were always forced into it: between silence and ruin, loyalty and betrayal.

And yet, sitting in that barren apartment, I wondered if perhaps, for the first time, I had chosen myself.

I had exposed Prescott not because I believed in justice, not because I wanted to save strangers, but because I refused to keep swallowing the rot.

Lucia had left, Mother would curse me, the hospital might fire me. But I could breathe. I could almost hear the faint laugh of the universe, dark and sardonic, amused that I had finally played by no one's rules.

I leaned back and laughed. The absurdity of it was almost

beautiful: a scandalous whistleblower, a chaotic sister, a furious mother, and a front-row audience of gossiping neighbors with imaginary popcorn.

All the tragedy and cruelty of the world reduced to a street theatre that somehow made the night lighter.

And I felt, for the first time in years, an almost perverse delight: in a world that demanded silence, that glorified efficiency and loyalty at the expense of everything human, I had found my laughter, my choice, my voice.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Umenyi Chisomaga is an emerging story writer and pharmacy student. Her work will appear in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Sublunary Magazine*, *Stripe Magazine*, and *Ojuju Magazine*. She believes stories are doors into hidden worlds, illuminating memory, emotion, and human experience, and she writes to open them for readers willing to step inside.

# Journal Entries of an Old Soul

PROSE BY L. BEE

September was the start of the year — the beginning of the race. At least in the country I grew up in.

The smell of crippling deadlines mixed with a trepidation of the very numbered days ahead filled the people with as much virility as needed. It's why the twins came in May. Why we could afford my dreams in June. Why my husband passed away in July.

We were always running a rat race that we knew would end in loss.

But we ran anyway.

It wasn't the fear of defeat that kept us on our feet, after all.

I met my husband two weeks before we were wed in his father's living room because my parents were dead and I had no home of my own. The traditional rites were all we did. Passing of a few naira bills and placing my hand in his to show that I was now someone else's baggage. For the first time in years, my aunt whom I'd spent most of my days with cracked a smile as she dusted off her hands and tucked the note into a suspiciously new purse.

"Enjoy your marriage." She'd said, like I couldn't possibly find marriage to the man she'd placed my hands into enjoyable.

I intended to prove her wrong.

It took me twenty-four hours to realise why she'd said that. Our consummation had been a debilitating car ride to the shabby hospital at the junction with its too hard beds and the nurses that couldn't care less who was dying.

We hadn't spoken more than a few sentences to each other. I didn't know his name then but, with the disgust blazing in his father's eyes and the tiredness in his mother, I realised that he was just like me.

Terribly unwanted and devastatingly alone.

He grabbed my hand, knuckles growing white as the pain shot through him, and repeated a string of words I didn't understand. Not until the nurse looked down at us from the top of her nose and inquired as to why he was apologising.

I didn't know just like I didn't know what was causing his pain. Even after his parents told me on the ride home with his head in my thighs, the bumps from the pothole causing him to groan

uncontrollably no matter how hard I tried to stiffen my body.

“Sickle cell. That’s what the doctor told us.”

“What is that?” I inquired.

His father dove into the pothole with enough speed to send my head thudding against the car door. “I don’t know.”

My husband told me a lot of things when he came to. That he was named Akinwale, because his parents prayed he’d be stronger than the rest of his siblings who’d passed away. That he knew sickle cell was a genetic blood disorder. That he didn’t know he was getting married until I’d walked in with my family.

Our conversations grew longer as the day went by. There was nothing else we could do in the boy’s quarters his family provided us with adjacent to the main house. It was through our pillow talks that I came to know—and love him. His parents wanted grandchildren, that much was clear. But Wale feared they’d be just like him. Sick, and awaiting a painful end. He wouldn’t put them through the same torture his parents put him through.

Not even to fulfil a duty.

During the sixth month of our marriage, Wale asked what I wanted to do. A silly question I thought—my responsibility was to stay with him and bear children who would live healthier than him. But he bore down on me and asked what I wanted in a voice that led me to look down at my feet in confusion and an overwhelming sense of smallness.

“You can choose to stay here with me and make as many babies as my parents want, hoping they don’t die. Or you can do something, anything else.”

“What choice does a domesticated animal have but to do as its master commands?”

He bunched his face so tightly they looked akin to an angry butthole. “Don’t ever refer to yourself like that again.”

That night, I allowed myself to daydream. A weird act I and Wale did when we ran out of things to say except it was his dreams that I listened to. Even at that moment I still didn’t know what dreams were.

“I want to go back to school. Adult school,” I’d said the morning after, all my confidence now lodged in my jaw. Still, my voice came out a little too quiet. A smile tore through his face at that before the coughs raked him. The only answer I got was a nod.

When I was younger, my parents had conversations in loud voices and flurry of fists. After they’d passed away, my aunt had

proven to me that that was the only way to speak to anyone else. A language I did not like so I did not speak, at all.

But Wale was the most outspoken person I knew.

He used words so much I would have a headache trying to understand what they meant. I believed it was because he was too weak to go after me with a shaking fist so I'd sit closer to him on the days he was furious. But he would shake his head at me or cluck like a disproving hen and turn away.

Naturally, his parents refused but he was resolute. Their refusal did not stand. A year later, I wanted to be a lawyer. The black and white confidence of the stiff-necked students appealed greatly to me.

My in-laws sat me down. "You either leave these wild-eyed dreams behind or you leave this house."

The paths laid out before me cost more than I thought all for a dream. It should have been easy to sit in that house and continue the family line as planned. But, I was out in the street by the end of the week and I wouldn't go back to my aunt's. So I wandered about, dust clinging to my feet until it was cardboard brown and I could draw lazily on it.

As the sun fell, a figure trudged over to my spot at the junction and sat by me. I knew him from his yellowing eyes. "*Ore mí*," he said, a bag at his back and that same smile I'd come to know dotting his lips "You would leave your husband behind?"

I nodded through my tears, wiping beads of emotion down my face. The lone calabash filled with entries for the gods sat shyly behind us. I beguiled him with dreams of my own, until the sky had darkened and I could barely see his face.

"So, what do you want to do now?"

The warmth in his hands are all I can remember. I felt them on my belly as I told him I wanted something other than being just his wife. Said it with the language he'd taught me.

August was ending on that day, just like today.

We took a gamble. Lived like hermits for the longest while. Fought the cold hand of death so many times by sheer willpower and determination. Saved every penny we could find to fund my dream but when the moment came, I couldn't bring myself to take the next step.

Wale was dying.

I'd spent three nights with him in the hospital and he could feel

the pain in my soul as badly as he felt the one cracking down on his body. Eyes of sympathy trailed towards us as I sat by the bed, fanning at him, whispering and praying.

The money for my education would be gone in a few more days, the proof of all our suffering all those years. “What do we do, *Ore mí?*”

Words wouldn’t come out of my mouth. Instead, these mournful sounds crept out of my chest and sat between us. It was foreign to me.

“I’m sorry, *Ore mí*. So sorry.”

If I could choose, I’d have given up everything. The dream of a barrister’s wig. The black and white letters of the law. Sacrificed to hold onto the one man that wasn’t given to me of my own will, but I couldn’t. Wale took that choice from me. Passed away while I slept with one hand on my head and swollen feet.

No-one asked what I wanted to do anymore. For the first time in my twenty-nine years, I was expected to stand on my own. To make the right decisions for my children. Being a lawyer would have to wait. A sacrifice I was beyond willing to pay. With the rest of our blood, sweat and tears, I took to a business, hoping something would work out from here.

It did.

My life was lined with crossroads and paths that seemed palatable but pricked at my soles until they bled. Still, I walked them of my own will. Carried my girls until they could walk all on their own. Watched them for as long as I could and then began the walk backwards.

To dust filled streets.

To a lone figure sitting by the edge of the road with an empty calabash beside him.

He smiled a smile that I found familiar, eyes no longer sickly yellow, and made room for me. All the confidence in my body lodged at the back of my throat. We talked under a bright sky. About dreams and life and the anxiety that came with August. September’s crazed rush to make all the big changes. The decisions I’d taken when he left.

I told him it had been a good life, though in some moments, I hadn’t known that to be true. My hands, now older, held onto his with more boldness than they did all those years ago and I traced the lines that time had erased from his palms. Regret sat with us too—



quiet, uninvited. But we paid him no heed still.

We'd run a race together that we believed would end in loss.

A foolish thought, that.

Who else can call it a good end but I, who lived it?

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

L. Bee is a Nigerian-based writer with more stories than the blood in her veins. With a focus on realism, her writings revolve around people, the intricate complexities that set their lives in motion and mental health. You can find her journalling in quiet libraries or on Medium as L. Bee.

# autumn death-poem for a sometime lover

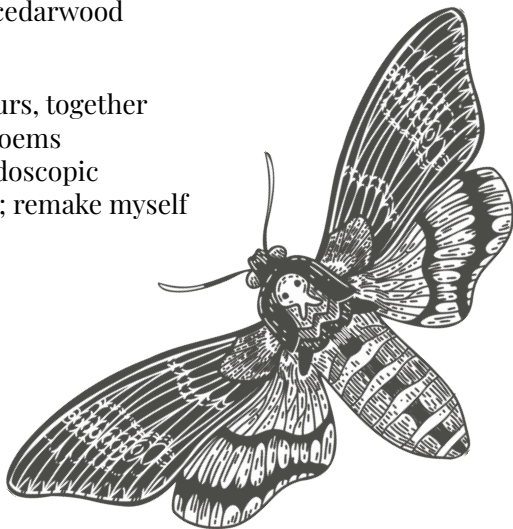
POEM BY NATASHA MIHELL

mosaic my bell jar  
should I wilt before my time  
paint me into the sky. taste me, love  
my colours. drink them all in.  
tangerine, clementine.

age, she flowers in my irises,  
I hold the minute hand between my thumb and forefinger  
together, we lap up the dying day  
plant our toes in the green moss  
rake our fingers through the sand

it is sacred torment—a wholeness  
our eyes hold prisms, you see  
sugary, without bitterness  
honeysuckle and cedarwood  
lemon; sea-scent

for minutes or hours, together  
a sunset, I write poems  
then shatter kaleidoscopic  
cleave the ribcage; remake myself  
and let you go.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha Mihell is an artist-at-heart living amidst the forests and urban decay of Canada's West Coast. Her writing explores the reclamation of self-love, hope, and power, amidst systems and circumstances that threaten hearts and minds. Connect at [natashamihell.com](http://natashamihell.com).

# indecisive hauntings

POEM BY SOPHIE MARLOWE

two paths lie before me

and i want the earth to swallow me whole

there's a calming allure to the first path

it seeks to fool me

beckoning me closer

as if i can't taste the chaos and disarray in the soil

as if the other side of paradise isn't wrought with wrath

and deep down that path

the trees get closer and closer

desperate to suffocate me

to grasp in their roots and devour me

never letting me free

that path ends in some kind of death

but the second falls in reverse

it greets me with the stench of rot and decay

repulsing me from getting closer to its thorns

thistles and weeds reach out to grab me

refusing to relinquish their hold on my flesh

begging me to stay in their pestilent tomb

to ignore the promise of peace

that's seeping through the thickets of foxglove

to ignore the allure of ascension

that's whispering through the cluster of brambles

that path ends in some kind of death

there are two paths ahead of me and

*god*

i just need the earth to bury me.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Marlowe (she/they) is a queer Yorkshire-based writer with a preference for poetry and scriptwriting. At the moment, they mostly dabble in an amalgamation of the uncanny, the weird and the eerie as well as body horror. Creating poetry and scripts that explore humanity's complex and destructive relationship with nature. Find her on Instagram — @anotherpoet\_soph

# She Chose and I Chose

POEM BY ALAN HARDY

Our bodies stumble into each other, more,  
a nudge of arms and elbows,  
as we head towards the shops,  
layer-wrapped against the cold.  
She'd hinted she wanted me,  
to hover near her,  
by the shampoo and make-up aisles.  
Years ago, her wish for me to be with her,  
whispered word or two, barely heard,  
swish of a coat, hand resting on my  
arm, would have brought elation. Exultation.  
Gratification. Would have been  
an invitation to have sex.  
After all this time,  
amidst the mishaps, heartaches, tragedies,  
and the pointless, trivial rest, it's a recognition.  
Of me. Of me of her. Expressing ourselves through  
our bodies. A habit of togetherness, closeness  
through multiple-layered sleeves.  
The touch we used to ache for,  
now, we give and receive on a walk to the shops,  
alongside each other, heading in  
the same direction.  
Passionless, perhaps, but still  
carried along effortlessly by the impetus,  
the uncontrollable rush of that first  
Big Bang.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Hardy has for many years run an English language school for foreign students (in UK). He's been published in such magazines as 'Ink Sweat & Tears', 'Envoi', 'Iota', 'Poetry Salzburg', 'The Interpreter's House', 'Littoral', 'Orbis', 'South', 'Pulsar', 'Lothlorien', '100subtexts', 'Fixator', 'Chewers', 'Feversofthemind', 'Suburban Witchcraft' and others. His poetry pamphlets include *Wasted Leaves* (1996) and *I Went with Her* (2007).

# Surprise

POEM BY DAITHÍ KEARNEY

I took you by surprise when  
I first sent you a poem  
If I'm honest I surprised myself.

Startled by the muse and  
the need to let me out  
I didn't choose.

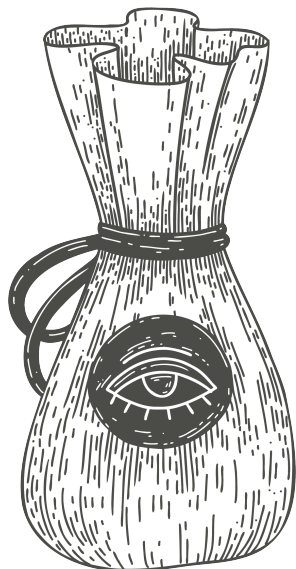
In the weeks since we first played  
Friendly hide and seek like children  
In the nearby gardens

The words have flowed like rivers to  
The lakes where we're alone  
In Bragi's fields.

Since I fell from a diving board and  
saw that you were falling too  
I felt no fear and reached;

We had no other choice but  
To sink or swim together  
Towards a distant shore

Where we danced with  
extraordinary synchronicity  
Unchained from past realities.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daithí Kearney is an Irish poet and musician. From Co. Kerry, he now lives and lectures in Co. Louth on the east coast. His poetry is inspired by his surroundings and his young family. His poems have been recently published in *Martello*, *Drawn to the Light* and *Field Guide*.

# The Bones of Our Mothers

PROSE BY JULIA RAJAGOPALAN

In an ancient forest of towering trees covered with trailing vines, I find her cabin. It is made of grey wooden planks and moss-covered thatch and has a rickety, wrap-around porch. The porch is filled with the debris of a long life, like a hoarding neighbourhood grandmother, if the grandmother liked taxidermy and the occult.

She is my last hope. The doctors give none. They use words like degenerative and palliative with a shrug of the shoulders, like I've spilled a glass of water, but when your bones are crumbling inside of you, even little accidents can be a death sentence.

Twigs crunch as I walk up the path to the steps, and it smells like pine and woodfire smoke. When I get closer, I see the chicken legs my grandmother promised. There are dozens of them, lined up under the porch as if the house has fallen on a flock of giant chickens. The legs are larger than any drumstick I've ever eaten, almost the size of my own legs, and the enormous claws are as big as my hands. The skin on them is pale and wrinkled, and the legs gently move talons stretching and retracting.

"Hello, Sisley," her hoarse voice rasps from the doorway. Her thick grey hair is tied in a high bun, but she is not as hideous as the legends claimed. Her nose is hooked, and her skin is wrinkled, but her posture is unnaturally straight. It gives me hope for my curved spine, barely erect under my large backpack.

"Hello, Baba," I say. "I mean, ma'am." My knees shake as I approach, in excitement, or terror, or both.

"I knew your grandmother."

"She told me how to find you." I remember my grandmother's kitchen table, a sanctuary from my mother's erratic cruelty. Over enormous bowls of rich red stew, my grandmother had told me about Baba Yaga, and right from the start, I believed.

"Come in." She turns, and I follow gingerly up the steps. The planks rattle under my boots, and the old fear creeps in. I will fall. I will break. I will die. Osteoporosis is supposed to be for the old, but sometimes, in a fluke of bad genetics, it hits the young, or the middle-aged, like me. A black and white goat is curled up on a worn pillow by the door, and it blinks its devilish eyes before going back to sleep.

Her house is crowded, much like my grandmother's was, with piles of old books, crumbling in dusty corners. The windows in her living room are small, but there's a fireplace with a crackling fire, and cosy lamps that glow with magic.

She leads me past a narrow staircase into the low-ceilinged kitchen. A hulking woodfire stove looms along the back wall, with two small windows on either side. There are counters under the windows, but these are covered with bottles and bowls, spoons, and spices. A long wooden table stretches the length of the kitchen, and Baba Yaga gestures to one of the rickety seats. I carefully dodge copper pipes and glass beakers on the table as I slide off my backpack and sit. My aching legs ease as I connect with the chair's crocheted cushion. I have been trekking in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains for weeks, looking for her.

"Have some tea." She sets a handmade mug in front of me.

"Thank you for seeing me," I say, like I've come for a job interview.

"You're here about your brittle bones."

"I'm not asking for anything crazy. I just want to be healthy. Can you get rid of the osteoporosis? I've brought a gift." I reach into my backpack and pull out a small turquoise box, with a diamond pendant necklace inside. I set it on the table and slide it toward her. It looks absurd next to a pile of black feathers and a dried, dead frog.

She looks at me and laughs a deep cackle that is so wild it's terrifying. I flush with embarrassment and fear, and reach to take the thing back. What need would a hag have for overpriced jewellery? I should have known it wouldn't be that easy.

"Not so fast." Her taloned hand darts out and snatches the box. She flips it open and considers the necklace, then she nods and sets it on the counter behind her.

"Can you help?" I try not to sound impatient.

"Life is a series of choices. Most of them between bad and worse," she tells me, as if any woman didn't know that.

"I'll do whatever." Baba Yaga's impossible tasks are legendary, but I am determined to complete one or die trying.

"You must complete a task, then make a choice. Your grandmother should have told you."

"What task?"

"You must weed my garden," she decides. "Do you accept or decline?" Baba Yaga's tasks are notoriously impossible. There's

more to it than dandelions and crab grass.

“Can I see the garden first?” I ask, shocked at my audacity.

“No!”

“Then I accept.”

When she shows me the garden, I nearly vomit. It’s acres wide and a riot of vegetative anarchy, competing plants wrestling for the little sunlight that trickles in from above.

“What do you have in here?” I ask, but the old woman shrugs.

“One mistake,” she says. “And you die.”

I walk to the wire fence, upon locating the gate, I notice I am alone, so I get down on hands and knees, bowing before the herby altar, and get started. It’s impossible to identify the different plants, even for an experienced gardener, but then I remember something. I pull out my cell phone and open an app. Before I pull any plant, I identify it. It’s slow and tedious, but by the end of the day, I can fit my entire body into the garden. At this rate, the task will take me years.

She comes out at sunset and glares at my progress.

“Dinner,” she barks, and so I rise, startled to feel no back pain. I haven’t had a painkiller all day, but there’s magic here. She leads me to the table, where there is a bowl of lentil soup with carrots. It is bland, but I eat greedily, and she places a cup of water next to me. I finish and prepare to set up my tent outside, but she points to a cot under the stairs. It has a clean, white pillow and a quilt made of mismatched scraps, and I cry a little with gratitude. There’s a small towel, and I go to the well where I retrieve a bucket of water, and wash myself as the crickets start their nocturnal symphony. I grab a fresh bucket of water and haul it in.

“Where do you want it?” She points to a basin on the counter. I pour it, and then do the dishes, using a bar of handmade soap. Then, she grunts a goodnight and goes upstairs, and I pass out on my cot.

Each day goes much as the day before. I weed, and charge my cellphone with a little solar panel. There’s no coverage, but I’ve downloaded the app, so it mostly works.

I am there for months, maybe years, as the seasons don’t change in Baba Yaga’s forest. It doesn’t matter, I have no boyfriend to worry, and my narcissistic mother won’t be looking for me. We haven’t spoken in years. My beloved grandmother, the only soul who might have wondered, has been dead for three years. No search party is



coming for me any time soon.

As I identify rows of carrots and potatoes, bushes of rosemary and thyme, the garden begins to take shape. I discover string beans climbing the fence and patches of cucumber vines. Through my work, it grows into the most beautiful garden I have ever seen, though I am entirely biased. One day, Baba Yaga comes out as I am tying snap peas to the fence.

“You know you’re done here, right?” she says, not unkindly.

“I know.” I don’t want to leave. I feel no pain, and I have purpose. I don’t feel judgement for my hunched spine and fragile body.

“Have I made a mistake?” I ask, though I am confident I have not.

“No,” she admits. “Come inside. I’ll fix your bones.”

We return to the kitchen, where pots boil on the stove. Green and pink liquids bubble merrily in beakers, copper pipes dripping into them. There is a beaker of orange liquid sitting on my spot at the table.

“Life is full of choices,” she says again. “Something can’t come from nothing. So you must make a choice.”

“What is it?” I breathe, my goal so close I don’t care.

“Did your grandmother tell you what she chose?”

“She came because she wanted a baby,” I say, thinking about what a disappointment my abusive, addict mother had been, but my grandmother had said it was worth it, because my mother gave her me.

“Did she explain what she sacrificed in return?”

“No.” A sour feeling eats at my stomach. Do I want to know?

“Something can’t come from nothing. To build a baby, you need bones.”

“You took the calcium from my bones to make my mother.”

“It was your grandmother’s choice.”

My grandmother’s betrayal washes over me with a cascade of cold, wet lies. She sacrificed me for my monster of a mother. Worse, the only person in the world who had ever truly loved me had lied to my face. She hadn’t known me when she had sacrificed me, but I think about the years she had comforted me through my diagnosis. She had never told me it was her fault. She was the only one who had ever loved me, and she had betrayed and lied to me.

“You will choose between your miracle and love,” Baba Yaga says. “You will never again feel a lover’s touch. You will never feel the support or companionship true love brings.”

I think about my relationship history, the chaotic affairs, the heartbreak, the misery. I had always hoped to find someone once I was fixed. I think about the long, lonely nights sitting on my couch, miserable and depressed. Still, through all that, I had always had hope of finding someone to love me. Can I really give that up?

Before I can chicken out, I snatch the potion off the table and drink it with a sickening slurp. It burns like a shot of bad vodka mixed with hot sauce and shivers radiate out from my core, in ripples of ancient magic. My spine straightens, and I can feel my body grow heavier and stronger.

“Thank you,” I whisper. She grunts and returns to the stove.

I go to my cot to gather my things. It’s only noon, and I can make a solid start on my way home, but instead I lay down. There’s no rush after all, maybe tomorrow I’ll choose to leave. The outhouse could be fixed, and the goat could use a shed. I’ll go after that.

Maybe, or maybe not.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Julia Rajagopalan is a writer of speculative fiction who lives just outside of Detroit, Michigan, with her husband and their very grumpy dog. For a list of her publications, check out her website: [www.JuliaRajagopalan.com](http://www.JuliaRajagopalan.com).

# Choose One

ARTWORK BY RIAYN GREY



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Riayn Grey is a chronically ill artist who works slowly in multiple mediums exploring spirituality, nature, rest, and more. Their work has appeared in *The Rebis*, *DoubleBlind Magazine*, and others. They live with their husband and dog in the rural Midwest.

# The Highway

POEM BY SHAWN SCOTT SMITH

You roll and slide but the path diverts,  
Neither leads to a win, which pain can you endure?  
His hands are dirty from work, but they hold you with care,  
But all you want is to push him away, into the void.

You catch a glimpse of her on the train,  
Her elf like ear peeking out under auburn locks,  
On another day you could have said Hello,  
Perhaps a life together. But your soon to be ex wife is here.  
Never one to seek out drama, you wait for the exit bell.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”  
They ask, eager to know, or a slave to the system.  
Probably drunk you think, but you say management.  
Management always likes to hear that.  
You curse under your breath.  
“What was that?”  
“Nothing”. It all means nothing.

It's 3am on New Years day. Your skin smells of bad drinks.  
Your breath of onions. There is a remedy here, a polite way to sleep.  
But the wheel of rotten meat in this convenience store spins too rapidly,  
And the first bad decision of the new year is a fried chicken stick.  
It is chased at home with another beer, your body rotten and lost.

It's a beautiful day in this beautiful world,  
The sun pierces your eyes like daggers in Juliet.  
Have you ever been a Romeo?  
And would you really want to?  
Seems like a lot of work.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawn Scott Smith lives in Asheville, North Carolina. He plays pinball, and likes to meet new people. All of his adventures are documented on his website at [luckycreature.com](http://luckycreature.com) and most social media spots @luckycreature

# The Bureau of Cosmic Misfortunes

PROSE BY AURORE PHIPPS

He couldn't say he didn't see it coming, the slow-paced catastrophe of a long-suffering day.

At 5 A.M., he had broken his mirror and stepped on the shards with both naked feet as if he had been pushed by an invisible force. A trail of blood stained the parquet floor, from his bed to the kitchen sink, as he retrieved paper towels on the cabinets. He loudly sighed in the half-lit fog of his one-bedroom apartment, moving slowly under the impenetrable shadows of the black chairs near the door. The pain made him wince, but he quietly settled into it. He was used to feeling pain, its little claws pulling at his skin, digging into the depth of his epidermis, grasping for his nerves. In a moment, he would have to pull the shards off his feet with tweezers yet the thought wasn't daunting. Sure, the tiny pieces of scintillating glass under his foot hurt him.

But he had known worse...

...the disapproving stare of his mother when he asked to go to Most Popular Girl In His Grade's thirteenth birthday party ("No, she is growing into a little slut!" had exclaimed her mother);

...his high school crush yelling, "Absolutely not, Big Tuna!" after he had asked him out during recess;

...his other gay college best friend ditching him for a fabulous tall blonde with a satin headband and Repetto ballet flats;

...the knee injury that quickly ended his burgeoning career as a ballet dancer;

...the painful realisation that his hole wasn't a pot of glitter and gold for the married man who took his virginity in the back of a beat-up Nissan Micra (just a hole among so many others);

...or that one time he got punched in the face and ribcage by a drunk man yelling every homophobic slur under the fluorescent light of a subway station;

...the day he was forced to come to terms with the fact that the seventy-year-old dodderer who had grabbed his prepubescent penis at a public pool would die peacefully without having to face the law.

Something fucked up happened, and then a sensory neuron

transmitted an electrical impulse to the spinal cord and then to the brain, and anger, sadness, acceptance, or grief ensued. And just like that, he was done pulling the shards out of the soles of his feet and had moved on to bigger and better things, and by “better things,” he meant “dissociating in the shower for an undisclosed amount of time.”

It's not that Pierre was unhappy. He had his moments. It's just that everything about his existence required him to develop a sort of endurance and never-ending resilience for tiny obstacles that seemed infinite. Which is why he was barely surprised when he got slammed in the face by the automatic doors of the Paris metro on his way to work. He didn't have time to lament on his swollen lips and ran to the library where he worked as fast as he could so as to save himself from the embarrassment of being witnessed in all his bloodied lip glory by strangers at the scene.

“What the hell happened to your lips?” asked his coworker Jean, monotonously.

“No comment,” Pierre replied, without an ounce of care for how rude he came off.

Jean apathetically accepted his refusal to comment, and no offence was taken. A few minutes later, Pierre was seen enthusiastically chatting with a customer, all smiles and imperturbable, while he turned the story of how he got hit in the face by an automatic door into a charming anecdote. He would repeat the same anecdote all throughout the day with the same entrancing enthusiasm and go home drained and exhausted, not without stepping into perfectly gooey canine faeces on the way home from work first.



Pierre had just finished peeling his organic lip peel strip off a newly bruised lip and was deciding whether or not Aloe Vera could accelerate the healing process when someone knocked on his door.

Three precise raps. No one knocked like that in real life. It was either Jehovah's Witnesses or Death.

He opened the door barefoot, shirtless, holding a half-drunk matcha latte that he had made in a frenzy to regain control over his life. The man standing before him wore a slim-cut charcoal suit with a badge clipped to the lapel that read:

**SOREL, H.**  
**HR—Bureau of Cosmic Misfortunes**

He looked not quite right. Somewhat unsettling. Tall, almost freakishly so. His skin, a texture purgatory between the gloss and the sponge, was almost iridescent in the hallway light. And his eyes, somehow both sunken and large, looked as if they had been stuck into play-dough by an overly enthusiastic toddler. Too dark, too wide, and faintly glowing like moss under a blacklight. His hair was the colour of cigarette ash and curled slightly at the ears. And yet, neither shock nor surprise was felt by Pierre. If anything, he felt intrigue and mystery. A jolt of something he couldn't name pricking at his skin, and possibly even making him hard. Mr Sorel felt mythical and providential, a new figure offsetting the banality of Pierre's Parisian life.

Pierre noted that Mr Sorel reeked of government stationery, coffee, sour sweat, and... copper?

"Good morning, Monsieur Glorieux, I'm Henri Sorel, head HR manager from the BOCM," said the agent with the sharp professional tone of a bureaucratic employee giving the performance of a lifetime. His voice was smooth, precise, and just slightly distorted. "We've been monitoring your file."

"Good morning, sir. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh my apologies, I realize now that you may not know who we are. The Bureau of Cosmic Misfortune is in charge of managing the amount of micro and macro misfortunes allotted to each human being from birth until death. And it seems that our office committed errors regarding your Pattern of Misfortune. It triggered a sort of cumulative ripple."

He opened a sleek leather folio, pulled out a sheet, and handed it over. It was titled—RECURRENT LOW-INTENSITY SUFFERING: INVESTIGATIVE NOTICE.

Pierre read the first lines aloud:

"Human being known as Pierre Glorieux, b. 1993, in Martinique, has been mistakenly subjected to double the traditional amount of misfortunes throughout his life due to double allocation of his file to the competent services. Two agents had been assigned to his file at the Creation Centre."

He looked up. "I'm not sure I understand what's going on?"

“Listen, sir,” said the agent calmly. “This is an audit and a settlement visit. Can I come in?”

“I’m not comfortable agreeing to that, sir.”

“Well, fine. Here’s another document relating to the case with additional details, as well as a brochure from the BOCM and my card. I can’t stay on this plane of existence for more than five hours, and you were my last visit today. It seems that prior management made too many mistakes.”

Henri didn’t leave. Instead, he checked his watch, sighed dramatically, and said:

“Actually, may I come in after all? I just realised that some sections of the file require real-time biometric confirmation.”

Pierre, still shirtless with a now lukewarm matcha latte in hand, shrugged and let him in. The truth was, he was quite literally “too stunned to speak”. He had started cataloguing every eerie aspect of this encounter a few seconds ago. Henri’s existence itself seemed to bridge uncharted gaps between humanness and the supernatural. He seemed technically human and spoke in the same banal corporate jargon as a run-of-the-mill HR manager. However, the technicality of his mortal appearance, confirmed by mortal verbiage, was undercut by a parallel world that, up until now, Pierre had no idea existed.

Henri walked in like a man who had never been inside a mortal’s apartment before. He squinted at everything; the dusty succulents on the book shelves, the pile of queer art magazines on the coffee table, the framed photo of a young Edith Lefel on the wall behind a small sofa, the vaguely phallic scented candles.

He sat stiffly on a dining chair, pulled out a clipboard with neutral black and white (with the occasional grey) forms.

Henri presented him with two options regarding compensation:

1. A financial reset: an anonymous windfall large enough to buy peace of mind for a short amount of time.
2. A “metaphysical reallocation”: the Bureau offered to remove his extra misfortunes and redistribute them to someone else. Unnamed, untraceable.

But then a third box was quietly offered. Unchecked. Barely legible.

Pierre leans in. “What’s this one?”



Henri replies, hesitantly:

“It’s a... rare clause. It’s a fairly recent addition. We can connect you with a therapist who’ll help you process some of the bigger misfortunes that you’ve experienced. I have to say, I have no idea what that entails, really. I’m not human, so I’ve never needed the help of one.”

“I didn’t want to seem rude earlier, because Lord knows I hate it when people abroad ask me, ‘Ooh but where are you really from?’ whenever I mention that I’m French, but where are you from? And what are you?”

Henri hesitates. Then leans in.

“I’m from a world exactly like yours, created as a sort of experiment and then repurposed as a utilitarian cosmic mirror. We exist within the same structures as you, same buildings, same jobs, same irritating elevator music, but with one key difference. Our reality is designed to ensure yours stays... consistent and operable? Well, as operable as possible!”

“I kind of want to stop you there because I respect the mysteries of the universe too much to let you out yourself to a complete stranger and mere mortal. Also, wouldn’t there be cosmic consequences to me knowing all of this?”

“Actually... we know you won’t tell anyone about this.”

“Absolutely obsessed with the ominous ‘we’ that you keep using. It makes you sound like you’re in a polyamorous relationship.”

Henri attempted a laugh before uncomfortably shifting on his seat. Pierre continued:

“So what you’re telling me is that the woman at the bakery near Pasteur, who either sighs at me when I’m annoyed or starts small talk when I’m feeling peppy, is a puppet? And her counterparts, the puppeteers in your world, rewrite scripts for micro-interactions based on my quarterly emotional metrics?”

“Honestly? Yes, that’s the whole thing. You just nailed it!”

“So I’m like a sexy and gay Truman Burbank? And you’re... the Grim Reaper if it worked at a supernatural accounting firm for alive people?”

“It’s true, you are sort of sexy and very gay, according to most parameters. And yes, I’m sort of like the Grim Reaper. And I also like to think of myself as the sexy version of them.”

A slight moment of tension fizzled through the air. Henri seemed

less tense yet still so unbelievably uncomfortable with the tone that Pierre had set. Pierre however, felt it again, his dick getting hard at the thought of cutting through the fog of tension, to explore the layers of Henri's supernatural being. Pierre looked at him again. Henri's uncanniness seemed to soften, filtered through the warmth of the living room and the secret understanding already settling between them.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aurore Phipps (they/she) is a Guadeloupe-born writer based in France. She's currently a certified English teacher in Paris. She is a former print and web contributor for Australian art magazine Beautiful Bizarre. Her writing has been featured in Erato Magazine, RIC Journal, Suburban Witchcraft Magazine, and elsewhere. You can find her on Instagram @purapari\_ !

# 3 SIMPLE SAMHAIN SPELLS

## A PROTECTION SPELL JAR

Before you do any spells, you need to be protected. It's essentially step one for absolutely everything. There are multiple ways to cast a protection spell. The simplest is sprinkling salt in every corner of your room/house or staying in a circle of it while you do spells. However, something for the everyday is a protection spell jar.

As you create the spell jar, keep your intention of protection in mind. You can do this by putting on music or a film that makes you feel safe in a place where you feel most relaxed. If your pets make you feel safe, for example, have them in the room with you.

### **You will need:**

- A jar or bottle
- A black candle for protection intent
- A single strand of your hair to tie the spell to you
- Something sharp and small (a thorn, needle, pin, etc.) to deflect badness
- Protection herbs (any combination of salt, black pepper, basil, rosemary, bay leaves)
- A scrap of paper or a bay leaf to write your name and date of birth on

### **You may want to use:**

- A pentacle charm (or a charm related to protection) on a piece of string
- Black tourmaline chips
- Clear quartz chips charged with the intention of protection (always cleanse them before charging)

### **Steps:**

1. Light some incense and cleanse everything—your space, ingredients, tools, and any crystals.
2. Carve your personal protection sigil into your black candle and light it.
3. Put your something sharp and protection herbs into the jar/bottle. If you have them, add your crystal chips too.

4. To tie the spell to you specifically, add your strand of hair and a bay leaf/scrap of paper with your name and birth date written onto it. You can draw your protection sigil over your name and date of birth if you want to. Roll it up or burn it and put it inside the jar/bottle.
5. Whisper your protection chant into the jar/bottle. That could simply be: “I am protected.”
6. Put the lid on your jar/bottle and seal with the black candle wax.
7. If you want to, tie your pentacle charm around the neck of the jar/bottle.
8. Extinguish your candle. **Do not blow it out** — cover the flame until it dies.
9. Put the jar/bottle in a place you will see it daily—every time you look at it, you’ll be reminded of the feelings you had while creating it. If you’re sceptical about the reality of magic, think of this spell as a little piece of mind magic. Magic doesn’t have to be an act. It can be a mindset—a way to channel how we work as a human being in relation to nature or otherwise.

---

#### RITUAL TO HONOUR THE FORGOTTEN DEAD

You may decorate your altar for Samhain with photos, possessions, or candles to honour your lost loved ones. However, who does this for those who have been forgotten? I do this ritual for them simply because I’m drawn to doing it. The thought of lives and stories being lost through time (or some other means) upsets me, so having a moment to think about them—even though I have no idea of who they are—feels right. If you feel like that too, add this ritual to your Samhain routine.

##### **You will need:**

- Purple candles—one for each group you’re representing
- A carving tool (a pen or knife will do)

1. Light some incense and cleanse everything.
2. Cast a circle around your altar and ground yourself in whatever way works for you.
3. Carve who the candle is for into each candle (e.g., ‘for the forgotten women’). You may also want to carve a memory sigil into the candles too.
4. Place the candles in a prominent and safe place on your altar.
5. Light the first candle and say something like, “You may have been forgotten after you left this world, but you are remembered by me now. This ritual honours you and your life and memory on this night of Samhain.” Do this for each candle.
6. When you are finished, do not blow the candles out because it is disrespectful to do so. Cover the flame until it dies, one by one.



#### DREAM ANCESTOR CONNECTION

If you need help or answers from somebody who has since passed away, this little spell is a comforting way of getting what you need. Before you go to bed on Samhain, say the name of the person you'd like to connect with. Ask for their advice and to meet in a dream. You could do this on behalf of somebody else if you have permission. It can upset and scare people when it works.

# THE TOIL & TROUBLE TEAM

## FOUNDER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MILLIE GODWIN (she/her) is a writer and editor from Nottingham, UK. She has many fleeting obsessions, but witchcraft and writing have been constants throughout her life. When she isn't getting lost in a story, she loves cuddling up with her dogs to watch all kinds of sports – or the same five comfort films.

Her work has been featured in Sixpence Society Literary Journal, DED Poetry, Feral Feline Literary Magazine, [BRACK]'s Tech Support, On-the-High, Paper Teeth Press, Ink, Sweat & Tears and more.



## DESIGNER AND TYPESETTER

DANIEL REDFORD (he/him) is a writer, editor, and proofreader from London, UK, with a background in short stories, poetry, and scripts. He is also a PhD English student at Royal Holloway, where he is researching Foucauldian concepts of biopower and writing a speculative/science fiction novel set in a pseudo-London near-future.

His work has been published in 'The Bedford Square Review', an anthology of work from MA Creative Writing graduates.

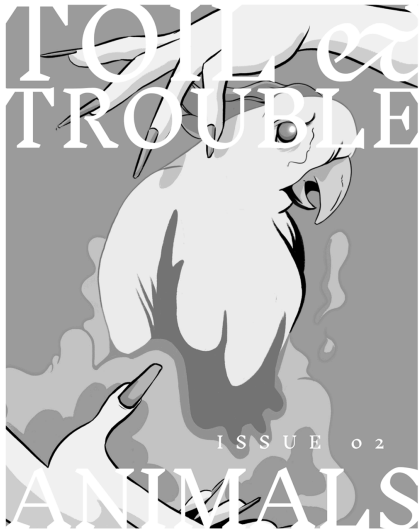
# PAST ISSUES

A WITCH-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE



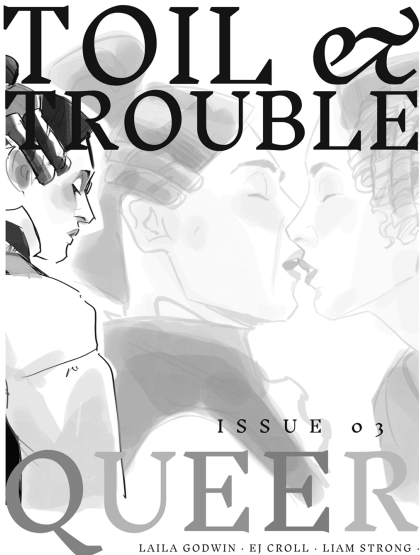
NOLL GRIFFIN · KIMBERLY KUCHAR · DAITHÍ KEARNEY · OWOLUSI LUCKY · K.A. HONEYWELL · RUTHENUM · HALLIE MERRICK · KIMBERLY SEWELL · MONA MEHAS · INDRANIL GHOSH · PETAR PENDA · SUZANNA LUNDALE · VIO · HELEN GWYN JONES · NEIL CHAMBERS · ELIZABETH BELL · JACOB FORD · OLIVER POSTEN · ALORAH WELTI · JESSE GABRIEL · LINDSAY PELLICIA · GABBY GILLIAM · STEPHANIE M. WYTOVICH · MELISSA NUNEZ · LAUREN ORTEGO · AMANDA LONG · CARLY CHANDLER · MIRIANA M. · BEATRIZ SEELAENDER

A WITCH-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE



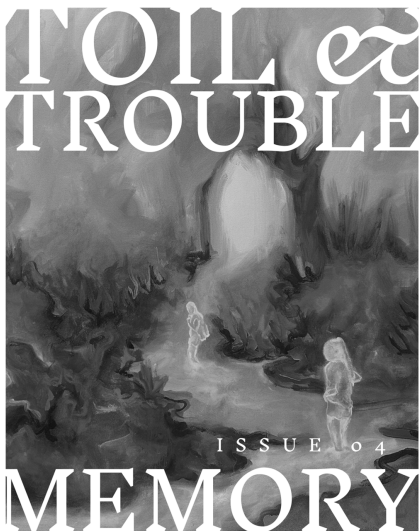
JAY KENNEDY · LAWRENCE MOORE · JENNIFER JONES · WILLIAM DORESKEI · MARIA COHUT · ERIN HALLIGAN · JAMES J. SIEGEL · MATTEA ORK · DAPHNE FAUBER · KATIE COSSETTE · JONA L. PEDERSEN · L. M. COLE · TIM GOLDSTONE · SHELLY JONES · MELISSA NUNEZ

A WITCH-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE



LAILA GODWIN · EJ CROLL · LIAM STRONG · LAR ASTRA · MORGAN MELHUIH · ECHO HART · KATIE COSSETTE · V.M. DOUBT · LEO SARGEANT · STEPHAN MEAD · MARY VALALSTINE · KEVIN KISSANE · LUCIA MORELLO

A WITCH-RUN LITERARY MAGAZINE



ALORAH WELTI · A.R. FREDRIKSEN · ANNAH ATANE · ANNE HARDING WOODWORTH · DIANE FUNSTON · ELLIE CAMERON · EMILY HOLMAN · ENORA STAUB · FRANK WILLIAM FINNEY · jw summerisle · MARK J. MITCHELL · MIRIANA M. · n.l. rivera · NELLIE LEVINE · NOBODY IMPORTANT · PAIGE FOE · REGINA NAGAN · SOPHIE KEARING · SOPHIE SAWICKA · TESSA FOLEY · TINAMARIE COX