**Synopsis**

Here is a collection of mini-story things which will become part of a larger collection of mini-stories, set in the fictional town of Melancholy Valley!

To briefly describe the town, Melancholy Valley is this mysterious, weird, mystical town on the edge of the world located next to a bog. It is seeping with strange supernatural phenomena, including ghosts, living shadows, sentient animals, otherworldly entities, monsters, and more. The citizens are generally pretty accustomed to these strange occurrences, but things begin to change after a large corporation discovers the town and begins trying to commodify it. Factories spring up and the town quickly becomes industrial, which clashes against the weird magical elements. New people begin to move into the town and they have to learn about its quirks, and the mystical elements are refined and sold to the world, slowly losing their otherworldliness, eventually becoming mundane.

All of the stories are set in the town of Melancholy Valley and they jump around between several different citizens and their lives. There isn’t one particular ‘main-narrative,’ but some characters are featured in multiple stories (for example, in this collection the character Claudius was featured in a previous poem where he bragged about his frog, and Sage Greya is a well known mystic who runs a talk show). There are also many images that appear in the stories, like ghosts, Another Place (which is a spiritual dimension under the town where ghosts live), shadows, and more. I hope that these aren’t elements that people will have to memorize, and rather aspects that they will understand or come to their own conclusions on as they read.

By the end, I’d love for this collection to include dozens and dozens of stories that all work to build more of the world of Melancholy Valley, until it feels like a fleshed out, interesting, and memorable world.

Thank you in advance for any and all feedback!

Claudius’ Frog Vanishes

The guards at the Frog Museum are absolute buffoons!

I am livid, I am frustrated, and my day has been absolutely spoiled.

Oh, this was supposed to be a day to celebrate my triumph,

my success!

But instead, here we are.

Earlier, I had decided to pay a quick visit to the museum,

for I wanted to visit my award-winning, celebrated

(and absolutely, wholeheartedly, perfect)

frog in its display case,

only for a bumbling guard to stumble over to me,

panicked, greasy, and sweaty,

exclaiming how my frog had been stolen!

I was shocked, horrified, how could they have let this happen!

However, when I went over to its display,

the frog was still there,

sitting on its gilded pillow, behind its glass case,

exactly as it always had.

I believed the guard was trying to play me for a fool,

so, I demanded he give me a worthwhile answer,

or I would fire him on the spot.

He explained, that just last night as he patrolled,

he witnessed a shadowy figure appear from behind a curtain,

and quickly, instantaneously, it flung a gangly, unnatural limb towards my frog’s display,

and it reached through and snatched it out!

However, according to this guard, before the shadow disappeared into thin air,

it replaced the frog with another frog that looked exactly like it!

I’ve looked this frog up and down, side to side,

and I am certain that this must be my frog,

The thought that someone could steal my frog,

that someone could so effortlessly replicate the perfection of my frog,

why…

Why that’s ridiculous!

For if such a thing was possible, if someone could replicate my frog,

then could that mean that they are as good at raising frogs as I? Or better?

Shadow Spas

Are you tired of looking at your shadow?

Are you tired of seeing the same boring shape against the same boring lights?

Don’t you wish your shadow could be something… more?

Something you could control or change?

Well, wish no longer!

These dreams of the past are now reality,

thanks to miraculous discoveries and developments from the Shadowmonger Corporation!

Just stop by one of our ‘Shadow-Spas,’

and, for a reasonable price, we’ll fix it up in any way you’d like!

Would you like your shadow to be a bit longer?

We’ll stretch it out and it might trick people into thinking you’re taller!

Or maybe you’d just like to completely get rid of it?

Shadows just get in the way sometimes, don’t they?

Or perhaps you want your shadow to stop wasting space and actually help around the house?

Let us zap some life into it and it’ll be cleaning in no time!

Or what if you want no ambiguity with your shadow whatsoever?

What if you want to force it to take exactly whatever shape you want whenever?

We most certainly will do that.

The process is non-intrusive and quick,

all you need to do is lay your body and your shadow down in one of our baths,

and we’ll fill it with warm, nourishing, ghost-infused bog water.

Throw in some bubbles, throw some cucumbers over your eyes,

we’ll put on music (if you can still hear it), and we’ll massage your shoulders.

It will be over in no time.

You’ll step out feeling refreshed and renewed,

and your shadow will be modified to your liking,

you’ll be ready to start a new, happier, more confident chapter of your life!

There is only one small, insignificant side-effect,

you will lose a small part of your shadow.

It will stick to the bottom of the bathtub, and there will be no way to reattach it.

The Shadowmonger Corporation will take it for research and development.

But a lighter shadow is a happier shadow, right?

It is.

Cackling Lanterns

Oh hello, what are you doing here so late?

Are you lost, or could you have heard the lanterns?

Well, regardless, my name is Gravekeeper Loid,

and welcome to Melancholy Valley’s only graveyard.

That’s right,

despite how big the town is, and how many new folks keep moving in,

all we need is one graveyard.

That’s because people here just don’t die,

the town has a knack for persisting, existing beyond everything and anything

I suppose a bit of that has rubbed off onto the people,

but no one can live forever.

The bog is ravenous, the streets are starved,

so when someone finally plops down dead,

the ground will swallow them up.

Their body is eaten, it nourishes the Veins,

and all that is left is their ghost

which is gently carried down to Another Place to live on.

However, sometimes the dead have some trouble going into the soil,

maybe the town just wasn’t all too hungry that night,

or maybe they just didn’t look very appetizing…

When that happens, all the lanterns light up around my graveyard,

and they start cackling and howling, it’s the ghosts talking.

They love lanterns, and they can communicate through them,

and when the cackling starts, it’s my signal to go out and gather that corpse.

The flickering light of the lanterns leads me to the dead,

then I carry them back to the graveyard.

When we return, the lanterns shake and flicker,

and all the ghosts, for a moment, are able to return.

They leave Another Place to guide the fresh ghost to its new home,

and just like the lanterns, they cackle, and so do I,

we are joyful and have much to celebrate, for this is a rare occurrence,

the ghosts get to come up and see the town for another time,

they get to come up and see the lanterns,

and I get to see them.

Pieces of Stars

Today another star fell down and landed in my backyard.

It’s is like the third one this week, and it’s getting really annoying,

You know, at first it was kind of fun,

I was like:

“Oh wow! Is that a real star?

Isn’t it crazy it landed in my backyard!

I need to hang it up on the fridge!”

I brought all my coworkers over and had them look at it,

and they were also excited,

“That’s so cool! What are the chances?”

But now they are EVERYWHERE,

everyone has had a star land in their backyard,

or on top of their house, or in their gutters,

they’ve fallen into the sewers, they’re probably in the bog,

every day it feels like a hundred stars fall out of the sky.

And they are sharp too!

I was going to work one morning, and I stepped on one of them,

it’s hard to see their glow in the daylight,

and it went straight through my shoe and got stuck in my toe.

Thankfully, I believe that this will stop soon.

I heard it on the radio, Sage Greya’s talk show,

someone called in asking about them,

and so she started going on and on about how this was a ‘bad omen,’ or something,

*I don’t care,* said the caller,

*When will the stars stop falling?*

So she continued,

she said that soon, we’ll run out of stars,

and then the sky will be inkier than the void,

then she blabbered on and on about some more stuff about the stars,

like how the ghosts are angry or how the stars were necessary,

blah, blah, blah…

All I hope is that she’s telling the truth, I hope that we’ll run out of stars soon,

because another one just landed in my yard and I just can’t take this anymore.

The Sludge

Greetings,

I hope my appearance doesn’t startle you too much,

I am the Sludge.

What *exactly* am I?

That is a very good question.

I certainly am a big bundle of all the things your town has thrown into my sewers,

all those ghosts, shadows, and bones that you discard,

I believe that, somehow, they have formed together,

in some sort of forgotten, inky soup,

and became me.

However, onto more pressing matters,

how have you ended up down here in my sewers?

Did you fall down one of the holes across your town,

those deep, dark pits where you all throw your waste down?

It is possible, you seem skinny enough to fit in one.

However, please do not worry,

I know how to escape, and I can guide you.

All I ask is for one small favor in return.

I go around and gather all of the things your town throws down here,

and I add them to myself.

As you expulse, I grow.

If I did not exist to consume these things,

surely my sewers would overflow and surely they would consume your town.

So, the next time you go to throw something down into my sewers,

would you consider throwing something pleasant down with it?

It is hard work navigating the tunnels and eating the waste,

and having a nice surprise to stumble across every now and again would be lovely.

I have been meaning to decorate, however there is very little I can work with.

If you would go out into the bog, fetch a flower,

and toss it down,

I would be very thankful.

Now come,

allow me to show you the way out.

The Eye Thief

Quickly, look over here!

No, not that way, over HERE,

in the alleyway!

Yes, this one, there you go!

Oh… well that’s rather disappointing…

Your eyes that is.

Oh, where are my manners, please, let me introduce myself first,

I am Philbert,

and I’m certain, although you cannot see my body,

you can surely see my eyes,

my hundreds and thousands of beautiful, beautiful eyes that glow in the shadows.

Surely you have seen them peering from every shadowy corner across the town,

it is one of the benefits of having so many, you can see so much,

you can send them off to watch so many things,

the excitement of seeing so many people and so many things at once…

And for the longest time,

I have been waiting to find someone with eyes as beautiful as mine.

Yours, well… they certainly leave much to be desired.

Although you do have many, I can tell that you’ve just recently acquired them.

You do not know how to control them, they have no unity

all over the place, no focus…

ugly…

However, I do have a proposal for you.

Look into my eyes one more time,

do you not see how beautiful they are?

Do you not wish yours could be like mine?

I believe that life is not worth living with ugly eyes,

so I will show you pity,

I can show you how to fix your eyes.

Step into the alleyway, come into the dark,

and then we can share our eyes, just for a moment, I promise…

Let me take them and I can show them the secrets I see,

and from that, they can become trained, perceptive,

beautiful, purposeful…

Please, give me your eyes…

Crows with Teeth

I know many things, but it’s not because I’m some wise or scholarly person,

in fact, I believe I’m a rather simple person.

The crows with teeth are the reason I know so much,

they are also the reason I always carry silverware in my pocket!

I discovered them by accident,

after a long day of work I prepared myself a casserole and ate it on the porch.

It was delicious, although the middle was hard as a rock,

(maybe I didn’t leave it in the microwave long enough?)

I kept trying to bash and scoop away at that solid center, but no luck,

and I must’ve put on just a little too much force…

I mistakenly flung the casserole and my fork into the yard,

then the crows quickly swooped down from nowhere.

I was convinced they were after the casserole, but they went for the fork,

and gnashed it to little pieces.

They seemed quite pleased with themselves, then they approached me,

stepping over the remains of the casserole,

staring expectantly, grinning with their skinny, bitty fangs.

I’m a lonely person, so I figured this could be a good opportunity to make some friends,

so I grabbed all the silverware I had and I gave it to the crows,

and one by one, they crunched each fork, spoon, and butter-knife to bits,

thrashing and gnawing,

laughing and jeering at each other and me.

Then they thanked me, and they said they would be back tomorrow,

so I quickly ran out and bought more forks!

And sure enough, they showed up, and again, they gnashed my silverware,

this happens every night, and sometimes when I’m walking to work

(hence why I always keep some in my pocket!)

and every time they’re done, they thank me and tell me a secret,

like how my hair looks nice, or how I smell good today,

or how to collect shadows, or how to see ghosts,

how to talk with rats, how to tell when you shouldn’t trust someone.

I believe I would’ve been truly lost in this town if it weren’t for them and their secrets,

I am thankful they are my friends, and I am thankful I lost my casserole that evening.

Lost in the Outskirts

How…

How do I get out of here?

Listen, it’s time for me to leave now,

I was only visiting briefly so I could get some easy money,

some of these weirdos were offering a lot of cash if you ‘sold your ghost’ to them,

they brought me into a factory, made me sign a bunch of paperwork,

then they had me swim in some gross, inky, black ooze,

and said it was done.

Just a bunch of crazy, superstitious malarky if you ask me

but now I can’t find the way out.

I could’ve sworn that I walked down this road when I first arrived a few days ago…

But the road looks so different,

this isn’t the same road, it just leads to more town,

the town just keeps going,

it just keeps going.

Sometimes I end up at the bog, sometimes I end up at the mountains,

I’ll end up back at town square, back at the factories,

but never at the exit.

There IS an exit,

isn’t there?

Or is there only an entrance?

No… that doesn’t make sense.

The creeps at the factory were no help,

they always bragged about all their exports, so they had to know a way out,

but they said their pathways out were restricted only for their caravans,

and they wouldn’t show me.

None of the citizens are willing to help either,

I ask how to get out, and they just stare at me,

*What are you talking about?*

then they’ll look me up and down for a moment,

smile, start laughing at me,

like I’m the biggest idiot they’ve ever met.

*If you haven’t found the exit already, then it’s probably too late for you,*

*might as well get used to this place.*

I Want My Mailbox Back

My sisters don’t live here,

and the only way they could communicate with me was by sending letters.

They’d show up in my mailbox,

and my helper frog would go out and grab them,

then, he’d swallow them,

and repeat word for word what they had wrote,

and they were always the most kind and pleasant notes,

hoping that I was feeling well,

hoping my helper frog was keeping me as happy as ever,

hoping that one day my sight would come back,

then, I’d tell my sweet little frog what I wanted to write back,

and he’d go off and write whatever I said,

and send it off.

But then my frog went silent.

I had heard him enter and leave the house, presumably to check if there were notes,

but weeks went by and there was nothing.

Why wasn’t he reading the letters?

Eventually, I asked, and then I heard him scribble and eat a note.

And he spoke,

He told me that as my helper frog, he would try to keep me happy,

always, forever, no matter what,

but today, he had unfortunate news to share,

the mailbox was gone,

completely gone.

And I asked how that was possible,

it was made of heavy, heavy stone,

and it was stuck deep in the ground.

And he responded that he did not know,

but the mailbox was not there.

There would be no more letters from my sisters.

So now I sit here in silence with my frog,

I know he is too small to replace the mailbox on his own,

and I know that I do not have the money to purchase a new one.

But I still hope that one day the mailbox will return,

I hope that I will get my letters again.

I Never Drank Crab Juice

Today, I visited my favorite restaurant for the last time,

It’s this old crab shack by the bog,

apparently, somewhere, there are swamp-crabs that they fish for,

at least that’s what the owner told me.

I loved the place, and I loved this town,

but I did not love my job.

I worked at a factory that made door knobs,

so, after years and years,

after I grew exhausted looking at the door knobs, I left.

I’d get another job here, but there are only factories,

and I just can’t work at a place like that again,

so I need to leave Melancholy Valley.

Today was my last day of work, and I’m leaving in the morning,

so, that also means it was my last visit to the crab shack,

but I didn’t realize that until I was twenty or thirty steps away.

It was the last visit, and I blew it.

How did I not realize?

Why, if I had thought about it for a second, I would have really cherished that last visit,

I would’ve made sure to order everything off the menu,

or I could’ve asked for a photo with the chef,

(he doesn’t even know I’m leaving,

and he’s never going to know why I stopped visiting)

and most importantly, I would’ve tried crab juice

On the counter, there was always a little sign advertising 'handmade crab juice.’

I have no idea what crab juice is,

is it just leftover blood from the crabs?

Is it the water that the crabs swam in?

Liquified crab shells?

Whatever it was, it sounded disgusting, like something I’d probably hate.

But now I’ll never really know.

And even though I’m almost certain I would’ve hated it,

I wish I could’ve experienced it at least once,

before I left.

The Veins

On the outskirts, where the town ends and the bog begins,

you will inevitably stumble across a hole in the ground.

They are impossible to miss,

they are huge and they are innumerable.

It would be best for you to stay out of them,

but if you are feeling curious, brave, or foolish,

then grab a light, something to keep you dry,

maybe something to help you remember the way out,

and hop in.

You’ll find yourself within a network of formless tunnels covered in moss.

The air is muggy and slimy, but these are not the sewers,

no, they go deeper,

it’s said they go down to the very center of the earth,

and that they distort reality,

and at the bottom, the very bottom,

is a hole in the world that will take you straight to Another Place.

These are The Veins of the town,

at least that’s what everyone calls them,

no one knows if they lead to a heart of sorts,

but like veins,

they are impossible to map out,

they shift, contort and breathe,

they constrict, they twist,

and they are the life essence for Melancholy Valley.

So many people have delved into the Veins,

filled with confidence, they believe that they might find the truth of the veins.

Do they believe that they can find the heart,

or that it’s some kind of treasure for them to plunder,

or that they’ll be gifted some mystical, unfathomable power?

It does not matter,

all of them are eaten by the Veins.

No one will ever find what they’re looking for down there,

and the town will stay fed.