

VULTURE CULTURE

NEW BODIES

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21

Front Cover Art - Zoe Georgiou

(Untitled), Pen and marker, work on paper, photo edited.

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EDITORS' NOTE

Bodies— everyone knows someone who has one.

Thanks to our contributors for this first issue of *Vulture Culture*; we loved your work and are honoured to be the home you chose for it.

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Homesick

It happens like this:

It's a series of clacks, deadened space that inflates the air between them, stretches it to the absolute end of functionality—a hyper-extended rubber band bound to snap. She sits and is still. A cold ick sits deep into her stomach; she knows exactly what's about to happen.

“Okay,” the woman across looks up, sun glinting off her glasses. The woman has pretty eyes, Savannah realizes belatedly. The color of freshly wet earth, ancient bark. “Tell me how it happens.”

Savannah shuts her eyes. “It's—I'm walking into a home I no longer know. The walls are tall around me; I think they hurt me—”

“*Hurt* you?”

“They're not nice to me, no,” Savannah shakes her head, her fingers messing with the fabric coming loose off the couch. “I'm cold...*they*, the walls make me so cold.”

A series of languid scribbles, an algorithm of click-clacks. “Here,” the woman says, and a tissue is pushed into Savannah's hand. She hadn't realized she'd been crying. “You're safe here. You are.”

A shaky nod, a stuttering of breath. She's safe here. “So, I keep walking. The walls are growing taller—taller, still. And, at some point, it's so dark that I can't see. I'm, like, running my hands along the walls the way they tell firefighters to do if they get stuck in a building, you know? Um, I'm running my hands along the wall, making right turns. Something cuts my palm, I think.” Savannah opens her eyes and looks down, almost expecting that same cut to transcribe out of dream into reality. There is nothing there; only unmarred and soft-palmed skin. She takes her thumbnail and presses it deeply into the middle of a heart line. She presses and presses until her mouth flinches into a wince. Savannah is keenly aware of those dark eyes on her, but she cannot bring herself to meet their gaze. “I'm scared and cold—because I know what's about to happen. I think that's always been my problem. I dream of tragedy, I dwell on the horror of it, and eventually, it happens to me. I think I've always known that this would happen. That I'd be the one to find her.”

A tiny singular beep. A soft sigh of hesitancy, the shutting of a booklet. “Savannah, our time's up for today.”

“Oh,” Savannah shifts, getting ready to stand. “Sure. Sure.” Then, sotto voce: “I'm sorry.”

The woman — Savannah knows her as Dr. Black — initiates the rise in the end. “Certainly not.” Mrs. Black's smile is soft, coming to her face easily, and Savannah finds herself staring at the nice lines of her teeth, the softness around the woman's eyes. *You're safe here*. Hope exists in those words, in the whitened grin before her and the delusion of that security is a warm reality. Could she one day be safe? Is there a future in which she wakes and does not taste the aftermath of her grief

against the roof of her mouth? Mrs. Black's hand comes to rest softly against the sharpened bones of Savannah's shoulder.

It's a nice thought, at least.

"You'll attend your classes this week, right?"

"Sure," Savannah says. This one's easy to answer. She never plans *not* to go to class, so this is not a lie.

"You'll eat? You'll rest? The meditations we've talked about?"

"Sure, sure."

Appeased, Mrs. Black leans over and rifles through some drawers in her desk, fingers moving deftly and all too quickly for Savannah to follow with her eyes. She doesn't pull anything out so much as she looks to be *hiding* something, shuffling myriad papers, angling her lean body just enough to prevent, but not enough that it doesn't draw overt suspicion. She smells that lurid scent of deceit, and the duplicity is so finely mirrored when Mrs. Black turns back around, that easy, happy smile unmoved.

Those dark eyes flick over Savannah's face and she feels their burn on the outskirts of her brows, down the sloping curves of her jaw, the lower line of her lip. Dr. Black takes a step. Another. And Savannah feels her palms, unmarred, soft, and full of flesh, and becomes all too aware of the hot breath rushing over her face, the tremble in her sternum. She watches Dr. Black reach her hand up, intent clear in the angularities of her fingers. They're shockingly cold when they brace against Savannah's cheek, so cold it burns. Those fingers glide in too-delicate passes. First under the space of her eye, tugging at the thin skin there, then traveling down to the plane of her cheek, feeling the musculature of the jaw. Mrs. Black's stare disregards flesh and goes right for the innards of what might make a person whole.

Later, she'll remember how the blood rushed straight to her cheeks so hard that it knocked her dizzy. Later, she'll remember how sweet the breath was against her skin.

"Hm," is all Mrs. Black says, finishing with a boyish pinch at her cheeks. "You look like you haven't been sleeping."

"No." Unsteady on her feet, pulse thudding, thudding, thudding. There's titillation on her tongue, that depraved animal want writhing under her skin. It makes her vaguely nauseous, vaguely...? "I've been having trouble sleeping."

But there is no indication of the same for Dr. Black, at least not that Savannah can parse out in the cool dismissiveness of her eyes. She leads Savannah to the door, gait almost imperceptibly weighted, and waits politely. Unhurried but expectant. Like waiting for someone to finish talking as they'd been rambling for too long. An entirely different flush hits Savannah's face this time.

"I'll see you Monday." The corners of Dr. Black's mouth lifts, but it does not reach the rest of her face. The door shuts with a finality. Savannah stares at the old pine, eyes cataloging the swirl marks, the suspicious scratches, the tarnished bronze of

the door handle, and can't help but think this is the last time she'll ever see this office.

#

She doesn't go to class.

She had planned to, of course. The night before Savannah set out her clothes, made a lunch she was proud of, and even managed to get some of the assignment done that she's been neglecting for weeks now. She brushed her teeth, took a shower, combed out her hair, and frowned at how much she had shed. Savannah accidentally skipped dinner, but that's okay. Forgetting wasn't out of the norm, and it was far too late to eat, anyway. She'd try again tomorrow.

Savannah curled herself under her blanket, feet roving restlessly together in the smooth warmth of her sheets and prayed for a decent night's sleep.

What happens is this:

Savannah dreams.

She waits under a streetlight, the neon amber blaring steadily into the synapses of her mind. Her breath comes in short, staccato pants, frosting in the air before her. Reality seems to only exist a small perimeter, one that extends to an opaque darkness ten feet from her in every direction. Her heart thuds in her ears, pulsing and pulsing until the rushing of her breath is all she can hear. She takes a step out of the warmth of the light, takes another into the dark. Another. The darkness is thick as plasmatic blood, congealed so much that she chokes on it with her first full breath. She can't see, but that doesn't matter. It's a feeling that drives her forward, an unsheathing of familiarity in her footsteps. It's the way her feet clip against the asphalt of the road, the way she can feel stiff blades of grass tickling at her ankles. They whisper *welcome home, welcome home*. Her hand reaches for the porch railing like muscle memory and finds that the paint-chipped wood is warm against her hands, alive almost.

Something in front of her moans and creaks, shuffles and settles. The relief that comes through the air is palpable. Lights flick on, two in tandem.

The eyes of the house behold her with an agonized air of metal-hot pain, an emotion like the way a dog holds itself after it thought you were leaving it forever. The door opens in the same fashion; tail tucked between its legs, head bowed for petting, quiet slurred grief-happiness falling from its mouth. *You're back*, the house says to her. It forgives her transgressions and invites her in, pleads, begs. *I've missed you. I've missed you.*

Savannah steps inside and finds what she always does. A house that deceives her, a house that festers and rots in its lies. It claims love, but hatred is its only virtue. It is this besetting sin that makes the house unknowable to her. Maybe she once knew the wallpapered walls as sunlight spilled against them. Maybe once the creaky floorboards were ones she could recall with an exasperated fondness. But instead, the walls grow up impossibly tall around her, taller than should be possible, taller than reason. They throw up refracting images of a warning sign; Theseus before the labyrinth without the blood of Ariadne to follow.

She does what she's done a hundred times. Places her palm flat against the wall, and shudders as she feels razor blades pull and stick into her skin. And she walks. Her hand becomes a weeping thing of gore, the gushing of her blood splattering against the walls, against the floor. It hurts to touch this house, and it hates anyone who might love it. It rebukes her every attempt at kindness and understanding. When she ventures too far down one artery in the wrong direction, the house rewards her with a coldness that almost kills her and leaves her numb with regret. When it knows she seeks the mouth, it sends her further away to other hallways and renders her disoriented. Savannah walks like this for perhaps hours, her right hand useless and dysfunctional, her mind fraught and hazed from an overload of adrenaline.

"Please," she begs, her voice cracked and high and desperate. "Please."

It is only in mercy that the house relents. It's three tight right turns before the house opens itself up at the belly. The hallways shrink to an expected size and the walls slowly come back to themselves, true to form. There's still the hint of maliciousness, but it's softer somehow now. Less hurt, less angry, less neglected. Savannah makes another turn—left this time—and comes to the opened, excavated heart.

And it's Savannah who finds her. Because of course it is. She was always going to be the one who finds her. She almost blends into the living room, back flushed against the cushions. It's the nervous wringing of the woman's hands that gives way to any life, the rest of her still and stiff.

"Oh," Savannah says, chest heaving, vision blurring. Her breath comes in wheezing bellows, lips trembling far too much to stifle. There's loss lining her gums, the heat of ache against her teeth, and nausea sticks headily against her throat and stays. It makes her shake. It makes her gag. "Oh," Savannah says again, and it sounds like a funeral song. "I found you—you're here." Then. "Victoria."

Victoria turns, the soft light of realization touching her face, a slow uptick of a smile coming to her lips, shaking loose the otherwise doll-like stiffness to her visage. Savannah's chest warms, an incredulous smile coming to her face to match Victoria's, the burn of unshed tears choking her momentarily. *She's here.* Victoria holds herself the way a god might, the sharp lines of her face, the feathered eyelashes, an unbending air of obstinacy. And Savannah worships. Savannah bends herself at the waist and prays for absolution, for penance, for devotion. She does this for Victoria the same way that she had done it in life. Unyielding loyalty. The inclination of sacrifice. A lamb running towards the slaughter.

"My love." Victoria's voice chimes the same way it had done for years, that bright, lilting accent, the soft country twang. Her eyes are pretty, Savannah realizes all over again with a startle. Ancient bark. Wet earth. "I've been waiting for you for so long," Victoria is saying, coming around the back of the couch and towards where Savannah stands in the entryway. "You're late."

Victoria's hands are a cold shock when they grab for Savannah's fingers, pulling her further into the living room. So cold it burns. But the feel of them is the same—the same softness, the same curves. Touching her feels like a pyre, something Savannah has burned for before. Her heart catches in her throat.

“How are you here?” Savannah hears herself ask, dazed still, untethered. She’s unable to look away, eyes cataloging all movement. She watches the way Victoria’s shoulders slip, watches the way her hair shuffles and gleams in the muted light. So beautiful Savannah becomes sick with it, becomes delirious with the loss of it all.

“Silly girl,” Victoria simpers, the edges of her smile quirked up like a laugh. “This is where I’ve always been.” She pulls Savannah down into the couch, hands flattening over her stomach, palms smoothing over her jaw. “Oh, darling. I’ve missed you. It’s rude to make a lady wait, you know? Where have you gone?”

“I’ve been—” Savannah bites her lip. How to explain? How to tell her she’s dedicated her life to one of abject suffering, that she’s sewn herself into her bed, starved until her bones started to show, talks out of the bottom of a bottle, and finds happiness only in thoughts of death? Savannah opens her mouth, closes it. Tries to start again. Oh Lord, she’s always trying to start again. “I’m so, so sorry,” she says eventually, “I’ve been keeping busy.”

“Sure. Sure,” Victoria says, eyes distant, fingers dancing delicate lines over the tautness of Savannah’s forearms. Savannah sighs, leaning into the warmth. She’s been cold for so long that it settled and made a home in the intercostal space of her lungs. Until it has become her, in such a very real sense. She could stay here, she thinks. She could stay here forever with Victoria and be warm, be *happy* again.

Of course, that isn’t how it happens.

Victoria curls her head until it finds the edge of Savannah’s collarbone. “I wish you could stay here forever.”

“I can. I’ll stay.”

“No,” Victoria sits up. Sadness shapes her mouth, lines the edges of her brows. Her fingers come up under Savannah’s lip, tracing it. “You really can’t. You’ll be called away from me soon. And I’ll—I’ll be left alone again. Here in this darkness.” Victoria looks at her hopefully, the small smile gone now. “Will you visit me again?”

“But I don’t want to visit again!” Savannah sits up. The ferocity of her voice agitates her when she’s trying to be soft, loving. It’s hard to soothe, though, and it bubbles up from her. It spills over into feverish movement, into acute fear. “You have no idea what it’s like to exist without you, Victoria. What it’s like to reach your fingers across a pillow, searching for something that will never be there again. I want to *stay*.” The breakdown. Savannah’s voice becomes a defeated whisper. “Please, don’t make me do that again.”

Savannah has spent her whole life mapping every inch of Victoria’s face. Has dedicated hours to understanding each twitch to her mouth, what it meant when she sucked at her teeth, when she bit at her fingers. Nothing about Victoria yielded any more secrets; Savannah had solved her labyrinth, traversed the maze. So why now was Victoria’s face suddenly unreadable? Was that delight at her mouth? Was it something sharper, like hunger? Her face falls carefully blank.

“There might be a way you could stay. Though—do you remember how I died, love?” Victoria asks, mouth pinching into a line, face angled away and towards the window that indicates nothing. Her hand brushes over Savannah’s in lazy circles, like an afterthought of affection. It’s the only thing that’s keeping her tethered. A feeling of slipping away eats at her limbs, presses kisses along her ears. It wouldn’t be so bad if she just let go.

“Yes.” Blood splattered on the walls, the red and blue flashes of the end. The unraveling. The remembrance against her tongue burns. It is all that she is. “I think about it every single day.”

“Then come here.” Victoria’s voice at her ear. “And let me tell you of sufferance.”

#

When Savannah wakes, she is a wound reopened, salt packed into the sides of her laceration. She is raw, skin pulsing along with her heartbeat, hurt, bleeding, and when she screams into her pillow, she hopes she screams so hard it kills her.

It never does.

High, walking into a state of oblivion only pain can bring, shapeless from sleep, Savannah gets up, puts on a pair of ratty sweats and a hoodie, and wanders the streets until she finds what she’s looking for. Victoria had said to find a street corner where the ends of the earth don’t quite match up, where the time is different with each step. That she will find something of deliverance, something that will make her body anew and whole.

Do you want to be made whole again, love?

Yes, she had sobbed, please.

Savannah walks and walks until her feet trip over uneven cobblestone, until the air filling her lungs tastes of dirt, of rust, absolution without gravity. It is in no part of the earth that she recognizes. Both cold and hot, like a fever. There is a man there with a set-up table, the white plastic made a light brown with age.

“This will destroy you,” the man says, old, gray, starving. He hands her something. She pockets it and laughs and laughs and laughs. Savannah walks and becomes unmade again, unfolding into reality. It won’t be too long now.

There is a church close to home. It spirals in opulence, an ivory tower that wraps itself into the sky, edges curved and soft, the entrance sharper, less forgiving. It feels like coming home, Savannah thinks. This door holds the same bite as her own and gives her the same flutter of dread that entering the threshold of her apartment offers. It is an act of betrayal to come home to a house that does not want you, will not let you settle along its bones. It is an act of tragedy. She cannot think about what it means if a church rejects you in kind.

Savannah’s feet lead her to the confessional as though they’ve memorized contrition. Then, she presses her face against the honeycomb lattice and becomes the image of repentance, her voice sounding far away. “Father,” she starts, “I—don’t

know how long it's been since my last confession. Years," she continues. "Maybe centuries."

A shadow with no face behind the partition inclines its head, a deep rumble of a voice saying, "That is okay, child." He bends his ear closer, hand raising like a warning sign.

"Stop. Please." She sucks a breath in. "I'm not asking for a blessing," Savannah hurries to interrupt him, squeezing her eyes shut. Her fingers grip so hard into the wood of her seat that it creaks and moans. The priest pauses only for a second.

"I will give it to you anyway, child," he says, finishing the cross. "Tell me of your sins."

Her mouth is dry. She struggles to swallow. "Father, forgive that I have love and lost. Forgive that I will walk away from the sun."

The priest is silent for a long time after that.

Savannah goes home and feels lighter than she ever has. She goes home and does not wince at the door, does not look at herself in the mirror. She goes home and takes a long, hot shower, and gets in bed with her hair still wet. No dinner. There's no time for that now. She takes the pills that she'd gotten from that old man earlier. They're blue, a nauseating shade so bright it hurts her eyes to look. There are only four, but it should do. Savannah snuggles into her warm covers, cricketing her feet together, feeling the smooth of her skin. And she swallows the pills whole.

#

This is how it ends:

She comes back.

The house greets her with a sob as she caresses the door open, kissing the wood hello, goodbye, thank you. It is easy to find the bloodstains of yesterday, to follow the hand-shaped smears down the long corridors, the abstruse doors, around the darkened, impenetrable staircases. The house does not fight her; it does not trick her; it does not greet her with malice. Instead, it holds her in its hands and whispers a warm breath over her. *I'm sorry*, it says. *I love you. It was always going to end this way.*

She says, *I know*. She says, *It's okay*. She says, *There was nothing else for me*.

The dark no longer holds the same shape of fear that it did before. It's rendered weightless with its new face. A thing to acknowledge, but not to surrender to.

Do you want to be made whole again?

Yes.

Good girl. A kiss pressed to her cheek, her mouth, her throat. *Good girl.*

There can be no more fear now. There's no room for it. There's only the certainty left, only the becoming. And she's almost home. Just a few more steps, she thinks. Just a few more and this will all be over.

Savannah presses forward, feels the walls shrink around her, feels the house knit back together at the seams. Slowly, it becomes less like a gnarled branch and clenched fist and more like the softness of a lover's kiss—like hands folding over her skin, thumbing at the points of her bones, an easy smile given like a promise.

The cavity of the house's heart opens in much the same way, and Savannah steps over and through the threshold into the room that'll be her last.

Victoria stands by the window, limned with a white-gold light that comes somewhere far off an impossibility. The long slating of her hair shuffles between her shoulder blades, her profile drawn incredibly sharp in the shadows. There's a quickness to her hands as she works over the beads of a rosary that suggest hours of practice. Savannah looks for a long time hidden in the entryway. Looks at the skin of her, looks at the bones, and remembers a time she wanted to press herself into them, become one with her circulatory system. *Let me be in you*, she once had said secretly into the dark long after Victoria fell asleep. *Let me be in you. Let me become a piece of you. Let me be your blood and lungs and breath. Let me do this so that you may never part from me. Me*, she had said. *Me. Let it be me.*

"Victoria," she says her name like a prayer, like the end of the world. She says it like an answer without a question—an ending without the beginning.

Victoria gasps, whipping around. Her eyes are blown wide at the pupils, her eyebrows shot into her hairline. Her chest hiccups and stumbles over a four-four timing. "You came back," she says finally, the lines of her shoulders dropping. "I—I wasn't sure you'd come back."

"Of course." Savannah takes a step into the room, ignoring this chill. "I'll always come back." She takes another, reaching for Victoria's outstretched hands. "I cannot turn away from you."

A wry smile. "Maybe that's always been your problem."

"Maybe," Savannah tries to laugh it off, ignoring how her hands form a litany of things that will never come again. It's all in the touch of it. It's all in remembrance. It disquiets her. She falls silent and feels the unevenness of her heart.

Victoria strokes her thumbs over Savannah's palms, feeling the heart lines there. "It's not so bad," she says after a while. "Not like you'd think. It's almost of scripture," she shrugs. "There is no more pain. There is no more hurt. No more suffering. The road to eternity is as easy as letting go."

Savannah sniffs and wipes at her face. She hadn't known she'd been crying. The tears come faster now, hot and wet down her cheeks, falling into the hollow of

her throat, soaking the front of her shirt. “No more pain,” she repeats, lips numb. “No more suffering.” She takes a shuddering breath in and sets her shoulders. Victoria’s eyes are calm and cool in the darkness when she meets them, betraying only love and adoration. It’s as easy as letting go. “I’m ready.”

The smile that comes to Victoria is worth all the anguish of before—the nights spent screaming in bed, alone with a loss so sharp it threatened to be her ending, there and then. It warms her chest, the feeling flooding deep into the pools of her belly. She leans forward, and Savannah moves to meet her on instinct. Their mouths connect, teeth pulling softly, hands coming to grip into hair, fingers insistent and probing.

It's as easy as letting go, Savannah thinks, smiling through the kiss. *It's as easy as letting go*.

Savannah doesn’t notice Victoria’s hands leaving her sides. She doesn’t notice the reach into her back pocket, doesn’t notice her drawing something that rings sharply between her fingers. She only notices Victoria’s fingers coming up under her shirt and feels pleased when they find the skin above the waistband of her pants.

She doesn’t even notice the sting of pain as the knife slips into the thin skin of her belly. Doesn’t notice until she feels the uncomfortable twisting and the blood rushing past her knees. Doesn’t connect what’s happening until the scent of rust fills her nose, her throat pulsing with bile.

It is a pain made uncomprehending. Her ears start to ring, her nose funnels mucus in droves, her neck heating in her body’s effort to draw blood away from the source of the wound and divert to her chest and head. “Ah!” Savannah rips herself away from Victoria, hands pushing out desperately.

“Shh,” Victoria whispers, mouth biting at her neck. “It’s as easy as letting go.”

The knife twists up again, curves along the side, and opens a smile of a laceration across the length of her abdomen. Lightheaded, dizzy, unsteady on her feet. She pushes mildly at Victoria’s chest, unable to utter words now. She has become pain. It is all she’s ever known.

“Let me become a piece of you,” Victoria says, lowering Savannah to the ground. “Let me be your blood and lungs and breath. Let me do this so that you may never part from me. Let me consume you so we will never be separated again.” Savannah hits the ground, eyes hollowed out and gone. “Me. Let it be me.”

Then, Victoria dips her head down, mouth and teeth moving in tandem. She folds her body into the curve of Savannah, presses their ribcages tightly together. A pair of hands becomes one. One mouth, one heart, one skin to live under in perpetuity. It’s them, it’s *us*, slurred together in chrysalis.

The body stills. The body moans. The body shifts and pulls and curls into itself as the muscle fibers regrow and snap into place. The body sits up, testing the strength of its new muscles. It has been made anew. It has been made whole again.

Outside, the house shuts its eyes and barricades its mouth as it weeps and holds its heart against its chest. Its walls fall in, pillars desiccating, the structure rotting. There is nothing left for it now.

Me. Me, the house had begged Savannah who could not, would not, hear it.
Let it be me.

Morgan Hollowell

Morgan Hollowell writes about haunted houses, monsters, and messy lesbians who get it wrong. She's currently working on her first novel *Tell Me If There's A Way Home*, a sapphic, dark fantasy for fans of *Silent Hill 2* and *Kentucky Route Zero*.

This Sorry Flesh

The aliens don't want someone obese, so you have to watch your calories. That's rule number one, and I watch mine very closely.

Six hundred per day on Mondays, descending by increments of thirty to sixty to ninety per day, then subtract 120 until you're eating just 300, perfect 300, and stay there for a while. You can make yourself feel full by eating lots of lettuce drizzled with Cholula. My favorite flavor? Garlic and lime. The bonus point is the Cholula runs right through, so you never have to face the bloat and poop weight you might get from other foods. The scale stays low.

On Sundays, when I don't feel hungry anymore, I do a water fast. That means I just drink water, nothing else. No soda, even diet; no coffee, even black. Because rule number two is:

Water purifies you.

The aliens took me when I was nine (that's three times three). I didn't remember it at first. For years my only conscious memory of it was that one day I went to play in the woods alone, and when I came out, I thought I was a ghost. I thought I'd died in there. I'd hit my head on a log, maybe, while using it like a balance beam, and my corpse was rotting in last year's fallen leaves. You know how they clot the ground even during the summer, because nobody rakes out there? They turn to a brown sludge beneath your feet? You know the smell even if you don't know exactly what I mean. Everyone knows the smell of rotting leaves.

Well, in middle school, the other girls started rolling their skirts to make them shorter, and that's when I saw it, the scar on my inner thigh. That's what happened when I pushed my way out of the woods, disoriented. I hurtled through the thickets instead of taking the path. Thorns catch; skin breaks; blood runs down your inner thigh. Everyone has imperfections. This was the first time I really noticed mine. That was the night I laid in bed and dreamed of the aliens. Beautiful and translucent-skinned. Blue eyes and long thin fingers. Their flesh was the color of a bruised apple. The closest I can get on my own flesh is just the color of a bruise.

That's when they told me they would give me a new body; that's when they told me they could get rid of my scar.

That's why I have these rules.

Rule number three is simple. Easy to remember. Three sets of high-knees every day, thirty-three high-knees per set. Like the cantos in Dante's *Inferno*, or that's what Mr. Falk says, the librarian, when he sees me reading it one day in study hall. The version I'm reading is prose, it doesn't have

cantos and it doesn't rhyme. But I keep going back to the ninth circle, and every time I finish a canto, I do a canto of my own. Thirty-three high-knees, and then read on.

Sets of three are so important. The high-knees are just one of them. There's yoga poses, hold each pose three times, thirty-three seconds each. There's sit-ups, too. I do three sets of thirty-three every morning, after "lunch," every evening before bed. Threes on threes on threes. I count my fingers when I'm nervous, twisting the fingertips to make my nails hurt. I count them in threes. Index finger, middle finger, ring finger, one two three. Pinky finger, thumb, index finger, one two three.

If I follow their rules, they'll take me again when I'm eighteen. That's three times three plus three times three. I don't have much time to get it right.

There's an old man in the Ninth Circle of Hell who ate his own sons. What I like about it is the way they offer themselves up. You don't see that today. "Father, it was you who put upon us this sorry flesh. Now strip it off again." Count Ugolino chewed his fingers. I chew my fingers too. I would offer myself up for my father too. I love my father.

Anyway, in the ninth circle there's Judas too, and Satan, and I find it interesting how Satan weeps, like he's stuck down there too. He chews Judas up over and over again and he cries. It's because they both betrayed somebody. You don't see Ugolino's sons down there, buried in ice.

I chew my fingers until my cuticles bleed. My fingernails taste like Cholula, garlic and lime. My fingers are never warm.

Rule number four is to do your homework in multiples of three. Three pages of English, three pages of algebra.

Rule number five is to chew three times with the left side of your mouth, three times with your right, three times with your left again. The next time you chew, you start with the right side, that way everything is fair.

Rule number six is to push your jeans down to your knees, make a fist with your hands, strike yourself three times upon the inner thigh. I don't repeat this one on the other thigh. Fairness doesn't matter here. What matters is that I hit myself right on that scar.

At nighttime I feel this stupid urge to stay up until three a.m. It isn't one of the rules but I can't help it. I get to 1 a.m., 2 a.m., and I start counting the seconds in groups of three. There are twenty 'threes' in a minute so it's easy to keep track. I lie there whispering "one two three,"

counting off the groupings on my fingers, with my eyes fixed to the window. At three a.m. I sit up and lean over, nose against the glass, and search the sky.

No need to count now. The numbers tick away. Beneath the sheets, unseen, I massage the bruises on my inner thigh. The scar is raised, a texture I can feel beneath my thumb, smooth in a way I can't describe, different from the way the rest of me is smooth.

I think the aliens, one of them at least, will look familiar to me, take a shape I recognize and trust. Someone I know and love, so I won't feel afraid. I pinch the scar to make the bruise hurt more, and in the other room, in my parent's bedroom, I can hear my father snore.

Rule number seven: tap your pencil while you work. Tap it three times, stop, then three more times. You know the pattern. If Gracie Hilcox gives you the stink-eye, pretend not to notice. You don't care.

Rule number eight: Tap each foot three times when you put your shoes on, to make sure they fit. Tighten the laces three times each. Knock your heels together like Dorothy. No place like home.

Rule number nine is new. In bed, I clutch Dante's *Inferno* to my chest. I close my eyes. It's 3 a.m. I whisper, "*Father, it was you who put upon us ... now strip it off again...*"

I hear long fingers tapping on the window.

I hear my bedroom door creak.

J. Alan Andrews

ribena

to taste blood in my mouth, i bite the skin of my own arm
the flesh tears slowly
velcro from the faux buckle of a child's shoe.
when bitter viscera pools in the hole left behind, it tastes of blackcurrant
rich, saccharine,
acidic

an elephant laid in front of me, and i watched her dying.
from her skin, i fashion a coat
from her veins, an oasis
but i must leave her with the tusks. those could never be mine
to be defanged is an indignity i would not wish on us both.

as i pour, the jug threatens to spill from my arm,
heavy,
as if it were digesting itself in sabotage.
the glass in front of me bubbles red.
my teeth are left sticky with the memory

Oleander

Oleander is a self-proclaimed homo.

saint michael comes to you in blood

You found it on the side of the highway, hiding within the knee-height grass. You slammed on the brakes and threw the car to the raw edge of the road, where you caught a glimpse of white feathers peeking through the unkempt field as half-dead as it was.

An angel—a real life fucking angel. Your mother would have called you crazy, but isn't that how all the saints are treated before their deaths? As Cassandra, as Jeanne, as the voice in the wilderness, as the child who would've failed out of Sunday school if you could because you'd rather plan how to martyr yourself than learn how the Church devoured its sons and daughters. What else is there to do but search for a sharp object to stab your jugular, or a pyre on which to self-immolate?

Here was your chance encounter to wash your soul of whatever sins God decided was worth saving you from before He took you. When you crouched to see what it needed, what it could give you, it whimpered in your ear. Your angel was something pathetic, a weak little creature who couldn't stop its insides from becoming outsides, the most human parts of it pooling cinnamon-sweet in the grass between its fingers. It would have nothing for you.

And then your angel grabbed you by the collar of your shirt, staining it with red, red blood, and beset its mouth on yours—not a kiss like love, but a kiss like hate, full of sharp teeth and tasting of scorched pennies.

You scrambled away, but it was not your angel staring back. It was your own body, made into something mangled after falling from your car, wrapped around a thick oak tree. You had always wondered what would happen when God abandoned you—and here it was. He let you die alone on the side of an empty highway, corpse and soul anchored to the earth with no loving Creator to return to, your only friends, the blades of grass that made your death bed.

Rhys Allen

Made up of at least 10% sweet tea, Rhys Allen is a nonbinary writer based out of southern Texas. They are a big fan of horror movies, feral women, and their two cats (who are not big fans of each other). You can find them in *Bizarrchitecture Magazine* or on Twitter [@rvkeiden](#)

What the Dead Eat

“What do the dead eat, anyway?”

A careless question, asked of the dead woman at the end of a long day’s ride.

Around her, food and drink; cups raised to lips and forks twisted in food. The rich gold of eggs’ yolk and the dark of well-cooked meat, the sizzle-crack of fat and the softer crunch of breaking crust as bread passes between the hands of companions, as lips meet lips on the rims of cups, as warmth curls up from the plates and the mouths of her companions.

Warmth, she can feel; she reaches out grave-stiff hands and touches them to the edge of a plate, feels the steam curling off the meat as if she can smell it.

Her companions clearly had not expected her to join them at the table, but when she had, they had poured her tea out of courtesy. The eyes looking are curious, not hostile.

“Dust, and worse,” she says with a shrug and a laugh, and the conversation flows onward.

The dead woman presses her hands to the warmth of the cup in front of her, but when she raises it to her lips it runs down her jaw, dripping onto the wood of the table in crimson droplets. The heat of it lingers on her tongue, *almost a taste, almost a feeling*.

What can the dead eat?

Memories.

The dead cannot experience; the dead cannot consume, cannot join the living at the table and share life.

But she still hungers, hunger that twists in her dry throat and the dry hollow of her chest, hunger that curls fingers around her ribs and wrenches, that crushes the wind from her as surely as a well-placed blow. The sort of hunger that drives you to your knees, leaves you dizzy and sick and turned around, repulsed and desperate.

Hands brush hands over roasted chunks of carrots and apple, and she *hungers*.

It has been so long since she was here, since she saw it. Since the smiles of the living were directed at her, and voices called her to the table. It

is useless; she cannot join them, not truly. She should not hold their names or their voices in her mind; the dead should not learn. They do not change.

But to be here and still be apart hurts as badly as poison burning through her cold veins, as badly as not breathing did at first.

What do the dead eat?

Memories. Self. She cannot touch the world, but she has the whole of her own life to consume. She cracks the memories between her teeth, devours them, and almost tastes salt, fat, the sweetness of the peaches in the height of summer.

It hurts. But it is, at least, a satiating kind of hurt.

Sean Marie French-Byrne

Sean Marie French-Byrne is a writer living in New England. They have a BA from Hampshire College, where they studied the intersection of literary adaptation and queer fiction. Their work has been featured in *DEAD HORSE* and their theatrical work has been produced by *Theater Between Addresses*.

unsatyr

Sitting on the riverbank, I carefully brushed my platinum locks. They fell over my shoulders in strands, and on all sides of my head. I hated having my hair cut. If I could, I would wrap them around my horns to keep them out of my eyes.

But I didn't have horns.

I dipped my hooves into the water, and continued straightening out my hair until it no longer looked like I had tossed and turned all night. Only my family and the village doctor knew I had been suffering from a terrible migraine. It was one more defect to add to my list of flaws. One more reason why I was a mistake of creation. I hoped to hide my problems from the rest of the world.

Alas, brushing your hair out did not fix the dark circles under your eyes, and against my sickeningly pale skin, it was wildly obvious I was losing sleep.

I frowned as I felt a painful throb inside my skull. Why was I born this way? Blindingly white, horn-less, and now, having terrible migraines. Instead of being a regular, normal satyr, I was the village abomination.

I rose from the riverbank to walk.

The smell of the lavender field cleared my migraines a little bit and made it better. Here, I was further from the village, from the feeling of being out of place. Here, I belonged.

I laid in the grass and rested.

And then they began to pelt me.

Younglings, picking up pebbles and throwing them at me. Telling me I was a freak, a monster. Taunting me with their little nubs of horns on their heads.

Although nobody had ever outright expressed their distaste of me in the village (fae such as us were loath to express anything that might make us seem ungraceful), the behavior of the children spoke volumes of what the village thought of me. I rose from the lavender field. A pebble struck my forehead. I ran, blood dripping down my face.

The pain was immense. I clutched my forehead in bed, gently bandaged by my mother, and screamed as my father sent for the village doctor. It didn't hurt this much initially, yet ever since I came home, the pain had only steadily increased. I struggled to hold still as the doctor unwrapped my bandage, checked my forehead, and reported nothing out

of the ordinary. The pain was merely a product of the concussion dealt by the children, combined with my migraines. Nonetheless, he re-banded it, and gave me a potion that was “sure to knock me out as cold as a corpse.”

I slept.

I woke up free of the pain that plagued me only hours ago, to a dry, crusty pillowcase. It was stained a deep, dark red. I gasped, and jumped up from my bed to inspect my wound in the mirror.

My reflection’s eyes stared back at me, the eye bags underneath them gone. My skin glowed, pale as ever, yet it was... shimmering. The hair that fell around the wound was caked red, yet the rest of my hair flowed flawlessly. In between my bangs, I saw something else. Something new.

Ivory, and pearlescent, it tore out of the bandages that had held it back. A single, solitary horn.

Mona Elarabi

A digital design student who writes in her free time. She enjoys writing about the experience of getting lost in your emotions and finding yourself in the mess.

And I don't know how to get across that sometimes being trans is

waking up as the cockroach every day

having to go to work regardless

sometimes it's talking about swapping body parts with friends

with giggling gravity, the way we used to trade pokémon cards

it's seeing each other as beacons because *there is a way to exist*

sometimes it's that the universe gave you a block of marble but you're both David and Michelangelo

carving yourself out one chip of stone at a time

always it is this. being created in his image and looking right back.

Ronja Thylén

Ronja Thylén is a literature student based in Edinburgh. They co-edit the queer Scandinavian lit mag *Tvers*.

body

I'm not in my head I'm in my body
moving around with the streams of my blood
sensing every itching patch of skin
every twinge of pain
every muscle synapse firing
I've left my thoughts in the fog
drowsed by the rhythmic,
dull thump
of my beating heart
scared to let it go

Marianne Eid

Marianne is a 23-year-old Norwegian Glaswegian lesbian who likes writing poetry about family, nature and women, and dislikes writing poetry about her health anxiety (which she does anyway).

HRTeeth

The pressure sensor on my toothbrush flashes at me. I ease off, but two seconds later it's blinking again. I ignore it. I've never really trusted the thing, anyway—I know my mouth better than some anxious piece of plastic. I spit white foam and run the tap, smiling as I picture all the overnight bacteria screaming as they're washed away.

After breakfast, I swill with mouthwash twice, following up with a pristine length of floss; ten strokes for each tooth, right up to the gumline. An interdental brush follows, probing into those difficult spaces where trapped remnants of my meal lurk in the dark and the wet, waiting for me to forget them so they can squirm in deeper. All it takes is one forgotten crumb, and the next thing you know you've got gingivitis, six fillings, and a root canal.

A thump on the bathroom door makes me jolt—hard bristles jab into my gum and I hiss. Paige, my housemate, pounds the door again.

“Hurry the fuck up, Casey!”

“Give me a minute!”

“You've had twenty—I'm about to piss myself.”

I sigh, and spit blood. Great. Now there's an open wound in my mouth. I wipe off my face, trying not to linger on how smooth my chin still is. I haven't done my Testogel yet today—doing it feels so pointless. Nothing's happening.

“Casey, I'm going to be late for work!”

I unlock the door, and she shoves past me. I leave her to her pissing and pre-work primping and go to dress, running my tongue over my teeth as I struggle into my binder. Twenty-eight, all in place. Nothing shifted, nothing swollen, no wisdom teeth emerging to upset the balance. Twice over and a third for luck—aside from the sore spot where I jabbed myself, all is well.

I'm still not sure what this appointment's about. I just got a text saying I had one. Some new bullshit to make getting my useless testosterone harder than it needs to be, probably. Four and half years just to get started on it; God save the NHS, right?

At least I get the morning off of work for this. Unpaid, but hey—nice to not be stocking shelves first thing. I fasten on a pronoun pin and double check I've got spare mouthwash in my work bag. My co-workers like to make fun of my swilling after my lunch break, but they won't change my mind.

You have to take care of your teeth.

“Thanks for coming in, Casey. Have a seat.”

I perch on the edge of the faded plastic chair. It creaks ominously. The doctor—and it's a doctor today, which surprises me; usually I get a nurse who glares at me like I'm wasting her time—taps away at her computer for a minute or so in silence. Going over my records, I guess. She's very tall and very thin, like a stick insect in a skirt-suit, and pale as porcelain.

“You've been on testosterone for eight months now, correct?” she asks, finally turning to me.

“Nine in a few weeks.”

“How are you finding the gel?”

“It's fine. I hate needles, so. You know. It's better.”

“How would you feel about trying a new delivery method?”

I frown. “I thought those were the only options.”

“It’s still a gel,” she says. “But it applies orally, instead of externally. Like...” she cocks her head and smiles brightly. She’s toothy—in a crocodile way, not a horse way. Too many, not too big. “Like Bonjela, but for hormones.”

I run my tongue over my gums. “Will it affect my teeth?”

“It’s perfectly safe,” she says. “You might experience faster physical changes, if that’s something you’re worried about.”

“I’m not,” I say quickly.

“Excellent.” The doctor unfolds from her chair—her knees click audibly, and I try not to wince. “You can pick up your prescription at the front.”

Five minutes later, I’m back out in the cold car park, clutching a small paper bag. Nearly nine months and all I have to show for it is a carpet of leg hair and acne. My voice has barely changed. I know things come in different for everyone, but I feel like I’m trapped in amber.

I fiddle with my pronoun pin as the bus rattles me home. Faster changes. She’d better be right.

Sat on the edge of the bath, I read the instructions on the folded paper carefully. It’s straightforward stuff: once a day, wash hands before and after, massage into gums, don’t eat or drink anything except water for an hour after application. I gnaw the inside of my lip.

It doesn’t say anything about when to clean your teeth.

I scan the tiny print again, hoping I’ve missed something. Before or after? How long in either direction? Will the chlorhexidine in my mouthwash affect it? Can I still use it if I cut my gum, like this morning? I could call the GP and ask, but even if they answer the phone, they’ll just tell me to read the instructions, or wait two weeks for another appointment.

I’ve waited years. Two more weeks might as well be a lifetime.

I decide to apply it before I go to bed. Easier to plan the whole eating thing. So that night, after I’ve brushed and flossed and brushed again, I peel back my lips with one hand and work thick, clear, scentless gel into my gums with the other. It leaves a faint, filmy taste in my mouth, one I can’t quite identify. Something medicinal and sweet.

I resolve to be extra diligent with cleaning while I’m using this—the last thing I need is some weird sugar hanging around for plaque bacteria to gorge on.

I lay in bed and tap my teeth with my tongue. Molars, pre-molars, canines, incisors, all rooted solidly in place. I count and count until I finally drift off. I’ve counted like that since I was a kid, and let me tell you—it’s a hundred times better than sheep.

Stubble springs up overnight—literally overnight, like I was paid a visit by transgender Santa. I gape into the mirror, running my hand over the rough, dark hair. I’m late for work because first of all, I have to shave—what the fuck, right?—and second of all, I have to have a bit of a cry on the bathroom floor about it. Finally! I could kiss that doctor—fucking *finally!*

A few days later, my voice drops. And when I say drops, I mean plummet, because I'm cracking through puberty on Monday, and by clock-off time on Wednesday, I sound deeper and smoother than my own brother. I ditch the pronoun pin no-one ever looked at with glee, and nearly give Paige a heart-attack when I call out that I'm home.

"I thought bloody Idris Elba was breaking in—you sure he's not out there?"

"I wish. Just me and a few hard-working hormones," I say, grinning. She rolls her eyes.

"Can you and your hard-working hormones clean the sink after you shave? It was rank in there when I got back."

I'll happily fish hair out of the plughole for the rest of my life. It's my hair. From my face. My face, growing my hair—I grin around my toothbrush, the me in the mirror one I've dreamt of for years, and every night I work gel into my gums and dive into bed, eager to see what new changes another morning on this miracle-T will bring.

At the three-week mark, I wake up, count my teeth, and one of my molars moves. My heart nearly stops. I probe it again—I've imagined movement before, mistaken slight natural shifts for incipient loss—and no, it's real. It's loose.

I race to the bathroom, breath sharp and shuddering, a hot flush of panic on the back of my neck. I fishhook myself, mouth wide, trying desperately to see. There's a thin line of blood at the gumline around the offending tooth; it thickens as I focus on it, dark and red and accusing.

"No, no, please—"

This can't be happening. I do everything right, I've done everything right my whole life; I'm not going to end up like my dad, gums full of gaps, more fillings than teeth. My dentist's sick of the sight of me—they banned me from getting check-ups more than every six months, because nothing's ever wrong because I *do everything right*.

I poke at the molar again with my tongue. I can't help it. As soon as I touch it, I know I've fucked up. Something falls into my mouth, hard and small and sharp, and I spit a chunk of enamel into my palm. I grip it tight in my fist, fighting back a sob.

I can't go to work like this. I call in sick, then call the dentist, pacing the living room while saccharine hold music tinkles into my ear for a small eternity. Their first available emergency appointment isn't until the middle of next week. I try to explain—there's a piece of me *missing*—but the receptionist ignores me.

"Eat carefully, brush gently, use mouthwash after your meals," she says. "Stay away from foods that'll get stuck."

"But I—"

"If anything comes free sooner, we'll let you know," she tells me, and that's it.

I hide in my room for the rest of the day, ignoring Paige when she knocks. I keep probing at the missing chunk, like maybe the next time I touch it, it'll be back to normal. It never is.

I apply my gel without looking, stroking the evening stubble along my jawline when I'm done. I can do this. It's a few days. It's one tooth. I'm a grown man.

It'll be fine.

A canine and a molar sit either side of the plughole. Water-thinned blood trails from their perfectly intact roots, swirling with spit-foam into the drain. I can't uncurl my fingers from my toothbrush, still buzzing in my hand. I close my eyes. Count to ten.

The teeth are still there.

I pick up the canine. There's hair coming in on the backs of my fingers, just like my dad has. The tooth is so small in my palm. Both of them are so small outside the safety of my jaw, yet the voids they've left are cavernous.

The phone drones a dial-tone into my ear—*beep, beep, beep* all day, hour after hour. Neither dentist nor GP pick up as the holes in my mouth continue to throb. She said it was fine, she said it wouldn't affect my teeth!

I make aborted starts to the door half a dozen times, meaning to go down there and get answers in person, but I can't go out. I can't talk like this, can't eat, can't drink—I don't even want to breathe. Middle of next week. That's all I can do, wait until the middle of next week for them to tell me it's fucked, my whole mouth is fucked; all the care I've taken, all the effort I've put in is for nothing.

I refuse to stop making the effort now. It doesn't matter if I haven't eaten, there's always a chance of something getting infected. That evening I steal one of the manual brushes from Paige's half-used packet of them, and carefully clean around the gaps, trying not to look too closely. The rest of my mouth I subject to the usual level of care, minty and meticulous.

But when I spit, it hits the sink with a heavy splat. Thick and clear, neither blood nor toothpaste. I run my tongue over my gums, sticky with residue.

All she said was that it was safe. She never said anything about my teeth.

There are teeth in my bed. I don't need to count how many, because there are none left in my mouth. Bloody drool coats my chin, and my breath hisses out in a strangled, high-pitched whine.

They grow back when you're a kid. You spend weeks crying about it until the spares erupt from your jaw, replacing your fragile baby teeth with something sturdier. When you're seven, you get a second chance.

You don't get one when you're twenty-seven.

For once, the receptionist picks up on the first ring. "Crown Dental Services, how can I help?"

Tears clog my throat, my mouth full of something metallic and sickly sweet. I don't know how to speak without teeth.

"Hello?"

My desperate plea—*you have to help me, they're all gone!*—comes out as a series of choked sobs.

The receptionist hangs up with a huff. I moan into my palms, splattering them with blood. Paige is at work. I'm all alone in an empty flat with an empty mouth, huddled on the bedroom floor with my racing pulse throbbing in my ruined gums.

I could kill that fucking doctor. What was her name—I’ve never seen her at the GP before. Who was she, that woman with too many teeth in her smile? Is this how she got them? I need to find her, make her fix this, there has to be a way to fix this!

It’s not the front door I end up walking through. It’s the bathroom. My neat box of dental care mocks me, all of it useless now. Lying beside it—the gel. The tube isn’t even halfway empty.

The boy in the mirror is a bloody-mouthed, tear-streaked mess, but he’s undeniably a *boy*. Less than a month. Less than a month and I look like I’ve been on T for years. I look the way I’m supposed to. I can’t go back. I won’t.

I pick up the gel. Close my eyes.

Pull back my lips.

“Crown Dental Services, how can I help?”

“I need to cancel an appointment.”

I can hear her frown as she types in my details. “It says here you reported a broken tooth. If that’s the case, we can reschedule—”

“I was mistaken.” I cut her off. “It wasn’t broken. It’s fine.”

“Sir, are you—”

I hang up. I don’t have time to waste arguing, I have to get to work. After last night, I don’t have to fight with a binder anymore, though my shirt’s almost too tight, snug over firm biceps and broad shoulders. I’ll have to ask if I can get a new uniform, go up a size.

I run my tongue over my teeth as I finish getting ready. Twenty, thirty, forty-five—it’s getting crowded in there, and it’s going to cost me a small fortune in floss, but I don’t mind.

After all, you have to take care of your teeth.

A.L. Thorne

A.L. Thorne has been writing since they figured out what words were, and nobody’s found a way to stop them yet. They delight in crafting queer weirdos for readers to get unreasonably attached to and sending them on adventures ranging from the fantastical to the erotic. You can find them procrastinating on their many works-in-progress on tumblr, [@space-writes](#).