



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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The Rumpelstiltskin Retellings: A Series of Poetic Blogs by Keyan Bowes

Miller’s Girl Speaks.oldmillrace.com

The fairy-tale never mentions my name –
A perfect reflection of my role.
I am the Miller’s Daughter, then the Queen.
I never chose to be either.

When the two men, my father and the king
Played out their game of chicken,
No one seemed to care that it was *my* life
That was on the line.
I wonder why he didn’t threaten my father,

When he led me into the room and said, "Now spin!"

Anyway, there in that bare
Closet of a room, that little man
Was my only hope.
I gave him my woman-things, the first two nights
My ring, I mean, and my necklace.
On the third night, having no more jewelry to give,
I thought his demand
Was for the third woman-thing, so I said yes
Before he asked it.

R.S.Skin.hiddenblog.com
(Rumpelstiltskin)

The grotesque little man of legend
Is me, you know. But no one tells
What I thought.

Playing around the palace
Where my human father sometimes
Suspected my presence, I came upon her.
It was the first time,
Since my magic mother vanished, leaving me,
A woman was in that room.

You know I would have helped her anyway.
The myth blames me, but who
Else was on her side in that bare room?
Her braggart father?
Her murderous future groom?

In honor, I did not make a beggar of her.
I took what she could give for the gold I spun.
I only sought what neither life nor magic gave me,
My son.

Miller's Girl Speaks.oldmillrace.com

So it's not true that all men want
Just one thing, any more than it is true of women
(Who must be content with whatever they can get).
The king my husband wanted gold,
My father wanted to impress him.
The strange elf did not ask for sex,
But asked instead for my first-born.
I was, let me say, relieved.

From today's perspective, I must justify it.
Here's how it was, not all that tough to understand.
First, it postponed the issue (no pun intended)
Of how to compensate the magic man.

Though I was set to offer him my body, it
Was a last resort I'd be happy not to use;
And of course I knew if I did not agree,
It would mean death. At just sixteen, that's
pretty hard to take.

Finally I thought (remember thinking)
How different is it, then, from giving up
A kitten from a litter, or a pup?
Especially *this* king's son.

King.castleblog.com

(His Majesty,

By the Grace of God, King of the Realm)

I thought I knew that braggart fool was lying.
I thought I'd catch him out and give him back
His daughter dead. (I didn't need the gold.
It's still lying around somewhere.)
Well, the joke's on me, but see how well I handled it.

The third time she spun the straw to gold,
I knew I had to safeguard that miraculous power
From other men, who could use the endless wealth
To challenge me.

Of course I did have other options.
I could have had her thrown in jail,
Or even put to death as I had threatened.
But why? And who knows what the risk might be?
One shouldn't play with magic,
As I've learned.

She was no princess, that's true.
But men have always known since time began,
The safest way to guard a woman is to marry her.

TheMillerHimself.oldmillrace.com

Well, that came out all right!
Though I thought for a few days there I'd really gone and done it.
What was the king so harsh for?
It was just a harmless brag,
And he could have laughed it off
as the kind of nonsense small men talk
When suddenly they find themselves before the King.
But now, I wonder, when I found myself
Saying my lassie could spin gold from straw
Did I know something I didn't know I knew?
I must have.
Something made me say it,
And now look, she's Queen!

Miller's Girl Speaks.oldmillrace.com

Oh yes, I married him.
He married me, and even if I could
Have chosen to refuse him, I would not.
I'm not stupid.
What other future did I have?
At best a farm-wife, with some man,
Hopefully kindly, for my husband.
And always in the shadow
Of the King's belief
In my golden straw.

Who knows? If it got out, maybe
Someone would want to burn me for a witch.
Miller's daughters don't turn kings down.
I didn't this one, though I did not forget
(As he promptly did) that he had said,
"Or else you die."

King.castleblog.com
(His Majesty,
By the Grace of God, King of the Realm)

It was a courageous choice.
Not every prince would take a miller's offspring
For his queen. A good choice.
She's comely,
Not overly reserved in bed, like some,
But expects to do what she is told.
Maybe she'll bear an heir.
Unlike those others. There's something to her.

It's true she has no political connections,
But those can be more trouble than they're worth.
She doesn't plague me with ambitious uncles,
And even my good father-in-law
Soon understood he could not be familiar.
So if she is no princess of the blood,
Who dares question me when I
Have dignified her with this marriage?

Queen.castleblog.com
(Her Majesty)

That's me, the Miller's Daughter.
New clothes, new handle, new life.
I can't say it's any worse than the dull old one, either.
I do my needlework as diligently
As I used to mind the mill.
Of course I miss my friends.

But that's growing up and getting married.
That's why they always cry at weddings,
Whether you go to the next town
Or the next palace.

I'm a good wife.
I do as I am told.
The senior ladies manage the palace,
And they do it well, with long practice,
At doing for a bachelor king.
I don't interfere.
I don't pull rank.
The King has not noticed anything different
Since I came to be his wife,
Because there isn't.

He demands his rights
From time to time.
Which man wouldn't?
Only in my dreams,
(Which I tell no one)
I recall the little man who
Didn't take that third woman-thing
I would have offered,
And in my dream
He does.

I wish I had someone to talk to,
But not the King. My side
Of every conversation goes, Yes, Sire.

HandMaiden.castleblog.com
Handmaiden to Her Majesty the Queen
and Nurse to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince

Poor thing. Maybe I was the only one
Who truly loved her, till the baby came.
I know she is the Queen, but then she came
From the village next to mine,
And though we were not girls together,
We might have been.

Who talks of lonely?
The king
Always did the right thing by her,
He doesn't stint her for anything
But his company, and that she doesn't mind
Once he gave her the son.

Queen.castleblog.com
(Her Majesty)

Well, stupid me. Any of you out there
Who are mothers or even fathers
Could have told me, I suppose.
I touched my cheek to his soft little one
And drowned in love.
The king my husband came
And looked down proudly at his son.
He issued the usual proclamations,
And the ladies arranged the usual
Ceremonies.

There we were, baby and I,
In our sacred dyad.
Baby opened his bright eyes,
Caught my gaze, and cycled his arms and legs.
In the corner of the room I saw
The little dwarf who saved my life
And asked my child.
The logic of the queen's chamber
Was quite as clear as that of the bare room.
If the choice was between my life and child,
Why, he could have my life, of course.
How could I have known then
What kind of love this is?
If I had known, the choice of death
Would have been as simple then as now.
Also, then, I hadn't understood
How a cradle empty of the king's heir
Would cause a ruckus...
It's not the same thing as the miller's grandson.

R.S.Skin.hiddenblog.com
(Rumpelstiltskin)

How do I explain the desperate game
Of guessing at my name
That I foisted on her? It's tough to justify.
It was not with sadistic intent,
Though I know it looks that way.
I found her more distraught
Than I had thought.
Perhaps I hoped
That three days of trying
Would give her time
To get used to it.
I already loved the baby
Who looked at me and smiled
And waved his arms

As though he knew me.
Indeed, I could have offered him
Something more than the king our father.
Immortality.

Was my mother such a one?
Did she despair to leave her son?

HandMaiden.castleblog.com
Handmaiden to Her Majesty the Queen
and Nurse to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince

As soon as she told her story,
Naturally I would have done anything to help.
Anything at all. I saw how she worried,
How close she was to suicide.
She kept demanding lists of names,
And I got them for her. But I knew
That was foolish, just the kind of blind logic
That comes from panic.
The only way, I knew, would be to get it
From the little man himself,
And I knew that I must follow him
Engaging him, perhaps, in conversation.
It's just as well that I am inconspicuous,
And I can walk so quiet in the woods.
For when I came upon his campfire
In his forest home,
I heard his name,
And hurried back with the means to save her.

R.S.Skin.hiddenblog.com
(Rumpelstiltskin)

My magic mother would have thought it right.
The clumsy, loyal woman
Clumped through the woods after me
Sounding like a herd of elk.
I knew what she was after,
And when I did,
I knew that she should have it.
I played out the charade,
I returned to the palace,
My home and hers,
I stamped my feet in anger,
And disappeared.
Baby laughed.

HandMaiden.castleblog.com
Handmaiden to Her Majesty the Queen

and Nurse to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince

She tells and retells this tale,
Though never to the King,
Her terror bleeding through the years,
And so she'll exorcise it:
That odd and dangerous little man.
My heroic walk through midnight woods
To save the child.

Prince.castleblog.com (His Royal Highness the Crown Prince)

My mother told me the story
Of Rumpelstiltskin and me;
And Nursie's quest.
She's still scared.
When I was little, she didn't
Tell me for fear of nightmares.
Rumpy and I
Giggle about it
As we play hide and seek
Around the spinning wheel and sheaves of gold
In our secret room under the palace.
(Sometimes I call him Dada
And he looks pleased.)

Dragon Trauma by Megan Arkenberg

Every day, she needs
to slay that dragon again.

It starts with the questions—
why didn't she fight? (It never
seems to matter
that the dragon had claws, teeth
like steel blades, fire burning
in its belly, and she had only
her father's broken sword.)
Why didn't she scream, or think
to build some clever trap
while the creature was yet circling
over her head? What
could she have been thinking,
walking alone and unarmed
in the palace garden—a place known

to be frequented by monsters?

And didn't she know
that pretty little princesses like her
are just the sort dragons look for?

Then the blame takes over.
Surely she provoked him,
with the sound of hot blood
beating through her veins
and golden river of her hair—
a tempting reminder
of that gold in her father's treasury,
gold he would undoubtedly pay
to bring his wayward daughter back.

But would he? If that knight
hadn't happened by would she
still be there in darkness,
a silly, damaged little princess,
too stupid to run. She breaks all
her mirrors, hacks off the hair
they blame for her fate. Some days,
she's not so sure it wasn't
her own fault, after all.

Inevitably, some bastard asks
if she enjoyed it.

Still, some part of her rebels,
hoping against hope
that this will all pass. Every time
she meets someone, witches,
trapped fairies, visiting delegates,
she prays they haven't heard—or if they have,
that they will try, for once
to look in her eyes
and see more than the dragon's shadow.

The palace women try
to make something useful of her,
teaching her to weave straw
into gold, to find the pea
in a mountain of mattresses.
These things, she already knows.

Tell her rather
how to keep that dragon dead—
how to heal the wounds
that never start to bleed.

Sleeping Beauty Speaks Out by Elizabeth Kate Switaj

Everyone who comes here knows my story. At least they think they do. It reminds me of my childhood, before the great sleep, when I'd tell my father that I had discovered a fairy cottage in the yard and he'd interrupt my story halfway through to tell me that I meant the groundskeeper's home, or I'd tell him about a room of glistening treasures, and he'd call it an armory without listening to what I'd found. This is how it goes: the latest lord or lady to join our court asks me what it was like. I start to describe the strange colors, the flights, falls, and monsters of my dreams. They interrupt me: "No, we all have dreams; I mean, what was it like when you woke up?"

I don't understand it. Everyone wakes up, too. Besides, never before or after my great sleep did I have such vivid—frightening and blissful—dreams. There were colors I've never seen, animals at once unicorn and bear and entirely tame. I climbed mountains that turned into enormous doves.

But I'm getting away from the story. I'm sure you don't care about my dreams, either.

The younger ladies ask me what it was like to miss out on so many years of youth, to sleep from twelve to twenty. I tell them it was peaceful and confusing; they're never happy with that. They want more details, but how can I give them that when I don't know what it would be like to live those years awake?

The men always ask about this kiss. I don't really remember it, but I describe it just like the one that followed at the wedding: wonderful, my lips felt warm and alive.

Some of the older women ask me something a little different: they want to know if it frightened me to wake up with a man I had never seen before leaning over me. I tell them yes, though that isn't exactly true. I shivered in fear when I woke up, but not because of him: I had seen him in my dreams. What frightened me was the very quaking thing: my body.

You might expect that, sleeping for so long, I would have wasted away. Indeed, my legs and waist had thinned enough that I could feel the difference. (Later I would learn from my mirror that my round cheeks had drawn in too.) That struck me as strange, as did the widening of my hips, but it was the heaviness of my chest that scared me. The little buds of breasts I'd had when I pricked my finger had grown round and womanly. I half expected them to start leaking milk the way I remembered my mother's doing.

Since she had died during my extended nap, I wouldn't learn that you had to have kids for that to happen until I actually gave birth. The rumors of the prince impregnating me while I slept are entirely untrue: do you think I would have married someone who did that to me? The twins, in all likelihood, were conceived a couple nights before the wedding, however.

As my belly grew, it came to feel like the only part of my body that belonged to me. The rest seemed as if someone had swapped with me while I was unconscious. It even seemed strange that my father, gray-bearded and bald by then, recognized me. My ankles still feel wobbly when I walk, and I can trip over anything, sometimes nothing at all. Thank goodness I have servants to run after the children.

I spend most of my time reading, trying to catch up on the things I never learned. Sometimes my prince and I read to each other; he's the one who taught me anyway. Occasionally, I carry out experiments: mixing chemicals or charting generations of plants. This has earned me a reputation as a great scholar, but I am nothing of the sort. It isn't just my years of sleep I have to make up for: my father raised me in ignorance. I didn't even know what a spindle was! Just a little bit of education would have saved me

from those years of sleep, but if he ever saw me trying to figure out how to read, he'd take the book away and tell me that a proper lady didn't need to know anything and that no one would want to marry her if she did.

Thank the gods (did you know there's more than one?) the prince who woke me wasn't like that. My body will always be strange, but at least I am allowed my mind.

Big Girl by Mary Rodgers

Emily looked up through the clouds. If she squinched her eyes up real good, she could see Castle Barrineau. She jiggled her fishing pole.

A pixie buzzed its wings under her nose. Emily swatted at the little fairy and sneezed. "Stupid pixie." The pixie stuck its tongue out at her and flew away.

The pole jerked in Emily's hands.

"Hang on tight, baby! Watch it, now!" Uncle Jake pointed at the pond.

Emily didn't take her eyes off of the red and white ball in the water. Up, down...up, down, up...then down, down, wet line stretchy, stretchy, all shiny in the sun! Up came the fish, a big one this time, this one she'd get to keep, wouldn't she? Wouldn't she?

She would.

Uncle Jake put his hands over Emily's, pushed her fingers inside the fish's mouth—it had teeth! Little ones, anyway—helped her pull the hook out, and splash! Into the bucket.

Emily leaned over the bucket. "He's big! Isn't he?"

Her uncle smiled. "That's a big old bass, baby. You did real good."

Emily frowned and rubbed her sticky hands on her shirt. She was seven years old today. She wished Uncle Jake wouldn't call her a baby. She was a big girl. Uncle Jake had shown her how to bait her own hook just this morning, "Careful now! Mind you don't stick yourself," and she *had* stuck herself, in her thumb, and it bled, and she didn't even cry.

Only big girls got to fish.

"Are we gonna eat him?" Emily sat down on a log.

"I reckon so." Uncle Jake sat down beside her. Emily looked out over the pond. The sun got all in her eyes and made red spots. She yawned. You had to get up real early to go fishing.

The bucket splashed. Emily looked inside and saw a toadie-frog sitting right on top of her fish! He was fat and slimy and had blue all on his neck.

"No no no!" Emily smacked the bucket. "Ugly old toadie-frog! Get off my fish!" She didn't want to touch him, old warty big-eyed thing. "Uncle Jake!"

"Easy, baby. I'll get him out—" Uncle Jake laughed and looked into the bucket. He stopped laughing. "Baby...leave, leave him alone."

“Why?”

“You mind me, now. We’re going up the hill to Mrs. Wheeler’s.” He grabbed the bucket.

“Why?”

“We got to, is all.”

“Why?”

“Emily Blair! You hush, now.”

Emily hushed. But it wasn’t her fault the stupid old toadie-frog was in the bucket. On top of her fish.
Stupid toad.

Up, up, up the hill they went, and it was hot, and Uncle Jake walked way too quick, but Emily didn’t make a fuss. Only babies made fusses.

At the top of the hill was Mrs. Wheeler’s house, all green and glowy. Mrs. Wheeler had to live up there all by herself on account of the fires last year. Emily didn’t think that was fair. *Toby* Wheeler was the one who let the baby dragons out. Stupid Toby. Shoulda made *him* live up there all alone.

Uncle Jake yelled, “Sarah? It’s Jake. I think I found him!” Mrs. Wheeler ran out and looked into the bucket and shook her head. And then Mrs. Wheeler reached into the bucket and she picked up that ugly old toad! With her hands!

“Ewww!”

“Emily! You hush.” Uncle Jake frowned at her.

Well. Emily crossed her arms. If Mrs. Wheeler up and caught warts from that nasty old toad, it wasn’t *her* fault.

“Jake. He’s hurt. Look at his leg.” Mrs. Wheeler lifted the toad in the air. One of his legs didn’t look right, all hanging down funny.

Uncle Jake said a bad word. “Looks like Old Man Catfish chomped him but good.”

“It’s infected. Lord above. It won’t heal until the spell’s broken.”

All this fuss over an ugly old toadie-frog.

“Mrs. Wheeler? I caught a big old bass today, all by myself,” Emily said. “I’m a big girl now.”

But Mrs. Wheeler didn’t listen.

Uncle Jake said, “I’ll go fetch Princess Barrineau straightaway.”

“The entire royal family left for the Festival two days ago. They’re out of range, now. And it has to be a princess, or it won’t work.” Mrs. Wheeler shook her head. Her face got all red and squinched up.

Was Mrs. Wheeler crying?

Uncle Jake said another bad word, and got real quiet for a minute. Then he looked down at Emily.

“I didn’t do anything!” Emily said.

“Didn’t say you did.” Uncle Jake kept looking at her funny.

Uncle Jake looked at Mrs. Wheeler and rubbed his chin. “Emily might could do it.”

Mrs. Wheeler shook her head. “Now Jake you know that was just gossip—”

“We got to try it, anyway. That leg looks real bad. Emily, go on up and give that old toad a kiss,” Uncle Jake said.

Emily’s mouth dropped open. “What? No!”

“Emily! You mind me, now!”

“Ewww! No! I won’t!”

“Emily, so help me, if you don’t mind me—”

“Jake,” Mrs. Wheeler said. “Stop yelling at the child. It has to be of her own free will.”

Emily’s face got all hot. Kiss a smelly old toad? Why? She ducked her head and started to cry.

“Emily. Emily, sweetheart. You remember the day I showed you the little mice? But they weren’t little mice at all, remember? They were really kitties?” Mrs. Wheeler said.

Emily sniffed and nodded. “Are you going to make the kitties again?” She liked kitties.

“Not right now, sweetheart.”

“Oh.”

“This old toadie-frog is just like those little mice, sweetheart. And he needs change back to who he really is, just like the little mice had to change back to who they really were.”

Emily rubbed her nose. It was all wet and itchy. “The toadie-frog is really a kittie?”

“No. No, he’s someone else. But Emily, I can’t change him back to who he is all by myself. I need your help. I need *you* to break the spell. I know it seems strange, but if you kiss him, he might change back to who he really is. And it’s real, real important he do that.”

Mrs. Wheeler *was* crying. Emily looked at the ugly old toad, all hanging down in Mrs. Wheeler’s hands. “Can’t *you* kiss him?”

Mrs. Wheeler shook her head. “This is a very special spell, child. I wouldn’t ask you to do it if I could do it myself.” Big tears rolled down Mrs. Wheeler’s face and plopped on the ground. “Please try, Emily.”

It was just awful seeing nice Mrs. Wheeler so sad.

Uncle Jake said, “It’d be a real big girl thing to do, baby.”

Well. Then she had to, didn’t she? And maybe Uncle Jake wouldn’t call her a baby anymore. Emily took a big breath. Maybe if she did it real quick. Might not be so bad, then.

Stupid toad.

She marched on up to him as Mrs. Wheeler held him out, and looked him right in his big bug eyes.

“You smell like pond-yuck and cow-flop,” she said. And then she squinched up her eyes real tight and kissed him on the top of his bumpy toad head.

Mrs. Wheeler put him on the ground and then there was a big puff of smoke. “Well. All that talk about her mama and the king...” she said.

Uncle Jake looked at Mrs. Wheeler and said, “Reckon we know who her daddy is now.”

The smoke went away, and old toadie-frog was gone. Mrs. Wheelers' son, Toby, was sitting right where the toad had been. He looked up at Emily and yelled, "You smell like fish-stink and girl!" He grabbed his leg. Looked like he'd been bit by something.

Emily put her hands on her hips. "Old toadie-frog was *Toby*?"

Mrs. Wheeler stuck her hand in her apron and pulled out some leaves and mashed them on Toby's hurt leg and started fussing at Toby. "What did I tell you about going into that witch's garden? I told you she'd turn you into a toad, didn't I? And look what happened."

"Aw, Ma!" Toby picked at the leaves.

"Don't you 'Aw Ma' me. Hold still."

Looked like Toby was in big trouble. Good. Emily looked down her nose at him. "I caught a big old bass today, all by myself. I'm a big girl now."

Uncle Jake came right on over to her and gave her a hug. "Well, Emily. I reckon you are," he said.

The Second Mrs. Sharma by Bindia Persaud

Mrs. Nisha Sharma was a sociable woman, and a galaxy of friends and acquaintances swirled unceasingly around her. Among these, Dr. Mohan Sharma was a faint, unobtrusive star. Small and neat, with soft, plump hands and a gently raised paunch, an air of shabby respectability clung to him so resolutely that people were inclined to forgive his not infrequent social lapses. Mrs. Sharma was fond of him in a distant, abstracted sort of way, but when he left a message on her answering machine, inviting a "marital alliance" between her son and his daughter, she was as scandalized as if he had cornered her in some secluded spot and exposed himself. True, parents were supposed to see to their children's marital prospects, but his approach was denuded of all subtlety and finesse; it stank too strongly of the market. Mrs. Sharma knew that young people today, girls especially, wouldn't submit, as she herself had submitted, to being prodded and shuffled around and finally mated to a near-stranger. (Mrs. Sharma carried within her a hot fistful of anger that would emerge at odd moments. When her future in-laws had visited her for the third time, buoyed by their unassailable status as the boy's people and encouraged by her mother's boasts about her musical prowess, they had insisted she sing a bhajan. She had chirped out a few lines of "Om Jai Jagdish Hare" while blinking back scalding tears. Since then, whenever the memory descended upon her, the tips of her ears turned crimson with indignation and she would goad her husband into a thunderous confrontation that left her limp, yet flushed with satisfaction.)

Mrs. Sharma made a brisk, peremptory stabbing motion with her index finger at the answering machine's delete button, but just as she was about to make contact, she paused. Nikhil was twenty-nine. His age would have lent him a fitting air of gravitas if he was a doctor or an engineer, but her son was drifting desultorily towards a Master's degree in English. It wouldn't be like the old days, a meeting over tea and then an engagement announced the next week, but there was no harm in meeting the girl, at least. She resolved to Consult her Husband (this operation was distinct in Mrs. Sharma's mind from merely asking his opinion, and necessitated the use of capital letters).

Mr. Arun Sharma, when she played the message for him after he had arrived home, was not receptive.

“Have we ever even *seen* this girl? Or the wife, for that matter?”

“The wife’s an invalid, I think. I’ve seen the girl at temple a few times. I think we should consider it. She’s doing medicine.”

“So why would she look at *him*?” Mr. Sharma delivered a hard, decisive snort through his nostrils. “Bloody loafer that he is.”

Mrs. Sharma remained silent, but her mind was whirring. Her husband was a mechanical engineer, and he saw the world in terms of brute certainties. She, though, possessed a refined, artistic sensibility that had been nurtured in a good ladies’ college in Delhi. She knew that the things she could perceive had a weight of their own, even if her husband dismissed them as gauzy irrelevancies. Her son had been seven years old when his arresting physical beauty had announced itself. He had been playing quietly in a corner while she idly scanned his face for family resemblances, and she had realized with a start that the commonplace features bequeathed to him – her husband’s assertive nose, her own moist, slightly protuberant eyes – had been transfigured into something extraordinary. She had been mortally afraid that adolescence would mar him, but in high school his limbs lengthened gracefully, his skin remained clear, and he acquired a trademark languor that enraged his father and entranced everyone else. Mrs. Sharma was acutely aware of the avid glances that fastened upon Nikhil whenever he entered a room, and she saw no reason why his face could not be considered a potential marital asset, as valuable in its way as a healthy mutual fund portfolio. There was very little difference between boys and girls these days, and if Sona Chopra’s fat son with his flapping Dumbo ears could get a girl who looked like Madhuri Dixit, just because he was an internist at St. Michael’s hospital, her son deserved to have a future GP as his wife.

Mrs. Sharma decided that it would be most prudent to bypass her husband for the time being and ask the boy directly. She made her approach while Nikhil was sitting Buddha-fashion on his bedroom floor, reading a book of political poetry by a South American that she had never heard of. Mrs. Sharma kept her gaze fixed on the angry brown fist on the book cover, and, in as even a voice as she could muster, outlined the proposal and awaited his response. Without raising his eyes from the page, Nikhil replied that he would need time to get to know the girl, but yes, he would consider it. Mrs. Sharma had expected some initial resistance, and had an arsenal of weapons (cajolery, threats, tears) at the ready. Her mouth fell open, goldfish-like, when she realized that she had won without effort. In a second of two, she collected herself and went downstairs.

Nikhil’s chief reason for saying yes was the ex-girlfriend that his parents had spent four years studiously ignoring. Now that she had left him, they were happy to pretend that she had never existed at all. Nikhil had met Corinne in a D.H. Lawrence seminar. At first, she had seemed bony and nondescript, with hair and eyes of no determinate colour. It was only upon his second look that he noticed her finely turned wrists and ankles, the elegance of her long spine. Her temperament was intriguingly brittle and spiky, but his foreignness made her easy to cow, at least in the beginning. When she asked him why he still lived at home, he told her that she had an ethnocentric lack of regard for non-Western familial patterns. She was silent; she even bowed her head slightly. Towards the end, though, her nerves had become dangerously frayed and she cycled between icy hauteur and coarse, barking fits. The decisive break came after she and Nikhil arrived at his house at two o’ clock in the afternoon and unexpectedly found his mother there. Nikhil murmured, “You remember my friend Corrine, right?” before sliding listlessly onto a sofa. Corinne remained standing. She slowly raised a hooked, accusatory hand and pointed it at Mrs. Sharma.

“You people,” she began. “You people reek and you don’t realize it. It doesn’t matter that you air out

your clothes and douse yourself with that godawful perfume or hair oil or whatever it is you use. There's always a smell of cardamom and fucking fenugreek clinging to you. If you weren't home, I was going to suck your son off upstairs. He tastes of what you smell like. That entitles me to a bit more that 'friend' status, don't you think?" With that, she stalked away. Nikhil saw her from time to time, scurrying around campus, but they never spoke again. He was surprised at how bruised he felt, and for the first time he thought that he could gladly sink into a conventional marriage, as easily as one would surrender to a soft mattress.

Mother and son had to convince the father; outnumbered, he grunted, but assented. The phone call was made to Dr. Mohan Sharma, who gave a faint cry of exultation when he heard of their acceptance. He insisted on setting the meeting for the following Saturday, and he made it clear, through subtle hints, that both sets of parents were expected to be there. Mrs. Sharma expected Nikhil to protest, to insist on meeting the girl alone, but he said nothing. Secretly, he wanted the reassuring bulwark of his parents between himself and whatever was to come.

On the appointed evening, after a silent, fraught car ride, the three Sharmas stepped up to a modest house of salmon-pink brick. Mr. Sharma dawdled, and when they came to the door, he squinted at the doorbell as if he had never seen one before. In exasperation, his wife pushed past him and pressed the doorbell with more energy than was necessary. They could sense a brief flurry of movement inside, then the door swung open. The woman standing before them was a rakshasi.

She was so tall that her head knocked against the door frame, and her height was matched by her vast, spreading bulk. Her breasts and belly hung loose and distended beneath the concealing folds of her sari. Small, red eyes shone balefully from the wide expanse of her face. Her mouth was open, and they could see her thick, scarlet tongue and the wet gleam of her sharp teeth. She smelled of meat and moss and something else. She held out a hand tipped with cruel scimitar claws, and greeted them in a voice that was surprisingly low and musical. "Please come in. I am Manju."

The Sharmas, their minds reeling from the revelation that their hostess was one of the female demons of Hindu legend, were stupefied into obedience. They half-expected to be led into a dank chamber strewn with bones and viscera and the huddled forms of groaning, half-dead human victims, but Manju Sharma's living room was little different from their own. There was a bronze Nataraja in the corner, a Rajasthani print on the far wall. She had even covered the sofas with plastic wrap, as did so many zealous matrons of their acquaintance, and there was a plateful of samosas and pakoras sitting on the coffee table. She gestured towards them, inviting them to sit. "My husband and Swati shall be in shortly. We'll eat dinner when they arrive. Please help yourself to snacks in the meantime." With that, she ambled off to the kitchen. There was something tentative about the way she moved, in spite of her size. It was as if she had to school herself to make delicate movements, rather than the broad, expansive ones that her limbs were accustomed to.

When she was completely out of sight, the Sharmas, perched on the plasticky sofa, gibbered to each other in high, urgent whispers.

"Mom, what *is* she?"

"A rakshasi. A demon. Nisha, you've seen the girl before. Couldn't you tell what she was?"

"They can change their shape. You know that, Arun. We should go now. Just run. God only knows what they want to do with us."

"They want to eat us, mother and daughter both. That's what rakshasas do. They lured us here, and you, you were so eager to see your son's shaadi that you fell for it."

The Sharmas all rose at precisely the same time, as if they were one body, but as they did so, they heard the awful, ineluctable sound of the key being turned in the front door's lock. Dr. Mohan Sharma came forward first, eager and smiling, rubbing his hands together in that fastidious way of his. His daughter followed behind. Nikhil sat back down on the sofa with a heavy thump and kept his eyes trained on the floor. The girl's presence flitted at the edge of his vision, but he didn't dare look directly at her until her father said, "Nikhil? This is Swati," and pushed her gently towards him. He raised his eyes to her and saw, not a ghoulish apparition, but a broad, tawny face, marked with strong eyebrows and framed by a leonine mane of hair. She smiled at him, and he could make out, resting against her full lips, a dainty pair of fangs.

"You're all hungry, I'm sure. We'll eat, no?" said Dr. Sharma, in that humble, ingratiating manner that brooks no opposition. The wife loomed in the doorway, and denied the chance to bolt, the Sharmas numbly followed their host into the dining room.

The food set before them was the same scrupulously vegetarian fare that they had eaten thousands of times: naan, rice, dal, rajma, mutter paneer. Their host fell upon the meal with surprising vigor, but his women, flanking him on either side, sat before empty plates. Curiosity and the iron imperatives of solicitude loosened Mrs. Nisha Sharma's tongue. "You aren't going to eat anything, beti?"

"Not yet, auntie. My mother and I don't eat *that*," the girl replied with a slight toss of her head. The saliva dried in Mrs. Sharma's throat, and she stared down at her full plate. She resolved not to eat anything. One bite and she would descend into a dizzying black sleep, and would awake to find herself trussed up like one of those monstrous turkeys that adorn Thanksgiving tables. She signaled to her husband and son, but saw, too late, that the stupid boy had already started clearing his plate. His eyes were glued upon Swati, and his hand shoveled food into his mouth mechanically.

The meal continued in quiet, punctuated only by Dr. Sharma's contented slurping. Silence was an intolerable vacuum to Nisha Sharma, even in circumstances such as these, and she felt compelled to fill it. "So, Mohan, how did you and Manju meet? Arranged marriage or lo—" The ludicrous question died in her mouth, and she swallowed the last syllable.

Dr. Sharma wasn't offended; he laughed. "Love, love! As in all our best films, we were childhood sweethearts. My father was a forest officer, and we met Manju's family deep in the jungle. Manju and I spent every waking moment together, until I left for school. When the time came, it was only natural that we get married, though there was opposition from both our families. Her father picked me up and threw me against a wall, although if you saw how we get along now, you would never believe it. Are you quite finished? I think it's time for the ladies to eat now."

Dr. Sharma's wife and daughter cleared the plates and disappeared into the kitchen. The host's eyes followed them fondly. His voice dropped to a low, conspiratorial whisper. "I have to warn you, my family has certain dietary requirements that may seem strange to you. In truth, I found them off-putting at first myself, but marriage requires tolerance and adjustment, for us gents as well as our better halves." He leaned back in his chair and beamed.

The women re-emerged, carrying an enormous brass platter between them. On it was a freshly killed goat, with a pristine white coat and wide, mournful dark eyes. They set it in the middle of the table. The older woman made a clean incision in its belly with the claw of her index finger, and then, without preliminaries, she and her daughter began to feast. They ripped the ropy innards from the body and crammed them into their mouths, pausing only to spit out the odd piece of gristle or hide. They pooled blood in their hands and drank it, and as their terrible meal progressed, their hair and faces became speckled with slick red wetness. Mrs. Sharma's sick fascination gave way to the realization that she and

her menfolk were not the intended meal, and she began to laugh, the high, unhinged laughter of relief. “My dear lady, your face looks like the sun emerging from behind the clouds. My God, surely you didn’t think - ?” Dr. Sharma turned to his wife. Manju belched, and belatedly placed her hand before her mouth.

“I can’t deny that my people have had bad habits in the past, but that was centuries ago. We aren’t barbarians. I can’t blame you though. We hide ourselves away in jungles and then wonder why people have misconceptions about us. I think it’s time for tea now, and we should leave these young people to talk in private.”

Mrs. Sharma sent a brief, interrogative glance towards her son; he nodded slightly. The elders cleared out, leaving Nikhil and Swati facing each other. She spoke first. “So, what do you like to do in your spare time?”

“I like to read. Poetry and plays, novels, that sort of thing. Do you have much time for reading yourself?”

“No, school keeps me too busy. I can’t say I’m literary. I read Stephen King to relax, when I find time.”

“I could recommend something to you, if you like. How about Chekhov?”

“Like the guy on Star Trek?”

“This is a different Chekhov. He was a doctor like you. His stories aren’t exactly action-packed, but he really understood human nature. I’ve got a copy at home. I could lend it to you.”

“Okay. How about you bring it over next Saturday? ... Look, this might be stupid, but I was wondering if you could come here and stand by me. I want to see if you’re taller.”

Nikhil got up and moved towards her. When they were side by side, he caught her scent. It was sweeter than her mother’s, and somehow familiar. He struggled to place it, and recognition flooded over him. There were times when he had put his arms around Corinne, and, through nothing more than a dim olfactory sense, he could tell that she was having her period. The same faint yet heady perfume clung to this girl.

It turned out that he was half an inch taller. This made him feel curiously light and airy. She hadn’t repulsed him, even from the first, but he had found the prospect of marrying her as incongruous as if someone had suggested that he wed a comet, or a patch of arctic tundra. Minute by minute, the idea was becoming less strange.

The parents came in then, and they took their leave. As coats and shoes were being pulled on by the door, Manju Sharma smiled at Nikhil. It was a surprisingly gentle and beneficent smile, in spite of her nightmare teeth. “Such a handsome boy,” she said. “Looks like Shashi Kapoor.”

Nisha Sharma’s belly was bathed in a warm, pleasurable glow, as it always was when someone remarked upon her son’s looks. The feeling persisted as they walked down the sidewalk to their car and drove off. They sat engrossed in their own thoughts until Nikhil punctured the reverie with an abrupt announcement. “I’m going to see her next week.”

There was a brief, barbed silence. Then Mr. Sharma said, “After all, our great hero Bhima married a rakshasi, and they had a noble son. Who are we to disapprove?” Mrs. Sharma knew that her husband’s sententiousness meant that she had scored a decisive victory. She aimed a secret, serene smile out into the dark.

The second set of Sharmas stood together at their front window, long after Nikhil and his parents had

disappeared into the night. This meeting was all Mohan's doing; his daughter was twenty-six, and he wanted to see her settled. He had chosen Nikhil because even men couldn't help responding to his beauty, and they shared a surname. One day when Swati was fourteen, she came in from basketball practice and announced that when she got married, she wouldn't be changing her name. In spite of his own unconventional pairing, her father was old-fashioned about certain things, and he expected his daughter to dutifully become Swati Gupta or Swati Shrivastava when the time for her nuptials came. She wouldn't budge on this issue, though she was a tractable enough child in other respects. When the dermatologist in the office beside his got married and added her eastern European husband's tongue-twister of a name to her own squat WASP one, he came home and said hopefully, "Some ladies have double-barrelled names these days, like the English aristocracy."

"I'm not doing that. I like my name just fine the way it is."

He had sighed and said nothing, but his heart leapt when Nikhil's parents accepted his invitation. Manju had worked herself into a frenzy of worry. She had even wanted to cast a glamour over herself and Swati, but he had vetoed that proposal. "No dear. They have to accept you and Swati as you are, or not at all. There can be no pretense." There had been a few tense moments during the evening, but all in all, things had gone well. Swati had told them she would be seeing Nikhil again, before she skipped upstairs.

The wife enveloped her husband's hand in her own huge paw. "I think everything will be all right," she said softly.

Ten months later, the wedding invitations arrived at Arun and Nisha Sharma's residence for their perusal. They were burgundy and cream, with embossed gold lettering. On the front, a jaunty little groom marched in front of a demure, downcast bride in a palanquin. Mr. Sharma snorted (a faint, barely perceptible snort – his wife was sitting at his elbow), and thought to himself that in this case, the wife should be marching and the husband should be following behind. No matter though; the wedding was going to happen, and there would be grandchildren, beautiful vigorous ones. The ordeal was almost over, and they all – bride's parents, groom's parents, boy, girl – could let out a grateful, shuddering sigh of relief.

Contributor Biographies

Keyan Bowes

A graduate of the 2007 Clarion Writing Workshop, Keyan Bowes is a peripatetic author of speculative fiction whose work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Big Pulp*, *Ruthless Peoples Magazine*, and *IROSF*. Keyan maintains a website at www.keyanbowes.org and is currently working on two novels for teenagers.

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Megan Arkenberg is a student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work has recently appeared in or been accepted for issues of *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Dreams & Nightmares*. She edits the fantasy e-zine [Mirror Dance](#) and the historical fiction e-zine [Lacuna](#).

Elizabeth Kate Switaj

Since receiving her MFA from the now-defunct New College of California Poetics Program in 2004, Elizabeth Kate Switaj has published *Magdalene & the Mermaids* (Paper Kite Press), *Shanghai* (Gold Wake Press), and *The Broken Sanctuary: Nature Poems* (Ypolita Press). It was while she was pursuing her MFA that a randomly selected library book about the experiences of autistic college students led her to the discovery that she is an Aspie. She is currently a member of the editorial board of [Gender Across Borders](#), and her short stories have appeared in *Colored Chalk*, *The Death Mook*, *Ruins: Extraterrestrial*, and *Gratitude with Attitude*. For more information visit www.elizabethkateswitaj.net

Mary Rodgers

Mary Rodgers wrote and illustrated her first short story at age 3. The narrative is definitely about her kitty. The accompanying pictures are open to interpretation.

Mary was born in rural South Carolina and has a deep affection for the culture and the people there. Her first screenplay, *Common Ground*, is a traditional drama that won a finalist slot in the 2008 Moondance International Film Festival. She is a proud 2009 graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop, and is currently working on short fiction and her first novel.

Bindia Persaud

Bindia Persaud is the descendant of indentured laborers who were transported from the Indian subcontinent to the Caribbean in the 19th century. She was born in Guyana and spent the earlier part of her childhood in England. She and her family emigrated to Canada when she was nine years old. She is a graduate of the University of Toronto and currently works as an editor. This is her first published work.