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POEMS

Poetry Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

It has been a joy to put this issue of Euphony together. In the process, I've come across so many poems that have stayed with me in some way, and so many I keep returning to in conversations with friends and quiet moments alone. We have chosen just eleven of these poems to share with you. I'm honored to share them in the hope that you too will find something—whether an image, a feeling, or a turn of phrase—that grabs you and won't let go.

The first two poems in this issue reconsider insignificant-seeming deaths: "Stump Work" gives a stump an honorable end, while "Nippy" mourns a neglected hamster with new eyes. "Stopping by the Red Water" offers a lyric portrait of desire, while the next few poems take a more wistful bent: "Dive Bar" and "Buffalo" seek solace for loneliness, whether inside a run-down bar or beneath the skies of the Great Plains. Our next two poems, "Year Four: I Am Chief of the Laundry" and "A Letter," explore simple acts of devotion as a nun prepares for the day to come and a letter arrives from far away. Things then take a turn for the surreal: "Eruptus" adopts a comic approach to a unique gastrointestinal condition, while "Surf Party in the Land of Make Believe," the issue's only prose poem, recounts a party that gets out of hand. As the poetry section draws to a close, "One Morning" powerfully describes the realization that you deserve better; and last but not least, "Pier" offers an aphoristic take on the great philosophical problems of barnacles.

Thank you for taking the time to pick up this issue, and we hope to see you again soon!

Liana Raguso
Poetry Editor

Stump Work

John Barr

They sell a stew of chemicals to rot
the stump, like quicklime on dishonored dead.
You burn what's left. This will not do.

Its bole held crown and root
against a century of wind and drought;
carried life—we never could,
not Orpheus, not Eurydice—
to this world from the one beneath.

Get the axe, give it the death
that is a noble's due.

Nippy

Erin Stoodley

wasn't mine to grieve. From a row of rodents
already buried, my sister picked a smooth black hamster
curled in the corner of her cage. Once home, we dusted her coat
of sawdust and droppings, submerged the little bear
in a sink of soapy water until our mother peered in
and screamed. Ignorant, as children are, we mistook hurt
for nurturance. Nippy survived, but for three days
spewed fluorescent orange. With the divorce, she too
was caught in joint custody. The first weekend, our father
hoisted her life into his pickup's passenger seat.
At his duplex, we burrowed. Attached
to the pale static of the television screen, peeling cheese slices
from paper. Soon we forgot Nippy existed,
relegated to the kitchen floor. For days she went unfed.
Then one summer morning, we woke, no father
between us. Wet-eyed on the front porch, he unclenched his mug
of rum, rubbed my sister's shoulder. There was nothing
he could do. A plot of soil in the planter. He marked her grave
with a popsicle stick.

Stopping by the Red Water

T. Dallas Saylor

They swear by it through stained lips, the dozens
dozing beside the red pond, lazing aching limbs
or scalded skin into the shallows, scooping

a handful down a hoarse throat, or wading deeper,
dunking chest then head like baptism. High noon,
& the sun cuts the little stream into glass,

the gentle runoff finding its way from the city's veins
to its barrens, its barren. If I stay another hour
I'll never leave, I'll always need another cup

of reassurance, I'll never dry & find my footing
back to you, my topaz. My fingertips rust & the bite
on my tongue reminds me I too have left you

what's left, my dregs, my blood run its course
& found its coarse settlement, sediment,
the sacrament's crust. Forgive my current,

my erosion. Allow me to come, undam
my eros: I'll open a fresh vein, still blue,
& you & you alone can taste it redden.

Dive Bar

Derek R. Smith

Like the harmonized clinking of
Empty old-time milk bottles
In a milkman's metal-handled
Lunchbox-sized carry case.
We lonely types
Arrange ourselves
Inside this dive bar.
And bounce against
Each other's hollowness,
Collected,
Making strange
And resonating sounds.
It's our alma mater song that
We sing when we're together,
While we're very much
Alone.

Buffalo

Eric DePriester

The buffalo are down for the night,
quiet with dreams of nothing.

I am not alone
without You.
I have a bottle of wine,
four cigarettes
 —three—
I have a world
waiting to be—

This home,
it cannot house me.
Swing in the sound and
let me taste sky.

The wine is thick,
rumbles steady,
leaves sweet velvet
on my lips.
I dream the residue
 —skin—
and only see You.

It takes so much time
to make one today.

Smoke water spirit,
let it all wash down—
away.

No more:
bottle of wine;
wasted moments
whispered down to the filter;
singing You songs

You will never hear.

Tomorrow I must know
the stillness of the plain.

Year Four: I Am Chief of the Laundry

Sharon A. Foley

Bras, panties, shirts, the name of the sister
stitched on each piece.
There are also communal sheets

ready to be placed in the front loaders.
I'm the Angel Raphael who
hangs them out to dry in the gated yard.

No distractions, just chores.
I thank God for giving me
enough clothespins.

Rainy days I use heaters and pray
that the laundry will dry. Steam hits my face
as I throw a sheet over the metal bar.

I mangle smooth Mother Superior's sheets.
For all the others, I just fold them tight
and square, but leave a few

wrinkles in for Sister Mary Rosary
who at breakfast always takes
the last Sunday Bun.

Through this simple work
I consecrate the day.

A Letter

Sammy Aiko

Your letter arrives with bite marks—
a daring escape from the vast gnashing jaws
of the U.S. Postal Service.

What a long and absurd journey
for such a small, frail creature.

What pains the world goes to
because we love each other.

Eruptus

Erik Moyer

The writer is lucky because he cures himself every day with his work.

-Kurt Vonnegut

I can't stop burping.
I average eighty burps per hour.
It is ruining my life.
When I fire too rapidly,
I start retching. If I don't stop retching,

I vomit. If I don't burp enough,
the gas snowballs through my intestines
like a sickle. My doctor tells me
there's no particular reason
why this might be happening.

He refers me to a gastroenterologist.
The gastroenterologist anchors
a camera down my gullet.
She shakes me awake to say
her findings are inconclusive.

In the meantime, smoke less,
avoid carbonated beverages,
and stop mouthbreathing,
you mouthbreather.
I am going to die. Wikipedia:

The failure to burp successfully
can be fatal. Also Wikipedia:
There is no documented evidence
that birds burp, though ornithologists believe
there is nothing which physiologically

prevents them from doing so.
I wish I could fly.
And crap thick milky burps
into strangers' open throats.
Then come home to feed my young.

Surf Party in the Land of Make Believe

Juan Parra

We heard strangers surfing the darkness of our living room. Strange sounds in the night can be terrifying, but these we didn't care about too much. People wailed like wolves whenever a giant wave rose from the darker corners of the apartment, and at first, we were a bit startled but never terrified. One unusual sound followed another, then another at a higher pitch, then another with rasping, deep voices until our guts were completely fucked up curious. The overpowering smell of banana sunscreen mixed with salt tickled our nostrils, but we blew our noses and soldiered through. The peaches infused with opium and the weed-colored cupcakes didn't look so bad. The emeralds they stole from under the couch, we could have never reached there, so we didn't care much. They were surfing, howling, and some even danced in circles around a bonfire. It was like they wanted to mess us up scared. Like, as if we were nothing but a bunch of pussies. We absofuckinglutly smashed it, as if prepared for this from the very moment we were rooted on this land of make believe. When it was finally over, we sat up in bed and gave excellent howls ourselves. We looked into one another's eyes; the craters where we know not to stumble on when the rain turns them into still pools, fooling us to live a life that will dry with time, a calmness that you and I will never survive.

One Morning

Emily Stutzman

Each night, you came to the bars
of the cell you built, and bade me
give thanks for my freedom.
Each night, you sprinkled the dirt
with crumbs, tossed in a soured sponge,
and bade me give thanks for my nourishment.
Each night, you bade me pray
for the holiness that neither thirsted nor hungered.
Each night, I knelt and put my tongue
to the dirt, filth to filth,
prayerfully savored each
unleavened morsel, put my lips
to the sponged vinegar, let it pierce
that tender flesh, grateful.
If you leave, you'll starve, we'll never feed
you again, you said each night, but

one morning, I believed
that crumbs and vinegar were not
my birthright.
One morning, I believed
somewhere, someone
would give me at least a heel
of bread, and somewhere, someone
would let me drink from the rain
puddled in their footprint.
One morning, I carved a key into the dirt, spit on it,
then pulled it to me, earth alive
in my hands, one morning, I reached
through the ribbed bars and opened
my cage, one morning, I walked
out of your catacombs, up
into the sun where I found
springs of singing water
and a feast.

Pier

Landen Raszick

There once was a post
installed before a dock.

There once was a barnacle
floating for its home.

Now there is a post
covered in barnacles.

How does this relate
to Theseus's ship?

Everything
grows barnacles.

PROSE

Prose Editors' Letter

Dear Reader,

Sometimes, the unknown makes for the best fiction. It leaves room for imagination, drawing us into the story created. This past quarter, our Euphony staff members looked through numerous stories and settled on the four that you're about to read. Though they all touch on different aspects of life, love, death, and so much more, they also all deal with the unknown. Whether that manifests itself in mythical elements or in the exploration of one's own thoughts, these stories dig into what makes the unknown so terrifying, yet enticing and exciting all at the same time.

The first story, "What Billy Needs," follows Billy and his father as the two set out to a graveyard to accomplish something that would terrify most—but not Billy. The mix of humor and sadness make this piece resonate on many different levels.

Our second selection, "Denali," sees a doctor in Alaska listening to his patients' stories of trials and determination as he reflects on his past and a love now gone.

We conclude our prose section with two stories from our annual Prose Contest. "Izanami Waits, in Hell" won our first-place prize, with "The Jackalope" coming in a close second. These stories captured the spirit of our prompt—Monsters & Mermaids & Myths...Oh My!—which asked submissions to retell a classic myth or mythical concept in a unique, new, or novel way. We hope you enjoy these fantastic takes on well-known concepts as much as we do.

Thank you for taking the time to delve into these stories with us. Happy reading!

Laura Ribeiro and Christopher J. Lee
Prose Editors

What Billy Needs

Rob Armstrong

They always go when no one is around.

Dad tells Billy it has to be that way. “If we’re caught, the state will take you away from me.”

Dad shuts off the pickup truck’s headlights before turning down a side road and cutting the engine. The spot they’ve chosen is where high school couples go for sweaty encounters, breath sweet with beer before sneaking home in pairs, hoping to avoid late-night lectures on temperance. Dad fondly remembers doing the same with Billy’s mother long ago, but he doesn’t say this. That’s not the kind of thing you share with your son, especially not these days.

With a shovel in tow, they pick their way through the tall brush for twenty yards before reaching a wrought-iron fence. By now, Dad has grown adept at negotiating these fences, but Billy still lacks the strength to clear the finials on his own. Despite help from Dad, one of the spikes tears at the skin on his forearm, leaving behind a bloody gash.

Dad pulls his T-shirt off and wraps Billy’s arm. “Keep applying pressure; the blood will stop soon,” he says. “It won’t need stitches.”

The moonlight helps the pair to navigate among the stones on the path, and they arrive at their destination.

Dad drives the shovel into the dirt. Billy gets bored with this part; the digging, that is. According to his doctor, Billy has low muscle tone, and so he does not dig.

Dad digs for over an hour. He never complains when they have to hunt, never says he doesn’t want to break the law. Once they believe, his parents do anything for Billy.

Dad and Mommy took a while to realize what was happening. They talked to many people to determine why Billy was so lethargic all the time and so uninterested in doing any of the things that other boys did. One psychologist made Billy draw lots of pictures. You can guess what these drawings were of: a family, a house, pets, vacations, friends. And Billy, five years from now. Nothing out of the ordinary was observed within the colored lines and shapes, except how Billy liked to mirror-write his name so that the letters are intelligible when read from left to right.

Billy doesn't think Dad wants to be here today. He probably wants to ask Billy to fight his hunger until another opportunity presents itself. Today, Dad is distraught and mute when it comes time to say his last goodbyes. Friends and family can't soothe him; his brother, Bob, is dismissed as a worthless drunk, Aunt Mary doesn't deserve an audience for what she did when she was a girl, and neighbor Cathy, the one who acts like a sister, makes the drama all about herself.

For Billy, the day is filled with the ever-present numbness that accompanied the thing that climbed inside of him at his grandmother's funeral years ago. Billy is a vessel—a predator.

Dad's shovel lets out a *clang*, and Billy's pulse races. "Do you think it's still there?"

"When you dig them up on the same day, you've got better luck snatching their spirit up to eat." This was told to Dad by a shaman who was located after an exhaustive effort to find a learned ear sympathetic to Billy's needs.

Dad pries open the coffin's lid to reveal his wife's corpse.

"Do you think she'll be mad?" Billy asks. He thinks Dad expects him to feel remorse. But inside, Billy only feels grateful that the lung cancer has provided this opportunity for him. Mommy had a love-hate relationship with cancer sticks.

"Probably not, but I'm not sure how a person changes once they become a ghost." Dad climbs out of the grave pit.

Billy touches his mother's still chest and waits for the purge.

When his mother's spirit withdraws from her dead flesh, it shakes its head and recoils. Billy feeds. Only Billy sees her mouth, "Don't."

THE END

Denali

Birgit Lennertz Sarrimanolis

“Did you know, Doc,” a young hunter named Sam said one September as he sat in the examining room with a gleam of excitement in his eye. “When attacked by a grizzly, it is best to play dead. A black bear you can fight, even if they can climb a tree after you. But with a grizzly you don’t stand much of a chance.”

The doctor lifted his eyes to his patient, unruffled. He glanced at the scar the bear had left on the man’s throat, close to his jugular vein. Having practiced medicine in Alaska’s interior for many years, the doctor had acquired a certain amount of callousness. His myriad patients came to his practice in Fairbanks from their cabins in the bush or their native villages along great rivers when they noticed something amiss or when an ache could not be further ignored. The doctor examined them. When had the patient first felt the lump? How long had the urine been tinged with blood? Was the pain in the lower back constant? His patients shared with him their ailments. And their lives.

“The sow was in our camp,” Sam recalled. “We made the mistake of getting in between her and her cubs.”

The doctor settled himself to listen, as he was trained and accustomed to do.

The hunters had been away from their camp for the day, scoping ridges that had turned crimson in the fall. They hoped to spot a bull moose with the appropriate antler span to secure them a legal shot. Upon their return they noticed nothing amiss about their campsite. Then they came across camp stools in disarray, upended cooking pots, and disheveled tent pieces. A grizzly, towering over the rubble, stood tall on her hind legs. Her cubs, grunting and prodding clumsily, knocked over the tin pots the men had used to heat up food the night before.

Sam stumbled backward, interpreting the grizzly’s upright stance as aggressive. Tripping, the hunters ran out over the tundra, intent on placing some willow bushes between themselves and the bear. The bear, feeling her lumbering cubs threatened, charged after them. Within seconds she was upon them. She pinned Sam, clawing his skull, cheek, and throat. His hunting partner stood rooted to the ground, aghast, until he remembered the rifle clutched uselessly in his hand. He fired wildly into the air and sent

the grizzly and her cubs loping off into a nearby willow thicket.

“You were lucky to have survived,” the doctor said, perfunctorily, because neither he nor his patient seemed particularly alarmed by the near-death encounter Sam had experienced.

“Yup,” Sam grinned. “And you know what else, Doc? I gave up moose hunting in favor of bear baiting!”

This time the doctor slowly shook his head from side to side. The hunter had acquired just enough confidence in himself, that measure of brassiness necessary to feel he could brave the circumstances around him. The doctor silently wondered whether he would be so fortunate the next time he encountered a bear.

When the doctor first started practicing medicine in the Far North, he listened—half in disbelief, half in awe—as his patients’ stories filtered into the examining room. Nonchalantly they recounted tales of durability, daring stunts, and predicaments. A hardened oil worker from Prudhoe Bay once told him about his work on the Arctic coast. Grinning, he described the subzero nights and how his coworkers amused themselves by tossing out the remnants of their mugs to watch the coffee freeze midair.

Athabaskans came from interior villages accessible only by bush plane or rivers. The demands of feeding a village took great effort and hard work. With a glint of brightness, they maintained the wilderness was the best place to view the wondrous northern lights when they wavered and undulated in a pristine night sky untouched by city lights.

A dog musher told him about running her huskies in the Iditarod race one February, challenged by mountains in the Alaska Range and the jumbled ice on the Yukon River and a thousand miles to Nome. She smiled as she remembered how the sun had risen exquisitely over the ice floes in the sea.

Most of the patients shrugged off their maladies and deferred their worries.

“My work shift on the North Slope starts tomorrow,” the oil worker said. “I’ll schedule my follow-up appointment in two weeks’ time.”

A bush jumper with recurring pain in his abdomen told the doctor he would wait until August to schedule his CT scan. “That’s when the rainy season will douse the wildfires.”

A halibut charter captain with irritable bowel syndrome told him he had a fully booked boat and needed to return to Valdez, even if it meant braving the waves that contributed to his queasiness. Could the doctor not just quickly call in a prescription,

one he could pick up on his way out of town again?

The doctor had long stopped questioning. Their stories were plausible, even if they sometimes sounded improbable. He, of all people, understood the resilience patients were capable of. Until one snowy October day when even the doctor was left awestruck by Jack Conner, both as a patient and as a man.

“What work do you do?” the doctor asked Jack conversationally as he pulled up a stool in the examining room. He noticed the Carhartt trousers, fleece jacket, and white bunny boots. Jack was disheveled and unkempt and smelled faintly of sweat, something not uncommon of nervous patients, particularly at their first meeting. He was not a large man, although his build had acquired some extra pounds not designed for the size of his frame. He had probably been a lean, muscular man in his youth. His gray hair was wiry. The deep wrinkles in his windburned face belied the fact that he was a man in his mid-sixties and made him appear older. His eyes were a piercing light blue and had the ability to hold a gaze, unflinching, for quite some time.

Earlier the doctor leafed through the pages of the medical report Jack brought with him from the clinic in Tok. A tight feeling in his chest had lasted for several days, prompting him, finally, to go to the clinic. The nurse practitioner on duty advised him to seek out an internist in Fairbanks. Jack, disgruntled, was immediately skeptical. The discomfort was not critical. A trip to distant Fairbanks, under snowy conditions, seemed more an inconvenience than a necessity.

“I drive a fuel truck,” Jack said. “In Tok.”

The small settlement was near the Canadian border, a disregarded spot that straddled two immense countries. The doctor imagined him driving down icy, dark roads to deliver heating oil to cabins, climbing down from the driver’s cab to engage snow chains so the truck could climb, tires crunching, gears grinding, up the hills. He would haul the heavy hose through deep snow to the fuel tank beside a cabin, wait until the tank reached its fill, and then coil the hose back onto the truck. It was strenuous work.

“You’ve never felt any pain in your chest before, any discomfort?” The doctor eyed him. Jack shook his head.

“Have you had an EKG done in the past?”

“Not as far as I remember.” Jack was not taciturn, simply quiet.

The doctor glanced at the medical history questionnaire Jack had completed, pages filled with small, neat handwriting.

Some items Jack left blank: his nearest family relation as well as his address. Were the omissions due to necessity or choice? The doctor read on. Sometimes he, too, wanted to place some voids into his past.

“Have you lived in Alaska for some time?” the doctor asked, even though he felt he already knew the answer. Over the years he had encountered two types of Alaskans. There were those who came to Alaska for adventure or gold or trappings, only to deftly retreat after the first winter. Others stayed in the vast land, bound to its frozen soil, unable to separate themselves either from its challenges or its serenity.

“Forty-some years,” Jack said matter-of-factly.

The doctor said nothing. He had learned, over the years, to glean information, medical and otherwise, in due time. He took his stethoscope and leaned in to listen. The room was quiet save for the humming of the small space heater and Jack’s breathing in, breathing out.

“I’d like to schedule a cardiac stress test at the hospital.” The doctor hung his stethoscope around his neck again and scribbled a note into the chart. “Possibly this afternoon.”

The situation needed attention, evident at once. The doctor did not show his suspicions. The patient did not appear perturbed.

* * *

At midday the doctor returned to the house on the hill. It was built of log, nestled at the end of a gravel road lined with black spruces. It was the home he was raised in before his parents passed away. He had followed his father’s footsteps by studying medicine and eventually taking over his practice, as was expected. It never occurred to him to leave Alaska to carve out a different type of life. Even when he went to Seattle for his training, the closest possible to Alaska for this purpose, he studied steadfastly, without deviation, keen on returning north.

In the tiny arctic entry, the doctor shed his winter boots and pegged up his parka. The house was silent. Before Mia left it held a certain air of comfort, even though Mia was not the homey type. Suppers were hastily thrown together. She had a presence, however, that he never really observed until after she left. She was there in the evenings when he returned from his practice, looking up from the armchair, laptop on her knees. She shopped on Amazon because there were no stores in Fairbanks. The town offered

so little, she often complained. No social amenities in the form of restaurants and musical performances. There was little to do, just wilderness and “mountain people.” The doctor did not contradict her. What she said was true. Yet he did not feel the same.

He ate a sandwich standing by the counter and added the plate to the dirty dishes already cluttering the sink. He sank down in his armchair, a favored spot by the window overlooking a copse of aspen and spindly birch trees. In a previous winter heavy snow had settled on the aspens’ upper branches. They now bowed down, crippled under the load, almost touching the frozen ground below. Their permanently bent form stood testimony to their supple strength in the face of a particularly adverse winter.

The doctor closed his eyes to remove thoughts from his head, but Mia’s image appeared behind his closed eyelids. Perhaps he had not been fair to her, promising her Alaska, urging her to return north with him. They met in a Seattle Starbucks near the university hospital. He wanted a cup of coffee in the early morning, gritty-eyed and longing for a respite of fresh air after a long call night. He found himself standing behind her at the counter. She was dressed for running in black tights and Saucony sneakers. Tendrils of blond hair on the nape of her neck were damp with perspiration. She ordered a lavender yerba mate latte with extra whipped cream. He asked for a cup of drip coffee, black, no sugar. Since they were the only customers, they fell into conversation as they waited for their drinks.

They saw each other occasionally, whenever there was a pause in his call schedule. A beer at O’Malley’s, an Irish pub not far from campus. A stroll along the crisscrossed paths of the university, where they watched some college students languidly throw a Frisbee. Sometimes they sat on her couch, takeaway containers from Whole Foods on the coffee table in front of them, and watched a movie. Never did they go to the museum or the symphony, places Mia would later lament did not exist in Alaska.

* * *

In the afternoon, as the doctor walked along a hospital corridor toward the imaging room, he was accosted by David, a young resident doctor from Seattle.

“It’s been such a great experience,” David chatted amiably, falling into step with the doctor. “I’ve learned so much. Not only in the hospital...but here.” David’s sweeping hand gesture implied Alaska.

It was his first time up north. He meant to experience all of it. Fishing the salmon runs in the Kenai River, whitewater rafting on the Gulkana, mountain biking along rugged trails in the Chugach Mountains. The doctor smiled and thought of the first summer he brought Mia to Alaska. She was eager to see the place he came from. She wanted to hike in Denali National Park in the summer, and pick blueberries on alpine meadows in the fall, and see the northern lights in the winter. He remembered how, toward the end of the summer, they camped on a gravel bar of Quartz Creek, high in the White Mountains. He taught her how to fish for arctic grayling and pike. In the evening they sat listening to the rush of the water in a summer dusk that never turned fully dark. She leaned her head against his arm, and he felt like he was truly home.

When the doctor pushed open the door to the imaging room, David asked whether he could observe the procedure if the patient was comfortable with it.

Jack Conner sat on the examining bed, looking down at sticky electrode patches on his chest and the wires dangling from them. An IV line, secured to his arm with purple tape, trickled with saline solution. His nod was almost imperceptible when asked whether David could be present.

"I'd like you to walk on the treadmill," the doctor explained, motioning toward the machine. "I will increase the speed and incline gradually. When we get to the peak of exercise, I will inject some radiotracer. This will help me evaluate the coronary flow. If, at any point, you feel tired or symptomatic, please say so immediately."

Jack merely grunted before he stepped onto the treadmill. For a few moments the room was quiet except for the whirring of the treadmill belt and Jack's padded footsteps on it.

"What plans do you have for Alaska?" the doctor asked David, deliberately casual for his patient's sake.

"My hiking buddies and I want to scale Denali," David offered at once, animated. He paused, awaiting reaction, but there was no exclamation from either the doctor or the patient at this intention of his to conquer North America's highest peak.

Jack produced a chesty cough and cleared his throat. David glanced at him sharply.

"Really?" the doctor asked, unruffled, showing no sign of worry. "By which route?"

"We'll fly to base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier," David

slowly continued. “We’ll attempt the West Buttress. It’s supposed to be more of a steady ascent, less rock, no vertical ice.”

The rhythmic whir of the treadmill increased as the doctor accelerated the speed of the machine.

“Have you mountaineered before?” the doctor asked.

“I’ve climbed Mount Rainier. I always wanted to see the summit of a volcanic peak. But only made it to Disappointment Cleaver.”

“Interesting name,” commented the doctor.

“Quite a few climbers turn back at that point,” David explained.

The doctor eyed Jack, who was now breathing heavily. Zig-zags on the EKG graph were recording erratically, cresting and falling, indicating a wildly arrhythmic heart. Beads of sweat glistened on Jack’s forehead, but he seemed to tolerate the labor on his heart. David looked quickly at the doctor, then back at Jack. The lines on the graph continued zigzagging in response to the stimulation.

The doctor calmly adjusted the incline, slowly injected the dye, then slowed the machine down before he stopped it altogether. Jack, mopping his forehead with the back of his hand, stepped off the treadmill.

“I’d like you to lie flat on the examining bench now, Jack,” the doctor explained. “We will take some pictures that will help show if there are specific areas of the heart that are not getting enough blood and oxygen.”

The doctor adjusted the scanner above Jack’s chest. Jack turned his head and focused his gaze out the window. He cleared his throat and spoke slowly.

“In 1950 the commercial flights to the Kahiltna Glacier had not yet begun. We started in Fairbanks, packed our supplies onto dogsleds, and spent the better part of two months negotiating our way to the mountain.”

Both doctor and resident stared at their patient, cardiac scanner momentarily forgotten.

“The rivers were still frozen when we left in early April. This allowed us to cross them. By the time we got to base camp, our supplies were down to half, and we hadn’t even started the climb yet.”

The doctor and resident said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

“We made our ascent via the south side because the West Buttress route was pioneered the following year by Bradford Wash-

burn's team.”

The doctor quietly repositioned the scanner and started taking the needed images.

“It was a difficult summer for the climb. We carried sixty-pound packs for three weeks to reach high camp.”

David stared at him, silenced. The weathered man in the Carhartts had climbed Denali.

“Frank and Sue became argumentative before we even reached high camp. They were both skilled climbers. They needed to prove to each other their superior mountaineering skills. Just in case our expedition should terminate anywhere below the top of the mountain.”

He paused.

“Bad weather set in. We were forced to dig snow caves and wait out a gale for three days. We roped down because the wind was strong enough to blow us right off the mountain. When the wind settled, Frank and I climbed another two thousand feet or so to get beyond the ridge gap we still needed to traverse.”

“It was right there,” Jack told them. “The summit. Within reach.”

The doctor extended his hand to help Jack back into a sitting position. Jack started buttoning up his shirt.

“Did you reach the summit?” David asked urgently.

Jack's blue eyes, for the first time, met his gaze.

“No, we didn't. It wasn't about reaching the summit anymore. It was about us. And what it cost us.”

David ran his hand through his hair.

“It was my last climb,” Jack told him quietly. “But it was neither the weather nor the mountain that defeated us that day.”

* * *

That evening the doctor looked out at the deformed, bowed aspens. The cardiac images confirmed what he already knew. A defective valve between the heart chambers, uncorrected and without surgical intervention, rarely let patients survive. By some strange twist of nature, Jack had braved the years as the blood sputtered sporadically through an opening barely constant and forceful enough to direct it to the needed arteries.

The doctor thought about the unassuming man and his incredible trek to conquer the highest peak. His stamina was now reduced to a labored walk on a treadmill. It was only a matter of time before his broken heart would surrender. The doctor leaned

his head back against the armchair, wanting to erase the day.

Not long into the first winter, Mia started to grumble about the town. Its houses were practical but ugly, resembling barracks and oversized garages, sorely lacking in architectural aesthetics. Snow-covered roads were sprinkled with gravel that pinged noisily beneath the car. The inhabitants of Fairbanks retreated into their houses, hung blankets in the windows and beneath the doors to thwart the cold. The streets and sidewalks emptied. What few eateries and coffee shops the town offered closed early. She missed the pulse of Seattle, its paved sidewalks, the bustle of shoppers in downtown shops. Even the evenings in front of the fireplace, once so comforting, became monotonous and stale. Mia grew more restless. And the doctor knew he had to let her go for her own happiness, even if it was at his own expense.

Jack, too, had given up the quest of a mountain. Something instinctive had warned Jack to turn back, to relinquish the summit, even when just barely beyond reach. Could it be that his own heart had given him warning, by a fluttered signal only he could feel beneath his breastbone, to let him understand that worthiness had little to do with daring feats? It was not the wild, staggering tales of his patients that were impressive to the doctor but their acquiescence that mattered.

The doctor placed his hand on the telephone beside him. A semblance of Mia's smile hung in the air in front of him. Then he paused. He would not try to call her again. In the gloaming of the day's end, the doctor looked out over the crooked aspens, rimmed in pink against the setting sun, and was able to find something remarkable in the ordinary, uncelebrated moments of life.

THE END

Izanami Waits, In Hell

Sammy Aiko

I go to him, in his dreams of other women. I become them: slip inside their soft bodies and wear their flesh like fine robes. I feel his hands, white and hard as pearl, on these breasts which are not my breasts. I feel his stabbing inside this body which is not my body—his stabbing, swift and sweet as the beginning of the world. I look at him, my wild black-eyed brother-husband, and he looks back at me unknowing, for this face is not my face which moans and sweats.

When his stabbing grows urgent and irregular, when he is almost finished, the other women become me. I show him my face, round as the moon and lovely as he remembers. I wish to drive him mad with grief. I relish in his moment of knowing—he recognizes me and his mouth twists with pain and desire. Sometimes the feeling is so powerful that it wakes him up. Sometimes I have a few moments with him, before this dream fades into the dark river of dreams. "Come to me," I say to him as he lies silent, still inside me, looking up into my face like a man before the onslaught of a flood. "Come be with me again."

I do not know how long I have waited for him. I do not know why he tarries.

I wander through the half-dark, lonelier than a ghost, longing to find him, in flesh or in sleep. This is a gray place, cooler than it is warm, damp and smelling the moldering wet smell of earth. It is a place of worm and willow, of shadow and still. Sometimes I sit in the great palace, basalt-dark, looking out its windows over the vast terrain, sure of his shape in every god and specter.

The old women tell me that he will not come to me. "All young women are like you," they say. "Stupid."

"You don't understand," I tell them. "For me he chopped our newborn son to bits with a ten-grasp sword."

They shake their heads and offer me cups of tea: pale, bitter. It burns in my throat like that terrible child in my birth canal. They offer me the food of this place and I eat it: roots twisted and many-eyed, tasting of nothing; insects brittle and blind, crunching in my mouth like salt. I am never hungry enough to be hungry, nor full enough to be full, but I eat to be sure I still have a mouth.

This desire for him is a desire which is not a hunger. It is a strangeness, opaque and ungenerous. It is a layer of volcanic ash. It

is a fog over the sea, so heavy as to obscure the sky. *I desire*, and wait for the day when there will be no *I*, just *desire*.

When he comes to me, his footsteps beat the ground of Hell like the great taught skin of a drum. I know it is him, know it miles away and hours ahead. Suddenly I know my shame. I shy from the scant light, retreat to the darkest corner of the dark palace, that he may not see me as I have waited. "Show him to me," I tell the old women, "but light no lantern. He must not see my face."

He comes to me, in the darkest corner of the darkest room in the dark palace in the dark world of Hell. He does not soften his steps as he approaches but lets his presence become a tremor, a shaking, an almost unbearable roar. When he stops and stands before me, everything falls still.

I listen for his low breath, so afraid of my satisfaction that I cannot feel satisfied. I am bloated with love, pressing out against my stomach like a possessing spirit, a malice all its own.

"Izanami?" he says. The sound of his voice in the gloom is like emerging from water into air.

"I have waited for you," I say to him, "many days and nights in darkness. I have dreamt of nothing, waiting for you."

"And I, all those days and nights, have dreamt of you." I almost laugh, but for the love spinning webs in my throat. "Now I have come for you, and we will live again, together, in the sun." I laugh at this, and the love begins to crawl from my mouth and nose.

"Come *for* me? You are mistaken, Izanagi. You have not come *for* me, but *to* me. How are we to live, together, in the sun, if I am not alive?"

He is silent; I know he does not understand. I do not want to live. There is nothing wrong with Hell, except the loneliness of waiting.

"My love," he says, finally, "you do not know what you are saying. Can it really be you? Are you my sister, my wife, my woman? Have you forgotten how we danced and begat many gods? That together we stirred the sea with a jeweled spear and made a kingdom?"

"Of course I remember these things; of course I am still your wife. But I am changed now. I have breathed the air and eaten the food of Hell. I will make no more kingdoms, beget no more gods. I do not want the sea, or the spear, or the sunlight. I only want to be here, with you."

"Can it really be you? Please, my love, show me your face. How I have longed to see you and to touch you!" He reaches for me

but swiftly I pull back. He smells of storms, of salt, of soft earth and growing things. I know he is beautiful without looking at him.

"Wait," I tell him, but he will not be stopped. There is a hunger inside him cruel as brush-fire. He lights a flame, just a small one, and steps close to me.

What must I look like to him? There are no mirrors in Hell, but I know I am ugly. I feel my cheeks sagging, softening, the skin wrinkling like overripe fruit. My hair is reduced to scraggly black tufts like a mangy dog, and my lips have receded so that the cool damp air moves across loose, broken teeth. The flesh of my body is sliding from the bone, what once was firm and pink with blood now shriveling, deforming, discoloring. What colors, I wonder? I hope the colors, at least, are beautiful: I hope I am turning lichen-green and iris-blue, and I hope that where my flesh tears open my insides burn red as the sun swallowed by the sea.

Awakened to my body, I feel the maggots squirming in the soft places, their white worm-shapes swelling with fat and muscle. Their chewing does not hurt me, but it is strange to feel myself disappearing into the narrow channels of their intestines. One drops from my belly to the floor with a satisfying gravity, like a plump peach drops from a tree. In the silent and dark its little body slithers against the floor. I am full of shame.

His eyes widen; he looks foolish, distorted in his hunted-beast terror. He looks at me only for the space of a breath before dropping the light, turning, and fleeing.

As he runs from me I feel the love inside me contract, then explode with new ferocity. I stagger on my feet, filled with a shooting radiance that turns my mind all white and my body to lightning. I shriek, a shriek which seems to tear my throat, a shriek which echoes monstrously through Hell. I move without knowing I move. I am annihilated; I am everywhere; I am a love which does not know itself from fury.

To my call come the specters, a thousand and five terrible warriors with abalone eyes, roused from their wanderings into the sheer ecstasy of battle. To my call come the old women, impossibly fleet-footed in their twisted tendinous bodies, always glad for the crush of living organs between their sharp teeth. The pounding of our feet shakes the ground of Hell as even his did not, shakes it as though it will crumble beneath us into an infinite nothing. We pursue him across the rough gray land, fly across the miles and snake through dark copses as naturally as the river roars into the waterfall. The great hordes of Hell, driven to frenzy by my awful obsession

which permeates the very air—snarling, wailing, clanging sword and cuirass, leather boots striking stone and squelching fen.

He is so fast—my brother, my husband, my man. He casts his comb down and his hair streams over his shoulders shining and black as seaweed. His body, mine since time began, heaves and strains its divine muscles, sweating a sweat which sings to me of his perfection, smelling sweeter to me than incense. He is so fast, and we cannot catch him— not the warriors, not the old women, not myself. As I run I feel wild, more wolf than woman. I have never wanted him as I want him now: to fall upon him, to devour him, to tear him to pieces.

Right to the entrance of Hell he runs, to the gaping stone mouth beyond which lies the life he loves more than he loves me, the life I have lived and tired of and will never return to. This mouth is obscure to me, a shifting of darkneses like the swirling silt of a deep, deep pond; I cannot see it, this life beyond the twilight land I have come to know.

He is so strong—my brother, my husband, my man. He steps through this black mouth, rolling behind him a stone so massive it could not be moved by a thousand men. He looks back to me as he pulls the stone into place with his god-strong arms, and I see that he wears a hard face, demon-fierce, the face he wore to watch me die. His eyes are lovely, shadowy and aglow, black lacquer in candlelight.

My love encircles me like another skin, and I wonder if it makes me look lovely again—if he can even see it. I wonder if it is as red as it feels, as red as my flesh where it tears and falls away, as red as the blood of our baby as he hacked it to pieces, as red as the rage of pure experience which is: sex, birth, battle.

We stand on opposite sides of the thousand-man stone. I cannot see him anymore. No matter: I will go to him, in his dreams. When he dreams of other women I will slip inside their flesh, I will feel his stabbing, I will reveal myself to him and drive him mad with grief.

"I have waited for you," the love says, "many days and nights in darkness. I have waited for you, and you have left me here, alone, dreaming of nothing. I will draw you back to me. I will take your beloved life from you: every day I will cause a thousand deaths, until you have nothing left to love."

"I cannot stay here with you, in Hell," he says, "but every night I will dream of you. And every day I will cause a thousand women to give birth, so that you may never run out of life to take

from me."

I press my rotting palms to the cold rough stone, listen to his heavy slow footfalls as he walks away. Even he must come back here, someday, and until then I will wait, lonely with my desire which is not a hunger and my love which is not a kindness, wandering through Hell in the half-dark.

The Jackalope

Reese Jones

Let me be clear: there is no jackalope. It's barely a folktale. Two brothers taxidermied a jackrabbit, severed the antlers from a deer, and grafted them onto the skull of said jackrabbit. They sold the carcass to a hotel. These days, unreal as they are, many jackalopes remain mounted on walls all around the United States. You have the history now. You understand how we got here. And I have my jackalope meat.

Let me address the jackalope meat: it is a blending of bodies. It's a two-for-one deal. Myths catch on slowly, but a good meal leaves a mark, so someone else threw the other parts of the bodies—thighmeat, breastmeat, tailmeat—into a meat grinder. Jackrabbit and antelope, unholy union, twisted into each other like rope. And out it comes: ground jackalope. It can be made into sausages. It can be shaped into patties.

I'm eating dinner, a jackalope burger, at this restaurant in the Wyoming summertime. A family of four sits at the table next to me. The children, two boys, one with a scribbled-over cast on his left arm, and the other, the older, wearing a dirtied baseball uniform, are playing a game: Babe Ruth lays his palm flat on the table, and the Hand Mummy, good hand hovering over his brother's, attempts to smash it against the table before Babe can dodge it. Every time the Mummy misses the hand and hits the table—which so far has been every time—the silverware takes a temporary flight and crashes back down onto the plates. Their mother encourages the Mummy. Babe smiles at her. They are one too-hard slam away from violence, but for now, they are all enjoying themselves.

I am letting you know this to prove that, although I am eating by myself, I am not alone right now. And even if this family were not there, on the wall to my right is a mounted jackalope. He is watching me eat this burger. I am expecting a tear to run down from his blackglass eye. I am expecting it to fall into my glass of water. I am expecting my drink to become a concoction of two things that shouldn't be in the same space. I am taking bites of my burger and frowning and I am wondering if you would enjoy this burger. I am wondering what you would have ordered if you were here. I am wondering if you would speak to the family, or which boy you would root for, or if you would become irritated with their noisemaking.

I am wondering what you would think of my taxidermied friend. I am wondering how wonderful it would be to be thrown into a meat grinder or a blender or a food processor with you and be turned into a bastardized shape of a human together. So when I am eating my jackalope meat and I have forgotten that I don't much care for eating meat, just know: I am thinking of you, always.

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