

# SUNRISE OATH

“Hello, dear stranger. Do you love the sunrise?”

September 3, 2022 ~ Issue 1

## Go ahead, take me!

This is a free litzine based in a fictional Waterloo, Ontario.  
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**Meaningless, said the Preacher. Meaningless.**

Futility, and vanity, and pride.

What profit has a man from all his labor  
in which he toils in midday's burning light?

The generations pass away and come.

The earth, however, shall abide forever.

The sun shall rise, and then the sun shall set  
and hasten to the place whence it arises.

The wind shall carry on toward the south,  
and then shall turn around and seek the north.

The wind shall whirl about continually,  
and travel in that circuit once again.

The rivers all shall run into the sea,  
and yet the sea shall not be ever full;  
the waters shall return to where they started.

All things are full of labor unexpressed.

The eye cannot be satisfied with seeing,  
the ear cannot be satisfied with hearing.

That which has been is what will come to be.

That which is done is what we set to do.

And there is nothing new beneath the sun.

Shall it be said of anything at all  
that it is new and never seen before?

# Editor's Desk

Solomon Hawthorn

SUNRISE OATH was born on an August trip to Muskoka (four hours each way, ft. an empty tank scare). Our party of three arrived past noon at Windermere House, where a culinary student friend was a live-in cook. He treated us to bruschetta, cold pea soup, burgers, sandwiches, and cake. I complimented the food, but not too much, as Neil was not in the kitchen and I wished not to suggest that he was unnecessary. On the contrary: his steak from months ago, paired with a red wine and savored with good company around a wooden table in a home dining room, was the stuff of dreams, and cost not a fraction of a restaurant's price.

Ahem. Lunch at Windermere House in Muskoka. Feeling clever, I took with me that week's *The New Yorker*, the summer's *The Paris Review*, a moleskin pocketbook, and an autograph album (our agreeable waiter Meghan signed it with her first pet's name, her mother's maiden name, and her childhood address). Nothing beats flaunting how learned and quirky I am. "So smart and cool," said the wealthy patrons as they imagined me taking their daughters as concubines. Untempted by delicious dowries, sparing a thought for the rabble living in the dark, I wept. How anyone lived ignorant of the printed word of their intellectual betters in NYC, how they went about without jotting two lines of iambic pentameter an hour (feminine ending, i.e. hendecasyllable), I knew not.

Let there be light. In Chinese, to be civilized is to be literate — *text* 文 *light* 明. In two columns of EB Garamond and Nunito, We bestow civilization to my hometown of Waterloo. The focus of this magazine is writing quality, with special weight on brevity and parsimony. Anything from abstracts to rants fit the bill.

First Saturday every month, til we give up. Enjoy it while it lasts. Your help in this crusade is necessary to the good of mankind (and one mean fella, yours truly).

Write to us, and pass this volume along. Or save it as a memento!

# Local Profile

Ancra Atlas

*I interviewed a second-tier Dota pro. The following is a compilation.*

Dota is war: two teams of five gain control of a map, and destroy the enemy base. In middle school, I played Dota at night and got dark circles under my eyes. Then I smoked weed for the first time and thought, “I was missing this!” My in-game name now refers to a famous weed-smoking character.

My family came to Waterloo when I started university. Away from extended family and former friends, I chose a solitary life and climbed the ranks. It’s exciting to advance a field. I want to be like the guys who created the atom bomb. I love trying crazy ideas, to the point of being accused of throwing.

Pro play brings glory. Problem: I have to talk to my team. Most players play with strangers in solo queue. If I could, I’d only play solo queue. With loud music on, I enter the zone. I can make a living with the game, but can I justify it as a career? Dota is stressful, and talking to my team after a hard defeat is the last thing I want to do. I don’t like streaming. I’ve had two thousand viewers and felt nothing. I teach some students, no clue about their results.

I plan to retire. The game taught me to not double down on bad decisions. If things go wrong, cut your losses. I don’t understand big words, or use them. Dota and music take up my mind as much as the wind, and maybe they’re good, but what’s ‘good’? The ultimate cause of all action is programming.

- **Shinwa Asian Cuisine.** Get the masala paneer with a side of rice.
- **Mary Brown’s.** Best spicy fried chicken in town.
- **Pasha.** Good shisha, and the waitresses are easy on the eyes.

# Malva

Robert Hail

“Will it hurt?”

Eastre set down her silver censer, smiling at the child on the bed and holding his hand. “Not one bit,” she said.

“Promise?” he whispered.

“I promise.” She unwrapped the bandages on his arm, peeling layers of red cloth. “How did this happen?” she asked, and removed the last chunk of wool.

“I fell.” Dirt and blood stained his cheeks. The glow of the fireplace illuminated his mangled arm. “I was playing in the forest and she”—he looked away—“I fell.”

“Are you sure?” She cleaned the nasty wound with warm water.

He recoiled, pushing back some tears. “Mom didn’t believe me.”

“Trust me, Iain.”

Iain’s glimmering eyes glanced her up and down. He thought for a moment, then leaned forward as she poured more liquid. “It was Thili,” he said, gasping from the pain. “A fairy. She’s my friend, but sometimes she’s mean to me.”

“She’s mean?” Eastre hid her frown. “Why is she your friend?”

“Thili can do magic,” he said.

Eastre’s heart panged. “I can do magic too.”

“It’s different!”

“I see.” She set his hand on the bed, and produced a candle from her purse. “You need better friends. Why not Wylie?”

“Wylie calls me names!” Iain stomped, creaking the wooden floor.

Eastre ignited the candle at the fireplace. Unhurried, she lit the censer, its frame riddled with inscriptions. “I’ll be your friend. I won’t call you names, or be mean to you.” She lifted the cage by the chain, nurturing the flame with parchment. Thin smoke filled the room with a sweet aroma.

Iain watched her hand swing back and forth. “Mom says I shouldn’t talk to a phony like you.”

She faltered. Floral fumes enveloped her, and essence filled her each time she inhaled. Distant voices made themselves comfortable in the confines of her mind, and pushed his words down where they no longer hurt her. “Why?” she asked.

He played with his thumbs. “Because real Weavers come from the academy.”

Eastre’s breath cut short. Pain flooded her chest, forcing her to inhale. Better, but not enough. They fell silent, and only the crackling of fire was left. A real Weaver. She knew what he was thinking. Why was she incomplete? Why could she not get a certificate from the academy? If only it worked that way.

Vapors permeated everything. Iain’s lips quivered, but his gaze relented not. “Mom doesn’t mean it,” he said.

“She’s right,” Eastre said. “I’m not half as good as Thili, am I?”

“Don’t say that!” He crossed his arms, but the pain forced him to relax. “You’re better than Thili.”

“You’re so sweet.” Eastre’s power grew within her, whispering nonsense inside her mind. She knew what they wanted, those voices in incomprehensible languages—they wanted Iain. As the curses called for him, he examined her with intent. “Don’t worry about me,” she continued. “Be still.”

The room was covered in white, but Iain was safe. Only a practitioner could harness the incense’s power. Eastre breathed to the beat of the essence, murmuring the commands she needed to say—no, the commands it wanted to hear. Magic stopped at nothing to achieve its aims, and curses were powerful, whimsical magic, capable of healing or harming in equal measure. If a Weaver was not careful, the essence corrupted everything it touched. No magic knew how to eat flesh like curses. If she lost her focus, Iain’s arm could turn necrotic or fall off. Curses consumed and devoured everything, and it was her job to control them. This is for you, Iain, she thought, staring at his swollen face.

“You hate me.” Lost in the sea of magic, a voice echoed in her mind. Her?

It spoke again. “I don’t hate you.” Iain?

“I disgust you.” A shy song, soft, melodic.

“You don’t.” Comforting, warm.

“Are we friends?” Sweet.

“We are.”

She extended her hand, and he offered his wounds. Heal, she whispered. Leave no trace of injury. With her index finger, she caressed every crevice and fold, drying blood as she murmured: May fate forgive him. Iain winced each time she reached a new area. Holes sew themselves shut, and rifts turned to plains. Eastre wielded the essence with grace, keeping its hunger at bay, never allowing it to escape her influence. May the flesh forget its pain. May he suffer not.

The smoke cleared. No incense remained in the room, and when she grabbed the censer, she found it cold. The spell consumed everything, even the flame. Iain moved not from where he stood, arm outstretched, tears adorning his cheeks.

Eastre stood up, eyes vacant, and caressed his arm. “All better?”

Her tone was soft, but her face betrayed her. Iain grabbed his fur coat from the hanger and bounded to the door. “Don’t lie to me,” he said, raising his voice.

“I would never.” Eastre smiled, and meant it. She gathered her instruments and set them on a table. Incense, censer, candles, pitcher — doctors envied this simple ensemble as much as they wanted her gone. “Are you leaving?”

“Of course I am,” he said, and opened the door. Icy wind blasted, swallowing what little warmth remained in the cabin. The dark sky, where the moon dared not shine, was uncaring. He stepped outside, and was welcomed by the storm.

“Don’t get in trouble!” She followed him out and helped him put on his coat. “And don’t play with fairies.”

Iain stepped backward into the night. “Eastre,” he said, “what’s your favorite flower? Mom says flowers make people happy.”

“Mallow,” she answered without hesitation. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

He nodded. “Mallow. I’ll get some.”

“It doesn’t grow here.” Eastre poked his forehead, making him stumble. His face grew red, though she saw he was holding back a giggle. That made her happy. “But thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I’ll get some! I said I would, so I will!” Iain sprang through the blizzard, kicking snow as he crossed the street. He banged on the opposite door, and it squealed open. Eastre recognized the figure of a woman when she knelt to hug him, and heard the boy yell: “Mom, what’s mallow like? Not money, mallow!”

Iain's glee and delight would not last. Nothing good lasts. Eastre felt the same chill as at the marketplace. She sensed the repulsion, hatred, contempt, and fear in the woman's eyes, and was put in her place. The town freak — whispered loud enough for all to hear, quiet enough to pretend nothing was said. Judging by Iain's reaction, his mother was doing that there and then.

It was over in a few seconds. The door shut, plunging the streets into lonely darkness. Even the snowflakes abandoned Eastre, leaving only the still winter.

She closed her cabin. The fireplace roared behind her, but she felt none of the heat. Even the warmest of furs and the toughest of leathers could not shield Eastre from the icy glares of her peers. She was a phony, the filthy vestige of a time that was no more, a relic of an era better forgotten. Some people suspected she was developing a compulsion, and was forced to call upon essence like an addict. It mattered not how many times she used her gifts to heal them, nor how little she asked in return. They would always see her as an outsider.

In bed, Eastre wondered how her life would be if she refused to learn Weaving. Her parents were not around to judge her. Maybe if she sang instead, she could be traveling the world as a songstress — a songweaver. Listeners would thank her, appreciate her, and be kind to her.

But that man would be dead, she recalled. She found him on the ground, and the smell overpowered her as she approached. It was the first time she used her talents to heal. His face relaxed as she closed his wounds, and color returned to his face when his blood flowed through him again. Were humans meant to work that way? Her mother said she'd get used to it. Sure enough, watching people recover from mortal injuries became normal. Their clinic reeked day and night, but the young Eastre joined her parents, her eagerness matched only by her patience.

No one masters Weaving with ease. The whispers are too powerful for most, who succumb to compulsion or abandon the practice. Eastre stayed, to become a compassionate healer like her mother, a skilled surgeon like her father. It was an old, dying tradition. Once respected, now reviled. Her parents reminded her of their sacred duty, but as much as they consoled her, they could never explain why the man she healed ran away. He screamed when he awoke, and cursed while fleeing. That happened sixteen years ago, when she was nine years old.

Eastre punched her pillow. It had less resistance than expected. She struck again, using more strength, only to get the same result. Her heart accelerated as she continued, panting, chest ablaze. Hit after hit, all she got was a muffled sound. She tried to make it hurt. Each attempt carried more strength than the last. Of course he'd run away. I'm a freak. She threw the pillow across the room, using her bed as the next target. I should know my place. I should know better.

She almost missed the faint sound of knuckles on wood, drowned out by howling winds. Perhaps an unlucky traveler, she thought, and stood. Her anger melted away, though her face was red. She calmed her breathing, conjured the best grin she could muster, and readied a tray with an ale pitcher and a mug. "Hey!" A muffled voice called from the other side. "You there?"

"Yes," she called out, then went to the door with the tray and swung the door open. She trembled, but pushed on. "I'm Eastre. How may I help?"

"I know your name!" A boy with a swollen face stepped into the cabin, his footsteps creaking on wood. "Of course I know my friend's name!"

That musty smell was impossible to mistake. The visitor held a single pink flower. Eastre used its incense in her daily practice, but nothing compared to the real thing. Mallow — the flower of curses, of healers. Five petals, simple and beautiful, moved up and down.

Her throat tightened. "Iain," she managed, "where did you get that?"

"Mom bought flowers yesterday," he said, closing the door. "She didn't tell me which one was mallow, but you were right! I knew as soon as I smelled it."

"You didn't have to." Eastre knelt, lay down the tray, and pulled Iain into a careful hug. "I love it."

He stroked her back. "Why are you crying?"

Her smile blossomed. "It's not important."

# Winter Wind

Rupert Verglas

Once upon a time — a cage of ice, a chilly gaze. I met her at sunset, when and where I least expected.

“I am a pilgrim seeking refuge,” I say to the lady in the gown.

She sees the storm beyond her palace walls, and with a graceful wave opens the door. “Lay not a finger on me, and you may stay.”

I sit away from her, and ask: “Why are you in a cage?”

“I am not in a cage,” she says in the melody of glaciers. “The world is in my cage, and I have freed you.”

I sit wordlessly, listening to the silence of the frozen ramparts standing in the still night. Hours pass, and her face softens.

“It is safe to travel,” she says. “Leave as you wish.”

“In the morning,” I say.

“The country is beautiful at night,” she says. “Leave now, and you shall see.”

“I seek not the beauty of the country,” I say.

She sighs. “Then what seek you, pilgrim?”

“More,” I say, and explain not more.

Flakes float by. One lands in her palm, and stays. “Snow is dancing,” she sings in four rising notes.

I catch one, and it melts. “Cold is fleeting.”

“Warmth is illusory,” she says. “Beyond life and history and seasons, cold is supreme. Someday, I might reign forever.”

I watch her eyes glisten in the moonlight. “For now, your reign must end?”

“I give way to warmth,” she says, “and warmth gives way to me.”

“The universe is cold,” I say. “The cosmos is an empty expanse.”

“I am alone out there,” she says, and reaches for the Milky Way, tracing the countless years between stars. “Cold is absence, and absence is lonely.”

“Have you no friends in other worlds?” I ask.

Her lips curl. “In no world.”

“You have a friend in me,” I say. “Let us be joined by cold.”

She lets down her hair, endless strands of light. “Cold is life, and life is isolation. Friendship is warmth, and warmth is death.”

“You fear death?” I ask.

“I am always dead and alive,” she says.

I pause. “Have you never feared who you are?”

She thinks, and says, “I know not what is death, for there is nothing to know in death. All I know is what is dying.”

I nod. “You know not what is love, only what is falling in love.”

“Is death what love is?” she asks.

“There is nothing to know when in love.” Something swells in me. “All I know is, I have fallen in love tonight.”

At last, at long last, her smile.. “Henceforth, you shall have nothing to know.”

I wake at dawn, and see a defenseless maiden. She now wears a sundress, and her hair now reveals her ears.

She nestles closer, and a puddle ripples beneath her.

I get up, and see the cage is locked. The door melts from my touch. I step outside, and find spring on the horizon.

“Where are you going?” she cries, and throws herself at me.

“No!” I step away too late.

She gasps in pain, falls to her knees, collapses at my feet. “I cannot keep you.” A tear falls, and freezes not. “Take me.”

I gave her my warmth. Her hair nips my stroking fingers, and melts away as frost, returning to light. I learn every inch of her, and remember how she burns, that woman of cold.

The sun rises, and the queen and her realm are morning dew.

My heart beats. One day it will stop, and give way to her. In time, I will be one with her again. I shall know nothing, and she shall be mine for all eternity. More than that, I shall be hers. That is our happy ever after.

# Evil Days Redeemed

Aurora Vici

Beauty is the antonym of happiness. I now begin a game of antonyms.

A bright and gentle day. Seeing her for the last time, the nymph of the woods, I fell in love. The canopy, so high, concealed not the peering sun. On the bridge at the river, Collis said: "Let's play a game."

I paused. "A game?"

"A fun one." She took out a coin. "Heads, you win. Tails, I lose."

It was no joke. It was serious — a game. "Why play?"

"Play." The coin arced through beams of gold. "Catch."

My hand reached out, and the light blinded me.

"Wake up." The curtains were thrown open. I groaned, sat up, and rubbed my eyes. A pop song blasted on the radio alarm. Clicking her tongue, my sister yanked the plug. "Morning, Morn."

"Evening, Eve. Looking good."

She adjusted her new uniform. "I won't be your nanny this year."

Long dark hair waved goodbye. Her steps bounded down to the first floor and out the door. I sighed, replaced the plug, and stared at four red flashing zeros. After fifteen years, the Meyer twins were no more.

I chowed down last night's pizza, got dressed, brushed my teeth, combed my hair. By then, the clock showed ten minutes' passage. Running late, I threw a dead smartphone, incomplete counterpoint exercises, and the later half of Beethoven's piano sonatas in a bookbag.

Downstairs, Eroica Vici was in the foyer. "Aurora."

I stayed on the bottom step. "Mother."

"I told you, Olivia shouldn't stay over so late," she said. "Did you walk her home? It's not safe for her to be out alone."

"Kea's older than me."

“And?” Her head shook, brow furrowed. “Also, Vesper left without a word.”

“She’s in a rush,” I said. “St. Maddie’s starts early.”

“She’ll be late anyway.” Eroica checked the time. “Your bus left. Want a ride?”

A double take. “We agreed never again.”

“One time.” Her keys jingled. “Let’s go.”

Once again, Eroica’s rant in the car made me regret giving her a chance. I stared out the passenger window at Columbia Street.

“I’ll be late for work,” she said. “I don’t mind, but it’s something. Everything I do, I do for my children. You and Vesper need to recognize my sacrifices,” she repeated for the millionth time.

My fingers played on my lap, learning a new cantus firmus.

“Earth to Aurora?” she prompted. “Cat’s got your tongue?”

“I’m gathering my thoughts,” I lied.

Her eyes narrowed. “Answer when I speak to you. Basic respect.”

I scoffed, and let loose. “Fine. I recognize your sacrifices, most of all forcing your name on me and Eve. Special thanks from the Meyers.”

The car jerked. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel. “Go on, hate me. The past won’t change.”

“You’re right, it won’t.” I laughed. “I won’t forget. Neither will Eve.”

The rest of the trip was silent and tense. Her angry driving was erratic, even as she turned into a side street behind my high school. Thrown around, I clung to a grab handle for dear life.

My heart stopped at the sight of a girl crossing the street. “Watch out!”

Eroica swore, the brake screeched, the girl fell.

The date was September 3, 2013. Thus began the first day of sophomore year, of my new life as Aurora Vici.

# Suicide at Sunview Heights

Solomon Hawthorn

It happened near Sunview Peak, where Tara Robles founded Sunview Heights. That was how the sign described it: *founded*.

The story of the founding goes like this: the city planners asked for Tara's advice on how they should design the neighborhood. She lived in Toronto at the time, but was the pride of Waterloo, where she grew up and went to architecture school. As a local with a famous name, a name that brought prestige, she said she'd help on two conditions: first, they had to find a way for her to see the land with her own eyes to help her gain a little inspiration; second, she wanted the option to buy a house of her own choosing and live there with her husband and her son.

The local government got back to her with 1) a spot, and 2) a guarantee. She hiked up, looked out at the earth below her, and envisioned Sunview Heights, the place she'd make her home. A selfish vision makes the greatest art, or so she always said in interviews. The neighborhood's big white houses became the home of many families, who erected a sign to honor the architect.

That's all I have to say on that one story, the first of many lighter ones I'll tell to color the titular event.

The story of the suicide at Sunview Heights is too long, much too long. I'll gloss over certain facts to make the story shorter, maybe sweeter.

Long story short: a loner female Sunview Secondary junior committed suicide by jumping off Sunview Peak. [REDACTED] hopped the chainlink fence and fell down — plunged down, some say — to her death.

At least, that's how the urban legend goes. In truth, no one knows exactly how it happened. The article in the local paper omitted many details, as did police reports I found online. I'm sure if my architecture career ever stalls, I can make do by writing all about the incident. But I could never do that — write all about it. If I did, I'd have a duty to learn about some things I've left untouched. There are things I don't know for sure, and I'd prefer if that would never change.

Tara's sign was taken away from Sunview Peak. Rachel told me last week, at the Sunset Grill by The Boardwalk. Our conversation went like this:

RACHEL SURRY                    Take some omelet off my plate.  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        It's cold. Eat it yourself.  
RACHEL SURRY                    By the way, they took away the sign.  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        The sign?  
RACHEL SURRY                    The only one anyone cares about.  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        Why would you tell me this?  
RACHEL SURRY                    It's best to know these kinds of things.  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        I disagree.

I checked my phone again, and was relieved. There was much to be relieved about. Rachel was busy with her startup, she and I no longer slept under one roof, and we only met on Monday at two o'clock, an hour before the place closed at three. Sometimes, even sixty minutes was too long.

Don't get me wrong, I love her dearly. One thing has never changed: she's family to me no matter what. Thing is, I've been finding her annoying. A recent change, caused in part by her involvement in the wider story.

SOLOMON HAWTHORN        Time to go.  
RACHEL SURRY                    So soon. I'll get the bill.

I nodded, then got up and stepped outside, waiting in the burning light and scorching August heat.

My cousin loves her chit-chat with the kindly owner, so several minutes passed before she came out and handed me an ice-cold water bottle.

RACHEL SURRY                    Call me if you get heatstroke.  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        I live right nearby.  
RACHEL SURRY                    Can I drive you today? Just once?  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        You worry too much.  
RACHEL SURRY                    With you, I can't help it.

She put on rainbow Ray-Ban aviators, the kind that assholes wore in middle school. Paired with her flashy summer attire — a ruffled off-the-shoulder floral blouse tucked in a pleated mini-skirt, platform sandals showing off painted toenails — her sunglasses almost had to be ironic.

They weren't. And that was even more ironic.

RACHEL SURRY Drink it all, you hear me?  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN I best be on my way.  
 RACHEL SURRY Two things, before I let you go.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN Juniper is waiting. Little Jason, too.  
 RACHEL SURRY If you're in a rush, you'd ask for a ride.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN Fine. What is it?  
 RACHEL SURRY The first thing . . . don't be angry with me. Promise?  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN I'm listening.  
 RACHEL SURRY Promise me!  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN I promise.  
 RACHEL SURRY Thanks. I've been thinking: it's time for you to visit.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN I did. Last month's family dinner?  
 RACHEL SURRY I don't mean your parents. I mean that place.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN Sunview Peak.  
 RACHEL SURRY It might bring some closure.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN I don't need closure.  
 RACHEL SURRY Everyone needs closure.

I nearly started arguing otherwise, but held my tongue.

SOLOMON HAWTHORN Okay. Second thing?  
 RACHEL SURRY I want my kiss.

She leaned in, as did I. Left, then right. As we grazed cheeks, I noticed her scent was different from what I'd come to know.

SOLOMON HAWTHORN Did you change your perfume?  
 RACHEL SURRY My shampoo. You gifted me a bottle for my birthday.  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN Oh, right.  
 RACHEL SURRY Let me guess, Juniper bought it?  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN My mom found it on a business trip.  
 RACHEL SURRY Still letting her bail you out?  
 SOLOMON HAWTHORN Sorry.  
 RACHEL SURRY I forgive you. Tell her I said thanks.

Her hand reached up and cupped my cheek, pinching it with a smile.

RACHEL SURRY                    Bye-bye, now. Same time next week?  
SOLOMON HAWTHORN        See you then.  
RACHEL SURRY                    Love you, baby boy.

I watched her drive away in her white Accord, then chugged the bottle in one gulp and threw it in a trash bin. Sweating on the way home, I thought about Tara's sign — or rather, where the sign once was. I never went to check nor do I plan to, nor do I ever plan to change my mind. On this I beg to differ from my cousin: some things are better left unknown.

What good would come from knowing? None, of course. I'll read whatever I can find about the incident that happened on the peak, but I don't want to know about the sign. For [REDACTED], the girl I couldn't save back then, I'll keep some stones unturned, some facts unproven. The truth is out there, at our old meeting place. I won't go back there. That I know for sure. My memories of her won't be tainted; I promised her I'd never let that happen. Obviously they have been, just a little, but I had to try.

It's not as if I can escape the past. The incident was years ago, yet it remains a story often told in whispers and in hushed, mysterious tones. I like this kind of story, but this one I'd prefer to leave untold.

Yet I'm writing this for you to read, something I thought I'd never do. I heard that outlining my thoughts in written (typed) words will help me find the voice I haven't yet discovered. But why discover my voice, and why now? Maybe I'm getting antsy from my time at home with my wife and infant son, away from architecture school. More than that, I've come to see how the stories I know all fit together, something I was unable — or unwilling — to see before.

Over time, I hope to piece together something better than the complete story, from shorter unrelated ones. A narrative quilt, maybe? Yes, let's call it that. Advance warning: I shall leave much unsaid, for myself and for [REDACTED]. In the first place, I'll never know how that tragic day went. I'll speculate on many things, but not on her death.

Funnily enough, the suicide at Sunview Heights is the one story you can expect me to sidestep, to withhold, to censor. Ironic, maybe? Not as much as the deal with Rachel's Ray-Bans, but pretty damn close.

# Epistemology 1999

Gale Jones

There once was an older girl, a younger woman, who saved me.

On her good advice, I quit my job. I gave my notice at summer's end, and Alain set me free from *Génoise et Thé*. "You can't be kept, *mon gars*." He patted my shoulder, and we shook hands, a parting between men. Waiting outside, Selene took off her sunglasses and dabbed her eyes.

I cleaned my room, fussing over details she fixed sooner and better. The curator was a lovely guest, bringing gifts and Charlotte. We were in bright humor from the change in the season, the shift in the wind. I did well as a host, as a man. I shaved my face, brushed my teeth, wore my shirt, and owned my life.

At the Old Port, we sat on a bench. She spoke, and I learned. I asked, she asked further. We leaned into mystery, and tackled the snake, fang and venom, as it was.

The questions multiplied, as she said they would. Questions — at the café, a glum place for me as a customer; at ritzy establishments around the city, places where she sought secrets and traded *la bise* with socialites, a trace of summer fever in her fashion; in the metro, on the last train of the night; in the calm of our chaste slumber, as I lay awake with her dreaming at my side, mouth open but a sliver.

So terrifying were the answers, I should never fall to sleep with a drop of her insight. I was glad, so glad to not sleep. It was the longest September, the best of my life. I soon forgot my sunrise oath, the promise made in early July.

A day before she left, marking a sudden end, was the one time she stood us up. Charlotte and I mused on epistemology over Alain's coffee, and parted on the hour.

Later, the curator came in without knocking. Her tone commanded: "The place around the corner, my tab."

She dressed the same, yet seemed not herself. I stood, and warned her to look away. I changed, and her sad eyes looked not away. Ah — they were a new color.

At Bar des Pins, sipping a gin and tonic, I regarded her, mentor and patron. She called the waiter in French, and touched my arm.

"Do you ever feel like life is so short, you might miss it? So short, I never knew it was over." She noticed her slip, and drank from the glass bottle I pushed to her. Selene was a stranger from a distant land, unraveling traveler in our midst, her blouse revealing what the heart was ashamed to know.

I cleared my throat, and tried — failed — to pull away. “You’re acting off.”

“Right?” A drop of Perrier ran down her chin. She wiped, hiccuped, sniffed. “I am awake. Life is but a dream.”

I paid with her card, and the tall wanderer leaned on my shoulder. We hobbled to my *un et demi*, tidy as I left it. She twirled, and kicked off her Converse sneakers. “Home, Gale Jones. Let us be merry!” A cackle bubbled, escaping her beautiful wide mouth. “The night is young.”

I held her, inches from an edge. “Let’s calm down. Come, sit.”

Her embrace threw me off balance. On my bed, collapsed and tangled with me, her whisper betrayed: “Thanks, but no thanks.”

She was on top, captivating me with frost and fire. She held her ponytail in disdain, narrowing her eyes.

“It all crashes down.”

A tug and a flick — like that, her hair tumbled. Bleached strands framed the milk-rose mask, the royal portrait leaning in. I stared at dark roots, short lashes, perfect teeth.

“My word to your word, my heart to your heart, my lips . . .”

A shy kiss, a brush.

“*J’ai baisé ta bouche.*” She hummed, opened her eyes, and let a drop fall. “So it is bitter, the taste of love.”

Is that how it was always meant to be? So halting, soft, and burning? Was that the perfect first I could not keep, the one I see anew in every dream? I looked away. “We should stop.”

“Should we?” She sounded sure, yet her legs quivered as I thought of *Bambi*, of fawn and doe, of Louise. I was aroused, and awake.

“I want to stop.”

“Please.” Her smile, seductive and mature; her eyes, when were they ever so young? Those brown gems, free of color contacts, more than the false blue jewels I knew, revealed a maiden pure and innocent.

“Selene.” I pleaded, and knew not for what. But then, she threw up, cupped her mouth, and wept:

“Meaningless, said the Preacher. Meaningless.”