

# The Festival Review

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# A letter from the editor

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Journals such as this one operate on the premise that there is something more to offer in the world of literature. A plethora of books, ebooks, chapbooks, magazines, newspapers, blogs, and journals are published each year.

There is more than any one person could conceivably read in its entirety with anything like enjoyment. As such, one's decision to invest time and energy to reading any one of these publications in particular becomes quite difficult.

I do not take this for granted.

Your patronage of this magazine is very dear to my heart. This publication is a labor of love, as are so many of its kind. Thank you to everyone who supports this independent literary magazine. I truly hope that you find within its pages something transporting, transfiguring, and transformational.

# Masthead

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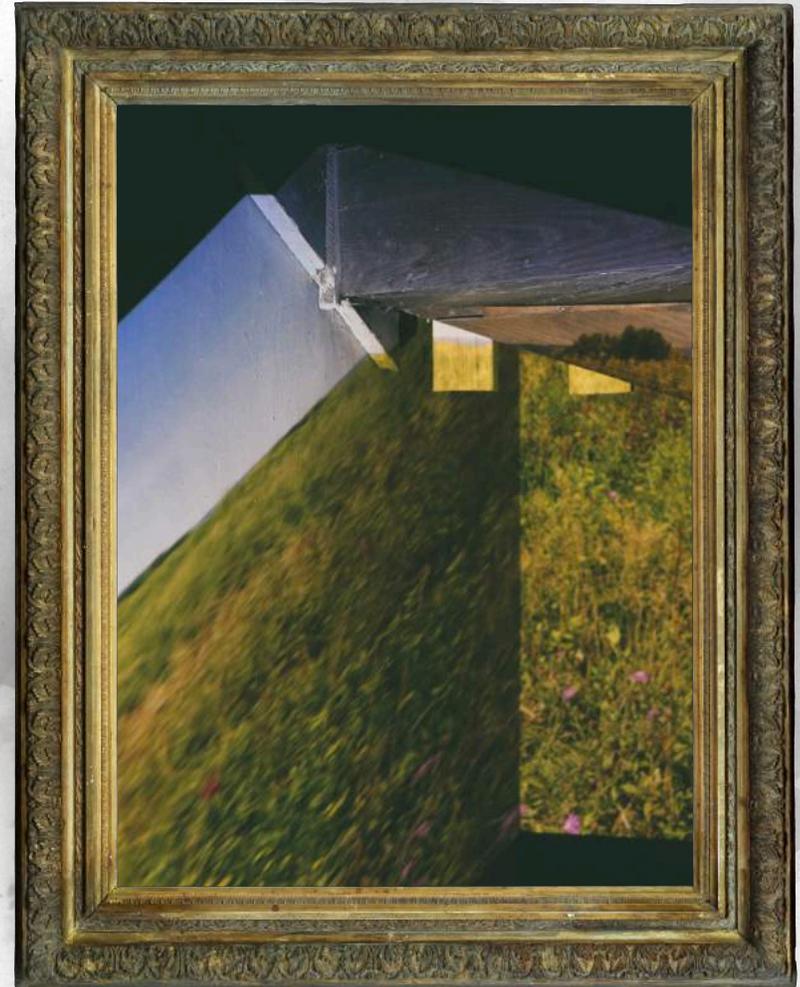
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# The Water in Tartu

John Sherer

The water in Tartu tasted better  
than any glass of wine I've ever had—  
it soothed my throat like pineapple

and quelled a riot in the ghost  
I'd almost given up;  
and as I turned to look

at the snowy blue light  
soaking into the curtains  
—the kind that nods yes, it's winter—

it once again was possible to believe  
that there may be something new under the sun,  
that I could let the world begin again,

that I could be wanted, even loved, that I  
could get lost among a thousand streets  
and reach the border of my being.



# Nightingale's Song

Chelsea Reynolds

Yes, if you swear  
can I see this?  
to take it all. If  
you will put that hand here  
and fasten lips tight  
and don't let the silk ruffle.  
Spin me to a pulp  
in three quarters time.  
Only then may you.  
I hate all that mars  
the rhythmic black and white  
stop your slurping  
sounds that pump from an organ  
or some distant drum rattling.  
Enter my ear and close  
the door behind you. I don't want to

outlaw your eyes from mine  
know my body deceives me.

Oh, to be lonely.  
What welcome change  
that would be. There's plenty of company  
clattering around in here.  
Squishing. Squish. Squelch. The sound  
of my gut. The sound of  
my heart remains to be seen  
or heard. Still. Listen.

Ah. It pumps.  
But only under siege.

Pecking. Rapping. Pricked brain  
protruding. Arms splay out probing  
for sip of sleep I know nothing about.  
Tomorrow, on a terrorizing golden lawn  
I will stroll.  
Not stagger, but stroll.

# False Spectre

Ashly Buck

I walked to the bank, listening to movie soundtracks. My pace was quick; never on the verge of running but feeling as if I were being pursued by a spectre of my own making.

Sitting there, watching people come and go, I had time to forget about running away from the ghosts of my despair; the coffee burnt my tongue while the muffin soothed.

Once I had nothing more to eat, I picked up my coffee and walked out the door. I moved swiftly, spilling a trail of my morning brew across the sidewalk. I realize, with every step I take toward home, that I should make peace with despair. We will embrace before the rain comes and the sun sets behind heavy clouds.



# Bloodshot Eyes and Tarot Cards

Grace Johnston



The tarot cards were a spur of the moment purchase.

I was introduced to them by my co-worker Kevin. Surprisingly, not some Madame Zodiac. But that's how satan works - he gets you through sweet eyes and genuine human connection.

Muahahaha

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The cards were beautifully designed and the descriptions weren't at all witchy or sorcery. In fact, they felt a great deal like prophecy, but without the heavenly pressure/human projection part. They were simply read as a tool for increased introspective thought

Admittedly, the first night I put them to sleep in my nightstand drawer, I had a moment of panic. Images from that scene in Indiana Jones and the Holy Grail where the grail is put into the Nazi shipping crate, and the wrath of God burns out the swastika totally grazed my mind. I thought, well shit, if there is a God, then surely I'm going to wake up with a burned out nightstand now that I've put tarot cards inside it!

Alas, I'm pleased to report that neither the cards nor the nightstand have any signs of god's wrath

# on payday we celebrate with rice and chicken

GS Murphy

at 5'1" she was a comical sight to the height of the 6'4" American  
Dryer ADG-330D machines, which stood taller still on palates  
for maintenance.

she would muster the strength to haul bag upon bag of filthy  
laundry into the machines cavernous and stoic, then transport  
into dryers, the work would dry her hands to desert scab,  
chafed, chemical raw and arthritic at 33.

(The state hadn't determined that a throw down 2 flights of  
steps and 2 dislocated disks were enough for state benefits) the  
violence was a parting gift from her last job

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Now slightly hunched and pain-be-damned-poor  
she cleans the neighborhood laundry, a modern day Magdalene  
sister,

the distant ancestors on her father's side would nod approval  
the rest of her bloodline wouldn't say much; mostly massacred  
and left for dead, bastard discards of Dawes Rolls and those  
fortunate to escape the great and terrible walk.

she spends 12 to 14 hours a day elbow deep in shit-stains, body  
odor and balancing chemical burns from both industrial and  
commercial detergent  
you never lose the smell of bleach in the nose, once sweet, then  
forever acrid, vile,

(to this day, to her children one smell of a laundry-mat enough  
to quicken tempers and produce an unasked tear)

this is back when 50¢ an hour plus tips were legal as long as the  
table was taller than the work.

there is no other income, the patriarch more often out of state  
spending as fast making it,

bourbon and whiskey was fathers perfume

just as acrid as bleach, if not worse

bleach will kill you quick, bourbon will convince you of love, then  
break you,

with a leather belt, the illusion until the next drink

but the violence was always 2 weeks out at a time, while the  
struggle for food was every day,

and she worked, raw hands and toothless smile,

on payday there would be Uncle-Bens rice, and a half pound of  
cut/grilled chicken,

there would be huggies and Lipton tea,

there was mom and the lingering smell of our neighbors sweat,  
mixed in with Marlboro cigarettes

and bleach.

# Vigil

John Sherer

# Self-help



By the Emajōgi I sat on a bench,  
unable to walk farther,  
and wept when I remembered  
the fountain in paradise,  
the cool fruit handed to me.  
A terrible dark fell over me  
and I felt my life was laughable.

Somehow I stood up, as if in stirrups,  
to depart from this Babylon, which  
I should have known was no Babylon,  
but a slow river in Easter light  
with greyhounds playing on the bank  
and trees kneeling to the water,  
the kind of paradise that is our portion.

I want to see  
you again and gaze  
upon your devastating  
skin, and hear  
your voice explain  
how little I  
have understood.

Try to find the holy  
in the soggy dish sponge;  
the spilled coffee in the satchel;  
the onion in the kitchen  
sprouting long-necked scallions,  
rotting, finally resting  
in its garbage grave.  
Try to find the holy  
in the brain silence  
that rules most of the day—  
a torpid mist polluting—  
and for which your recent  
accidental gardening  
is now a metaphor.  
Try to find the holy  
in an unexpected dawn,  
when you're gulping water  
and the guests have gone.

Now sketch her face  
without looking at the page.



# Mania Strikes Noon

Sophia Falco

You'd visit me when mania strikes noon  
stuck in a tiny hospital room  
the world was mine,  
but I didn't make it in  
time  
and seconds minutes hours  
collapsed  
on my head  
so I hid under the white sheets  
on my bed—

a prison

a prison

a prison

depression talks back, don't you know?

Whereas reality crumbled at my finger tips  
like  
a stale sugar cookie depression

talks back to me, don't you know?

And you  
you love  
me always—  
just the same.

# Above High Street

Stood up for a date  
(how funny—my nose had bled,  
a first in twenty years,  
and I was nearly late),  
I sat at the floor-to-ceiling  
where you joined me  
for a Sazerac or two,  
and agog we watched  
a Nile of people  
in animal costumes  
glide past, spilling  
from a convention  
in lavender dusk.  
Cars were clogged  
on busy High Street  
by cartoon elk and foxes;  
the bunnies and the bears  
lingered in the crosswalk,  
their eyes like shells,  
their smiles immutable.  
And to think  
I have ever complained  
about my life.

John Sherer

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# Hotel Monteleone

Revolving around the bar  
once each quarter-hour,  
Aviations and a Vieux Carré quaffed,  
we said that marriage was unthinkable,  
almost, for us, unspeakable,  
for we are different every decade,  
and promises are made by those  
who don't need all the information.  
The mirror kept us in sight  
as we carouselled, caroused  
around this tiny toe-hold of the universe.



# Fatuous Love

Colin James

I've never sat in the library  
correcting papers  
eyeballing the neophytes.  
Others pretend less successfully,  
are asked to move along  
which is tough on credibility,  
bus schedules and café clout.  
Denialists gather  
around the corner  
stigmatically folding  
and unfolding their proteins.

# The Last Time I Saw My Brother

Philip Shreck

The rivers of America are spotted with small, uninhabited islands which are no different than forests, other than their accessibility. On one of these islands, shirtless and pacing in the low light, was my brother. Seeing him like this reminded me of years ago when he and Dad fought red skinned and drunk on the front lawn. On hot summer nights the argument would catch like wildfire and spill out from our house where the air conditioner cycled stale air.

I remembered the crisp snap of the screen door opening and swinging shut. Dad and Mike circled each other like planets in slow orbit; Mom watched from the front window; I peeked behind her hip. Mike eventually took off down the street, teary eyed and muttering, and Dad would holler himself hoarse and then go back drinking in the garage, tools rippling as he settled atop the weight bench. I'd tell you how sad it made me feel if it was possible to describe. Sometimes the neighbors called the police. The cops wouldn't put their sirens on but you could hear them from a few streets over because they'd haul ass, engines gunning and kicking up gravel along the worn street. My son has

anger problem, Dad would say in accented English, but the cops would ask him if he'd been drinking, and Dad would say something like is it a crime to have a beer in my own home? Mike was seventeen or eighteen around then. He'd disappear but then a few days later be right back in his room and he and Dad wouldn't say word one about any of it.

It was about 15 years after that summer when I went to pick up my brother in a town in central Connecticut as a favor for my father. Dad called me just before Thanksgiving letting me know Mike was in trouble and needed a ride home. I hadn't seen Mike in 12 years, not even at our mother's funeral. I set out from Boston right away. The address was in a place called Collinsville, a village nestled in two opposing bends of a river that formed an S. It sprouted up in the 19th century around grist mills and an industry of axes, knives, and other edge tools. In the decades past it shed its industrial roots and settled in as pretty, lightly populated riverfront hamlet with a minor arts community. After driving across a bridge into town I passed by a bar, an antiques

store, a small industrial museum, and a barn on the river's edge that rented out canoes, kayaks, and paddle boards. The address Dad gave me was for the second floor of a three-family that looked sunk into the cold muddy earth. Mike wasn't there, instead only an odd young man named Robichard who said he was an essayist, though he wore a Dunkin' Donuts uniform and asked me to drive him to work. Robichard had a thin goatee and made intermittent eye contact while looking for something around the room. I drove him to work, and on the ride he told me that Mike was paranoid and had taken off earlier in the day, but would probably be back in the evening. I thanked Robichard and turned back down River Road, the way I came in, towards the interstate.

It was just after 5 PM on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, yet there was little traffic. The town center was empty except for an older couple being led by an inquisitive dog and someone turning off the barbershop's lights. Halfway over the bridge that bisected the river, I noticed a blur of movement out in

the water. Through the sepia dusk I saw a man standing on a small patch of land, pacing and shirtless in the November cold. I pulled over, put on my hazards, and got out of the car. "Mike!" I shouted from the bridge towards the island, maybe 100 feet away. He didn't hear me. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted again. "Mike!" He stopped pacing and looked up at me. "Mike, it's me, Jack! What are you doing out there?" Mike patted his hands down towards the ground like he wanted me to be quiet. He gestured towards the west end of the bridge. He then shoved a kayak into the water and started paddling in that direction. I got back in the car and drove to the end of the bridge, turned right and parked just off the road as Mike pulled the boat ashore.

He was ghost white and trembled as he walked over to me. I took off my jacket and held it out to him. "Take this," I said. Then, "Where is your shirt?" He didn't answer but took the jacket. "Get into the car and warm up, for chrissake," I said. He slipped on my jacket and sunk into the passenger's seat like a block of ice. I returned to the driver's seat and turned the heat up as high as it would go.

"Drive, please," Mike grunted.

"What about your canoe? Are you okay?"

"It's not my canoe. Just go ahead and drive along the road and I'll tell you."

I shrugged, put the car in drive, and started off down the road. It was not on the way to the interstate.

We drove for a few minutes in silence and I stole an occasional glance at my brother. He looked older than 32, his actual age. He wore spotty gray-brown facial hair, not enough to really be a beard, and had stray pockmarks on his cheek. A faded scar ran from his forehead down along his temple to the edge of his eye. He shifted uncomfortably, holding his hands to the heat vent, alternating his gaze between the passenger window and the rear view. He then told me the story of his recent life, which both began and ended a non-sequitur. He'd been in a relationship with a woman up in Barre, Vermont, but left because she wanted him to babysit her kids all the time and he'd had enough. A friend of his told him about a commune for men being run down by Great Barrington, where you could live and eat for free if you helped

around the farm and took some courses. The farm turned out to be just some shabby house on a half-acre of land, and the men living there worked retail or odd-jobs and spent a lot of the day drinking beer and reading the pamphlets that Don, the "leader", wrote. Don was an advocate for the rights of Men, Mike said, and was brilliant. He saw the threat more clearly than society did, and knew it was leading up to something serious. The "commune" was where he had met Robichard.

Mike said another man in the house, Deveron, accused Robichard of being a homosexual. Mike said it was because of the way Robichard spoke and that he highlighted his hair, but that he wasn't gay. One day, Don brought a woman back to the house that he'd met at some casino in upstate New York. Mike said she was a whore. There were ten men living in the house, and half were excited, tapping their feet and shifting chairs, and the other half were nervous as hell and looked on quietly. Don took the woman by the hand and walked her over to Robichard, and told him he could go first. Deveron was whistling and laughing but Robichard told Don he wasn't interested. Don said it wasn't optional and the house quieted down. Robichard stood up and

said “fuck this” but Don slapped him in the face and pushed him back down. Then Don just started laughing and the girl seemed confused as hell, and Don ended up taking the girl to his room and didn’t share her with anyone.

Mike didn’t like any of it, he wanted to make clear to me, so he and Robichard took sixty bucks from a drawer in the kitchen and ran out of there. They took a bus down to Connecticut and ended up in Collinsville.

My brother and I hadn’t seen each other in ten years, and probably hadn’t had a serious conversation ever, and yet he recounted this slight episode of his life like it was a matter of life and death. At the very least, I expected some explanation for how Mike ended up on that baby island in the Farmington River, shirtless and freezing. Mike’s commune story was relevant to a narrative in Mike’s head that I wasn’t privy to.

Mike asked me to take him home so he could change.

Back at the three-family, Mike went into his room I saw it was a mess, covered in clothing and trash, and that his mattress sat on the floor. I waited in the kitchen. A few minutes later, he walked out wearing jeans and a t-shirt, looking normal enough,

and I asked him if we was ready to go.

“I have work tomorrow,” he said.

I scratched my neck and looked straight at Mike. “Then why did you ask Dad for someone to come get you today?”

“I never said today.”

Instead of engaging in conversation, Mike walked to the kitchen and started rooting through the cupboards in search of food. I heard slamming and huffing and a general pang of frustration. He came out of the kitchen gnawing on a roll that looked hard as a brick. The home reminded me of how young men lived in college - cheap frat rentals with mix-and-match furniture, overflowing trash cans, empty fridges, and unswept floors.

“Mike.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m driving back to Williamsport for Thanksgiving.” I looked at my watch. “I still have a ways to go. Dad said you wanted a ride home. What’s the deal?”

“Sorry, Jack. I have to work tomorrow.”

“You have to work on Thanksgiving? Where do you work?”

“Dunkin' Donuts.”

“Oh. With Robichard?”

Mike took the roll from his mouth and hurled it against the wall. He balled up his hands and stormed into his bedroom, slamming the door, and dust puffed up from the floorboards. Five seconds later, he opened the door and stomped out.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s OK, Mike,” I said. “But, tell me. What’s going on? Dad said you were in trouble.”

Mike started rubbing his fingers back and forth along his scalp. He repeatedly plunked his chest with his index finger. “I took the initiative to go find work. I found the job at Dunkin'. I interviewed, I got the offer, I started first. For 10.50 an hour.” Mike now jabbed his finger towards the front of that house. “That MOTHERFUCKER starts and they offer that MOTHERFUCKER 11.25 an hour. He started AFTER me! He only knew about the job because of me! And I *vouched* for him.

STUPID MOTHERFUCKER.” While Mike spoke someone upstairs walked across the floor, causing minor creaks which would’ve gone unnoticed if not for Mike’s wincing at each footstep. Mike stood, neck craned towards the ceiling, seeming to take up more space in the room with each breath, his face red and his eyes bulging with sagging, leathery eyelids like some carnival grotesquerie.

Witnessing this, I felt a pang of regret for ever thinking my father a prude, just some confused immigrant schmuck, for claiming Mike had a pornography problem all those years ago. Of course the problem was my brother, not my father’s unfamiliarity with the norms of American youth.

Here, see my brother, raving lunatic.

Robichard just then came through the front door, red faced and shivering, like he had walked home from Dunkin’ Donuts in the cold without a jacket.

“Fuck!” Mike said.

“Fuck you,” Robichard said. He disappeared into a hallway and then a door slammed.

I looked at my brother. He bit his nails, a habit he kept

from childhood, and looked at me. I couldn’t help but stare.

“What, what, what?” he said.

“Why did you call Dad?”

Throughout all this, Mike wouldn’t dare make eye contact with me. “I don’t even remember calling him. I was probably sick or something.” He seemed to rock back and forth while standing. “You’d better go,” he said.

I stood up to leave. For a brief moment I considered hugging him, but it was a very brief moment, and instead I said, “I have some extra cash on me. You want it?”

Mike accepted the money - 120 bucks - said thanks, and went back into his bedroom. I went out to my car and drove away.

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When I got home to Williamsport and told Dad that Mike wouldn’t come, I couldn’t tell if he was sad or relieved. It was always hard to tell with him. We had pasta and meatballs because Dad couldn’t make a turkey or anything like that. The food was neither an American tradition nor a Polish one, not even a family tradition, it was just Dad working with what he had, but it was still hot and filling. We both drank a lot of red wine. “I know it’s

in a box but this stuff is actually pretty fancy,” Dad said. I went to sleep in my old room, feeling sluggish and thick. Lying on my bed I could see out to the front lawn, silver in the moonlight, but I was too tired to do more remembering and turned away to look at the blank wall. It was covered in dust. Sometimes there’s no making sense of something, and sometimes there’s no making sense of anything, I thought, and sometime after that I fell into a deep sleep.

Perhaps because of the red wine and the smells of childhood I had an odd, vivid dream. I dreamt of Gunter Liftin, a young German caught on the wrong side of the newly erected border in Berlin in August of 1961. I could see him walking, hands in his pocket and kicking pebbles, staring out at rolls of barbed wire and the Brandenburg gates just beyond. He’d spent the day just before the wall went up preparing his new apartment in West Berlin, but was caught on the wrong side of the city when the border practically appeared out of thin air - aided by thousands of loyal Stasi agents - in the nighttime hours on that historic Sunday morning. But the Brandenburg Gate was not where he would attempt his escape, but rather in the

Humboldthafen, a small canal in the middle of city, where if he completed a swim of 150 yards he would find himself on a shore of West Berlin, free once more. He made it 20 yards before being seen and ordered to stop. He kept swimming onward and was shot through the back of the neck. Gunter's body was fished out of the harbour by the East German police a few hours later. In my dream I felt the sensation of a bullet entering my neck and exiting my throat, or my mouth, and of course it wasn't painful because it was only a dream, but rather a surreal feeling of repeated shock and a fabricated sensation of death that is the best our imagination can do. I wondered if Gunter knew he would die, or knew it was likely, but I knew there was little chance of relating to chaotic, miserable times in history, where through a perverted confluence of events you may be shot at for swimming in the wrong canal. That's the truth of history, or the trick. That Gunter jumped out into water not because he was stressed or frustrated but because he sought distinct freedom, an actual location, a considered risk of being shot that was worth it, as opposed to the present, where it seemed nothing could be explained except to lump it in some general malaise or ennui or dissatisfaction that was the

explanation for all things. There was darkness then that I didn't remember. Sometime after that I dreamt of Robichard, and in this dream Robichard sat at a desk and wrote an essay in some leatherbound journal, using a quill pen or something equally esoteric, and in my dream I looked down at Robichard and laughed cruelly, thinking of him pouring coffee and microwaving circles of egg at Dunkin' Donuts, and that even if what he was writing in his essay was important and well written, it wouldn't matter one bit.

I woke up in a daze in the middle of the night and heard my father standing at my bedroom door, looking in at me and breathing softly, like he used to when we were kids, and I knew his head must be filled with thoughts of something but what they were I had no more idea as a grown man than I did as a child.



# The Common Good

Stephanie Mark

The men driving the cart coughed as they slung the corpse onto it. Weak, ashen, and wheezing, they were likely to end up on it themselves before long. The patrons in my tavern stared after the cart until it passed on to the next shop in a whirlwind of bloodied sand.

“Second one before dusk,” said one patron. “Surprised they keep coming here.”

“If you can’t get any healing salves,” said the man beside him, “where else would you go but here? The plague gets me, you bet your ass I’m getting drunk.”

“This dragon’s plague hasn’t claimed me,” said the first as he rose, “but I’m drunk anyway. And I’m getting home to a bed I don’t have to share with anybody who might be infected.” He flicked a small copper coin toward me as he left. As he parted, another man slid across the threshold, bandaged, not someone I recognized.

“Probably a noble,” said the patron who remained. “Here to tell us they’re rationing more orichalcum from us commoners

to help with the war effort.”

“At least they aren’t rationing food yet,” I said.

The newcomer came close enough to respond to the last comment. Hobbling, he strode with one leg while dragging the other. That leg of his pants was tattered and uneven. I wondered if he had a club foot.

“Now that’s hardly the blithe conversation for a place like this.” Despite the white patch on his brow and the jagged scar reaching down his neck, he smiled as if he were meeting old friends to play cards.

“Definitely a noble.” The patron crossed to the other side of the bar.

“Just a common man looking for a common drink.”

The other patron either didn’t hear or didn’t believe this comment. He muttered to himself, “Probably going to start a damned drinking song.”

The newcomer did no such thing.

Matted, russet hair framed his face. Stubble encroached

his face but hadn’t bloomed there; this was a man who hadn’t shaved in weeks, but not months. His cheekbones were sharp, his brow wide, his nose pronounced. It was a noble look even if his ratty garments were anything but.

The cloak slung about his body, secured in front by an iron pin, had acquired a patina of dust. His doublet was the color of mud and peeling from the middle where its laces frayed. His trousers were the same; their original color, based on the portion closer to his waist, matched his cloak. As I assessed that part of his trousers, my eyes delighted at the other feature they noticed, whose size and shape excited my body. I quivered, but shook my head rapidly, as if the thoughts were soot I could release from my hair after a day trudging around the city.

“Well met, my lady...” He bowed his head, having no cap to tip.

“Cecelia,” I said.

“Then, my lady Cecelia--”

“Please just call me Cecelia,” I interrupted. “If

you'd be so kind, Mister..."

"I am called Octavian Marsh," he said. The last name likely meant an orphan, foundling, or some other kind of abandonment. My father told me they named children that way in wet, boggy Traumwick. He looked like most citizens of Traumwick, dark hair against pale skin and eyes so blue they looked more like the sky than what I'd see if I exited the tavern and raised my head. Moreover, I didn't know what other city-state would give a man such a strange name.

"How can I help you, Mister--" I began, about to form the sound of his last name, before realizing it might mock him, offend him even. "Mister Octavian?"

"I'd like a mug of ale. Cecelia," he added, "with no title." I nodded to show my thanks. Before I turned to pour it, he then said: "If it's as fine as you, I'm sure it will not disappoint."

"And if you've got as much silver in your pockets as on your tongue," I said, "you'll be able to pay me the three coins for it."

He smirked as I turned away from him,

ostensibly to reach for a mug to serve him, but actually to smirk myself. Once calmed and equipped, I turned back with an even expression. The three glittering coins lay beside the mug I placed and the bag he'd removed from his back and slung on the counter.

"I told myself I wouldn't buy a drop of this after I left home," he said, "but I deserve it."

"A great victory?"

"For Mastiga the Plague-Bearer, yes," he said. Then he rolled up the sleeve of his pant leg to reveal the bone that had crept through the flesh and the splint he'd tied against it. "That old dragon nearly got me, and now I'm celebrating that he didn't."

"You fought the dragon?"

"Technically he fought me. I wasn't expecting the ambush. Nor were the seven men who were with me."

His tone and tense told me what happened to them.

"And you decided to visit a tavern afterwards?"

"I decided to visit the closest city-state with a

magister who might heal me. Besides, I had some ethereal root. This leg can't do much for me, but I can't feel the pain." The enchanted drug seemed potent enough to dull the pain of his other men dying, too. "I should be fine until a magister can examine it tomorrow."

"I don't know if there are any magisters here."

"I'm sure I wouldn't need an elite to work this spell," he said. "Probably an augur is enough to do it."

"You don't look like a soldier from any of the major city-states," I said. "And the magisterium isn't helping you, or else you'd have church garb strewn all over your body. So let me guess: the king of Traumwick heard a prophecy that only you could kill Mastiga, thereby ending the wars?"

Rolling his eyes, he waved his mug to the side as he spoke. "The prophecy was actually directed to me. And Traumwick is technically ruled by a duke, not a king."

"And that was enough to inspire all of you to charge at a dragon?"

"You sound skeptical."

"It took five expeditions to kill Kirius during the First

Servile Wars. We haven't had a single expedition get close to Mastiga, who's supposed to be even stronger than Kirius was."

"That's why I'm here," Octavian said. I tilted my head to the side. "Within a few days, the moon will be full. And so Mastiga will have to slumber on the Athalian Coast. And considering all the armies he's possessed are fighting further inland, that means he'll be defenseless."

He smirked as he sipped his drink. His was the smug rather than the gentle charm, the kind whose success is known to the user, the kind I loathed for how it warmed my body.

"That's why I need more than healing in the days before Mastiga has to roost. I need to see if I can find more men to help me. I need provisions, of course. And if there are augurs, I can also ask about enchantments for my sword, because the sharpened dragon tooth was—"

"I could spare a room for you at no charge."

He furrowed his magnificent brow. He doubted that I would offer this without pay. Perhaps I planned to rob him, or assassinate him, or otherwise extract value from him.

"Call it an investment. Once I can say that my tavern housed the man who killed Mastiga, every traveler within ten leagues will want to stay here."

This sounded better than me leaving multiple rooms open at a loss for three weeks because of how many people had recently died.

"By the gods," he said. He slammed the mug against the wood. The counter rattled from the force. How I envied those beaten, battered panels of wood.

I helped him grab the railing for the stairs, steady his body, and ascend. Then I pointed to the room at the end of the hall that he could take. When I apologized for leaving him because I needed to tend to my ailing father, he waved off my concern. Then he turned to me.

"You are truly a woman beautiful in both body and spirit."

"Thank you, kind sir."

Although it was likely a lie, I had to believe it wasn't. This want, at least, I might acquire.

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When I brought him his mead, my father lay on his bed with a scroll. The pockmarks on his skin had faded; color had returned to his skin. Yet he coughed and wheezed when I crossed the threshold, longer and harsher than he had the past few weeks, as if strangled by his own body. I tried to approach during a lull, hoping to bring the goblet close enough for him to drink, thereby ending the fit. Every time I moved, however, the lull ended. And so I stood and waited for the salvo to conclude.

When I brought the drink to his lips, his breathing quieting, his writhing subsided. He placed the scroll on the table to his side. He thanked me for this, said he'd be his regular self after a nap, and offered assistance for tomorrow that I refused. Then his eyes closed, calmed.

This resulted from the quarter of a potion of oblivion I poured into his mead and that neither of us mentioned. He'd turned away two weeks before when he saw me decanting it into his drink. It was stronger than the potion of stupefaction that patrons requested in their ale for an extra coin if they wanted a

stronger, quicker euphoria. Potions of oblivion, though, dulled nearly everything, including pain, curses, and regret.

I brewed this as if we had the orichalcum needed to act as catalyst. I brewed this as if it were a curative spell, a thaumaturgic challenge that we could solve. I brewed this as if it weren't palliative, as if it were anything other than overwhelming numbness.

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When Octavian came down the stairs, some of the older patrons had already arrived. Unlike Octavian, these men had bodies that could do little but consume and often in large quantities. I wondered if they did so to spend hours away from their descendants, who would not have to see their sorry state.

Were it not for his youth, Octavian would resemble these men. He had the same filth-smearred cloak, the same sullied trousers, the same disintegrating boots. His doublet, however, had intact laces and a color like the sediment in old wine. Evidently his bag held more than weapons.

Nonetheless, it did hold weapons, which one of the patrons noticed at Octavian's side. He ogled Octavian's literal

sword the way I'd ogled his metaphorical one. The patron's hands fidgeted, his eyes twitched, his legs squirmed. I leaned forward to confirm he remained on the stool; I couldn't bear the spectacle of another injured septuagenarian.

"There's a fine blade," he said.

"Well then," Octavian said, "there's a keen eye you rarely see these days. Hail and well met, sir."

The man accepted his hand as they gave each other their names, hometowns, lineages. "Is that one from Clovis the Giant? I thought he'd stopped forging them."

"He has. This was from Clotilde the Prisoner, his cousin. I went all the way east to Zedenhurst after the wars ended just to get it."

"I thought Clotilde only made magic staves," said a different patron.

"I thought she went blind," volunteered another.

"It was only temporary," I said. "It happened when the thrall besieged the city."

"I didn't know you were also an historian," said Octavian. His teeth gleamed like his blade when he smiled at me.

I turned away from him. I wanted him to leave this tavern, either into the city streets without me, or up to his room with me. I couldn't endure his public presence.

"I lived there when it happened. My brother was in the fighting. It's how my mom died."

"That undead army never got into the city," said Octavian. "The only casualties were the soldiers on the battlefield."

"My mom died of hunger. The noble families enforced the rations on everyone, regardless of family size or need, in order to feed the troops. Either my mom or I wouldn't be able to eat enough. She gave me the food she'd eat so that I might survive, since I was smaller and needed less."

"I thought all the city-states had food caches?"

"All the nobles had food caches."

---

"I heard you had a blade of prophecy," I said. As I entered his room, he had the sword against a whetstone resting on his leg. He sharpened the blade with long, slow, tender strokes. This was clearly something he valued in both form and function.

Of course, warm as it made me to watch those caresses, I stared instead at the muscularity of his exposed chest.

“I’d let you see it,” he said, “if I wasn’t working it right now.”

“You don’t have some other blade you’d let me touch?”

“Well, for the eager girl.” He reached into his bag, removed a small dagger with a gilded hilt, and threw it toward me.

I caught it, unsheathed it, regarded it. I could not admire this the way I could the beautiful blade on the whetstone.

Nonetheless, even without form, this had function. I sliced through the air, jabbed, pretended to parry and actually thrust. It satisfied me to hold it. I had missed the sensation of that firm, hard weapon in my hand. I missed it too much, evidently, from the way he smirked when I slid the blade into the lacquered red sheath.

“The only shiny objects I have that most ladies want to hold are coins.”

“I like those too,” I said. “But after my brother

died, my father said I needed to know how to defend our tavern. I also shot small arms, even heavy artillery. I can even swing that heavy blade of prophecy. Hauling barrels of ale keeps the muscles firm.”

“I can see that,” he said. He winked when I brought my arms close, let his fingers caress the skin. But he spoke as if it were an evaluation or appraisal. “I could use someone with that skill.”

“You’re very kind,” I said.

“So that’s a rejection?”

“Of course it is. I could never leave my ailing father. I can barely tend this place working sixteen hours a day.”

“But what of glory?”

“A toy for the nobility,” I said, “a trap for us commoners.” I paused. “Or at least some commoners.”

He began to recite lines from a ballad about the men who slew the dragon Kirius during the First Servile Wars. I shoved his sheath to his chest. Then I provided my brother’s name and asked the man if he knew him. He shook his head.

“A simple man, not highborn, not wealthy, who

wanted glory like every boy his age. He went on exploratory missions once he heard that Kirius had possessed so many men.”

“And he fell in combat while valiantly protecting Zedenhurst?”

“Yes,” I said, “and was then turned into part of the thrall. Turns out his comrades who survived didn’t want to write hymns for the man who went on to kill their friends.”

---

Every morning Octavian trotted down to the counter, regaled the old patrons with where he would go today, and then vowed to return. When he did, he brought something new, so that after three days he had polished boots, cleaned cloaks, food that wouldn’t spoil on the road.

The next day, he announced that he had all the gear he required and would leave in the morning.

Even though I had watched the sky and saw how the moon had waxed, his words chilled my body. I slashed against my skin with the hand beneath the counter. I berated myself. I knew this town, this suffering, this disease. I shouldn’t expect suitors, let alone husbands.

Some of the augurs can do it.”

“What is it you need to acquire today?” asked one of the ancient patrons. Octavian beamed as he turned to them, delighted to discuss his own quest, purpose, destiny.

“The magisters in this city-state can make a serum of verity,” he said. “Despite my common status, they’ve said they can give it to me if I show my worth in the trials of the frost.”

“I know they won’t give you orichalcum if you beg,” I said. “But could you ask about a serum of longevity? I don’t know if it will help my father, but I will try anything to prevent the blight from taking him.”

When Octavian furrowed his brow, it did not excite or even intrigue me.

“I’d have to undergo the trials of the wind, at minimum,” he said. “Besides, I saw a series of staves when I entered your establishment. Surely your father must be able to work a spell to cure whatever Mastiga used to infect him?”

“Without orichalcum?”

“You don’t even have to be a magister for that.

“Do I look like I know enough magic to even walk through the church doors?” I said. “Let alone have enough talent to rank among the augurs?”

“It would take me at least another day. I can’t spare that.”

“Can you spare getting the serum of verity? Could you instead take the trials of the wind and get the serum I’ve requested?”

“The serum of verity displays truth and purpose, honor and vision, the meaning of my calling, and perhaps even my prophecy. I need to know that in order to conquer Mastiga.”

I tilted my head at his description. It was intangible, philosophical, and altogether the opposite of what men wanted in their arsenal. It was also vexing, as I showed when I sighed loudly enough that he responded.

“Pray be calm, my lady. You can’t believe that your family’s individual suffering is more important than the empire. Healing your father is now more important than defeating Mastiga? Than ending these wars?”

“That’s not true.”

“So then you’re not angry?”

“That’s not true either.”

---

After he left, I staggered into the cellar. The voices above me itched and burrowed into my skin. They were the locusts that wanted my crops and then, after devouring those crops, wanted me. I needed to heal my beleaguered mind.

I reached for a narrow oak staff kept in the corner. I recited the few ancient words of the basic, and only, dueling spell that I learned when I’d tried to become a simple cleric at the bottom of the magisterium. Like most spells taught to children to hurl at each other, it dealt momentary harm, leaving no marks or burns. Less flashy than fake fires or conjured animals, it created a series of small knives to hack at the target’s skin. In this case, the target was the caster.

It stung and burned and stole all of my attention, which made it ideal for both distracted opponents and overtaxed barmaids. It didn’t hobble, it didn’t incapacitate, and it didn’t

even scar.

I let the daggers scrape across my back, peeling away the anxiety and rage and babbling that surrounded me. The agony grew, swelled, shoved everything out of my sensorium. Eventually it spread to my hand. Unable to hold the staff, I dropped it and thereby the spell, turning the painful waves against the wall where they might crash, break. As they faded, I knew my thoughts and feelings and perceptions would return, but they would take hours at least.

I threw a cape over my dress so that none could see the momentary wounds--that would be worse for business than leaving the bar untended--and slowly stomped up the stairs.

---

A screaming came across the hall. Fearing it was the blight's clutches tightening around my father, I dashed to his room only to find it pristine, dark, silent. In contrast, when I went to Octavian's, I heard the clamor of a man roused from slumber.

When I entered, he was splayed supine over the bed, his pupils stretched wide.

He panted as he lay beneath the thick covers. Dirt

and grease matted his hair to his head. He looked confused more than groggy, less like he'd slept poorly and more like he just realized he'd fallen asleep.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I tried it before I went to sleep."

One hand rubbed his eye while the other pointed to the crystalline cylinder of dusky liquid.

"The serum?"

He nodded. "They said it had to follow a moment of bliss."

I pulled the covers from his body so he could sit up and stood in front of him.

"Mead wasn't enough to do that?"

"It wasn't just mead," he said. "I thought of Traumwick. I thought of returning to the man and woman who adopted me, speaking of my conquest, the everyday man-made hero. But I suppose I was too frightened that I might fail. I had a nightmare, of course. Everyone in Traumwick mocked me. They said I came from nothing, had no talents, had no reason for any woman to prophesize about me. So I was alone."

"You aren't alone," I said. His body warmed me even before I touched him. I brought myself toward his legs. He steadied me, pulled me closer to him.

"No," he said. "But I wonder if the rest of that is true."

"It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter if I'm not able to slay Mastiga?"

"It doesn't matter where you came from," I said.

"I don't hear of orphans slaying dragons."

"I don't hear of prophecies being lies."

I slid my fingers from his hand to his chest. His muscles were hard enough I feared I might cut myself. He was hot and smooth; his taut flesh glistened beneath a faint film of sweat. The hand he braced against the bed he now brought atop my leg. It was like I'd walked into a forge the way the heat swelled in all directions, oppressed every part of my body. I needed him.

"Kiss me," I said. As he did, his tongue flooded my mouth, claiming that space like he claimed my body, his hands pulling me against his overwhelming form. I was something he brought to himself and pulled apart, unwrapping every layer of

clothing like I were a gift presented to him. I was something he wanted, perhaps even expected.

He panted as he pushed his fingers into me. It was rhythmic and continued, slowing the more that I pressed my chest against his. And then he brought more of himself into me. He thrust with force and with regularity. I looked away from his closed eyes, his open mouth, his satisfied expression. The flames stoked within me erupted. My body melted against his, opening itself not only to him but to the world. Distinctions between bodies, between the bed, beneath us, between the air itself all dissipated. I collapsed into it all. There was nothing anchoring me, no threat of starvation, no fear of my father's death, no creeping sickness, famine, death.

If only I could have stayed there.

---

I couldn't have stayed there: a state of pleasure, a place he remained, a mental state in which I remembered him.

I was becoming an image rather than a girl, a character rather than an individual. I would be a bawdy story told to different septuagenarian men in different taverns when a

different dragon spawned its own demonic army. Bards would write ballads about his bravery, conquest, sacrifices. Bards would not write ballads about me so much as a single physical part of me.

I needed to mute my mind.

I hadn't cleaned everything in the tavern and locked the doors by the time he crept down the stairs. Save for the laces on his boots, he'd dressed himself, shoved everything into an overflowing bag, even splashed some water over his face. He embraced me as he approached.

"Are you leaving?"

"I can't stay in that bed."

"Did you have another nightmare?"

"The serum worked," he said. He released me, took to a chair, and began to tie his boots. "It was why the prophecy picked me. I saw my true parents, the ones I never knew. They were Baron and Baroness in Zedenhurst." I put down the mug and walked to the counter. My hands, body, mind needed support more than they needed distractions.

"Do you know what this means? They were the

ones who protected the city during the war. They were powerful rulers. I come from them, rather than nothing. Of course, they couldn't let me know this, in case any of Kirius's worshippers tried to kill me."

I didn't understand why they'd kept it secret, why they didn't tell him so he could train himself to fight any vengeful undead, rather than living unaware and vulnerable. I had to ask him about it before I succumbed to this mania, suffered the same nightmare I'd heard him endure.

"And you know all this from a dream?"

"It was a dream," he said, "but it was also a vision. I knew it was a vision when I saw it. I felt it."

"All dreams feel real when you're having them."

"But this was a dream specifically after I took the serum. And they wouldn't have used all their orichalcum for this if it weren't worthwhile."

"They used orichalcum for it?"

"Defeating Mastiga the Plague-Bearer requires sacrifice."

"How does this help you defeat him?"

He rolled his eyes like I'd asked him how his sword

would help him against the dragon. “Because I can trust in my ability. I know that what I did wasn’t a lie. I know that my nightmare was the deceit, because of my blood, my lineage, my destiny. I know that I wasn’t some...”

“Some what?” He walked toward the counter with eyes and mouth open. When pleading words attempted to escape, I continued. “Some commoner?”

When he stretched his hand toward mine, I swatted it away. “Get out.”

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