

# BLOOD IN the water



A collection of short stories and poems

**This serves as our final requirement  
for our CW 10 class.**

CW 10 WFX

Group 3

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# Small World

**Annika Therese Ong**

Under the vastness of an endless sky,  
We cross the same road, you and I  
A million paths that split and wind,  
Yet somehow, we're never far behind.

In a world so full of wondrous sights,  
With endless stars and city lights,  
Yet you are here, by chance or choice—  
A quiet pull, a silent voice  
Strings tied by hands unknown

And though we part, I can't ignore,  
The quiet hope there's something more.  
Each meeting leaves a trace behind,  
A lingering thought I cannot find.  
I wait, not knowing when or where,  
But longing still to meet you there.

They say the world is too big,  
Yet it shrinks in your presence  
You become the compass that guides.  
Perhaps it's not the road that binds,  
But something deeper we're meant to find.



# In This Town

Ceanna Jeremae Hedriana

The humble subdivision of Redmond in the outskirts of Bacolod was disturbed by a screeching stop of a moving van, the gravel ground groaning against its well-used tires. Startled awake, I wiped my lips to avoid any traces of saliva before peering outside the window, noticing we had arrived at a familiar house.

"A'ight, we've finally arrived," the driver told me, shifting gears. "I'll get those boxes for 'ya."

"Thank you," I said, scrambling to collect my things. I opened the passenger door and hopped out, the ground crunching beneath my feet. I walked towards the house, awe apparent on my face.

The exterior walls were painted the typical eggshell white with a terracotta clay-tiled roof, but what made the house stand out from the rest of the homes on the block was its wide porch covered with an awning made from the same tiles as the roof.

I was lost in my thoughts before being brought back to reality when I felt something touch my shoe. A squeaky ball rolled away, and I heard a yip. A shih tzu was running towards me with its little owner running just behind it. The little girl who looked around ten was in a pink lolita dress and her little feet tapped against the ground as they ran in my direction.

Once in front of me, they stopped. The dog picks the ball up and gives it to the little girl who takes it with her dainty hands. Then, she looked up at me, her head bobbing to the side in silent inquiry.

"Hi there," I chirped, squatting to her height. "I'm Gail. your new neighbor. What's your name?"

She didn't answer and just kept looking at me. The silence felt so long that it started to feel awkward. I stood up straight and couldn't help but shift uncomfortably under her gaze. She had big doe eyes that seemed to look up at me in wonder. I noticed she was clutching her teddy really tightly. The plushie had mismatched button eyes, its mouth sewn shut with a bright pink thread. The girl giggled, her eyes turning into crescents. She looked at me in... glee?



"New blood."

I blinked, thinking I heard the girl wrong.

Before I could ask, I heard a voice hollering from behind me.

"Mae-mae! I told you not to run off too far!"

I whipped around and saw a panting lad, around the same age as me, donning a gray bathrobe and red plaid pajamas. The man practically lifted the little girl like a sack of potatoes, making her squeal. "You rascal, you even made Molly and this kind woman accessory to your crime!"

I was just watching the whole exchange, still perplexed. Perhaps it was the effect of being in a new town where I knew absolutely no one. After roughhousing the poor kid, the man sets Mae-mae down to play with the dog, before placing his attention on me. He offered a charming smile, revealing a dimple on his right cheek.

"I see you're new in town," he observed, nodding at the moving van.

"Yeah, trying to find my own path or whatever it is that people do," I laughed, immediately cringing internally at what I said. "I'm Gail, by the way."

"Marco," he replied. "This little kid here is my niece, Mae-mae. Hope she wasn't causing any trouble." Mae-mae came around and placed something on Marco's hand. It was a short piece of nylon string with three beads hanging from it, which she picked up from god-knows-where. Marco gave me a weird look and simply shrugged as if saying "Not my kid, not my problem."

"No, she seems like a sweet kid."

We were still exchanging pleasantries when the moving guy caught my attention, saying he was done with all the boxes. I thanked and paid him for his services. He gave me a small salute before starting up his van and driving away.

"Well, welcome, newbie. We're having roast for dinner later if you're feeling up to it." Marco grinned, "Redmond's a small subdivision, but the people are truly the best ones you'll find. In fact, I think you'll love it here."

After the exchange, I spent the rest of the day settling into my new home. Once I was done arranging the basic furniture in their place, I decided that I did enough work for the day. I had been on my way to heating a pack of macaroni and cheese into a pot when I heard the doorbell ring. I made my way to the main door. Opening it, a friendly face of an elderly woman greeted me.

"Hi! I hope my visit isn't troubling you," the woman smiled, her laugh lines appearing as she did so, "I'm Linda, your next-door neighbor. I saw the moving van earlier in the day and figured I should make a good impression." She lifted her hands that were holding a small tray of what looked like carbonara. My eyes immediately lit up at the sight of food and flashed her a smile, opening my door wider to beckon her in.

Linda and I immediately launched into a conversation. Perhaps it was the motherly vibes she had or maybe it was the carbonara, but I found myself being at ease with her, which really says something about my affinity to this town.

She looked like your typical Filipino grandmother that would scold you and tell you, "*Selpon ka na lang nang selpon! Wala ka nang ambag sa bahay na 'to,*" before offering you cut-up fruits later in the afternoon like she didn't just crush your whole being prior to that. Her stature was small and looked harmless enough, but the way she briskly walked and moved around with little to no joints aching told me that she still had a bit of years left in her.

"So you worked as a newscaster in your old town?" Linda's interest was piqued. We had been talking about the nature of my move here, especially since I was without any family.

"I was always on prime time," I mentioned with pride. "Journalism was never my passion, I was more of a painter." I traced the rim of my glass with my fingers. "Mom was the one who told me to take up journalism, and I complied because I didn't want to disappoint her. After she passed, that career path just kinda died with her."

"And you're here because..."

Shrugging, I said, "Trying to find a new place to belong, I guess. I never had any other family besides Mom. Now that she's gone, all that's left is me."

Linda sent me a look, one of pity or understanding, I was unsure. She reached out and held my hand that was on the table and squeezed affectionately. "I had a kid with me; my granddaughter. She'd be around your age if she was still alive."

She used her free hand to reach the locket around her neck. She opened it, revealing a picture of a young woman. Dark hair, dark eyes, tan skin. Your typical, basic Filipino face, yet beautiful nonetheless.

"I'm so sorry to hear that." I squeezed her hand back tightly. "I bet we would've made great friends."

"It's alright. I understand." After a beat, she added. "You come to me anytime you like, young lady. Perhaps this is that child's way of saying I don't have to be alone, you know?"

Not long after, Linda bid goodbye and I thanked her for the food. She gave me the warmest hug you could ever give to someone you just met that day. Knowing that Linda was my next-door neighbor, I felt good and felt more at ease transitioning into my new home at Redmond.

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Marco contacted me a few days after, inviting me for a casual dinner at his place. He mentioned that he'll be having a couple friends over and that it was a good opportunity for me to meet other people. I agreed, despite being a bit bummed out that there would be other people. I couldn't deny the initial attraction I felt for Marco and had wanted to explore that a bit more, but I guess that would have to wait until after the dinner.

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I arrived at Marco's home, but I surely had been underestimating it. He probably had the largest house on the block, and that's saying something, given that most of the houses here have two storeys. And, my god, the guy said a couple friends. I expected three or four, not freaking twenty-something.

"Gail, you made it!" exclaimed Marco, giving me a hug. Due to my surprise, I could only reciprocate by awkwardly patting his back. He pulled back and sent me a grin, "How's Redmond so far?"

"Good. A lot good." I answered, my eyes preoccupied with trying to inconspicuously check him out. He was wearing a pair of dark-washed jeans and a white polo that fit him so well. His dark hair was slicked back and looks like it's been dying for someone to mess it up. I imagined what it would feel like running my fingers through them, making them look unruly.

"Thanks for the invite. I kind of feel underdressed now," I spoke, awfully aware of my purple-sweater-black-shorts fit and my go-to Crocs.



"You make sweaters look like something you'd wear to a ball," he tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear. "You're that pretty."

I playfully rolled my eyes but I was already swooning inside. Marco could say the cringiest line ever and I'd still be stupidly kicking my feet in the air.

Marco ushered me in and started introducing me to the people in his house, two of which were Alice and Jace who I took a particular liking to. Alice was there in sweats, thereby immediately being awesome in my book, while Jace cooked the menudo I raved about and said that he'd be happy to make me more next time. After what seemed like a perpetual smile on my face and an eternal conversation of pleasantries, I finally had some alone time after telling Marco that I have to go to the toilet.

I had been wondering where Mae-mae was when I lost my way. While walking around, I heard a weird sound, like a bunch of metal clanking against each other. I furrowed my brows, trying to decipher where I heard it from, but I didn't hear it again.

There were more hallways than I was used to in a house "Was it here?" I mumbled, opening the door nearest to me. It revealed a clean, dark room. Before I could fully open it, though, it had been forced shut and a vice grip was on the wrist of my hand that had been holding the door knob just now.

"What do you think you're doing?" Marco asked, his voice dangerously low. His tone was threatening, and his eyes were staring daggers at mine.

Perplexed at the sudden change in demeanor and slightly panicked, I just looked at him, mouth slightly agape. He tugged at my wrist he was holding, making it so that our faces were inches away from each other, making my breath hitch. I could clearly see the freckles on his face and feel his breath against my lips.

"I asked you a question."

I could hear my heartbeat hammering against my chest, but I wasn't sure if it was due to panic.

"Toilet?" I squeaked in a small voice. He didn't budge and continued to stare at me, his eyes flickering at my lips for a split second. After, he sighed and let go of my wrist, making me hold and rub the area that was now starting to ache.

"You shouldn't be roaming around like this. Didn't I tell you that the toilet was on the right of the hall?"

"I forgot, sorry." I sheepishly scratched my head. "I wasn't trying to snoop, I swear!"

"I know." He sent me a look of regret, "Sorry, kinda went too far there. Are you hurt?"

I immediately shook my head, "No, no. Nothing I can't handle."

He raised a brow at my response. Smirking a bit, he commented, "Is that so? How much can you handle, then, Gail?"

"Uh..."

He chuckled at my once-again speechless state. "Cute. Wanna go back downstairs with everyone else?"

"Sure," I said, despite the fact that I still wasn't able to go to the toilet.

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I was currently out with Alice and Jace, who I invited to eat out with after hitting it off with them at Marco's dinner. Fortunately, they were actually close friends so we agreed to all just meet together. We got brunch at the diner just outside of the subdivision that served the best chicken and waffles, per the judgment of Jace. I'd have to say, I second the motion.

"Damn, newscaster, huh?" whistled Alice. "So you're, like, covering true crime and stuff?" She fiddled with her plate of hashbrown and eggs benedict, moving them around but not actually getting a piece to eat.

"Well, that's not the only thing newscasters cover, you know."

"Duh," she rolled her eyes. "But are you? Because if you are, I've got a scoop for 'ya." I raised a brow at this in question.

"Alice!" reprimanded Jace, further piquing my interest. "Stop scaring the newbie. Do you want her to leave in her second week here?"

"What are you talking about?" I leaned forward a bit, the conversation now having my full attention. Given that it was the weekend, it's no question why the place was packed and filled with noise of people talking and utensils clanking against plates of food. If they were really going to give me a scoop, I would want to hear every single word of it.

"Well, you know how you shared to us that you feel as if Redmond is the most peaceful subdivision you've been in and can actually be a place where you can raise a family?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's just say that you're probably wrong about that."

"Girl, just spill it."

"Ugh, fine. Alright," Alice entwined her fingers with each other, resting her chin above them. "Redmond isn't the utopian village you think it is. On the contrary, you might be in the most danger just by staying here."

Cue Jace smacking the back of Alice's head, "You're still speaking in codes, weirdo." He turned to face me, "What Alice is trying to say is that you should be careful particularly at night, especially that you live alone. You don't know what sickos live around here. Sure, being in a subdivision is a lot safer, but there are a lot more things to worry about in life than a bunch of robbers."

"What, is there a serial killer I should be wary of or something?" I joked, but when they didn't respond, I sobered up, "Holy shit, are you serious?"

"We don't know if it's a serial killer, per se," Alice and Jace shared a look. "There have just been news about missing persons in Redmond since a couple years ago. The number has been growing since. It's actually why there are a lot of vacant houses around here."

"Ramona Angeles, Kate Yao, and Mel Fidel had all been residents of our block. It's crazy, really."

This hadn't been listed when I bought the house. Despite being visibly bothered, I couldn't help but satiate a bit of my curiosity.

"Did they ever know if it was the same person abducting these people?"

"That's what the authorities deduced," shrugged Alice, "Like, all missing people were female and had *morena* features. They concluded it was some sort of twisted fetish by the dude."

*Not necessarily a dude*, I thought. I noticed Jace looking unsure, eyes darting from Alice and me. "You seem like you want to say something."

Jace sighed, "Alright, I'm not sure if I should say this, especially since you look like you've been cozying up with him lately... but there are rumors going around that Marco may have something to do with the victim's disappearances."

"What now?"

"The women we mentioned earlier, all of those were somehow connected to Marco."

Alice listed them off her fingers, "Ramona was his former business partner, he was Kate's client in the barber's, and Mel was his ex. So..." they let the sentence hang.

Marco didn't really strike me as someone who'd commit a serious crime. Then again, so does a huge percentage of all criminals. My mind went to that one moment upstairs when I mistakenly thought of the bedroom as the toilet and his whole personality did a 180. I only credited that reaction as his boundary for privacy, but perhaps there had been something more to it than I initially realized?

"Nothing was ever confirmed," Alice immediately said, all the while elbowing Jace. "As far as we're concerned, Marco is a potential bachelor for you to get frisky with. Go get laid, girl."

"They say after they literally tell me that the guy might be a serial killer," I deadpanned. The comment didn't go unnoticed, though. Was my interest that obvious that these people who I've only met a few days ago immediately pointed it out?

"You gotta live life dangerously," Jace shrugged.

The rest of the hang was uneventful, with us just talking about the latest gossip around the block and whatnot. While on the walk home, my mind drifted back to our conversation. I had never been one to believe rumors without proof, but it'd be stupid of me to brush these allegations off, even if they were only rumors. I whipped out my phone and typed in the following words into the engine: *Redmond missing person case*.

The first link was immediately of the women who were reported missing for the past three years. It was a blog post, though, instead of actual news. I was scrolling through the site when something caught my attention. Furrowing my brows, I read the words, my eyes widening as I registered what was written.

*Bereaved parent Linda Fidel screams for justice for her granddaughter Mel Fidel after her remains were found on Ongco River near Redmond. Linda tells authorities that Mel hadn't been home for four days since...*

I wasn't able to finish reading the blog. I found myself walking up to Linda's porch and knocking on her door. She opened it and her face immediately contorted into a smile when she saw me. "Well, hello there. What brings you here?"

I silently reached out and gave her a hug. She was obviously shocked, seeing as she stood there for ten seconds not doing anything before patting my back, asking "Is everything okay, child?"

"Yeah," I said, "Just wanted a hug, you know?"

The woman chuckled and properly hugged me this time, her palms rubbing comforting circles on my back, like a grandmother would do to her granddaughter. The thought crushed me. I couldn't imagine handling the news that your granddaughter had been missing for days before inevitably seeing her body thrown out a river.

Come to think of it, Alice and Jace said that Mel was Marco's ex. I wonder if Linda was aware of the rumors against Marco.

"Are you sure you're okay? Where's the bastard that made you feel like this," I can tell she was only saying this to lighten the mood based on her lighthearted tone. "Just tell me who and I can get my rifle out and make it look like an accident."

I pulled away, chuckling a bit. "Do you actually have a rifle?"

"Oh, I do," she proudly said. "My husband was a skilled hunter and taught me all he knew. At the old house we owned at the end of the block, we still had those makeshift targets when he taught me how to shoot. I'm also adept at traps and making people disappear without a trace, if that's what you're going for."

"Easy with the self-promotion, Linda. If it had been anyone else I'd think you're a serial killer or something."

She grinned, "Good thing it's only you, then."

Later that night, I prepared for another dinner at Marco's house after accepting his invitation.

Of course, I had another plan I'm planning to put in motion for this visit. Like I said, I didn't believe in rumors, but I do have to say they aren't unfounded. My plan was to see how Marco reacts when confronted with this hearsay.

This time, I made sure to dress a bit nicer, donning a plain black dress to still express 'casual' but a little more put together. Marco opened the door to his house and I am once again blessed by his good looks. This time, he was wearing a black top with long sleeves rolled up to his elbow, making his arms more prominent.

I shook my head, internally calling myself back into attention to the plan.

As I entered his house, I outstretched my hand that was holding sans rival, which he mentioned was his favorite sweet treat after meals.

He was practically bouncing on his feet as he was getting it from me and placing it in the fridge to cool it while we ate dinner.

The dinner was nice. This time, it was only me and Marco, with Mae-mae peacefully playing in her room. Marco said she really valued her alone time.

"This is really good. I can't believe you're such a good cook."

"My sister taught me before she passed. Practically became my acting parent, you know?" We had talked about his sister and my mother in text a couple nights before.

I nodded with understanding. "I bet she's really beautiful. Mae-mae's getting the genes."

He stared at me with a soft smile on his face, "You're way more beautiful."

I playfully rolled my eyes. "One more word out of you and I might think you're flirting with me."

"And?" he challenged. "Would that really be a bad thing?"

I didn't answer and simply stared at him, gauging his reaction. He met my stare and raised a brow, one end of his lips turning up ever so slightly. That move made him look so good I had to look away. He laughed at my reaction.

"I like you, Gail," he finally said. "I've thought of this ever since I saw you in front of your driveway a week ago, but I really want to know more about you."

"Am I really that interesting to you?" I noticed we were slowly getting nearer and nearer each other.

One moment we had been a polite distance away and the next, my elbows were already touching his. We were still intently staring at each other, but I caught him glancing down to my lips a couple times since the start of dinner.



"Very interesting," he said, almost a whisper. "You always look so put together and seem like you have everything under control." He took a strand of my hair and twirls it around his finger. After a while, his light touch became increasingly tight, before he gripped the strand of my hair as tight as he could and pulled me to him, our lips only centimeters apart.

"I can't help but think what it would take to break you."

The comment made me heat up. I tried not to let him notice it and gave him a smirk of my own, "Good luck finding out, then." I immediately pulled away as if nothing had happened, tilting my head. "Dessert?"

He shook his head, rolling his eyes. Nonetheless, he gets up to get the dessert I bought from the fridge. As he was serving the cake for the both of us, I heard that prominent sound of metal clanking against metal once again. I turned to Marco to see if he noticed but he was only preoccupied with trying to cut a perfect triangle from the cake for us to eat.

"Do you hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?"

Cue the sound once again. "That!" I exclaimed, holding up my pointer finger to nothing in particular. "That weird sound. Is it coming from below?"

He just chuckled, "If there was a sound coming from below, I'd know. But no, I don't hear anything." He gave me my share of the sans rival cake. He took a seat and immediately went for his serving. He groaned, closing his eyes as he savored the dessert.

"I'm not making things up. Are you trying to hide a person in your basement or something?" I joked. I took a bite of the sans rival as well.

He looked at me with a raised brow. After a while he replied, "Trust me, Gail. If I was going to hide a person in the basement, I'd make sure they wouldn't be able to make a sound."

I didn't know what to say to that. Why would he say it like that?

"It's probably just a plumbing thing," he said, waving his hand off, "I'll call the plumber tomorrow to see what the problem is. Thanks for the heads up."

"Sure," I replied, but I was still unsure what to make of this whole conversation. I wasn't even able to corner him about the rumors like I'd planned because he suddenly had an important call that he had to attend to.

He told me where I could find Mae-mae and teasingly told me to get the directions right this time.

As I walked through the hallway, my mind was flooded with thoughts regarding the missing person cases.

I knocked at Mae-mae's door. After hearing a faint, "Come in," I turned the knob and opened the door, seeing her cross-legged on the floor and playing with her dolls and stuffed animals. When she saw me, she scrambled to get up and walked towards me. She took my hand and pulled me to where she had been sitting, silently telling me to be a part of her play.

"How was dinner?" the kid asked.

"Your uncle's a really good cook," I complimented. "Didn't you want to eat dinner with us?"

"Already ate. Plus, Coco told me he wanted some alone time with you." The kid was still preoccupied with playing with her dolls but never failed to hold our conversation. Her dolls all had something unordinary; multi-colored eyes, stitched up mouths, mismatched bunny ears. Mae-mae definitely made an impression the first time I met her, but I guess she's just a quirky kid.

"I see."

After a few beats, Mae-mae looked at me. "Will you be Coco's new girlfriend?"

"Uh," I started, not knowing what to say. "No? I don't know. Ask your uncle."

She turned back to her toys, "You don't have a mean gram'ma do you?"

"No... why?"

"Coco's last girlfriend left and her gram'ma was soo mad. She went to the house and shouted at us, saying she'll hurt us bad."

Putting two and two together, I figured it was Linda threatening Marco after what happened with her granddaughter. So she must've known about the rumors. Perhaps believed them, even?

There was more to this case than I originally thought. Linda didn't seem to be someone who weakens when one of her own gets hurt. On the contrary, I think she'd be one to fight back.

"It was scary. She even had a gun with her."

I froze. I did remember saying that Linda was familiar with firearms and she said an I quote, "making people disappear without a trace."

Had I been looking at this all wrong? Has it actually been Linda, trying to frame Marco all along?



# Forgotten Waves

Nicole Cruz



Madison drifted through the towering coral spires of her underwater kingdom, her wavy blue hair flowing like silk in the gentle currents. Her tail shimmered in shades of white and pale blue, the scales catching the faint light of radiant creatures that dotted the seascape. Around her, the ocean pulsed with life—schools of glittering fish wove through the coral, and the soft hum of the tides created a melody that should have felt like home.

But home was an anchor, and her crown was a chain.

At twenty, Madison had dreamed of freedom—not of thrones or kingdoms, but of unbridled independence. She longed to explore the uncharted trenches of the ocean, the places whispered about in stories passed from one generation to the next. There were myths of sunken cities where spirits lingered, trenches so deep they touched the edge of the unknown, and magical relics hidden in forgotten grottos. Madison wanted to chase these legends, to let curiosity guide her as freely as the currents. More than that, she dreamed of the surface. She wanted to see the world beyond the sea—its bustling towns, its forests, its people.

But dreams were fragile things, and like seafoam, they dissolved under the weight of responsibility.

But dreams were fragile things, and like seafoam, they dissolved under the weight of responsibility.

Madison's parents, the king and queen of their vast underwater realm, had taught her to honor the sea's mysteries and carry the weight of their lineage. Their passing left her as the sole heir, the throne a burden she hadn't asked to bear. Her kingdom's duty was sacred: to guide the souls of those who perished near the sea. It was her task to ease their journey, to grant them the peace they sought. The sea was not only a place of life but also a passage for the dead. Those who perished in or near its embrace—sailors, wanderers, those who fell victim to its depths—found their way to her kingdom. Madison's task was to guide these souls to the Beyond, a paradise dedicated for the souls of the departed, to ease their journey and grant them the peace they sought. Day after day, she led an endless wave of souls through the luminous currents. Some came willingly, their forms steady as they crossed into the Beyond.

Every now and then, a story stayed with her. A sailor clutching a locket with a lover's picture. A child whose eyes brimmed with wonder, even in death. And, in the rare moments when the currents grew calm and her duties paused, her own memories began to surface, unbidden and vivid. She had buried her longing for independence beneath the duties of her crown, but in the quiet moments, her thoughts drifted upward. She thought of the sunsets she had once watched from the shore, the fiery hues painting the sky and the waves alike. She thought of laughter and the sound of footsteps on sand.

Liam.

His name was a whisper she barely allowed herself to speak. Yet it lingered in her mind like the ghost of a melody she could never forget. For two years, Liam had been her connection to the surface world, her escape from the boundaries of her underwater life. Every afternoon, at the same time, she would surface near the rocky shore where he waited. They watched the sunsets together, their conversations weaving a bond as deep as the ocean itself. Liam would sit on the rocks, the golden light reflecting off his hair, and share stories of his life on land. He told her of bustling streets, the beeping cars, the busy shoes of the city, and the thrill of adventure. Madison, in turn, shared tales of the sea—the glow of underwater caves, the playful songs of dolphins, and the ancient wrecks that lay undisturbed on the ocean floor. For two whole years, the sunsets became their ritual yet tied to the promise of the next day.

## ***Flashback: Memories of Sunset***

*"If you could keep just one memory of all the sunsets we've seen together, which one would it be?"*

*Madison blinked, startled by the question Liam had thrown at her. She glanced at the sky, then back at him. "It's impossible. Every sunset is different. How could I choose?"*

*"Come on," Liam urged. "There's got to be one that stands out. One that's... special."*

*Madison bit her lip, her fingers brushing the water. "Maybe this one," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper.*

*"This one?" he echoed, his grin softening into something more tender. She nodded, her gaze meeting his. "Because you're here. And because it's happening right now."*

However, almost two years passed since that conversation, and one day, Liam stopped coming. Madison waited on the shore for weeks, her heart heavy with questions. She searched the horizon, hoping to see his familiar figure walking along the sand, but the shore remained empty. Since his disappearance, Madison often found herself wondering what had become of him, why he had stopped meeting her at the shore, why he had vanished without a word. She told herself to let it go, to let the past sink into the depths of her memory. But the thought of him clung to her like barnacles to the underside of a ship, small and stubborn.

On days like this, Madison felt the pull of her past more keenly than ever. She thought of his face, the way his dark hair framed his eyes. She thought of his stories, his laughter, the way he had looked at her as though she were something extraordinary.

But Liam was gone, and Madison's world had returned to the endless rhythm of her duties.

The sea demanded much of its queen, and Madison gave it everything she had. Still, beneath the shimmering waters of her vast kingdom, her heart beat with a quiet ache. It was the ache of dreams left untouched, of questions unanswered, and of a love that had drifted away, as if carried on a tide she could never hope to follow.

"Your Majesty," a familiar voice broke the stillness.

Madison looked up to see Gwen, her trusted steward, swimming toward her. The older mermaid had been with the royal family for over seven years, long enough to have seen Madison grow from a rebellious teenager into the reluctant queen she had become. Gwen's violet tail flicked gracefully as she moved, her expression a careful blend of urgency and reverence.

"Gwen," Madison said, her tone steady, though her curiosity was piqued by her urgency. "What is it?"

"A new soul has arrived," she announced, her voice tight with importance. "I thought it best to bring it to your attention personally."

Madison's brows knit together. New souls arrived daily, some hesitant and frightened, others eager for the peace the Beyond promised, yet Gwen rarely brought them directly to her.

"Why?" she asked, leaning forward slightly, her shimmering hair cascading like liquid silver over her shoulder.

"This soul is different," Gwen replied, her tone dropping as though he feared the ocean itself might overhear. "He remembers nothing but his name. It's as if he were... washed clean."

Madison sat up straighter, her wavy blue hair cascading over her shoulders. Amnesiac souls were rare, their existence is like that of a drifting ship without an anchor. These souls had no recollection of who they were, no sense of identity or connection to the life they had left behind. Without memories to ground them, their essence often felt untethered. Guiding such souls required more than the usual solemnity and compassion Madison offered to those who passed through her kingdom. It was like piecing together a shattered mosaic without knowing what the final image should look like. One wrong step, one moment of emotional overload, could leave an amnesiac soul stuck, unable to pass to the Beyond, their essence fractured and incomplete. Madison knew this well.

"Bring the soul to me," Madison said after a pause, her voice calm but commanding. Moments later, Gwen returned, her movements hurried and her fins fluttering nervously. The faint, pale light of the new soul followed her like a shadow. Madison straightened on her coral throne, her heart already beginning to race without understanding why.

The waters seemed to chill, an almost imperceptible shift in the current, as the soul stepped into view.

Madison froze.

It floated before her like a memory made real, its form shimmering faintly against the dark, iridescent backdrop of the throne room. Its features were indistinct at first, like a dream slipping away upon waking. But as she looked closer, recognition crashed into her like a breaking wave. The slope of his jaw, the tousled dark hair that framed his face, the soft curve of his lips—all of it so painfully familiar. Even in this ghostly form, he was unmistakable.

Her voice broke before she could stop it. "Liam."

The name escaped her lips in a whisper, trembling under the weight of grief and disbelief.

### ***Flashback: Memories of a Bracelet***

*The evening tide lapped gently at the shore, the sun casting its last golden rays across the rippling waves. Madison sat perched on a large, smooth rock near the water's edge, her tail curled beneath her. She loved this time of day, the way the ocean seemed to glow as if it held the sun's light within itself.*

*Liam appeared over the dunes, his silhouette dark against the soft colors of the sky.*

*"I made you something," Liam stated, reaching into his pocket and pulling out something small and carefully wrapped in a piece of cloth.*

*Madison blinked, her curiosity piqued. "You made me something?"*

*"Yeah," he said, his tone sheepish. He unwrapped the cloth to reveal a bracelet made of tiny, colorful sea glass beads strung together with fine twine. Each bead was smooth and glimmered faintly in the fading light.*

*Madison's breath caught as he held it out to her. "It's beautiful," she whispered, her voice soft with awe.*

*"Really?" he asked, relief flashing across his face. He smiled, the tension melting from his features. "Well, good. Because I wanted you to have something... to remember me by."*

*The words made Madison pause. "Remember you by? You're not going anywhere, are you?"*

*Liam's grin faltered for just a moment, but he recovered quickly, shaking his head. "No, no. Just, you know, in case you get tired of seeing my face every day."*

*Madison wanted to tell him that nothing in this world could mean more to her than spending sunsets with him, but she did not want to add drama to a nice day. Instead, she extended her wrist, watching as he carefully tied the bracelet around it. His fingers brushed against her skin, sending a warmth through her that had nothing to do with the sun.*

*"It's beautiful." Madison said again, her voice barely above a whisper. She was beyond happy to know that Liam remembers her favorite color.*

*And then, suddenly, that little piece of memory is right in front of her.*

*The memory struck Madison like a tidal wave, crashing into her with all the force of the ocean. She could almost hear his laughter again, that easy, unrestrained sound that once lit up her world and made the vastness of the sea feel small. She could see the playful crinkle in his eyes as he teased her about human things she didn't understand, or the way he always looked at her when she spoke of her underwater world—as if she were telling him the greatest story he had ever heard. And now, here she was, standing in the throne room, staring at the pale, translucent figure before her. The boy she had once known—warm, vibrant, alive—had been reduced to this ghostly fragment.*

*Madison's hand drifted instinctively to her wrist, her fingers brushing against the bracelet he had given her so long ago. The beads, once vibrant red, were now slightly worn smooth from years of being submerged in saltwater. She had never taken it off.*

But now, here he was. Changed. Ghostly.

"Liam," she whispered again, the name trembling on her lips like a fragile thread about to snap. Her voice was heavy with grief, thick with the weight of everything unsaid.

The soul turned toward her, its movements slow and deliberate, as though it were fighting against an unseen current. His expression softened slightly, though his eyes remained clouded, distant.

"Do I... know you?" Liam asked, his voice faint and faraway, like the soft murmur of waves lapping against the shore.

The sound of his voice pierced through Madison's heart, a bittersweet ache that left her breathless. It was him, Liam, but stripped of everything that had made him whole. She wanted to tell him everything in that moment: about the bracelet, the sunsets they had shared, the promises he had made, and how she had clung to them like a lifeline. But she stopped herself. His spirit was fragile, standing on the edge of recognition and oblivion, and she couldn't risk pushing him into despair.

"I'm Madison," she said finally, her voice steady though her heart felt as though it might shatter.

"Madison," he repeated slowly, the name rolling off his tongue as though it carried some distant, unreachable significance. His brow furrowed slightly, and for a fleeting moment, she thought she saw a spark of something in his eyes—a flicker of recognition. But it was gone as quickly as it came.

Liam's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his translucent form flickering faintly in the glowing water. Finally, he nodded. "Thank you," he said softly.

Madison's hand brushed against the bracelet on her wrist once more, the touch grounding her in a reality she wished she could escape. She clung to it, as though it could tether her to him, to the memories that were slipping further away with every passing moment.

"Come with me," Madison said, her voice gentle but firm.

Liam followed her without question, his form gliding silently through the water like a shadow. They arrived at the Luminal Chamber, a cavern where the heaviness of the ocean seemed to lift, replaced by a calm stillness. Surrounding it was a circular mirror, its surface smooth and shining like liquid silver. This mirror was no ordinary reflection; it showed more than appearances—it revealed pieces of one's soul, glimpses of forgotten memories or feelings hidden deep inside.

As Liam settled, Madison remained standing, her fingers tracing the edges of her bracelet. She inhaled deeply, willing herself to be strong. "Sometimes," she began softly, "the sea holds pieces of our lives we've forgotten. Memories... they're like tides. They come and go, and sometimes they return when we least expect it."

Liam hesitated, his form flickering slightly. He looked from Madison to the mirror, a nervous expression on his face. "What if I don't like what I see?" he asked, his voice quiet, almost a whisper.

Madison gave him a kind smile. "Memories can be hard," she said, floating beside him. "But they're part of who we are. Even the painful ones can teach us something. And I'll be here with you the whole time."

Liam nodded slowly, then moved toward the center of the chamber. He sat cross-legged in front of the mirror, his hands resting on his knees, and stared into the shimmering surface. Gradually, the mirror began to ripple, as if touched by an invisible wave. Soft colors started to swirl across its surface. Shapes began to form, hazy at first but slowly becoming clearer.

"Do you remember anything?" Madison asked gently, her voice a soft current in the stillness. She couldn't help the desperation in her tone, the hope that each word would spark something deeper inside him, something that could restore him to the person he once was. The weight of their shared history hung heavily between them, and the silence that followed seemed to stretch for eternity.

Liam's brow furrowed as he closed his eyes, his face contorted in concentration. "I... feel like I'm remembering pieces," he said, his voice distant as if speaking from a faraway place. "I think... I was younger. I was at the sea a lot, wasn't I?"

Madison nodded, her heart beating faster. She could sense the glimmer of recognition—those fleeting moments where he was almost there. Almost remembering.



Liam's eyes snapped open, and he looked at her, a spark of confusion and longing in his gaze. "I remember being on the beach," he murmured, his voice soft but shaky. "There was something important. Something I had to do. I couldn't... I couldn't let it go."

Madison's breath caught. She had seen glimpses of his memories—his love for the sea, the sunsets they'd shared—but this was different. He was beginning to remember more than just their time together. He was recalling something else. Something that made his heart ache.

She reached out, her hand brushing his arm, grounding him in the present. "Liam, you're safe now," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "But you need to know what happened. You need to remember everything."

Liam looked at her, his eyes wide. "I want to remember," he said, his voice full of uncertainty. "But it's so hard. Everything's... blurry."

"Come with me," she said, her voice soft but insistent. "There's a place where memories come back more clearly."

Liam hesitated for a moment, uncertainty flashing across his face, but then he nodded, his movements slow but resolute. He trusted her, just as he had in life. He followed her without question, drawn by an invisible thread that seemed to pull him closer to the truth. She led him through the glowing halls of the palace, deeper into the heart of the sea. The water grew cooler and quieter, and the silence between them deepened as they moved farther from the kingdom.

Madison led Liam to a smooth stone in the center of the cove, its surface covered in moss and seaweed, slick and glistening under the pale light of bioluminescent creatures. The water was calm here, the current slow and gentle, as if the very ocean itself had decided to give them a moment of peace. "Sit here, and just let the memories come," she said softly, her voice tender and encouraging. "Focus on the sea. Let it take you back."

Liam looked at her for a long moment, uncertainty still written on his face, but there was something in her eyes, something he remembered, that seemed to settle his nerves. Slowly, he sat beside her, closing his eyes as he allowed the weight of the world to lift off his shoulders, if only for a moment. The quiet stillness wrapped around him,

the water pressing against his skin as though trying to coax the memories to the surface. For a long while, nothing happened. Time seemed to stretch, the water around them barely moving, as if the world were holding its breath.

Then, Liam's face shifted, his features tightening in concentration. His eyes snapped open, wide with recognition, his body trembling as he struggled to understand what was happening. "I... I was near the water," he gasped, his voice raw with emotion. "I was... hurt."

Madison leaned closer, her heart pounding in her chest. "What happened, Liam?" she asked, her voice soft but filled with urgency.

"I was walking along the shore," Liam continued, his voice growing clearer, though still tinged with confusion. "There was a storm. The waves were crashing, and there was... something. A figure. A child." He swallowed hard, his voice shaking.

Madison's breath caught in her throat.

Liam's face went pale as the memory unfolded before him. "I tried to pull the child to safety, but the wave—it hit me. I—I couldn't get up. I couldn't breathe. It felt like I was drowning." His voice broke, his body shaking with the force of the memory, as though he could feel the crushing weight of the ocean even now.

Madison's heart ached for him as she watched him struggle with the truth of his past, the sacrifice he had made, the life he had lost. His gaze shifted, haunted by the tragic realization that, despite everything he had done, he hadn't been able to save himself. Madison's voice broke through the heavy silence, soft and tender, offering a quiet affirmation. Liam had gone back, hoping that he could find closure, hoping that he could find the peace that had eluded him. But instead, he had drowned again—this time in the memories he couldn't quite recall, in the life that had slipped away from him. His journey had been a never-ending cycle of trying to find peace in a world that had already taken everything from him.

Madison could feel the weight of his sacrifice settle in the water around them. The ocean had taken him once, but it hadn't given him back. And now, she doesn't know what to feel. All these times of wondering where the world had taken Liam, all the years of empty sunsets and lonely nights spent wishing for his return—none of them had prepared her for this.

"Can I go now?" Liam's voice broke the silence which was growing.

## **Flashback: Sunsets and Promises**

*The waves caressed the shore with a soft rhythm, their murmurs blending seamlessly with the distant calls of seabirds overhead. Madison perched on a large rock near the shoreline, her tail draped elegantly over the edge, catching the warm glow of the setting sun.*

*Beside her, Liam sat cross-legged on the soft sand, his sketchbook resting on his lap. The pencil in his hand moved with practiced ease, capturing quick impressions of the scene before him: the curve of Madison's tail, the delicate fall of her hair, and the serene but faraway look in her eyes. He worked in silence, the sound of graphite against paper a faint counterpoint to the steady rhythm of the waves. Every so often, his gaze would flicker up to her face, lingering just a moment too long before he returned to his drawing. He could tell something was on her mind.*

*Liam finally set his pencil down, leaning back slightly to study her more closely. "What's going on in that head of yours?" he asked, his voice breaking the stillness with warmth.*

*Madison blinked, startled out of her thoughts. Her lips curved into a small, faintly apologetic smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Nothing," she said softly, though her voice lacked the conviction to make the lie believable.*

*Liam tilted his head, unconvinced. "Madison," he said, his tone patient but insistent. "I've known you long enough to tell when something's bothering you. You're staring at the sunset like it's about to vanish forever. What's really on your mind?"*

*Madison exhaled slowly, as though trying to release the weight pressing against her chest, but it remained. "It's just..." she began, her voice trailing off. She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Sometimes, I can't help but wonder how long we'll have this."*

*Liam's brow furrowed slightly, his hand stalling on the edge of the sketchbook. "Have what?" he asked, leaning forward slightly, his attention fully on her now.*

*"This," she said, gesturing vaguely to waves and to the brilliant sky. "Us. These moments. I'm a mermaid, Liam. My world is down there," she continued, motioning toward the vast ocean stretching endlessly before them. "And yours is up here. It feels like... like we're borrowing time. Like someday, we'll have to give it all back."*

*Her words hung in the air, heavy and unspoken truths finally given voice. Liam stared at her, his expression softening as he took in the depth of her worry. Slowly, he closed his sketchbook and set it aside, shifting closer to her. "Madison, I don't care about any of that. The differences between us—your world, my world—none of it matters to me. What matters is this. Right here, right now. Us."*

*She turned to look at him, her eyes searching his face for some reassurance, some promise that could anchor her in this fragile moment. "But what if something happens?" she whispered. "What if I can't come back to the shore anymore? What if we're forced apart?"*

*Liam reached out, his hand finding hers where it rested against the bracelet. His fingers curled around hers, warm and steady, grounding her in a way nothing else could. "I could never forget you," he said firmly, his voice low but resolute. "Not in a thousand lifetimes. You're the most extraordinary person I've ever met. How could I ever let go of that?"*

*"I promise," Madison said, her voice trembling with both fear and determination. Her gaze locked onto his, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I promise I'll never forget you, Liam. No matter what happens, no matter how much time passes. I'll remember you."*

*Liam's expression softened into a smile—a small, tender thing that held none of the usual mischief she'd grown so used to, but something deeper, more vulnerable. Though the night would eventually fall and time would press on, that moment felt infinite—an unspoken vow etched into the sands of the shore, carried by the waves, and imprinted forever in their hearts.*

"Madison, I think I'm ready to go," Liam's voice was soft but had a firm tone to it.

Liam stood before her, his soul flickering like a candle struggling against the wind, his form barely tangible, slipping in and out of focus. He was almost gone, almost free, and yet, Madison could still feel the faintest trace of him, tethered to her, unwilling to let go. But he was fading, and with every passing moment, the chance for her to keep him close slipped further from her grasp.

Madison swallowed the lump in her throat, fighting to keep her composure, but the weight of everything, of their memories, their unfinished story pressed down on her, threatening to crush her. She couldn't lose him. Not when he couldn't even remember her. But she had learned a painful truth, one that she had been trying to ignore: souls like Liam, souls burdened with lingering regrets, didn't last long in this in-between

place. If they lingered for too long, their memories fade, their forms become less defined, and eventually, they would dissipate into nothingness, like dust caught in the wind. A tragic fate for a soul that wasn't ready to move on, that hadn't found peace. It wasn't just a risk—it was inevitable.

"Liam..." Her voice trembled as she spoke his name, a whisper in the thick silence between them. She reached for something at her side, her fingers trembling with a mix of fear and desperation. Slowly, she pulled out the framed sketch, holding it out toward him.

Liam's gaze followed the movement, and Madison watched as his eyes landed on the picture. It was the one he had drawn of her—of the two of them—sitting together by the shore, the sun dipping low in the sky, painting the horizon in shades of gold and pink. The memory came rushing back to her, vivid and painful, but she couldn't see it in his eyes.

"This... this is us?" His voice was soft, almost apologetic as he examined the sketch. But there was no spark in his eyes. No sign of the boy who had held her hand as they watched the sunset together.

Madison took a deep breath, forcing herself to swallow the rising tide of grief, and spoke softly, "Do you remember when you drew this? It was just after we spent the whole day on the shore, watching the sun go down together. You said you'd never forget." Her voice faltered as she spoke the words, the ache in her chest threatening to overtake her. She had tried to hold onto every last fragment of him, every precious memory, but it was slipping away, just like the sea pulling the shore into the deep.

She closed her eyes, trying to hold back the flood of tears that threatened to spill over. With shaking hands, Madison reached for the bracelet that had always been with her—the one he had given her so long ago. The red beads, still vibrant against the pale skin of her wrist, felt like a lifeline to the past, to the time when he had been hers, when they had promised one another that they would never be apart. She held it out to him, her voice breaking as she whispered, "Liam... Do you remember this bracelet you gave me?"

Liam's gaze drifted to the bracelet, and his eyes softened for just a moment, but the recognition never came. He studied the smooth red beads, the delicate craftsmanship, but it was as if they meant nothing to him. "No, I don't remember."

Madison's breath caught in her throat, and the tears she had been holding back finally broke free, spilling down her cheeks. She couldn't stop them. She couldn't stop the overwhelming sense of loss that consumed her—the painful truth that she had already lost him, even though he was still here.

Liam's expression softened, and for a moment, she thought—just for a moment—that he might reach for her, that he might take her hand and tell her that it was all a mistake, that he would stay. But instead, he took a small step backward, his form flickering even more, the pull of the Beyond becoming stronger, more inescapable.

"Madison," Liam said, his voice barely above a whisper, filled with sorrow. "I have to go. I don't belong here anymore."

"No," she protested weakly, stepping forward. "You don't have to go. Not yet. You're not ready."

Liam's eyes softened, filled with sadness, but his form was no longer whole. The flicker of light that surrounded him was growing stronger, and with it, the weight of his departure. He looked at her one last time as though he were sorry but couldn't find any reason to be. Madison took another step toward him, her hands trembling, but no matter how much she reached for him, no matter how loudly her heart screamed for him to stay, he was slipping further away.

Liam's voice, barely above a whisper, broke through the haze of her grief. "Madison, if we really had shared something in the past, tell me, what is your favorite memory of us?"

It was a question that tore at Madison's soul, one that seemed to echo in the depths of her being with the weight of all the unspoken words, of all the unmade memories. She had so many memories—so many beautiful moments, each one a testament to the bond they had forged together in the brief time their worlds had crossed. She remembered the sunsets they had watched together, sitting on the shore as the sky was in hues of orange and pink, as the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

However, even with all the memories Madison could recall—every soft laugh, every lingering glance, every whispered promise—none of them existed in Liam's world anymore. To him, she was nothing but a way to the afterlife, a fleeting presence that slipped through his fingers like sand. She had been the anchor in his life, the person who made the sunsets brighter, the one who stood beside him as the tides shifted.

But now, she was just a distant echo in his mind, a whisper he couldn't quite grasp. It was a cruel irony. Despite all her efforts to preserve their bond, the truth remained undeniable: his memories were absorbed into nothingness, swallowed by the amnesia of his death and Madison, the queen herself, was powerless to bring them back.

Madison swallowed, forcing herself to steady her breath, trying to keep the chasm of grief from swallowing her whole. But her voice, when it finally came, was barely more than a breath, a whisper carried on the fragile threads of her despair. "This. Because you're here. And because it's happening right now."

The words tasted like salt on her tongue, the weight of them pressing down on her chest, but they were the truth. It was this—right here, right now, standing before Liam as he was slipping away. She could feel him fading, feel the distance growing between them, but in this moment, he was here. And that was the only thing that mattered.

For a split second, Liam's eyes widened, the faintest flicker of something like recognition crossing his features. His gaze softened, and in that brief moment, Madison dared to believe, just for a heartbeat, that he was starting to remember. That he was beginning to piece together the fragmented memories that had been stolen from him. Maybe, just maybe, he could see her, see the truth of what they had shared. But it was swept away by the light around him that grew brighter, too bright, too fast, swallowing him in its glow. It was as though time itself was bending, pulling him away from her in one final, irreversible motion. His form flickered one last time, and before she could even reach for him, before she could speak another word, he was gone.

"Liam!" she cried out, her voice breaking as the word tore from her chest like a knife. But he was slipping through her fingers, dissolving into the light, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. He was gone, and in that final moment, the sound of her own voice calling his name felt like a cruel mockery of everything they had been. There was no answer. Only the sound of the ocean, lapping at the shore.

The loss of him felt like a physical wound, like a hole had been carved in her chest, and there was nothing in the world that could fill it. She couldn't even comfort herself with the thought that maybe he had remembered, that maybe that fleeting moment of recognition had been real. She would never know if he had truly remembered her. All she knew was that the world felt colder now, darker. The sun had set, and with it, any hope of him returning.

Madison's knees buckled beneath her, and she collapsed to the floor, the weight of her loss crushing her like an anchor dragging her under the water. She felt as though the very earth beneath her was dissolving, the foundations of everything she had known crumbling to dust. All she could do now was wait. Wait for the time when she, too, would cross into the Beyond. When she would find him again, in whatever form that would take, and perhaps then, she could tell him everything she had never been able to say. But that would be a long time from now—too long.

The thought of waiting gnawed at her, but it was the only thing she had left.

True love, as Madison learned, is not about clinging desperately onto what was, but about finding the courage to let go.

And so, she would wait. She would wait for however many years it took, until the day she crossed the boundary between life and death. And when she did, maybe—just maybe—he would call out to her.

END



# Protect My Peace

Elisha Isabel Peji

Trigger and Content Warning/s:  
mentions of blood, implications of trauma  
and PTSD

How can I protect my peace  
when my mind feels like a battalion?  
The memories are bullets piercing  
through my heart.

They said I was a fire, and they  
loved the light and warmth, until they  
saw ashes from the wood that once  
was.

How can I protect my peace if  
my enemies were once friends?  
Coming up with strategies, my body  
an army of one.

What use does peace have with  
a soldier like me? They said:  
["I can only wreak havoc. I have  
destroyed them and myself.["]

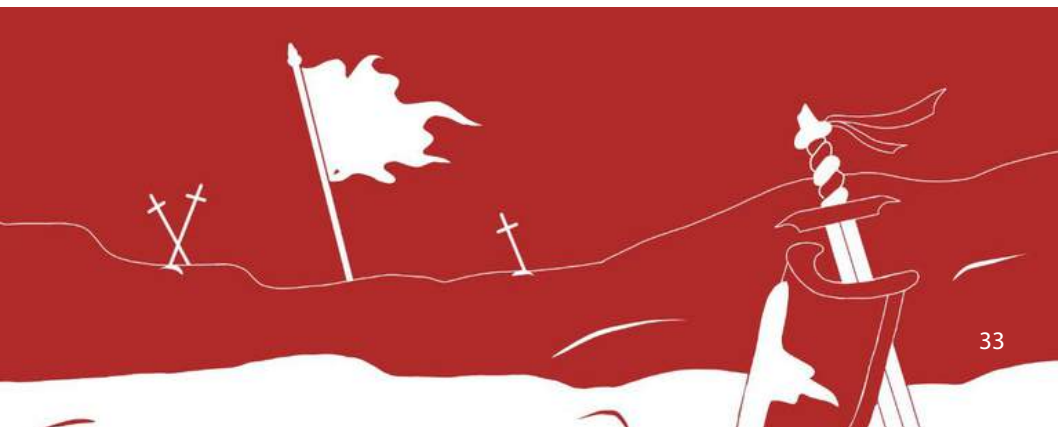
That must be true because  
the smell of blood overwhelms  
my nostrils.

Awake or asleep, I am fighting,  
gasping for air as I remember  
the raising of voices, scornful tones.

The war may be over, but  
it hasn't left me.

The wounds won't close, and  
all I see is red static, trying to come  
back to earth when  
that is where it all ended.

I want to drop my shield and spade,  
but it is my nature to keep fighting.  
Now, peace is here, and war is done,  
but I am still trying.



# To You, in 200 Years

Raissa Chloe Curray

Erwin stepped off the taxi and arrived at his father's coastal estate. It was a quiet arrival, unlike the grand receptions he was used to in his military days. The house itself was tucked away on the edge of a sleepy European town, but was not unfamiliar to him—he'd spent many years here as a child, but now it felt more like a sanctuary than a home. It felt different now, larger and emptier, especially with his mother out of the picture.

Erwin was a man of contradictions: the kind of person who could command a room with a mere glance, yet preferred the quiet solitude of books. A man who knew how to wield charm like a weapon, yet carried the sharpness of past scars beneath his exterior. He was a man who had seen the world, tasted its dangers, and now, at the age of twenty-eight, felt the burden of having conquered it all without a clear direction forward. His injury, sustained during a naval expedition months prior, had put him on leave for the rest of the year. His life had always been one of movement, the promise of endless horizons, but now, in the quiet stillness of this mansion by the sea, the world outside seemed irrelevant. His father, Augustine, a well-respected historian known for his pacifism, had insisted that this retreat was necessary for Erwin to recuperate.

As Erwin stepped inside, the house greeted him with an odd sense of welcome—cool air, silent walls, and the faint scent of old books. The hallway stretched before him, lined with family portraits and relics of his father's career. A low voice echoed from the sitting room.

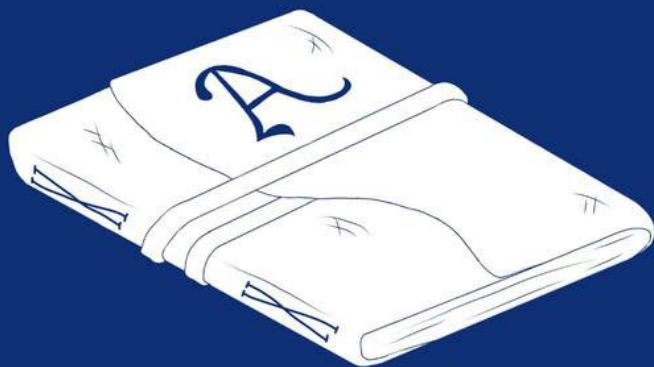
"Erwin. It's good to see you here," Augustine's voice was calm, and he gave his son a soft smile.

"Father," he replied, his voice quieter than he intended. Erwin stood still for a moment, observing the man who had raised him with such precision.

"I'm glad you've arrived safely. You've been away from this place for far too long, and it's good to see you home—though it's hardly what I imagined your return to be."

Erwin felt a warmth in his chest, it was nice to see his father. "The injury's not as bad as it sounds, but I suppose a bit of peace will do me good..." His gaze briefly swept the room, before landing back on his father. "It's quieter here than I remember."

"Yes," Augustine agreed, his tone softening. "It's been quieter since your mother passed. But it's the peace we need for you to heal. I trust this will do you some good."



The study was large, well-lit by the fire crackling . The scent of old books lingered in the air. Erwin sat across from his father, the low hum of the evening outside adding to the atmosphere. "I still don't understand why you're so insistent on this place," Erwin said, not unkindly.

Augustine didn't immediately respond. Instead, he glanced at his son with something akin to sorrow in his eyes. "It's about... reconnection. Not just with yourself, but with something deeper." Augustine began slowly, looking down at the papers scattered across his desk.

Erwin raised an eyebrow, pushing his chair back slightly. "And what is that? This house?"

Augustine's gaze darkened slightly, his voice lowering as though he were confiding a secret. "It's about understanding history, Erwin. Not just what's been written down, but the things left unsaid—the stories buried beneath the surface. There's a reason your mother wanted us to live here, even if I never fully understood it."

At the mention of his mother, Erwin's fingers stilled on the armrest. He watched his father carefully, noting the slight tremor in Augustine's hands and the way his gaze drifted, unfocused. Nearly a decade had passed since his mother's death, yet here Augustine was, carrying the weight of her memory like it had happened only yesterday.

Erwin's fingers tapped idly on the armrest, his face unreadable. "You've always believed that history is history. Facts. Figures. Why this sudden urge for reconnection?"

Augustine seemed to struggle with his words for a moment, as though he had to choose carefully what he was about to say. "Because the past, Erwin, never really leaves us. There are things we carry—things we cannot escape. There's something about this place, something I should have confronted years ago."

Watching his father's face grow distant, it was apparent that Augustine was still holding on to his grief over his mother. The way he spoke, the sorrow in his tone—it was almost as if her absence lingered here. Erwin knew that Augustine's "reconnection" was really just his way of trying to bring her memory back into his life. But he wasn't certain on what he meant about something his father should have confronted.

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That night, unable to sleep, Erwin wandered the mansion's hallways, the moonlight casting shadows across the walls. The house was still, the kind of silence that seemed alive, with the creaks of an old structure that had seen more than its share of stories. His thoughts drifted back to the conversation with his father. Augustine's words had been heavy, laced with meanings Erwin couldn't quite parse. Probably just nostalgia, Erwin thought. Maybe his father was feeling the weight of the years creeping up on him, grappling with time in his own peculiar way.

His wandering brought him to the study. The door creaked as he pushed it open, the sound echoing in the quiet night. The room felt older than the rest of the mansion. Dusty shelves on the walls, sagging under the weight of neglected and forgotten artifacts. The scent of aged paper hung in the air, with the faint whiff of smoke that lingered from earlier that evening.

Erwin stepped inside, his look swept over the room—papers scattered across the desk, a globe resting in the corner, an assortment of objects that seemed more like relics than belongings. Then, his eyes fell on something he hadn't noticed earlier: a small wooden box, unassuming yet distinctly out of place.

It sat on the desk, its edges worn smooth with age. The carvings along its sides were intricate. It wasn't locked, and there was no obvious sign of its significance. But something about it caught his attention. Brushing a hand over the lid to clear away the dust, the wood was cool under his fingers. There was no name, only the faint smell of cedar that escaped when he lifted the lid. Inside were a few loose pages and a thin journal bound in faded green leather.

Erwin frowned, lifting the journal out of the box with care. He turned it over in his hands, studying its delicate stitching and the faint initials engraved into the cover: A. Taking a seat at the desk, he opened the journal, the brittle pages cracking softly as they turned. The handwriting inside was delicate yet firm. The first page bore a simple heading:

*"The Reflections of Alunsina."*

The name stirred vague memories of whispered legends from Erwin's childhood—a local ghost story about a woman said to curse anyone who dared to love her. Shaking off the thought, he turned his attention to the pages, the words pulling him into a life long since buried in time.

*March 12, 1805*

*My mother once told me that the blood running through my veins is like the sea—divided, fierce, and yet endless. It has been a blessing and a curse. How cruelly ironic that I have such a bloodline that pulls me to the tropical shores I cannot touch.*

*I have been promised to Duke Edric Dickens, as if my life were a mere commodity. But I do not belong to him, nor to this family, nor to this society that seeks only to crush the freedom in my soul. I am a prisoner in my own brown skin, bound by the weight of my Filipino heritage.*

*But tonight, I met with her again. She calls herself a 'revolutionary'—a woman of justice. She has taught me resistance. The movement we have joined is one of revolution, one that demands the end of colonial rule. It is dangerous, and I have been warned by those around me not to get involved. But the blood in my veins calls me to it. It calls me to fight for what is right, for what is mine.*

*I fear that in this battle, I may lose even more. A curse lingers over me, one that clings to anyone bold enough to love me with sincerity. Perhaps it is nothing more than a myth—a superstition handed down through my mother's lineage—or a cruel prejudice of race against her and I. Or perhaps it is a reality we are bound to confront. Even so, I refuse to abandon what feels true in my heart.*

Erwin paused, his finger resting lightly on the edge of the page. He leaned back in his chair, The crackling of the fire in the hearth was the only sound in the room. The diary felt heavier now, as though the words on its pages carried not just her story, but an unspoken demand for something more—for understanding, for action.

A curse clinging to anyone who loved her... it sounded like a folktale, because it was. It was one that Erwin had heard of during his childhood, the sort of thing whispered to keep people in their place. He smirked faintly, shaking his head at the absurdity. Love was dangerous enough without the supernatural, he thought wryly, thinking back to his entanglements during his years in the military.

Erwin stood, diary still in hand, and walked to the window. Outside, the sea stretching out in the distance, vast and unknowable. "Foolish or brave," he muttered to himself. Or is there even a difference, he thought.

The study door creaked, and Erwin turned to see his father standing in the doorway, his expression unreadable. "You're still awake," Augustine said, his voice low and quiet. His gaze flicked to the diary in Erwin's hand. "Read something interesting?"

Erwin hesitated, then held up the journal. "I came across this in the study—Alunsina's diary. Always thought she was just a myth, but turns out she was very much real."

A flicker of something—recognition, perhaps—passed over Augustine's face. "Ah," he said simply. He stepped into the room, and came to stand beside his son at the window. "She was... a remarkable woman," Augustine said after a moment, his voice carrying a weight that made Erwin glance at him.

"You speak as though you knew her," Erwin said carefully, searching his father's expression.

Augustine smiled faintly, a shadow of something bittersweet crossing his features. "No. But history has a way of keeping certain people alive, doesn't it?"

Erwin didn't respond, his gaze returning to the sea.

—

March 29, 1805

*Another one, dead.*

*I received the news this morning. One of my suitors—Baron Leon—was found dead in his study, his face flat against the desk. The servants say there were no signs of struggle, no poison, no mark on him at all. It is as though his life simply left him. There was nothing in his face, no trace of the pain of dying, just stillness.*

*Of course, the gossip mills are already turning. People are whispering, drawing their own conclusions, as they always do. They say it's the curse—this curse of my bloodline, the one I carry in my veins... How quickly they forget my mother's grief, how she was forced away from the land of our ancestors, the pain of being torn from her home, only to be bound to a world she did not choose and married to a man she does not love. How quickly they mistake my identity for a curse because of my skin.*

*Tonight, I met with her again—the revolutionist, my mentor—to deliver her the news of Leon's death. She is unlike anyone I have ever known. She calls herself Rosa, but she is far from a common name. She is a revolutionary, a woman born in the Philippines, and though I have never stepped foot there, she speaks of it as though it lives in her heart and soul. She says the land calls to her, and I feel it too in her words.*

*Rosa tells me of the myths and spirits that shape the land, of how the people's hearts are connected to the land's mysteries. It is a place where the negative energies of the world can manifest, taking form as curses. I wonder now if the curse that follows me is something born from the darkness of my blood, or if it is simply the shadow of those who wish to control me. Rosa speaks of resistance—of fighting colonialism—and I wonder if my bloodline has always carried this rebellion within it. If I am to be free, I must first understand what binds me.*

*But now, with Leon gone, I cannot ignore the truth of it. His death will only give more fuel to those who seek to control me. It will make them more wary of me, more afraid of the very thing they do not understand. And so, the curse grows, not because of the blood in my veins, but because of the fear they carry in their hearts.*

For the past few weeks, Erwin had found himself returning to Alunsina's journal, a habit he hadn't anticipated forming. Each evening, he would retreat to the quiet solitude of the study, a cup of tea in hand, and lose himself in her words.

It started out as a mere curiosity—a study of history, a glimpse into the mind of a woman long gone. But now, the journal had become a fixture of his routine. It wasn't that he believed in the supernatural or in curses. No, he had lived long enough to understand the dangers of sentimentality, especially when it came to the written word. But there was something about her story that kept drawing him in.

Her thoughts on the curse were curious, to say the least. Erwin had tried to brush it aside, dismissing it as the romantic musings of a woman trapped in a world that didn't understand her. But even as he read with skepticism, a small part of him couldn't help but wonder. The curse, she claimed, was not something born from her bloodline, but from the fear others had of what they couldn't control. That was a sentiment Erwin understood all too well.

Erwin was no stranger to tragedy or death. He had seen men fall in battle, comrades lost to illness, to time. But there was something unnerving about the way Alunsina spoke of death—how casually it entered her life, how easily it seemed to follow her. And as much as he tried to rationalize it, to distance himself from the idea of a curse, he couldn't quite dismiss the thought entirely.

Even during the day, in the moments when his mind wandered, he found himself thinking about her, about the life she had led, and the way her words had begun to shape his understanding of her. He had never been a man to give in to emotional indulgence, but Alunsina's inner world—her rebellion and such—had struck a chord in him, something familiar yet far removed from his own experiences.

As the weeks passed, Erwin noticed the subtle shift. At first, he'd been a casual observer, analyzing her words from a distance. Now, he found himself almost anticipating her next entry, wondering what she would say, what new insight she would share about herself, her life, her thoughts. It wasn't that he was attached—no, he was too pragmatic for that. But there was an undeniable intrigue, a pull that he couldn't quite shake. But he tried to tell himself it was just the curiosity of a man who loved unraveling mysteries.

Erwin shook his head, a faint smile curling at the edge of his lips as he set the journal down for the night. He had no time for fantasies, no time for the ghosts of women who had lived centuries ago.

—

A week passed, and the unsettling feeling still lingered, despite Erwin's best efforts to shake it off. He couldn't quite dismiss the sensation that someone was always watching. He chalked it up to stress, to late nights spent reading Alunsina's diary, the weight of being away from work, to unfinished business in the office.

Tonight, he had a dinner gathering to attend at a nearby estate. It had been far too long since he had visited his childhood companions, and it seemed like the perfect opportunity to catch up. The dinner was meant to be a light affair, a chance to escape the swirling thoughts that had dominated his mind for days. Nothing too serious, just casual conversation, a few laughs, and a brief respite from his brooding. He pulled on his coat and gloves with his usual practiced ease, preparing himself for another round of polite exchanges, as he had so many times before. But the moment he stepped out the door, the air felt wrong.

It was the way the evening sky had darkened faster than it should have, the way the wind felt colder than normal. He dismissed it, deciding it was nothing more than the unusual winter chill creeping in earlier than expected.

He started his father's car then left. The drive was uneventful at first, but as he neared the estate, a sudden, sharp pain struck him in the chest. It wasn't like the faint discomfort of a typical headache or muscle strain. It was more intense, like someone had plunged an invisible dagger straight into his ribcage. His vision blurred, and his fingers instinctively gripped the steering wheel tighter. It's just the weather, he tried to convince himself, trying to focus on the road. You're fine. Just... drive through it.

But the pain spread—worsening with every breath. Erwin fought the growing panic that clawed at the edges of his mind, each breath more labored than the last. He pulled over to the side of the road, slamming the brakes in a desperate attempt to keep control, but his hands were shaking, and he felt his chest tighten more.

Suddenly, the world around him spun. The car seemed to tilt, its interior closing in on him. He tried to grab his mobile phone to call for help but he could barely breathe. He grabbed at his chest, his heartbeat racing in his ears, and for a moment, he thought—

But then, as quickly as it had come, the pain began to recede. His chest slowly loosened. His breaths, shallow and quick, returned to normal. Gasping for air, Erwin collapsed back against the seat, drenched in sweat, his pulse still pounding in his ears.

It was as if something unseen had gripped his heart and squeezed, only to release its hold when it had no more use for him. Erwin stared blankly at the road, his mind whirling with the impossibility of what had just happened. A heart attack, he wondered, shaking his head in disbelief.

He sat there for several long minutes, gathering himself, until finally, he started the car again and drove the rest of the way to the dinner. The pain hadn't come back, but the unease lingered. It felt like a curse had settled over him, woven into his life. No longer could he deny it.

And it would not let go.

—

*April 5, 1805*

*Heart attack, the doctors say.*

Erwin blinked at the first few words of the entry.

*Another one of my suitors. This time, it was Lord Edmund. He was found in his library, his hands frozen mid-turn of a page, his eyes wide with something unspoken, as if the last thing he saw was a truth that was too much for him to bear. The physicians say he died of a heart failure, much like the others—no poison, no external cause. Just a sudden, violent rupture of the heart, as though it had been squeezed from within.*

Erwin's mind flashed to the events of the night before. His own heart—tight, as though gripped by someone. The suffocating pain while trying to pull the car over, the cold sweat that had chilled him to the bone. It had passed, he told himself. Just a scare, nothing more. But now, with each word from the journal, the doubt crept in.

*I wonder if there is truth in it now.*

*It is strange, the way the heart betrays us, physically and metaphorically. They all speak of the heart as if it were the center of truth, but it is a liar, like the body that holds it. How easy it is for one to love, and yet how easy it is to die of it, to be consumed by it, as though the heart were a fire that burns too brightly, too soon.*

*I swore I will not be like them. I will not be consumed by the heart.*

*Yet, I wonder—if it is the curse that follows me, or if it is simply the burden of the love they all bring to my door, a love that is not meant to last. Perhaps, in the end, it is not my bloodline, nor my skin, but the longing they all share for a freedom they will never possess.*

*Just as I.*

*The revolution has failed. The underground movement has dissolved. They're silencing us, erasing us from history. I am no longer sure what is real, and what is simply the echo of those who came before me. Perhaps, one day, it will all become clear.*

*If you are reading this, Erwin, I hope you know what you are getting yourself into. For some curses never end.*

Erwin stood up abruptly, the chair scraping back sharply. The room seemed to close in on him. He had always been a man of control, of reason. But now, that control seemed to be slipping through his fingers, like sand through a clenched fist.

He shook his head, trying to dispel the unease that clung to him. It was nothing. It had to be nothing. But as he turned back to the journal, the pages opened before him, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him. And for the first time in a long while, Erwin felt a flicker of doubt, an uneasy chill that he couldn't explain away.

He had been warned, hadn't he? Alunsina had written of it so clearly. Something about her had gotten under his skin, and despite his better judgment, he couldn't bring himself to let it go. Not yet. And whether he liked it or not, he was already in too deep.

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His gaze shifted to his father, sitting at his desk, scribbling in his journal. Augustine was engrossed in his work, unaware of the tension building within Erwin.

Erwin said, his voice measured, his words precise, "I've been thinking about something. The women who were taken from their lands, brought here, sold like property—why is there no record of them in our local library? Or the attempted revolution? You've spent years studying the history of our hometown, and yet, none of this is ever mentioned."

Augustine didn't look up, his pen continuing to scratch across the paper. "Erwin," he said, his voice calm, but with an edge, "You've been reading too much fantasy."

Erwin allowed the silence to hang in the air, weighing his response carefully. He wasn't asking out of ignorance—he had already calculated his father's likely responses. He wanted to prod, to expose cracks in the armor of the man who had always been his mentor.

"Don't you find it strange, though?" Erwin pressed, his tone calm but deliberate. "Your father was a historian, and you too—well, you're considered one of the region's most respected minds. Surely you would have come across something about it by now. If not in books, then in the local archives, or from the stories that older generations pass down, such as this journal... And yet, there's nothing. The revolution was not some minor event. A rebellion, the taking of women—it's significant, don't you think?"

His father finally set his pen down, a faint trace of tension visible in his shoulders. Augustine's eyes narrowed, but there was a careful calculation in his gaze as if he were determining how best to respond without revealing too much.

"Erwin," Augustine began, his tone still even, though a little more guarded, "You're treading dangerous ground. You're asking questions that you have no business asking. Some things are better left unsaid. History can be rewritten, yes, but it's not always for the better. Some stories don't need to be told. Some truths can tear people apart."

Erwin paused, absorbing his father's words, but his mind quickly turned over the options. His father's response wasn't entirely unexpected—Augustine had always been one to prioritize stability. "So," Erwin said slowly, choosing his words with care, "you're saying the truth could be dangerous. But dangerous to whom? To our people? To the family? Or to you? Because we both know your reputation is closely tied to the history you've helped shape. Wouldn't revealing this truth jeopardize everything you've built?"

Augustine's face tightened at the suggestion, and for a moment, Erwin thought he might be too direct. But his father's composure remained intact.

"The truth is dangerous to everyone, Erwin," Augustine replied, his voice low, yet firm. "History is a weapon. It's not just about facts; it's about control. If people know too much, if they understand too much, they might lose their faith in what they've been taught. Our region is known for its longstanding peace. If you want to stir up trouble, then fine..."

"You're young, Erwin. Idealistic," Augustine continued, his voice tinged with a cold finality. "You think you can change the world with ideals, but you can't. History is written by the survivors."



Erwin straightened, choosing his words with even more precision now, like a commander preparing to engage in a final, decisive battle. "I've already been caught up in this, Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, I've crossed a line by reading that diary. And you're right, it's dangerous... I've had my share of heart attacks and nightmares. Paranormal activities, hearing hums, the feeling of being watched, seeing someone in the corner of my vision. But the people who lived through those events—they deserve to be remembered. Whether it's good for peace or not."

Augustine stood then, his chair scraping harshly against the floor, the tension palpable between them. "You don't grasp the gravity of your actions. You think you're doing something noble by unearthing the past, but all you're doing is making things worse. It's not just history you're disturbing—it's the reputation of our region. We've always been seen as allies of the good. Why would you want to change that now?."

Erwin met his father's gaze, unflinching. "I'll be the one to decide what's worth fighting for."

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Alunsina settled on his lap, her presence overwhelming in a way that stole Erwin's breath. The weight of her body against his was an electric jolt, each subtle shift sending a shock of warmth through him. Her fingers slid into his blond hair, gently tugging him closer, coaxing him to her. The softness of her touch, the heat from her body pressed against his, felt dangerously intimate—a temptation he could neither deny nor fully understand.

Her smile, slow and knowing, never reached her eyes, but it was enough to make his pulse race. She was so close, too close, the line between comfort and discomfort thinning with every moment. Her breath, warm and steady, brushed against his skin, and it seemed like the air itself was thickening, laden with something unsaid. His chest tightened with an unfamiliar need, a deep yearning for something he couldn't name. Her lips, inches from his, parted slightly, and for a moment, everything was still, as if the world held its breath.

Then, her expression shifted. Her eyes seemed to hollow, deepening into something darker. A cold, emptiness that stretched miles, as though the gaze piercing into him wasn't human. His throat tightened, every instinct screaming to pull away, but he couldn't. He felt frozen, trapped under the weight of her stare, until the first crack of her neck broke the silence.

Her head tilted unnaturally, the crack echoing in the room, and blood began to pour from her eyes and mouth. The warm, intoxicating aura that had enveloped him turned to something cold, visceral. The liquid dripped down, hot and thick like tar, splattering against his chest, his neck, as if she were bleeding into him, marking him. The grip in his hair tightened, her touch no longer gentle, but possessive.

Then the scream came. It didn't come from her mouth alone. It came from everywhere, from every corner of the room. The shriek multiplied, a thousand tortured voices. Each one was a cry of anguish, desperation, and something far worse, far older than any fear he had ever known. The room felt like it was closing in, the walls pressing against him, squeezing the air from his lungs. His chest tightened, his breath caught in his throat, and his limbs locked, unable to move. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, drowning out the screeching, but it was no use. His vision blurred, the room spinning, distorting as the scream escalated, growing louder, more suffocating.

Erwin snapped awake, heart racing, a cold sweat covering his body, gasping for air. His surroundings were familiar, yet somehow comforting—the study. The journal. He realized he had fallen asleep there. He blinked, trying to focus. He had thought it was just a dream—but there was something wrong. Something too real. His hands brushed against the desk, and he froze.

There was blood on his hands.

Confused, he glanced down and saw that the blood was not his. It was seeping from the open journal, the pages damp with the dark, sickly liquid.

His breath caught in his throat. The journal. The one that had haunted his nights. With trembling fingers, he flipped open the first page. Empty. All of it. Page after page of empty, inkless paper, as though the words had been wiped clean by some invisible force.

Except for the last page.

His eyes snapped to the final page, where, in stark, crimson ink, the words appeared:

You have chosen to open the door. Face what is behind it.

The blood on the page seemed to pulse, as if alive, and Erwin's skin crawled. The air around him thickened, the room closing in on him like the walls themselves were shifting, bending toward him. The temperature dropped sharply, the blood smell growing stronger, suffocating him. He tried to stand, to move, but his body felt heavy, rooted to the spot.

Panic clawed at him as the room pressed in, the weight of it almost unbearable. He could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears, louder than ever, faster and faster. The walls were breathing. The shadows whispered his name. Alunsina's scream rang in his mind, echoing like a final warning. Just as he thought he couldn't bear it any longer, everything went black.

Erwin awoke with a gasp, disoriented and drenched in sweat, but this time, it was his bed. The familiar warmth of his room surrounded him, the oppressive feeling gone, replaced with an eerie stillness. He sat up, the lingering sensations of the nightmare clawing at his chest. The cold, the blood, the suffocating walls—all of it had felt so real. But this was real.

He glanced around, but there was no sign of the nightmare. No blood. No journal. No bloodstains on his hands. Only the morning sun spilling through the window.

With trembling hands, he reached for the drawer beside his bed and pulled out the diary. It was there, right where it had been before. The leather-bound journal, weathered by time. His breath caught. He opened it to the first page.

Empty.

He turned to the last page, and his heart sank. The words were still there, written in crimson ink: You have chosen to open the door. Face what is behind it.

The decision had been made. He couldn't turn back now. Erwin shot up from his bed, the weight of the dream still pressing on his chest. Without hesitation, he grabbed his laptop, opened Google Docs, and began to type.

—

Erwin packed his belongings with care, folding each shirt and placing books into his bag as it could quiet his restless thoughts. His leave was over, and it was time to return to the field. The house, for all its heaviness over the past weeks, now felt strangely light, as though some invisible weight had been lifted. Yet, it was emptier, too, the walls themselves mourned the tension that had finally come to the surface.

Augustine entered the room quietly, his footsteps soft but deliberate, the faint rustle of his coat the only sound. He stood by the doorway for a moment, watching Erwin finish his task.

"You've set something in motion. And now you're leaving," Augustine said finally, his tone measured but carrying weight. After Erwin published the book, there was no immediate uproar, no damning headlines. But Augustine knew better than to think the storm wasn't coming. His son knew it too.

Erwin paused, placing the last of his things into his bag before turning to face his father. "I did what I had to," he replied evenly.

Augustine crossed the room slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. "You've jeopardized everything this family has stood for."

"It wasn't a decision I made lightly," Erwin said, his voice steady but lacking hostility. "If that tarnishes the image of a region that prides itself on peace while ignoring its past atrocities, so be it"

"You've stirred waters that have been still for a reason," Augustine's jaw tightened. "You think you understand the weight of what you've done? The world isn't kind to people who reveal its skeletons, Erwin." He paused for a moment. This time, his voice was slower, more sorrowful, "You're leaving today, but I'll remain here to face what comes. The questions, the scrutiny. The reputation of our family, our region—it will all be dissected."

"I'm aware of the consequences," Erwin said, his tone quieter now, but resolute.

Augustine turned away slightly, running a hand over the edge of the desk. "You think you've won some moral victory. But you've painted a target on this house, this name. You've invited chaos under the guise of justice."

There was a flicker of something in Augustine's expression—pride, perhaps, or resignation. It was gone as quickly as it appeared. "You remind me of your mother," he said after a moment, his voice soft but edged with something heavier. "She had that same unrelenting need to fix what was broken, no matter the cost."

Erwin's posture softened slightly, though his resolve did not. "I think I understand her better now."

Augustine gave a small, weary smile, though it didn't reach his eyes.

Erwin snapped his suitcase shut, then left the room, not bothered to say anything else to his father. He carried it to the front porch, stepping out into the crisp air of the early morning. The sea stretched before him, calm and endless, its surface glinting faintly under the pale light. He walked to the edge of the sand, stopping at a spot he knew instinctively—where Alunsina had stood two centuries ago.

The breeze brushed against his face, carrying with it the faint scent of saltwater and something else. It stirred a strange lightness in his chest. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the journal. Its cover was worn now, the pages inside just as empty as they had been when he'd last checked. Even the haunting message on the final page had vanished, leaving nothing but blank paper.

Erwin's grip tightened around it for a moment. He felt the weight of what it had carried—the stories, the curses, the ghosts—and what it no longer did. Slowly, he stepped closer to the water and threw the journal toward the waves. It tumbled through the air before vanishing into the water with barely a ripple, swallowed by the sea and the past it held. It was as if the sea had been waiting for it all along, a repository of stories too heavy for the living to carry.

Erwin stood there, staring at the water, his breath steady but deep. He thought of Alunsina—her voice, her words, her defiance. He imagined her standing here, centuries before, her gaze fixed on this same horizon. Perhaps she had dreamed of freedom as she stood where he now did, the salt wind tangling in her hair. He closed his eyes for a brief moment. The sea stretched on, endless and eternal, and Erwin let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

A sharp honk from the driveway pulled him back to the present. His cab had arrived. Erwin turned, glancing one last time at the house behind him. It stood lighter now, but it was hollow. In the window, Augustine stood, watching. Their eyes met through the glass, holding for a brief moment. Neither moved, neither waved. Then, without breaking his gaze, Augustine turned and disappeared into the house's shadowed interior.

Erwin exhaled softly, dragging his suitcase to the waiting car. He slipped inside, the door shutting with a thud, and as the cab began its motion down the coastal road, he didn't look back.

# Drown

Elisha Isabel Peji

Trigger and Content Warning/s:  
implications of sexual harassment,  
mentions of drowning, implications of  
trauma

I want to trust the water,  
but I feel like I'd drown. I already feel  
it in my lungs, silenced  
in desperate despair.

Is this normal for the water to do?  
Chills run down my spine as I reimagine  
the cold. Its hands envelope around me  
even if I say no.

I try to swim away, but I don't know how.  
Crying for help, I make no sound.  
Drowning in you  
is a silent affair, especially when  
nobody is there.

Finally out, I stop and stare  
at the sight of my re-lived despair.  
Holding  
myself, the lifeguard says,  
"I didn't see it, so nothing happened."

He should have seen me drowning,  
but he was looking away.  
He should have protected me,  
but he didn't.

I should have protected me,  
but I couldn't.

...!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

My heart s h a t t e r s.

There are only droplets  
on my skin and hands  
but it feels like drowning  
all the same.



# The Hearing

Annika Therese Ong



As he stepped to the stand,  
His voice sited through the years of blood  
as if it were a sudden downpour  
Amidst the queries and cries  
A country confused, disconnected from  
reality

The court is filled with;  
Mothers cradling the empty air  
Fathers, tired of wandering, searching for  
their children  
Kids seeking justice for their parents

As he speaks,  
He narrates this war as it was a casual  
conversation  
Cold words and statements  
No regrets or resentment

They call it a hearing  
But they refuse to listen to the sounds of  
gunshots in the alleys,  
The screams of a child in the streets,  
The cries of loved ones in the morgue  
The calls of relatives searching for their  
family,  
The never-ending wails of sirens in the  
dawn

The hearing filled with quiet cries  
Never mentioning the forgotten names of  
lost voices  
All there is to hear is a loud voice of a  
commander,  
A commander who wears this silent war  
as a badge

# The Grey Hungry Wolf

Alexis Dabu

Note: This story involves paths, which leads to different outcomes depending on your choice. Words or phrases in [brackets] are choices for paths.

In the outskirts of Lycae, there's a small cottage resided by a girl in a red hood and her grandmother. Close to the house is a village, separated by a thick forest. On the other side is a mountain of which packs of wolves live, one of which was mine. We usually feast on prey found here, birds, snakes, any sort. Occasionally, we'd sneak into the village, and feast on its residents, and for these past weeks, I've been getting an appetite for such. Ever since, day by day, I have observed this small family. The girl seems to stroll down the village by morning and return to the cottage by evening. It seems to be her routine. And today, this day, I've decided to make my move. However, things seem different. On her way down, she seemed wary, aware that she's being watched. Strange. Quite strange. Nevertheless, as she entered the village, I made my way to the cottage. My plan was simple. The grandmother is sick in bed, and I can only assume she's taking care of her. I can't say for sure what's happening because the windows are always closed, and I never got close to the cottage to really check. One day though, she mentioned how sick her grandmother was on her way down. That's how I got quite the gist. I plan to take the place of the grandmother in bed, and once the girl approaches me, I'll pounce and take care of my appetite. However, as I get close to the cottage, I get a scent. It smelled like...

<< [COW]

[BLOOD] >>



cow. It smelled like cooked beef, more likely beef stew. I went in, ready to hide the grandmother. However, she was not in sight. I see how alone I am in this house, but there's this uneasy feeling that I'm not. I feel lost with my plan, yet I smelled the stew again. I'm used to eating meat raw, but this meal was quite tempting. I dared to take a sip of the soup, and a bite of the beef. It was delicious, not like any food I've consumed before. I took more bites, and more sips. Then, I felt it. I felt heavy, dizzy, and drowsy. As I tried walking to the door, I swayed and swiveled. Then suddenly, I fell unconscious on the bed. I woke up tied to a chair, facing a red hooded girl, and her healthy grandmother. As I regained some comprehension, I heard what the girl was saying.

"A wolf? So, it was a wolf who was stalking me in the forest."

"You seem to be hungry. After all, you went all out on our beef stew."

I asked how long she has known of a stalker in the forest. It was the grandmother who did the talking this time.

"Weeks ago, my granddaughter, my dear Rosemary, told me about an uneasy feeling."

"She felt that someone was watching her in the forest. It's creepy, you know?"

"So, I hatched a plan with my grandchild. I had to make sure you'd think that I was sick"

"We'll cook up a delicious stew and lace it with sleepy herbs. Once we have captured the stalker, we'll..."

<< [KILL]

[ASK]>>



blood. It was strange, yet I shrugged it off, thinking it's probably exposed meat for their meals. Finally, I'm here. I was about to hide the grandmother elsewhere, but she uttered some unsettling whispers.

"Help me. Please."

Then, I saw her blanket stained red. It had the same scent as the one I smelled earlier. Her legs. Skin and flesh were missing. It's as if her body was being flayed. As I felt uneasy from the sight in front of me, I heard rustling of fallen leaves and sticks. She's already by the door. I hid in the closet as there was no time left to leave. As she arrived, she removed her red hood, unveiling what seemed to be a bloodstained dress. Come to think of it, I caught faint scents of blood from her every day. It's as though she tries to wash them off but never succeeds, thus weakening the scent of blood. As she entered the bedroom of her grandmother, I saw everything from the closet slits. She removed the blanket, grabbed her knife, and flayed a chunk of her grandmother's leg. She grabbed the vegetables from her basket, chopped it, and made stew with her grandmother's flesh. And as she sat down near the bed, eating the stew, she talked.

"Granny, why did we have to be this poor? I miss mommy and daddy."

"We were starving, no food for days, and I got crazy. I took a bite out of mommy, then daddy hurt me, and I hurt daddy back."

"After that, daddy didn't fight me anymore, they stopped talking. I was still starving, so I began eating mommy and daddy slowly."

"I ran out of them, so now I started eating you."

"I'm sorry grandma."

So that was how it was. After learning things are the way they are, I became more terrified, eager to escape. She approached the door, and I thought she was leaving once more. I was finally able to escape, yet the next sound I heard wasn't a welcome one. The door creaked shut, the sliding locks clicked. The girl leaned back with a sinister grin. "Now, where is that wolf?" She knows I'm here. It's starting to make sense. She returned in a short time after she left, when she would normally do so in the evening. She... she just waited for me to invade the cottage. She checked the cupboards, under the bed, and the ceiling, until all that is left unchecked is this closet. Being sure of herself, she stabbed her knife through the closet door slit. The knife went through...

<<[NOTHING]

[MY CHEST]>>





kill him.”

They thought I would be a man, but after finding out that I’m indeed a wolf, they seem to have other plans. Rosemary, the girl, grabbed a knife, stood behind me, and placed it on my neck, preparing to slit it. With a sinister grin, she says,

“You know, a person wouldn’t have tasted so well, and it’s bad to eat other people, so we would’ve just burned your body if you were a person”

“But a wolf is not a person. So maybe we can eat you.”

“Besides, I want to try wolf for tonight grandma.”

“Okay sweetie. I’ll prepare you a nice supper later.”

“Wait. Wait”

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Suddenly, I felt a sting along my neck. I couldn’t move my arms. The image I’m seeing of this small family is... turning? Suddenly, they’re standing sideways. Then, it hit. My head had hit the floor. Ahhh, they cut my he-

*I was hoping to have dinner, but it was I they ate.*

*What has become of my fate... a serving on a dinner plate.*



ask him a few questions.”

“His motives, his intentions, we should find out first.”

“All I wanted was food. Rather, I wanted something different. I have been growing an appetite for humans, and it hasn’t gone away since.”

“Right. Of course. Then I’m afraid to say... it will be you who’s getting eaten today.”

I see her preparing to swing that cleaver across my neck. I’m about to- wait! something’s...

“Hey, Granny. Who tied me up?”

“Rosemary. Why do you ask?”

“It’s loose.”

I quickly clawed the ropes apart, and lunged for the largest threat. I bit off the grandmother’s arm, and gnawed on her horrified face. It only took a while for her to be unrecognizable. So, this is a human. It tasted better than I thought. Though eventually, the appetite shrank as I ate more, until it’s finally gone. I got up and full.

“Now, where is that girl?”

---

*I’ve had my fill of human meat. Though, I died after.*

*You know what? I don’t mind dying. I’ll go quietly now.*



nothing. This is my chance. As she struggles to take the knife off, I bust the closet door open, running straight for the door. Luckily, it was easy to slide the lock open, and I got the door open in no time. However, as I narrowly made my escape, the knife she threw struck my leg. It hurts. It stings, but I have to keep moving. Keep running and running, she could be following behind. I kept running and running, until my leg bled out, and soon after, I will have as well. I'm slowly getting lost in thought.

Ow! I tripped on a rock. I couldn't get up anymore. I think I've run far enough. I just need to take a rest. Just close my eyes, and res—

*Oh. I guess I died sleeping. What a horrific child that was.*

*There wasn't any point in escaping. I shouldn't have went there.*



my chest, and that's where I drew it. I gasped for air, choking in my own blood. I'm losing consciousness, but I could still hear a few words.

"Th██ yo██ a██."

"Th██ks to y██u, I w██'t██ ave to e██ gr██d██ a any██re."

"N██w p██se. Di██"

Ah, I completely lost my hearing. I'm slowly losing thought. Ahhhh, this su—

*This was'nt part of the plan. I just wanted to eat.*

*What a horrifying final sight to die on.*