



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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High Pasture by F. J. Bergmann

I must have started crossing over to the grazing-meadow as soon as I could walk, because I can remember toddling along the causeway, my small fingers twined in Nousie's fleece to hold myself upright, and Dadda shouting at Zeek, the bellwether, to be sure and bring the flock home before nightfall. Maybe Dadda wasn't really my father; he never said. His legs were as naked as his arms, with long smooth toes.

He said we had come from below, where the clouds sleep and dream their silver dreams. Once, I tried climbing down the steep slope, where there might at one time have been a path. I cut my hands on the sharp rocks and lamed myself (my hooves did not heal for a fortnight) and finally could not go on when the air became thick, opaque and poisonous. I slept then; when I woke it was to find Dadda dragging me, limp and queasy, upward over the loose gravel. He called me a fool, in a terrible voice; I never tried to descend again.

The only life I remembered was atop the two high plateaux linked by a narrow causeway, each ringed

with blunt peaks like a mouthful of elderly teeth. Our compound, an interconnected warren of sheds and pens, rose from the rock floor of the smaller plateau. Little room was left for grazing there, but the other plateau was a vast prairie, lush with red-orange grasses whose metallic sheen undulated beneath the sweep of winds. As the snowmelt ponds shrank in the dry heat of summer, feathery mosses in shades of blue unfurled to mist their edges with cerulean smoke.

I crossed with the sheep every day, with the sun on my stronger hand coming and going. Nousie would amble along next to me, nudging me amiably, while her lambs cavorted on ahead. After Zeek died and none of the young rams were old enough to take charge, it was I who led the flock on our daily journeys. Mornings the snow would be melting already, bright trickles streaming down the rocks, new growth splitting the stones with crackling reverberations wherever liquid seeped into the fissures. Evenings we'd trudge home in the violet air, silver powder spangling down from the Snowline, that broad drift of icy stars dusted in an oblique band across the sky.

As I grew older, Dadda taught me to twist the wisps of wool caught on rock edges and wind them onto a spindle, then to card and spin whole fleeces into skeins, to keep me busy during the meadow days. After milking, I would make cheese or weave, until it was time for me to go to sleep in the barn with Nousie and the other ewes. I used the wool from the few dark sheep to weave in complex patterns from punched cards that Dadda gave me. No errors were allowed, and no two patterns were ever the same. I once had to unravel three evenings' work of a nearly finished length because of one reversed weft. I saved my own shearings for fine lacework.

Like all the other buildings, Dadda's house was made from slabs of ochre rock, fused at the angles where walls met. At regular intervals, the stone thinned to yellow translucency, allowing a faint flush of daylight to pass through. The loom was kept in the largest room. It was also the only room to have a lamp at night. I would weave, carefully counting pattern-threads on my fingers, while Dadda made mysterious marks on papers and pressed buttons in a rapid sequence on a device that flashed strings of symbols across a glowing window and occasionally spoke to him in words I could not understand. When I was smaller and he was kinder, Dadda read to me from picture-books and taught me all the names for everything in the world, but perhaps there are other names, or other worlds.

He told me not to concern myself with what happened to my weavings; he said they were gifts for the gods. Every few weeks, as the larger moon waxed, the growing stack of patterned blankets would disappear while I and my flock were on the far side. Sometimes the ripe cheeses or one or two of the younger rams would be gone as well. The rock spurs hid the compound itself, but I would hear a muted rumble, which grew until the stones trembled, and a glow would illuminate the mountainside, like sustained lightning. Later in the day, this would happen a second time, and when I came back in the evening, he would announce gravely that the gods had condescended to visit, and tell me whether they had been pleased with what I had done. If they had approved of my work and behavior, dinner would be better than usual for several days; if not, I would have only sheep-milk until they came the next time. Sometimes I wished that I could see them and speak to them myself, to ask them if Nousie would ever see her sons again, but I was too intimidated by Dadda's tales of the gods' quarrels and caprices to make the request.

#

When I was very young, the ewes bore every spring, and always twinned or tripled, but gradually the old ones became barren and died. The flock became smaller and smaller. I was happy at first to spend less time carding or spinning, and more time gamboling with the older lambs, playing Mountain King and leaping boldly from the rock spurs, but there were fewer lambs every year, and they became sickly,

and their bones more brittle. The younger ewes rarely had more than one lamb, and with mounting frequency, they were deformed and had to be flung into the abyss. A few of their inconsolable dams leapt to their deaths after them. Finally the ewes stopped bearing at all, so that the ones who died were not replaced.

I had always slept among my sheep and never needed a blanket, but it grows cold of late. Nousie lost her sight, and stopped eating when no new lambs came in the spring. One day she stumbled too close to the edge of the causeway. I grasped her thin fleece and tried to hold her back, but the wispy strands pulled away and tore from my hands.

The milk of the few remaining ewes dwindled, then ceased. Dadda became increasingly morose and developed a tremor in his limbs, and the vehemence of his evening interlocutions in the unknown language intensified. When the last two sheep died, dark foam on their blue lips, Dadda insisted that I continue to cross to the pasture each day, even though there were no sheep left to accompany, no more wool to card or spin. The huge moon was almost full. The thunder and glowing light came as usual, and when I returned, as early as I dared, I was alone. One small cheese was left, and a blanket damaged long ago by a careless lamb.

After the cheese was gone, I thought that the sheep-grasses might sustain me for a time. At first the bitter leaves made me dizzy, and I retched, but I soon felt a warm dullness, and with each day, a growing need.

#

I did not cross over the causeway to the pasture today. I am tired and ill, though I crave the grass. The moons say that it is almost time for the gods to come.

A Texture Beyond Dreams by Swapna Kishore

Dawn, and stained shimmers stream over the dew-fresh grass, but for once Lavender does not join her sisters.

Gossip envelops her: a sister with a hint of citreous talks of the arthritic craving a mountain-climbing dream; another sister, green, spice-sharp, trills at such folly. Night-weary shimmers mingle, separate, and swoosh around. Smudges puff upwards, coalesce into dark clouds, and drift out of the meadow. For an eternity, Lavender had been too glad for the cleansing to wonder where these residues of mortal morbidity went. Today, she imagines them bursting over unsuspecting men and women, flooding misery back on body-weary, death-dreading mortals.

“Lavender, are you not joining the romp today?” asks a pearly dilation, blue-veined from last night, the jasmine smell faint with fatigue.

“Later,” says Lavender, hoping she does not have to explain what she does not understand. Dreamsisters cleanse themselves so that they are light and joyous enough to weave good dreams; humans like Anomie need her. Yet today, tossing off these residues of mortal contact seems dismissive of the mortals they are bound to help.

#

Last night.

Ridges and scars hashed the slumbering girl's face. Her fingers were gripping the pillow. "Give her a dream of color and happiness," Anomie's father said, blinking hard.

Shield strengthened, Lavender searched the child's memories. Yes, here, an abundant vein—the aroma of oven-fresh bread, tinkling wind-chimes, a ladle tapped to a racy beat on a brass pot. Enough to texture a dream.

Color and happiness. Deeper, past smells and sounds, must lie rainbows, or flowers tossing in the breeze, or a butterfly to fashion a fairy from. Strange. All she saw were shadows and tangled gray threads. Then, dazzling through smoky shapes, a scene: a flash of light, a deafening crash, screams, an agonizing crunch of bones, sticky crimson pools, and ...black. Only black.

Dead eyes opened. The child sniffed. "Dreamsister? I smell lavender."

"Yes, child?" Lavender tendrilled.

"My fingers trace scars on my face," Anomie said. "But I feel beauty in my bones. Show me the reality."

Eldest had instructed Lavender to weave a dream for this child, using the dream-turn of the child's father. The child demanded the truth, but her father wanted to cheer his daughter.

So Lavender whispered, "Hush, child, sleep on," and laced bubbling waters with fresh spring smells and scarlets and golds of courage and purity.

#

Memories of Anomie are obsidian shards in Lavender's softness. Dreamsisters spend their eternal lives granting mortals their three dream-turns; is that not compassion enough? Why does Lavender feel she has failed?

Restless, she curls herself tight, drifts to the meadow's edge. She eases out into the village. Daytime visits to the village are forbidden, but no one has noticed her leave. Humans cannot see her, and she will stay safely distant so that they don't whiff her lavender.

The daytime mortal world glares bright despite her filters, a sharp contrast to the meadow's mellow light. Men are plowing fields, threshing grain, arguing, laughing. Their heartiness pulses fierce; she tightens her shield.

Suddenly Lavender stops short and dodges behind a tree; Eldest, who should not be out in the village either, is hovering near a cottage.

Why is Eldest here?

The cottage belongs to Sarah. She sits darning on a wooden bench, an overflowing workbasket at her feet. She winces at each pull of the needle. Stiff, swollen fingers. A wrinkle-swamped face. She appeared in the village one night, naked, spouting gibberish, tearing her flesh. A kindly couple nursed her till her hysteria subsided. Now she earns coin as a seamstress.

Eldest lingers near Sarah, splotches of dark-heart color marring her gold aura. Lavender, curious, watches from behind a tree.

Noon. Sarah cracks her fingers, groans, and stands up. She rubs her back. She sniffs and jabs her finger at Eldest, who must be invisible to her. "Marge, stop spying. Go."

Marge. Marigold. Eldest. How did Sarah know?

Eldest turns dark-heart all over, like a million horrible memories. She lumbers away.

#

Eldest lingers often near Sarah's cottage, but Sarah always senses Eldest and yells at her to leave, and Eldest stops coming after some days.

Lavender continues her visits, though. It seems to her that if she can understand just one mortal, she will understand the restlessness caused by Anomie.

Sarah's sighs and creaks make Lavender pity the futility of mortal life and feel grateful for her ethereal insubstantiality. Yet, a brush of a sunray can smooth away the cares folded in Sarah's face.

Once, pruning a flowerless shrub, Sarah pricks herself. A red dot grows on the fingertip. Neck tilted, she smiles wistfully at the gathering ruby, bulbous, bright against pale skin.

Too curious to stay safely away, Lavender comes closer.

Sarah sniffs and frowns. "A lavender sister? Why have you come? Do you want to experience a body?"

"No no, we sense a body during dreamweaving."

"Only through your veil." Sarah snorts. "Remove it and see what life is. Or are you scared?"

Shedding the veil makes Lavender feel vulnerable, exposed, but a mere mortal has challenged her.

She discards her protection and dilates into Sarah.

Oh the shock. Jags of color blind her. Smells, full and heavy, choke her. *And the weight.* Dense flesh, thick with pain. Loud thuds, vibrations.

She hurtles out.

"Gave up?" asks Sarah.

"I'm coming again." Braced for coarseness, Lavender re-enters. Sensations submerge her; she expands through the body, accepting the bounds and protection of skin. She can retract whenever she wants.

Warm sun on a face, so very gentle. Often during dreamweaving, Lavender has touched memories of basking in the sun, but such contentment? She could linger forever...

"*Out,*" barks Sarah.

#

Lavender has woven infinite dreams, for adults and children, for those able-bodied, for the sick, for the blind. She has waded through ecstatic memories and horrific ones. Anomie was not different, yet she was. Perhaps, despite all cleaning and shields, stray lint of mortal contact clung on, thoughts clustered, and feelings. And Anomie's reed-thin voice, spanning a chasm of sightlessness, gummed all into a lump too solid to crumble.

Sometimes Lavender flits past Anomie's cottage. She does not enter.

She does not remember when or how she began, if the eternal ever 'begins.' She has never questioned anything.

Until now.

Even so, what is her question?

#

In one of her flesh-dips into Sarah, Lavender shares memory of a dream Sarah dreamed. It boils with more intensity than she has ever woven into a dream.

Perhaps all humans intensify obtuse dreams. Or perhaps Sarah is unique.

What did Anomie experience the night Lavender wove her the dream?

#

Lavender broods too often. Sometimes thoughts collapse into insights that open vistas of joy. Ecstasy. Sorrow. Devastation. Living.

#

She would have discarded her shield during dream weaving, but laws require maintaining equilibrium between the formed and formless. She brushes off her guilt about her violations when she tries on Sarah's body; heightened perception, awe, and horror have become an addiction.

Those glimpses of real life throb with power.

#

"I was a sister before I grossed," Sarah says.

This clumsy old woman?

"Which rule did you break?" Lavender asks.

"I chose to gross." Sarah rubs her fingers, gazes at a spot where Lavender is not. "I wove dreams for a youth and fell in love with him. He said he loved me. I took over a visibility cloak for him. I turned out...like this and..."

Lavender imagines tentative fingers tracing lines on flesh. She quivers in foolish anticipation, she, who only knows flesh by borrowing.

#

Mortals often praise Lavender now, so Eldest assigns her the toughest jobs—the poorest, the most dejected, the angriest. Every night, Lavender exhausts herself to uncover the best inside them for dreams. Come daylight, she skips daily romps and rushes to Sarah—friend, sister, provider.

And on the days Lavender is refused entry, her tormentor.

#

"I ran barefoot here as a child." Sunlight dapples the cripple's face as he lies under a canopy of trees, smiling. "Hear the leaves rustle. See those reds and golds. Smell the autumn dust..."

He was thrown off by a horse—he shall never walk again.

"What dream do you want?" Lavender asks him.

"Weave my best memories," he says. "Make the dream so vivid and dramatic that I recall every detail. It will help me recover."

Energy surges through each of his memory shreds. Whirling emotions suck her in—blackness

interwoven with gold, desolation braided with hope. She topples out of his mind, overwhelmed. Fascinated by his lack of resentment, she had forgotten to strengthen her shield.

Gasping under the ferocity of life in this helpless man, she thinks:

Before humans die, they *live*.

#

Lavender craves for more.

She tells Sarah, “Let me share your body for a few days. You don’t—”

“I shouldn’t have let you in. Go, and do not return. You cannot straddle two worlds.”

“*No.*” Anguish sears Lavender. Will she never again feel grass as sharp spikes? Will her world revert to too-smooth, bland senses?

“Return to your meadow,” Sarah says. “Or accept my visibility cloak and release me.” Her eyes sparkle with a swift hope, perhaps of agelessness and freedom from flesh.

Can she surrender her gossamer life for perpetual heaviness, Lavender wonders. Instead of carefree morning gossips, fashioning of dreams, there will be aches, and confinement. She will age like Sarah, labor to earn bread. All this merely for real grass under real feet?

“Will the cloak make me like you?” she asks.

Sarah shrugs. “Old or young, ugly or beautiful, healthy or crippled, who can say?”

A cripple, Eternity! Yet the man staring at russet leaves radiated energy. If she grosses, she will *feel* things.

Not forever. Age will slow her, death reduce her to scattered ash. Ceased existence.

Even ashes are more real than perpetual vapidty.

“Give me your cloak. I release you,” Lavender whispers after a long while.

Sarah touches her forehead, mutters something, and says, “Melt into me.”

#

Coarseness suffocates Lavender when she lowers herself into Sarah. An excruciating pain ends and begins her, crushing her into limbs, torso and head. Moments stretch to infinity before imploding into a now that remains.

Imminent.

A tornado of aches and tingles. A smothering by smells and sounds. Energy crackles through Lavender. She molds into her new form and directs her senses to her skin and outward. Her first breath chokes—the thick air clogs her chest before releasing its substance through her.

She is alive. She is human.

Who is she?

She rubs her eyes open with new, heavy hands. She is alone.

A voice hammers in her head, but she cannot make out the words.

“Who...what...?” An inert tongue. Blood roars inside her and batters her eardrums.

The thought tendrils become a word. “Lavender?”

A faint smell she cannot recognize. Images return. Eldest. Sarah. Visibility cloak.

Solidity.

The skin itches; she wants to claw it off.

“Don’t,” says a soft voice. “It took me two days to adjust when Marge handed over.”

Marge. Marigold. Eldest.

Her head hurts from thinking. A robe lies near her. With clumsy hands, she forces it over her head. She gropes the wall and places foot before clumsy foot. A weird symphony engulfs—footsteps, an insect’s chirp, a peddler’s call. The yellows dazzle brighter, the browns are dreary, the blacks a hollow nothingness. Raw skin chaffs against cloth. Bare feet bruise against the coarse floor.

Outside, a profusion of wine-red flowers covers hitherto flowerless, thorny bushes. A heady fragrance, familiar.

“Rose?” She whispers, something clicking inside her. “Rose? Sarah?”

Near the rose bushes, a stem pokes through the soil. She bends down on painful knees and caresses the plant. “Lavender?” she whispers to herself.

Haunted Persuasion by Lilian Wu

The clock in the hall struck twelve midnight with a solemn gong, nearly startling Leslie Wong into dropping her book. Rubbing her eyes sleepily, Leslie gave an enormous yawn before she decided that she needed some caffeine to stay alert. As she made her way to the kitchen in the dark, Leslie kept her ears open for any suspicious activity that had plagued the household for the past few weeks.

There were none, so Leslie shrugged and entered the kitchen, flicking on the switch as she did so. Perhaps the stress of having an incredibly overbearing mother-in-law under the same roof had caused Winnie, her old friend of nearly twenty years, to imagine things. Then again, Leslie thought wryly to herself, having Mrs. Huang for a mother-in-law would drive even a saint up the wall. Ever since she had arrived for a ‘short’ stay a few weeks ago, Mrs. Huang made life a living hell for Winnie, who couldn’t seem to please her mother-in-law. Mrs. Huang loved embarrassing Winnie in front of the other neighbours by complaining incessantly about her daughter-in-law’s lack of wifely virtues. Thankfully, Winnie’s neighbours were good folks who knew otherwise, but it added undue pressure to an already stressful life.

Benjamin, Winnie’s husband, tried to intervene on a few occasions but fought a losing battle against his mother’s masterful use of emotional blackmail. Every time Benjamin tried to reason with his mother, Mrs. Huang would inevitably turn on the weepy eyes and moan that he didn’t care for his old and useless mother anymore. There was little a man could do under such circumstances so there was no choice but to back off. With little resistance in her way, Mrs. Huang looked set to reign supreme until the ‘haunting’ begun.

It started with objects flying off shelves for no apparent reason. Then the light switches throughout the

flat were flicked on and off even when there was no one in the room. The last incident even had Mrs. Huang moved from her warm bed behind locked doors to the living room in the middle of the night! It would have been enough to make anyone leave but with the irritating stubbornness that characterised unwanted houseguests the world over, Mrs. Huang shook off the incident as a case of sleepwalking and insisted on staying. Though Leslie was no expert on ghostly encounters, she personally thought that Mrs. Huang must have irritated some unearthly being with her mere presence. When Benjamin was sent on an urgent business trip, Winnie had called Leslie and begged her to stay a few nights. While Winnie claimed that it was to have her detective friend find out the reason behind the disturbances, Leslie sensed that Winnie did not want to be alone with her mother-in-law while her husband was absent. Leslie could hardly blame Winnie since she would have taken drastic measures a long time ago. Winnie was simply too nice to deal with a woman who was an old hand at bullying. Besides, Leslie was curious to see if Winnie's flat was really haunted.

"What are you doing?" A voice suddenly demanded unceremoniously from the kitchen's entrance so Leslie turned and saw Mrs. Huang standing with arms akimbo as if her personal territory had been invaded.

"I'm going to make myself some coffee so I'll feel less sleepy, Mrs. Huang," Leslie answered with a pleasant smile. "Winnie told me to help myself if I need anything from the kitchen during the night."

"Huh! This is not your flat, you know," Mrs. Huang retorted rudely. "You can't just help yourself to anything that doesn't belong to you."

Leslie raised an eyebrow but kept her temper under wraps. Mrs. Huang had an uncanny knack for starting quarrels and Leslie refused to be baited.

"I guess you're right, Mrs. Huang," She agreed amicably as she returned the coffee to the cupboard where she had found it. "Maybe I should go and buy myself some coffee instead. I think there is a 24-hour coffee shop somewhere near here..."

Mrs. Huang paled.

"You...you can't!" she protested. "It's...it's too late for a young lady like you to be out and about."

"But I need to have some coffee or I'll fall asleep before I can find out the reason behind the disturbances," Leslie explained with exaggerated patience. "Once that happens, nothing short of an earthquake will be able to wake me up."

Panic materialised on Mrs. Huang's face as Leslie moved past her towards the living room where she had left her wallet. "What if...what if the ghosts came while you're gone?"

Leslie stopped and gave Winnie's mother-in-law a look of surprise. "But I thought you didn't believe in ghosts, Mrs. Huang."

"Err...well...you shouldn't be out this late at night anyway. Why don't I make you a cup of coffee instead?"

Without waiting for Leslie's answer, Mrs. Huang scurried to the kitchen.

"Oh but will it be too much trouble for you, Mrs. Huang?" Leslie called after her even as she hid a smile. "Maybe it's better if I go buy the coffee instead..."

"It's ok, it's ok," Mrs. Huang assured her from the kitchen. "I...err...don't mind."

Since Mrs. Huang's nature was far from helpful, Leslie controlled her mirth with much difficulty.

“Thanks a lot then, Mrs. Huang.”

* * *

Leslie had barely settled in with her coffee before Mrs. Huang came running out of her room screeching like a banshee.

“What the...” Leslie jumped up with wide eyes as she watched Mrs. Huang being chased around by what appeared to be pillows bent on a whacking spree.

“Mom? Leslie?” Winnie suddenly appeared with sleep-tousled hair. “What’s going on?”

Leslie pointed at the hysterical Mrs. Huang without a word, looking like she was about to break out in wild laughter. It was indeed a comical sight as Mrs. Huang tried to evade the pillows that seemed to be controlled by an unseen presence. Funnily enough, neither Leslie nor Winnie was targeted while the pillows pursued Mrs. Huang with an almost manic energy.

“Don’t just stand there and gawk! Come and help me!” Mrs. Huang shrieked as she ran past them with hands covering her head.

Winnie and Leslie exchanged indecipherable glances.

“I suppose we better. Benjamin would never forgive me if anything happens to his mother,” Winnie said with just the tiniest tinge of reluctance.

“It’s just pillows though,” Leslie mused out loud, “you want to wait till the heavy objects come out?”

“Leslie!”

“Okay, okay. I was just kidding.”

Winnie and Leslie ran after Mrs. Huang and grabbed a pillow each. It seemed to be effective for the remaining pillows dropped to the floor with a soft thump. Mrs. Huang collapsed onto the sofa with a huge sigh of relief and then turned to Winnie angrily.

“What took you so long to come rescue me? Did you want me to get beaten to death by the pillows?”

“Of course not Mom,” Winnie protested feebly as she sat down beside her mother-in-law. “I’ll never let anything happen to you.”

“Besides, I don’t think it’s possible to be beaten to death by pillows,” Leslie added brightly.

Mrs. Huang seethed with rage but before she could tell them loudly just what she really thought of their valiant efforts to save her, the lights in the living room suddenly went off and made her squeal instead.

“Wh...what was that?” Mrs. Huang clung to Winnie in fear while Leslie immediately dove for the torch in her bag on the sofa and switched it on.

“All right, come out whoever you are,” Leslie called as she shone the torch around the dark living room.

No one answered or appeared so Leslie navigated her way carefully to the light switch and flicked it on. The lights returned but revealed nothing save for a petrified woman hiding her head under the cushions on the sofa and refusing to come out no matter how Winnie coaxed her.

Leslie felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth but decided it was not the time to make light of the situation. The culprit had to be found, and soon, or Mrs. Huang would go into hysterics, which was really the last sight Leslie would like to see.

“I’ll go check the rest of the rooms so you two stay here,” Leslie instructed Winnie and Mrs. Huang as she turned her torch off.

Just then, the doorbell rang and sent Mrs. Huang into a high-pitched shriek, thankfully muffled by the cushions she had on her head.

“Can you please see who’s at the door?” Winnie asked Leslie. “I’ve got to calm Mom down.”

Leslie nodded as she went to answer the door and then stared at the sight that greeted her. Outside the gate, armed to the teeth with knives of all descriptions, stood Mr. and Mrs. Tan, Winnie’s next door neighbours, looking extremely determined.

“Is everyone all right?” Mr. Tan asked as he brandished his kitchen knife threateningly, “We’re here to deal with whatever made that hideous scream just now.”

For the first time in her life, Leslie had no idea how to react to the pair of gung-ho senior citizens in pyjamas. Mr. and Mrs. Tan’s gorgeous son, Fabian, was not armed but wore a pained expression that spoke volumes of what he really thought of his parents’ combat gear.

“Err...actually that was Mrs. Huang,” Leslie said slowly, wondering if she should give in and collapse in laughter.

“Mrs. Huang?” Mrs. Tan echoed with obvious dislike in her eyes but smiled with false sincerity. “Why? Has she been hurt?”

Leslie told the entire story to the Tans and Fabian offered to help check the flat with her.

“It’s better to have a man along, just in case,” he explained with a small but knee-weakening smile.

Leslie was hardly immune to his charms so she agreed readily and unlocked the gate to let the Tans in. Mr. and Mrs. Tan remained in the living room to give what comfort they could while Fabian and Leslie searched through the various rooms for any clue to what might have caused the disturbances. Leslie even checked the pillows that had attacked Mrs. Huang for any device but turned up nothing, much to her mystification. If the disturbances were not human-induced, then what could have caused them? Leslie could only wonder.

“Why don’t you have your mother-in-law come spend the night at our flat while Leslie investigates?” Mr. Tan suggested to Winnie kindly. “I’m sure she’ll be able to sleep better there.”

Mrs. Tan didn’t look happy in the least but agreed grudgingly with her husband’s offer. “Yes, we have an extra room where Mrs. Huang can sleep quite comfortably.”

“That’s a great idea, Mom,” Winnie told Mrs. Huang happily. “What do you think of it?”

Mrs. Huang regarded Winnie with raised eyebrows.

“Why do you look so happy when they made the suggestion?” she asked accusingly, “Oh I know. You just want an excuse to drive me away, right? Wait till Benjamin comes back! I’ll tell him how you’ve been mistreating me!”

Winnie tried to explain but Mrs. Huang wouldn’t hear of it. Instead she assumed a martyred expression and moaned about how unlucky she was to get a daughter-in-law like Winnie. Everyone else narrowed their eyes dangerously but Mrs. Huang seemed totally oblivious.

“Well, I suppose you could stay here,” Leslie cut into Mrs. Huang’s lamentations smoothly. “Only don’t blame us if you get walloped by pillows again.”

Mrs. Huang stopped and turned ashen when she recalled how she had been targeted mercilessly by the pillows earlier that night.

“Oh, all right,” She conceded resentfully, “But don’t expect me to forget what you did tonight!” Mrs. Huang threw an imperious glance at Winnie.

“She’s acting as if everyone owes her a favour or something,” Mrs. Tan muttered angrily to Leslie as they followed Mrs. Huang to the door.

“I know, Mrs. Tan,” Leslie answered softly. “I can’t stand her either.”

They grinned at each other like they were kindred spirits before the Tans headed back to their flat with Mrs. Huang. For a moment, it seemed as if Winnie and Leslie could get some peace but their hopes were dashed when they heard Mrs. Huang’s scream from the Tans’ house.

“What now?” Leslie groaned as she ran after a panic-stricken Winnie.

Before they could reach the Tans’ flat, however, Mrs. Huang scrambled out desperately trying to protect her head as pink fluffy pillows followed her with a vengeance.

“Get the pillows!” Leslie quickly instructed the Tans who appeared at their doorway with wide eyes.

They managed to subdue the pillows but Mrs. Huang had had enough.

“That’s it! I’m leaving this dreadful place!” she declared shrilly, causing other sleepy but irritated neighbours to emerge from their flats.

“Then what are you waiting for?” one of them said crossly. “Some of us have to wake up early for work or school, you know.”

Mrs. Huang’s face changed a bright red before she turned to march back into Winnie’s flat. Winnie ran after her mother-in-law to try to calm her down, but to no avail, for Mrs. Huang appeared minutes later with her luggage.

“I’ll remember this!” Mrs. Huang promised Winnie darkly before she stormed down the corridor to the lift lobby.

It was the best sight that anyone had ever seen.

* * *

When Benjamin returned home after his trip, he was stunned to find that his mother had already left.

“What happened while I’m gone?” he asked his wife and Leslie in disbelief.

Leslie explained as Winnie fixed his favourite snacks and tea in the kitchen.

“It’s not your wife’s fault though,” Leslie added. “I hate to say this but your mother was really too hard on Winnie. Anyway, you don’t have to worry too much about her. I went to check with your mom’s neighbours and they assured me that she is doing fine.”

“But you better go see your mom and make sure she’s all right,” Winnie suggested to her husband as she set down a tray on the coffee table. “I’d have gone myself but you know how your mother feels about me...”

Benjamin took his wife into his arms and gave her a comforting hug. “I know. I’m just glad that nobody was hurt during the disturbances. Was there a reoccurrence after my mom left?”

Leslie stirred her tea thoughtfully. “You know, now that you mention it. There wasn’t even the slightest

squeak since that night. Isn't that the strangest thing?"

Benjamin couldn't help but agree. It had been entirely too bizarre an event to be happening in sunny Singapore, but since it had stopped, perhaps it was better to just forget about it.

Winnie stood up with a smile. "Well, now that everything has returned to normal, shall we have some fruit to celebrate the occasion?"

"Sure," Benjamin said distractedly while Leslie nodded cheerfully as she turned to the delicious snacks on the tray.

Both of them didn't notice the mysterious smile on Winnie's lips as a stray piece of paper on the floor floated to her outstretched hand.

Lady of the Lake by Adrienne J. Odasso

As she's come to understand it, the gig is a joke. She was alive, once, a long time ago, but that's behind her now, and the water is as deep and safe as ever. The only change, perhaps, is that swimming is easier, and she rarely feels hungry. It's a shame, because fish used to be her favorite. Living in a place like that, she'd gotten used to fish growing scarce. It was easy to frighten people by showing up and politely asking for picnic scraps, though the feeling afterward was kind of hollow. The trouble is that people don't speak her language anymore.

Usually, it calls for something more impressive than harassing picnickers. She hates appearing on roadsides; that takes a lot out of her, somehow. She's so accustomed to the water (it's not the sea, it'll *never* be the sea) that stepping ashore has become a discomfort. Often, she's afraid, and she runs away faster than her targets do. She wonders about the nature of the contract and knows she should have given it a little more thought. People think there's not much to do when you're dead, but the truth of the matter is that a lot of strange opportunities spring up. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Long ago, before there were sailors, she'd had the sea. There was something about living seaside that you couldn't get anywhere else, and, nowadays, she can't imagine why she'd thought that haunting a lake would be diverting. If she was alive, maybe, but then it wouldn't be a haunting, and she would be in great peril. She'd already been trapped once. The water is safe, though, and home enough when, by rights, she ought to be gone. She shies from the thought.

Today's target is a man with a camera. He's photographing the lake. The shamefully easy part is sneaking up on him without making so much as a ripple, then silently breaking the surface. What he sees will be up to him, be it dead thing or disturbance, monster or ghost. Dead things and ghosts aren't exactly the same, although the man with the camera doesn't seem to know this. For long seconds, he stares, unblinking.

See me, she whispers, and believe.

The man doesn't, and he won't. He yawns, rubs his eyes, and squints at the water. He shows signs of confusion, as if something's amiss with the current or the weather, and, unhurried, takes a picture. He lowers the camera and sighs. It's the slow days that are the worst, she thinks, and swims off to find some picnickers. Things aren't what they were in the old days, for certain. People are hard pressed to believe in happy endings, let alone in ghosts.

Sinking, she opens her yellow eyes wide in the dark.

Cloaked in Red by Cherie Camins

Cheresa could smell the delicious scents of *pancit* and *lumpia*, some of her favorite foods, wafting through the air and she followed her nose into the kitchen. Her mother stood at the counter, chopping carrots into slices with a large knife while something sizzled on the stove. She let her stomach lead her to the plate of *lumpia* on the table and picked one up, careful to blow on it before taking a bite. A burst of flavor hit her tongue and she began to chew, savoring the taste.

“*Anak*, that’s for tonight’s party.”

Cheresa swallowed the bite and blushed at her mother’s words. She was forever doing before taking a moment to think. “Sorry, mommy. Is there anything I can help you with? I can help roll up the *lumpias* for you.”

“I am nearly finished with that, but there is something you can help me with.” Her mother wiped her hands on the towel hanging from her apron before turning around. “I have a very special task for you. Your *lola* is feeling too ill to come to the party tonight. Could you take some *bibingka* to her? I have all her favorites. *Puto*, *kutsinta* with shredded coconut flakes, and *leche flan*.” Her mother smiled. “You know how your *lola* loves sweets.”

“I can put that in my new basket daddy gave me.” Cheresa was about to leave the kitchen to retrieve said basket when her mother called out for her to wait. Her mother picked up the basket off of the counter behind her and Cheresa nudged her toe against the grain of the wooden floor, slightly ashamed for not noticing it earlier.

“I already packed the sweets in the basket. Do you remember how to get to *lola*’s house?”

Cheresa had to think for a moment before nodding her head. “Yup! I remember from when we went to visit her last week.” She recited the directions dutifully from memory.

Her mother nodded and there was a wistful expression on her face as she patted Cheresa’s soft hair. “That’s right, *anak*. You’re growing up so fast. Soon you’ll be a young lady at thirteen. Remember to give the basket to your *lola* and return straight home. No detours and do not accept anything from strangers. Got that?”

“I know.” Cheresa bounced on her heels, excited by the prospect that her mother was letting her do big girl things. “I’ll wear the red cloak *lola* gave me for my birthday. She’ll like that.”

“That’s a good idea. Now hurry on and grab your cloak. I don’t want these sweets to go cold before your *lola* has a chance to eat them. But don’t run in the house!”

Cheresa carefully walked out of her mother’s sight before running to her room and grabbing her red cloak that hung over a chair. She tied the cords around her neck snugly and hurried downstairs to where her mother was waiting by the door with the basket in hand. Cheresa took the basket and held it against her side, her red cloak partially covering it.

“I’ll be back soon, mommy. Bye!” Cheresa stood on her tiptoes to kiss her mother’s cheek. Then she opened the door and began her journey.

The sun was high in the sky as she closed the door behind her and stepped onto the sidewalk. It was the weekend so there were plenty of people walking to and fro on the sidewalks, busy to get to whatever destination they were heading towards. She dodged out of their way as she took a left from her house and walked towards the giant hill that would lead her to her *lola*. She loved being outside whenever she could. Cheresa was happy that there weren't as many Jeepneys on the road coughing smoke that made her cough in return.

Cheresa wrapped her free hand around the edge of her red cloak and marveled at the softness of the material. Her *lola* had made it for her for her birthday and she adored her cloak. It was her favorite thing to wear.

Unbeknownst to her, a creature spotted her from the shadows from the nearby trees. It had the head of a horse as well as the lower body of one, but his torso belonged to that of a man. It was a *tikbalang* and he could think of nothing more fun than to lead Cheresa astray from her path. He licked its lips and stomped his hooves in the dirt as he followed the girl in red.

Cheresa made it to the base of the hill without any trouble and frowned at what she saw. There was construction work going on and large signs blocking anyone from going further.

"Now how am I going to get to *lola's* house?" she muttered as she peered over the sign to where she could see workers wearing hard hats as they worked the noisy machines. As interesting as it looked, she could not remain to watch them. She needed to continue on her journey.

"I can be of some service." Cheresa turned around to see a pleasant looking man with his hands stuffed in his pockets. "I know a shortcut around the construction on the road. I was going that way myself. Would you like to accompany me?"

"My mommy says I shouldn't take any detours," she said slowly. But she needed to reach her *lola's* house and her only way there was blocked. She couldn't go back home without completing her task. Her mother would be so disappointed. Cheresa looked back towards the construction work then down at her basket loaded with her *lola's* favorite sweets.

The pleasant looking man, who looked and sounded vaguely like her favorite *tito*, shrugged his shoulders. "The way I know is the only way around the construction crew and you can't go through them today. Don't you want to go wherever you're going with that basket?"

"I do! My mommy wants me to get these sweets to my *lola* because she's sick and can't come to tonight's party." She sighed and nodded firmly as if she made up her mind. "Mommy would understand. Which way do we go?"

"This way, through the forest. You should be where you want to go soon enough." He held his hand out in front of him. "The name's Tik. What's yours?"

Cheresa did not want to tell Tik her name, but he did say his name first and he was helping her reach her *lola*, so it was only polite. Her mother always told her to be polite. "My name's Cheresa." She lifted her own hand to shake his.

"Pleasure to meet you, Cheresa. Shall we?"

Tik turned towards the forest and Cheresa followed behind him, her red cloak flowing behind her.

The canopy of the forest was tall and wide, blocking out most of the sun's rays. Cheresa did not like the shadows and stuck close to Tik in order to feel safe. She kept a tight grip on her basket, making certain she did not drop it in the dirt. Her mother would be so upset if she did and her *lola* would be sad.

After awhile, and what Cheresa could have sworn was the same fallen trunk off to the left she had seen at least five times, her legs began to hurt from all the walking. She did not know what time it was, but she knew in her heart that this was not a shortcut.

“Tik,” she began hesitantly. “I think we should turn around. I have to go home for the party tonight.”

“It’s just a little longer, and soon you’ll see your *lola*. Don’t you trust me?” Tik flashed a familiar grin and a shiver stole through her. She should have never followed him into the forest. She was a fool.

“I do, but my legs hurt. Can we stop for a minute or two to rest?” Cheresa was only twelve years old, but she had a vague plan on how to escape. However, it would only work if Tik said yes. She needed him to say yes.

He paused and Cheresa was struck by how similar he looked to her favorite *tito*. She gave a little pout and she made a show of reaching down and rubbing her calves. Finally, he nodded and Cheresa cheered internally. “My mommy says to lessen the pain, I need the tiny white flowers that grow in the forest. Do you think you could get some for me, so I can continue walking without pain?”

Tik pondered her request for a moment and finally acquiesced with a nod of his head. “I’ll be gone for just a moment. Don’t run off. This forest can be very dangerous.”

Cheresa agreed and waited in the same spot, continuing to rub her calf until she could no longer see the back of Tik. Then she straightened and hurried back in the direction they came from. Her mommy was going to be so mad at her for following a stranger into a strange place, but she could deal with the lecture after she made it to her *lola*’s.

There did not seem to be an end to the forest and as she walked, she worried. She did not recall them traveling so far through the forest. Without Tik next to her, the noises of the animals sounded extra loud. She wrapped her cloak around her, half to keep her warm and half to make herself feel safe. Her red cloak would keep her safe until she reached her *lola*’s house.

The sounds of machines drifted to Cheresa’s ears and she shrieked in delight at hearing the wonderful noise. She had never heard anything more sweeter. She picked up her feet and ran towards the sound, hoping to finally be free. In the distance, Cheresa could see sunlight peering through the trees and she ran, breaking out of the forest. The sounds of machines were loud and there were construction workers doing work, but the sight and sound of the river filled her attention more. She was almost to her *lola*’s house.

She spotted the dust road by the river and clutched her basket even tighter. She was almost there. Only then would she be safe.

With every step she took on the dust road, passing other houses on her left and right, made the weight in her heart lighter. Cheresa saw her *lola*’s house in the distance, a bright red house with two trees behind a white fence, and beamed. It felt like she had not been to the house in near forever. She smoothed her black hair down, it had tangled up in knots during her journey, and wrapped the cloak even more so around her body. Then she raised her fist and knocked on the door. She could hear shuffling from behind the door and she looked up to the wrinkled, familiar face of her *lola*.

“*Lola!*” she cried out as she enveloped her arms as far as they could go around her *lola*’s waist. “Mommy sent me to give you a basketful of sweets since you’re not feeling so well.”

“Thank you, *anak*. Come in, come in. Let me see what you brought for me.” Her *lola* opened the door further and allowed Cheresa the rest of the way in.

Cheresa took in the comforting sights of her *lola*'s home. There were framed paintings of their family on the wall as well as the sofa and chair covers that her *lola* made years ago. Cheresa took in a breath and could smell the scented candles her mother always sent for *lola* to use. She could even smell the faint hint of something that was wholly her *lola*, a scent that would always remind her of her second home.

She made her way to the sofa and placed her basket on the small table in front of her. Her *lola* sat across from her in her favorite cushy chair and stared at Cheresa. "Don't you want to see what mommy made you, *lola*?" she asked as she fidgeted a little with her hands.

Her *lola* shook her head and continued to stare. "I wore the red cloak you made me for my birthday. See?" Cheresa ran her fingers along the cloak hanging from her shoulders. Normally, her *lola* would be cooing over how adorable her granddaughter was and pinching her cheeks before opening the basket and sharing her sweets with her.

Maybe her *lola* was sicker than Cheresa or her mother had thought.

Or, as Cheresa turned to look at the large mirror hanging over the fireplace that her *lola* never used, maybe something else was wrong with her *lola*. Her mother used to tell her stories about the creatures who lived in the forest and the mischief they played on humans.

Cheresa placed a bright smile on her face. "I need to use the bathroom before I have to return home. Mommy's probably wondering what is taking me so long."

Her *lola* nodded and she got up from the sofa, carefully making her way to the bathroom. She passed by the open kitchen as she ducked inside. Cheresa closed the door and leaned her back against it. She needed a plan to prove that her *lola* was still her *lola* and what to do after that. She scanned the bathroom for something, anything, she could use for proof, but her mind drew a blank. Then she spotted her *lola*'s favorite necklace hanging on a wall hook. It once belonged to her *lolo* and her mother had once told her in hushed whispers that the diamond hanging from the center of the necklace was a lucky charm.

Cheresa grabbed the necklace and placed it over her neck. She needed that luck now.

She opened the door and spotted something in the kitchen she could use. Cheresa made a quick trip to the kitchen before walking back into the living room where her *lola* still sat. Cheresa reached for the basket and lifted the lid, pulling out the plate of *kutsinta* with the coconut flakes. Before she completely pulled the plate out, she sprinkled some salt on the sweet. Her mother would disapprove of ruining the sweet and her *lola* would make a puckered face at the taste, but this was the only way she could prove anything. Her *lola* had always told her that salt was magical and good.

"*Lola*, I think you should have some *kutsinta*. You know how that's your favorite. I'll even have one too." Cheresa plucked a piece of the orange dessert and offered the plate to her *lola*. She held her breath, waiting for *lola* to take a piece as well.

She did and together they took a bite of their *kutsintas*. The taste was awful with the salt sprinkled on the top, but she chewed as if she enjoyed it, while she watched her *lola*.

Her *lola* took her first bite and she jumped up as if she had been hit, spitting it back out. "What is this?" she said, hoarsely as she tossed the *kutsinta* to the side.

Cheresa also stood and clutched her necklace as she backed up away from her...no. That was not her *lola*. It was something else.

“Who are you and what have you done with my *lola*?” she demanded.

Her not *lola* laughed and the skin of her body melted away as the creature slipped off the appearance of an old woman. Cheresa gasped and took another step back. The creature looked like a cross between a horse and a man as it stood on two legs with its hooves. She knew what it was. Her mother would tell her bedtime stories of the creatures who roamed the land among humans.

“I know what you are. Give me back my *lola*.”

“You were supposed to die in the forest, but you tricked me and managed to escape. Fortunately, I knew exactly where you were headed.” Cheresa could not help but stare at the mouth of the *tikbalang*. It had the mouth of a horse, but it spoke as easily as any human. She had not expected that. “Now you dragged your dear *lola* into this.”

Cheresa gulped, but stood strong as she lifted her chin in defiance. She would not let her *lola* down. She was nearly a young lady. Her mother even said so. All she needed to do was remain calm and think things through. Cheresa dug into the inner pocket of her red cloak and pulled out the container of salt she had grabbed from the kitchen.

“Don’t think I wouldn’t use this against you if you don’t give me back my *lola*.” She shook the salt container towards the *tikbalang* and noted with satisfaction that he was the one now to take a step back. “I have plenty of salt here and I’m not afraid to use it.”

The *tikbalang* snarled and thrust his hand to the side, pointing towards her *lola*’s bedroom. “She’s in there, sleeping.”

Cheresa did not look towards the bedroom as she kept her focus solely on the creature. It would be foolish to take her eyes off the *tikbalang* now. “Did you do anything to her?”

“She’s only asleep.”

“Then leave her house and don’t come back!”

When the *tikbalang* made no move to leave, she stepped closer to him as she poured out a handful of salt onto her palm. She closed her fingers over the tiny grains and raised her hand as if she was about to throw it. The *tikbalang* snarled once more and turned to leave. Just as it opened the door, it turned back and shivers ran down Cheresa’s spine at the evil look it gave her.

“You think you may have won, little girl, but I wouldn’t walk alone near the forest if I were you.” Then it left.

Cheresa slumped to the ground falling onto her knees, thankful her ordeal was over. She took in a steady breath before getting back to her feet and heading towards the bedroom. She had to see with her own eyes that her *lola* was all right.

As she stood in the door frame, her hand grabbing onto the frame for support, she saw her *lola*’s sleeping form on top of the quilt covering her bed. She was all right, they both were. Cheresa placed a hand on her *lola*’s arm and gently shook her awake.

“*Lola*? Please wake up.”

There was nothing better in her young life than seeing her *lola*’s brown eyes blinking up at her. “Cheresa? What are you doing here?”

A giggle slipped past her lips and she leaned down to envelope her *lola* in a hug. “Oh, *lola*. Mommy sent me here with your favorite sweets because you weren’t feeling so well. On the way I met a

tikbalang.” She quickly told her *lola* what had happened and this time it was her *lola* who embraced her in a hug.

“I don’t want you walking home by yourself, *anak*. I’ll call your mommy and let her know you are staying here for the night.” With her *lola*’s words washing over her, the tightness in her chest that she did not realize she was carrying loosened and it felt like Cheresa could finally breathe easily.

“Okay, *lola*.” Cheresa settled her red cloak so it could include her *lola* in its warmth and she closed her eyes as she snuggled with her *lola*.

She was safe.

Contributor Biographies

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Jeannie Bergmann is a web designer and artist. She maintains madpoetry.org, a local poetry website, as well as this site, wfop.org, and others. Her poems have appeared in the Beloit Poetry Journal, Blue Fifth Review, Cannibal, Margie, the North American Review, nthposition, Real Poetik, Rosebud, Southern Poetry Review, Tattoo Highway, on asininepoetry.com (as Easter Cathay), and her Flash translation Lace was shown at the 2002 Electronic Literature Symposium. In 2003 she received the Mary Roberts Rinehart National Poetry Award and was a finalist for the James Hearst and Joy Bale Boone poetry prizes and the Violet Reed Haas book prize. In 2004 she won the Pauline Ellis Prose Poetry Prize and was the runner-up for the Stephen Dunn Award. In 2005, she received third places in The Writer magazine New Discovery contest and the Lumina Ultra-Short contest, and won Rosebud’s 2006 Mary Shelley Imaginative Fiction contest. She co-edited the 2008 Wisconsin Poets’ Calendar.

Swapna Kishore

Swapna Kishore lives in Bangalore, India. She has written technical books and a business novel as part of her professional work. While she balances many roles, her dominant role in personal life is as a caregiver for her mother. She writes speculative fiction to retain her sanity, and to explore ideas in settings that allow weird thinking. Her fiction has been published; her most recent publication being in Ideomancer. Her website is at <http://www.swapnawrites.com>, and her blogs are at <http://swapnawrites.wordpress.com> and <http://zigzagmusings.blogspot.com>.

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Lilian Wu is a freelance writer hailing from Singapore, most recently published in local magazine Vita Edition. Her other stories, and clips of her past published works, can be viewed at <http://dreamsofluthiea.wordpress.com>. She also runs a blog for aspiring writers and mangaka (Japanese style comic artists) at <http://amwc.wordpress.com> where she hopes to encourage Singaporean writers and mangaka to pursue their dreams without fear of failure.

Adrienne J. Odasso

Adrienne J. Odasso is currently completing her Ph.D. in English at the University of York (UK). Her

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Cherie Camins is an Asian-American writer, born and raised in Hawaii. She currently writes at Helium.com in her spare time and this is her first published fictional work.