

A DAILY DRUNK ANTHOLOGY EDITED BY KRISTIN GARTH

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editorial note

Death Is A Bear For All of Us

by Kristin Garth, editor of *A Drunken Midsommar*

Like all great films, *Midsommar* teaches you something new each time you watch it. On my second watch of the film, I noticed a poster Dani sleeps beneath in her apartment after the death of her family but before she goes to Sweden.

Like the murals of the Hårga, which we see when the visitors enter the housing for younger people, this picture is perfectly prescient of the plot to come. A little blonde girl with a crown (much like Dani) kisses a bear on the nose (much like Christian in his final form). Of course this meant nothing to me the first time I watched the film because I knew nothing about Dani or Christian's future. On the second viewing, I was like what? This was there all along? And I googled.

It turns out the artist is Swedish; his name is John Bauer. Bauer was an illustrator of fairytales. Besides *Poor Little Bear*, Bauer famously painted a girl crowned with fern and candles. It's called *Lucia*. Its influence on *Midsommar* is evident.

Like many of the characters in *Midsommar*, John Bauer had an early appointment with death. At the young age of 36, he was traveling with his toddler son and wife and made a fateful decision. It is as fateful as the decision Christian, Josh and Mark make in going to Sweden. Hearing of a terrible train wreck, Bauer makes a last minute change in his accommodations to avoid such a fate. His family travels by boat instead — a boat that sinks killing his family.

I found so much parallel meaning in not only the art of Bauer but his life and death as well. Bauer, like all of us, feared death and did his best to avoid it. He failed, as we all will fail ultimately. We will look death in the eye like the bear we always knew was waiting for us in the guise of disease, a murderer, mental illness, whatever its form.

I wrote *Poor Little Bear* after the painting of its name by Bauer and its influence on *Midsommar*. We may never go to Sweden or experience the film's brutal rituals regarding death. But we have our own rituals and superstitions and dance with death that convey the fatalism and despair this experience imbues in all of us. We all bow before the poor little bear, that is death, in our own ways, before it ultimately devours us, too.

Poor Little Bear

*after Midsommar and Poor Little Bear
a print above Dani's bed by the Swedish
painter John Bauer*

Before familicide, Midsommar, death
kept close at hand as Ativan, you
repose, lips primrose, exhaling baby's breath
below bear, princess a Swedish artist drew.
The beast of death his own eyes peered young
into, at 36, he picks a boat trip,
abstains from the dangers of the train. Lungs
of lake water slay him, his wife and son, flipped
by excessive weight of freight, 1918.
Did you know this when you looked at them?
The kiss of death proffered by a tiny queen
upon the muzzle of a death machine seems
as much nightmare as a fairytale —
as is a life in which none of us prevails.

poetry

The Queen Must Ride Alone by Taylor Brunson

To flower mountainous
in a pulsing world,
I may never stop dancing again,
throat blooming a wail.

In a pulsing world,
grief: a swallowing
throat, a blooming wail,
brains blossoming on impact.

Grief, a swallowing
world growing through me.
Brains, blossoms, impact,
flickering gulp of pyres,

a world growing through me
again and again and again.
Flickering, gulping pyres
for everything I've loved—

again, again, again
you exhaust me,
a thing I've loved
just to be held.

You, exhaust, me.
Another thing to bear
just to feel held,
you have become

another thing to bear
in fire and smoke.
You have become
all my wild laughter.

In fire and smoke,
I flower mountainous.
O, my wild laughter,
I may never stop dancing again.

MONTAGE WITH EXES by MICHAEL CHANG

ur a triple threat like awkwafina

ur lies my sustenance

ur perfume my poison

tell me how u crave love

ur cult of no-personality

husks of boys, formerly young kings, in silent worship

they kneel, backs turned, hands empty

u mistake them for stone angels in a garden

or ghost maps on funny paper

they fall, catching themselves, glint of white roses swaying

the room rendered a void,

there will be no shot of recognition

i could not save u from urself

but do not despair

let's try this again

bare home by Ashley Bullen-Cutting

no entry
go away
hose not hoes
remember
before

*you can't
write me something like that
and just disappear*

meanwhile
not asleep
mum and dad
not arguing
turn to winter

family fumigation
a flower at a time

unheld by Sam Distefano

she took them so she would never be alone again, leaving you
with only his words, a quilt of pity and cruelty unraveling when
you become too much for him to bear, he tears you
from agony and thrusts you into alien light, leaving you
grasping desperately for the ribbon, the stem, whipping,
pollinated with the violence of continuing to exist, unheld
and sun-soaked, for the first time
seeing yourself for what you are

exhaustion, the ceremony BY KAILEY TEDESCO

i could never love you the way i love a triangle— i'm mangled,
or else so full of snarl, tears with the energy of a tantrum-child.
grief blisters from me in runes of mayflower
& crinoline. un-whisked, i can remember where you lived
when all the lungs i knew best
laid flat & wingless, no limbs garden-raising
from the breath of a bear, pre-roar. here i am well-softened
& then hardened for good, my cries water the blooms
so that i'm consumed in the extinguishing of your flames.
where were you when i had a gut-feeling, when i had a big birthday,
when there was no one else? we mourn collectively
in our newly grown gowns, un-slumbered & humming,
watching ourselves get sick & sweating with the dance
& the crowns & severed bleeding hearts we thought we really wanted.

The Beckons by Amy Alexander

Fine linen for the fire
Throat burning from a choir of No
Slouching in sodden snow
I am easy to know. Open.
My face a button of Astrid.
Purple bruise hue, blasted by wind
And grief. You glean thin-skinned lost girls
For the wreath, thorns and curls
May Queens, ribbons to twirl. Ask: "Are
You held by him?" My scar
Beckons. "Days are longer now, see?
Come find a home with me."

LAST SUMMER IN HÅRGA by Rachael Crosbie

1. SMOKING HENBANE

When I smoked them, the yellowyoke petals spoke of the dead. They bloated from folk skies and white suns. Wheeled with ghosts, I choked on the roads ahead, silked and woolen and fevered, weeping in my throat.

2. LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

He soaked me with light, the glow swollen and sallow and bright, in front of a two-way mirror. The Other basked in shadows, bloated whispers. A smile broke—

3. BUTCHERED ANIMAL

He basted my lips with so much cherry gloss, dripping from a sloshed sun, to kiss me for the last time. Summer soured my skin, the warmth sitting heavy like spoiled custard. He sunk his bright teeth in me, to swallow brassblood and crave me more as butchered animal than girl.

Catchstitch by Kolleen Carney Hoepfner

Every flower you crushed in your fists
made its way into my mouth eventually. Your kerosene
kept me slick and dangerous. Have you ever been held
by a lilac's base note? It smells like rot, tastes like rot.
Have you ever breathed deeper
than a poppy field? Touched
a never ending sun? I promise you, eventually
you stop picking at the blisters
and just let the blackened tissue crackle
on your teeth and tongue.

My love. My bright and morning star.
Your fumes became my acrid breath
and I am still choking on your ghost after all this time.
I am still screaming into the breasts of my sisters
your name, like an incantation. Sisterhood can't save me,
I've learned. It can only sync with my tide,
stain my bedclothes. Their fingers trace my spine every night.

When you open your eyes don't be frightened.
I am only an idea you once had now. I am only a distant dream,
your unwilling maypole tethered by your calloused hands.
Think about how painful it is for me to be so revered.
Think about how delicious it could be, to finally be the bear.

Hive by Donatella du Plessis

We are held too hard in our man-made hive
Bees that do not swarm
Awakened each day by the light
Of an artificial sun

Whether dreaming, or dream-reading
We are solitary never
Who would not wish to be a Queen
If it meant riding alone?

That's ...Not How Bipolar Disorder Works by Shannon Frost Greenstein

I have known the depths of darkness
anguish disguised as apathy, brain devouring itself like an ouroboros
sinking through the miasma and into the melancholy realm
where everything is futile; where there is no redemption.

But I just watched *Midsommar*, and that's not how Bipolar Disorder works.

I have stayed awake for days
high on my own neurotransmitters, anxiety sparking from my fingertips
psyche vibrating while my hands refuse to settle
and absolute crap with impulse control.

But I just watched *Midsommar*, and that's not how Bipolar Disorder works.

I have frightened those I love
made threats I did not intend, cries for help manifesting as tempest
mental illness speaking with my voice
and desperate for someone to provide a respite.

But I just watched *Midsommar*, and that's not how Bipolar Disorder works.

I have had bad ideas before
schemes birthed in a flash of insight, better left undiscovered
I have failed to consider natural consequences
and regretted my reckless decisions.

But I just watched *Midsommar*, and that's not how Bipolar Disorder works.

I have yet to be homicidal
a danger to others, prone to breakdowns of the schizoid nature
I am not the insanity typically attributed to my gender
or to my disease.

But I just watched *Midsommar*, and that's not how Bipolar Disorder works.

I have learned to cope
with this Achilles' Heel, the maelstrom of mania and depression
to successfully navigate life in this world
and to be capable of joy.

Because *that's* how Bipolar Disorder works.

self portrait wearing a dress made out of flowers by Wanda Deglane

after Midsommar (2019), dir. Ari Aster

I want you to tell me the world is green and
beautiful / and everyone is dancing / tell me
I can scream for as long as I want / and
I'll someday be able to make myself stop /
I want to be crumpled against somebody's
chest / but these days being held / feels
more like being beartrapped / bearskinned /
these flowers growing heavy on my shoulders /
this daylight seeping from my mouth / tell me
if I light my heartbreaks on fire / I might see
a better me in the ashes / glowing
honey-skinned and smiling / tell me we're
tumbling end over end over this cliff / and
we'll just spread our lungs like wings and fly.

As the yellow house came down by Nick Olson

We'd gone in having watched the first trailer,
had seen *Hereditary*, but that was it.
Popcorn in Winston's little arthouse,
a/perture screening, scooting into the end of an aisle.

It was the slow unfolding for me,
then Dani's cry, guttural,
cue title, cue music,
cue Ari Aster fucking both of us up.

I think we saw both of our exes
in Christian,
a gaslight sprinkle here, insult dash there,
and the audacity of leaving something like that.

Cutting away our codependencies
and trauma bonding,
watching the Hårga watch,
and the soundless drop of bodies onto stone.

Coming out a little bit,
think I dissociated with Dani,
and you said holy shit or holy fuck,
can't remember quite which now.

And the way that people ask,
But how can you be tricked into
something like that? How can you
let someone hurt you?

And hoping they never find out for themselves.

Catharsis isn't something common
in horror films, isn't a requirement or often
even a consideration. But Dani had it, and I
think we did too.

So we spun with her,
and watched flowers dilate,
studied color differences in drinks,
story visualized in paintings, tapestries.

As the yellow house came down
and the flames went up, transition into
Dani's smile,
we let out all we'd been carrying.

majdrottning by Shyla Jones

we are only as holy
as the runes say we are
the rock bleeds under
fog and we kiss the soft
eyed girl until she skins
herself and feeds us her
skeleton like pig's feet
ättestupa ättestupa
ättestupa ättestupa
spring has sprung so
let us hammer skulls
into fertilizer throw
rotting bodies into
floral senicide and
wear the shells of
artless men to seduce
the bear we sing our
song and together it
consumes like fire
until she sweats out
the noose tied around
her neck and twirls
around it in the sun
instead we are always
splitting apples with
our mouths feeling
tulips crunching down
our swollen throats
majdrottning we are
kissing your fruit by
the maypole the
burst of blommor
on your neck like
sun flare flowering
for every decade
hereafter

It's Always the May Queen's Choice to Make by Jack B. Bedell

Empathy's easy to come by
when we see a bear locked
inside a cage so small
it can barely spin around.
Our hearts want to unbind
its chains, set it free to run
into open field. Maybe just
not the field we're standing in.
And as much as we know
how trapped this bear is,
how locked into its own
skin, how many of us would
choose to strip our own bodies bare,
be lifted off our chair and placed
into the bear's warm belly,
to feel its blood bond to our
naked selves until we are truly
one creature set free by flames
to float as ash on air?

Lunar Dust by Louise Mather

If the blossom
does not flare -

standing between you
and the precipice,

stooping dust of lunar
shadows, coiled

summer soaked
to flesh,

haunted by the trail
of elixirs

the moulding of breath,
vermilion in the river.

Is this not the dream
you had as a child -

from the first thorn,
to know

how everything will end-
with feathered skulls,

runes clasped to bark.

How to Deprogram Yourself After Leaving a Cult by H.E. Casson

First:

break the very smallest of the cult-created rules
break it often
break it softly

(perhaps a word, forbidden)
(perhaps a lie, unhidden)

until you have defanged it
till it's failing to elicit
a chest flutter
a breath catch
a dizzy spell

until the hell they promised
comes in waves
and not deluges
flow and ebbing
your refuge is just another line
un-ruled
you've learned to cross

say it loud: you're not the boss
of me

Next:

you practice being free

spend a day where you do nothing
I mean nothing
full-on nothing

put the leisure back in pleasure
sleep till dinner
and don't measure
out your portions

drink an ocean
eat a forest
dance arrhythmic to the chorus
or just stop
I mean stop
full-on stop
Then:
go
but when you want to

go to places where they want you
to discover what you want to do
instead of what they want you to

and leave
before they say you can

make a plan
and then erase it
build a shrine
and then deface it

spackle over all your cracks
with sticky tac

And then:
don't ever go back

This is My Home by December Lace

I reign in fields of flowers, a crown of blooms upon my head.

I am no longer anchored inside closets of grief,
chained to nightmares and drowning in sorrow,

my severed roots twisting aimlessly in spurts
of agony and rage beneath my skin.

I reign in fields of flowers, a crown of blooms upon my head,
the howls of grief no longer racking my soul.

This is my catharsis, this is my flowered tomb,
how I will spend the rest of my days-

not collapsed inside a sheltered body of assigned flesh,

but a devoted member to a collective whole, a communal cry,
my smile plucked deep from the underworld and given as One,
reigning in fields of flowers, the howls of grief no longer
racking my soul, a crown of blooms upon my head.

(un)blooming by Samantha Fain

after Lucille Clifton

*won't you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into
a kind of life?*

again I have remade myself
into what I need most:

pleasure, a pile of happy
flowers. the burning

warms me—we hold
each other. I do not need

convinced of my peace.
I gesture towards light,

offer my heat and cement
my body again as sacred.

I forget all my befores
and live in newness.

what did I see to be except

a softer violence, a mouth
that drinks the juice of ripe fruit,

tears skin open just for the burst?
similar to sunrise. similar to how

*everyday
something has tried to kill me*

but this time I killed myself first.

Atop the cliff by Magi Sumpter

i

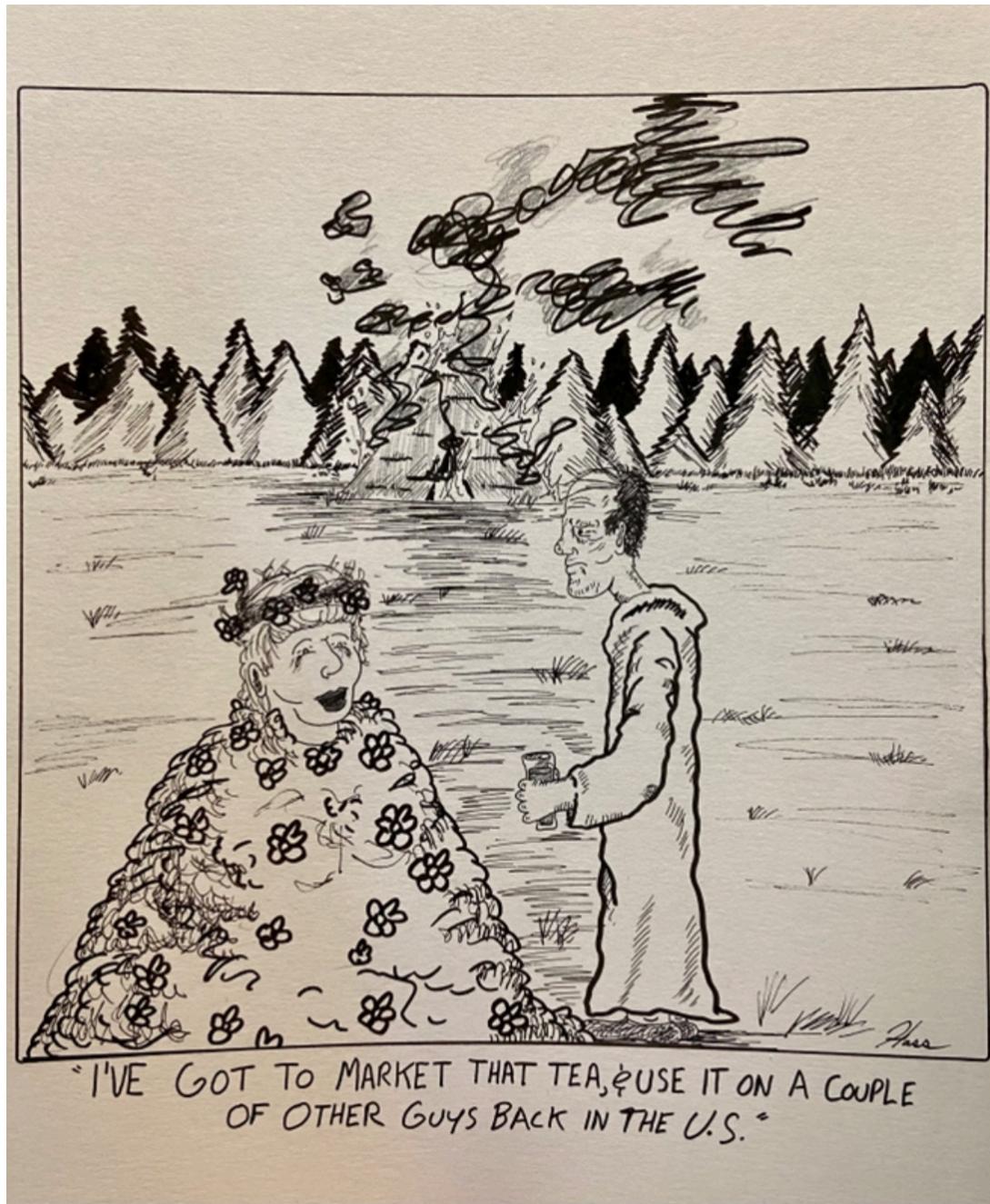
Atop the cliff,
wander through
green meadows
above. The sky
calls below me,
a wintry mix of
cloud and carmine,
louder than your
own mortality.

ii

Atop the cliff,
find ourselves
among the gods,
smearing life in
with solid earth,
so that we might
be remembered
as gods ourselves.
Our children look
up from the sun
and smile.

i

Atop the cliff,
soar downwards
to the heavens below,
the frozen smile all
you need to survive
the trial. I will follow
you soon, praying
this aerial serenity
is the first thing
I remember.



Cartoon by JOHN "HOSS" TAYLOR

flash fiction

the disco tech by Monique Quintana

There once was a doll who couldn't hide the way she watched her own legs in the grass. Little did she know this was the prelude to another dimension where she and her best boy doll would be wedded. On her favorite day of the year, not her birthday but not her death day, her bones began to make her a dress of balloons and cellophane. A song began to make its way out of her mouth as a garden path open up for her, lined with mannequin heads and synthetic hair flying in the sky like ribbons. That morning was a bear, a realization that the boy she planned to love just wasn't right for her. The clouds sketched her a pistil-shaped drinking glass to celebrate how the rag lovers would hate each other now and forever after. She began to dance to the beat of perpetual daybreak. The strawberry shot honey rained down her hands to make truce gloves, but she rejected them. Little rag doll sisters emerged and began to bake her rib cage brightly as a wooden tavern light. Its inflammation made the strobe lights there, and they all danced inside them. *Dress flowers dress flowers are a cheap waste of time*, they said. Our doll heroine began to slide on the grass, slick and slower than the rollerball lip gloss on her face in her passport photo. She thought it would be the best party ever, but it wasn't, still she danced on anyway.

Spinning Under Flowers by Palaces P.

You are shivering, rhythmic on one side of the room, and on the other I'm sitting in my coat. You come see me when I become suicidal, and you tell me that you wrote a short story. It is the best news that I have ever heard. A girl wants to tell me that I am sexy, and then we are yelled at for peeing too much before we got here because oh damn this stuff made my pussy wet, and it was so wet that I started to have a river in my head, too. And the stuff was purple, sort of like my dress, because it got mixed up in your bag with your dye from the Frosh week. How funny is that? Later, I cannot speak. I can only ask if someone turned on the lamp in the mid-night. You say that you didn't—but, oh, the purest flame inside my closed lids

Burning Men by Briar Ripley Page

Day of the flower ritual, day of the sacrifice, longest and brightest, day of days. You are among the

chosen, and you are honored to stand on the stage with the others. You understand that you are being

given a gift— that you are being given *as* a gift— that the next few hours will be beautiful, suffused with

joy and power. The captives, struggling weakly at their bonds through a haze of narcotic drugs, don't

understand anything. Their chairs clatter as they rock back and forth, muscles and fat bulging between

coarse, tight ropes. They roll their eyes around like frightened horses. It won't matter to the gods of the

poppy and the field. Their bones will be accepted into the earth just as yours will be. Their flesh will be

taken up by the sun and the air, ensuring another year of lush crops and fair weather.

Your sister puts a crown of reeds and bluebells on your head; she gives you a reed doll to hold.

Because you are a child of the faith, you will not feel any pain. All the agony of death will pour out from

your skin and into the doll's woven limbs. You thank your sister with a smile, although you are no longer

allowed to speak.

A toast, a song, a dance. The high priestess blesses you and your brothers in sacrifice green. She

doesn't bother blessing the captives, who would not accept her blessing anyway. Two of them seem to

have passed out. The third is moaning and shaking his head. Sun

turns his curly hair and beard stubble
from dirt to copper. If he were not drugged, and faithless, and afraid,
he would be by far the most
handsome among you.

The high priestess stands before the crowd. She says a few
words. She says exactly as many words as
she needs to say. Then the mayor mounts the stage and drones for a
while about community and pride and

strength and the cycles of the seasons. The love inherent in the act
of giving one's life for the continuation

of a greater whole. The mayor enjoys his own voice; he's probably
the only one who does. You fidget

with your reed doll as he talks and talks. When you look at the
copper-haired man again, he's succumbed

to unconsciousness. Drool leaks out of his mouth and trickles down
the side of his tan, muscular neck.

Your mouth is dry, you realize. You wish you could have some
water. You wish you had paid closer

attention to the taste, the coolness, when you were given your last
draught earlier.

The mayor is finished. Finally. The climax of the flower ritual is at hand.

All the young, unmarried women check that the bundles of
sticks, hay, reeds, sweetgrass, and dried
blossoms around the stage are packed tight. They make adjustments
as needed. Everybody else retreats to

a safe, respectful distance. Your sister makes eye contact with you
once, lifting a bale to a higher position

on the pyre. Her eyes gleam with wetness. She nods and smiles. Her
fingers shake between the twigs.

When they've finished, the Poppy Maiden in her red dress makes
a signal. The other women, all in

white, step back, forming a wide circle around the stage and the stacked kindling.

The Poppy Maiden sprinkles accelerant over you and your companions, over the boards of the stage,

over everything. She does this with unhurried precision, like she's solving a math problem.

She strikes the long match. Drops it. Retreats.

Ignition.

You watch the flames swirl up in great, spitting orange ribbons. The women have begun to sing a

threshing song. You look into the summer sky, bluer than any water. Your mouth is still dry. Your feet and

legs are starting to get uncomfortably hot. Your eyes tear up, and smoke threads through your lungs.

The copper-haired man catches fire. You smell him burning, a cooked animal with crackling skin. His

hair is lost in black and red and gold. A shimmer of incredible heat. As far as you can tell, he never wakes

up.

When the edges of your trouser legs start to crisp and ripple with flame, you're not afraid. You clutch

your reed doll and wait for the glory. Soon you'll be one with the sun and the air.

A shock of pain takes you by surprise. You are too surprised even to scream. The pain, itself a kind of

long, red, searing scream, takes your voice away. You're watching your own flesh crackle and char now.

This is not supposed to happen. You're supposed to be protected.

But it turns out the fire doesn't care about spells or rituals or fear or faith. The reed doll combusts all

at once between your blistering palms. You bite through your tongue. You can't breathe.

The village and its people are lost to your vision in the fire and the smoke, though you

can still hear

singing. You cannot see your sister. You cannot pick her voice out of the multitude.

You cannot see her, but you want to tell her about your mistake, about the truth of the world, grim and

almost funny. You want to tell her that none of it matters. That drugged and bound or crowned and

willing, no matter our beliefs, we all go the same. And it hurts more than anything else.

God's Hand by Tahlia McKinnon

i wondered, often, why we only ever made love outside. then, one night, as we lay rooted to the forest floor, our wiry limbs entwined, he asked me how it felt to have god's hand upon me. to have angels bear witness to my beauty. and i understood, then. why his benevolent touch sometimes felt like thorns through my flesh. why the pain was always so exquisite.

lately, he has been telling me that nature has forgotten me. plants the words like a half-grown kiss upon my cheek; lips taut like apple skins. i see black roses blooming from between his teeth. and the earth feels suddenly unwholesome underneath me.

i find myself thinking back to that very first time. on the beach, when we stood with hot sand underfoot, tongues spilling like froths of seafoam. my half-formed hands were slick with sunscreen and sweat. sprawled, we melted into the soupy sediment, naked bodies pallid and ablaze.

after, we'd sat staring out to sea. i had never seen it before, not in real life. *nature reveals the truth of our own*, he had breathed, voice strangled by half-slumber. his words crashed against the dark whisper of the waves, part seductive and harrowing to me. i couldn't place why.

we had stirred from our sleep, eyes gritty like pitted olives. the sea curling frozen fingers around our toes. wind kicking up sand like an impatient child. and i was an impatient child then, too. i wanted him, again – though the sun had scored our backs and singed our flesh. the ocean's stigmata.

between hot heady kisses, he had asked me of my dreams. and i found myself telling him. split open like an oyster; equal parts shiny and dark. see, i had the same dreams every night.

standing at the edge of the earth, unclothed and alone. always, i try to pray, but find i have run out of words. it is such a dark and desolate place; i feel it change me. the waves below begin to crack like knuckles. the smell of sea brine hangs so thickly in the air, that my stomach starts to churn in the same rhythmic patterns as the water. the wind begins to roar; grows wilder. the ground rumbles beneath my feet. sky turns blood-shark black. my skin crawls with my soul; puckers and blisters like salt of the earth. and suddenly, i know that i am about to die in the most violent of ways. but it's as if my life finally makes sense to me – now that it's ending.

i had worried that i'd scared him. but he had told me, then, of how he pitied me. exposed to so much, so young. *when i was your age, life's grievances were like catching fish in bare hands. they would sooner slip from your grip. now, your lot must learn to gut them first.*

and i had smirked then. because i knew how we survived it. how humans were such dirty, filthy creatures after all. i asked him what he thought it meant. the recurring night terror. if i was cursed; damned; condemned. *i walk a path of faith, not fear* - he had insisted. but i had never known the difference.

even in the years that followed, after we had scorched ourselves in midsummer meadows, fingered desires in nondescript fields, lay each other down in lakes, leaves, under canopies of trees – i never knew what secrets lay scattered in the soil, coiled up like little slugs. and come dusk, before i ever had a chance to ask him, in a flash of suburban dust – he'd disappear.

and now, he only tries to harvest my darkness. fell me down and dig out my sadness. still, he can't see how like a tree i truly am; gnarly ugly roots the realest part of me – never the flowers.

Catharsis by Shawn S. White

It's over, Lyn.

It's over, Lyn.

It's over.

Underneath the heat of the waning streetlamp, he was breaking up with me. We left my apartment eight hours ago, smiling. At least, *I* was smiling. Now, I stood in the heat of dawn wondering why I didn't wear my tennis shoes instead of my pumps and why my boyfriend was breaking up with me. The bitterness of the salt in my eyes obscured my sight, and he stood in front of me like a watercolor painting, mixes of dark hues.

“What?” Was all I could muster.

He turned in circles, from what I could tell, stammering. The sun bled behind him, an orange-gold fusing with his flesh colors.

We're done.

I dragged my sleeve across my face, staining my new red top. For a moment, my sight was clear, but he was cast in shadow. What was he thinking? Then, the tears welled, and the world was a messy canvas yet again.

Then, “What did I do?” Did I say that? The voice was my own, but the thought was not.

Nothing. It's just me. I'm not r....

His voice felt far, then I realized his back was turned to me. Each syllable was drowned out by the passing, honking taxis and staggering, mumbling drunkards wandering around us.

“What?”

I'm just not ready! Do I have to repeat it? You know how hard this is for me?

He was looking at me again, I could tell. His voice was clear, but his face was blurred, contorted, as I tasted more salt against my tongue.

“I thought you loved me,” I said, struggling to breathe underneath the words, the air pumping in and out, in and out.

I always will. But not like that. You're very special to me.

Then, his hand was on my face, rubbing away the streaks. His fingers were cold against my warm skin, as I bathed in the rising sun. His yellow shirt was suddenly clear to me as he brought his arm back to his side, and I realized how much I'd always hated it. But never until now. Then, he reached down. He picked something up.

Here. I know you love these little flowers that grow on the street.

He ripped a dandelion from the dirt and decorated my head with it. His fingers felt like claws as he mangled my hair, placing the flower in an uncomfortable position where it drooped over my face and pulled on my roots.

You look beautiful.

The tears slowed, and his face was morphing back to normal. His crooked nose stuck out to me, and it was suddenly too long and pointy. His ears were small, too.

Take care of yourself, okay?

Then, he hugged me. My body went still. I felt nothing. His breath reeked after all the wine and sushi we'd consumed. His odor nauseated me, probably from all the dancing. When he let go, I breathed. How long did that hug last? I think he smiled at me, and then began walking away—into the street.

I closed my eyes and waited for him to vanish out of sight, until maybe I woke up and was back in bed, rearing my head from drunken nightmares. I didn't feel the glass sting me until I opened my eyes again and saw him lying on the hood of a taxi. His head had gone through the windshield, and the glass scattered everywhere. He bled into his awful yellow shirt, and his mangled body looked like a human hamburger. His face was clear, glass shards piercing his eye sockets and nostrils. He was looking at me—with what was left of his face, anyway.

Around me, a mother was crying as she held her child who couldn't help but stare on. A man was screaming for help. The taxi driver was limping as he stumbled out of his car, weeping.

The morning was warm, like an embrace. I took a deep breath and stared into the sky, and smiled.

Satisfied Customers by Tim Gaydos

It was a simple phone call that brought him here.

“They need a bear, an adolescent. Preferably one already tamed.”

Animal trafficking was one of the many hats Kristoff wore so he thought nothing of it at the time. It wasn’t until he was in route and realized just how far off the beaten path the directions provided were taking him that he began to wonder what he had gotten himself into. When the man who introduced himself as Father Odd offered him a drink, Kristoff could only answer yes. Father Odd was so warm and welcoming when Kristoff had arrived with the bear, turning down the offer would be rude. He had to drink it, even if it did taste too sweet to be spring water. Now, Kristoff found himself sitting in the grass next to his ex wife as the wind began to swirl all the colors of the trees together.

“It was a mistake to come here,” she told him. “One more mistake you can add to your list.”

Slowly Kristoff turned and looked at the woman he had claimed to love, back when she was flush with her family’s money. He tried to open his mouth and speak but it was weighed down with loathing. She smiled without warmth as blood trickled down the side of her head from the hole she put there once Kristoff had taken everything and left.

He could hear the shapes of voices. They were discussing him. That was all Kristoff understood. “You are quite the topic it seems,” his ex wife’s voice surrounding him. “Neither villager nor visitor. Isn’t that something.”

Kristoff’s hands were vibrating now. He looked down at them, these hands that had swindled so many. They were talented hands, adept at many forms of mischief. Now they swayed in stillness, growing and blossoming from his skin. They were miraculous, these hands. The ones that so long ago moved chess pieces across the board as his father tried to teach him the game. “You sacrifice the pawns,” the old man had instructed. Kristoff took that lesson to heart but never cared for the game itself, for the patience required. His father would always wear disappointment from across the table, the same face he would wear when Kristoff signed the documents declaring the old man of unsound mind. The same face now peering back at Kristoff from his own hands.

That wasn’t right. That didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense.

Kristoff looked back up at his ex-wife, pleading. *I’m sorry*, he said with his eyes. *I’m sorry for everything.*

Astrid looked back at him with flowers blooming from the sockets. “It doesn’t matter,” Kristoff felt her say.

Suddenly Kristoff realized he was walking, being led away from Astrid as the grass seemed to part before his path. There were people on either side of him grasping his shoulders, all

smiles and pleasantries. They spoke but the words flowed over him with little friction, leaving only a general imprint. They were pleased, but no longer needed Kristoff. It was a good thing, the wind told him.

Ahead of them stood a figure who held something large in his hands. It looked very heavy, and Kristoff knew it was meant for him. As he knelt down in front of the figure Kristoff heard his father once again. "You sacrifice the pawns." For one last moment, Kristoff understood.

essay

Picking The Yellow Wallflower Backwards by Nicks Walker

Summer is magical, even when you know how it's done. I can understand why we might burn each other alive to ensure the end of winter, or the sunrise. That part of me is a tiny animal lost in the gaze of yellow. Yellow is an outlier, an in-between. It is the colour of smiley faces, anthrax, Pikachu and daffodils. It is a primary colour in pigment, but not in light – so, for man made things, for art, but not for nature. Yet it is the colour of flowers – petal crowned bundles of genitals, feeding our bodies and our ecosystems, pouring up out of the ground in semi-perfect, repetitive, mathematically generated patterns. Yellow is where the geometric and the organic meet. It appears where our animal brains – pattern crunching machines – are most primal, and primed to perceive miracle. The ineffable blessings of the day and of the end of winter, the meta-dawn. Yellow marks the boundary between life and death.

Midsommar is a film about eating life and digesting grief. It is deeply about the horror and ecstasy of yellow.

Firefighters follow a long yellow tube to the annihilated bodies of Dani's family. Tuned up against a muted blue background, these incursions of yellow are as unnatural and natural as death. They are rubber and plastic, inorganic, a warning – poison. But the men, in their black and yellow stripes, are also bees, dispassionately harvesting. There is fertility abundant, if dormant, in the sterile tragedy of winter.

The scale of yellow's incursion on a blue world escalates as midsummer dawns. A yellow pyramid looms over Dani – a discordant meeting of fake and real, natural and constructed, obscenity and the divine. Yellow is in the bowls, the meals, the pubic-hair laced tarts, and most of all, the flowers of the Hårga. The reverence for yellow is absolute in a community that worships the balance of life and death. Young girls pick yellow flowers backwards, killing the small things in celebration of their life. Yellow flowers fill the eyes of a sacrificial corpse, displayed, hung by wings of inverted lungs. Yellow is the obscenity of miracle, the point where horror becomes beauty – something that the Hårga doesn't just understand, but venerates.

Christian is disgusted by a casual gift of the flowers because he sees sacrifice, obligation, in their giving. Nothing is given with no intention of receiving. The yellows of midsummer, the height of day, the prime of adulthood, flowers in bloom, are all situated at the crest of life. Christian is horrified by the yellow flowers as he is horrified by his adult body, the pressure of decision, and the risk of change – his fertility and his impotence. He feels plucked by Dani – killed and trapped in his prime, and obliged to give her life in return for his murder. He isn't strictly right, but he is attuned to his social context, the cultural physics of the Hårga. (At this point, if no other, he is a promising anthropologist.)

The flowers, crushed, create the psychedelic yellow-water which the Hårga use to break down internal boundaries and connect, unclouded, to nature. Ingesting the yellow brings Dani and Christian into a dance of life and death, artificially juxtaposed and entwined. Dani dances, speaks, grieves, eats, is crowned, and kills. Christian is raped, paralysed, stuffed into a bear, and burned alive. The themes of the yellow-trip are organic, but it is fundamentally inorganic – a naturalistic sequence of events engineered by the Hårga around characters, archetypes. It is a fertility ritual, deliberate and man-made. They are in the yellow-zone, a hyperreality where opposing binaries are compressed into a single bursting flower of movement, mathematically precise. They are victims of the lunacy of patterns and shapes – the ever-compelling belief that human action must turn the wheels of the natural world. Psychedelics only intensify the human lens on reality.

There is a Swedish saying - “*Gult är fult*” - meaning, approximately, yellow is ugly¹. It is not surprising that we find yellow ugly. It is not surprising that it scares us. The miraculous inorganic fertility of yellow does something to the human brain – it says, this cannot just be happening. We did this, somehow – and if we want to survive, we need to do it again. This is a tragic heuristic, and one Midsommar understands deeply.

Midsommar is about the profound liberation of being ecstatically human – of being social, physical and worshipful, of fucking and screaming and grieving, of celebrating the gifts that come with loss, and the losses that come with gifts. It is also about delusions of synchronicity, patterns, and the perceived demands of nature. There is horror in the way we seek balance, in our everyday ritualism, in the rush of grotesque joy we feel when we watch another person grieve or fuck or burn. We are, despite our artificiality, a part of nature. We cannot academically distance ourselves from ourselves. The incursion of yellow, the fertilisation of the egg, the rise of the sun, are magical. Midsommar reminds us of the danger in that magic - especially when we think we know how it's done.

1 Midsommar Production designer Henrik Svensson (<https://www.frameweb.com/article/the-creepiest-character-in-the-midsommar-movie-its-the-spatial-design>)

Monstermania by Josh Sippie

I used to host “Scary Movie Tuesday” in college. Every Tuesday, another new horror movie, another new monster. We watched everything from *Insidious* to *The Conjuring* to *Innkeepers* and a general through line creased the lot of them—monsters, dead or alive or somewhere in between. Once you met the monster, all that fear you’ve been building up over the course of the movie was put to the test. If the monster was terrifying, your fear was given a face.

If the monster was lacking, your fear fizzled like a deflating balloon and the movie lost its edge.

It got to the point where no monster, no zombie or demon or ghost, stood out from any other. Except *Sinister*, but that’s a talk for another day. Which means—nothing justified true terror anymore. Every movie, you build up this anticipation to see the manifestation of evil and it ends up looking like a low-budget birthday party clown. I used to do this trick, in the early days of Scary Movie Tuesday, where I’d watch the corner of the screen to avoid seeing the monster head on. But I didn’t even need that anymore.

Then came *Midsommar*. My mother-in-law invited me to watch it after a particularly long conversation about scary movies. She’d seen it before, I hadn’t. Just us two. I went in with this brazen confidence that I was the scary movie champion, I’d seen it all, I couldn’t be scared.

“I hosted a scary movie night every Tuesday,” I told her for probably the third time, sitting on my \$100 fold-out Wal-Mart futon with zebra-print fleece throw.

“This isn’t like those movies,” she said.

“That’s what they say about *The Conjuring* too.”

As we watched, from about the third minute on, I was sweating, tensed, gritting my teeth. I deflected my discomfort with jokes, pretending like everything was okay. Everything was distinctly *not* okay. I hated *Midsommar*. I truly, deeply hated it. I still do. I wanted every moment to be the last. I didn’t want to feel these things I was feeling. I didn’t want to think about the things that were etched into my brain like Sumerian cave paintings.

You want to know why I hate flowers? *Midsommar*. I used to think bears were my spirit animals. Guess who ruined that? *Midsommar*.

It all stemmed from my inability to put my finger on the villainous evil. I couldn’t find the painted face of a monster, the horns of a devil, the teeth of a beast. The monster was human. Those old folks who broke their heads open like gourds on the rocks? That was humanity. Burning folks alive? Humanity. Stringing them up like potted plants? Humanity.

There is no zombie crawling out of the grave, no demon infiltrating your soul. *You* are the

problem. *We* are the problem. And we always have been, now that I think about it. Thankfully, I've never had a scary, white-faced witch crawl through my computer screen and destroy my family from the inside out. I've never had undead guests at a hotel push me down stairs. These things don't happen. And as an amateur ghost hunter, I've looked for these things. They aren't there. But humans murdering other humans in disgusting, often ritualistic ways? That shit happens. And that's what makes this godforsaken movie so fucking scary. There aren't any monsters other than us and what we let ourselves become, and what we do to each other.

I haven't seen *Midsommar* in two years, but I still reckon with it at least once a week. I still think about more than I'd like to. I've stopped facing down googly-eyed monsters and started facing all the monstrous things I've done over the years. I was a bully. I was a drunk. I was rude, arrogant, selfish, misleading, and at times, just a straight up asshole, a liar, a cheat, a thief. Now, I never convinced anyone to jump off a cliff to kill themselves, but let's invoke the words of the Bible here—For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it (*James 2:10 ESV*).

Thanks, James, for tag-teaming with a Swedish cult to remind me that I'm an awful person who might as well have strung up my enemies and planted some azalea bushes in them. But that's the new reckoning. Not whether your fear will be justified by a scary mug and pointy teeth, but whether you can do better than someone else. And I obviously don't mean accomplish more, or score more points. I mean *be* better. Kinder, nicer, sweeter, however you want to put it. In a completely noncompetitive way. Not just by not fucking murdering them in a grotesque grandstanding, but in not cutting them off on the sidewalk, or not using a condescending tone. Every little bit helps. And hey, maybe if you show someone else that kindness, they, in turn, won't lock everyone inside the house at the next family Christmas Party and burn the house down.

I never approached horror movies to get introspective and maybe that isn't even the point of *Midsommar*. It's probably not. All I know is I have no need to re-watch *Midsommar* anytime soon because I'm still too busy reckoning with my first viewing of it from two years ago. Until I can come to terms with being a better person myself, I'm not ready to be reminded how evil people can really be.

About The Contributors

MAGGIE HOFFMAN is a professional writer and artist from small-town Pennsylvania who is inspired by all things horror.

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DECEMBER LACE is a Best of the Net nominee, cosplay pinup model and former professional wrestler from Chicago. She has appeared in The Chicago Tribune, Pro Wrestling Illustrated, Twist in Time, Pink Plastic House and Coffin Bell among others. She loves Batman, burlesque, cats and horror movies. Handle her [@TheMissDecember](https://www.instagram.com/TheMissDecember)

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