

Isidoro de Sevilla

Short Story Writing Contest

2022

Edited by
Pilar Royo-Grasa,
Julia Echeverría Domingo
and Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen



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SHORT STORY
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Department of English and German Philology
Faculty of Arts
University of Zaragoza

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PREFACE

There are two aspects of this volume that I find worth remarking on in the Preface: one is its collaborative and cross-cutting character linking different facets such as students and supervisors, class material and a Faculty writing contest, official and private funding. The second aspect is the way this book gradually developed from a class project focused on creative writing, through a writing contest in which some of the students decided to participate, to the final publication of the four stories you are about to read. Let me tell you about it.

These pages contain four unedited short stories written mostly by first-year students doing an English studies degree at the University of Zaragoza. Each story is individual but they all have a common framework: a teaching innovation project supervised by teachers.

The integration of creative writing into higher education—a rather traditional setting—is still a somewhat pioneering approach. Obviously, even though this project

focused on writing, it involved and activated other skills. According to participants, reading, particularly narrative, proved to be not only a good way of learning about the nuances of the English language and culture but also the discovery of models for writing style, of stories which—if only occasionally—resonated with the students’ interests and helped them find their own voice.

Throughout the academic year, creative writing fleshed out and grew into a popular activity; in other words, what started as an original teaching initiative eventually transcended the classroom. Students found out about an English short story writing contest run by the Faculty of Arts to commemorate its patron Isidoro de Sevilla and a few of them decided to participate. My first contact with these stories happened when I was appointed—together with my colleagues David Almazán and Lola Herrero—a member of the panel of judges for this contest. To be honest, before reading them we feared we would find the typical ideas and clichés so common in students’ compositions. We were struck, however, by the originality, fresh approaches and sheer quality of the four manuscripts which are now part of this volume.

All these stories are on the somewhat dark and gloomy side and seem to share a longing for transcendence from a traumatic present. The protagonists create a kinder historical, fictional or artistic scenario, an alternative sheltering space where they can leave behind their harsh realities. To be sure this may be interpreted as pure escapism, but I’d rather see these stories as a way of reflecting the writers’ personal conflicts or problems in our society, or even as a metaphor for their loneliness when

faced with the blank page or canvas—the world of endless possibilities—in the process of creation.

As you see, many professionals have tried to support and accompany the students in different stages of this daunting process, to encourage those who showed a passion for writing. Even the eventual publication of the stories is the result of a successful donation-based crowdfunding among teachers of the English department. It may seem a humble contribution compared to the writers' individual efforts, but really it is not. We all know that writing and finding your voice is a slow and difficult process. As Stephen King puts it: "Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough."

This book shows that we—supervisors, the faculty and funders from the English department—believe in the authors of these short stories. Now it is time for you, dear reader, to join us.

Ramón Plo Alastrué
Head of the Department
of English and German Philology
University of Zaragoza

PROLOGUE

Pilar Royo-Grasa, Julia Echeverría Domingo
and Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen

Nuestra auténtica fortaleza es creativa.
[...] Lo imposible debe ser soñado primero,
para algún día hacerlo realidad.

Irene Vallejo, *Manifiesto por la lectura*,
2020.

Imagination and creativity are intrinsic to human beings in general and the Humanities in particular. The degrees in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Zaragoza have always sought to promote the imagination and critical thinking of their students through the different branches of knowledge, ranging from History and Geography, to Art, Philosophy, Language and Literature. These disciplines encourage new ways of looking at the world and its multidimensional realities and enable students to face its challenges in creative ways. Within these fields, the degree in English Studies offers a comprehensive insight into the culture and idiosyncratic specificities of English-speaking countries. In it, students are equipped with a deep theoretical background, methods and tools to approach and analyse cultural products, yet creative writing has been somewhat overlooked so far as a discipline in the curriculum. We believe that, as Jonathan Bate states, “there is no inherent reason why there should be such division

between criticism and creativity in English studies” (2012, xv). Writing stories is indeed one of the ways through which students can explore the different linguistic, literary and cultural aspects of the English language in a more active manner.

Inspired by this premise, the 2021-22 Teaching Innovation Project “Short Fiction Writers Club/Club der Kurzschrifsteller” (PIIDUZ_1_155) opens a new venue to engage students in the process of writing stories. The project was born out of the students’ expressed interest in creative writing. It was applied, among others, in the subject Lengua Inglesa I, taught in the first year of the degree in English Studies. The project consisted in establishing a “writers’ club” in which students could voluntarily participate. In each session, the participants discussed the narrative and stylistic features of a crime fiction short story proposed by the teacher and which they had to read in advance. This initial activity was intended to familiarise students with the short-story genre and its writing techniques, including reflecting on the importance of building suspense and plot twists in short stories. In the second half of each session, students had to create alternative versions of parts of the story provided as a way to cultivate their imagination and writing skills. All this was directed towards the final aim of the project: the production of an original piece of fiction written in groups. The activity was a success, with thirty-two students participating and ten final group submissions which impressed the teachers for their quality and originality.

Taking the opportunity provided by the Short Story Written in English Contest organised by the Faculty of

Arts (“Concurso de relatos Isidoro de Sevilla” 2022), the teachers involved in this project encouraged the “writers’ club” students to participate with their own individual stories. Some first-year students of the degree in English Studies decided to send their stories. The present volume gathers the four short stories that were finally submitted to the contest. The first story collected here, “Ashes of Ament,” by Zsofia Csuti, won the First Prize. In it, Csuti pays tribute to her great-grandmother with a beautifully-written story set in the context of the post-World War II deportation of Hungarian Germans after the Potsdam Agreement. “Colorless Portrait,” by Sara Marín Lafuente, won the Second Prize. Marín’s short story navigates the world of art through the character of a young girl working as a security guard at a museum, with the peculiarity of her being able to jump in and out of paintings. The Third Prize was awarded to the short story “The Librarian,” written by Sara Valero Cameo, a student from the degree in Modern Languages. The Gothic-inspired tale takes place in the children’s section of a library and narrates the unexpected encounters of a librarian with the readers who visit it. Last but not least, “The God of Time,” by Gabriel Bravo Yagüe, also introduces us to the world of fantasy through the intertextual networks the author establishes between its young male protagonist and the worlds of literature, painting and music, where the boy takes refuge from his daily plights.

All these short stories share a certain essence: they are unique examples of the creative and transformative power of the imagination, and they all offer a particular access to a plural and diverse world. By means of fiction and art,

human beings have been able to represent and express their understanding of a reality that is not easy to grasp in a direct or rational manner, a truth that can be found in folklore, myths, fantasy, magic and even in the innocent gaze of a child. Nevertheless, despite the atemporal expression and questioning of certain issues present in all literature, the stories included in this collection also show a specific present-day significance. “Ashes of Ament,” “Colorless Portrait,” “The Librarian” and “The God of Time” seem to share certain *topoi* traditionally associated with the Gothic: ghosts, internal monsters and unresolved family conflicts, but these are approached here from a fresh and contemporary perspective. Readers will be surprised by various metafictional elements, such as the self-awareness of literary authors, as well as by Wilde-like figures who come alive in a painting. They will also find plenty of intertextual references to different works of art; and a thorough questioning of the limits of fiction and reality, of human perception and art, and of traumatic historical moments that resonate strongly today. In short, these outstanding stories will no doubt entertain readers’ literary taste buds, spirits and minds.

This collected volume has been funded by the Department of English and German Philology of the University of Zaragoza, and by the teachers who have generously shared part of their budget to support this project.* We would like to deeply thank each of them for backing it. Special thanks are due to Prof. Dr. Ramón Plo,

* You can find the full list of contributors in the final section of this volume.

Head of the English Department, for his efficiency and for helping us to develop this initiative. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Arts, to the Dean, Dr. Elena Barlés, and her team for organising this contest every year and for including English as a literary language in it. We would like to thank the contest board for their work in reading and selecting the winners. Finally, we must thank our students for their motivation and capacity to create inspiring stories. We hope this collection serves to spread their ideas and to encourage new writers to embark on the fascinating journey of storytelling. Now, please, come on board and enjoy reading these tales!

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ASHES OF AMENT

Zsofia Csuti

Winner of the First Prize

After the Second World War the allied powers agreed on the deportation of Hungarian Germans in the Potsdam Agreement. This meant that thousands of Swabians were to be deprived of their properties and expelled from what they had always known as home. Those of them who declared their German ethnicity in the 1941 census or were members of the Volksbund—an association that spread the beliefs of the Third Reich—were either deported to East Germany or sent to labour camps.

*

Reta was fourteen and she had never left the area before. All she knew were the four streets that made the village up, and the two hills that formed the valley in which her home rested peacefully. The village was pretty. Its houses were all long and slim, and had neat front yards with peonies, asters, and moss roses. Almost all the families had animals: the chicken coops, pigsties, corn cribs and other buildings formed independent little cities where

cackling, grunting and the sound of the grinder created a never-resting ambience. She knew who lived in every one of these houses: their names, what they did, how old they were and if they were nice folks or not.

*

On the 6th of April 1947, when she stepped out of one of these houses, she knew that its “folks” were not on the nice list anymore. She was with her mother, whose dark eyes grew narrow in the hazy afternoon light. Her lips tightened in a stiff, thin line—a sign that she was furious. She shivered lightly when the door creaked open behind them. The village’s teacher, the *Lehrer*, stepped out to the porch and looked at the two of them arrogantly:

“What is done, is done, Frau Stern. We stand proudly by our choices. You should do the same.”

Reta’s mother did not answer. She did not even turn. She just squeezed her daughter’s hand and stomped off the stairs. They left the garden slamming the wooden gate shut with a squeak. They turned to the left and crossed the wooden bridge that arched over the small stream that ran through the village. She pulled Reta after herself as if they were late from somewhere. Reta started to feel uneasy—the things the *Lehrer* said, her mother’s silent rage and all the hurry made her nervous.

They stepped into the garden of another house, where—Reta knew—the Jung family lived. She knew this house well, as she was friends with the family’s oldest daughter, Mari.

But Mari was not home that day. Her mother was hanging clean clothes on the string swinging from one wooden column to another along the porch.

“Frau Stern! How are you doing?” shouted Mari’s mother from behind a huge white sheet. “Are you here for the rabbits?”

“Good morning, Ilonka. No, I’m not here for the rabbits—in fact, I won’t be able to take them. I need to talk to you. Inside.”

“Inside?” asked Ilonka. She seemed slightly offended that she was ordered to go inside her own house, but she didn’t say a word about it. Shrugging her shoulders, she threw the wooden pegs into their box and disappeared in the kitchen. Reta’s mother followed her.

“You are to stay outside. If I catch you eavesdropping, you can’t come to the walk of Emmaus tomorrow,” she said as she looked back at her from the door.

Reta sat down on the brick stairs of the porch. She did want to go to the walk of Emmaus. It was probably the most wonderful thing to happen during Easter. On Easter Monday, all the Swabians in the village put the food they prepared for the holidays in wicker baskets, and they headed up the hills to their wine cellars. There they laid out thick woollen blankets and had a picnic with games and music.

Of course, she was not going to play those childish games that year anymore. After all, she had already turned fourteen the previous fall. The Jung family was also invited to the event, and they were planning to sneak out with Mari to go up the Goblin Hill which was right behind the cellar of the Sterns. Rumour had it that if a girl went up that hill on Easter Monday and prayed holding the ashes of the ament that was used for the mass, the Virgin would appear in front of her. Reta was very eager to see her, and

she had already taken some of the ash from the morning mass. She kept it in the pocket of her coat.

She wanted to ask a favour from the Virgin, although she felt rather guilty for complaining about her mundane problems. Anyway, her problem was her problem, and as we know everyone feels most concerned about their own worries, however small they might be. Ever since she turned fourteen, her surroundings seem to have been treating her differently. There were unsought questions about her leaving school and starting to work on the fields, and she knew that in a few years she was supposed to get married and have children. Not that anyone has ever asked her about it, but she had it clear as water that she did not want any of that.

Although she knew little about what goes on between a man and a woman in a marriage, she had seen the many types of relationships the people in the village had with each other. Marriage was her least favourite. It seemed as if husbands and wives were always sour and bickering with each other. Also, the unspoken rule of marriage—that is, that the woman should obey the man, made Reta even more reluctant to enter this institution.

Her mother had been widowed since the first years of the war. As she was small when her father left with the army, she had close to no recollection of what their marriage was like. And even though her mother grew sombre in the following years, she felt that she would rather be alone like her than to be ordered around by someone else. For this reason, she wanted to talk to the Virgin and beg her not to find a husband for her, even if people would call her a “spinster.”

She was jolted out of her thoughts by the angry whispering of her mother and Frau Jung.

“You know I cannot do that! For heaven’s sake, why did you even put your name on that list?” hissed Frau Jung.

“What do I know about these lists? Do you think I doubted the word of the *Lehrer*? He said it was to join some club to help the Swabian boys on the front, how on earth was I supposed to know that it was for the SS?” retorted Reta’s mother with a stifled voice. “Ilonka, they are going to take me away. Today, tomorrow, God knows when. They are going to take my house away. The animals, the food, everything they can find. Haven’t you heard what happened with the Ferbers yesterday?”

“Yes, I have.” The room fell still, and Reta could hear the ticking of the clock in the kitchen. Her heart, as if it wanted to catch up with the rhythm of the minutes, started beating faster and it slowly crept up into her throat. She touched it with her hand and the pulsing beat lashed softly to her fingers.

“Help me, Ilonka. I beg you to take them with you.”

Frau Jung did not reply. After moments of heavy silence, the door opened behind Reta and her mother stepped out to the sunlight. Her eyes were darker and even narrower, and her mouth had completely disappeared into an insignificant line.

“We are leaving,” she announced. They left the garden as hurriedly as they had arrived a few minutes before.

*

Pip, Reta’s brother, was waiting for them in the garden. He was drawing circles in the dust with a stick while

the family's dog, an enormous *kuvasz**, laid behind him, holding the back of the seven-year-old boy. When he saw them, he threw the stick away and ran up to their mother to welcome her with a hug. They went inside the house. The kitchen was cold—it was only April, and the weather was still quite chilly. The sleepy rose gold beams of the sunset started to appear through the bars of the windows and flickered on the colourful plates that hung on the walls as pictures. They started preparing dinner—some bread and cooked potatoes with a bit of sour cream and leftover bacon—and by the time Reta's eighteen-year-old brother, Jan, arrived, all was ready.

“Good evening, Mutti,” he said as he entered the room. He looked tired, but he smiled warmly at Reta and pat Pip's head. “How was your day?”

“It went by. Come and have dinner with us.”

They ate silently. Reta tried concentrating on her food. “A bit of potato, a piece of bacon, a splash of cream, and the hat is the bread,” she thought to herself as she pricked everything up with her fork.

After dinner, they washed their hands and faces and changed into night robes.

“Reta, Pip, time for bed now. Say your prayers and go to sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day,” said their mother.

They did as she asked, climbing under the thick eiderdown quilt. They had to share a single bed with Pip—most of their furniture was taken away when Russian troops pillaged the area. Pip fell asleep fast—he had been out the whole day with the cattle, and he was dead tired.

* *Kuvasz*: Hungarian shepherd dog

But Reta could not sleep. She was staring at the ceiling as she listened to her mother and Jan clean up the kitchen. For a long while, there was only the sound of plates and glasses clinking and water splashing in the wooden tub. Then she heard the screeching sound of chairs being moved—they must have sat down.

“Is everything alright?” asked Jan. There was no answer at first, but Reta could hear heels tapping against the floor in anxiety.

“Check the children, are they asleep?” whispered their mother.

Reta closed her eyes quickly, but through her eyelids she could still feel how the shadows changed in the room as Jan entered quietly. The floor scraped under his feet as he came closer.

“Yes, they are,” said Jan as he returned to the kitchen. “What happened?”

“Do you remember the paper I signed for the *Lehrer*? That list he gave us last year to support the boys on the front.”

“I do,” answered Jan with a questioning tone.

“Well. That wasn’t a list just like that. It was the Volksbund.”

Jan slammed the glass he was drinking from and started coughing.

“The Volksbund? That fascist group?”

“Quiet down, you will wake them,” hushed their mother. “Yes, that list. I didn’t know about it of course. The *Lehrer* didn’t go into details, and I was stupid enough to trust him.”

“But Mutti... If it’s true what they say about those who are on that list, they will...”

“Come for me. Yes.”

“Will they take you to the camp?” asked Jan with a shaky voice.

“Or they will deport me and the little ones.”

“Deport you? Where?”

“To East Germany. I don’t know.”

“Oh, Mutti...” whispered Jan and a heavy silence fell on the room.

Reta’s heart crawled back into her throat just the way it did in the afternoon. She squeezed her eyes and mouth closed as if they were the gate that separated her from reality. She knew that if she opened any of them, she would see or say things that are too painful to even imagine. She put her fingers on her throbbing throat to find comfort in the rhythm of the ticking of her heart. But comfort didn’t come. Her thoughts started racing, inviting vivid, horrid pictures to come alive.

“What do we do now?” asked Jan finally.

“First of all, we prepare the children’s bags. If they come, you will need to take them to the hills and hide there until I’m back. You can go to the old lodge by the lakes and stay there. I will have someone go out to you every once in a while.”

Reta felt how desperation started to take control over her. The images became even more horrible and colourful, and the quilt felt awfully heavy on her chest. She wanted to shout, to blurt out the one question that has been echoing in her head since her mother’s last words, and just as her mouth flung open and eyes unbolted, Jan asked that same question:

“What if you don’t come back?”

*

After they quietly packed a small bag for everyone, Jan went up to the attic to prepare a basket with some food. His soft steps resonated on the ceiling as he paced up and down. Their mother stood by the window of the kitchen—Reta could see her face as the moonlight shone brightly over it. She stared at her for a long time, almost blankly. When she finally fell asleep, the horrid pictures came alive once again in the form of bizarre, frightening visions. They were like fever dreams—somewhere between reality and imagination, her mind fought fiercely to process all that occurred that day. Amidst battling her own thoughts, she did not realize when her mother entered the room and sat down on the side of their bed to embrace her two children, burying her head between the pillows to muffle her sobbing. Reta and Pip twitched and whimpered in their sleep, not knowing that it was the last night they dreamt in that bed.

*

The morning was just as restless as the night. Somewhere around six o'clock the children were woken up by their mother's anxious voice as she shook them up from their sleep.

“Reta, Pip, quick, wake up! Get dressed fast!”

“What's happening?” asked Pip with a drowsy voice as he sat up in bed.

“The walk of the Emmaus starts early this year,” answered their mother, throwing clothes on top of the quilt. In ten minutes, both of them were dressed and ready to go. Jan was waiting at the gate—he was carrying a wicker basket in his right hand and a hefty bundle on his back.

“Let’s get going,” he said briefly, not looking his siblings in the eye. Reta looked at their mother, who was standing behind them. Pip instinctively reached for her hand to hold it, just like they always did when they went for walks. But their mother did not return the move. Pip’s hand swung awkwardly in the air.

“Are you not coming?” he looked up at her frowning incredulously.

“I will come later,” she replied, looking Reta in the eyes piercingly.

“When?” Reta asked with a squeaky voice.

“As soon as I can. I promise,” came the answer. They locked eyes for what seemed like eternity, until Jan grabbed her shoulder and reached for Pip’s hand to gently pull them away.

They turned their back to their house and their mother, but Reta kept looking at her, forcing her head to twist in a painful way. She only lost her sight when they turned right and disappeared behind the lush shrubbery that bordered the dirt-road. They followed the path up until the great meadow that spread at the bottom of the hills and where the wine cellars were built in a neat, orderly line. Their cellar was right in the middle—its white walls shimmered in the morning light. Reta saw a figure standing next to the wooden door, and as they got closer, she realized it was Frau Jung.

“Good morning, Jan.”

“Good morning, Frau Jung.”

“I can’t believe they are already here. They arrived at half past five.”

“Do you have the key?”

“I do,” said Frau Jung and she reached into her pocket. She pulled out an old iron key and gave it to Jan. “This is for the basement of the lodge. The door is in the back behind the log shed. It’s almost impossible to see it if you don’t know it’s there.”

“Thank you. Is anyone else coming?”

“The Rupperts are on their way already. They had to take a detour through the valley as the gendarmerie started the search in Drüben street.”

“Alright then.”

“Take good care of yourselves. I will go visit you when they are gone.”

“Thank you, Frau Jung.” The woman looked at the three of them warmly, with a sad half-smile on her face, and she left in a hurry. They watched her run down the hill and disappear on the road.

“Why are we going to the lodge?” asked Pip indignantly, and the spark of doubt twinkled in his eyes for the first time.

“We are going on an adventure. Just the three of us, what do you think?” Jan asked him jokingly, but the boy’s eyes grew wide open with fear.

“Just the three of us? And Mutti?” he cried, tears running down his cheeks.

“Hush now, Pip, Mutti cannot come with us. She had to stay home a bit. It will all be fine, but you need to do what I tell you; do you understand?”

But Pip was inconsolable. He started running down the hill and Jan had to chase after him to stop the boy. He lifted him on his shoulders as the little boy hit and kicked every inch of him, screaming with anger. Reta raced to them and took Pip’s head in her hands.

“Pip, Pip, you need to stop screaming. You know, there are bad people in the village now. Mutti stayed behind to talk some sense into them, but if you keep on shouting, they will find us, and Mutti will be in big trouble. Do you understand now? Please, hush and do as Jan tells you.”

Pip looked at her—his eyes were swollen and red, and although he was still weeping, he stopped kicking around. He let out a rugged sigh and laid his head down on Jan’s back. His body rocked back and forth almost lifelessly as Jan carried him towards Goblin Hill. They entered the sparse grove that grew at the bottom of the slope. Reta, for the first time in days instead of feeling scared, felt strong. She reached into the pocket of her coat and looked for the small box with the ashes of ament. She clutched her fingers around it and squeezed it hard. The trees started appearing more and more often around them and soon they were deep in the forest. In the distance Reta thought to have heard shouting, and for a moment she was scared again. She dug her nails in the wood of the box in her pocket and looked at Pip, still hanging from his brother’s back. He looked hopeless and small. Reta ran up to him and took his hand.

“Pip, do you know where we are now?” the boy looked at her from the corner of his eyes.

“On Goblin Hill.”

“That’s right. Did you know that if a girl stands on top of it on Easter Monday and prays with the ashes of ament from the mass on Easter Sunday in her hands, the Virgin will appear to her? And then she will listen to her pleading and help her. Today is Easter Monday and I have the ashes here in my pocket. I will pray as hard as I can, and I will ask her to keep Mutti safe. Will that be good?”

Jan grunted annoyedly when he heard Reta's plan, but she didn't care. Pip lifted his face and looked at her hopefully. Reta gave him a kiss and said:

"I will catch up with you. It won't take much time."

"Don't stay long."

She took a turn to the left and dove into the bushes. She cut her way through until she reached a small ridge on the top from which she could easily see the whole valley—including their own house. She took the box out from her pocket, opened it, and carefully poured the ash out onto her left palm. She clenched her fist and placed her other hand around it in prayer and turned around, facing their home. She closed her eyes and raised her head towards the sky. The chilly morning breeze snapped at her face and hurt her throat as she swallowed some of it while she mumbled her prayers. Three deep wrinkles appeared in the middle of her forehead and her fingertips were white, almost transparent from pressing them together so hard. Suddenly, the wind changed, and it brought new, unnerving sounds with it. Reta did not even know what they were at first. The sounds resembled screams, but not quite exactly. "The animals." It dawned on her suddenly. Her eyelids flung open, and she looked at the source of the sound—their own backyard. All their animals, the chicken, the pigs, and the cows shrieked in turmoil, running up and down, jumping and flying back and forth in fright. Some men were entering their coops and sties, trying to catch them. In the front yard, some other men were standing around a black figure—her mother. All of them were armed, and judging by their gestures, they were ordering her to leave, pointing at the carriage that stood on the street. But her

mother did not move. She turned around and looked right at her, as if she knew her daughter was there, looking down on the scene. They stared at each other until one of the men tossed her mother in the back with the grip of his gun and she fell in the dirt. She stood up slowly, cleaning her hands in her apron and looked up at the hill once more. From between the clouds, a single beam came out and placed her tall, solid figure in an absurd spotlight. Then she turned around and, surrounded by the men, left the garden to sit on the carriage. There were other people on it already, and when the horses started pulling the heavy load, they moved together as the reed does in the wind. Her mother vanished behind the buildings and Reta's hands dropped open. The ashes of the ament flew away in the wind.

When she finally caught up with her brothers, they were almost at the lodge.

"At last! I was worried sick," snarled Jan at her. He was not carrying Pip anymore—the boy was walking by his side, carrying the wicker basket full of food.

"Did you see the Virgin?" he looked up at her. His eyes were asking for comfort.

"Yes. Yes, I did." she answered.

"What was she like?"

"Like a tall rock in a beam of light."

Pip hummed in agreement and put the basket on his other arm to be able to hold hands with Reta. He clutched his fingers around her palm and squeezed it lightly. The road wound silently ahead of them.

COLORLESS PORTRAIT

Sara Marín Lafuente
Winner of the Second Prize

Maya was inside a blurry black-and-white movie. She spotted a shadow lurking in the distance. *Run. Hide.* But her body was stiff.

An echo of steps reverberated all at once. The silhouette became clear: a faceless crowd of people heading towards her. They seemed to be staring at her, but the humanoid creatures were eyeless. For a split second, there was a sudden, almost imperceptible, burst of color. For a moment, the grayish shades were vibrant greens, blues and yellows. And then, back to black and white.

She looked around, the faceless multitude still trying to surround her. Her heartbeat became louder, like a roaring drum setting the rhythm of the death march approaching her. There was another brief outbreak of colorful tones. The creatures were coming closer and her heart was pounding faster. The colors started blinking, dancing intermittently to the beat of her rushing blood. Then, it was just black.

She heard a buzz and woke up. It was still dark. She turned to the nightstand and saw her phone ringing. It was her mom. She picked it up.

“I hope I didn’t wake you up, honey.” Maya checked the time. It was 6AM. “The neighbors have just had a baby and she’s crying all the time and I can’t sleep. She reminds me of you. You were very noisy when you were little. Not like now. You’re so quiet now.” She was about to reply, but her mother interrupted her: “How was your date with that guy Melissa set you up with? Did you two get along well?”

Maya sighed and said: “Mom, I have to go to work in an hour. It’s too early to talk about...”

“You have to make an effort! You’re never going to find a husband or have children with that negligent attitude.”

“Maybe I don’t want to have kids or a husband.”

“I’m concerned about you. You seem so... lonely. You don’t have a husband, you don’t have children and all your friends live abroad. Why don’t you call your schoolmates to see how they’re doing?”

She shivered.

“I never really liked them.” *Nor did they like me.* “I’m just fine, mom, don’t worry about...”

“But you have to try something new! You’ve been stuck in that security guard job for so long.. All you do all day is watch old paintings!”

That was a reductionist description of her job. At the Cosmopolitan Museum, visitors had the chance to go inside the paintings; they were able to soak in the artwork’s atmosphere, talk to famous characters and wander around iconic landscapes for fifteen minutes. However, nobody should stay in for more than fifteen minutes. If they stayed

any longer, they were at risk of never coming out of the painting again. Her job was to make sure that nobody got stuck inside the pictures.

“Why don’t you travel around for a bit?” her mother insisted. “You’re always talking about traveling to Cuba by yourself, but the last plane you took was to visit aunt Gilda in Iowa five years ago.”

“I can’t just leave, mom. I have responsibilities.”

“Like what? You don’t have any kids.”

“Like my job. It’s not that easy.”

“Oh! Your dad’s just woken up; let me get him on the phone.”

“Mom, don’t...!” she begged, but before she could hang up she heard her father’s grumpy voice.

“Maya? Is that you? It is quite early for you to be up, isn’t it?”

She nodded and looked outside the window. The street was empty and dark, only lit up by blinking broken streetlights.

“Good morning,” she said to the guard sitting on the security check. He was so engrossed in his phone that he just stayed silent. She bowed her head, ashamed, and kept walking. He spoke again and her body froze.

“Jeremy told me to tell you to go to his office.”

She turned around.

“Did he tell you why?”

He shrugged.

“Something about a reassignment.”

She walked into her boss’ office. He was sitting at his desk reading a magazine. He looked up for a brief moment and when he saw her, looked down again.

“Today you’re in the Egyptian room,” he said bluntly. She felt a quiver running down her spine.

“In the Egyptian room? On my own?” she asked with a reedy voice.

He lifted his gaze, upset.

“Yes, the Egyptian room. By yourself.”

“But, sir... My condition...”

Some called it “paintphobia.” For her, it was the crippling anxiety at the thought of stepping inside a painting. Sometimes it interfered with her work performance because most guards let visitors know their time was up by entering themselves inside the paintings. Since she could not do that, what she did was to shake the paintings lightly. When the visitors felt the quake, they knew they should step out.

However, most of the artworks in the Egyptian room were murals. They were so big that she could not just grab them and shake them. Her boss knew it and he knew about her condition. And still, he had assigned her the Egyptian room by herself.

“Your phobia, I know... But we’re short on staff today and I need you to cover the Egyptian room.” She flinched. “Don’t look at me as if I’d just asked you to kill somebody! It’s not the first time you watch that room, isn’t it?”

“No, but I have always been with somebody else. If things got complicated they could step inside the murals and...”

He looked down at his magazine again.

“You’ll figure it out. Now, take the chronometer and the walkie-talkie and go. We’ll be opening soon.”

On her way to her spot she walked past some of the most famous paintings of the museum. Since there were

not any visitors yet, the characters within the paintings were free to do as they wished.

Boticelli's Venus and the angels by her side were swimming around the sea and splashing each other playfully. Las Meninas were caught up in an intense debate regarding US current politics. The couple in Grant Wood's *American Gothic* were kissing passionately, whilst Arnolfini's married couple were arguing over their dog. The Scream was unclenching his jaw and when he saw Maya walking by, he smiled and saluted her politely. The entrance to the museum was always very chaotic but she loved every second of it.

Before she reached her spot, she stopped in front of the Dalí room. Delilah would watch it that day and she thought of asking her to switch positions with her, but she immediately kept walking. She could not do that. Not while *that* painting was still hanging in there.

She came into the Egyptian room and the impressive murals stood defiantly above her.

"Hi, Maya!" greeted Queen Nefertari from within one of the murals. "It's been so long since we last saw you."

"Finally, a real human!" shouted God Ra, relieved. "It's so boring being stuck in here for the whole weekend with the same old doodles"

"Oh, shut up!" answered Queen Nefertari.

"We've been together for 3000 years. I'm tired of you already." Ra turned to Maya and said: "While we wait for the first visitors, do you want to come in and play to guess the hieroglyphs?"

She looked back at the entrance, rubbing her arm anxiously.

“I’d love to but...”

“Her condition, idiot,” said Nefertari glaring at him.
“She can’t come in.”

“Yeah, right, I’d forgotten.”

The loudspeakers rang a tune and said:

“We’re going to open now. Everybody, go back to your original positions.”

“I hate being sideways all the time. My neck’s gonna kill me, I swear...” complained Ra stretching his body.

“You’re an Egyptian mural,” answered Nefertari.
“What did you expect?”

The first few hours passed by calmly for Maya. It was not the most popular room; most visitors only looked around without entering the murals and if they did, they never surpassed the fifteen minutes.

Suddenly, a girl came in. Maya felt instantly tense; children without adults to supervise them were the most dangerous visitors. The girl looked around and stopped in front of Ra’s huge mural. She widened her eyes and leaned in closer. Then, she turned to Maya and smiled.

“Hi. I want to go inside this one.”

“Did you come here alone?” she asked, stuttering.
“Where are your parents or... your teacher?”

The girl tilted her head sideways.

“I’m already ten and rules say that children over ten can enter the paintings by themselves.”

“That’s right... When your fifteen minutes are up I’ll scream and you must come out immediately, OK?”

“Yeah, I know.” She turned to the mural and her eyes sparkled with awe. “Can I come in now?”

“Sure,” she answered and started the chronometer.

The girl took a step closer, raised her hand towards the mural and vanished. Maya came nearer and saw the girl turned into an Egyptian doodle on the mural’s surface. She quickly got along well with the characters and asked them to play hide-and-seek with her. They all ran away and disappeared.

The fourteen-minute countdown came to an end. She tried to scream, but her voice came out weakly. She coughed and tried again: “Hey, kid! Time’s up!”

There was no reply. She inspected the mural, but the girl was nowhere to be found. She felt her heartbeat racing. She kept looking around and screaming to the girl until she saw Ra’s profile: “Ra, wait! Can you tell the girl that the fifteen minutes...?”

But he was gone before he could hear her.

She took her walkie-talkie and asked: “Anyone available? There’s this girl... She won’t come out of an Egyptian mural and I can’t go in because of my condition and...”

“The Renaissance paintings room is packed, I can’t leave,” replied a co-worker.

“Sorry, busy,” added another one.

“How long has the kid been in there?” asked her boss.

“Fifteen... Maybe seventeen minutes.”

“Get into the mural right now for god’s sake!”

“I-I-I can’t... You know, with my...”

“You either get into the fucking painting or you’re fired. Our reputation can’t stand losing another child.”

She swallowed and felt her hand palms sweaty. Breathe in, breathe out... *You can do this.* She stepped closer to the

mural. She extended her hand towards the mural and closed her eyes. *You can do this.*

I walk in and suddenly everything changes. My nostrils unblock and the air smells like papyrus and cinnamon. The golden colors are brighter, almost burning my eyes. The graze of cloth caresses my skin as I move around. It is as if all my senses were obstructed until now. As if I was asleep. But, suddenly, everything feels... real. Suddenly, somehow, I am the one narrating this story.

“What the hell is happening?” I ask out loud, and I’m astonished by the loud volume of my reverberating voice.

“You’re inside the painting, congratulations!” says Nefertari.

“Yeah, I know,” I reply. But this is too much. I have to get out.

The woman walked out of the painting and stared back at the majestic mural. The wonder, the magic, the excitement... It was all gone. She felt empty. But, for a moment, she had felt a passion she had never known before. It was as if her feelings were her own for the first time. As if she was in control of her own narrative. She had to feel that again.

I am again inside the painting. Everything gleams around me. A gold rush of adrenaline runs through my veins. I smile and look around, amazed. I cry tears of joy. Now everything feels so real that it is scary. For the first time, I feel... alive.

“You’re inside the painting too,” says a high-pitched piercing voice.

I turn around and see the girl in front of me. One of her eyes is starting to melt down. She’s going to disappear. I can’t let that happen. I grab her hand and take her out.

Once they were out of the mural, she let go of the girl’s hand. She was complaining about how strong her grip had been, but Maya interrupted her: “Do you know how dangerous that was? If you stay in for too long you dissolve into the background. You disappear forever!”

“Yes, I know that,” she replied calmly.

“Then why didn’t you get out when I told you to?”

She shrugged. “I was having fun,” she said.

“You can’t just risk your life because you want to have fun!”

“For what reason would you do it then?”

“You don’t do it. You only have one life.”

The girl tilted her head sideways.

“What’s the point of having it if you don’t enjoy it?”

She smiled, turned around and left the room.

Maya stood there, thinking about that girl. She was reckless and stupid, but she was kind of right. The intense euphoria she had felt inside the mural... She needed to feel that way again. But not in that room. She needed to step into a real painting.

She heard a voice through the walkie-talkie: “Boss! Emergency in Baroque paintings. We need you here ASAP!”

“On my way!”

The timing was perfect. Her boss would not be supervising the security cameras, at least, for the next half hour. That was her shot. She walked towards the exit and shut the room’s entrance by closing the red cord.

“Hey, where are you going?” asked Nefertari.

“I have to do something.”

She knew where to go. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych’s room was being watched by Daniel. It would be easy to get rid of him.

“Hi, how are you doing? You seem tired,” she said.

“I went to a wild party last night... I haven’t slept a wink,” he answered.

“Do you need a break? I can cover you for fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, please! Thank you!”

Once he was gone, she made sure to close the room so that nobody would bother her. She stepped in front of the triptych and heard the tiny characters from the painting screaming at her. As always, they seemed to be having a party.

She felt a lump in her throat and rubbed her arm anxiously. It was getting harder to breathe. Her paintphobia was still there. But she remembered all the excitement she had felt when she was inside the mural and she heard the voice of the girl inside her head telling her to *jump*.

And so I do. I am suddenly naked, my bare feet touching the grass; a grass painted with the greenest color I've ever seen. The reds, the blues, the pinks... The colors glow intensely and I can't help but smile. A herd of people, animals and strange creatures surround me, talking and laughing all at once. I can't understand anything, but their voices sound like a choir of happiness. I laugh.

Then, I see a phone on the ground. I recognize that it is mine. It rings loudly, like an emergency alarm. Everyone covers their ears. My mother is calling. I hang up but she starts bombarding me with texts. “It is important,” she says. “I'm working and busy,” I answer. “Pick up the phone,” she insists.

“What is it now?” I say, annoyed.

“The Smiths are having another baby! Isn't it wonderful?”

I feel the ground shaking under my feet. Boiling fire runs through my veins. A kind of rage I've never felt before. My voice comes out screaming:

“Is that why you interrupted me? Is this seriously the bullshit you're calling me over?”

“I just...” she stutters. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Now you want to hear my voice? All you do is talk, talk and talk! You never fucking listen! You have never truly cared enough about me to listen to me!”

Before I can get an answer, I throw my phone away, back to the real world.

I look around and everyone is staring at me. None of them are speaking but I can hear their voices inside my head, judging me. You’re selfish, they say. That’s all you’ve ever been. A lonely monster. I have to get out.

Maya was back at the museum, feeling very dizzy. She ran into the bathroom and washed her face with freezing water. The coldness numbed her face but she did not care. The emptiness felt good.

Suddenly, another woman came into the bathroom, breathing heavily. It was Delillah.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Maya, you’re here!” She hugged her. “My father’s had a stroke and I have to go. Please watch the Dalí room for me.”

She fidgeted. *That painting was in the Dalí room.*

“Please,” Delillah begged. “Jeremy is still handling this crisis in the Renaissance paintings room and he won’t listen to me...”

“Okay, go. I’ll cover you.”

“Thank you!” She hugged her again and left.

Maya’s shoes echoed on the marble floor. Then, she stopped. After all these years, she was again in that room. She only had eyes for one of the pictures: *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man.*

She stood in front of it. Anxiety kicked in. She rubbed her arm compulsively, pounding her nails into her arm. *No.*

She stopped. She had to go in. She started the 15 minute countdown on the chronometer.

Everything's black. I can only hear my own breath. My own voice.

I feel hurt. I feel a pain I've been trying to cover up for a very long time. But it didn't go away.

When I was little I liked art. I loved art. I felt butterflies in my stomach whenever I saw the vibrant colors in the Monet's or spectacular chiaroscuros in the Velazquez's. I was amazed by their ability to create playgrounds for me to explore just by using paint. My mother thought it was stupid. She never took me to museums because she thought it was a waste of time and that I would be better off doing activities that would help me fit in with the other kids.

The first time I went to a museum was on a school trip. I saw the painting I'm in right now. I was in awe. It was like magic coming alive. The white cloth, floating above the globe like a carousel's tent. Planet Earth as an egg cracking open. The continents, melting away. An old world being destroyed. A new man, being born. Blood dripping. Life and death. Creation and destruction, balanced out. A new man. A new beginning.

It's not good to show deep emotions during middle school. You have to pretend you don't give a damn about anything. But I couldn't. I wanted to dive deep in the new world I'd just discovered. So I asked the teacher if I could. She told me that the painting wasn't pretty enough to come in. I insisted. The other kids told me I was a creep in love with a naked man. The mockery lasted for months.

I was mortified. I thought that, to be safe, I should try to fit in with them. Like my mother wanted me to. The best thing for me to do was not to speak. And just like that, I was left alone.

"Hi," says a deep voice. I raise my head and see a crack of light among the darkness. A hand reaches out. "Do you want to come out?"

I grab the man's hand and step out of the blackness. I look back; I was trapped inside the melting globe from the painting. Above my head, the carousel tent spins around slowly. The man, the woman and the kid from the painting are in front of me. They speak all at once:

"It's been a long time, kid."

"Do you remember me?"

"You were never gone," they answer.

"Yes, I was. I lost myself," I reply. "I was terrified at the thought of going inside the paintings, because it reminded me of the anguish I felt when they left me alone. Before, my world used to be colorful and exciting, but they turned it gray. They stripped art away from me."

"And still, you decided to work in a museum."

I shake my head.

"After all these years, I had never stepped into a painting until today. I don't work here because of the art, I work here because I'm selfish. I get to tell people that they are having too much fun, that they have to stop. Because if I can't be happy, nobody should. I work here because I hate everybody. I'm a monster."

I look away. This is the part where they leave. When I'm left alone. But they don't.

"Your job is to make sure people are safe," they say. "You know what it's like to feel trapped, so you chose a job that keeps others from making the same mistakes you did."

"No, that doesn't make sense. They hated me, so now I put my hate on them."

"Did they? Or were they just afraid, like you?"

"Why would they be afraid?"

"Because they thought your voice was so powerful that it could take control over the narrative inside their heads."

I tilt my head sideways.

“It... makes sense. That’s how I felt with them... How I feel with my mother too. I thought I hated them, but I was just scared.”

I look down at the blood, dripping slowly, surrounding my feet. But when I look closer, I see that it was never blood. It was just red paint.

“They didn’t strip art away from me. I stripped art away from myself by allowing their voices to hold so much power over me. They only hurt me because I let them.”

The man, the woman and the child smile. The chronometer beeps. The countdown is over.

“It’s time to go,” they say.

“I don’t want to. Here everything seems magical and exciting. Out there the world is... colorless. I feel like a puppet moved around by what others expect of me.”

“If you can feel this excitement here, you can feel it out there too. It’s all about perspective. You just need to let go of the strings that pulled you towards the past.”

I smile. “I’ll come back.”

They smile back. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

I walk out of the painting. I notice colors that weren’t there before. My suit is deep blue. My shoes are shiny red. My hair is golden.

I check my phone. My mom has texted that she’s sorry about bothering me at work. I text her back. “I was way out of line. I’m sorry. I’ll go visit you after work and we’ll talk.”

I go back to the bathroom. I look at myself in the mirror and smile. Then, it hits me: I’m not within a painting, but I am still the narrator of the story.

THE LIBRARIAN

Sara Valero Cameo
Winner of the Third Prize

Every day looked the same to me. I woke up at sunrise, drank my coffee, worked at the local library, went back home and went to bed. I found happiness in my routine and never, in ten years of it, had I ever hesitated that this was the life for me. Most of my usual patrons thought I lived there and, maybe if I asked, they would say I was just another piece of furniture from that place. Of course, they were all under the age of twelve.

Taking care of this section of the library is easier than one might think and certainly much more agreeable than its adult counterpart. I have never been yelled at by a small child because we didn't have a book about frogs; granted, we had plenty of books about that particular subject. Children listened to the "library lady" (an official title) closely and followed my advice. They knew that they had to take care of the material they chose so more kids could enjoy it. They were cleaner, calmer and better listeners. We might be in the basement with little natural light and

carpets so old they had become another personality to be aware of, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Mornings were usually quiet, and I spent that time reading my own books and researching the best ones for our youngest clientele, although sometimes that was the same task. I always thought that some children's book authors considered their audience not smart enough to understand stories, so they never made it through my filter. I was the favourite librarian of many children, and, as such, I had big responsibilities; in exchange, they told me their wildest thoughts. There was something so charming about them, trying to make sense of the tales they told, that I would let them talk to me about them over and over again. It often got to me when I saw them grow up and move to bigger books, just to get their place taken by another bright-eyed child asking me if I ever saw the woman at the back of the room.

I found it quite funny to hear the same story repeated from different sources. There were obvious changes: sometimes the woman was browsing the fantasy shelf, but some people have also seen her checking out some of our dictionaries. I obviously understood why. No matter how old or alive you are, you can't know everything, and that is why we have libraries. Not that my reasoning ever convinced the crowd listening, but a librarian can dream. Personally, I never had an encounter with our mysterious tenant, and, because of that, I wouldn't dismiss her existence. All in all, if I haven't seen it, I can't say it doesn't exist. I, however, didn't believe in ghosts. That didn't mean I got to crush anyone's joy, that wasn't my job. My library was a safe space for minds too bright and adventurous for the real world.

Being alone in the library, though, was a completely different story. Sure, there were people working on the floors above me, but they seemed a world away. The silence was deafening, and, even if I usually enjoy the quiet ambiance of a library, I couldn't avoid checking twice behind me. I am a very logical person, but I have also read many ghost stories and the library was the perfect place to let my imagination free. I wasn't afraid that I could come face to face with some apparition, I just enjoyed the thrilling anticipation before turning a corner. Luckily or not, the only time I got startled was by a six-year-old sitting on the floor, taking all of our fairy tale books out of their shelf trying to find the magical kingdom hidden somewhere.

I have always wanted to be a librarian, but when I was a kid, my mother told me I would get bored because you can't talk to people in a library. I didn't have the heart to tell her that that was one big selling point to eight-year-old me. I was very happy to stay in silence for eight hours a day, but the library is a place for people above anything else, so it was impossible to avoid conversation. The good thing is that children are never boring. On the other hand, I treasured the opportunities to talk with adults like they were gold nuggets. That's why one Tuesday morning I couldn't resist and approached a woman who was squinting her eyes to read some of the titles. She was around my age, maybe older, but her hair was still completely black, whereas mine was starting to grey on my temples. She noticed me by her side and straightened with a polite smile. People rarely start a conversation with the librarian, unsure of the protocol.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" I asked. She looked back at the shelf and whispered:

“I’m not sure what I’m looking for.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for,” I reassure her; I quickly glance at the books in front of us before speaking again, “are we looking for something for a pre-teen? We got some new fantasy books a couple of weeks ago that are really popular.”

She gained confidence with my words and agreed to follow me further into the room. I explained to her our new acquisitions and let her patiently glance over them while I observed her. She was shorter than me, and also wider, the kind of presence that filled a room. She styled her short straight hair in the way I always wished I had the face for; she swiped it back with a gesture of her hand and it miraculously stayed in place. She had a soft profile, all curves and round angles. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her gentle lines, especially those big dark eyes. I didn’t meet people often, so from time to time I took my chance to admire someone from a distance. That was enough for me.

“I think I’ll take this one.” Her deep voice took me back from my fantasies. “But I’m still going to look around if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” I replied smiling and trying not to overthink how the gesture felt on my own face, “the place is yours. They can check the books out upstairs too if you also want to look there. Anything else, just ask me.”

The woman smirked at me before disappearing behind the next shelf. I went back to my place feeling chipper than usual, but to my dismay she never came back to my desk.

Although I saw her a couple of times more in the next few days, I didn’t talk to her. She seemed so focused on the books around her, with a small crease between her brows,

that I wouldn't want to bother her. I wondered, though, about the reader waiting somewhere else. Apparently, fate didn't want me to know, because she never checked out at my desk, which was disappointing, even if I would never say it out loud.

It wasn't the first time I developed a crush on a woman in the library. It was mostly for fun, to give some novelty to my everyday life. I enjoyed my small life, but I would never reject the opportunity for change. I wouldn't do anything though, that was not the purpose. I only wanted the giddy feeling, the butterflies, inventing excuses to go upstairs and casually run into them. However, this time was different. I didn't need to move from my desk to see her wandering between the shelves. That, our impossibility to start a conversation and her mysterious aura had me hooked. Maybe it was just boredom, since I didn't know anything about her, but I could still enjoy the fleeting headlightness. It would go away in a few weeks anyway, but I would relish having a heart for a short period of time.

That was my mindset, to admire her from afar, when she surprised me again. She didn't come to the front desk where I was working on some boring paperwork, but waited behind a shelf observing me from head to toe. I wasn't aware for how long she had been doing it, but I could feel my face heating up when I realised her eyes were on me. I took it as an invitation to walk up to her and so I did. There was no one else on sight, so I might as well.

"It's a hard job to lure you out of your duty," she greeted me, smiling.

"Oh, are you a siren, singing to lead me to my doom?"

"You don't need to worry, I won't eat you."

“Shame.” The words escaped my lips before I could stop myself. I am not shy, but I’m not a smooth talker either. The courage felt foreign on my tongue.

“Be careful. Anyone can hear us.”

“There’s only us here today,” I replied, peeking to the other side of the aisle with a smile, just to be sure.

“You never know,” she whispered, leaning slightly closer.

“It’s really inappropriate to do this in a library, you know?” I was only half-joking; I didn’t need a lecture from any of my co-workers about my work ethic. “We should go talk somewhere else.”

“Where is the fun in that?”

Her smug smile made me shake my head, but I walked with her away from the entrance while we talked in hushed tones, pretending to be nothing else than a librarian and a patron. Her name was Jhansi, and her voice resonated amongst the wood walls no matter how much she tried to whisper. I could feel her low tone echoing in my bones. She wasn’t shy in questioning me and I had no issue with it; it had been a while since someone had shown an actual interest in my life. She was particularly curious about how I became a librarian and for how long I had been working there, which I found quite endearing, since most people assumed it was too boring of a subject to talk about. Jhansi, however, listened attentively to what I had to say.

These kinds of encounters became quite frequent, to the point I started considering her a friend. I never managed to get even the smallest crumbs about her personal life and, after a few attempts, I refrained my curiosity. I was

convinced by that point that, if she hadn't said anything about it even after my not-so-subtle interrogation, it was a painful topic she didn't want to talk about. If anything, I was a master of finding the best ways someone could distract their minds. Our conversations were light but there was something behind our words, a secret intention that gave the excitement to my life that I didn't realise I was lacking. I couldn't miss it, because I never felt something quite like it.

Slowly, the days turned colder and darker and, before I knew it, I was working through the few hours of sunlight. Those first days of autumn took a toll on me every year, until I found my balance again and could go back to my personal rhythm. Jhansi was the only one who seemed to notice. She shot concerned looks my way, but never mentioned it. She bit her lips as if to stop the question from escaping. As a kindness of my own, I pretended to not realise her trying to avoid me. Instead of waiting for me in a hidden stop, I had to catch her by surprise. But when I started feeling better, she relaxed too. I didn't bring myself to ask about the strange change of attitude, as it was gone as suddenly as it appeared, and I wondered if it could have any connection to her family life. A few times she didn't know I could see her; I had been able to see some terror bloom in her eyes. And although all of it was gone, I couldn't keep the thought away.

We weren't able to find real moments of intimacy. There was a constant feeling of being watched that I couldn't shake off, but every time I mentioned it jokingly, Jhansi only laughed. I asked her out a few times. I tried to be as clear as possible about my intentions, but she never

gave me a clear answer. I wouldn't have minded a 'no', all I wanted was to clear the air between us. Was it casual flirting that meant nothing? I was fine with that. She was, first and foremost, a friend, and precisely because I didn't want to lose her, I needed to know. I was getting restless by the day, thinking I could mess something up at any given moment.

It was a particularly cold evening that I got what I wanted. We were sitting on the floor of the empty room. It was late and I was supposed to close soon, but we were comfortably close, our knees lightly touching. Then, Jhansi suddenly took my hand. I froze in place, only able to think how beautiful her golden complexion looked over my dark skin.

"There is something I want to tell you, but I'm scared you will think I'm mocking you."

She looked distressed. If I had to go by her expression, I knew that whatever it was, was the truth.

"Okay. Tell me."

"When I do, you'll have to choose. I can't tell you more until the end, but nothing will be the same," she explained, her eyes fixed in mine. I nodded and held her hand stronger, unsure of what was about to come.

"Some time ago, I used to come here to hide with a girl. We would look for the darkest corners and avoid everyone. It added to the fun." She smiled, not really seeing me anymore; I wondered whose face was taking my place. "One day, I waited for her, but she never came. I never found out what happened. The only thing I could do was wait at the front door for hours, hoping that that would be the day she'd come back. One of those times, I went inside

due to a thunderstorm. It was pouring and I was wearing exactly this.”

She pointed at her thin black sweater, which looked like it had seen better days.

“I was freezing, and I thought no one would mind if I waited the storm out sitting somewhere in the library. I fell asleep on one of our favourite chairs and, when I woke up, the building was closed. I tried to get out, but there was no way, and it was still raining. I was fine with spending the night here. It wouldn’t be the first time I slept where I shouldn’t. But then I saw him. Everything was dark, except from the lightbulb right above him. I had never been more scared in my life. He started talking. I don’t remember the details, but he was telling me the story of his death.”

Jhansi looked at me, expecting some kind of reaction, but I was unable to do anything. It was difficult not to think she was laughing at me, but the serious mask was still covering her features. I waited for her to continue.

“I couldn’t move after he was done, no matter how hard I tried. He laughed and told me why. When a certain type of ghost tells you their story, you have to choose: you either take their place, or are doomed to hear the souls that never left this world until the last of your days.”

I had so many questions, that the beginning of a headache was starting to settle in. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I didn’t know where to start.

“So, you are... a ghost?”

“It’s more complicated than that, but let’s go with ghost, yeah. I understand it’s a lot to take in, but...”

“What happens afterwards? When someone replaces you. Where do you go?”

“I don’t know,” Jhansi admitted, “I don’t think anyone but those who have gone there can say.”

I paused for a beat, before whispering:

“Why me?”

The question hit Jhansi like I stabbed her with a dagger.

“I didn’t want it to be you. But I had been observing you, the only one coming here often enough for it to happen. I didn’t want to do it to anyone else.”

“Is it that bad?” I ventured to ask.

“I’ve been trapped here for forty years and there hasn’t been a day that didn’t feel like torture,” affirmed Jhansi, pain dripping from her words.

I thought about my job. I thought about my home. I thought about my daily life and a clear resolution appeared in my mind.

“I will do it.”

Jhansi looked at me as if I just said the most outrageous thing, but before she could say anything, I carried on:

“There is nothing tying me here. I was convinced I was happy, and I think I was, but... Right now, I would do anything to change it. And it’s your fault.” Jhansi’s eyes widened in shock. “I’m happy with a small life, but that life is worth nothing if you aren’t there. I wouldn’t be able to go back to those days. And that means that you are too important to let you suffer like this.”

“Listen.”

“I did listen. You said it was my choice, so I’m choosing to make you happy in the only way I can. You can’t take this away from me.”

“You don’t know when... if you’ll get someone to take your place.”

“It’s a cruel rule. I don’t know if I’ll be strong enough to do it. But... Will you wait for me on the other side?”

Jhansi squeezed my hand gently. I didn’t realise we hadn’t let go of each other yet.

“As much as it takes.”

“Then let me help you,” I begged, “let me take your place.”

The next minutes, days, weeks are confusing in my mind. I guess I never considered how much of a strain it was to let go of the mortal plane. But now, as I wait for the next person to meet their brutal fate, I can’t bring myself to regret my decision. Not when I know Jhansi is waiting for me wherever this takes me.

THE GOD OF TIME

Gabriel Bravo Yagüe

Dear reader, the story I am going to tell you now may seem scientifically impossible. But it is not. You must believe my words: I am trapped in a kind of purgatory. I do not know how much time I have been living here, but it must have been a lot. I can touch a beard on my face, which I did not have before, and when I scream my voice is different, deeper. All I can see around me is darkness and its shape is rectangular. Nevertheless, I deserve this. I have teased God by believing I was mightier than him. And I am sorry. I hope you pray for my soul.

But how on Earth did I get stuck in this purgatory? You see, when you are alone, young, poor, and all the world around you starts breaking apart, you trust anyone that seems kind and tries to help you. A huge mistake.

This is the part in which I beg you to believe me: I was fooled by a hideous fiend. You must warn your loved ones that this demon is in the dark, willing to drink the souls of the unfortunate. I could not stop him; it was too late.

You still have a chance.

At some point in 1978.

My name is Jared, and at the time of the story I was 12 years old and living with my parents in Brooklyn, New York. My father worked as a welder at the port of New York and New Jersey. He was the breadwinner of the family, whereas my mother stayed at home taking care of me. She used to play the guitar in my uncle's band before getting pregnant with me.

Seen that way, you must think that we were the typical, happy, American family. Let me clarify that we were neither happy nor typical.

First, my mother had to put aside her dreams of becoming a guitarist because that was what society told her to do. Also, my father's wage was not enough to pay the bills, so we were always on the brink of eviction. I remember my mother being extremely distressed, but she was also unwell because my dad used to come home pretty late at night, sometimes even drunk. She feared that he was meeting other women.

The night I met the hideous fiend, my mother was crying in her bed. It was a Sunday night and my father had disappeared for three days. My mother is British, so I knew that she needed a cup of tea. I went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. While I was pouring the milk into the tea, I could hear a disturbing noise emerging behind my back.

"You are just tired, Jared," I said to myself, trying to calm myself down.

However, the noise intensified and, as I turned around, I asked with a quivering voice:

"W-who is there?"

The light of the microwave in front of me suddenly turned up. From the inside, a child-like voice whispered:

“I am your friend, Jared. You can ask me to do whatever you fancy. I’ll do it with pleasure.”

All of a sudden, the kitchen turned bitterly cold, and I could not move. With shaking hands, I dropped the cup of tea.

“Jared... get closer,” insisted the microwave.

I gained control over my body again and ran to my bedroom. My mother was still crying in her room, and so was I in mine.

The next day at class I could not stop thinking about last night’s event. Was it real? Did I reach the point of hearing imaginary voices?

What surprised me the most was the microwave’s attitude to help me. I did need help. At home, I was living in a dysfunctional family, and at high school I was being bullied by a bulky boy called Blake. This situation of abuse started when Blake found out that I liked reading. Last year, I brought some comics to read at lunch time. While I was reading them, he approached to me and cried out:

“You’re such a geek,” which made everyone laugh out loud.

I must confess I stopped reading since I felt ashamed of myself. As you clearly see, I was low on self-esteem. Now that I am trapped in this jail, I have lots of time to reflect on my past and I know something for sure: I should have continued reading. It was my hobby and it helped me escape the harsh reality. Here, in this jail, I have nothing to read. There is nothing whatsoever, just darkness.

I was still thinking about the microwave when the teacher made me go out to the blackboard. It was a square root exercise, and to be honest, I sucked at maths. I could not complete it, and yes, you have guessed it correctly, Blake said something hurtful to me again in front of my classmates, who laughed out loud once more.

After the class, the teacher came towards me:

“I am talking to Blake’s parents this afternoon, Jared. He is making your life impossible.”

Before replying to her kind words, I noticed that we were not just the two of us in the room. I could perceive a dark shadow above our heads, spying on us.

“Are you alright, Jared? You look pale. Do you want me to call your parents?”

“You can see it too, can’t you?” I asked, pointing my shaking finger at the ceiling of the classroom and completely ignoring her question.

A deranged-looking man was in the middle of a totally dark space with his mouth covered in blood, and his bulging and menacing eyes were looking at me as though I was his prey.

“Of course I can see the lamp. But your face tells me you see something else,” a comment which proved I was the only one capable of beholding that beast.

The horrible man suddenly ran through the ceiling in the direction of the door. He wanted to block it in order to prevent me from leaving. My heart started to beat vigorously as I ran to escape the classroom.

“Where are you going now?” cried the teacher.

When you run for your life, your primitive self is activated, and you are much faster and stronger than

ever. I went through the door, quickly turned behind, and slammed it. However, I glanced at the class again, breathing with difficulty, and there was no sign of the monster, just the teacher, sitting on a chair, looking at me with great concern.

Where was the monster? Were he and the microwave's voice both products of my imagination? Was I going crazy?

But somehow, I trusted my senses were not distorted. In fact, no sooner had I left the classroom I remembered a painting my grandfather showed to me a couple of years ago that looked exactly like this monster I had seen in the classroom. I remembered that the author was a Spanish one, but I did not recall the name; so I went immediately to the library. In the art history section, I found a book about the Spanish painter Goya, and there it was: *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Part of the 14 *Black Paintings*, this one in particular gripped my mind for a while because of its brutality. My grandfather, who was a painter himself, was really inspired by Goya's art; and this work in particular was usually brought up by him in several conversations to explain to me how immense greed can destroy a man's heart.

Had I seen, then, the god of time? What else could have it been? The only thing that baffled me was that previously in the class... he wasn't holding one of his sons, like in the painting. Did it mean that I was the next in his cannibalistic plan?

There was a monster at high school, and I had to stop it. It was an exciting task I was eager to complete. I left the library, the cold bringing my eyes to tears. And what was worse: Blake was waiting for me.

“So, you squealed on me. Did you know that my mother is at the hospital and that she can’t be bothered by things like these? Now I have got to stay after school cleaning the class while I reflect on my behaviour. What about your behaviour?” And all of a sudden, punched me in the nose, which started to bleed quickly.

He had never ever hit me. The furthest he had gone in regard to his bullying was locking me in the lab while everyone was cackling. And then I realised—I was more scared around Blake than around the monster.

I got home and went directly to the kitchen. My anger had possessed me when I cried out:

“STUPID MICROWAVE, WERE YOU WILLING TO HELP ME? WHY DON’T YOU BRING ME SOMETHING OF BLAKE?”

I stopped to take a breath of air. I could not believe my own words when I asked:

WHAT ABOUT HIS RIGHT HAND, HUH?”

I waited for ten seconds, and, as there was no response, I headed off to my bedroom. I was feeling more relaxed, when suddenly I heard the beep from the microwave. I opened it up and there it was: the right hand of Blake covered in blood.

“Do not feel guilty about this. Everyone in your shoes would have done the same thing. That kid was lying about his mum being ill, so you felt distressed. What a despicable guy,” the microwave spat.

I managed to articulate: “How do you know that?” while my face twisted in a grimace of disgust and my hands started to sweat a lot, just like when you are scolded because you have done something bad.

“I know everything, boy.”

Nausea swept over me as I looked at Blake’s right hand; the same hand with which he had punched my face a few hours before. Even his knuckles were still swollen due to the blow he gave me.

“I am aware as well that you used to read a lot, but since Blake made fun of you, you quit reading.”

My disgust promptly turned into awe by its words. Either he had spied on me for years, or he was a God-like creature with superpowers. Perhaps both.

“You see, I know that you feel sorry for his hand right now. But deep down in your heart, you do not feel guilty. You enjoy his suffering, as much as I do. I already told you, I am your friend.”

Although I still felt remorseful about what I had done, and I was not sure how I would get rid of the hand and how I would clean it all, I felt listened to, as though I had a friend.

“If we are friends, how come I don’t know your name?” I asked, as I tried to wipe the sweat from my hands with a dish towel.

“Silly me. You can call me William. It was the name of your grandfather, the painter, wasn’t it?”

“You really are God, don’t you? You know everything about me!”

William let out a nervous giggle.

“God or not, you can always trust me.”

“My father says religion only brainwashes you.”

“Your father has a point. So many wars have been fought because of religion.”

I did not know much about history and wars, so I decided to change the topic of the conversation.

“I used to read a lot of superhero comics and every now and then novels too. But as everyone thought I was a freak, I stopped reading them. I have tried instead to make new friends, but everyone avoids me. Do you think I should begin reading again?”

“Of course. Reading is the only habit that will save you from their ignorance. I like reading too.”

He made a pause and with excitement, said:

“I’ve just finished reading *The Shining*, by Stephen King. Do you want me to lend you the book?”

“What is it about?” I asked, intrigued.

“On second thoughts, the book is too creepy for a young boy like you. But I know you’ll love this.”

William made a few beep sounds and said:

“Open my door!”

A Batman comic was there, instead of Blake’s hand, which I had already forgotten about.

“Do you like it?”

“Of course I do! Batman is my favourite superhero,” I said as my eyes glittered with excitement. “Because my family isn’t doing well at the moment, I haven’t bought a comic for a long time.” I added.

“Are you hungry, Jared?”

“Yeah, why?”

William started doing the beep again, and I felt that my heart was about to explode. What would he do this time?

On the plate, there was a big juicy hamburger with French fries. “It’s exactly what I fancied right now! Thank you, William.”

The fear I had experienced the night before had merely disappeared. It turned out I had had a friend in my own house all this time, and I did not know it.

“You’re welcome, Jared. The reason why I did not lend you King’s book is that it deals with a situation very much like your own; at least as far as the father is concerned. Tell me something: Your father does not seem to care about you and your mother, does he?”

I had never talked about my father with anyone else, apart from my mother, so I got my sorrows off my chest when I said:

“My father sometimes behaves like a prick. He knows my mother truly loves him, and he still sleeps somewhere else. And our finances are in the red lately.”

“I’m awfully sorry. Do you think they will get divorced?”

“I don’t think so. My mother always ends up forgiving him. She wants us to stay as a family, although I wonder sometimes if he loves me as much as he says he does. Simply because he wouldn’t do these kinds of things.”

“Your mother should look for a new partner; she deserves to be loved. And you too, Jared. I’ll be like a father to you.”

That last sentence moved me to tears, and I could only say:

“Thank you.”

I still wanted to talk to him about the experience I had had with the monster, but the conversation had already been too intense, so I went to sleep.

At this moment of the story, I must pause to say that my soul was already corrupted by sin. I had trusted a creature which could bring joy, but also misery. Blake’s hand was just the tip of the iceberg. Under it, a hell.

The next day there was no trace of Blake in class. A very worried teacher said:

“Blake was attacked yesterday and he is in hospital, still recovering. We still don’t know the author of this horrible crime.”

I couldn’t help smiling maliciously, knowing that the real author had been my friend William.

During break time, a guy called Patrick, Blake’s friend, came to me and said:

“What have you done to Blake, huh? You were the last person he talked to,” and he gave me a shove.

I was getting upset by him and said with the most menacing tone I could make: “If you ever dare to touch me again, I’ll make sure my friends pay you a visit.”

Patrick became so frightened that he never said anything to me again. I was starting to feel like the lion in the pride. However, I was a bit disappointed because I did not encounter the monster. I guessed his intentions were not killing me, then. Maybe I got a bit excited too early, but I would tell William anyway. At least I had a friend!

When I reached home, I could hear the sound of some chords my mum was playing in her bedroom. I chose not to say hi to William first, but to my mum instead.

“You play this song too much lately, don’t you?”

“It speaks of my current situation with your father.”

“What is the name of the song, again?”

“‘The Chain,’ by Fleetwood Mac. My love for your father is like a chain because I’m too in love to let it go.”

I plucked up the courage to tell her my opinion:

“Mum, dad will probably come back. But that does not mean he will love you the same way you love him. Do you really want to continue living like this?” and my heart broke upon looking at my mum’s downcast expression.

“When you fall in love, you’ll understand. Now, go and cook a pizza. You must be hungry. I love you, Jared, don’t forget it.”

I was feeling angst when I heard the beep of William: “How is your mum, Jared?”

“She doesn’t want to give up on her marriage. What infuriates me the most is that my father is probably having sex with other women, while my mother is here at home thinking of ways to save this marriage.”

“At least you expressed your point of view. Perhaps she considers it and finally in a few months she gets divorced. By the way, your mother has good taste in music, just as you do in comics.”

“Have you heard her playing the guitar?”

“Of course, she plays remarkably well.”

“That is really nice of you, I will tell her later about you! I can’t wait for her to meet you,” I said smiling.

“Don’t mention that idea ever again. I just want to hang out with you,” his tone of voice turned gloomy.

“Come on! You are the only friend I have, it’s normal I want you to meet my mother. I don’t understand why you are so bothered about it.” I shrugged.

Later that night, while I was in my bed, I heard William’s voice calling me, and it sounded urgent; so I got up and ran as fast as I could.

“You should open my door. But I warn you: your father is a bastard.” His tone of voice was deeper. I was worried our earlier discussion had annoyed him.

Inside his wallet lots of documents could be found.

“I see his identification, his driving licence... But nothing special”

“Are you sure?”

I was missing a pocket to look at. My hand touched a photograph of him and a woman I did not recognize, but she was not my mother.

“Shit... My father is dating somebody else. He is grabbing her by the waist, and they look so happy.”

I felt betrayed because I thought that his time outside home was spent with women he did not care about, but this photograph showed a new version of the facts.

I started crying uncontrollably.

“Shh... Your mother will hear us.”

“Why are you so insensitive? My mother is being cheated on. She has the right to know this right now.”

“Your mother has a vulnerable spirit. It’s best you tell her the bad news first thing in the morning. Let me hug you now, my dear friend. You know how much I love you.”

“I know, William. I love you too.” I said while I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my pyjamas. Had it not been for William, I would have run away in the middle of the night. I was extremely thankful he was there to support me.

“I’ll be your father now. Just make the wish.”

“I wish you were here with me.”

I blinked and all around me was darkness. Except for one little rectangular shape through which I understood how I had been fooled. The image still gives me goosebumps to this day. In front of me, William showed his real form, which was that of the same monster that had tried to kill me in class.

However, this time... He was holding a corpse, mine! He stared at me with his bulging eyes and cried out laughing hysterically:

“It was too easy!”

Then he said:

“From now on, your existence will be felt like a chain.”

I essentially died that day, and that is why I am trapped in this purgatory, between heaven and hell.

The fate of my parents is unknown to me, although I am not optimistic they managed to escape from that monster.

It is still a mystery to me as well why he chose me over everyone else. Was I a menace to him, as Saturn’s sons and daughters were to the god of time?

We will never know.

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