





# **Voyages and Visitors**

An anthology of stories and poems

by the teen writers at Studio NPL and Southern Word

# About Southern Word & Studio NPL

Through the literary and performing arts, **Southern Word** offers creative solutions for youth to build literacy and presentation skills, reconnect to their education and lives, and act as leaders in the improvement of their communities. We are committed to providing youth, especially in underserved communities, with as many opportunities as possible to develop and publicly present their voices both live and in print, video, audio, and digital media. We believe that through spoken word poetry, creative writing, and music production every student has the potential to be effective communicators, critical thinkers, and strong leaders.

**Studio NPL** is a non-formal educational environment for teens to engage in interactive, technology and arts-based programming hosted by skilled mentors from Nashville's community of makers and artists, and through valuable partner organizations like Southern Word. Daily programming is provided, free of charge, in nine library locations and is designed to give teens the opportunity to learn and practice skills in science, photography, creative writing, music production, 3D printing, poetry, and more. Through programming they are invited to try new things, engage with new people, and build confidence in themselves and respect for their community. As a space housed in the Nashville Public Library, it is an honor to support the work of Nashville's talented and passionate young people by being a supporting partner along with Southern Word to bring this creative writing anthology to print.

# Foreword

In these pages, you will follow characters on voyages: struggling to survive a capsized wreck, returning to a tiny Czech village after years away, journeying to Earth after a lifetime on a far-flung colony. And you will encounter visitors—welcome and unwelcome, strange and familiar: a jeweler who isn't what he seems, an unknown voice on the line, fortune-telling cards in a too-real nightmare, a wrathful brother and a winged gray-blue kitten. Though each of these stories takes us into a different world, different characters, different fears, hopes, and desires—each reflects the unique vision of the writer, the care and attention to words and images, the dedication to discovering the stories we want to tell, shaping them, and finally sharing them with readers.

Wednesday afternoons, a group of dedicated teenage writers gathers for a workshop which is the product of collaboration between Southern Word and the Nashville Public Library's Studio NPL. Writing may seem by definition a solitary act, yet as these writers know, it doesn't have to be. And in fact, there's something incredible that happens when a group of writers comes together, to work alongside one another, to learn from, collaborate and support one another. As the leader of this workshop, I have had the privilege to write with, discuss fiction, and learn from each of the members.

Each week, the writers share moments from their past weeks, triumphs and setbacks, hopes and frustrations, writing goals and visions. Together we discuss an aspect of fiction-writing craft: characterization, subtext, world building, voice, dialogue, plot, or we read a short story and discuss how other authors have crafted their stories and how we can apply those techniques to our own writing.

Then the writing begins. So many times over the past year I have looked around the group to see everyone locked in on their writing: typing on phones or tablets or longhand, headphones in or out, looking up with that particular far-eyed gaze that means the writer isn't actually looking at what's in front of them, but looking inward, for that perfect word or line of dialogue or image.

After a writing session, writers choose to share their work and then give each other thoughtful feedback: their emotional reactions, the lines they loved, questions they have for the writer as they continue to develop their work. This sense of community is what has sustained this workshop and inspires me as I've watched these writers grow and develop their craft over the past year.

- Anna Silverstein, Southern Word Writer Mentor

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# It's About 3:27 AM

Sabrina Lessly

You've been staring at the lazy spin of your almost broken ceiling fan for... what time is it? You roll over to look at your nightstand clock. Five hours now, soon to be five and a half. Maybe you should've spent more of that time with your eyes closed—you know, actually *trying* to sleep—but that hasn't been working for the past several nights, so why bother trying it now? It's... it's *weird*, this not sleeping. Not quite in line with the way a human body should work, not quite in adherence with common logic and knowledge somehow retained from high school health classes. Weirder still is the certainty of it, the idea that you haven't gotten even a second of sleep for the past week being a *fact*, not a feeling. There *is* a feeling, though, buried deep underneath the haze of exhausted frustration and thoughts deteriorating in coherency. A feeling of... of...

You sigh and rub at your eyes. Even if you had any clue what it is, your sleep-deprived brain has forgotten any good words. You use more effort than should be necessary to focus on the clock again. *Really?* Not even a *minute* has passed? You groan and, in spite of past evidence and knowing *beyond* knowing that nothing will work, bury your face into your pillow and squint your eyes shut. Counting sheep is something you found childish even when you *were* a child, but desperation asks unusual things of people. You spend a little too much time imagining the sheep before you start: puffy, ghost-white fleece glimmering under the moonlight; knobby, stocky legs that end in polished hooves; soft and delicate ears; and large, staring eyes with those eldritch rectangular pupils. Your reason for this evades you.

1... 2... 3... 4...

... 77... 78... 79...

... 213... 214... 216... 217... 21—Wait, no. 215? Did you count that? Did you count 215? And what about 214? Did you count that one?

...Does it *matter* anymore?

A jangling cacophony startles you. It's... it's your phone. That's right, that's what your ringtone sounds like. *God*, are you even *more* tired? How is that *possible*? You struggle to move your hand in the direction of the nightstand. Covers, more covers, lamp, glass of water—careful—lamp again, pho—no, no, that's the clock. Edge of nightstand, edge of nightstand... phone! You move your head to take a look. The caller is... a string of numbers. Nope. You hit ignore and let your arm fall onto the bed.

It's ringing again. You look. The same numbers. Are they? Yes. Probably. You're pretty sure. Ignore.

More ringing. Same numbers. Same response.

Seriously, *again*? Screw it, let it ring. Maybe that'll prove your point. Whatever point it is you have. Heck if you know.

...

...

...

Okay, phones don't ring for this long.

You answer. "You have the wrong number."

*"Oh, I don't think that I do."*

They sound like they're speaking in italics. This thought makes no sense. Neither do they. "Nope. Don't know you."

*"Oh, I think that you do."*

"Is that how all of your sentences go?"

*"There's no time for this nonsense. I need you to l-"*

"Huh. Guess not."

*"Listen to me. You can't stay where you are right now. You need to come to me."*



# Wandering Rogue

Bethany Reinsch

I look out over the railing into the sea as the cruise ship floats through the water. It's raining and windy tonight. I push my ponytail away as it whips my face, but give up pretty quickly as it keeps coming back. I love standing out here watching the ocean churn. It's chaotic. But it's beautiful.

"Aimi! Come inside," the ship's captain yells. I pretend not to hear so I can stay and watch the storm, but he comes outside to make me go as thunder claps. Immediately after we shut the door, I look out the window to see lightning strike the water. Maybe it shouldn't, but watching the lightning and the wind calms me. I stand motionless at the window for about twenty minutes. Then I see it.

It's a wave. Yes, waves are common in the ocean. But it's huge. This isn't just a big wave. It's a rogue wave. And these can wipe out ships. They can be up to 40 meters. They're terrifying. They're not common. But they do happen. And there's one coming straight toward us.

"Kaito!" I yell for the captain. "Rogue!" Kaito comes running to the window.

"Oh no." He grabs at the communication device strapped to his belt loop. "Control, we have a rogue. Turn the ship into the wave if possible." That's the only way to stop the ship from rolling. We need to get over the wave before it breaks. But since this is such a large ship, there may not be enough time.

There is not enough time. The ship is turned only part of the way before the wave gets to us. And it gets to us just as it starts to break. Kaito starts to speak over the intercom. "Passengers, we are nearing a rogue

wave. Please hold on to something if you can. In the event that the ship rolls over, you will need to exit as soon as possible. Please take a flotation device now as a precaution.”

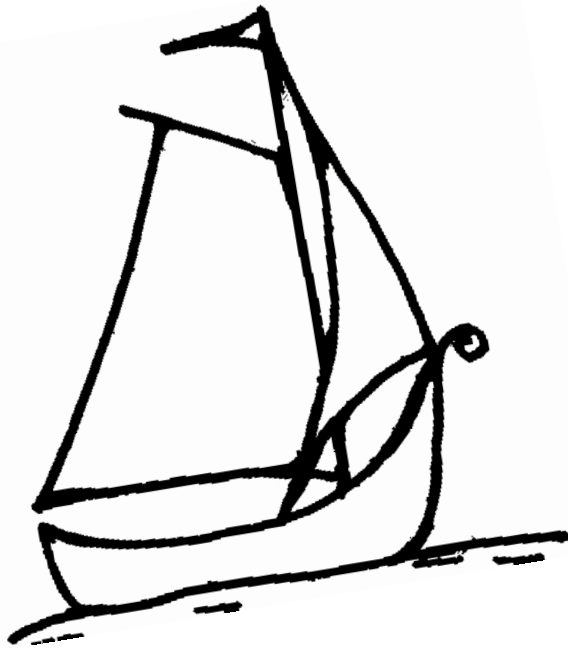
I grab a life jacket and brace myself. The ship begins to roll. Three times. That’s how many times we all end up on the ceiling. Then it stops. We’re still on the ceiling. The boat is going to start sinking soon. Kaito begins giving more instructions over the intercom, but I know what to do. I’ve been trained for this.

I find an emergency exit and swim away from the ship as fast as possible. I’m just barely out of reach when the ship goes down. I can feel the slight tug of the undertow as I watch from a distance. I can see that there are still people too close to the ship. They won’t make it. The undertow is too strong there. I frantically tread water before realizing I’m in a life jacket. I’m not sinking. Then I completely freeze. There’s nothing I can do to stop it and there’s nothing I can do to help them. And Kaito. He basically raised me. What am I going to do, where am I going to go? I have no home. I have no family. I have no friends. I don’t know what to do. I can feel tears running down my face. Or is that just the ocean splashing me? Both. Definitely both. I have to do something. I have to stop the ship from sinking. I swim towards the ship as fast as I can, but it’s gone. I have to stop before I get too close. I have to survive this. I can’t stay here. I have to leave. It’s just like last time.

Except that last time it hadn’t been a rogue. It hadn’t even been a cruise ship. Just a little boat. We shouldn’t have taken it so far out. It hadn’t lasted long in the storm. But there had only been one life jacket. I was the youngest, and the weakest swimmer. But like I said before, we shouldn’t have taken the boat so far out. The rest of them hadn’t been able to swim long enough to survive. I had been freezing and close to starving when the captain of a ship had seen me, just a speck in the water.

Kaito saved me from the ocean and became a father figure to me. But he wouldn't abandon his ship today, even though it capsized. He's told me before, "You never leave your ship in a disaster, especially if there are other people on it that you can help. But if this ship ever sinks, I want you to be the first one off. If no one else survives, you will."

And so that's what happened. I float in one area for a while, looking for other people floating in the distance, but I don't see any. Then that's it.



# Wonderful Rail Route

## Tomas Cernocky

When I was young, I adored trains. And I still do. I love the squeaking of wheels against rails, the whistle, the beautiful nature the train uncovers, and the trains themselves. To me, they seem like parents carrying their children through trails in forests while having trips on foot.

If you want to get from Tišnov to Žd'ár nad Sázavou (little towns in the Czech Republic), you have two options. You can either go along the faster and more modern rail or along the one built a couple of hundred years ago, leading through forests and fields, past many creeks and a castle, where the trains always used to be powered by diesel, not electricity.

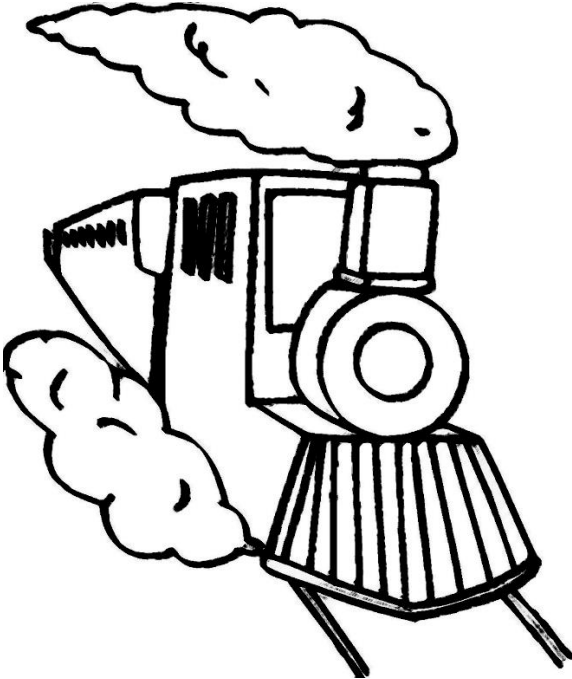
My village, where I used to live, and my parents still do, lies past the more modern rail. Throughout my whole life, besides interminable traveling on the modern rail, I wanted to experience the second one as well, due to curiosity. In the end, I managed to do just one route on that mysterious rail; it was like a fairytale.

Then, however, I began to attend a college abroad. I was missing my fairytale very much. Every night I dreamt about the rattling local train consisting of three orange-green cars. About various towns and villages past the route.

Now, it is the first summer break since I've been in college. That means what? I have enough time to visit my parents. And as I come there, I will be close to what? To my dream rail!

I am going from my parents' house to Tišnov by car to get on my local dream train. Just one turn—and—here it is! But...what? I cannot see any trains any more. Instead, the rail has become a tourist attraction; there are

little cars on it, with seats and pedals like on a bike. I am stunned—I will experience the rail for the second time as if going on a bike, and the fresh wind and vapors from the herbs will be blowing past me. There are no trains or parents any more, I have grown up.



# Nero's Demons

## Brooklynne Scivally

The sun had barely set below the horizon, casting its reddish purple rays across the atmosphere. The droplets of water that clung to the bare tree branches began to crystalize, creating a faint tinkling sound as the treetops swayed. Bits of snow began to fall from the sparse clouds silently onto the forest below.

A bright yellow flash of light signaled the arrival of a large white bear with golden wings, camouflaged against the snow save for his dark gray ears and tail. The bear glanced around with his golden eyes, letting out a deep sigh that quickly became a small cloud of condensation.

“Nero...” The bear huffed. “Always late.” The bear opened his large wings, propelling himself into the snow-dotted sky and gliding across the treetops with searching eyes.

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Elsewhere, the long gray shadows of a great pine tree extended unnaturally, producing a horned bear with fur the same murky gray, and dark leathery wings. A silver chain with a glowing sun charm hanging from it dangled from his neck, the only source of light on his shadowy form.

The bear pulled himself from the shadows as though climbing from a pool of water, huffing with the effort as his paws fumbled for purchase in the snow. Once he found himself on solid ground, the shadowy portal receded into the darkness.



Nero glanced around. The forest air was still. He shivered, a few quick huffs of condensation rising from his mouth. He knew Luca hated the lowlands, claiming it was too hot with so much lava around, but he at least could have chosen somewhere warmer to meet. A snowflake fluttered idly, landing on his dark-furred muzzle. He grunted with displeasure as it melted into his fur.

Wings flapped nearby. “Brother! There you are,” Luca called from somewhere above him.

Nero jumped slightly. He turned to see his sibling just above the trees, Luca’s golden wings seeming to glow in the dusky haze.

“You are late,” Luca announced.

Nero bit back a wry retort of *the sun is always early* as his brother landed, opting to bow his head apologetically instead. His chin bumped against the medallion as it began to glow. Its pacifying magic swam through him, the warmth coursing through his veins and settling on his mind. He couldn't joke around, not now. He had to be obedient. He had to be civil.

“Apologies,” was all Nero said.

Luca scoffed. “Come. Sit down and let us get to it. I have other business to which I must attend.” Luca strolled over to sit in front of a broken tree that had collapsed into a pile of rocks. He gestured to the space across from himself, not so subtly directing Nero to sit on the other side of a rock. Nero plopped down unceremoniously into the snow by the trunk with a loud crunch.

Luca rolled his eyes. “Now then,” he began, “status report. How is collection?”

Nero willed away a grimace, feigning contemplation. Demon capture was easy on its own, but the rapid growth of their population was beginning to be more than Nero could manage alone. Even now he could hear some

demons nearby, grumbling and hissing among the shadows around the two bears.

“I am doing my best,” Nero sighed, lowering his ears at Luca's icy stare, “but some... *help* would be appreciated?” He winced inwardly, anxious.

Luca raised an eyebrow. “Can you not convince some of those...*beasts* to help you?”

Nero ignored his brother's tactless choice of words. Most monsters often elected not to help him, though it was not for lack of trying. Nero had little authority, as they all saw him as one of them. An equal. None of them worshipped him the way Luca's angels did Luca. If Luca so pleased, all the god had to do was clap his paws together and angels would appear to tend to his every whim without protest. The thought made Nero's stomach churn with envy, the medallion making quick work of it.

“My ‘beasts’ are of no use to me,” he lied. He tried not to put too much force on the word, so as not to appear mocking, but it felt like betrayal coming from his mouth. It was a cruel reminder that Luca saw no difference between the monsters he lived with—the ones who talked and laughed and cried alongside him—and the screeching, thoughtless demons he came out to capture every night.

Luca let out a disdainful sigh, scratching at the stone between them in thought. “Have you made *any* progress in cleaning up your *mess*?” he asked.

Nero winced. He wanted to say *no*, but that was not what Luca desired to hear. It was not what he wanted Luca to report back to their mother.

“...Yes,” Nero said, fighting the urge to look away. Luca narrowed his eyes just a fraction, and Nero began to sweat. Luca knew he was lying, of course he knew, but Nero did not wish to back down.

Seconds passed, and no words were exchanged. Luca’s face remained impassive, calculating. Nero momentarily broke eye contact, wary of whatever Luca was thinking about.

Without warning, Luca clapped his paws together. “Splendid! At least there is *some* good news to tell,” he said forcefully, too forcefully. Nero winced.

The brothers stood, one after the other. “Now go,” Luca ordered. “Nidah has told me that someone will soon pass on in this vicinity soon. I thought I would give them an escort to the Highest Lands personally.” Luca smiled to himself.

“That is very kind of you, brother,” Nero commented, the good-natured sentiment he was trying for not quite reaching his voice, but Luca did not seem upset by it. Nero turned to walk in the other direction, but he only managed to take two steps back towards the mountain in the distance before Luca cleared his throat. Nero turned his head slightly, peering back at his brother.

Luca stood tall by the stone, his golden eyes glowing in the semi-darkness. His folded wings unfurled, raising high above his head. “Mother will be *so* pleased to hear the good news about you,” he said, leaning onto the stone before him.

Nero swallowed, feeling dread crawl up his spine.

“But next time we meet, your news *will* be *better*, hmm?”

Nero's eyes widened as he nodded obediently. Waves of dread swam through him, conveniently unfettered by the medallion.

Luca smiled, then turned. He strolled into the trees, folding his wings at his side once again. Nero watched him go, not taking his eyes off of the bear until he completely disappeared into the mangled forest. Nero waited a few more seconds, and then let out the breath he had been holding.

He had gotten off easy for now, but next time, Luca wouldn't be so kind. Nero grasped the chain of the medallion and lifted it over his head, opening a portal within the shadows and dropping the necklace into it.

Finally free to feel his own emotions, Nero kicked a pile of snow, stalking away with a huff. He felt his boiling fury rising as he trudged through the snow, no real destination in mind. All of his repressed emotions came flooding back to him.

How could Luca *do this* to him? They were *brothers*. They were *family*. He supposed family meant *nothing* to his opposite. He didn't see Luca blackmailing *Nidah*, even though the three gods all knew how uncomfortable Nidah made Mother. Surely their mother's approval would be a lovely reward for *her* as well. But *no*, only Nero needed to be *bribed* and *blackmailed* into submission.

Nero growled to himself, feeling his anger burn beneath his temples. He raised a freezing paw and placed it on his head. He...needed to calm down. He had no time to waste. There were demons to collect, and his own emotions were of no help. If his anger grew strong enough to make a new demon, he'd have another problem to deal with.

Nero sighed, stopping to rub his eyes. He wasn't used to all this...light.

Something small and solid collided with Nero's side. He jumped as it fell back into the snow, letting out a tiny *oof*. Nero gaped in shock.

It was an angel. A tiny grayish-blue kitten angel, with sky blue eyes and premature golden wings. It looked frail and helpless as it heaved breath after breath, and looked up at him with wide eyes.

When he locked eyes with it, the whole world went still. The kitten didn't scream or run away, not like Nero anticipated. Instead, it merely blinked curiously at him.

“Hello there,” Nero said quietly, as not to scare it.

The kitten's ears pricked up.

“Are you lost?” Nero asked.

Its only response was a tiny mewl. Nero couldn't help but smile. He placed his front paws on the ground by the kitten, lowering his face to its height. He exhaled, stirring up some bits of snow that had yet to freeze together. Tiny snowflakes fluttered down and landed on its head. The kitten blinked confusedly, letting out another mewl.

It picked itself up and toddled towards Nero, coming close enough to inspect him with a tiny pink nose. It twitched its tail in curiosity.

“What a poor soul,” Nero murmured as he watched the tiny creature move. The kit looked to be at least a few months old, but its premature wings indicated that it had been at most a few days since its death, if that.

Nero frowned. If it didn't have enough Lucan magic to appear any older, then it could not have been more than a few minutes old when it died.

Nero lifted his head, scanning the gaps between the dark tree trunks for any sign of movement in the undergrowth. Where was Luca? He must have startled the angel into flight, so where was he? Did he not give chase?

Nero felt a lingering dread crawl up his spine once more. What would Luca think, seeing him talking to an angel, and such a tiny one? Nero needed to leave. He couldn't risk it.

He looked the angel in the eyes. "You cannot stay here," he told it forcefully, hoping it would understand. It did not cower, but its ears fell at his tone. Nero took a step back.

The kit's ears flicked up, and it mewled loudly as it scampered after him. It tripped over itself in the snow. Nero pushed it back with a paw, returning it to its original spot with a nervous laugh.

"Go on, now," he whispered. "It is not safe here." The kit simply mewled again, renewing its efforts when Nero turned away again.

He pushed the stubborn creature back again, carefully sliding it backwards across the snowy earth. Small powdery tracks formed behind its paws. "I told you, kitten, it is not safe here. Go back to Luca, he will take care of you," Nero told it sternly, meeting its eyes again. The kit frowned up at him, its bright blue eyes watering.

Nero's heart clenched with pity, and he moved a bit closer, debating touching it. The kit solved the dilemma for him, taking the opportunity to climb up and lay down on top of his paw.

Nero grimaced, but lifted his paw. The kit held on with tiny claws as Nero carried it to a lump of snow, and desperately tried to hang on as Nero shook it off gently.

The kit plopped into the snow sadly, shifting slightly before its tears broke loose. It began to wail loudly, Nero's ears falling back as he cringed at the sound. As much as he was hoping Luca was not close enough to hear it, he hoped Luca was close enough to come and retrieve it. The sky was growing darker with each passing moment.

Nero flapped his paws. "Shh, shh! It is all right. Luca is probably just back there, I can go get—" Nero snapped his mouth shut as the kit wailed louder, cutting him off.

“Hm. Alright, well...” Nero murmured, unsure if the kit could hear. “I will have to leave you here, then.” Nero began to step away. Luca would come for it, he told himself. As much as he hated to leave it, he couldn't stay.

The kit immediately stopped wailing as Nero stepped back, scrambling to come after him again. Nero held out a paw sternly, and the kit froze in its tracks. Nero kept his paw outstretched as he moved away from the kit, step by step.

The kit finally seemed to give up, curling into itself and shutting its eyes. Nero took the opportunity and spread his frozen wings, taking to the sky before the kit opened its eyes again.

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Nero spent a few hours collecting demons. The screeches of the last one rang in his ears, he could have sworn the little being had shaken the earth. Most of the other demons in the area were put on alert, so he decided to give up for the night. Once he was done, he took a portal back to the lowlands, rather than using the physical entrance in the mountain. He stepped through the ground, into the comforting ashy red rock and the darkness all around. He huffed, his mind still in a state of unrest.

A looming shape before him stirred. A large black dog turned to him, rolling her entire frame over to peer at him with her three red eyes.

Nero held up his paws. “My apologies, Lucida. Did I wake you?” he asked, embarrassed.

Lucida chuckled, closing her third eye. “Eh, maybe. Don't worry about it. How was your meeting, love?” she woofed quietly. Nero would normally curl up next to her and rant about Luca, but he could not even think of his meeting. He paced nearby.

Lucida sat up, concerned. "Somethin' eatin' ya?" she asked, placing her large black paws on either side of Nero, cutting off his pacing abruptly. He sat down, looking away.

It had been a few hours. That was more than enough time for Luca to find the kit and take it with him. But what if the kit ran from him again? Luca was not a very patient god. Would he pursue it again? What if it was attacked by demons?

Sensing his distress, Lucida wrapped her paws around Nero's middle, pulling him in to rest his back against her chest. His head barely touched her chin. She leaned down to nudge him with her muzzle.

"C'mon," she whimpered, "talk to me. What's wrong? Somethin' happen with Luca?"

Nero looked up at her. "I ran into an angel," he whispered. "It was a kitten. It was all alone..."

Lucida blinked curiously, interested. "Did Luca come an' get it?" she asked.

Nero shook his head. "That is the problem. I think it *ran* from him. I left it there, but..." he trailed off.

Lucida hummed in thought, but did not reply.

Nero fidgeted for a moment, trying to get comfortable. But he could still hear the kit's wailing, could still see its tearful eyes. When it flopped onto his paw, he'd felt it purr, the tiny thing rumbling into his fur.

He had to go back. Just to be sure it was gone.

Lucida moved away just as Nero's resolve began to harden. She let him go, nudging him slightly with her muzzle.

"Go on, then," she chuckled.

He stared up at her accusingly. "Stay out of my head," Nero laughed.



Lucida blinked her third eye sweetly. "I dunno what you're talkin' about, love," she said, grinning toothily. The two bumped noses before Nero turned and practically ran back through a portal determinedly.

It took him a while to find the spot, but he eventually found the stone where he had met with Luca. Eyes squinted with concentration, he let his memory guide him. He reached the area where he left the kitten quickly, recognizing his own semi-covered paw prints. The clearing was empty, only piles of snow and foliage remaining.

Nero let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," he whispered. "It is gone." Then, after looking around to make sure Luca was not still present, he added, "Luca is not doing a horrible job after all."

As if summoned by his words, a squeal sounded from behind him. Nero's head swirled around, eyes landing on a nearby bramble thicket. The kit was scrambling out of it, mewling and crying out. Nero's face fell. It had been there the *whole time*.

"Come here," Nero murmured as he gave in, opening his paws to the kit. It wobbled over to him, and he scooped it up into his arms the second it was close enough. He pressed the freezing scrap of an angel to his chest. It purred with relief, kneading its tiny claws into his fur.

Luca had not come for it, by the looks of the surrounding area. No paw prints around, save for his own. Nero inspected the thicket. It was prickled with thorns and leaves, but open. It would have been easy for Luca to reach in and pick the tiny kitten up, no effort needed.

"I cannot believe him," Nero growled lowly. "Two hours, and you are still here. I am not leaving you again. It is much too dangerous this time of night." The kit simply purred, presumably feeling warm and safe. Nero sighed, opening a portal nearby.

He hesitated before he stepped through. He was already on Luca's bad side. Was he really about to *steal* one of Luca's angels?

Nero hardened his gaze, tightening his hold on the kit. If that was what it came to, then yes. No matter what Luca said. This kit did not deserve to suffer because of his own fear of Luca's words.

He stepped into the portal, cradling the angel tightly, and let the darkness of the lowlands envelop him once more.



# A Country of Amputees

## Tomisin Adewuyi

my parents left home after a revolution  
black blood boiling  
people wanted more  
citizens fighting back  
clichéd descendants of kings and queens  
who were once enslaved  
took back their crowns  
the euphoria was short lived  
I don't know much  
but they didn't know much  
my ancestors forgot what light was  
after being stuck in a cave  
for years  
they couldn't make fire  
lazarus resurrected  
but without Jesus to guide us  
we were scared  
our colonizers  
cut off our limbs  
the prosthetics  
we were given made of  
assimilation and european values  
after years of a nation  
walking on fake legs of corruption and greed

my parents thought of me in the distance  
saw *me* in the distance  
decided to leave  
unlike others who jumped ship  
without thought on their own volition or by force  
my parents planned it so we'd land on a raft  
and so i'm here  
Separated  
an amputee with phantom pains  
pains caused when i taste my moms jollof rice  
or inyo or dodo or whatever  
or when i butcher yoroba in front of my grandma  
or when i learned i've been mispronouncing my last name for seven years  
phantom pains



# Proposal

## Bethany Reinsch

I look across the park at Jia and smile. She sits on the wall of the fountain in the center of the park, surrounded by pink and yellow tulips that are swaying in the breeze. *Wow*. The water is gently rippling behind her. It's incredibly clear today, more so than usual. She doesn't know I'm already here, so I'm going to keep out of sight until I get closer. A short puff of wind rustles the leaves in a cluster of trees nearby. I try not to get too close to the trees though. I've heard that recently there have been a lot of escaped dogs attacking people before their owners can catch them, and they've been hiding in the shadows underneath the trees. As long as I don't get too close it should be fine. I reach into my suit pocket and clutch the little black box. I spent hours in the jewelry store trying to find the perfect ring a few weeks ago. It took a lot of searching, but I finally found the perfect one. It's simple, but she'll love it. I stay where I am for another moment, remembering that day in the jewelry store.

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I wandered around the square in search of a place to buy a ring. I had one specific place in mind, but I wasn't quite sure where to find it. I passed a used bookstore and a candy store, plus a few kettle corn shops. Kettle corn was that town's specialty. I had decided to go to a town a few miles away instead of my own because the selection of rings I had seen there was atrocious. The best I could find there were plastic. I may not have had a ton of money, but I still wanted to get something nice for Jia.

I finally found a jewelry store and pushed open the door. The chimes rang almost too loudly. I closed the door slowly so that they wouldn't ring again. I didn't see anyone in the room. It was dark, but the displays of jewelry were lit up so that everything sparkled. I glanced around, but still didn't see anyone.

"Hello?"

Nobody answered. I walked over to the nearest case of jewelry. It was full of silver necklaces with diamonds and rubies embedded in them. The next case was filled with bracelets. Earrings were in the next. There were no rings.

I started to turn around to leave and saw a light out of the corner of my eye. I turned towards it and realized that it was coming from the other side of an open door. How had I not noticed it before? I glanced around again before going through the door.

I gasped when I saw what was on the other side. There were rows and rows of glass cases containing all kinds of jewelry, ranging from the tiniest earring to things nobody within three hundred miles of this place could afford. The other end of the room was barely visible. I couldn't help myself; I walked up and down the aisles for what seemed like forever.

Finally, I saw them. There were rows upon rows of rings. I could have wandered through that room for days and still not seen every ring. I walked around for a while, maybe an hour, maybe three, before finding a display of rings that looked like they could possibly be within the price range I was looking for. I admired them for a moment—the others might have been more expensive, but these somehow were nicer.

"What can I do for you today, sir?" The owner of the shop shuffled around the corner, his voice echoing throughout the room. He carried a cane with an ornate accessory on the top. It resembled a hand reaching out,

covered in rings and bracelets. It would have been nice to look at if not for the fact that whoever made it let it heat up longer than usual, so it looked like melting flesh. I chose to ignore that part.

“I’m looking for a ring.” I tried not to stare at the hand and instead focused on making eye contact with the shop owner. I immediately regretted this when I saw that his eyes were bloodshot like he hadn’t slept in days. I let my eyes travel down to the rest of the cane. It was really beautiful, in a terrifying way. If the top of the cane was melted flesh, the rest of it was dried blood that was pouring from the hand, but had since stopped. It was made of chestnut-colored wood, full of complicated swirls meant to look natural.

“What kind of ring are you looking for?”

I jumped out of my trance and looked back up at the shop owner.

“We have rings for nearly every occasion: mood rings, wedding rings, promise rings...”

“I’m actually looking for an engagement ring.” I interrupted before he could continue on to “rings for your mother-in-law’s vow renewal” or something like that.

“Ah, of course. I should have guessed that would be what a youngster like yourself was here for. Now, tell me all about this girl and I’ll find you a perfect ring for her.”

It was a bit of a strange request, but he *was* pretty old. I spent the next few minutes explaining to him how Jia and I met, how we spent our time together, and even the smallest details like the highlights in her hair, and how for a while just after we first met, she dyed all of her hair lime green (we were in college at the time, and she did it on a dare).

The shop owner nodded along. He was clearly keeping a mental checklist of the things he needed to know, because he turned around and

went behind the nearest counter and into the back room through a door I hadn't noticed before while I was in the middle of telling him about Jia's friend Sal.

He came back seven and a half minutes later with three small boxes. He set them in a line on the counter and opened them one by one. The first contained a ring with a huge diamond on it. I'd been saving for a while, but I didn't think it really fit Jia's personality. And I still didn't think I would be able to afford it. The second ring was nice, but there wasn't much to it. It was just a plain circle. I moved on to the third. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was perfect. The band was three layers wide, but each layer was thin enough that together they were only as wide as any other ring. There were three small diamonds set in the center. I paid for the ring and thanked the shop owner. As I shook his hand, I couldn't help but notice how much of a resemblance it bore to the one fashioned on his cane.

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I've known for a while now that Jia is the girl I'm going to marry. We've been together for a few years, but it was obvious after the first that it was perfect. But I've been putting it off. What if she's not ready? That was my reasoning for a full two years. I'm finally ready to tell her I want to be with her forever though. I've waited too long already. Last night I saw on the news that a bridge collapsed, killing hundreds of people. What if one of them had been her? I look towards her again. She's wearing a navy blue dress, and she looks amazing (as always). I can't let anything happen to her. Last night I realized that I have to protect her from everything I possibly can.

As she's sitting on the edge of the fountain, her fingers glide over the surface of the water. I glance around and find a dandelion so that when I get



to her I can tuck it behind her ear, to try to show her I really do care. A few of the seeds float away as I pluck it from the grass.

I hear snarling behind me when I start to stand up. Assuming it's one of the escaped dogs, I turn to see if I recognize it so that I can return it to its owner. I step backwards. These are no pets. They are...people? There are two of them, shuffling towards me. They're still snarling. What's wrong with them? One of them veers off the path and grabs a biker's arm, pulling him off the bike, then rips off his helmet and...did they just *bite* him? *What is going on?*

I notice that the other one is still moving towards me and realize that it's the shop owner from the jewelry store. I step backwards again and trip over a root. I can't get up. The man is already here, holding onto me so I can't go anywhere. I look into his eyes. He somehow looks...sorry? Then he bites my arm, hard. I scream and punch him in the face. He stops for a moment in shock, then shuffles away.

Jia is looking over here now. Well, so much for surprising her. I hurriedly stand up and try to dust the dirt off of my suit. She puts a hand over her mouth, and at first I think she's laughing at me (I do tend to trip over things), but then I look at her eyes and realize that she sees the wound on my arm from the crazy person that bit me. She rushes towards me.

Something isn't right. I want to run towards her, tell her I'm okay, but I can't. I can barely move my feet, and my voice isn't working, and my vision is starting to blur, and I feel dizzy, and my arm has stopped hurting, but I feel like all of my skin is peeling off even though that doesn't make any sense.

I start moving towards her, slowly, but I'm making progress. I try yelling out to her again to let her know everything will be fine, we can just wrap up the wound and take care of it and everything will be fine as long as

we're together, but it doesn't come out as words. It just sounds like cries of hunger. *This isn't right.* "Jia, it's okay, I'm okay, you're okay, we're okay." I can't say it. The words won't come out.

I'm close to her now. She's standing completely still. She's in shock. *Why are you so afraid of me? How horrifying am I for you to be so terrified? You've seen me in horrible places. I've been a complete mess. You've seen me in pretty much every situation. How is this happening?*

I step closer, still making strangled noises while trying to tell her I'm not going to hurt her. I want to keep her safe.

Then my body lurches forward at her and she squeals. I have no control over myself. I need to regain control. I focus as hard as possible. I try to step away from her, protect her from myself. I can't force my feet away from her. I can't leave her, not after all we've already been through. She wouldn't understand why I was running away. I've been a coward in the past. I won't be anymore. I step toward her in a desperate attempt to save her.

I grab her neck and feel myself laugh as she screams, "No, look, it's me! Craig, stop!"

I dig my nails into the side of her face, wishing I could stop myself but not able to show it. I watch as her skin splits open and my hand travels down past her chin back to her neck.

"Please," she whispers. I can feel the ring in my pocket as I sit there. If I focus on that, maybe I'll be able to fix this. I squeeze my eyes shut and force my hands to stop moving. I concentrate on the way the box feels. I shove my hand in my pocket and pull the ring out. It's just as simple as I remember it being.

"Jia," I somehow manage to say. "Will you..." I can't get the rest of the words out.

If I hadn't waited so long, she would have said yes. But now, she's terrified of me. She shakes her head slowly, her eyes wide. I can hear that she's having trouble breathing from the shock of all of this.

I want to hold her, to explain that I never wanted any of this to happen. But it's too late. She'll never want to stay with me now. So instead, I throw her on the ground and crouch next to her to watch the life drain from her eyes and the blood pour from her wounds.

I manage to pull the ring out of my pocket and put it on her finger, but it doesn't matter. She's gone, along with any control I had over all of this.

*No, I think. How could I do this?* I never wanted to hurt her at all, let alone like this. I tear into her skull. *We had it so good. How did this happen?*



# Guest

## Tomas Cernocky

“So, where are you from, actually?” I asked while having breakfast.

“I am from Zabaluhville,” the reporter replied. “That’s about 350 light years from here. Our planet is three times smaller than the Earth, so we have less gravity. That’s the reason why I’m so fat.”

As I saw him again putting up his device, which looked like a gumball, for communication to his home planet, I recommended, “Let it be put away for a while now. Look around you firstly, and create your perspective. If you want to send out any reports, don’t do so until morning tomorrow.”

Jonatan Vypudil is a newspaper reporter from an alien planet called Zabaluhville. It is the year 2555, ten years after the Great Jump in Technology. Back then, millions of people flew away from Earth to colonize other planets in the universe. Now, Jonatan’s news agency has sent him on a mission to Earth. His task is to find out how the colony on Zabaluhville has diverged from the everyday life on Earth since the start of colonization. Hosting an alien reporter is an honor. I had nothing to do at work today, so I volunteered. Experiencing a foreigner is always exciting though it may be sometimes funny.

I knew from what I had already asked Jonatan so far that people on his planet live in normal houses like us. People are nostalgic of the Earth’s lifestyle. They don’t want to live in the sophisticated structures of apartments—at least not throughout their whole lives—even though the current technology offers it.

We had some scrambled eggs for breakfast. Afterwards, I decided to show him a typical day at a high school.

The school is just two miles from my house, so we rode there on bikes to have a pleasant morning's physical exercise. As we got there, the man in the front office greeted us.

Jonatan said, "We have substituted this job with computers already."

"You know," I replied, "you have been building up a new civilization. That's difficult for everybody who represents one of its parts, am I right? If people are under tough circumstances, they trust each other. However, here we have comfort, and someone is getting too bored. Yet the number of hackers has been increasing, and the computers might get hacked any moment."

The first class I led him to was math. Students still use classic straight edges and compasses, just the paper has been improved so that it automatically sharpens the pencil while drawing. Every line is, therefore, super exact and neat.

Jonatan mentioned, "Yeah. Math still has to be drilled through the basic manners."

I nodded. "A couple of years ago, mathematicians finally at least partially solved the mystery of prime numbers. They have deduced a formula into which if you plug a number, you can figure out whether it is a prime or a compound number. However, it still remains a question whether there is a finite or infinite quantity of prime numbers. There always emerge on average ten new mysteries for each problem solved. How wonderful our world is!"

"If your world really is so wonderful, has the problem between Israel and Syria been solved?" Jonatan cut through my recollections.

"Oh, you are right. It persists. Next, I am gonna take you to an English class where students are discussing what other actions the U.S. should take up when all the possible sanctions have already been imposed."

The big euphoria, after the conflict on the Korean peninsula had been pacified 500 years ago, was quickly replaced by a bewilderment at the nuclear missiles Syria had acquired. The religious activists have been incessantly fighting for the Temple Mountain, regardless of the disasters the previous wars in the world caused a long time ago.

After the visit to the English lesson, Jonatan was satisfied by the new ideas he had heard from the open-minded students. One of the students had proposed that both sides should abandon the mountain, and just suppose they attempt to conquer it. This attitude will prompt new vehemence towards the development of both the technological and the ethical side of the society. Thanks to this, Syria might overtake the U.S. in economic growth, which is their target.

“Albeit this idea is not so realistic, it shows the student’s sagacious thinking,” Jonatan said admiringly.

While we were having lunch, Jonatan asked me what job I had.

“I have studied math and physics, and then worked in Red Hat for a couple of years. However, I founded my own business at the age of 30. So I have been a businessman for fourteen years. It is focused on production and research of iridium-batteries. Before I started that corporation, I had noticed some interesting trajectories of electrons in certain iridium isotopes that would contribute to the batteries’ capacity. And now I am manufacturing those batteries.”

“Isn’t it too—humdrum?” Jonatan suggested. “Running a business, that’s just money, nothing more.”

“Despite the fact that you have many keen perspectives on various things, I disagree with you now,” I opposed. “There is a lot of care for money, certainly, if you are a businessman or a businesswoman. In the case of any illegal businesses, it might really be the only businessman’s priority. But in

the case of many other ones, it is more than just money. At the beginning, you have an idea. Sometimes, you can have an idea deduced from something you have discovered or solved. Then, you do the outline that you will be doing, you get some employees, you do the official documents, and look for projects further on.”

“But looking for projects means to seek money, so you are a beggar partially, too. You also should not be upset at me because I say this to my father as well. He leads a group of scientists who analyze human speech. He, however, does not do any research any more, but looks for projects. Because he is okay if I tell it to him, so should you,” Jonatan argued.

“You know,” I said, “today’s world is interesting. Sometimes it seems to you that we people are just children building a sand castle at a playground. But in reality, it is still tough. If you have no money, you cannot buy any bread. People just find different ways to benefit both themselves and others.”

“Yes,” Jonatan replied. “Sorry, I sometimes get a feeling from what I see that the world might become perfect one day. However, the only one perfect in here is God. We should rather not concentrate on the question of what’s the sense of everything, but do our silly things instead.”

“Correct. Even in the case of math. If you end up at a not such good place in a math competition, it doesn’t mean you are a mug at math. Math is not one thing, nor two nor three things. You cannot point at it. If we say the word ‘math,’ we mean a conglomeration of various theories that one often can keenly apply when working on a project. The students ranked high have a lot of these theories elaborately studied; therefore, they are able to solve those questions on the competition test. Albert Einstein once said that those who know everything are not clever. However, those who know the basic things and know where to find the further, in-depth information, they are

clever. So even if you were not as successful, you firstly might succeed the next time, or not take it too seriously. But, hmmm, if you don't take things seriously, what are you actually living for? Well, I don't know. You have to decide; you are a clever man.

"Also, don't blame science because it can kill people. The thought of world wars is frightening, but science can treat people as well. Think of just how many women would die if there were not enough knowledge to do Cesarean sections? This is the fact: It is up to you. If you use science with the right intentions, it is completely all right. And tell me about your culture. What issues do you have down there?" I said.

"Well, that's a controversial and nail-biting question. We don't have as many societal problems as we do natural catastrophes. The fact is that Zabaluhville has a turmoil of thermal energy from inside. Thus it happened that ten miles from our city, a volcano started whirling. We are 'waiting' for the explosion now. And there is not very much to do—you cannot put a volcano into a big concrete block like nuclear reactor. Instead, there were emergency shelters built. But the city would be leveled to the ground.

"And you cannot imagine how comfortable the Earth is. In Zabaluhville, you cannot just go outside and take a walk in a park. Zabaluhville's atmosphere does not include oxygen. We use cars for transportation only. We have to park them in garages connected to buildings by tunnels every time in order not to come in contact with the atmosphere. However, living on an alien planet is juicy, therefore I ought not to move here."

But even Jonatan had been given this elaborate reasoning why the world is as it is, he remained a bit sad that everything around him was not super. I, therefore, looked for something later in the day to make him cheerful. The symphonic orchestra of our city was playing Mendelssohn's



fourth symphony in the evening, which I thought a great opportunity to give the day a pleasant conclusion.

In the afternoon, we took a pretty hike. There is a beautiful lake surrounded by rock approximately 50 miles from the city.

The orchestra did a beautiful job in the evening. Both of us were pleased; however, Jonatan astonished me once he addressed a woman and criticized her hair dye, which was, in his opinion, too eccentric. Moreover, after the woman exclaimed her offense in a stunning voice, tapping her fingers onto a nearby railing, Jonatan replied, "You should better tap the fingers against your forehead." Subsequently, the woman's face reddened totally, and I moved Jonatan aside, and poured off of me millions of excuses why she should not report this incident to police. Then, I reminded Jonatan that he is a guest only, so he should treat everybody with respect, and sometimes not say his considered opinion out loud.



# Gristle

Mika Nelson

I sat there and watched the wall bleed. Viscous scarlett tears ran down onto the floor.

I just sat and watched. I didn't do anything to stop it. I just let my overactive brain take over.

I thought about the essay, the projects I had due, the clothes I had to wash, the dog I'd have to walk that afternoon, the music I had to practice, asking teachers for recommendations, whether or not I'd been too harsh during English, the English language and how bad I am at it, my impending court date, my potential impending dates, the AP Art History test I had yet to study for, the movie Dark Crystal and how it is a cinematic masterpiece, Troll 2 and how it is a trainwreck but I still love it for who it is, the next school bake sale and whether or not they will have chocolate milk, when my next therapy appointment was, my personal trans agenda, the pizza I had ordered two hours ago that still wasn't here, how hungry I was. I thought about how I wanted to change my life.

I was immobile, watching blood rush from the grimace of the hole in the wall.

I thought I'd never move, but then the doorbell rang. The pizza might be here.

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I fell asleep watching the wall. I woke up to a sea of black gristle. My pizza stained couch was floating in it. The grimace had grown to the length of a twin size bed. The black substance smelled like mildew, and rotting meat. I gagged, the substance was up to my kitchen counter.

Paddling to the door was not an option. I was not going to stick my hand in whatever that was. I could only imagine it would feel like paddling through ground meat.

The room was a wave pool of epically gross proportions. My couch was at the mercy of the waves. They rocked the couch gently like someone holding a mug of tea they were trying not to spill.

I let myself get lost in the sea of sauce. Whatever had been holding me together had long unravelled. I hadn't realized it before but I had gone numb. I'd been numb for so long. I was shaking. I would have to make a decision. I was being pulled towards the open mouth of the hole.

I decided to let fate decide.

I closed my eyes and waited for it to end. When I opened my eyes again I was at the mouth, It smiled at me as I was swept down into the depths.



# Moor Lights

Quinley Brady

A light glimmered on the moor, a light that some thought to be the will-o'-the-wisp. They took this as a bad omen, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was. It seemed to be calling out to her, calling out for someone to help it, someone to save it from something...something that the light could not defend itself from. She sighed and turned away from the window. She knew her mother would scold her for looking at the moor lights, yet, what if it was something that needed help? What if it wasn't one of those bad spirits?

Well, if it wasn't, then she had to do something! She couldn't just sit here and do nothing. Her mother would be angry at her for going out to the moor at night, but she had to do something... She knew and had been told a million times that there was something wrong with the moor at night. At night it was haunted by evil spirits, she had been told, who shrieked and howled. They stood outside the houses of the dying, and waited and waited for them to die. Well, at least that was what she had been told, but she was not entirely sure if it was true... If it were, she was certain she did not want to face these spirits, but she had to help that creature, or spirit, or whatever it was. She knew she had to, but she didn't know why...

But she knew she had to. She climbed out of the bed she had been lying on, and crept down the dark hall past her mother's room. Her mother was definitely worried about her going out at night because of what had happened to her father. He had disappeared and her mother believed it was due to the will-o'-the-wisps who lived in the moors, who were constantly

trying to lead people to their deaths. Her mother believed her father was one of those who had been led astray. She sighed, and pressed her hand against the wooden wall as she went down the stairs, and into the small room off to the side of the stairwell. Three times she stumbled into things and almost fell over as she walked through the darkness, but each time she caught herself, and went on. Finally, she reached out and felt a cold, round object and turned it, as she did she heard a creaking sound as the door opened. She ran out into the darkness and the door shut behind her with a slam.

She exhaled. Now...about finding that light. The light that seemed to be calling to her, calling to her to help. She picked up the hem of her nightgown and walked into the darkness. With each step she took, she felt the cold and damp earth underneath her feet. The light seemed to be disappearing and then reappearing once more, again and again. But, she had to find it for it needed her help, at least, that was how she interpreted it. As she walked further, the ground seemed to be getting wetter and wetter, and the air seemed to be getting colder, too. The wind would at times blow past, and it seemed as if it was trying to grasp onto her hair and pull her into the darkness. She shivered. If it meant risking herself to save this creature, or whatever it was, she had to do it.

She looked up and the light appeared again, but now it was in an even darker part of the moor. She ran toward it, trying to get its attention, yelling "don't vanish again" and "I want to help you," but the light disappeared into the darkness, the black, engulfing, darkness. She called for it to come back, but it didn't. She waited a few minutes, but no light appeared again. She looked around in the darkness, but couldn't figure out where exactly she

was. All she could see was blackness, and all she could feel was the wet mud underneath her feet. She looked up, but the moon had gone now, it had been hidden under the clouds. She ran her fingers through her hair. Why? Why had she done this? She had disobeyed her mother who had strictly told her not to go out to the moor at night, for creatures haunted it, shrieking, yowling, and waiting, waiting, for someone to come out...at night. And, she had known to never follow the moor lights, yet... she had followed. And no good comes to those who do.







**KANSAS CITY, Mo., Dec. 16.**—One hundred and fifty delegates, representing more than 600,000,000 organized laboring men and women, are gathered in Kansas City for the purpose of organizing for the



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# THE WEEK

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