

WHEN THE CLOCK
CHIMES

Fiction & Poetry

LIANA MIR

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WHEN THE CLOCK CHIMES

Hear the clock chime the hour!

See the sweet briar flower

Hover on the edge of power—

Wound to heal, heal to wound,

Bloom to die, die to bloom.

REMEMBERING LENA

—

SEVEN DAYS

Wesley Bryn returned to the book on Wednesday. The title and author name on the cover meant nothing to him—*David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens—but inside the front cover, a soft blue floral designed bookplate had a due date for Wednesday, today, blue inked in loopy feminine handwriting. Stamped at the bottom of the bookplate was an address for Pretty Things, presumably the establishment where he had borrowed, rented, or otherwise procured said book.

Wednesday, the day calendar said it was. The third. The calendar was the eye in the midst of a storm—photographs that should mean something, names and addresses, places he needed to be and by when, a favorite quote framed in wood.

Yesterday, Wesley read through his journal, one of them anyway, the story of his own life, and found it as words from a stranger, but here was this book handwritten as if to him. *'Due back Wednesday, February 3rd.'* He pulled out the street map of the city from the phone book and guidebooks rack—every rack and box and basket neatly labeled; he would change it as soon as he figured out how—and looked up the address, trying to ignore the yellow star sticker he had placed over his own. Not far from here. He took the book and went.

A bell tinkled over Wesley's head when he entered. Pretty Things was in the heart of town and he just one walker from the busy street outside.

"Hey, you made it."

Wesley stopped inside the door at the girl's beautiful smile aimed at him. She was a tiny *pretty* girl—his hand could swallow up her entire wrist, perhaps her waist if he tried. Her hair was a burnished honey color that hung down to her waist and her eyes seemed open enough to take in all the parts of him he didn't even know yet.

"I came to return the book," he said automatically, stepping forward, glancing around as he did so to

notice the books and Victorian-style knick-knacks scattered over welcoming tables with comfortable chairs and couches surrounding them. Bookshelves were everywhere, adorned by clocks, bottles, scarves and prints of poetry and quotes.

She reached over the counter and took the book with another smile. Wesley could see a small home-like kitchen behind her with a teapot on and steaming next to a fragrant platter of cookies on the counter beside. “Did you like it?” she asked. She flipped open the cover, glanced over the bookplate, then closed it again and looked at him, listening intently.

Wesley shrugged. How could he answer that? He remembered... Tuesday. No more, no less. “Do you have another you could recommend?” He leaned both arms on the counter.

“You know,” she said reasonably, “you could buy books instead of borrow them. Then you wouldn’t have to remember to come back.” But she was smiling as she flipped open the hardcover and peeled out the bookplate to file in a drawer he couldn’t quite see.

But Wesley thought he knew why he borrowed *David Copperfield*, watched her write out that due date

for Wednesday. He wanted a reason to come back. “I like borrowing.”

She smiled up at him, a brilliant sweet smile, and laughed a little with a sound like a chime as she set the book back on the counter between them and leaned her chin into her hand and her elbow on the hardcover. “Well, what did you like about this one?”

Taken aback, Wesley thought about that. He frowned and glanced toward all the shelves full of other books in the rest of the small shop. “I’m not really sure.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “You always seem a little lost when you’re here.”

“Do I come here often?” he asked, wondering sincerely.

But she glanced up at him, puzzled expression glimmering in her warm brown eyes. “Only every week for the past three months. Come on, let’s see what I have.”

They went together over to the books and the scattered coffee table tomes and discussed this one, that one. “Would you like some tea?” “Yes, that would be nice.” She fetched it. They enjoyed the

smell of cookies, the taste of jasmine. He picked a book, *Jane Eyre*, and they sat down together to read.

Of course, they did not make it further than a few chapters, not with the occasional customer she jumped up to help or their somewhat frequent discussions of what they were reading. He had to stop himself from writing in the book, but she just smiled and brought him a pencil and told him he could, and that for some reason, made him like her even more.

“What’s your name?” he asked when the afternoon sun was slanting its rays and turning a more burnished gold.

She laughed that chiming laugh of hers and held out her hands for his book. She put in another of those blue floral bookplates and wrote in pen, ‘*Due Wednesday, February 10th*’ then signed, ‘*Lena.*’ “There,” she said. “Now you’ll remember it.”

Wesley held the book and frowned thoughtfully. “I forget. Often.”

“I know people who forget things all the time,” Lena shrugged lightly, unconcerned.

But not their own names. Their lives. Everything before last Tuesday.

“I’ll bring the book back Wednesday,” he said as he got to his feet, began the walk toward the glass front door with its tinkling bell.

Time enough to wake and read his journal, remember his name, his life, and everything before. Time enough to reread *Jane Eyre* and his penciled notes between the words, crammed into the margins, and remember . . . Lena.

WITH THE TIDE

I think I was supposed to close my eyes
when you weren't looking.

I think I was supposed to remember
we had no future.

I think the sea swollen tide
was coming
to wash you away and I
came along for the ride.

THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

—

VARDIN

Family dinner became family gathering, and Josh was finally able to start settling in to his friend's home. Vardin architecture was imposing, to say the least, and the thick, plush carpets; richly-colored hangings over wood paneling and ancient stone; and the exquisite, expensive furnishings made it difficult to be comfortable until the children were playing across the rug, the young adults laughed and talked around the fire and from various perches, and the mother and father of the home snuggled on the great couch before the hearth. The family was Vardin to the core but for some reason, preferred when in private to speak French, which Josh knew, but occasionally

when their fluency in it exceeded his, dipping into plain American English to include him.

But as much as they tried to make him feel at home, Josh was still American, an intern, an outsider, still trying to take in all the things that made *Vardin* *Vardin* and foreign to him, still a little startled under the intent gaze of Renaiven's eyes. Jean had introduced his father by name and stood back a moment to see how Josh would react. Renaiven's eyes were black all the way through, no white, and with golden flecks. When Josh did nothing more than blink twice, they introduced him briefly to Lenee, the youngest daughter, who had clearly inherited the trait. Finally dinner and acceptance in a world he wasn't entirely sure he was ready to accept.

After perhaps an hour of conversation, Josh found himself drifting to a small balcony on the outer edge of the room. He loved the colors in *Vardin*, made intense by the otherwise invisible atmosphere of the Barrier overhead, and he suddenly wanted to see the stars in that vivid night sky.

When he stepped out onto the balcony, he saw Lenee, sitting on the far side and hanging her legs over the edge between two wide rails, and nearly

started. She was leaning back against the drapes, so her dress almost seemed one with them, and looking out over the view of the water gardens below.

“Bonsoir,” he greeted softly.

Lenee was the one he could not claim to know. She was always quiet and out of the way, barely able to glimpsed if he was not looking for her.

Her eyes glanced toward him, but she smiled softly and did not move. “You can come out.”

The reply was in English, and for some reason, that made him smile back as he sat down next to her.

The air was cool and the sky as vivid as he had imagined, an intense blue that remembered its color when fading toward utter darkness with bright white pinpricks and one evening star shining brilliantly just over the horizon. The sun had not yet slipped away completely, and its golden light spread benevolently over the valley of Vardin. The scent of roses and plants he had not studied the names of yet wafted up on a mild breeze.

“It’s beautiful out here,” he said suddenly, then glanced over at a slight movement at the corner of his eye.

Lenee had stiffened slightly. “Beautiful,” she murmured. “I never know what that means.”

Josh hesitated, then answered as if it was a reasonable question. “You know, pleasing to look at.”

She tilted her head to look over at him, her open gaze *almost* meeting his. “I can’t see color.”

He hesitated at that, the way she said it so simply, like it meant everything and nothing to her all at once. “Color blind?” he asked, but even as he said it, he realized he already knew the answer.

She answered anyway. “I only see heat.”

“But your father...” He trailed off at the sad denial in her eyes.

She shrugged, that casual French shrug not at all of Vardin. “The gifts that pass down are unique.” The gifts, a topic no Vardin native spoke of with an outsider who had not proven themselves trustworthy. She *saw* heat.

Josh leaned back, trying to take it in. Lenee had a sweetness, an innocence about her that drew out a person’s protective instinct, and he couldn’t deny how badly he wished he could reach up and take hold of that rich tapestry of blues and distant stars and lay them like a cloth at her feet.

A remembered poem, murmured softly,

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light...¹*

She would have to strain to hear him, but she must have, for she smiled shyly just a little. “And those are beautiful?”

“Yes,” he answered her. “They are beautiful.” She was blind, in a sense, but not deaf, not deaf, and he went on. “The sky right now is the color of the low rumble of a father telling a bedtime story to a much-loved daughter.” He heard her catch her breath. “And there’s one bright star, brighter than the rest. It’s distinct and like a last, sweet kiss on her head. The sun is barely over the mountains. It’s shedding dark gold light, like the hum of a mother’s lullaby from the doorway as she walks out into the hall and it drifts away.”

¹ “Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven” by William Butler Yeats

He fell silent, uncertain if he had made a fool of himself.

*I have spread my dreams under your feet...*²

She stared upward at the evening skies above them, then turned slowly, reaching out a hand. Gently, she traced over his features, and he realized that while she could see his body heat, this was the only way she could make out the details. At last, she dropped her hand to her side and smiled shyly, just barely, and ducked her head.

“You’re beautiful.”

*Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*³

After a long moment, he remembered how to breathe.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

A DREAM OF SPRING

when sun the spears of light casts down
in golden pillars pierce the earth
and radiance on the clouds a crown
bursts in phoenix-like rebirth

then from hence where flames array
the mountains with their goodnight glow
the last sweet song shall cast away
and float where only dreams can go

WINTER ROSE

*double drabble*⁴

—

SEVEN DAYS

Winter fades the edges of the dark red rose Wesley gave her. Lena glances up from her book and frowns at the milk jug sitting on the window sill just behind a frosted pane.

She loves the way the light filters through the petals, making them glow an even richer hue, loves the way it makes her think that maybe, just *maybe*, she really *is* seeing something through the way he smiles when he looks at her, like she puzzles him but he likes it and doesn't want her to stop; the way he borrows books and brings them back each week; the

⁴ A story of exactly 200 words

way he lets her talk about her favorite stories over and over when everyone else tells her to write it down and leave them alone.

Lena set the rose in the window and watered it and now it's been five days; she'd wanted it to last the full seven until she saw him again. She touches one green leaf and smells the sweetness of its petals.

"Don't die on me," she whispers to a flower that cannot hear her. She wants a bloom that lives beyond a week. She wants Wesley to smile at her without confusion.

A TRADITIONAL LOVE POEM

—

by Gideon Thompson⁵

ALLIANCE

Roses are red
as the curve of your smile
To be blessed by such beauty
makes mornings worthwhile

Roses are pink
as the glow of your skin
Your radiant beauty
shines from within

⁵ A character in the Alliance universe

Violets are blue
as the hue of your eyes,
like pieces of Heaven
come down from the skies

Violets are soft
as the sound of your voice
More graceful than songbirds
who laugh and rejoice

Sugar is sweet
as the kindness you show
Everyone loves you
wherever you go

Sugar is loved
as you also are too
Stay near to me
and I'll always love you

OF MANY COLORS

*drabble*⁶

—

BREATH

Twelve colors, rich enough Kileshin could almost taste them. She ran her hands over the vibrant velvet cloths only the wealthiest could afford, fingered the gold and silver satins for trimmings, spun from the silk of gold and white temple spiders of Briganth across the desert. Kileshin was fourteen years old and had been trained to the needles from her earliest memory. Bright threads woven of precious metals glimmered under her touch, ready for her hand.

⁶ A story of exactly 100 words

Kileshin sighed and removed her own coarsely woven day cloak of cheap bleached white, tossing it out of her way so she could work.

*Can love erase what you have done;
Can hate unmake you are my son?*

*Sweep the starry sky of my tears,
And black alone is left of years.*

THE COMMERCE OF HEARTS

—

BREATH

The woman who enters my shop is young in body, but she is not young. I have seen battle; I know the scarred.

Her eyes are pale, wounded, weary. She moves as though every muscle in her body aches and glances away from the delicately carved stone bottles nestled among swaths of fine fabrics. Instead, her gaze lingers on the circular glass slabs set beside with gently calligraphed names: *vredé*, *inul*, *hoshult*. Selflessness, duty, peace. Fingers glimmer out to touch, then rapidly withdraw.

“You have been to a collector before?” I ask the needless question, needless as I am Mavren, a collector, and recognize the faces of those I have laid waste.

Her gaze flits upward, shuddering past the old uniform of an Enforcer, that remnant of my former life as the hands and will of the King, then onto my face. There it stays.

She strides forward abruptly in a rustle of coarse cloth and sets her small bag of yet coarser weave beside the one tilted stool I retain, where she proceeds to sit. Her eyelids drift shut. "Leave the duty," she says.

Ah, have mercy on us, powers, we who deal in the commerce of hearts.

Her clothes, almost more slender than she, betray her humble means, her figure declares her motherhood, and her eyes are the eyes of the heartless, lacking much of the spark of humanity. We are much alike in that.

My palm closes neatly over the skin above her heart. With my flesh, I feel the sharpness of her intake of breath, but with my soul, I feel the acrid potency of her love. She has children who need food and clothing and shelter in these hard days. She has a husband whose work does not bring enough to give it to them. I hunt through the welter of emotion, its vibrancy, and little wonder she is wounded. She has

sold her fear, resentment, joy, gratitude, wonder—everything. Everything but duty, love, and the pain they cause her.

I could take the duty. It would fetch a handsome price, enough to keep her a few months before she swept the path to a Collector again. I leave it, ye powers, I leave it.

Love. Pure, undiluted, potent love. It warms my soul and fills me, then I step away and breathe it out into a bottle, stopper it with a black clay infused with implacable.

The mother's eyes open and are cold, but she has a duty to her family and will care for them. She chose well.

I pay her enough to provide for a family of five for more than a year, long enough to bring new work or much enough to educate the children to care for themselves. She nods her head and walks past the shelves of hearts, unheeding and uncaring when hers joins them.

WITH YOU, SINGING

a lullaby

Hush, little one, and don't you cry
I'll be close, never say goodbye
Dreaming's sweet, just a pretty lie
I'll be with you singing

Sleep, little one; I'll hold you close
Close your eyes; I won't let go
Oh, what secrets that we know
I'll be with you singing

Hush, little one, your heart is full
My love and whispers are in you
Know there's nothing you can't do
I'll be with you singing

Sleep, little one; you are my heart
Perfect in your every part
I will end and you will start
I'll be with you singing

Dream, little one; one day you'll wake
Bright new mornings you will make
Until then, for your dear sake
I'll be with you singing
I'll be in your dreaming
I'll be with you singing

BRIDGE

—

David & Abigail

We never talk, he wanted to whisper to this woman, his spouse, this stranger lying on the bed beside him. *We never talk.* It was too hard to find the strength.

He could not bridge the silence. He could not... Suddenly, he felt her hand on his shoulder.

He covered it with his.

BY THE NUMBERS

—

David & Abigail

Love is nowhere, Abigail Mortin thought to herself. If it were anywhere left, it would be right here with her husband she no longer knew how to relate to, but she couldn't *feel* love when she looked up from her kneading dough at the tired middle-aged man frowning at the kitchen table over a newspaper.

David had been buried in work and statistics so long—just a few more months, he had always promised, and they'll wrap up this project—but by the end of those eight years when David finally dragged himself out of numbers back into the real world, they had grown apart. He knew only numbers. Abigail could not share his love for them.

Paper rustled. She watched her husband stand and walk over to her, put one hand on her hand.

“Are your hands clean?” she sniffed, kneading with a little less vim.

“Teach me how to make bread,” David suddenly said softly.

Abigail glanced up in sharp surprise. “You’ve never been a baker,” she pointed out, perhaps a little harsher than was warranted.

But David pressed his hand a little more firmly onto hers. “Please.”

It surprised her, the quiet desperate pleading in that voice. She looked up at him, uncertain, more uncertain than she’d been when he took the job as City Statistician and buried himself in a deluge of work she simply couldn’t understand.

Perhaps—Perhaps.

Her heart and body softened, enough, and she nodded. Baking. She pulled out the numbered measuring cups and spoons she never used—always been taught with a pinch of this, a handful of that—but that he would understand. It was a start. It was enough.

DICHOTOMY

Whisper softly

You speak too loud

Love me gently

You are too proud

Miss me greatly

You're fine alone

Hold me tightly

I'm flesh; you're bone

WELL-DOING, WEARY

The old preacher wearily settled his bones at last on a wooden pew, harder than the harsh land that had grown this church. Years had bent and burdened him, years of reaching out his once strong, now gnarled hands to a people with ears stiff from not hearing, mouths folded in grim lines, and jaws set each one against their neighbor.

The Allens who hated the Luther boys with their pesky cattle. The Westfields who could never forget the Allens had married their pretty Adelaide and been unable to fetch a doctor or midwife in time to spare her life in childbirth. The Johnstons who despised the Westfields' small and almost barren property, forgetting that God is no respecter of wealth.

You cannot love your God and hate your brother.
You cannot hate your brother and love your God.

So the old preacher's back was weary as he was, his old bowed, his heart aching to grow weary too. "What have I done for You, Father?" he cried out, demanding of his God. What heart had softened under his care? He should leave these hardened hearts and shake the dust from his feet.

Struggling to stand, he scabbled those gnarled hands against the armrest of his pew, but then stopped.

Unnoticed beside him, a little girl in her soft pink sabbath dress had settled quietly with folded hands and sat smiling at him. The sincere sweetness in that smile set him back down.

"Josabel Allen," he said abruptly. "You're Adelaide Westfield's little girl."

Josie nodded, still smiling, perhaps even smiling wider now that he had recognized her. He had cherished such hopes for that wedding, that perhaps it might bring some peace to a valley filled with bickering families and feuding clans.

"Yes," he repeated. "Josabel." He had forgotten the little girl.

"Are you sad?" she asked in the soft voice of a child. Four, was she?

The old preacher nodded. "Yes, Josie." His memory bore him up. Yes, that is what he heard her father call her in the church porch. "I have been weeping over Jerusalem." He doubted she would understand his meaning, and that was well. She was too young for such burdens.

But the little girl nodded solemnly, curls bobbing, then reached out her fresh, young hand and patted his cheek. "Granma Westfield told me God keeps all our tears."

Granma Wes... His thoughts stuttered to silence. He looked at her. Granma Westfield. A thin, spare, grim-faced woman who had once vowed to never look upon the baby who caused her daughter's death. "Does she now?"

Josie nodded and smiled again. "I wanted to tell you, but you never saw me smiling at you."

Until weary and resigned, he had sat upon a pew and demanded his God to speak. Tears brimmed in his eyes and he patted the sweet child's head with his gnarled hands. How often had the Lord wanted to show him but he never saw Him smiling?

THE VOICE OF GOD

—

Moses & Tzipporah

I.

I remember being a little child
Daughter of the high priest of Midian
I remember the light within his eyes
When he heard the voice of God

God of our fathers, God of Abraham
God of the Hebrews, God of Midian
God of our mothers, God of Sarah and
God of Keturah and me

You were the stranger out of Egypt
You were raised by the Pharaoh's daughter
You lifted your hand against the shepherds
Driving my sisters and me

I remember the well of Midian
Your dusty face as you poured for our flocks
I remember familiar light shining
Out of your eyes; you had heard

From the time I had been a little child
A toddling assistant to the priest
I remember the light within his eyes
When he heard the voice of God

You were a stranger out of Egypt
Yet you claimed to hear the voice of the Lord
Who were you to the God of the Hebrews
That you heard the voice of God

II.

I was the shepherdess of my father's
House, the guardian of sisters and flocks
He gave me the staff when I was still young
I kept his motherless tents

My husband became a shepherd to me
And I became a shepherdess to him
Though I kept still my father's flocks and herds
Still saw the light of God's voice

I was the shepherd woman with two sons
And a husband no less hard to care for
You follow this voice, the voice of the Lord
I go with you to Egypt

I am a stranger among the Hebrews
We worship the God of Abraham, but
They are the children of Sarah and I
Am the child of Keturah

These are the children of your and their God
They look in your eyes; they do not see light
They do not know you heard His voice and came
You tell me take our sons home

III.

I do not regret waiting in our land
I do not regret keeping Jethro's house
I do not regret knowing you will come
My husband and his people

Your God and mine has called you to this place
To the tents of the high priest and to me
God of your fathers, God of my mothers
Called you to our holy mount

I will come to meet you in the desert
Even wilderness cannot keep me here
When I have seen your tents spread out like home
I will bring your sons to you

I will meet you with eyes that understand
The light within your own is light from God
The God of Abraham shone in your face
He is the God of Moses

The God of Tzipporah told me to go
He brought you to me, all your people too
I have heard the voice within my heart
Telling me to come to you

You are not a stranger now in Egypt
You are not a stranger in Midian
I am not a stranger among your tents
We have founded our own home

VELOCITY OF RAIN

—

Dylan & Ellie

I met you when I was five years old, and you grabbed my hand with your sticky fingers, laughing as you pulled me toward the other children.

“She’s on our team.”

I asked you why after we were both lying on our backs on the grass after kickball, sides still heaving from running our hardest in the game.

You grinned as you tossed the ball up in the air and caught it again. “You’re fast.”

I wondered when in the world you would have noticed.

—

I was ten years old when I raced home from the library in a surprise rain shower, and suddenly realized I heard feet thumping the concrete sidewalk behind me. I didn't stop, but I did turn, still running and caught the sight of you behind me, your body grown lanky over the last summer.

I stopped around the corner, palms grinding hard into the stone wall.

You drew up beside me, panting.

"How long?" I asked. I had to take in a gulp of damp air to go on. "How long have you walked this route?"

You cocked your head at me curiously as if not understanding the question, then your face split into a wide grin and you laughed some sort of rough chuckling sound. "You're fast."

You ran to the next sheltering doorway. I was fast. It took me only moments to catch up.

—

You lay on your back on my bed, studying the ceiling or the trajectory of the ball you were tossing up and down in your hand. I thought you would be crazy to

play baseball for a living, but I understood the skill that made you think of it.

We were teenagers then, and the only things I was certain of in that stuffy little room with its excess of books and pencils was that I was studying anything I could learn, since I didn't know where I would end up, but that I wanted to be sure I ended up with you.

"You're crazy," I finally said, breaking the silence that settled in the weight of your declarations. "You can't blow off college for baseball."

"They let you do both, you know." You sat up on the bed, tossing the ball to one side.

I watched where it rolled off in the corner. You didn't.

"What do you think I ought to do?" you asked quietly in a serious voice I didn't recognize.

My gaze stayed steady in the direction of the ball, but I didn't see it any more. I was too focused on the stillness in the air and the gravity in your tone. I wondered if you would take it in your head to do whatever I answered. You were that kind of crazy.

I sighed and sat down beside you. "I think you should go to school and try things and then decide." It seemed safe enough to say.

You nodded after a long moment and leaned your head on my shoulder. “Okay.”

—

You hated school. I knew that. My gaze would wander after your stooping shoulders as you walked drearily along campus grounds. I watched you wrestle with books you declared dead and steal time with me to read the ones you declared alive.

“They’re all books.”

You rolled your eyes at me and slid a textbook across the library table. “I hate the rain here,” you said out of the blue.

I glanced up at you without moving. You didn’t seem to notice, hands tapping restlessly on your homework. I picked up the textbook, propped it open on my own, and started reading.

Your hands went still and you listened as I read.

—

I understood what you meant. Rain was only alive when you and I were running in it.



In the middle of the second year, I was turning down the other guys who noticed me. We hadn't talked about anything or where we stood, but I never thought we stood anywhere. We belonged to each other in motion, and the choice to move together had always been both of ours.

You noticed when you found me in the library, smile stretched thin at the history major who didn't want to hear 'no.'

You stepped forward and dropped your bag on the table, so we both looked up. You grinned. "It's raining."

I took your hand and followed you outside.



You hated college, and we both knew it. We stood under the eaves of the outside entrance to the campus library, watching water soak into the grass.

"I could get a job," you mentioned offhand. Your hand played with mine in the absence of something else.

I turned into you and spoke honestly with a bravery I hadn't known I had. "I don't care what you do as long as we do it together."

Your head came up, eyes widening in surprise. That broad grin split your face and you tugged on my hand.

We ran through the rain from the eaves to the little copse of trees to the gazebo further down the grounds. There you stopped, your weight arresting my speed and pulling me into you like a planet spiraling toward the sun. I laughed, and it felt unfettered for the first time in weeks.

"I'm slow," you said and kissed me breathless. "I don't hate the rain."

It took me years to understand you would have gone anywhere and done anything to hold me. It took you years to realize I would follow you wherever you went.

I laughed and kissed you back. "I don't hate it either."

*The ageless winds of summer fled
Before the gales of fall
Winter captured all of them
And held them in its thrall
The songbirds kissed the skies goodbye
And dallied with the south
The north awoke and shook a beard
Of snow onto its mouth*

FILL MY HANDS WITH YOU
(VELOCITY OF RAIN, REMIXED)

—

Dylan & Ellie

Somewhere between the library and the school on a long, downtown street with tiny brick alleyways leading off it, Dylan lived at the top of a ten-story apartment building with his mother, his grandmother, and his dog. Somewhere on the same street two buildings down (he thought), there lived a little girl with black braids, golden brown skin, and a warm laugh who ran between the school and the library and the library and home. He would walk or run behind her, but he never could catch up.

—

When he was about seven years old and the neighborhood kids needed another kickball player at the picnic, he found her by the potato salad and pulled her by the hand from the table.

“She’s on our team.”

The dark-haired girl shot him a curious frown with furrowed brows, but then the ball was flying and she saved her questions for later.

—

Later came on the grass where they’d dropped after playing hard and eating until they were full to bursting. Dylan stared upward at the clouds and tossed a ball up and down in his hands, letting the weight of it settle into a comfortable rhythm as he imagined his father telling him, ‘Catch it, Dylan! You got this!’

Memory settled under the girl’s curious sharp lilt and gave way to her words: “Why’d you pick me?”

He glanced over and grinned, thinking of pounding feet on the sidewalk from the library running ahead of him. “You’re fast,” he said.

He let her stare and tossed the ball upward without looking to catch it easily in his hand.

Her name was Eleanor, but she called herself Ellie. She'd stop by his table in the school cafeteria from time to time and trade a few words before she moved on to sit with the girls.

He practiced playing baseball until the coach told him he was the best player on the team.

Dylan was twelve and Ellie ten when a surprise rain shower caught them in the library. He was checking out when he saw her pause under the doorway, watching the rain fall down long enough that he almost caught up to her, almost reached her side before she started running.

Almost.

She was like a streak of laughter and lightning, impossible to catch up to, impossible to reach and touch. But then, her head turned and he thought for a

moment that she had actually seen him. She reached the corner and pressed her hands to the wall to bring herself to a halt.

Dylan stopped beside her. He watched the rain streak into her dark hair and glisten on her eyelashes.

“How long?” she demanded. “How long have you walked this route?”

He wanted to tug on her dark braid and remind her of that long ago picnic, but instead he just grinned and chuckled over the slight sting that she never looked back to notice. “You’re fast.”

He ran ahead of her to the next sheltering doorway, then heard her pounding feet just before he felt her hands against his waist to stop her headlong rush. Her dark eyes were full of laughter. They ran together for the first time.

—

Ellie’s friends moved to his table and intermingled with his. He sat beside her at lunch and caught her hand as they laughed and ate. The world always felt better with something to fill his hands.



She wanted to go to college and he wanted to play baseball. Job offers in the neighborhood came in here and there: the local store, the library where he studied, the mechanic shop down the street.

Ellie would invite him up to her room sometimes to fill in the gaps of their homework behind an open door. He would clear a space among the crammed in books and watch her sit up on the desk and laugh, her smile white in her golden brown face, a sundress fanning out over her knees. She was good at school, loved to read the way he loved to play ball and catch impossible throws. Somehow he wondered if he ever would manage to quite catch her.

“You can’t blow off college for baseball,” she told him.

Dylan sighed and sat up on the bed as he tossed the ball aside and let it wander where it would. “They let you do both, you know.”

She watched the ball’s path while he studied her. Tension filled up the space in his chest. Her mind had run out ahead of him, and he wanted to stop her from slipping out of his grasp.

“What do you think I ought to do?” he finally broke the stretching silence. It made her look at him, made his chest tighten at the look in Ellie’s eyes.

She sighed and came over to settle on the bed beside him, her arm warm against his. “I think you should go to school and try things and then decide.” She looked up at him with something quiet and wanting, something like hope.

She wanted him there with her. It was tentative and frightening, but it was there, right where Dylan had always hoped to find it.

He leaned his head on her shoulder and slid one arm around her waist. Her hand found his and she didn’t pull away.

“Okay.”

—

Once they got on campus, things were supposed to get easier. They were going to the same college, still studying together at the library, still poring over books and cloudy skies and the velocity of baseballs and pounding feet, but Dylan could never quite shake the feeling he was falling behind. He hated school and

more than one professor suggested tutoring or a different, easier course when they saw how much he studied and how little good it seemed to do.

Ellie smiled when she walked with her friends, but her eyebrows furrowed together in worry whenever she threaded her arm through his.

He wanted to wipe the concern out of her eyes. He wanted to find a way to keep up with her as she laughed her way through stacks of books.

“Textbooks are dead literature,” he told her over the library table one day, but he left them open anyway and pretended to be trying to read them. Endless weeks of studying and getting nowhere were beginning to wear away at Dylan’s edges, but he kept staring at the words, thinking somehow they’d start making sense.

Ellie glanced up from her pile of homework and fun books, the kind she used to read aloud to him in her bedroom. “They’re all books.” She shrugged, but her dark eyes took in his restless hands beating time on a history book, and he didn’t think she was as unconcerned as she was trying to let on.

He rolled his eyes and slid the history book across the table, indicating a particularly dry passage.

“Dull, dead, boring. I hate the rain here,” he muttered. It wasn’t like the rain at home. They didn’t run in it.

She seemed to hesitate, then surprised him by drawing the history book toward her and beginning to read it aloud. Somehow, it didn’t matter how dry the material; she made it live with her voice.

—

By the middle of the second year, Dylan wanted out. Ellie was a good student and a beautiful girl. She was getting attention from students and teachers alike, and he was barely scraping by in a world he didn’t belong in.

She still tucked her hand into his arm as they walked, but he knew he was slowing her down. He knew if she ran, he couldn’t possibly keep up.

—

“Dylan.” Ellie shook her head as they stood in the sheltering doorway of the library as rain fell and soaked the green lawn. “I don’t...” She paused and

lapsed into silence. “I don’t care if you get a degree in business.”

He stared out at the rain, watched the gray skies empty themselves into the earth. His hands were empty and finally, he caught one of hers in his, breathed in soft relief when her fingers tightened around him instead of pulling away.

“I could get a job,” he said at last, thinking of grocery stores and book shops and libraries and garages. He looked into Ellie’s eyes and wondered if she’d let him brush back the damp hair from off her cheeks.

She turned her body into his, startling him, and breathed out softly, “I don’t care what you do as long as we do it together.”

He stared at her, trying to understand that, trying to understand why someone like Ellie who could always run faster, learn more, be better... It hit him then with something like laughter and fierce lightning that she’d been chasing after him almost as hard as he’d been chasing her.

He grinned; he couldn’t help it. He tugged on her hand and pulled her laughing into the rain to run, to run toward the small gazebo further down the

grounds. He pulled her under its shelter and into his arms.

“I’m slow,” he said, admitting something that had pained him for years and he’d always thought she’d known. He was slow, and she was fast, and somehow that had always made him afraid he would lose her. He pulled her close and kissed her, feeling her smile beneath his lips. He kissed her until he was no longer afraid. “I don’t hate the rain.”

Ellie laughed her warm, golden laugh and caught his shoulders in her arms. “I don’t hate it either.” She caught him and he caught her.

They held on. They laughed.

His world was always better when his hands were full.

WE DREAMLESS KEEP

—

MIRROR

we dreamless keep
the stars, the heavens, the earth spinning
beneath her golden axis as she laughs—
wondering when she'll ever stop (will she
ever?). you always told me
do not dream, there's more to life than dreams
and I, forgetting to ask what else?, forget
the stars are born from lightning hearts;
the heavens cascade from open minds;
the earth, our bodies borne on the open winds
of maelstroms, spinning with our flight, non-flight—
for what is flight without our dreams?

A HANDSBREADTH LIGHT

—

VARDIN

She wondered when she had begun to trust him.

Llereya out of Calai was not bound in the manner of some or most. Her gift was in her bonds and the bonds arrived with trust, whether or not she wished them. Spring had brought Cayden to their hunting band, and as the mists faded away with the wintertides into the summerlight, she found he had found a way into her mind. When she returned to her own House, the feel of him went with her and she knew where he traveled and how far. The intrusion went deeper than her dreams.

Dreaming was traditional, the *rothnen* way of knowing one's other—she had dreamed of Cayden from the time she was fourteen and knew when she

met him who he was—but this slid across the barrier to waking. Now, he walked with her in her house and the lands of her *yaven*, her family. She knew his moods as readily as that of her brother, her sister, her father.

“You are troubled.” Bryn stood behind her in the morning light.

Llereya preferred views for her meditation. The faint golden hues following the dawn lit the water gardens behind her balcony, softening the still chill wind. It was the first morning without the mists. “I have a new bond,” she answered.

Her father said nothing to that. What could he say? She had been collecting them from her childhood and had no recourse to do otherwise.

But Bryn understood perhaps better than most what it cost to her to be so intertwined with those she loved. In the way of many of the gifted, Llereya’s gifts came one at birth and the other at manifestation. She had felt her mother’s pain the day she died. She had tasted her sister’s fear when Kenira was captured in war. She had tasted the darkness of Kenira’s angry grief when her husband had been killed.

He came to stand beside his eldest daughter and look out on the morning with her. "You trust him." It was both question and answer.

Llereya's eyes drifted shut and in her mind, she was standing in the place of stones, her retreat enclosed on all sides but one from her land, Vardin. She preferred views for her meditation and out from the opening in that rocky sanctuary, her nation lay spread out before her. Like a songbird, she could fly along the shimmering golden threads of her mind-scape to a sister, a brother, a father, an unclaimed lover who would be.

"I am but a handsbreadth to his span, my father," she answered softly. It had bothered her when the dreams first arrived. Cayden had been alive from time of the First Great Slaughter, from the time the nations of Rothnarak and of Vardin split. He had lived for centuries. She had no such length of life among her gifts and no desire for it. "I am a child to his years." She barely touched the golden thread that led to Cayden. "He will live on after I am dust."

She opened her eyes and saw compassion in her father's gaze. He had been rothnen to a woman

without gifts, her soulmate, though he too would ever be untouched by time.

“Ah, my strong wind,” he called her name by its meaning instead of its sound and tugged on her hair affectionately. “It was worth it.”

Worth it though Llereya’s mother had not lived past her daughter’s seventh birthday. Worth it though she had never been gifted and would never have lived to the end of her husband’s span of days. Worth it for the trust that knew not length of time, only depths of love. It would be worth it.

Llereya leaned against her father and closed her eyes again. It would be easy to pretend she were only a little girl again, but she did not. It was not her way. Instead, she let her mind become the songbird and fly along the golden light of the morning—toward Cayden.

TO FALL

I wake up each morning,
hoping to fall in love.
I imagine it must hurt
when you reach the bottom,
But from what spectacular heights
we must fall to fall
and down the descent,
the heat riding up my back
in a brace for the impact—
It is better to fall
than to never know flight.

BEST FRIENDS

drabble

—

ALLIANCE

“Hey, kiddo.” Brenton, the biggest, meanest kid in second class, stopped in front of five-year-old Shelley, who immediately clutched her lunch bag closer. “I could smell those figs all the way across the lunchroom.”

Brenton reached out, then abruptly reeled backward from a flying fist and Shelley was staring down, surprised, at the bully sprawled on the floor.

“That’s *my* best friend,” a tall blonde girl from third said beside her, glaring narrowly.

Brenton scrambled away.

Shelley peeked up at this odd rescuer.

“I’m Langley,” the girl introduced herself, then threw an arm around Shelley’s shoulders. “Let’s go eat lunch.”

SINCE WHEN

drabble

—

ALLIANCE

“Why did you say you were my best friend?” one little girl, Shelley, asked the other, Langley.

The two girls were settled in at a lunch table, sharing knishes and snacks. Shelley had a handful of expensive figs from offworld. Langley’s mother had baked flatbreads.

Langley popped another piece of fruit in her mouth. “That bully had no right to your figs.”

“G—d never lies,” Shelley answered solemnly.

“You know why?” Langley leaned back and stretched, then plunked both elbows on the table and grinned. “If He says it, He makes it true. You are *now* my best friend.”

THE WILD BALLOON

Somebody find the kiss I misplaced, waylaid:
there it goes wandering down the lane.
Run after it! Catch it by the toes,
and whatever you do, don't let it go!
Love is the wild balloon in the wild breeze,
bobbing with the buffets but with enough strength
to carry us—both, not one, but both—up, up.
I cannot see beneath my feet:
the earth's obscured by the clouds of dreams.

LATE RETURN

drabble

—

SEVEN DAYS

“The line is broken.” Lena stared at the receiver and the offending tone ringing through it.

“It’s dead, not broken,” her assistant Angelita corrected her, continuing to file cards on Pretty Things’ book collection. “And you can just call him tomorrow. It’s not like he doesn’t return his borrowed books.”

Lena frowned. In the last few months, Wesley had never missed a week. Every Wednesday, he returned his book, borrowed another, stopped to talk about the reading. Was he hurt?

Angelita was staring at her.

“What?”

Angelita grinned. “You’ve got it bad.”

Lena sighed, exasperated, and hung up the phone.

WATCH ME DREAM

—

MIRROR

watch me dream
the worlds wander after
forget the road that led you here
bleak and solemn waylights drifting
forget the bleak, forgotten year
the fires of cosmic drifting minds
and let me show you visions clear
the winds of heartsouls, live and swift
the way we used to see

dream anew
and time shall be hereafter
writ in heart our souls' provisions
wound, unwound by dreamers sifting
speak to me in shattered visions
the spoils of heavens sifting finds
lead astray our strayed revisions
the bounds of futures, pasts are shifting
be who we used to be

FOREST FRUIT

—

FAEOLOGY

Sarah is a little girl standing at the foot of the great giants. They stretch their limbs, achingly, up to the sky, those ancient trees.

She cannot see the forest for the trees.

They sing to her, call to her, draw her out of her bed at night until she comes to them, lays her small, cold fingers against their peeling bark and stares up so high, high, high, wondering why she can never see an end to their multitude of branches.

Why do you mourn? Sarah whispers, knowing what the people of her small town do not, that the trees want something she does not quite understand. *Why do you cry in the middle of the night?*

We are dying, they would say if they could speak. There are no young ones of us like there are of you, and no one listens when we stretch our branches and call out to be rescued.

She is a little girl standing at the foot of the great giants. She looks about and sees a forest, that ancient forest, then she scrambles up the sharp and peeling bark. Its brittle edges scrape her shins and knees, but she climbs higher and higher until she reaches the branches where the dark fruit grows. Her father harvests the fruit. The town harvests the fruit and sells it in faraway markets where it fetches a high price, high enough to put wood in the stove and plainer food upon their plates, but only barely high enough, only barely enough fruit to feed them all.

The little girl takes down a piece of fruit, two, three. She shimmies back down the peeling bark and scrambles into a heap beneath the trees. Shooting upright and brushing herself off, it is quick work to determine her own health. The scrapes will heal, the scratches are red for such a short time. They are trees, no forest to stand and grow into ancient.

Then Sarah begins to walk, the fruit under her coat, until she passes through all of her tiny town and

to the other side. Moonlight plays with her hair, wondering where she is going. She stops by the river and leans over to unbury her little box of summer treasures: a sea shell, favorite stones, her mother's laughter and scent in a bundle of dried flowers. She pulls out the box and puts in the fruit and buries them over again.

Sarah stands under the moonlight and listens, listens, listens.

The trees are no longer crying.

*who winds the stairs of heaven,
climbs upon their pendulous swinging,
pauses to hear the angels singing
unspeakable songs around one clinging,
and breathing passes on from then
to now where love unwinds the stairs,
unravels the spiral to claim what's theirs,
and breathing becomes the singing?*

THE SINGER

—

CALINDRIA

Kaliri was a young woman once, proud in her strength, perhaps more than was her right. Even now, it took so little, hardly a thought, a slight thrumming of her vocal chords—her soul—and the teapot nudged itself onto the tray she held. Still almost unconscious, this stretching forth of power blended with thought. She hummed softly while she carried the service into the warm sitting room to lay out on a tea table between the chairs.

The visitors' cloaks spilled carelessly beneath them on her furniture. Their boots dug heavily into the soft rugs her husband had made for her—he wouldn't tell her what of. Their visages were hardened, strengthened

by a war she had once fought in; men of command they were.

She poured out. The china tinkled delicately as tea trickled into the cups and cups scraped against saucers and the men took them with nods of gratitude. She took her own teacup in hand, tested the brew's heat with a bare sip and warm breath, and then settled back into a separate seat somewhat removed from her two guests.

She was not given to the old courtesies that once guided her every way. She wore her husband's soft, thick tunic and cloak about her for warmth and a pair of loose trousers like a young man or what a servant girl might put on beneath her skirts. Her once lively conversation skills had been put to rest years prior. The only things she retained from her youth were her appearance, no easy thing to lose for one of her kind, and her restraint, impossible to give up. There was a time...

But ah, couldn't they all say that.

Kaliri took another sip of tea.

Silence stretched taut over the small room, and she made no attempt to break it. These men had climbed the highest mountains of Vas'hehr to find

her, knocked on the thick wooden door her husband had carved with his hands, fashioned in the old ways of her people, not his, and begged admittance. If only for the length and difficulty of their journey, she allowed them inside and offered them sustenance. But no more. She knew those red cloaks, stitched with the swirling patterns of the new self-styled nobility and their warriors' brooches of gold and ivory mingled together and their raw, hardened eyes that had seen the height of treachery. If they wished to speak to her, they would find the words from somewhere in themselves. She would remain silent.

"Your fame still stretches to the sea," one said, his low voice rumbling intrusively into the space between them.

Kaliri merely looked at him and sipped her drink.

The older one frowned at the man who had spoken. He had darker hair, darker eyes than the young soldier, a face that might have remembered her himself. It was he that turned to her now and spoke with a rough, coarse voice but the smoothest of manners.

"We have no place to ask of thee."

Ancient words. Ancient rituals. For the first time, fire flashed within her. Briefly. She squelched the urge beneath a warm bath of peaceful understanding. This man needed what she had once given so freely. He understood that she would not give it.

She tilted her head, appraising him. "You do not." These were not the words of ritual, and he stiffened. But they were truth.

The younger man pulled in his foot and began to lean forward, but his commander stayed him with a hand, dark eyes never leaving Kaliri's face.

"And yet, we must ask," he rasped out. "Though we have no place, yet we must ask of thee, singer."

"Singer?" Kaliri arched her brow and raised herself up in her chair at last. China tinkled when her saucer met the tray. She stared at him, spoke in surprised fury. "Do these old bones sing? You have come too late, commander. There is nothing left."

The young soldier's eyes flashed surprise of his own. He looked her up and down. "You could not be old."

Her gaze snapped to his. "What do you know of age, child?"

The commander stood, turned away for a moment. Both of them watched as he took two paces to the right, then whirled back to the left. He looked at her. "You have song left in you."

She snorted her derision. "As much as you." The bitterness alone was enough to kill any power of her song. Those bright, pained notes lifted within her and died on the ache of her thoughts. "You know nothing of the old singers," she said softly. She lifted her eyes again to the dark, understanding eyes of the commander. "You know nothing of me," she whispered. And the words were too soft, spoken too well in the language of friends. She stiffened at her own self and looked away.

"I know a singer when she speaks," the commander replied.

Kaliri did not answer. She lifted her cup and sipped out the last bit of tea swirling about in the bottom, then placed her cup on the saucer again. Finally, she met the commander's eyes again. Her voice was cold. "I will give you rooms."

His dark gaze followed her out into the hall, but only the young soldier's hesitant steps echoed softly on the ground behind her.

She put them as far back from her own chambers as was possible to go, gesturing at the low-slung wooden beds her husband had made. Fresh linens came from the great chest in the hall and she spread them over with a quiet thrumming, smoothing out the creases more easily than a simple maid could do. The commander watched her with those knowing eyes, but Kaliri knew the extent of her abilities and she did not cross that line. Restraint in manner and in power. To unmake would be deadly for far more than just herself. She left them in that distant room and let them sleep away from her dreams, lulled by the mountain winds.

Morning found her guests ready to go their way. The younger was clearly agitated, wanting to remain, perhaps, and persuade her to fulfill her duty to their people. But it was the way of hospitality in Vas'hehr that to remain would be to overstay her generosity. So they gathered their things to leave. She packed them provisions so she would not have the burden of serving them again.

"They will overrun the country," the commander said suddenly.

Kaliri tightened the strap on the satchel and checked it for leaks.

He continued on in that low rasp. "Their falcons fly over the southern foothills. We have seen walking scouts down by Ráven."

Her fingers froze. Pain hissed out from between her teeth.

The younger gave her eyes of worry.

"Do not speak of Ráven," she stated icily, lifting her face to the commander's.

In that moment, he drew back, knowing somehow that he had overstepped his bounds, that he did not know, as he thought he had, just what happened on the fateful day her song broke in pieces against the mountain, and all were terrified at the loss.

"Shezo," he whispered in quiet apology, a sound she had never been granted by a red-cloaked warrior. But it was too late now for that word to assuage her grief.

She gave them the satchel. Tears stung behind her eyes, but with the practice of decades, she could reach for peace, clasp to the Presence within her and release her anger—again.

"I am no singer," she told the commander. "Tell them that the great singer Alakarea is dead."

And she closed the door behind them.

—

Kaliri.

The voice was not unfamiliar to a woman once a singer. It followed her like the tender breath of a mother's lullaby, or the rumble of a father's heart-beat.

There was much left to her to tend in this home—all she had left of her husband—and he was the only man who had ever known her name.

"I am here," she whispered over the soft tomatoes, past ready to be plucked. She was still here, still breathing, notes still humming beneath her fingertips. But it was not to the tomatoes she spoke.

I am the Great Singer, the one whose melody has formed the stars. Have you forgotten?

Forgotten the song and the Singer alike. The former birthed from the latter. The heart was prone to forget.

“I have not forgotten, my Lord,” she murmured. She had chosen the silence, what silence she could have, chosen to stagnate rather than rage in her grief. “I have not overcome.”

...

“There are rules of power,” Thea tells her over and over. “For every portion of light you would bring into this world, my daughter, that is how much darkness you must overcome.”

My daughter. Alakarea.

“I will learn,” she answers submissively. She is young, young enough to change who she is for what she would have.

...

“It has been long,” she answered now the One who made the song. “I do not know how to overcome this.”

Remember Me, alakarea. I have already taught you this.

She bowed her head submissively and wondered within when she had been taught.



Three days later, Kaliri opened her door to carry out the dishwater and pour it on the roses that grew alongside the steep path leading to her door, but she stood still when she saw the commander sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms around them, clearly in an attitude of waiting.

"How long have you been there?" she asked. One hand slid to her hip.

He looked up at her, then rose slowly to his feet. "Only since this morning. It was too dim a light to come upon your door."

She did not flinch at the words of another culture offered her with such conciliatory tones. She raised an eyebrow at him. "Where is your chaperone?"

"About twenty paces down with the danani," he said roughly, speaking of the mountain cats they rode. Smooth words and jagged voice. She wondered what kind of a singer he would have been.

A moment of silence, then he said, "The singer, Alakarea, is not Yakhweiré."

Kaliri studied him for a long moment. There was something in his eyes that had not been there before. Finally, she nodded in the direction of the glen down the mountain.

"Call him."

She served them tea, as before. This time, she first served the younger man, then she went to the commander and poured out for him. She took none for herself. It was the way of Vas'hehr.

"Your husband was not of our people," the commander rasped, almost as a question.

Kaliri stood and stared at him. "You speak as an intimate to ask me that," she chided. Fifteen years among their people and she breathed their ways like her own.

But he was not chided. "Yet you serve us as a woman of Vas'hehr."

"You misjudge me," she replied coolly.

He stared at her.

The young soldier looked back and forth between.

She hummed quietly to herself, poured her own tea. The liquid swished softly into the cup, dark honeyed liquid, warming beneath the gentle song. She was never who they believed her to be. Only her husband saw her and saw *her*.

...

The singer is young, a power to be reckoned with. She cuts a long, slender figure upon the mountain into the wind, hand upraised, voice lifted. Wind cuts around her, gentling at her back, pressing sharply into an almost knife-edged point, before hurling itself before her into the thick-pressed troops of green and brown livery below.

She is the last great singer this people has ever known. The keening cries of fierce gale and the high ringing of her voice, like a silver bell chiming higher and fuller and louder until the armies of the south hold their ears against the sound, pushes back the sea of brown and green and dark hair and faces. It is an irresistible force that sends even the falcons careening out of the sky beneath its onslaught.

Wind sings beneath her hands. Mountains sing beneath her feet. Arrows shot at her are turned away. Darkness lancing slowly into twilight brightens beneath the blast, as though she can hold the sun itself in its place.

It is said that when she breathes, the army will press forward again. But it has been hours, and the song has never faltered, or she has never breathed.

...

“Commander, who do you think I am?” Kaliri leaned back, lifting her cup to sip lightly from the gilded edge. She settled it back into its saucer. “Do you know?”

He stared at her long with dark eyes beneath furrowed bushy brows, forehead knit into weathered lines. The young soldier beside him fidgeted nervously, but remained silent.

Finally, the commander spoke, “You are not of Vas’hehr.”

“I,” she said firmly, “am not of anywhere.”

Both eyebrows winged upward. His mouth formed a grim line. He lowered his gaze, drank from

his tea, lifted his eyes again. “Your husband was not of Vas’hehr.”

“He was not.”

Yakhweiré he was, and so he should ever remain.

“But you are a singer,” the commander persisted, still so certain, so sure.

Kaliri lilted out a laugh, bright and soft like the girl she once was and was no longer. “What I am and what I was are separate things.” She canted her head toward him, considered. “You are as much a singer as I.” Yes, she could feel the light, trembling notes around him, deep and strong. “There is something there that either was or can be...” She shrugged. “But is not.”

“Things that were do not cease,” the younger burst out suddenly, drawing both of their sharp attention. He gestured with his heated voice. “These things are *real*. They do not end.”

“What do you know of it?” Kaliri asked sharply. “Do you know the song that speaks to the depths of the rocks? That sings forth from the bright stars? That flows from the heart of the Singer’s Presence?”

He caught in his breath at that.

“Do you know the Great Singer?” she demanded.
“Have you heard Him sing?”

Silence snapped between them all.

The commander dropped his hand to his knee and lowered his cup to the table beside. “We know nothing,” he finally whispered, grizzled voice, grizzled age coming together in weary defeat.

But a fire had been lit in his young companion’s eyes. “Have you?” he asked, loud enough for the stone beneath them to hear and resonate the song of reply.

Have you heard the Great Singer sing? Have you heard the song of the Presence?

Kaliri looked at him and saw in his eyes a fire she had long thought dead. “You believe I have not?” She spoke quietly, her own passion banked beneath the recognition of a familiar spirit.

He snorted and sat back, chewing on the inside of his own cheek. “I don’t know,” he said, teeth clenching, head turning. “I don’t know how anyone who has could leave it.”

Have you no other gods before me.

She closed her eyes, unflinching beneath the pain, leaned back in her seat, and let her memory take her.

...

When he wakes, he does not see her. His limbs tense and muscles clench, battle-wary and alert. He sees the strange roof of stone over his head, the hot breeze brushing against cut openings, and through them, the distant foreign expanse of sand.

But he feels her, for she does not cease in her ministrations.

“You were injured when we found you,” she tells him quietly. She dips the cloth in cool water again before bringing it back to his brow.

“Who are you, daughter of the desert?” he asks.

She guessed correctly, speaking to him in the language of the mountain people. He called her in his own tongue, *miqakarea*.

It is no wonder then she took the name of ‘daughter.’

“I am a daughter,” she says.

He reaches up to stay her hand. "I would rather die." His face hardens. "Or kill them."

She draws her hand away but shakes her head. "You will not die, warrior of Yakhwein." She sets down the cloth and begins to change his bandages.

"You are stubborn."

She raises an eyebrow at the bloody gauze but does not answer.

"They are my enemies," he tells her, voice and expression fierce.

"The greatest victory is in loving them," she replies softly, not looking at him when she tends his wounds.

He turns away, toward the open window. "I don't believe that." He sounds rough and weary, bitter at things she will not guess at.

She finishes her work carefully, then shrugs. "You don't have to."

He looks at her then for the first time since he awoke. His eyes are piercing, a light blue not common of Yakhweiré, the men and women of Yakhwein.

She leaves him with those words.

...

Kaliri opened her eyes and looked into the strong, weary face of the commander, the uncertain but passionate gaze of his young officer.

She said, "I will go."

—

The mountains knew her. They remembered her name. They sang to her from deep within the hidden places of the rock as Kaliri, the commander, and the youth picked their way across old, rutted paths, long disused but by the bravest, or the most foolish, of travelers.

She held still in the middle of the path somewhere between a distant valley and an even more distant mountain. Both men stopped to look at her, but neither understood why she stood so still and shrugged her cloak back off her shoulders and let the wind blow loose through her hair. She raised her eyes to the sun and heard a pure and distant note carried faintly on the breeze. So far away it sounded, the sound of home.

The mountains of Vas'hehr sang to her from the beginning of her journey. The mountains above Ravén

sang to her, a cold and riveting sound simply because she did not want to hear it. The distant cliffs of her own true home sang to her, calling her onward, reminding her of things she once told her husband.

...

"The greatest victory is in loving them," she tells him.

"I don't believe it." His tone is bitter.

She shrugs simply. "You don't have to."

...

Kaliri remembered these things, remembered what made her walk away from those cliffs and follow after a man not of her people nor of her land.

I will be with you, my daughter, when you sing in a barren land.

"We must be going," said the commander.

How long had it been since Ráven, since the day she stood upon the mountain and her song shattered against it? The old songs had pounded through her blood.

...

"Feel it, sing it, say it, be it—it's all vibration." Kaliri explains, but he does not really understand. Finally, she falls to old Thea's words: "There are rules for power."

...

"It is the Rule of Alchemy," she spoke softly into the wind. It stilled under her outstretched palm, and she inhaled deeply.

I will be with you.

Will You be my strength?

The soldiers stared at her, feeling the shift in the mountain air. Yes, these mountains knew her.

"I don't want to feel it anymore," she had said once, knowing in the giving up of song, at least she would not shatter the world.

"For every portion of light to come into the world, a certain portion of darkness must be overcome." She lowered her hand, heart trembling with old pain. Over the years, numbness had become her friend and restraint her earnest companion.

The younger watched her approach. When she drew even, he asked her, "Why did you walk away?"

She did not answer at first, waiting on a still small voice.

...

"Why have You forgotten us?" the people cry to their Great Singer, cry as if they do not know the song comes from the Singer and their own hearts rise against them.

She is the last of the great singers, and she cannot help but wonder, Perhaps you have forgotten Him.

...

She answers him simply. "Because the greatest victory is to love them."

—

It had been twenty-two years since she had stood upon the heights over Ráven, since the cries of fal-

cons had scored her skies with the sounds of war, since her tears had burned her and broken her song.

Kaliri, the daughter, stood over a vast view of forest and rippling river and stone. A village had been rebuilt upon the old, but it was now guarded heavily and walled about. Chirrith foot-soldiers hid in the forest and sorties had been sent out before today.

...

He is not a singer first, though he has spent weeks' worth of hours trying to add the discipline.

"Feel it, sing it, say it, be it—it's all vibration," she tells him. "Your love is as strong as any singer's song. It is the song."

By the time they reach Ráven, he agrees that she will be the singer and he will be the warrior—as he has always been.

...

"He was always yours," she admitted softly, and her words were not for the forest or for the falcons crying to battle or for the Chirrith soldiers surging

forward in brown and green. Her words were for the Singer that made the song, that made her husband, gave him voice, and gave him to her for such a brief time.

For a moment, she lifted her eyes and hands to the heavens and wept with gratitude for the years that they had shared, for the love that they had received.

"They are my enemies," he had told her so long ago, voice and face equally hard.

Chirrith, you were my enemies.

...

"The greatest victory is in loving them."

"I don't believe it."

...

She opened her mouth and sang. Wind sang beneath her hands. Mountains sang beneath her feet. Darkness lancing slowly into twilight brightened beneath the blast, as though she could hold the sun itself in its place.

WE FASHIONED WINGS

We left the earth and fashioned wings
from random, scattered terrestrial things:
abandoned hopes, forgotten dreams
woven with love to make the seams.

We made a ship of sinew and sweat
and climbed the stars where once we met
before we wandered back in time,
hoping for a brighter clime.

We thought the earth in younger days
could be a home for future strays;
we thought we could return again
now that it was free of men.

"There is no earth," we now declare,
but also true, "We do not care."

Our home is in these ancient wings,
the stars of space, our love that sings.

DON'T SAY A WORD

—

ALLIANCE

Casey was eleven years old when the captain of the Good Heart changed everything again. They'd been forced to stop by the only space station handy for supplies, Yeldeht, a ratty little port at the corner of a backwater star system. What supplies could be had.

The captain brought back Casey's requested jar of engineering oil, two large barrels of beans and rice instead of guaranteed sanitary ration packets—and a boy.

He dumped off the food on Scroggs with a gruff, "Make sure that's not flea-infested," then instead of the oil, put the child's sticky, dirty hand in Casey's. He was maybe four or five and crying quietly. She eyed the captain skeptically.

"Name's Kade. His parents died today. The locals wanted to eject him with their bodies"—ejection being what passed for burial among spacers.

She could have asked for details or sent the kid to Tracian or Delli, older girls with some hint of motherly instinct to their personalities, but that would take time away from needed repair work, so Casey scowled, snatched her oil, and turned on her heel toward the ducts, tugging Kade behind her.

He put up little protest, just some muttered ramble of what were probably swear words. They learned them young at places like Yeldeht.

They reached the ducts quickly. Casey ducked into the outside hallway running parallel to respiratory duct B-210, shoved the oil into Kade's free set of grubby fingers, then pried open the duct hatch with her own free hand. Kade took one look at the gaping maw into darkness, planted both feet, and hollered at the top of his apparently well-functioning lungs.

Casey huffed in frustration and let him go. "Scaredy." She started to shimmy in without him and was promptly startled by his immediately grabbing her and trying to bodily yank her back out.

She stared at him. He was yelling at her in the Yeldeht gutter dialect, one she wasn't conversant in, let alone fluent. The only word she could make out was 'no' in all nine conjugations muddled between the rest.

G—, she realized with a strangled curse. They didn't eject bodies at ratty, little, resource-poor space stations like that. They recycled them. In ducts that looked like this one.

She let him yank her away from the duct hatch and then sat down, scowling, and took him into her arms. Kade squirmed terribly, but Casey was strong and held him tight.

There was a reason she scowled all the time. She remembered—remembered, d— it, when all she wanted to do was forget—and began to sing in a voice so clear and sweet that Scroggs, trundling the potentially flea-infested beans down a near corridor, stopped his grumbling to listen and wonder who it was.

*"Hush, little baby, don't say a word.
Sissy's going to buy you a mockingbird,
And if that mockingbird don't sing..."*

Kade stopped squirming, and Casey kept singing the entire song over and over until eventually, he stopped crying.

QUEEN OF HEAVEN

—

MIRROR

I

Under a brassy, golden sky
I met the Queen of Heaven by
The edge of a long and golden road
Her eyes were dark, but they were cold

Her midnight hair drank in the light
Her golden skin could burn my sight
Her motorcycle matched her black
Her kindled gaze made tension crack

The Queen of Heaven seemed to be
Ice and fire equally
The furnace of a heated sun
Compacted to an iron gun

I was young, so she was too
I'd rather that the sky were blue
But Mother always chided, blunt
We cannot have all things we want

Wanderer I'd ever been
She raised her brow, expression sin
"We ride the long and narrow road
'Til heavens burn and stars corrode"

The Queen of Heaven ought to be
A story bright, a carol sweet
The Queen of Heaven looked at me
And set me trembling on my feet

II

The sky at dusk is brazen gold
At morning light, red sunders bold
Evening wakes the cloudswept green
North for winter, flocks careen

We woke one night before the dawn
To skies as pale as green chiffon
TVs sputter words and chime
“Beginning of the end of time”

The Queen of Heaven 'round her cup
Curls her hand and drinks it up
Coffee's known to open lips
Among the lies, some trueness slips

The mothers prayed by candlelight
Though none was needed; skies were bright
The fathers fought they knew not what
With hopeless rage and words that cut

The girls at school were known to weep
 Huddled together like wild sheep
The boys took off, for what could hold
 If time was dead and earth was old

The Queen of Heaven should not care
 When lost were all the reeling stars
The Queen of Heaven tossed her hair
Retorted, "Don't you know what's ours"

III

The road was long; we rode it hard
The sun was gone, the nights unstarred
 We stayed in every kind of place
 Built by God or human race

We tasted water when we passed
We ran the earth and mountains vast
Caught dragonflies within our hands
 Traced the spider's silken strands

The Queen of Heaven seemed to be
 A rebel woman, young like me
A wayward beam, a scorching flare
 A ray of sunlight caught midair

Winds were rare, the hills unswept
 Summer's balm was endless kept
We stopped and watched the eventide
 With coffee and a scone beside

If red and green the skies display
 Do the color blind see gray
 Is all of heaven dimness now
And to them beauty disallowed

The Queen of Heaven should regard
 If wounded souls belong to her
The Queen of Heaven's eyes were hard
 No answer would her tongue confer

IV

Quietly quieter every day
No birds to sing, no beasts to play
The 'tenders shrugged and took our cash
To tuck into their growing stash

I watched the world through the glass
Watched the loss of earth amass
"Is this the way the world ends"
A wearing down and none defends

The Queen of Heaven raised her brow
She tapped her fingers, shrugged; "Not now"
It angered me to hear her speak
But who could breach her sharp mystique

I took her wrist and stayed her hand
To make her hear my harsh demand
She caught my eyes within her gaze
And set my soul within ablaze

Fire burned, she scorched my lips
Then from my mouth, her finger slips
She will not answer, will not save
I know it, certain as the grave

The Queen of Heaven ought to be
Protective of humanity
The Queen of Heaven looked at me
“What do you know of deity”

V

Her name was Silvia, Silver, Syl
It changed for every house and hill
Her laugh was golden, bright and free
Her smiles given readily

I tangled hands within her hair
She left it loose without a care
We rode together on one bike
We were so close and unlike

The Queen of Heaven seemed to be
Close enough to touch and see
I touched her brazen, golden skin
And knew I'd never see within

I held a crumbling tome that dusk
And asked her in a voice too brusque
“Are you Syldé, Queen of Night
Or Sylfen, Ruler of the Light”

She turned to me with darkened eyes
And laughed in joyousless reprise
“Do you know when you ask me
Anything of humanity”

The Queen of Heaven should be fierce
And gentle as the ruling sun
Knowledge of her should not pierce
Her skin; it should not make her run

VI

She looked at me with midnight eyes
And only then, I saw them lies
“Neither.” Then she walked away
And summer fell to winter’s grey

OF MEMORY AND MAKING

—

SEVEN DAYS

“Memory’s a fickle sort of thing,” Connor cut over his girlfriend, mouth a grim line, suddenly surprisingly intense.

This sort of thing always surprised her because normally Connor was the easygoing one in school, took everything in stride, and shrugged off the small disasters of college like they really were just that—small. It’s what Ashelynn liked about him. It’s why when he stopped being easygoing, it shut her up—like now.

Elsie blinked at them, shoulders stiff with tension. Jake scooted his arms back off the table and leaned back, as if backing off from the redhead Connor. Didn’t seem to have an Irish temper, that one, but

you never could tell. Rudi shrugged and bit into his sandwich.

Normal school lunch, laughing and talking until they got on why people were the way they were, and Ashelynn thought it was because of the things they remembered and chose to remember. Normal until it wasn't.

"Fine then," she snapped back, tired of getting blindsided for the umpteenth time since knowing him. "Memory's fickle. Isn't that the point?"

His mouth straightened a little more, tight shut. He shook his head, slid off the bench, and walked away out of the cafeteria, dumping his tray on the way out.

Ashelynn felt her mouth drop open and she snapped it shut and glanced back at the rest of her friends.

Elsie sniffed. "I may not have a boyfriend, but I'm pretty sure you're supposed to go after him."

Ashelynn scrambled her things together, looked at her lunch tray.

"Leave it," Rudi said, so she did.

She found Connor out by the wall that surrounded the school's manicured lawns. He was staring off into a blue sky puffy with clouds. She wrapped her arms around herself against the wind's chill as she stepped up behind him.

“Connor, I’m sorry.”

He turned his head, then shook it and looked back. “So am I.”

Little things. Sharp words. Apologies. Reaching out and hugging his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder, wondering if she would ever handle a relationship with the grace her mother did. Connor slid around, braced his back on the wall, and hugged her properly. It felt good for a moment, really good.

“We’re not made by memory,” Connor murmured into her hair.

Ashelynn wondered if she should ask what he meant, wondered how he knew so certainly. She opened her mouth then closed it and held on a little tighter. Some questions were better off left unasked. When she pulled away, he held onto her hand as they walked back, but his focus seemed to be elsewhere, lost in thought or memory.



His twin, Wesley, never had that great of a memory. Connor had that figured out by the time they were four, five years old—long enough ago that he didn't really have a date for it. They would make up new games together and a few days later, Wesley would forget them—and just about everything else.

“Wesley, it's time to get up!” Connor tugged at his brother's covers in exasperation.

The sun was shining and surely they hadn't been up that late. But Wesley stubbornly clung to his covers, brown head buried in comforter and sheets. Connor tugged again and Wesley just made a small annoyed sound and burrowed deeper.

“Wesley!”

It was a normal morning, tug of war with the blanket, trying to force his twin to open his eyes in the brilliant beams of a new day, and Mom coming in and chuckling at the both of them. Then Wesley did open his eyes at last, tousled and sleepy, and looked up at their laughing mother. He blinked twice and asked, “Who are you?”

She stopped laughing.

The bottom fell out of Connor's world that day, ran into an endless whirlwind of tests and doctors and of Father crying when men weren't supposed to cry. *"There's something wrong with the transitioning to long-term memory," the doctor whispered. "He essentially loses a little bit more every day until by the end of the week, it's completely corrupted during the sleep cycle."*

Tuesday. Wesley and Connor were born on a Tuesday, and every Monday night Wesley was born again.

—

Connor paused in the doorway to the school and blinked back to the here and now and Ashelynn, staring up at him hopefully now that he was with her again. He held onto her shoulder and almost tightened his grip, almost told her that Wesley was always still Wesley, no matter how often he forgot, no matter how often he remembered. But for only a moment.

He couldn't bring himself to tell her if she didn't really want to know. She would always be Ashelynn, worry-free, carefree Ashelynn who smiled and

laughed and tried to lighten him up when he got too serious—no matter what he told her.

NORMAL WRITTEN IN
COFFEE GROUNDS

—

The Database & Justus

KINGDOMS & THORN AU

coffee winter

Normal is

The day you stepped inside the glass
black coffee burbling in the maker
was fogged and bitter cold
bitter grounds releasing rich aroma

reading summer

Normal is

The day you walked inside my door
your hand warm against my waist
was heated summer fragrance
imprinted pattern burned into my skin

coffee winter

Normal is

The way you leaned over the bar
foaming milk, whipped and creamed
eyes intense, and called me barista
the swirl of blackness and white

reading summer

Normal is

The way you wrote on my body
books crowding the bed and chairs
eyes intense, and asked me what you wrote
laughter forming words into life

coffee winter

Normal is

The day you sat at table five
chocolate dark and semisweet crumbled
and made it yours for winter
into the bitterness, changing it

ONCE UPON A TIME

—

SEVEN DAYS

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, a little boy was sitting with his back against a tree and frowning quite intently at a book in his hands. It was assigned reading for his class, but it was a long book and he couldn't seem to get through the whole thing without forgetting something that might be important on the test.

The little boy was Wesley Bryn. He had a brother in the same class, but Connor's reassurances to help him with homework did not and could not extend to tests—for obvious reasons.

On the other side of the tree trunk, a little girl walked over, freckled nose planted in her own book, not assigned reading, but one of those delightful

tomes stuffed with fairytales. She did not see the little boy and probably would not have preferred another location if she had. She plunked down and leaned against the tree.

The little girl was Lena Johnson. She was a bit of a bookworm and being homeschooled, she didn't really know the kids at school. Nevertheless, on her breaks, she sometimes walked the few blocks over for their spectacular selection of trees to read under. So the little boy and the little girl sat back to back reading, and finally, Wesley Bryn asked aloud, "What does 'ahoy' mean?" He was constantly running into things he didn't understand in this book about pirates and treasure and adventures set in a world quite unlike his own.

Lena turned around and said, "It means, 'Hello there.'" She went back to reading her book.

Wesley frowned and went on.

"Why would he do that?" Lena demanded of her book, frowning at the actions of the prince.

"Let me see." Wesley came over, read over her shoulder, and answered, "Oh, that's easy. He didn't like what the princess said about him, so he's trying to prove her wrong."

“Well, he could be a little smarter about it,” Lena groused.

Wesley shrugged and went back to reading.

Finally, the school bell rang and both got up to go their separate ways. Lena smiled at him before she left. “Here. You can have it.” She gave him her book and smiled cheerily.

“Thanks.” Wesley felt he should reciprocate, so handed her his own book, and they went, each to their own.

Later that night, she read of pirates and treasure and adventure and wistfully wondered whether she might go on an adventure of her own one day. Later that night, he read of fairies and princes and dragons and thought that here was a book at last that made sense!

*Castles in the air we weave
Of dreams and visions with our leave
We grant ourselves the right, believe
And only then, may we achieve*

THE CALLER AND THE DRAGON

—

VARDIN

There once lived a strong and powerful dragon named Rathor. He breathed fire through his mouth and through his wings, and all of his skin was hot like a burning furnace. He could sense when any person drew near to his lair. If they did not have any light of fire within them, he would burn them to ash if they did not run fast enough and far enough.

Now Nira, the Caller, decided that this state of things must end, so she took her dark hair and braided it tightly, and took her bright, golden skin and worked in a lotion that would not let her burn, and took her dark eyes and let them call to fire.

She had no light of fire within her (she was brave). She called with her eyes and could only call one thing at a time (she was reckless). She stood on the shore of her lake, ready, and impervious to flame (she was wise). And Rathor came.

The dragon came with a roar and with fire burning from his lips and cast her way. He hung in the air above her and blew and blew a mighty gale of fire through his outstretched wings. Nira's skin grew hot and her eyes stung, but she did not burn to ash. Rathor blew and blew, but she stood beneath him, unharmed and waiting.

Rathor bellowed his frustration and flew downward to the earth to fight her directly, for her call held him fast and he would not leave until she had been destroyed.

But when he fell, she glanced away. Her dark eyes called to fire. She turned them toward the storm.

Rathor could not see what she was about, but he struck her with his wing and she fell against the darkly scorched and barren earth. Still, she called. He raked her with his claws, and she gasped, bleeding brightly, but still, she called. He opened his mouth and burned

her blood where the impervious skin had broken, and she wailed with the pain.

But there.

The clouds began to boil. The waters of the lake began to seethe. The dragon, too caught up with his prey and intent to destroy, did not heed what Nira had wrought. The waters rose and the thunder met their roaring, and lightning and furious wave mingled to cast Rathor to the darkly scorched and barren earth. Nira stood, and again it struck. She lifted her arm, and again it struck, and there was lightning in her eyes.

At last, the dragon lay dead. Nira knelt beside him, panting and ragged with blood, for he had hurt her terribly. She turned her dark eyes and let go of the storm, the wind, the water, and lay down on the shore to sleep.

THIS IS THE END OF THE
WORLD

—

MIRROR

The glass breaks, the heart shatters, and

The queen is in her tower where

the ravens circle over the specks of brightness

all that's glittering under the light—

the broken glass, the broken hearts—

it's all illusion until it breaks

like cracks in the mirror, the truth beneath:

in a thousand pieces of secrets lost.

This is the end of the world.

INTO THE TEMPLE OF THE SUN

—

FAEOLOGY

Night brown shadows had gathered in the homey kitchen, settling over the dustless cabinet tops of carved wood and looming in the corners on stone slab surfaces. A dim red light glimmered from the grate in the morning oven, where Grandmother would warm her hands and set her cup of tea in the ashes before beginning the day's baking.

In the stillness, wings of soft gold light fluttered in the aroma of yesterday's bread and Nyx, eldest of the faelights, flew upward panting to land on the highest shelf on the wall near the door. Fuzzy static beat through her fleshless body, gold spirals of

ancient languages in ancient figures frayed through her dying radiance.

Nyx was a wrongness that should not be, and here as she lay dying, she knew it. Faelights may sentient be, but they weren't supposed to have feelings, thoughts, personality. Her carefully crafted cell-minds spoke to collective intelligence, not personhood, and so not understanding herself, she had foregone the restorative measures engaged by the other lights. They repaired themselves. They broke themselves into pieces and re-formed. They curled up in their winged cocoons of spiraling ancient words in ancient graphemes and became reborn. But Nyx... Grandmother loved her as she sang her humming tunes and obeyed Grandmother's thought and touched commands. She lived for Grandmother. She lived.

"Fool!" Nyx shook her head with vim. Not even a faelight could live forever.

This morning the youngest lights had screamed out laughter in their golden tongues that spoke only dead and ancient languages. They laughed at the old faelight who bumbled about as a common insect, panting her way to lighten the bread and make it rise, to fill the water in the rose jar, to weave air into

droplets of water and milk and honey as any faelight could do in a moment.

What faith could the elements possess?

Rebirth in fire, in dry brown wings tightly bound around herself, fraying her bones into liquid streams. And would what made her Nyx be born again with her?

Night had faded the harsh edges of the day. Eternal snow hemmed in the windows. Grandmother was asleep in her bed.

Nyx folded up herself and thought of human dreams and myths and imagining sleep, imagined dreaming of a bird born of the sun.

THE UNMAKING

—

MIRROR

Shake, shake stars from streaming courses
Break, break molten silver beams
Clasped 'round glassy mirror choices
Take, take time out at the seams

Gaze, gaze deep into the mirror
Blaze, blaze hearts into your dreams
Whirled 'round, making and unmaking
Raze, raze heaven 'til it gleams

Bright, bright in the molten mirror
Spite, spite reflections and regimes
Passed 'round, shattered into pieces
Smite, smite worlds from their schemes

Pass, pass torches to another
Chasse, chasse life to what it seems
Danced 'round bright and gleaming mirror
Glass, glass shadowed now redeems

BLOOD OF DRAGONS

—

VARDIN

Akena was a slender, black-haired shadow slipping through the House of Britak, down stone passageways and through the book-walled rooms of their Household's seat. She was sixteen years old and unbound. She had mastered not even one of her gifts and sometimes a tiny flame of wonder burned in her whether her parents felt shame at the fact.

Sixteen years to make a woman from a child. Sixteen years and she should have been a guardian. Sixteen years and she should have lowered her neck beneath the Queen's hand and be bound to service of her nation, Vardin.

Dusk made the House quiet. It suited Akena's purpose, for though she moved with grace and

silence, there were others in the great families who needed no ears or eyes to sense her passage, for she was of the *kahtchen*, those gifted with various abilities: to see with their minds, to hear thought, to sense the passage of another *kahtchen*, to exert their will over common elements, to pass through time or space, to bring forth fire and not burn.

She paused above the corridor overlooking the training courts but did not step into it. Instead, she reached out with her *kahtchen* senses and felt the flicker of *clomen*, that element of giftedness, burning within a single body. One. Akena licked her lips in concentration, reached again—straining. Her father. Her father who was fire, who had bound himself under the name Burn, and who had named her *born of flame*.

She stepped out into the corridor, but turned out of it to a small side door leading to the stairs that went below. She would join him.

—

Burn, as every other guardian, trained with and without his gifts. He trained with fire, burning and

leaving unburnt the things he wished. He trained with staff, sword, and his own hands as weapons in the dances which taught a guardian how to protect the plain.

Akena stayed in the shadow of an awning, where garden vine flowers trailed up the side of the House and she could watch her father before letting him know her presence. She had heard the stories since she was a little girl—stories of how the dragon households of the mountains of Rothnarak were once brothers in arms of the households of the valleys of Vardin and stories of the great wars fought between them over who had the right to live: those who could kill a plain human with a thought or those who were the untainted creation of God. And in between stood the guardians, the gifted kahtchen who had promised to keep both alive by sacrificing their own freedom to do so.

But Akena wasn't bound. She was still a little girl for all she was a woman.

Like a shadow, she flew out from under the awning and her father met her, stroke for stroke. She lost herself in the training, in the idea that she too might one day be a guardian.

He broke off when she stumbled the third time. She didn't look up from the ground at him, kept her eyes on the rapidly darkening ground and heard her own breath ragged in her ears.

"Akena."

Akena. A command. She scabbled herself to a standing position, ignoring the pain of overworked muscles and screaming bruises. She brushed the shimmering black hair from her eyes and stood before her father. His own eyes stared back, almost hurt within them as he tried to read her.

"You've been quiet lately," he finally said then looked away and hung his staff on the wall in its place. He held out his hand and she took it to go in beside him. His fingers flicked up unconsciously. The torches in the stone stairway lit.

She could not do as little, to burn only what was needed. Her hand clenched on his before she could stop herself.

He turned to her in surprise and realizing the futility of saying nothing, she went on while she was still brave.

"I'm a dragon, father," she said, chin lifted, daring him to deny her. He was so very Vardin with

his dark blonde hair, his mastery of his normal gifts, and she looked like her mother, Shayna, who was powerful enough to claim abstention, the right to simply abstain from using her gifts unless life and blood were at stake. Akena looked like a daughter of the mountains with her golden skin and black hair inherited from Shayna. She breathed fire. She felt the burning rolling out from under her skin whenever she felt anger, joy, anything. She sensed clomen as another heard sound. She was a dragon like the dragons of the mountains, their enemies, and unbound. By law, that made her rogue.

Her father's eyes seemed to burn into her, even in this shadowed passageway. He reached out and brushed her long hair from her face himself, hand lingering gently. "You are my daughter," he said at last. "You are a daughter of Britak." He shook his head. "Even Alyón has dragons." His birth House and one which produced the guardians most favored for national service by the Queen.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to be told that he too breathed fire when he was not feared by the very people he had sworn to protect. It wasn't enough.

She shook her head, opened her mouth to speak and—

Voice sharpened, he silenced her. “Not all dragons are rogue.” He turned his back and continued on.

After a moment, she followed.

—

Mother found her in the morning. Akena stood leaning over her sword, palm pressed against the hilt, hilt pressed into the warm earth on the hill looking up toward the mountains. Akena did not have to turn to see Shayna Casal out of Britak, the most powerful kahtchen they had ever known, approach behind her. She could feel that hum of power reaching out to embrace her. They called her mother Universe, for she could destroy one.

“Mother,” Akena said softly, staring into the swirling sigils etched into her steel. “Am I wrong?”

Silence stretched. She had expected as much. Shayna never answered before thought. Akena had long practice in patience and she exercised it now, waiting until at last her mother came and settled on

the ground beside her, traced one finger lightly over the symbols on her sword.

“When I was four, I glimmered,” Shayna began.

Akena turned sharply to listen, for her mother had never spoken of how she gained her gifts or control of them.

“Sometimes, the most powerful gifteds glimpse their power before it is theirs,” Shayna went on. “I did that. I touched my mother and she grew very pale and very sick. When I was older, I learned I could never touch anyone again without taking away their life.”

Akena knew it. She had touched her mother and been amazed at the strangeness of how it felt to be healed and drained at the same time.

“But—” Shayna stood, taking up the sword out of the earth and wielding it knowledgeably. “I also learned that mastery, hard won, is worth much.”

Akena watched her mother take up the dance where Burn had left it the night before, watched as her mother put her sword back into her hand and bid Akena continue it again. So Akena did, until her muscles ached and her bones were weary enough for the sun to be sinking in the sky, though it was not yet

noon. She questioned Shayna with her eyes for she had no words left to ask.

“I am also a dragon, daughter,” Shayna said.

It took Akena aback, but could hardly be denied. Shayna may have been born with one gift, the gift to use another’s life and strength and power, but it had granted her all else. Shayna was all gifts, even the dragons, and though she was the Abstention Line, she too guarded their Household and their nation. She had taught their sons and their daughters to guard, taught them the histories, taught her own daughter the laws of the Households of Vardin.

Akena lowered her eyes, accepting her mother’s word. She raised them again and stared into dragon fire in her mother’s eyes. She would guard, no matter who looked into her eyes and saw the enemy.

A LADY IN THE DRAGON'S
COURT

—

Jhemet de Calai

VARDIN

My mother taught me
To be a lady in the dragon's court
You must be a lady and a dragon both
With soft quiet ways and a reserved manner
The dagger to bind your hair—and not the brazen
sword

For which is more heroic?
In the eyes of men, to do a deed so great
No one man should have been able to do it
In the eyes of a woman, to do so much
And leave men wonder how it came about

Which is more effective?
The fires burning without and leaving
A way of escape through the smoking walls?
The flames that smolder within and linger
To consume an entire heart

My father taught me
To be a dragon in the court of men
You must be human and dragon both
Able to speak with your mouth and whisper
And swallow the words as tongues of flame

For which is more natural?
In the eyes of men, to love the ones who
Born near you are yours with a full heart
In the eyes of dragons, to burn with heedless fire
For all who are not dragons are not yours

And which is better?

The fires that make our wings and roll upon our skin

Burning ash and soot into claws?

The flames that light our hearts and kiss

Our lovers, our mothers and fathers, our young

AS THE RIVER BREATHES

—

KINGDOMS & THORN

As the river breathed, so did Spirare. She slid down the gritty tunnel wall and watched the brightness of the kingdoms city, Bellyn, swallowed up overhead as she passed out from under the manhole and landed with a weak splash in the bottom of the river's channel. Bellyn was built over the long, enclosed throat of a river when it was still a Thorn city, belonging to that republic, before the rebellion, before the period of anarchy, before the kingdoms rose up from quarters and communities to establish rule in various parts of the whole.

Then, as kingdoms are wont to do, the eastern Merchants Kingdom raised import and export taxes to the horrified and almost reflexive reaction of the western kingdoms and a brown-cloaked man of the High Land of Bellyyn showed up in Spirare's disreputable little apartment at the center of a little-known, ill-lit plaza and hired her to crawl into the underbelly of the city and find out why the river no longer flowed.

Water flowed from faucets opened in the western end of Bellyyn; they did not in the eastern side. She didn't think there was much mystery in who was responsible or why.

It was dark, damp, dirty—nothing she wasn't thoroughly used to. "All boys learn to drown. All girls go up and down," she sang to herself in an odd, half-rhythmic tune as she'd sang to herself from the time she was a too-skinny, stringy-haired, blonde waif shimmying into dark and dangerous places as if she wasn't a dangerous place herself.

Oxygen murked about the stale air. She could feel, feel it *spirare*, and way far down the sightless tunnel water leaked from something and with it oxygen, oxygen trapped with hydrogen molecules, oxygen trapped in metal ores. She did not know what

metals held it, only the water because she could hear it dripping and feel it pooling under her feet, but she was a special—a human for sure and a monster by half, created at the pleasure of the Thorn Republic in her own memory era of blinding, unforgettable pain.

“All boys learn to drown.” She snatched the free oxygen about the tunnel and tumbled in the flow it made around her, let herself bounce about in a river of her own making. “All girls go up and down.”

Sometimes Spirare wondered if she were half-crazy to go with her half-monster, wondered if the men on the street above, waiting for water, knew that she had sucked the oxygen from rooms far larger than this one, far smaller, that she had left men gasping for breath and helpless to find any. It was never a pretty way to go.

She stopped singing, hung suspended in the air of the tunnel, felt serious and grim. G—, she was a monster and she hated it. But the people needed water.

They’d taught her to kill. She would learn to heal. *I promise, I promise*, she thought in a harder, firmer prose than her singsong madness. She reached out her hand and felt the oxygen in the world around

her straighten at attention, felt it feel her, and willed it under her command. Loosed from the metal first—*to weaken it*—loosed from the water—*to pull it harder*.

“Breathe,” she breathed the word, calling the water, the river to come, to breathe and let the power of its breathing do the work for her.

Metal creaked. Tunnel walls groaned with tension. Pure oxygen sprayed through the blockage and struck out with a force that should have sent her flying, but she was buoyed in her tightly woven oxygen bubble, her river of her own making.

“Breathe!” She pulled again and harder and then the water came. Upheaval and darkness and floating spiraling rushing water, water, hydrogen, water, metal, oxygen—Oxygen. She gripped it and flew upward through the manhole, landed in a wet and coughing heap on the pavement.

“You are a strange sort of woman,” the brown cloak of High Land told her. People were gathered in crowds beyond the pavement of the street, peering from storefronts and sidewalks.

Spirare laughed at him and loosed the oxygen bubble from 'round herself, drank in the dirty, dingy air of the overcrowded Downtown District. It was

good to taste that air and know that under her feet,
the river breathed.

WHERE WINTER KEEPS

—

MIRROR

Where Winter keeps, the day is dim
Remembrance has forgotten him
The icy circle circumscribed
Has blood and poetry imbibed
Palatial realm of hope bereft
Despair is on his frozen breath
Forget his eyes and turn away
Lest sorrow keep escape at bay

The Queen of Heaven, that heated sun
Danced with him when both were young
Her heart her every tear it shed
Their glitter burned in him instead
The fleeting kiss, the passage of
A woman knowing how to love
She took her fire, took her pain
They say it will not live again

Where Winter keeps, he lived that day
Before she took the sun away
Where Winter keeps, he shudders now
And breaks with snow the harvest bough
When darkness comes, we flee the night
He stamps his feet and snuffs the light
Where Winter keeps, he cannot stay
Take joy; she will come back one day

TENDERNESS

—

VARDIN

Renaiven was known as a harsh man—for the severity of his punishments within the Hunter’s Guild, for how he trained fighters with fatal precision as if they were responsible for their own life, for his merciless and uncompromising approach to guarding Vardin, willing to sacrifice anything at all.

When he stepped inside his home, a tiny child unaware of his reputation ran giggling to his knee and raised her arms with delighted smile.

“Rose.” He caught her in his arms tenderly and held her close, burying his face in her auburn hair. Over the tiny head, he could just glimpse her mother standing in the doorway, watching him. “Do you know I love you?” he asked.

“Of course, I do, Daddy.” She kissed him on his cheek, heedless of the emotion swirling inside him.

Renaiven was known as a harsh man, but no one but his wife knew the real reasons why, knew that he would sacrifice anything at all to avert the dark futures he had seen with his gifts and in visions, anything to save this tiny child and the nation that birthed her.

He held her and, for a while yet, refused to let her go.

AT MY BACK I ALWAYS HEAR

as the river breathes

the stars run down from heaven
lights burn out on candles
candles flee the night

and as the river breathes

the children lose their laughter
in endless streams of sand
bound by spheres of glass

as the songbirds sing

they growing ever younger
beat their useless pinions
against the water's beams

and the river breathes

in the flightless songbirds
in the new grown children
out the new born land

WHEN THE CLOCK CHIMES

—

SEVEN DAYS

48 Hours

The workday was finally over at seven in the evening when it was normally Wesley Bryn's day off. He walked in, still blinking from the fast-fading sunlight that still seemed overbright. He had taken off Monday and slept during most of the day, waking up before that ephemeral cut-off time, that moment when all was lost and all was changed, then stayed up since.

Wesley blinked at the answering machine on his kitchen counter just inside the door. It was blinking back at him. One wink, two winks, three winks. A long pause, then the pattern repeated. Three messages.

He took a deep breath. He remembered. Forty-eight hours and weariness had etched itself deep into his limbs. His eyelids begged to droop. His feet almost began the path toward his bedroom unbidden, but Wesley glanced about his living room, his small apartment, the lifetime worth of mementos and memories hung about the walls and framed on tabletops and worked into the smallest and largest aspects of his environment. He was master of himself, his fate, his life. Despite his family who loved him, his twin who treated him as close as any twin could ever be, Wesley chose to live alone. He would not give up this trial now.

He reached over and pressed the button on the machine, listened, and idly picked up a nearby object from the countertop, stopping only once he realized what it was.

A fine hardcover—hand-sewn, full-bound—lay open in his hand, his thumb stopped over the address stamped at the bottom of a blue floral bookplate, under the handwritten name, '*Lena.*' A classic book. She liked classics, Wesley thought to himself, considering back over the titles in his journal. She liked it when he came back to see her and smiled with that

bright smile that said, 'I almost thought you would forget me.' And he did forget her. Every. single. time.

He sighed and turned off the machine—having not heard a word of the messages it played—and forced his weary feet to move back again the way he had come, out instead of in, and took his jacket as he went.

It was walking distance to Pretty Things, perhaps the reason he had first been drawn to walk in the glass door under the tinkling bell, listen to the chime of it and the chime of Lena's laughter when she spoke to another customer or hummed gently to the tea in the kettle. Reading over his journal occupied him through the long Tuesday night spent trying to stay-
ing awake, and reminded him of meetings he still had no recollection of, the significance of a pressed red rose framed over poetry on the wall.

It should bother him that he did not remember the rose, but somehow it seemed enough that she did.

Evening crowded along the busy streets and the last bright shades of sunlight winked brighter promise than they could afford to deliver on. Wesley let the crowd of walkers down sidewalks—families out with

their strollers, couples walking together, a street singer crooning her lullaby to the city and the passersby who listened—engulf him until it released him again before the little bookshop with its knickknacks and pictures and prints and crumpets and pretty things.

He took a deeper breath than a returned book ought to warrant and walked in.

The woman behind the counter wasn't Lena. She looked up, she smiled, but the smile wasn't sweet and shy like Lena's. "You're Wesley, aren't you?" she asked, and he stood confounded in the door.

He cocked his head and answered very, very slowly, "Do I know you?" It bothered him, this unexpected dilemma.

The girl shook her head and she laughed. "No, no. I'm Angelita. Let me get Lena for you." She stepped away from the small register and slipped into the back area he could not see.

Wesley took the opportunity to breathe again, hope that he wasn't so wrong with his one memory of last Wednesday, with thoughts and impressions borrowed from journals and her penciled thoughts in the margins of his book.

Lena appeared out of the back, a petite little thing, shorter than his shoulder, with waist-length honey-brown hair and the sweet, shy smile he remembered. "I thought you wouldn't make it," she breathed, reproachful but reserved, trying to be playful when she sounded worried like his mother.

He came forward apologetically and handed her the book. "I had work today." She was beautiful as he remembered and he wondered why this life of his couldn't be simple, why he couldn't come in tomorrow and see her and *remember* and ask her out like his brother could or home to meet his parents.

"Oh." She took the book and looked up at him for a long moment, standing a little on her tiptoes. That quizzical look, perhaps trying to read some significance into the statement. "We're closing soon, but did you want to stay a little, pick another book?" Her heels came down and she glanced down to work out the bookplate and add it to the file.

He stared at her, tried to find the words to say, this will never work, I shouldn't have tried to see if it would, it will never be fair to you.

“Say yes already!” Angelita’s voice called from the back. “Don’t make me endure another day like today!”

“Shush!” Lena blushed rose-red, mortified expression. She hurried to put the book back on the shelf, embarrassment in every gesture.

Wesley watched her and wanted to tell her everything, that every Monday he went to sleep remembering, that every Tuesday he woke in a brand new world. Instead, he answered quietly, slowly, helplessly, “Yes.”

He needed to get home to journal his day before he slept but there was next week, always next week.

*You are an ever-fixed mark
The sun that fades on the world's end
And the winds that faint when the worlds fall
Shall slap like tides on the rock of your presence
Solid beneath my heart*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liana Mir reads, writes, and wrangles the muses from her mundane home in the Colorado Rockies and, occasionally, from the other side of the Barrier.

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