

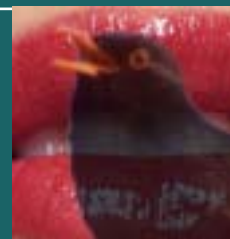
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speculative fiction

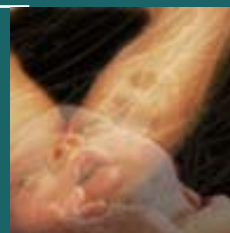
fantasy

C. S. E. Cooney
Oak Park Eris



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Mari Ness
Rumpled Skin



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Autumn Canter
The Gone-By Quilt



poetry

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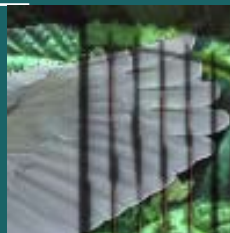
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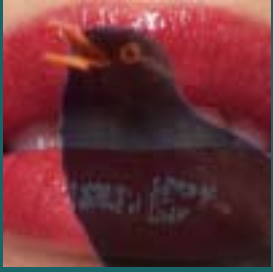
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C. S. E. Cooney

Oark Park Eris



C.S.E. Cooney lives in a Chicago garret with no pets, no plants, but a very nice cross-breeze. Her work has appeared in Subterranean Press, Goblin Fruit and Doorways magazines. She has two stories appearing in future issues of Black Gate, and occasionally writes theatre reviews for Killer-Works, an online repository for all things disturbing.

I wrote Oak Park Eris for my friend Stephanie, who tells me funny stories about life in the Chicago 'burbs (some of which may or may not include witches, dragons, dead Hessians and guillotines). This one's for you, Mrs. Q.

“Leaving aside minor differences like the cage in the basement, telekinetic children, and the fact that the gnomes of this garden were only ceramic, the Lulkins’ house bore a strong resemblance to her own.”

(For Mrs. Q)

“You look just a little bit ugly,” her daughter ventured.

“Miss, I’ve had it to here.”

They glared at each other. Her daughter’s eyes were like two cool jewels on the Snow Queen’s icicle crown while her own were hot and blurred and stinging. It was not easy to dress for a Pampered Chef party she did not want to attend under the gimlet gaze of a choleric tween.

“Mrs. Burbanke won’t be wearing dead birds,” sniffed her daughter.

The Shaw Witch smoothed down the raven at her shoulder.

“Melisande Burbanke drinks protein shakes,” she replied.

“So?”

Lilith had mastered derision by the age of two; at nine, she was the gold-star-holding belted galactic champion of contempt. It was a trick of the mouth. A tilt at one edge, like a smile but sharper, and her native aloofness flashed out and bled what it cut.

“She drinks protein shakes made out of unborn babies,” the Shaw Witch clarified.

“You just don’t like Mrs. Burbanke ‘cause she’s better at magic than you.”

In answer, the Shaw Witch smeared a vicious red onto her mouth. It

was a shade, she had recently been informed, that women over forty wishful of preserving a frazzled cantlet of their dignity should surrender to a younger generation. The mirror wisely refrained from announcing out loud—as was its habit—that she looked tired. Rather, it focused its cruel attention on Lilith, whom resentment had gilded in a charming glow.

“They’re all going to laugh at you and be scared.”

“Lil,” said the Shaw Witch, “go downstairs and bother your father before I single-handedly bring poisoned apples back into vogue.”

Lilith left.

*

“I don’t want to go to a Pampered Chef party.”

Her husband glanced at her. “Coward.”

“So?”

Dark gods below, she sounded like Lilith. They had more in common than the Chinese-chopstick length of their fingers. That’s what made living together so difficult.

“Avoidance tactics are for lesser women, Eris.”

“I can be a lesser woman.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, Nid.” The dead raven wobbled with her shrug. “Alice Lulkin does not need two witches of the western suburbs fighting a pitched battle over pan scrapers and avocado peelers.”

Nid sat calmly in his cage, reading a collection of plays by a dead Hessian. She was about to go out into the open, into the night, into public, vulnerable to attack from a very formidable sorceress with a glittering black chip on her shoulder the size of the Amsterdam Diamond, and he was reading *Woyzeck*. Again.

“Lilith hates me.”

Nid sighed and closed his book. He kept his finger in between the pages, which made her want to kick him. Her long fingers clenched around the bars of his cage.

“Lilith doesn’t hate you. She just misses Janice. And wishes she’d never been born of your loins.”

Seeing her expression, Nid let his book fall to the floor, reaching to caress each of the three knuckles on her forefinger. The scales leafing his wrist glinted gold and silver as her rings.

“Speaking of loins,” he said.

Hope made the grackle feathers on her breastbone flutter.

“I don’t have to go out at all. We could set the kids up with a movie...”

“No.” He pried loose, not without regret. “You need to get out more.”

“*You’re* talking!”

“I don’t come from a long line of agoraphobic cannibals in candy houses. My pedigree is not suspect.”

He stopped her huffy reply with a surprise flick of his tongue. It forked out between the bars and caught her squarely on the ear.

“Be nice to Mrs. Burbanke,” he admonished. “You were best friends not two weeks ago.”

The Shaw Witch stomped out of the basement.

*

Leaving aside minor differences like the cage in the basement, telekinetic children, and the fact that the gnomes of *this* garden were only ceramic, the Lulkins’ house bore a strong resemblance to her own. Their lawn was nicer though. The Shaw Witch did not *do* lawns.

Eight vehicles crammed bumper to bumper along the curb. Lights blazed behind sparkling windowpanes. The Shaw Witch crossed her arms over her steering wheel and leaned forward to mutter, “These people clean their windows. Oh, help.”

Under nervous smoothing, the feathered corbie corpses on her dress melted into a classic black cocktail get-up. Green Gucci slingbacks materialized on her bare feet.

“That’s it,” she announced, realizing she was talking to her daughter, who was not there but who might be listening in anyway. “That’s all I’ve got.” And she slid out of her red Dodge Caravan and marched up to Alice Lulkin’s front door.

Alice greeted her with every affectation of warm delight. She may even have been sincere.

“Eris Shaw! I’m so happy to see you.”

The Shaw Witch felt her face fever up. “Hi. Am I late?”

“Oh, fashionably,” Alice assured her. “Fabulous shoes.”

The Shaw Witch grimaced. “Thanks.”

“Wine?”

“*Please.*”

“Red or white?”

“White.”

“We have a lovely Pinot—or a Chardonnay?”

The Shaw Witch plastered an expression of good-natured insouciance over her anxiety. If it didn't work, Alice didn't notice. She had already turned her back and was trotting her perky and perfectly clad self to the bar in the living room. Alice wore a yellow sundress that showed off to stunning effect the results of tanning booths and power yoga. The silver chain around her ankle dangled a solitaire diamond.

With a slick of sweat on the upper lip so carefully Naired earlier that day, the Shaw Witch followed in her hostess's wake. Everywhere around her the walls were pale beige with large framed Kincaid prints. The air smelled of legitimate Pottery Barn potpourri (a far cry from the sort the Shaw Witch made for her customers, for protection or prosperity, for fertility or to assist in communion with the dead). Glass cabinets glittered with prismatic menageries and shepherdess figurines. No one looked up when the Shaw Witch entered the living room.

These were nice people, she told herself, nice people who attended church and PTA meetings and block parties. Nice, sophisticated people of the twenty-first century, who would not set her house on fire and subject her children to the rack and candle. Nice, suburban, middle-class, well-dressed, well-heeled, housewifely type of people.

Then Melisande Burbanke spotted her.

“Shit,” said the Shaw Witch.

Melisande's pretty, blonde, Michigan-born, Indiana-bred, Chicago-finished, housewifely face wore an expression not unlike the wild Russian *Vodyany* as it sits wetly by the millpond waiting to beat small children senseless with its cudgel, thereafter to drown and eat them. In a flicker unseen by the rest of the room, Melisande was standing before her.

“Eris Shaw.”

“Mrs. Burbanke.”

“Still peddling your cheap talismans to the Brownie moms?”

“Still sending your night hags to drain their dreams?”

Melisande smiled with all her teeth. Very white and hygienic, that smile. Several thou-

sand dollars of dental work had smoothed every fang, bleached all the bloodstains. The Shaw Witch could barely bring herself to admit that Melisande's smile might be a natural phenomenon, or that only a few weeks ago they had met regularly for tea, to compare grimoires and walk their kids to school. But that had all ended when Janice quarreled with Lilith Shaw over the beheading of an American Girl doll.

The doll belonged to Lilith—a Kirstin, solid and blonde and blank-eyed as a Valkyrie—but Janice loved it like her own, fawned over and cooed at and doted on it every time she visited for a play date. The day of the incident, Lilith and her brothers had spent a productive morning in the basement with their father, constructing a miniature guillotine and learning all about the French Revolution. By the time Janice arrived, dressed up and ready for a long afternoon of potion making and pretend, Lilith was eager to employ the guillotine.

“Citoyenne Kirstin, thy fate awaits thee! Liberty! Fraternity! Equality! Death to the aristos!”

And... *Whoosh.*

And... *Thwack.*

Janice cried and ran home to carry tales to her mother. Melisande, exasperated by emotional upset of any kind, forbade further interactions of the Burbanke/Shaw households. She telephoned the Shaw Witch to tell her so, and the Shaw Witch had not reacted politely.

“Mutilating dolls, in my opinion, is a natural threshold of girlhood. Maybe if your daughter paid more attention to the history channel than Barbie.com, she'd toughen up some.”

Lilith Shaw had not been invited to Janice Burbanke's birthday party. Everyone else in the whole fourth grade had been.

It was war.

“I didn't think you'd come tonight,” said Melisande Burbanke, sotto voce. “I didn't think you'd dare.”

“Afraid I'll bring this house down around your ears?”

Melisande gestured to the women chatting around the hors d'œuvres on the coffee table.

“Their ears, too.”

The Shaw Witch licked her lips and croaked, “Collateral damage.”

“They'd deserve it,” whispered Melisande almost winsomely, “all these hooked-on-co-

lonics granola crunchers. I've seen you sneer at their Birkenstocks, Eris, their all-natural fibers and organic grocery lists. They deserve every shag-bottomed hag I throw at them. They deserve to have their dreams sucked dry and their chests crushed at midnight by the grinning weight of demons."

The Shaw Witch refused to return the smile. "So long as you keep sending your *toggelli*, your ill-wishes, and your wasters-away to the women of this community, I will sell my counter-magics to dispel them."

"Swiss Army knives stuck under the mattress?"

The Shaw Witch flushed. "Cold iron. It pays the mortgage!"

"Used gym socks to distract my ghouls from their intent."

"Amulets of jet and diamond," the Shaw Witch shot back. Melisande flinched, so she pressed on. "Jewels painted in menstrual blood. Wolf skins stuffed with St. John's wort..."

By this time, Melisande was cringing, covering her eyes with one hand and making wards with her other. There were times when even speaking the ingredients of a powerful counter-curse harmed the original ill-wisher. The Shaw Witch kept tabs on all Melisande's transactions for business purposes. Breaking her enchantments was creating a nice little nest egg for the Shaw household. Nid had recently mentioned wanting to repaint the twins' bedrooms.

"Call off your *toggelli*," she commanded, before Melisande could recover. "Abrogate your night terrors. Draw the needles from your fetishes and dabble no more in blood crime."

With visible difficulty, Melisande straightened from her hunch. "I don't crumble so easily, Eris Shaw. Besides," she tossed her lustrous hair, beaming for their hostess. "I need a new mortar and pestle."

With a shy smile, Alice joined them, handing the Shaw Witch a glass of Pinot Grigio. "Here you go, Eris. So, how are you? And how is your husband?"

"Just fine, thanks."

"And what is his name again?"

"Nid."

"Ned?"

"No." Melisande toyed with a pearl button on her lacy collar. "Nid. Short for Nidhogg. Perhaps you've come across the name in your classic Norwegian studies?"

Alice did her best to look bilingual. “It’s an interesting name. He must be an interesting man to have married—I mean, if you married him, Eris, he must be interesting. What does he do?”

The Shaw Witch began, “He’s a—”

“Dragon,” said Melisande.

“Avert,” said the Shaw Witch.

Alice’s eyes glazed over.

“May I have another glass of wine, Alice?” the Shaw Witch asked. “It’s nice. I can taste the strawberries.”

Alice wandered away to the kitchen. Melisande smirked.

“A bit low for you, don’t you think? And you so high on your horse, talking about blood crimes.”

The Shaw Witch reapplied her lipstick. “You and I are not finished, Mrs. Burbanke.”

Melisande brushed a flea-sized mote of lint from her perfumed breast. “Eris, dear. Didn’t I tell you that shade of red is a bit...young for you? But I won’t say anything more about that. How are your children? Beautiful children, your brown boys, so sturdy, so small. Have they learned to fly yet? Have you put bars on their windows? Little boys do get around. And then there’s your daughter. Turning out to be quite the ghoul, isn’t she?”

The Shaw Witch took a quick bite out of her empty wine glass and spat the shards into Melisande’s face. She spoke quickly, without bothering to lower her voice.

“Loosened teeth and twisting tongue

Bruise the tissue, squeeze the lung

Pharynx, larynx, trachea

Esophagi dysphagia

Halitosis, tonsillitis, sinusitis, et alia

So mote, so be, FIAT!”

Melisande left the party, bleeding from nose and eyes and unable even to choke out her excuses. No one but Alice talked to the Shaw Witch after that, and Alice was soon too busy with her presentation to socialize. It included preparing a cold pizza, which the Shaw Witch did not eat, as some of the glass she had swallowed was dancing havoc on her ulcers.

She ended up purchasing a cheese grater, a six-inch stoneware muffin pan, a carving knife and a bamboo cutting board. She helped Alice clean up afterwards, by way of apology.

“He’s a teacher,” she said as Alice walked her to the door.

“Who?”

“My husband. He teaches stagecraft and stage combat at the university. Adjunct faculty.”

“Oh.” Alice blinked at her. “That’s nice.”

“Yes,” said the Shaw Witch. Her feet hurt. The high heels threw her gait off.

“Mmn,” Alice said. “Well, thanks for...”

“You should come over for dinner sometime,” the Shaw Witch blurted. “I’ll make putanesca. My grandmother left me this recipe, involving lots of garlic, and octopus, and the neck bones of swans.”

“Oh,” Alice said again. “I’ll have to talk to my husband.”

“Right, well, whenever.” The Shaw Witch began to turn away. Alice put a hand on her arm.

“I’d like to meet Ned. And your kids. It’s just...”

“I know. Forget I said anything.”

The spell was instantaneous.

*

“Lilith? Tigris? Leo?”

The floor beneath her bare feet was tacky from the June humidity. Her high heels had vanished. Her crows had returned to her gown, dead-eyed and indignant at having been concealed for so long. The house felt abandoned.

Dashing to the kitchen, she threw open the basement door and clattered downstairs, yelling as she went, “Nid, Nidhogg—where are the children?”

The twins crouched with her husband in his cage. Tigris was painting a Fighting Uruk-Hai from his *Lord of the Rings Strategy Battle Game*, while Leo, occupied gluing down real turf on the playing board, paid no attention to her entrance at all. Nid glanced up to greet her. He had a paintbrush in one hand and a glue gun in the other.

“Lilith,” he said before she could ask again, “has gone on a play date with Janice.”

“Janice Burbanke?”

“The Burbankes arrived about an hour ago and invited Lil over to their house to play. Our daughter levitated. Literally. She was that happy.”

The Shaw Witch wanted to stamp or throw something or change her husband into a gerbil. But the twins were watching, and her husband was impervious to her magic.

“I can’t believe you let Lil go off with that woman.”

“Eris.” Flames briefly limned Nidhogg’s nostrils. “It’s like this. Janice likes her dolls with heads. Lilith doesn’t. Let them work it out, with fists or spells or tea parties. It’s nothing for us to get so worked up about.”

“Nothing? And all the vile magic Melisande’s been stirring up in the neighborhood, that’s nothing too, I suppose?”

Nidhogg shrugged. “That’s business. She, like we do, has a mortgage. Besides, she keeps on like she’s been, we’ll be able to paint the boys’ rooms by next month.”

“Nid!” The Shaw Witch threw up her hands. “I’m going out.”

“Do that, witchwife.” Her husband’s eyes glinted goldenly. “Break me out for a *real* emergency. On that night, I’ll let you ride me across the sky.” His mouth glowed scarlet, like lit rubies or living coals—and she scowled at him, unsure if she wanted to stick her tongue down his throat or a silver spear through the one soft chink in his armor.

“You’d better hope everything is butterflies and puppy dogs at *Chez Burbanke*, Mr. Nidhogg.”

“Don’t worry so much, *strega*.”

“Hmph.”

As the Shaw Witch climbed out of the basement, she turned all of her blackbirds into doves and egrets and snowy owls. This sort of visit required a white dress. But she did reapply her red lipstick, with interest.

*

Melisande waited on the curb, arms akimbo, pale skin jaundiced in the sodium light. When she noticed the colors of the Shaw Witch’s surrender, her mouth curled, parting to spew curses or contumely, but the Shaw Witch rushed her before even one syllable could be uttered, kissing her full on the mouth. Red lipstick smeared, forming a seal of silence.

Melisande’s eyes widened, then narrowed, then rolled in resignation. For the second time that night, the Shaw Witch had stolen her speech.

“That’ll keep,” said the Shaw Witch, “until I see my daughter is well. Then we’ll talk.”

Janice and Lilith were practicing alchemy in the backyard. Quantities of empty shampoo bottles, eye-droppers, perfume vials, milk, vinegar, dishwasher detergent, talc, bath salts, cups of flour and pails of sand surrounded them in heaps and rows like a faerie feast Unseelie in quintessence.

The Shaw Witch watched them unobserved. Lilith Shaw, thin and bony and graceful, with the long, oddly-jointed fingers of her ancestresses, behaved with painful politeness, almost a subservience, to Janice Burbanke, who by nature was far less bossy. The Kirstin doll’s corpus had been reattached to its cranium by means of an incantation, a red ribbon, and some crazy glue. Beatifically, it presided over the twilit idyll.

“Try some of this.” Janice Burbanke offered Lilith a packet of active yeast. “Mix it with your aqua-sour potion and it’ll foam up.”

“Cool!”

Lilith’s sea-glass gaze flashed over her mother. The Shaw Witch felt her bones turn invisible. A horror and a marvel, how one’s daughter could reduce one to wind and dust. Then Lilith smiled and the Shaw Witch made her retreat. She rejoined Melisande on the front lawn. As one, they plonked down on the curb and set their chins in their palms.

Melisande raised her plucked eyebrows. A tired flick of the Shaw Witch’s fingers, and the seal wiped itself from Melisande’s lips.

“Lamia,” spat Melisande.

“Beldam,” said the Shaw Witch.

“Crone.”

“Shrew.”

“Hagfish.”

“All right—*pax!*” The Shaw Witch angled her body toward Melisande. “Look. Lilith needs Janice. She’s her best friend. One of her only friends.”

“My daughter is...sometimes overly sensitive.” Melisande blotted her mouth until the red lipstick was no more than a few murderous smears on tissue. “Lilith’s Reign of Terror upset her.”

The Shaw Witch struggled to keep her voice fair. “Has Janice never been inside your workshop?”

Melisande shrugged. “Janice is inclined to the company of kittens and guinea pigs

and...bunnies.”

Well did the Shaw Witch know what Melisande thought of bunnies. She kept their severed feet strung up on a laundry line in the garage.

“Nid wants to have a barbecue Friday,” she invented.

Nid would not *mind* having a barbecue. He never did. It gave him an excuse to come out of his cage and set things on fire in a socially acceptable fashion. He and Mr. Burbanke, no first name, would drink beer and mourn the Cubs.

“Oh, yeah?” Melisande narrowed her eyes. “What’s the occasion?”

“Solstice. Bring your broomstick and a nice dry white.”

“You can’t be serious.”

The Shaw Witch shrugged. “Truce ‘til Equinox?”

Melisande made the sign of the horned moon with her pinkie and index finger. Her nails were sharp, manicured, could tear open a dove for entrails or unpick a spell knot in seconds. The Shaw Witch mirrored the sign, feeling apprehensive. Her own nails were quick-bitten and only occasionally painted. She held her breath, willing the abatement of their mutual aggression. At least for now. At least for the summer.

Melisande turned the horns to face her own body.

“*Fiat*,” she said.



*“My gold made
her into a queen,
although she
hated me for it.”*

Mari Ness

Rumpled Skin

Mari Ness lives in central Florida, where she focuses on attempting to convince two adorable cats that her laptop, despite appearances, is not a cat bed. You can find more of her fiction and poetry in odd corners of the net, including Fantasy Magazine, Hub Fiction, Goblin Fruit, and more. She keeps a very disorganized blog at mariness.livejournal.com.

I’ve always been fascinated and repelled by the dark undercurrents that flash through fairy tales. What would happen, I wondered, in a marriage that began as unpromisingly as that in Rumpelstiltskin—where the king does not marry the girl for her beauty, but because he believes she can spin gold, and the girl does not marry the king for love, but because her choice is marriage or death?

My gold made her into a queen, although she hated me for it.

From the shadows, I watched as she shuddered each time the king stroked her arm, how she paled each evening as the night grew near and it came time for her to follow the king into bed. I saw the bruises on her arms and legs, and heard her muffled screams in the night. I saw his smile grow each morning.

He only stopped when she quickened with his child, although she and I both knew it would not be for long.

“I hate you,” she whispered, although she could not see me in the shadows where I crept.

“You are alive,” I whispered back, throwing my voice so she would not know where I was. “My gold kept you alive.”

“This is not alive. I have not been alive since I lived at the mill.”

I did not answer that.

“You were weeping,” I said instead. “I saved you from your tears.”

“I hate you,” she repeated.

The child within her grew; freed of his attentions, she grew less pale,

and gained a smile from him when she tended the bruises of the girl who took her place in his bed. “This respite will not last long,” she whispered, and it did not. He struck her before the birth began.

“You owe me the child,” I reminded her.

“A straw promise.”

“Nevertheless.”

“He will kill me, if you take him.”

The servants did not hear, nor did he, but I waited in the shadows, and wove her cries and screams and blood into my hands. I watched him take the child in his arms; saw her face grow tight in pain.

“Weak, like you,” the great king said. “Though her skin is touched with gold.”

When he placed the child into her cradle, I could see the bruises on the child’s arms. The great king frowned. “I shall have no whining brats,” he said, and bruised her mother’s arm.

“I hate you,” she whispered.

I traced the bruises on her skin with my shadowed hands, kneeling beside their golden bed.

No wonder, then, that I took the child. The only wonder: that for three days, she pretended to forget my name.

Autumn Canter

The Gone-By Quilt



Autumn Canter lives in Baltimore with her comic guru husband, baby son, four belligerent felines and hundreds upon hundreds of books. Were there an apocalypse, she is confident she will be entertained as long as there is a source of light by which to read. She writes when her toddler sleeps and plays with blocks and stuffed elephants the rest of the time. Her work has been published in Sybil's Garage No. 6, Farrago's Wainscot, Strange, Weird and Wonderful Magazine, A Fly in Amber, and The Absent Willow Review.

You can learn more about her than you ever wanted to know at her blog, www.felinefixation.com. She is always looking for recommendations of what to read next. Do share.

I wanted to write a story with an African American character because of the lack thereof in speculative fiction. I also had my personal reasons. My husband and son are of a mixed racial background. Though we have come a long way towards equal rights, prejudice remains. Sadly, we have seen this first hand as a family. At the heart though, this is a story about forgiveness, one of the greatest things a person can accomplish—in my humble opinion, anyway!

She once said, "I loved you more than anything." The memory's right there, clear as day: a square of fabric that once clung to her sweaty breast and sighed with her beating heart beneath. Emily had been twenty-something, burning through and through with summer blood.

With quick flash stitches, hand to foot like paper dolls, she said next, "I like to drink the June day rains out the gutter pipe." This memory is old, paisley cotton, stitched up with a red, red heart. She was no more than twelve and soaked to the bone, with thunder rippling across a sunny sky like a giant laughing up in the hills.

Next to it, a corner piece of flannel sheet that once adorned a girl's small bed. The fabric is the color of cotton candy and bubble gum. When she got scared at night, she put it in her mouth and chewed. You can't see the impression of baby teeth, but they are there: spaced wide, sharp as little blades.

The quilt is folded up careful, one end put back to show the inner layer: black as tar, coal, cinder, soot. It's pieces of her story all sewed up. A tapestry of her life.

*

Emily had the strange touch in three fingers: thumb, first, and middle on just her right hand. The midwife told her mother it was so within the

"Emily had the strange touch in three fingers: thumb, first, and middle on just her right hand.

The midwife told her mother it was so within the baby's first hour out of the sea she grew in, kicking, for seven months.

She busted out early, scrawny and wailing, with three twitchy fingers scratching colors into the air."

baby's first hour out of the sea she grew in, kicking, for seven months. She busted out early, scrawny and wailing, with three twitchy fingers scratching colors into the air.

*

Her papa made her little mitts to keep her magic fingers muffled. But time came when she tore off her mitts and sent her magic fingers to work—sending dollies dancing, stuffed bears pouncing out at passing feet, sheets floating up off the bed to flap like birds around the light fixtures.

One morning two bags of flour chased each other up and down the stairs, hacking out grainy clouds and coating every inch of surface with powder. Mama screamed curses about Emily's magic fingers and took out a sharpened knife from the top drawer. She'd have them off!

Emily sat in the midst of it all, screamed and clapped her hands. Her which-way hair was white and eyebrows and lashes the same.

The anger poured out her mama like a keg free of its plug. She stood still, struck by sorrow. She hid the big knife in her skirts and cried.

That night, Emily toddled up to her father, held up her three tricky fingers, and said, "Gub. Gub, papa. Gub".

He made her gloves in every fabric he could get his hands on. Gloves that covered up her magic touch and left her other fingers free.

*

At school no one spoke to her. They'd heard stories that she was witchy. Emily spent most of her time sewing dresses for her dolls and working on her quilt, silent and alone, wishing it was otherwise.

The year she turned eleven, fresh out of the bath with her hair sticking up straight and her eyes black as coals, she turned over things she didn't quite have the age to understand.

In the mirror, oval in a piece of white painted wood, Emily looked at herself: at her brown right hand and the strange pale fingers that God had put on her for reasons unknown.

She tucked in the thumb and the middle digit, leaving the first poking out, and went cross-eyed looking at it near her nose. It was paler than her hand but otherwise didn't look too special. It'd been so long since she'd done anything with it.

She still remembered a towering image of her raging, weeping mother holding up a kitchen knife and screaming, "I'll have them off! I'll have the devil work off you!"

Maybe...maybe it didn't even work anymore. Slow as honey down the jar drawing ants, she reached out towards the Emily in the mirror. She touched the girl's chest where two little nubs poked out the front of her nightgown, showing she was on the way to being a woman.

The glass rippled like a puddle with a rock tossed in. The girl in the mirror flashed a smile and Emily, standing still, recoiled.

The looking-glass girl came close, squishing up her button nose to the inside of the glass, and said, "Emi, you better pull yourself together, 'cause Mama is coming up the stairs right now and she's gonna braid our hair."

When Mama came in, Emily was sitting on the end of the bed, glove covering her right hand. The looking-glass girl was doing just the same, but when Mama wasn't looking she winked. When she saw that Emily wasn't going to say a thing about it, she pulled faces: pig's nose jerked up with a thumb, yanked down bloody red eyelids, and wagging, slobbering tongue.

When Mama had gone with a kiss and a tuck, Emily laughed quiet as could be into her fists. Out of the dark, caught in the glass and frame, the other Emily spoke out: "At least we have each other."

*

Emily had an old broken piece of mirror that she propped up in the barn. On warm days she sat there to read a book and practise her stitches. She spent this time with the other Emily quilting together old fabrics, reading aloud, chatting with the girl in the mirror that wore her face.

Sometimes Emily's mama and papa heard her laughing into the twilight as they waited on the porch for supper to cool before calling her in. They didn't know she left each night with a kiss smacked against glass and an "I love you" for the looking-glass girl she'd created.

*

The years passed. The quilt spread over her lap, rainbow pieces netted together. Big enough now to swaddle a baby doll or wrap her shoulders like a shawl. The looking-glass girl grew with her, took her secrets and her loneliness.

Emily wished there was some way she could put pieces of the looking-glass girl into the quilt, but bits of glass, even sewn in careful might bite. Emily soothed them both by saying each piece that was hers was also the other Emily's too. Their smiles were identical—flashing teeth in the dim shadows of the barn.

Emily might have been enough for the looking-glass girl, but the same wasn't true for

Emily. Though she loved her reflection, her only friend, Emily was hot blood and flesh. She wanted more.

*

“You taste as sweet as you look.”

They met out back under the maple line that bordered the creek. White boy with two sparky blue eyes: color of the forbidden. No Negro girl, even north of the Mason-Dixon Line, should be lip-stuck to a White: white as a snake belly, a snow mound, a slap-dash spread of paint. An Irish boy.

“You better head on back.”

“Don’t you worry, Emily. I don’t care what any would say and neither should you.”

After he had gone and she counted off the seconds till she could follow, the other Emily moved up on the water’s face: ripple skinned with tadpoles stitching through her gleaming eyes. “It ain’t fair. You get to kiss on him like that, and me, I just get to see it there burning on your lips and beating in your breast. What life is this, only getting to look on yours?”

Emily tossed a pebble in the water girl’s face, making her ripple and dance and look old as old can be. “You shut up. You only a bit of me and can’t have more than that.”

The looking glass girl cried into the water, tears flowing over pebbles and south.

*

Emily took one of her lover’s old shirts and cut it into pieces, spreading it throughout her quilt, binding the fabrics together. The looking-glass girl sulked with arms crossed and mumbled to herself. Emily ignored her and raised up a square of fabric to sniff. It smelled just like him still.

“You like that stupid white boy more than you like me. You don’t care nothing about me at all.”

Emily tossed down her quilt and snapped, “What do you want from me? You ain’t even real. You ain’t nothing but a bit of magic. If I could get rid of you, I would. I’m tired of not being able to look at my own face and have to hear you nattering on all the time!”

Emily pricked herself with the needle and cursed, sucking her thumb and tasting the cotton over her magic finger. It sizzled.

The looking-glass girl’s face got ugly with anger. “I thought you was my friend! But you ain’t. I hate you. I ought to tell Mama what you done, making me. I ought to snitch to everyone else what you doin’ with that boy down by the creek.”

“No, you won’t! No, you better not!”

Lucky thing Mama and Papa were down the road visiting old, sick Mrs. Jones or else they would have heard two girls shrieking, cursing, crying loud enough to scare the barn swallows out the eaves and into desperate flight.

An old sheet took care of the looking-glass girl. When she was covered up, Emily could pretend the other one didn’t exist at all.

*

It hurt for the looking-glass girl to move away from Emily: to stretch herself thin as air, back and back to a place she’d been—just another mirror-face to that ungrateful, no-good girl. She shivered in the running water, silver-skinned.

She wasn’t just magic. She wasn’t just a piece of Emily made alive to look back when the other girl looked in. She’d show that rotten Emily!

Her paste-pale lover waited by the creek. He twirled a ring in his hand that would look fine on Emily’s brown finger. It filled her up with a sick dread to see it.

He heard his lover calling, teasing from around the water, singing sweet. When he bent down low and put his white face down towards the sound, the looking glass girl snatched him up, filled his mouth, choked up his throat, took him down and down till he was laid out waist to waving yellow hair in the water.

She’d show that Emily girl to share her kisses.

*

Later that day, Emily was walking by the grocery windows when her reflection peeled away from their stepping and said, “You see this Negro girl here? I killed her lover, that O’Hart boy with the yella hair. She was kissing up on him when no one was looking.”

That was how Emily found out. She fell down in a crying heap, dust from toe to hip, and screamed.

There were no secrets now. Their forbidden love was over shown by his murder and her magic. She had nothing left to lose.

She had to try to bring him back.

*

There was one funeral home and one body laid out in it: drowned in the creek out back the school—blue face, blue-eyed.

Emily went right in, through grief-bent mourners sitting vigil, shying away from her

narrow body tight with grief.

The father came up spitting curses, “What you doing here? You done enough. More than enough and some. You ought to be jailed. You ought to be burned and hung.”

Emily stripped off her glove and felt the room take a great suck of breath as her pale, twitchy fingers caught the lantern glow and flashed.

She touched her lover’s cold brow, his hair, his nose, lips, the glued shut lids of his eyes, but there was nothing and nothing. No breath. No movement. No honey voice saying, “Emily, I love you.”

A grief scream came out of her as her arms flopped up and down, beating her own chest. From the lantern glass her miniature reflection laughed and from Emily’s twitching fingers sparks shot and sent all the ladies’ hats, trailing mourning veils, to flying.

*

“You need to pray. You need to get down on your knees from morning to night and ask God to take back your devil work.” Mama laid her shaky hand on Emily’s head.

Outside the white boy’s folks held up bricks, threatening to break up the window glass if the devil girl came back saying, “Yes, I killed him! I killed that cracker! I killed that good-for-nothing! I drowned him in the creek! I put that uppity Emily in her place!”

Emily glared at the covered mirror, the curtained windows, hate and more hate beating from her broken heart for her murderous reflection.

She couldn’t go anywhere. The looking-glass girl spat awful things, cusses and whore talk from the windows, the bathroom mirrors, the shine off the fishbowl. She was everywhere Emily was: in the church, the school, the town grocery.

Witch girl, they spat at her and drew the cross over their bosoms, cursed.

“I hate you,” she hissed at the mirror.

“I hate you,” her voice echoed right back and the sheet swayed as if breathing.

*

Deep in the night, her legs full of cramps and her hands locked tight over the cross her mama had put there, Emily crawled to the mirror, pulled up a corner of the sheet and saw the other girl waiting. “I’m going to get you gone,” she growled.

“I’ll believe it when it’s done. ‘Till then I’ll make your life a hell on Earth every which way you go.”

Emily tore the quilt out of her sewing basket and rubbed her cheek on the pieces that once soaked up her lover's sweat and now took her tears.

Glove peeled off with aid of her teeth, she touched the inside fabric with her magic fingers, turning it black as her heart: gone to rot with rage, grief, and hate so thick she could taste it bitter on her tongue. She knew something had to be done quick or the infection would spread, and even her papa's handiwork wouldn't keep her taint out of the world.

Soft as feathers cutting air and rain coming down, she thought she heard her lover's voice from a distance. It wasn't him, of course, just her hope dying. She wrapped herself in her quilt, a rainbow cocoon, soaking it with tears.

*

Some hated her. Some were afraid. Fewer still shed a few tears on her behalf when they were sure they were alone. But all came out the day she stood and called them: windows shooting up letting in the chill, blankets pulling back to their feet and slapping, doors rattling on hinges and knocking dents into the walls.

Through a film of clouds the sun peeked out, hid, made itself bold and cast shadows. Emily stood in the spring sun, thin as a waif, hollow-eyed with tears shed each night, each day since he died.

She waited till they'd gathered: barefoot, sleepy-eyed, horrified, the entire town in their nightclothes waiting. She slapped her tricky hand up against the red brick of the town hall: pretty brown fingers, two pale as paste and the thumb the same. "I didn't ask for it and I'm done with it. You are witness. The only sin that's mine is not having done with it sooner."

"Stupid girl," spat her reflection from the glass window to her left.

The cleaver in her hand came down, once, twice. Three magic fingers on the dusty boards and one girl screaming. The one that wasn't went after the glass next, spraying blood from her stumps and spittle from her lips. The looking-glass girl shattered into pieces and was silent.

*

As time passed the mirror gathered dust. The wooden frame shed paint as skin. The sheet that cocooned the glass was yellow stained and brittle. It stood at the foot of the bed. It loomed.

The quilt lay in its shadow. You could see Emily's life in the patchwork pieces, from baby gowns to flour bags, to lover's rags and bloodstained gauze layered thrice to hold the threads.

It all gathered dust in the abandoned house, the eyesore of the town. The neighborhood kids threw rocks into the windows and shattered them to pieces. They carved their names into the boards that sealed the windows on dares to prove they were brave.

No one went inside.

No one went inside ever, except the old woman, and she never came back out—alive, anyway.

*

The old woman sat on the end of the bed and rubbed the quilt with the remaining fingers of her right hand. It was the pieces of what was, the memories.

There was so much missing, the after. The graduation black and wedding gown white, hospital receiving blankets and scraps of cloth that her children stained and grew out of. That wasn't in the quilt. She'd severed herself from this part of her life, along with her cursed fingers.

Now, at the end, Emily found that her oldest memories still had teeth—they gnawed. She knew it was time to face her ghosts before she joined them.

Her hand passed over a knot, a lump in the fabric. There. She moved it to the window. An incision in the black cloth, clumsy, bloodstained stitches. She pulled the threads and they gave, unraveling, puffing out dust.

Bones spilled out on the floor, rattling. They jittered, shook, spun like tops possessed. Her nubs tingled and went warm.

Seeing them dancing brought her back to that day when she slapped them up on pitted, red brick warmed from morning sun.

Emily thought of yellow hair roped around her brown fingers, of a face smiling back at her that was not her own, glued-shut corpse eyes and painted cheeks, and broken glass sparkling over her toes dripped in blood.

Tears slid down her cheeks, lost in the wrinkles. She staggered when she bent to scoop up the bones. The bones jumped into her palms like eager children. Weeping, Emily closed her remaining fingers and her broken nubs—locking the bones in place. They lay still, pleased, humming with power.

Afraid it would not be enough, she flung herself at the mirror. She leaned against it with a cry, with a murmured prayer of please, please, please and yanked. The sheet trailed to the floor and over her feet shedding dust.

A young Emily looked out at her, hands cocked on narrow hips, sulky mouth in a pout.

“I wondered when you’d find fit to look at me again.”

One old, palsied hand pressed against the glass, over the smooth mound of a young girl’s cheek. The old woman leaned forward and kissed the glass, kissed the silver tears, stroked the smooth black hair.

Oh, the smile. A smile without wrinkles, without dentures, without years of experience gone by. A girl’s smile. A smile that once stretched her own lips and flashed her teeth. There it was, still alive, innocent and hopeful, on the looking-glass girl’s face.

*

The old woman was found on the floor. Her hand, frozen stiff and missing fingers, was pressed to the base of the mirror. The old glass had run in ripples and whirls down towards the floor. It looked like weeping.

Out in the yard, a young black girl stood with the neighbors—dashed red and blue from the lights of the police cars. She clutched a dusty, patchwork quilt to her chest and cried.



Megan Arkenberg

Fairest

Megan Arkenberg is a student in Wisconsin. Her work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, and *Fantasy Magazine*, and has been accepted for upcoming issues of *Strange Horizons* and *Clarkesworld*. She edits the fantasy magazine *Mirror Dance* (<http://mirrordancefantasy.blogspot.com>) and the historical fiction magazine *Lacuna*.

“The iron shoes at the end of the Snow White story never seemed like a protagonist’s brainchild to me. That was my first hint that there might be more than one villainess in that fairy tale.”

*“Oh, yes, you are
lovely,
but revenge
does not suit you.
There are faces to
which
a little cruelty
adds magnifi-
cence--but yours
is not one of
them.”*

My beautiful daughter,
what gift is this you bring me
on your wedding day?
Iron shoes? Oh, love,
I am no fairy anymore
to be kept away by iron
nor frightened by the heat!
Give them here—here, let me dance!
I was a lovely dancer in my day.
As lovely, I dare say,
as you used to be
that night in the forest
when I drank a pig’s blood.

Oh, yes, you are lovely,
but revenge
does not suit you.
There are faces to which
a little cruelty
adds magnificence—but yours
is not one of them.

So why the shoes?
Are you bitter at me
for your long sleep—the sleep

which brought your prince to you?
Do you blame me for my cruelty?
I tell you, beautiful one,
you make yourself a fool
by following in your mother's footsteps.

But watch me dance, my darling.
If you must learn from me,
learn this: the reaping
of pain for poison
and fire for lies.
One day you too, my wicked
wicked daughter,
may need to trace these steps.



Michael Meyerhofer

Confessions of an Errant Knight

Michael Meyerhofer has published four collections of poetry with two more forthcoming. His work has appeared in Asimov's, Mythic Delirium, On Spec, Ploughshares, Arts & Letters and others.

"I was thinking of the various cliches in heroic tales; often, heroes seem to be predestined rather than made. I decided to try and write a poem in which the "hero" was only a pretender, motivated not by lust for riches and fame but simple, human loneliness. A "hero" inspired to earn what he has been given, even though his honesty (ironically) might see him stripped of the chance. I also like adding a little humor whenever possible because I think that's a great way to disarm the reader and leave her or him more open to a

*"OK, fine, I'm not
the Chosen One."*

OK, fine, I'm not the Chosen One.
 I found this platinum sword in a gift shop,
 scratched these holy runes with a nail.
 My mother was not a mermaid—
 barmaid would be more apt. As for Dad,
 he knew no more about magic
 than he knows about ambrosia farming,
 which is why we ate turnips instead.
 But there were no barbarians, no torches.
 No Etoshi spear skewered my dog.
 My sister lost her virtue not to a minotaur,
 but the fletcher, both of them bored
 and to tell the truth, quite homely, besides.
 No scion from the gods led me to you
 unless you count the open road,
 your window's hint of bilberry pie.
 What are lies, anyway, if not aspiring truths?
 Never mind. Close the door, please.
 I feel the winter in my bones and I love
 the way you polish my sword,
 the way you talk of me around the well,
 and most of all, how you look at me
 when the moon filters through the slats
 of this poor, ramshackle castle,
 like you think me capable of greatness.



Jennifer Jerome

Nettled

Jennifer Jerome is a native New Yorker. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications, including The Pedestal Magazine, Flashquake, ChiZine, Pebble Lake Review, and Goblin Fruit. For more about her work, cast your 'net at www.jenniferjerome.com.

“I wrote this poem because I wanted to know what she’d say if she could speak, this good girl, this responsible sister.”

*“I only do this
because I have
to. There’s no one
else
who can”*

I only do this because I have to. There’s no one else who can. Eleven swans wheel overhead, bright wings flashing as feathers catch the sun. I piece together shirts from nettles. Green needles pierce my fingers: blisters swell up, fat as bread dough. I do not fly at this. My tears soak the harsh plants, keep them pliable. The salt burns. The birds scud down around me, watch me while I work. Their dark eyes never blink. I can’t tell which brother is which, they look the same to me. They squawk their terrible squawks. I could sob and sob and not make a sound around the stone in my throat. I don’t bother. I rest my hands and watch the swans preen; beaks curl down to polish sides as white as snow that’s bound to melt. What would happen if I stopped? I still remember love, rough hugs, the endless clatter of boots on the stairs. What’s left now, a house of dust. The gate gusts shut; the great birds fling up into the sky, a flurry of feathers and wind. I’d give my own strange hands to be there — I’d flee the wind down if I could, screaming out to every other wild loosed thing, never once looking back.



Marcie Lynn Tentchoff

Five Days After

Marcie Lynn Tentchoff is an Aurora Award winning poet/writer from the west coast of Canada. She edits for multiple magazines, and her own work has appeared in such publications as *Weird Tales*, *On Spec*, and *Aeon*. Her poetry collection, *Sometimes While Dreaming*, is available through Sam's Dot Publishing.

"The title and first few lines of this poem lodged themselves in my brain and demanded to have a poem surrender itself to be written to suit. Luckily, the poem didn't fight too hard."

On the first day after she met him
she went out shopping,
ran her credit card bill high
to buy new clothes and jewels
in antique styles that suited his,
all forest greens and azure blues
like noonday skies.

On the second day she got her hair done,
had it dyed to dazzling
sunshine-colored brightness,
hoping that its daylit tones
might sooth the longing
in his voice when he had talked
of times before.

On the third day she sat beside
her silent telephone, checked its
batteries and phoned her voice mail
service twice, before she forced
a small, self- deprecating laugh,
and thought to buy a mystic
crystal charm instead.

The fourth day found her
on the internet, downloading
ageless songs of love and loss,
of mythic spells, and demon loves,
of maids betrayed, and young men's lies,
and dreams turned into nightmares
when the magic fails.

*"On the first day
after she met him*

*she went out
shopping"*

Erasing the Universe's Chalkboard

Five days after she met him,
she went out wandering past a maze
of silent night clubs, asking after
one that no one seemed to know,
searching for a door, a song, a person
she'd found once under the perfect stars,
but never, ever would again.

Elizabeth Bear

N. K. Jemisin, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*.



N.K. Jemisin’s debut novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, is a book built out of incompletely reconciled dichotomies. The tension this creates is often beneficial to the narrative, but sometimes it contributes to a certain lack of structure that robs the book of needed tension.

The book opens with Yeine, a young warrior woman—a barbarian by the standards of the ruling class, and yet the daughter of a prodigal princess of the conquering imperial family—recalled to the imperial capital of Sky to take her place as a third and most certainly sacrificial heir to her grandfather the emperor. Yeine, telling her own story from the perspective of an indeterminate later time (a conceit that I found generally engaging, although it did engender a little too much auctorial coyness of the “I’ll tell you that later” variety) brings the reader into the society of Sky, which is a political shark tank that would give Eleanor of Aquitaine an itchy sensation, if not actual hives.

The imperial family are relentless and horrible, capable of the sorts of atrocities that will be familiar to readers of Harlan Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream,” and in general entirely devoid of human feeling or compassion.

Yeine must navigate this brutal society to protect the homeland she loves—and to save her own life, if possible. But higher stakes are on the horizon, because the imperial family have achieved the power they have through mistreating a collection of captive gods, the (purportedly evil) Nahadoth and his spawn.

Nahadoth—for me, the most intriguing character—is more complex than he appears on the surface, and Yeine soon finds herself embroiled in an emotional and potentially fatal folie à deux with him, as she attempts to preserve the existence of her nation and find a way to free the enslaved gods.

Unfortunately, I was never entirely convinced by the politics in this book, upon which the success of its narrative rests. The characters did not reflect the richness of complex motivations I would have pre-

ferred—this was part of the reason the narrative felt like a young adult novel to me; good and evil were very tidily delineated throughout—but instead are clearly drawn into sides: good and decent people with Yeine, evil and treacherous people against her.

In addition, I found Yeine herself problematic as a protagonist. Some of this is because she is the classic ingénue, and throughout the book I kept finding her insufficiently invested in the problems presented to her, such as saving her own life. She was quite invested in the kingdom of her childhood, and as she was presented as a young warrior, I wished there were more societal grounding worked into the narrative to make me believe in her lack of regard for her own safety was a result of that warrior upbringing, but the result is that Yeine seems weirdly passive and disinterested—even in regard to the murder mystery surrounding her mother’s death—and thus subject to narrative fiat rather than motivated by her own drives.

However, it’s fairly easy to dismiss those somewhat minor problems, especially in a first novel, when the worldbuilding is as rich as it is in this book. Within the compass of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, Jemisin managed to create a number of compelling societies, including that of the gods. Several of the characters—notably Nahadoth and his alter ego—are quite lovingly crafted and complex. The climax suits my preferences as a reader to a T, except I would have liked to see Yeine more complicit—and more active—in what eventually transpires. In keeping her innocent, Jemisin has also left her powerless. (For me, the strongest scene in the book is a horrific one in which Yeine finally brings the war to her enemy, but—alas!—that agency and ruthlessness is quickly stripped from her just as she seems about to actually make a fight of it.) And while I would have liked more nuance in the portrayal of the villains, I cannot argue with Jemisin’s assessment of the evils of cultural imperialism run riot.

Elizabeth Bear

Review:

The Choir Boats, Vol. 1 of *Longing for Yount*, Daniel J. Rabuzzi. Chizine Publications.

Desideria, Nicole Kornher-Stace. Prime Books.



Daniel J. Rabuzzi's *The Choir Boats* is a book of somewhat deceptive heritage. While definitely taking advantage of the current interest in steampunk and the Age of Reason, structurally and thematically *The Choir Boats* is right in the centre of the Tolkien tradition: it's full of prophesied quests, long journeys, evil forces, worlds at stake, the discovery of strange and new powers in everyday people, and a series of objects to acquire and places to reach before the narrative can progress—and this is only the first of a trilogy. It might be wearing a frock coat—and a quite accurate cut of frock coat at that, since Rabuzzi has a doctorate in European history—but *The Choir Boats* is quest fantasy, through and through.

This isn't to say that a lot of those Napoleonic trappings aren't exciting and interesting stuff. The magic system is almost entirely mathematical, existing in calculations and algebraic arcs, which is a really nice touch: the math-magic both reinforces the slight steampunk feel and makes the magic feel more concrete, less out of step with the industry and rationalism of the setting. It's more Ada Lovelace, less Galadriel, and it's a great fit with the time and place. So is the costume and presentation of the initial primary antagonist, The Cretched Man, whose tall hat, long coat, and demonic hunting dogs manage to evoke both Jack the Ripper and the Hound of the Baskervilles. And for once, the long delays in travel that every quest fantasy seemingly needs to include have a decent explanation: tides, and the availability of ships in and out of London, South Africa, and parts more unknown.

It also grapples with some of the pitfalls of a 19th-century setting: namely, the question of how contemporaneous attitudes to race, gender, and class stack up to the modern reader's, and how to balance that desire for strict accuracy with characters actually accessible to the reader. Rabuzzi includes a spread of non-white, non-European characters, from the decidedly brown-skinned inhabitants of the extra-dimensional continent of Yount to merchant Barnabas McDoon's Indian ex-fiancee, lost to him because of his (uncle?)'s own racial prejudices, to an emancipated family of former American slaves living in poverty

in London. All of these characters are drawn with satisfying amounts of agency, given their social positions: Maggie, the daughter of an ex-slave mother, works as a housemaid and is isolated not just because of her poverty, but her skin; she's still a mathematical prodigy and possesses some measure of magic. McDoon's former fiancée runs into social trouble because he jilts her, but she's not cast out of her family, blamed, or treated like a fallen woman; her family, when they arrive on the scene, lashes out quite rightfully at McDoon, and he takes responsibility for his actions. Female characters—McDoon's niece Sally, Maggie, and a good spread of secondary players—carry their rightful share of the narrative, knowing things that the male characters don't, working side by side with them, and receiving their respect, all while recognizing or skirting the social conventions of the time. Rabuzzi does a tidy job at acknowledging the gap between the era's social ethics and our own and bridging it without compromising the integrity of the setting and period.

The stumbling blocks in *The Choir Boats* are in the execution: in taking Tolkienian fantasy as a structural inspiration, it's unfortunately also dragged home the drawbacks of that genre. Frequent blocks of exposition on the world or the characters' internal thoughts, a somewhat wandering path for their quest, and muddled goals, which aren't always at the forefront of the narrative, make it hard to keep a sense of tension or stakes. It's an issue enhanced by a not-yet-developed sense of what to narrate over and what to actually demonstrate blow-by-blow: frequently, actually interesting and pertinent plot points are rushed over in narrative, handed in summary to the reader, while incidental subplots or footnotes of conversations are presented in full. Whenever a good head of tension, of stakes, of leaning forward into the book to find out what happens is built up, it deflates quickly thereafter, mired down in exposition. Characters' emotional reactions are also narrated over, which makes it hard to really feel jubilant, afraid, engaged with them for the entire length of the book. In a novel whose inciting incidents involve the kidnapping of a child by dark forces, this is worrisome.

On the whole, the weaker points of *The Choir Boats* aren't the integrity of the ideas or the narrative choices made—and definitely not the design, as ChiZine Publications puts out impeccably professional, beautifully-designed books—but the stumbles you get when a new author's still finding their feet. If flawed, it's a first novel that's got definite ideas about where it wants to go; Rabuzzi's work three or four novels down the line, when it's mature and confident, should be something to look forward to.

Nicole Kornher-Stace's *Desideria* is a dark and rather untraditional second-world Gothic, set in some indeterminate time period with echoes of both the Victorian and the Renaissance. It's a book about liminal spaces: a city where the names are French and Christianity exists, but which is nonetheless entirely fictional; a madhouse full of the not-really-mad, guarded by not-really-warders; and, of course, the theatre. It's this emphasis on between-spaces, things that simultaneously are and aren't and the pulling-apart of those two, that makes *Desideria* so compelling.

That, and Kornher-Stace's ornately-turned prose, which hits the best of both worlds: both stylistically gorgeous on a sentence-by-sentence level and transparent enough to not get between the reader and the story. The style of *Desideria* really is ornament: it enhances what's already there, and the effect is something like reading Sarah Monette or (I'm assured) Barbara Hambly: noticing the reveling in the shape and sound of words, the twists of sentences, the vividness of details until the story sucks you back in and you're down the well again.

Structurally, *Desideira* is also both intricate and ambitious: a present-day thread—wherein an amnesiac Ange St. Loup is confined in the worst of all pre-moral treatment madhouses, and slowly works to discover her identity—frames the story of her life as an actress in the poor theatre Lady Minerva, and nested inside that is the script of the last play they performed before Ange leapt out the window of the burning Lady Minerva. While the setup is perhaps unnecessarily slow, spending a little too long wandering the madhouse before getting into the mystery of who, what, and why, once the machine of the plot gets running it produces incredible curious tension: each bit of the puzzle creeps in quietly, and there's an audible click just before the end as it all comes together. Kornher-Stace knows how to feed the curiosity of the reader just enough so they feel there's progress being made on the mystery but still keep looking for more.

When it all comes together the reveal is perhaps too obvious and explanatory: the book insists on stating what we've, of necessity, already figured out, which takes a little of the fun out of the equation and deflates some of the thematic resonance partially built up between the three narratives: thematic resonance that could have been bolstered and explored a little more. Stating the explanation for what happened—and that it's all that happened—shuts down the sense of mystery and excitement around the plot a little too much, but that's a more than forgivable issue in a first novel.

Desideria, on the whole, takes on something very difficult and exact and pulls it off in a way that's absorbing, exciting, intellectually fascinating, emotionally true and well-crafted, bobbles and all. I'd recommend this wholeheartedly to fans of Sarah Monette, Catherynne M. Valente, and Caitlin R. Kiernan as definitely an author to watch.