



# 4Elements

Loren Rhoads

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Available only to subscribers of Loren's email newsletter.

For more of her writing, check out Loren's homepage at [lorenrhoads.com](http://lorenrhoads.com).

Every project is a collaborative effort, even when the work is done in solitude. Thanks to Martha J. Allard, who was there when I got serious about writing. Thanks to the writers' groups and many classes who helped to polish these stories. Thanks to my grandmother, for continuing to inspire me, and Darren Mckeeman, for publishing the story of her headstone. Thanks to John Benson, for pushing me to polish "The Fox and the Foreigner" for *Not One of Us*, and Vale, who inspired me to publish *Lend the Eye a Terrible Aspect*. Thanks to Alan Beatts and the staff of Borderlands Bookstore, for giving me my first professional reading and Kathy Ptacek, for giving me a column in the HWA newsletter. Finally, thank you to Mason, forever and always.

# Welcome to the Elements

Ever since my husband Mason and I stumbled across Highgate Cemetery in London during the first Gulf War, I had been serious about visiting cemeteries. Late in 1997, I met Thomas Roche at Borderlands Books after a reading for his *Noirotica* anthologies. In addition to assembling those books, Tom served as nonfiction editor for Gothic.Net. I nervously pitched him a monthly column of cemetery essays. I'd never done anything like it before. I was amazed when he said yes. Then I wrote for Gothic.Net for four and a half years.

"Rooted" was one of those columns. Sometimes the most familiar places are the hardest to write about, because all those layers of memories tangle around together. I'd long wanted to write something about where my love of cemeteries originated, but I didn't feel like I had a story about Bendle Cemetery until my grandmother's death.

I thought about including the essay in *Wish You Were Here: Adventures in Cemetery Travel*, but that book was so stuffed full that something had to give. The essay has had a rich, full life, though.

After its initial publication on Gothic.Net, I published an excerpt in *Morbid Curiosity* #5. Different parts of it have appeared on CemeteryTravel.com. This is the first time the whole story has appeared in this form.

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Mason and I went to Japan the second time in 1999. We stayed with an American friend Mason met through Charnel Music, our record label. Terri lived in the Shibuya neighborhood of Tokyo. Every day, as Mason and I walked back to Terri's apartment, we passed a shrine to Inari, the Shinto god of prosperity.

I was fascinated by the combination of cement walls and vermilion torii gates. The fox statues wore red bibs and smiled with their tongues lolling out. I really wanted to write about them, but I didn't understand much about their worship, certainly not enough to write nonfiction.

For several years, I'd been working on a novel about a red-haired witch named Alondra DeCourval. I had a rough outline of Alondra's life in my head. It made sense that she would go to Tokyo after her guardian's death. "The Fox and the Foreigner" was one of the first Alondra short stories I wrote.

The story was first published in the venerable genre zine *Not One of Us*. Thanks to that publication, the story made the long list of the

British Science Fiction Award in 2008.

Since the story was written, I've written a series of stories about Alondra traveling the world. They're set in Oslo, New Orleans, San Francisco, Prague, London, and Venice, among other places. The stories have been published in the books *Sins of the Sirens*, *The Haunted Mansion Project: Year One*, *Strange California*, *Best New Horror #27*, and most recently in the magazines *Weirdbook* and *Occult Detective Quarterly*. Several short collections of the Alondra stories are available as ebooks on Amazon.

The cover image of this *4Elements* chapbook is the Toyosaka Inari Shrine in Shibuya, which I photographed in 2014.

\*

I found the Octavio Paz quote from which I took the title of the Medusa story in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. The quote comes from his *Posdata*, in which he also says, "Whoever builds a house for future happiness builds a prison for the present." According to Paz, "the acid that dissolves images" is criticism.

The impetus to use the quotations in the story came from Re/Search's edition of Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden* and Mason's love of French Decadent literature. When Medusa says, "Count your blessings; some people can't see," that quote is taken from the live Big Black album *Sound*

*of Impact.*

The story itself was spawned by an older man in one of my creative writing classes at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. This expert expounded at great length about the gender differences inherent in storytelling. There were certain voices a woman could never master, topics she could never face, stories she could never tell. I was incensed. My imagination could take me anywhere *and* I wasn't afraid to confront anything. I still can't read the story without thinking, "Screw you, buddy."

"The Acid that Dissolves Images" appeared initially in the book *Lend the Eye a Terrible Aspect*, which Mason and I edited for Automatism Press in 1994. After Alan Beatts of Borderlands Bookstore invited me to read at my first Litcrawl in October 2005, he encouraged me to assemble a chapbook so I'd have a collection of my own work. "Acid" appears in that collection of my early science fiction, which is called *Ashes & Rust*.

\*

The last piece in this collection sprang from my journal after Mason and I visited Florence in 2001. Seeing the waxen dissection models at La Specola really was the goal of our trip to that city. They didn't disappoint. In retrospect, I wish I'd paid more attention to the dodo's skeleton and the weird collection of taxidermy in the museum, but

that's a good excuse to have to go back to Italy.

The essay "Anatomical Venus" is taken from my travel memoir *All You Need is Morbid*. The book was published on Wattpad in the summer of 2014, where it won one of the first ever Watty awards. It was published in this form in the Horror Writers Association newsletter in April 2018.

\*

So here are the four elements of my work: travel (often cemetery) essays, morbid personal essays, dark urban fantasy, and grim science fiction. As you can see, there's a fair amount of cross-pollination. Travel inspires everything I do; so does morbid curiosity. I loathe genre limitations.

Thank you for signing up for my newsletter. I hope you enjoy the ride.

Loren Rhoads  
San Francisco  
April 2019

# Rooted

When I showed my grandmother *Death's Garden: Relationships with Cemeteries*, the book I'd edited, I was nervous about what she would say about a book of essays about cemeteries. Grandma was a plainspoken woman who'd survived the Depression as a girl in Missouri. She didn't spare your feelings if she could tell you the truth. It was one of the many things for which I respected her.

She paged through the photographs of grave monuments, examining each one. When she'd finished, she rested her gnarled hands on the book cover and asked, "You didn't include your grandfather's stone?"

How could I tell her why? The marker made me uncomfortable. I dodged the question and said, "I didn't have room for all the pictures I've taken."

"I hope you'll write about it someday," she said.

I guess I had to wait for her to be gone to be able to do it.

\*

My grandfather's headstone is large and very solid. It consists of a short riser of polished red granite topped with a foot-high block with a glossy beveled face and a rough, unpolished back. The name Rhoads is emblazoned across a banner

with scrolled edges. Beneath it to the right, another scroll proclaims my grandfather's first name and middle initial. He was born in the last years of the nineteenth century and died before I was born.

I'm told he was a large, bluff man who homesteaded in Wyoming before coming to Flint, Michigan to work in the auto industry. He courted my grandmother while she was waitressing. He was forty-two. She was thirty. Neither of them had ever been married. They bought a farm out on Beecher Road in an area that's still considered township. Out there, in what is barely still farming country, they raised three children. My dad was the oldest, just like me.

The only image I have of my grandfather is a photo in which he sprawls, asleep, in an armchair in his overalls. Grandpa worked at Buick for thirty-five years. In and around his day job, he farmed soybeans and wheat and raised chickens, sheep, and cattle. When he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-four, my grandmother buried him a mile down the road from their farm in a little country graveyard.

\*

I grew up on a farm between my grandmother's house and the graveyard, which is named Bendle after its first caretaker. The names on the gravestones inside the fence were familiar:

Nichols, Carpenter, and Calkins were the roads nearby. I was an adult before I understood that the roads were named for tracks that led originally to the first farms in the area, settled by families who had cleared the land and built old red barns that still stood when I was a girl. Like all children, I thought that Clayton Township had always existed, instead of having been organized as late as 1846.

The Lyons family, whose descendants still lived out on Nichols Road, donated an acre of land to the fledgling community to serve as a burial ground. Around 1838, Bendle Cemetery's first occupant was one of Seth Hathaway's children. That monument, if ever there was one, has vanished. The oldest existing tombstone remembers Albert Ottaway, less than a year old when he died in 1844.

That initial acre fascinated me when I first began to pay attention to graveyards. There, I saw my first lamb on a child's grave. Among the oldest monuments stands a six-foot tree trunk with limbs lopped off, dedicated to the Youell family, and a 'white bronze' obelisk for the Carpenters. One of the Nichols' graves said only "Infant Son," dead so young he wasn't even given a name.

I was in elementary school when my mother first took my brother and me to the graveyard. She brought butcher's paper and a box of Crayolas,

tucked in the basket of her bike. Taping the paper tightly against the headstones, she showed us how to make tombstone rubbings.

The gravestone that mesmerized me most marked the grave of my cousin Karen. She lived less than a year, killed in a car accident that sentenced my dad's youngest sister to a coma. A little bird with upraised wings adorned Karen's gray granite monument. Her epitaph said, "Think of her still as the same, and say she is not dead, she is just away."

That phrase haunted me. Of all my cousins, Karen would have been closest to my age, closer than my brother. She and I would have been the eldest of the mob of eight grandkids that grew up together. I wanted her to be my secret friend. I spoke to her when I was lonely. In the fourth grade, I tried to summon her with a séance. I scared myself by seeing an unfamiliar girl in my mirror. My mother was horrified when she discovered what my girlfriends and I had been up to.

The mystery of Karen's death still intrigues me. I don't know if what I know about it is true or if it's a story I've told myself. Karen died back in the days before car seats were mandatory for kids. I'd always thought she was flung from her mother's arms. One day, my great aunt said something to the effect that the firemen didn't

realize there was a baby in the car and smothered her by accident when they pulled her parents out. The accident was so long ago; no one remembers what really happened—if they ever knew. My aunt suffered damage to her memory in the collision or the coma. The only other person I might have asked is my grandmother, and now she's gone.

\*

The thing that made me uncomfortable about my grandfather's gravestone is that it already had my grandmother's name on it. When she bought the stone, the funeral home persuaded her that it would be cheaper to carve her name and birth date into the monument at the 1961 price. Then only the final date would need to be carved once the stone was set in place, which is a more expensive procedure since the engraver must travel to the cemetery. Throughout my whole life, the ground beside my grandfather's coffin waited to swallow my grandmother.

I don't know anyone my age who already has her headstone in the ground. I don't know many people who have thought far enough ahead to purchase a grave plot. We're too mobile now. Many of us fled the places where we grew up. Nothing seems permanent any more: marriage, motherhood, mortgage. Death, even if we study it, even if it fascinates us, happens to other people. Few of us have prepared for our own demises.

When Grandma had her last illness, I hurried home to see her one last time, but fled before the end came. As the plane bore me back to San Francisco, I knew I was making a mistake. *I should have stayed*, I kept thinking. *I should have stayed. I should have stayed 'til the end and watched her go into the ground.*

October 2000 was the first time I was able to come home after the funeral. I kept so busy after I arrived that I didn't have a moment to visit the graveyard. Finally, about an hour before I needed to get in the car for the drive to Detroit to fly away again, I visited my ancestors.

As I rode my mom's bike past the cemetery gates, I felt how this was my home: this little cemetery where my dad's parents lie, where my mother's mother and the only grandfather I remember lie, where my parents had three plots—one of which would become my younger brother's.

In the cemetery, names familiar from my childhood weather on stones that say, "Not Dead, Only Sleeping" and "Passed Out of This Life." Those old sentiments linger from the days when good Christians believed they would wait in their graves until Gabriel blew his trumpet and Jesus burst the bonds of death. I remember the stories of my childhood, even if they offer no comfort.

Richard Bendle, who kept the first book of

records for the graveyard, has one of my favorite epitaphs: “He sleeps where many loved ones sleep/And many tears are shed/There many friends in sadness weep/O’er him, the immortal dead.”

Grandma chose no epitaph, no words to sum up the life she left or the husband she joined. She was a staunch Baptist, saved as a girl at a tent revival. In the end, she believed that Jesus was waiting for her when she died, waiting to escort her home. I don’t have any such faith. I talk to her like she’s in the ground, not in the skies singing hosannas in her wavering, tone-deaf voice. I have no illusions that she’s sleeping beneath my feet.

I felt awkward as I framed a photo of Grandma’s headstone. I remembered her lying on her deathbed. I treasured the memory of seeing her brighten and call my name and tell me that she loved me. Tears prickled my eyes as I thought of all that is lost. I knew the photo could not capture what I felt, nor could any words. The woman I loved is gone, will always be gone. In her place, I am left with a stone.

# The Fox and the Foreigner

On this small neighborhood street, the heart of Tokyo sounded muffled, drowsing in the languid dusk. Alondra DeCourval strolled back to her hotel through the autumn humidity. Although she wasn't far from Shibuya Station, she heard no voices. Not a single car passed. She could have been in another world.

It hadn't been a productive day. Alondra wanted a kimono—something elegant but not too rich—to wear to a moon-viewing party. The couture shops of the Ginza were beyond her budget. Anyway, she felt foolish draped in silver tissue embroidered with spun gold. She couldn't wear a kimono with cranes, since those denoted brides. She couldn't wear black-on-black brocade. As with other aspects of Japanese culture, she understood better what was proscribed.

The day's one triumph: she'd bought a beautiful pair of wooden sandals. The saleswoman had smoothed snowy tabi socks onto Alondra's *gaijin*-sized feet and adjusted the sandals' thongs. At 5-foot-4, Alondra had never felt like a large woman. In Japan, she stood eye to eye with most men.

Worse, everywhere she went, her flame-red hair occasioned comment. Elderly ladies crossed the street to avoid her. Fashionable schoolgirls trailed her, crooning, “*Sugoi, ne?*” Emboldened by too many cups of sake with their officemates, disheveled salarymen accosted her, chanting, “*Konichiwa, konichiwa.*” In addition to the braid, she vowed to wear a hat tomorrow.

Alondra took a deep breath. For the space of an entire day, she’d actually been occupied by something other than Victor’s death. She’d allowed herself to be distracted by the minutiae and pleasures of being so far from home, without suffering the grief that had driven her here in the first place.

Tomorrow night she would face Ichiro Tadashi, dealer in occult Orientalia. While he did not dispute that her guardian had attempted to purchase a book from him, Tadashi denied receiving any money. He brushed aside the receipt Alondra found amidst the papers on Victor’s desk. If the dead man’s estate hadn’t received the book, Tadashi wrote, what did it matter to him?

It never occurred to Alondra to wonder why *she* cared so much about the book. Victor’s library held many volumes, most of which would go to a room in his name at the British Museum, once his sons had finished cataloging them. Victor left Alondra enough inheritance that she’d never need

to work. Her problem with Tadashi wasn't the money or the book itself, but the principle of the thing. Victor had wanted this book enough to pay £130,000 for it. He'd wanted it, so Alondra would get it. It was all she could do for him, now that he was gone.

Anyway, as far as Alondra could determine, Tadashi didn't use the magical texts he sold himself. That gave her an edge.

A breath of incense brought her up short. Alondra stood still, inhaling something rich and sensual, not quite jasmine.

Tucked between the shuttered noodle house and shadowy coffee shop stood a strange hybrid of antique architecture and concrete, set off from the street by a vermilion torii. Beyond the gate, a pair of stone foxes sat on waist-high pedestals. They had clever eyes and sharp, smiling muzzles. Someone had painted the insides of their large, inquisitive ears blood-red.

An unseen woman called, "*Konbanwa.*" Good evening.

Alondra echoed, "*Konbanwa.*" Her voice was lower in comparison.

The woman invited, "Would you join me for a cup of tea?"

Still in Japanese, Alondra answered, "I wouldn't dream of troubling you."

"It would be my pleasure," the woman said.

“You speak very good Japanese.”

“For a *gaijin*.” Alondra bowed her head. “I would be honored to join you for tea, but my Japanese is limited.”

“I can speak some English,” the woman answered. To prove it, she said, “Please visit with me.”

Alondra stepped off the sidewalk toward the torii. The gate delineated sacred ground, distinct from the mundane street outside. Alondra wondered if the inhabitant was a nun, forbidden to show herself to the world beyond the gate. As Alondra stepped through the gate, she heard the sweet peal of a bell.

While Alondra passed the stone foxes, a wooden door slid open at the front of the temple. A woman knelt behind it. She wore a kimono as red as blood, embroidered with white foxes chasing small silver balls. Her robe was breathtaking, by far the most striking garment Alondra had seen in a day filled with beautiful things.

Noting Alondra’s admiration, the woman smiled. “Would you like to have tea on the veranda? The air inside the temple is hot; we might have a breeze outside.”

“It would be nice to sit out here,” Alondra replied. “May I help you bring the tea things out?”

“It’s no trouble.”

The woman lifted out a short square table. It held pottery cups and an iron teapot on a cork trivet.

Alondra slipped off her shoes before stepping onto the low porch. She knelt beside the door.

The nun reached into the temple for two simple round cushions. Alondra watched how she sat on hers, then copied her.

“*Hajime mashita,*” the woman said. “*Kitsune desu.*”

Her name meant fox. Strange. In Japanese, Alondra answered, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Kitsune-san.”

The woman’s smile was enigmatic, but she appeared pleased. In English, she said, “No, no, only Kitsune.”

“My name is Alondra DeCourval. *Alondra desu.*”

Kitsune rose to her knees to pour the tea. Exceedingly graceful, she lifted the pot with her right hand while her left held her kimono sleeve away from the falling water.

Although her mouth watered, Alondra rested her hands in her lap. The tea would have been nearly boiling when poured. She’d scald her mouth if she didn’t give it time to cool. Every *gaijin* made that mistake at least once.

“Have you been shopping?” Kitsune wondered.

“May I show you what I bought?”

“Please.”

Alondra took the box from the shopping bag, untied its silk ribbon, slipped off its wrapping paper, peeled back the tissue inside, and removed the geta. She passed the sandals to her hostess, who examined them.

“These are very good quality, Alondra. They must be for a very special occasion.”

So Alondra repeated the public version of her invitation to the moon-viewing party Mr. Tadashi was hosting in Ueno Park tomorrow night. She explained how much she wanted to dress appropriately and her unexpected difficulties finding a kimono.

Kitsune made a tiny gesture and Alondra guessed correctly that the tea had cooled enough to drink. A Japanese hostess couldn't drink before her guest. Kitsune watched to make certain Alondra enjoyed the tea, then lifted her own cup.

They drank in three ritual sips, draining the cup on the third. Kitsune poured more tea and sat back to let it cool.

“I would like to help you go to Tadashi-san's moon-viewing party,” she offered.

“I would be honored to have your advice.”

“I have a kimono that would suit your beautiful coloring, if you would allow me to make you a gift.”

“Oh, Kitsune,” Alondra said cautiously, “a kimono is too rich a present.”

The nun sat very still, her head inclined so that Alondra couldn't read her expression. "I have many kimono. One is perfect for you. Please honor me by wearing it."

Alondra leaned forward to bow. It was too much to accept, but if she didn't, she insulted her hostess's generosity. Alondra said at last, "I would be thrilled to have your help."

"Come late in the afternoon. I will help you dress."

"What shall I bring with me?"

"If you buy a nagajuban or two in white or pink, I will give you an outer kimono and obi. Bring your beautiful geta." Kitsune handed the sandals back. "Oh, Alondra, this will be so much fun!"

They drank their tea in companionable silence. Alondra studied the other woman's face as Kitsune gazed off into the quiet neighborhood. Her chin was sharp, like Alondra's own, but unlike Alondra's broader cheekbones, Kitsune's face was almond-shaped. In the light of the streetlamps, the color of her eyes was difficult to name, but when she turned toward her guest again, Alondra caught a glint of gold. Her hostess wasn't quite human.

Amazed not to have noticed before, Alondra lifted her teacup. After she'd drunk, she asked, "How long have you lived at the temple, Kitsune?"

“Not long. I used to live in the woods outside Nara.”

“Shibuya must seem very different to you.”

“I miss my home, but people here are kind.”

\*

When Alondra left the temple, novelty had evaporated from the Japanese streets. The apartment buildings were like buildings in America. The streetlights were streetlights. However, the nun living in a semi-modern temple was really a fox spirit—and she wanted to give Alondra a kimono. Alondra smiled to have found magic, even in the metropolis. That was something Victor had shown her: how magicians and magical creatures always found each other.

Reminiscing, she missed the turn to her hotel and had to double back. Few of Tokyo’s streets met at right angles, so she couldn’t continue to the next intersection and make three right turns. The city was a maze that bewildered anyone beyond their familiar haunts. It must be intentional, Alondra thought. What were the city-planners hiding?

Finally, she reached her hotel. The night clerk wished her good evening as he summoned the elevator. The tiny elevator car would have given Alondra fits, if she allowed herself to worry about it. When she’d arrived at the hotel, the bellhop had whisked her suitcase away to a freight elevator

elsewhere in the building. She couldn't have wedged it into the elevator with her.

Alondra locked herself into her room and slipped off her shoes. She padded past the water closet into the bathroom and lifted the tub's cover, then set the taps to run. She often thought more clearly surrounded by water, when the air in her aspect was stilled.

If Kitsune was a fox hiding in the shape of a woman, what did she want? Foxes, in the old Japanese tales, were often tricksters, but just as often they were the wronged parties: hunted, abused, beaten, their tails set afire. Kitsune's offer of the kimono was extremely generous. Perhaps, under Japanese etiquette, Kitsune volunteered a favor to Alondra with the expectation of receiving something in return.

Alondra undressed and pinned up her braid. She showered, then climbed carefully into the deep Japanese tub.

As her chin touched the surface of the water, Alondra's heart pounded hard twice.

Tadashi's family home was in the woods outside of Nara. Coincidence seemed unlikely.

\*

Shopping for clothing was vastly simplified the next morning, now that she only needed undergarments. Alondra chose an opaque underkimono of ivory and a sheerer one of cerise that

brought out the blush in her complexion.

After that, she wandered the aisles of the Seibu department store, seeking a gift for Kitsune. Alondra needed to acknowledge the fox's generosity with something that wouldn't compete with it. The levels of Japanese gift-giving were complex, too easy for a foreigner to misstep.

Alondra considered flowers for the shrine. Seibu's floral department offered many pretty variations of the traditional seven flowers of autumn. Eventually, she decided that flowers were too impersonal.

She lingered in the produce department. She contemplated a box of beautiful red strawberries, completely out of season, matched perfectly in shape, size, and color, for 20,000 yen. Nearby sat a flawless green melon for almost \$400. A fox might appreciate beautiful fruit, but Alondra couldn't be certain it would taste good. She didn't dare prod the melon as she would at the grocer's.

Wandering randomly, she discovered a pet department. Since Japanese lived so close together, their pets were miniaturized: teacup-sized balls of fur. Alondra passed chinchillas and sleek black rats, shorthaired kittens and longhaired puppies. A tank held jellyfish, undulating on an artificial tide. A glass column housed a pair of unfamiliar butterflies and a cocoon dangling from a withered branch.

That tempted her more than anything had so far. Alondra saw a certain poetry in giving butterflies to a fox.

Nearby a bird began to sing: a lilting, liquid melody. Alondra's heart soared on the sound. She approached a tiny Japanese woman wearing an apple-green smock like a lab coat. "*Sumimasen ga. Nan desu-ka?*"

The saleswoman offered a tight, shy smile. In English, she answered, "That is *uguisu*. Nightingale."

It began its song again, notes tumbling and flowing over each other. Both women listened, captivated.

When the bird paused, Alondra asked, "Is it very expensive?"

"I think it is hard to take to America."

"It is for a Japanese friend," Alondra explained. "In Shibuya."

The clerk drew a calculator from the pocket of her smock. She typed in a number and a string of zeroes. It was less than Alondra had budgeted for her kimono. She counted out the bills.

"Could the bird be delivered to my hotel today? I would like to present it myself."

"*Hai.*"

Shopping finished, Alondra returned to the hotel to nap. She needed to be sharp for her meeting with Tadashi.

\*

Alondra showered again before fixing her hair. She coiled the flame-red strands atop her head. She looked more like a Gibson girl than a geisha, but the style would do. One of the focal points of a kimono was the nape of a woman's neck.

She made up her face quickly, accenting her green eyes with mascara, touching her lips with soft pink. Buttoning up her blouse, she called the desk to make certain the nightingale had arrived.

Knots twisted in her stomach. Alondra sank down to the tatami floor, hands clasped around her knees. *What's the matter?* she asked herself sternly. *You don't have to accept the fox's gift.* In the folktales, foxes often misled travelers, but they could be seduced or flattered or bribed. Alondra was confident that the nightingale would please Kitsune.

*Tadashi, then.* Alondra hugged herself. She had no real reason to fear him. Their correspondence had been abrupt and unfriendly, but the moon-viewing party was merely an interview, not a confrontation. Tadashi the businessman couldn't countenance a rumor that his business was untrustworthy. She just needed to persuade him that a *gaijin* had the ability to damage his reputation.

She could do it. She'd studied hard to behave properly. The fox would help her dress acceptably.

She had to believe that, in the face of everything, Tadashi would deliver the book or return Victor's money.

And if the bookseller failed to make things right, Alondra would feel justified in using magic against him.

\*

When Alondra left the hotel, the falling sun lurked behind the skyscrapers. Her left hand held the shopping bag with her geta, tabi, and the two nagajuban. Her right carried the birdcage. It wasn't heavy as much as awkward. Luckily, she didn't have far to walk.

The late afternoon air felt thick. Alondra moved slowly, trying not to perspire. That was one of the Japanese prejudices against foreigners: that they were sweaty, smelly barbarians, offensive to refined Japanese senses. Alondra set her packages down in the shade of an unfamiliar tree to rest.

A typhoon spun out in the Pacific Ocean, pinning a high-pressure system over Tokyo. Alondra couldn't afford to draw the storm onshore and flood out tonight's party, but if she didn't get a whisper of breeze, her shower wouldn't last long. She mulled her options. A zephyr would be far too strong and she'd risk bringing down the typhoon. An ariel was too intelligent and too easily bored. If she called one, it would cause trouble. A sylph was what she wanted, but couldn't risk upsetting the

fox by bringing another magical creature into her domain.

Ah, well. She'd just have to suffer, like all the other *gaijin* in Tokyo. Alondra smiled. Perhaps she should have accepted the hotel clerk's offer of a taxi, even though it had seemed silly to ride a handful of blocks. She would definitely cab—and hope it was air-conditioned—to Ueno Park for the party.

\*

As she crossed beneath the torii, the nightingale fluttered inside its cage. The sound seemed unnaturally loud, louder than the cars whooshing by, louder than the schoolgirls giggling across the street. Alondra wished she could reassure the poor bird.

The temple's door remained closed as Alondra passed the guardian fox statues. Perhaps this was the reason for her unease before she left the hotel. Perhaps she'd wasted the day searching for an unnecessary gift while her fairy godmother absconded without providing a gown for the ball.

Alondra moved into the shadow of the temple and set her packages on the porch. Eyes closed, she opened her senses like she hadn't done since coming to the metropolis. A shiver crept through her. She was being watched. Judged.

Alondra knelt beside the nightingale's cage and lifted the scarf that shrouded it. "Do we speak

any words in common, little bird?" Alondra whispered. "I don't know the Japanese to ask you to sing."

The bird regarded her with a bright black eye.

"Would darkness inspire your voice?"

The nightingale bobbed on its swing.

Alondra reached out with a fluid wave, trailing her fingers, then closing them into a fist.

"Darkness, gather," she murmured.

The shadows on the veranda drew toward them.

The bird flitted around its cage. Returning to its perch, it tilted its head back and opened its beak. Melody flowed out, clear and liquid, bright with joy.

Goosebumps quivered over Alondra's skin. She slipped off her shoes and sat on the edge of the veranda.

The bird charged into a complicated roundelay. The melody was simple enough that Alondra could almost hum along, except that whenever she tried, the bird skipped ahead, changing rhythms and keys.

The door of the temple slid open. Kitsune held the red sleeve of her kimono across her face like a mask. Her dark eyes shone with tears.

"Tadashi Ichiro will find your gift irresistible," she said bitterly.

"Kitsune-san," Alondra said softly, "the

nightingale is for you.”

The bird began a new song as sprightly as a bamboo flute. Alondra and the fox listened, charmed. Then Kitsune murmured, “Alondra-chan, this is a very expensive gift.”

In careful Japanese, Alondra answered, “It is inexpensive if it pleases you.”

“Alondra-chan, this is too grand a gift to give a stranger.”

“Are we strangers, Kitsune-chan? I’d hoped we were friends.”

“I am no friend of Tadashi Ichiro,” the fox said softly. “He has abused my family.”

“My family, also,” Alondra said. “I am here to make him answer for that.” She met the fox’s searching gaze. “Will you help me face him?”

“I would be honored. But first—” Kitsune reached out and unlatched the door of the birdcage. The nightingale halted its song, regarding the two creatures outside—the one who had liberated it from the harsh lights and artificial scents of the department store and the one who set it free. The bird hopped to the edge of its doorway. Then it flew up into the rafters of the temple and began to sing again.

“I hate to see anything imprisoned,” Kitsune explained.

“A bird in a cage or a fox in Tokyo,” Alondra said, “if there is a way to free them, it is my

privilege to help.”

Kitsune’s smile was very sweet. She lifted the folded clothing from her lap. It was a deep antique gold, embroidered with tumbling Japanese maple leaves in metallic burgundy: a magnificent kimono.

“Come inside, Alondra-chan,” Kitsune said. “Allow me to help you dress.”

\*

The wooden sandals were tricky to walk on. Alondra had to concentrate so that she didn’t stumble. The obi bound her breasts so tightly that it was impossible to draw a deep breath. She began to appreciate the deliberate grace of the geisha.

The night brightened rapidly as the full moon rose over Tokyo. The darkness of Ueno Park spread between the twinkling lights of skyscrapers. Alondra wasn’t sure where to meet Tadashi’s party, but wasn’t worried. Lanterns lined a walkway between the halves of a lotus-filled lake. Alondra tottered toward the sound of laughter. Someone would help her.

As she neared a group of boisterous young people, a remarkably handsome man turned toward her. An expression she could not translate crossed his face. He raised a pale cup in her direction. Alondra inclined her head. Odds were good that he’d never seen anything like her

before: the gold kimono, the flame-red hair caught up atop her head.

The young man handed his cup to a friend and approached Alondra. He wore a dark Western-style suit over cowboy boots. When he bowed, he asked in perfect English, "How do you do?"

"How do you do?" Alondra discovered that bowing was a whole new experience in the kimono. "Perhaps you can help me? I didn't realize the park was so large. I am supposed to meet Mr. Tadashi." She took the invitation from inside the square drape that hung from her sleeve. Kitsune had shown her how ladies carried everything they needed inside their sleeves. "Could you direct me?"

The young man scanned her invitation beneath one of the lanterns. "You are to meet him beside the Toshogu Shrine, near the zoo." He handed the invitation back. "I will accompany you."

"It's not necessary."

"My pleasure." He bowed again. "I have never seen—you will pardon me, I hope—an American in such a magnificent kimono."

And he was burning with curiosity, Alondra understood, but too Japanese to ask about it. "It was a gift from a friend," Alondra said. "It must be very old."

"I think so."

“May I ask you another favor?”

“Of course.”

“May I rest my hand on your arm? I feel like a clumsy *gaijin* in these geta.”

He didn't laugh as he offered his elbow.

The park was thronged with people celebrating the harvest moon. Laughter, lubricated by sake, echoed across the surface of the lake. Alondra felt lonely amongst the celebrants. The sensation startled her, since people had been so kind throughout her visit.

She told her new acquaintance her name.

“*Hiroshige Hiroshi desu*,” he answered. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“You speak such perfect English,” Alondra commented.

“I work for the *New York Times* bureau,” he said. “I studied journalism at Columbia.”

“Thank you for your help tonight, Hiroshige-san.”

“No problem. If I stayed, my friends would continue to pour sake for me. It's good to clear my head in the company of a beautiful woman.”

Concentrating on where she placed her feet on the paving stones, Alondra let the compliment pass. Hiroshige changed the subject. “How do you know Tadashi-san?”

She told Hiroshige about Victor's book and the trouble she had gone through to track it down. “At

a temple in Shibuya, I met one of Tadashi's former tenants, who also has a dispute with him. It seems Tadashi-san may not be entirely honorable."

Hiroshige stopped abruptly. "If you think he cannot be trusted, why do you meet him alone?"

"I won't be alone," Alondra countered. "He's invited me to his party."

Hiroshige faced an old-fashioned building rising above the umbras of trees. "That is Toshogu Shrine."

The building looked deserted in the moonlight. No lanterns glowed around it. No voices laughed.

Alondra felt herself flush. She'd spent so much time studying Japanese and preparing for this party. She'd spent so much money on the journey and the wardrobe—and the nightingale. How could she have been duped into coming to an empty shrine on an island in a manmade lake to meet a man who simply vanished into the enormous metropolis around them?

Beneath the trees moved an indistinct figure. "Miss DeCoravah?" he called in heavily accented English.

"Tadashi-san?"

The figure bowed. "*Hai*. I am afraid you do not come."

"I don't like this," Hiroshige whispered.

Alondra didn't like it either, but she'd invested too much to back out. Besides, she owed Kitsune.

Alondra smiled as she took her hand from Hiroshige's arm. "Tokyo is one of the safest cities in the world," she said. "There are people all around."

"There's no party here," Hiroshige argued quietly. "If he wanted to meet you, why bring you to a dark corner of the park?"

"I'm not afraid of him," Alondra assured. "You've been very helpful, Hiroshige-san. Thank you for escorting me here. Don't worry."

Hiroshige refrained from mentioning how the unfamiliar clothing and wooden shoes hobbled her. Instead, he pulled a small case from inside his jacket and withdrew a business card. Moonlight painted the paper blue. "Please do me the favor of calling tomorrow," he said politely. "We can compare moon-viewing stories over lunch."

Alondra tucked the card into her obi and bowed before tottering away.

\*

Tadashi sat on a stone bench facing the shrine, moonlight shimmering off the dragon on the back of his kimono. Beside him squatted a stout pottery bottle and two cups. He'd slicked his bone-white hair back from his long horsy face. "Thank you for coming, Miss DeCoravah."

"Thank you for the invitation, Tadashi-san."

He waved a hand toward the bench. "Please join me."

Alondra sat with her back to the shrine to face the lake and the revelers across the water. Tadashi watched her. Alondra held her peace, admiring the familiar contours of the moon, its soft cold light floating between the water lilies.

“Who was that man?” Tadashi asked.

“A stranger from whom I asked directions.”

“Ah.” Tadashi poured sake into the pottery cups. He raised his and waited for her to join him.

Alondra picked her cup up. The chilled pottery felt inviting on the warm night. Her mouth watered. “To the resolution of our business,” she proposed.

Tadashi lifted his cup to her. “*Kampai!*”

Alondra licked her lips, tasting sake on the air, then drank. The liquid had a distinct tang, like rubbing alcohol. It burned her mouth. She took another sip, trying to decipher the flavor. This *must* be an acquired taste, she thought.

Silence stretched awkwardly between them. When Alondra raised her sake again, she saw the moon’s reflection inside. It looked like a bright silver ball, no larger than a toy. Her head felt very strange, heavy inside. Her gaze snagged on her right hand and panic flashed through her. The emeralds in her ring smoldered. She’d drunk poison. The cup tumbled from her nerveless fingers, spilling sake on Kitsune’s kimono.

It didn’t occur to Alondra to scream; she was

too angry. *This is stupid*, she thought. *What does he think he's doing? I can't believe he's drugged me. Lots of people knew where I was going: the hotel clerk, the taxi driver who brought me to the park, Hiroshi Hiroshige who works for The New York Times. I am a gaijin with bright red hair. Anyone who saw me tonight will remember. How can he be so foolish? I don't intimidate this easily.*

Across the lake, a bird began to sing. A hush spread across the water as everyone in the park listened. Alondra recognized the refrain sung by the nightingale on the fox's veranda. Had the bird followed her? She had hoped it would choose to keep Kitsune company.

Tadashi set the sake bottle reverently on the ground. Then he moved behind Alondra and wrapped his arms beneath her breasts. He tugged, but her sprawling limbs and the kimono made dragging her difficult. She must outweigh the lean old man. Tadashi cursed in Japanese. Bound by the drug's sinister euphoria, Alondra wanted to laugh at him.

Weird yipping echoed through the night. Hiroshige had said the Toshogu Shrine was near the zoo. Maybe it kept foxes. That was easier to believe than that Kitsune had braved the park where she knew Tadashi would be.

The bookseller released Alondra. She flopped down awkwardly. Her head bounced on the stone

bench. Bright white pain flared through her skull. Tadashi glowered as if she were intentionally being difficult.

He untangled Alondra's legs and hiked her up the bench. She felt one geta slide off her foot. He thrust one clammy hand into the bodice of her kimono.

*This is really happening.* Cold fear trickled down Alondra's ribs. She had been drugged and raped as a child. In nightmares, she sometimes drowned in that helplessness again. She'd been isolated then, with no chance of assistance. Now, help was all around, but as long as the drug scrambled her thoughts, she was at Tadashi's mercy.

Fury chased the fear from her blood. She was not a powerless child. She was not about to be raped by a shoddy businessman who thought he could bully her into dropping a legitimate grievance. Spirits of air could be summoned by sound. Rescue was at hand, if she could force her voice out. She managed an ugly croak.

Despite the tangling layers of fabric, Tadashi forced her knees apart and wrestled with her underwear.

Somewhere beyond the trees, Kitsune's voice rang through the park. "Alondra-chan?"

When Alondra didn't respond, Hiroshige shouted, "She's gone to the Toshogu Shrine."

“Why doesn’t she answer?” Kitsune called back. “Can you help her? Can you help me?”

*I must do something*, Alondra thought. *I can’t just lie here intoxicated and half-naked and wait to be rescued*. But her limbs felt so heavy. Really, all she wanted to do was close her eyes against the dazzling moonlight.

Hurrying now, Tadashi raised his own kimono.

Wings whirred out of the blackness and something struck Tadashi. He reeled into the bench. It rocked, but didn’t tip over. Tadashi’s arms flailed, trying to fend off the bird. The poor nightingale was so fragile; Alondra worried it would be injured.

Her acquaintances called back and forth in growing concern as they located each other in the crowded park. A gabble of voices rose, calling a word that hadn’t occurred to Alondra: *Keisatsu*. Police.

Tadashi staggered, cursing, into the lake. She wondered if he could wade away from the island, stumbling off amongst the koi and lotus leaves, abandoning the foolish *gaijin* woman—drunk on sake and so immodest—for the police to find.

The nightingale perched in a branch above Alondra’s head, singing furiously.

The beam of a flashlight cut across the water, followed by a shrill whistle. A mob of people surged down the causeway toward the island.

Several flashlight beams skimmed the surface of the lake, highlighting Tadashi.

Alondra's will sparked white-hot. Commanding Tadashi's gaze, she forced her left hand upward. She could work unsympathetic magic despite the language barrier. She pointed her pinky at the apposite part of his anatomy. As he watched, she slipped the finger between her lips and clamped her teeth into the joint, sawing them back and forth until she tasted blood. Tadashi stumbled to his knees. He roared in pain, clutching his groin.

Alondra used the spell to hold him until several policemen plowed into the lake, breaking her eye contact.

The fox pulled the kimono down to cover Alondra's knees. Then Alondra swooned in Kitsune's arms, resting her head against the fox-woman's kimono-clad breast. The nightingale landed on Kitsune's shoulder, looking pleased with itself.

"Thank you, Alondra-chan," Kitsune whispered, wiping the blood from Alondra's lips with her sleeve. "All my sisters thank you."

Alondra was dying to know what horrors they'd been forced to suffer. It was not the Japanese way to ask.

\*

Hiroshige stayed with Alondra as paramedics

took her to the hospital. He predicted that she'd been dosed with some kind of animal tranquilizer and, when it wore off, she'd have a terrific headache. He postponed their lunch date until he could work up the story on Tadashi.

After the headache faded and the hospital released her, Alondra still felt woozy. She returned to her hotel room, planning only on a bath, followed by a nap.

Just inside the door, she found a shopping bag full of the street clothes she'd changed out of at the fox temple. At the bottom of the bag lay a book, the first edition of Lafcadio Hearn's *Dragons, Badgers, and Foxes: Animal Avatars of Ancient Japan* that Victor had purchased.

A note fluttered out of it, written in child-like English characters. "Alondra-chan, when Tadashi Ichiro was hospitalized—thank you most especially for that—my sisters crept into his house and found this book. We hope you will accept it and the kimono as tokens of our gratitude." The note was signed with a paw print.

Despite what had nearly happened, Alondra was glad to have been of service. She stretched out on the futon and flipped idly through the book's pages. One of the illustrations halted her. She saw a fox like the statues outside Kitsune's Tokyo temple. "The fox is the messenger of Inari," the caption read, "God of Prosperity."

Perhaps Tadashi should have considered that before he abused the god's messengers. Alondra intended that, by the time she was finished, he'd have to liquidate his book collection to pay his legal bills. She expected the court to discover that he'd raped other women and defrauded other collectors, but being Japanese, they hesitated to come forward and press charges. As a *gaijin*, Alondra had no such qualms.

She wondered when she'd have a chance to visit Nara, see some of the Japanese countryside. What she'd sampled of foxes' hospitality had been very nice.

# The Acid That Dissolves Images

You throw the magazine into the jumble of makeup heaped beneath the mirror. “Pretentious gory poseur,” the critic called you, “bastard love-child of Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson, and the whole twentieth-century shock-rock scene.” You draw a (hopefully) calming breath. The critic obviously hadn’t stayed for the whole show.

Obviously. Medusa is an angry itch inside you, mixed in the bile that creeps up the back of your throat. You suck miserably on a beer, but the bitter taste won’t go away. How long can this sane front hold?

Your hands shake as you load the gun. The first bullet shatters the mirror, your reflection; the second silences the digiplayer. As Medusa rises, you feel the hardness returning. It feels *good*.

Medusa wonders: if she shot the body you share in the shoulder, could you still go on stage—despite the pain, despite your arm hanging incarnadine against the shiny black latex bodysuit? You wish there were some way to shoot her. Instead, you hold the magazine at arm’s length and blow it to confetti. It snows down around you, smelling of cordite.

Over the dressing room intercom, Carl asks, “Are you ready, Rachel?”

In response, Medusa laughs. Her low, cruel cackle has become your trademark.

To invite him in, you promise, “I won’t shoot you.” Still, the creature inside you might, just to see how Carl would meet death. He is one of the few young men you know, a conscientious objector. A couple of months ago when he became part of the band, he claimed he would rather report to prison—with all that entailed—than join the Army. But the night his draft notice came, Medusa plucked out his eyes on stage. Carl fainted before she finished the first one.

He can’t afford cybernetic replacements, of course, and the Army won’t lay out that kind of cash for a grunt they don’t expect to see again once they dump him in the desert.

You’ve been wondering why Carl stayed in the band. Maybe, in a twisted way, he is grateful to Medusa. He’s as friendly to you as anyone dares to be these days.

Carl opens the dressing room door. He seems to regard you through the gauze that covers his empty sockets. “Did you read the review in *Modern Image*?” he asks.

You decide to be honest. “Why did our first national publicity have to be a slam?”

“Any mention is better than no mention at all.”

Carl crosses his arms on his chest and leans against the doorframe. "Sounded to me like she made up her mind about us before the show started, then left after the first song. They call the magazine *Image*, not *Substance*." He smiled. "It hasn't affected the size of tonight's crowd. Maybe it helped."

You wish he hadn't told you that. Medusa has gotten really wild on the nights she's had a big audience. Last time it was Carl. How can she top that? Feigning calm, you jab the pointed nail of your little finger at your eyelashes, forcing the mascara to spike still more. Finally you say *screwit* and pull the bone-white shock of bangs into your face. These normal gestures do not faze Medusa. She shows you white hair clotted with crimson. Behind it, your reflection wears Medusa's smile.

You follow Carl from the dressing room. The cinderblocks of the hall are covered with the graffiti of a hundred bands. Most of the names are unfamiliar. When you reach the wings, the effluvia of spilled beer and hair mousse washes over you. You envision the crowd: witch bitches in their black gowns and silver talismans, knots of mohawked punks, a tourist or two in bondage gear. Desperate women, wanting a spectacle to make them forget how lonely they are, how long ago their men disappeared into the desert. Carl gets laid every night. So does the computer jockey,

Ann. It seems forever since you've had anybody but Medusa for company.

The band stands in a clump, passing a joint of Lydia's one-hit weed. Though excluded, you bask in their camaraderie. Again you are glad to have answered their ad for a singer. The performances allow you respite from Medusa, when you don't need to clutch her leash so tightly. Still, now that she's grown abusive of this freedom, perhaps you *should* quit.

"Poseur," Medusa murmurs. "*You* would quit after one scathing review. I don't need you holding me back any longer."

You realize Medusa still holds the gun. You thrust it through the back of your belt and hope she will forget about it. How likely is that? Still, she can't kill you. She needs you to move around in. And she needs the band, to do whatever it is she's come to do. You promise yourself that they'll be safe. You think she understands that imprisonment would not be worth the exhilaration of murder.

The houselights dim. The audience rustles, a thousand-eyed beast whose attention is suddenly focused. Your fingertips are icy as you slip the microphone over your head, switch on the box of effects at your hip. "I'll show you gore," Medusa teases. You wish you knew what she has planned, but you never do.

The machines kick on, spewing pale smoke that smells like myrrh. In the gloom, Ann's computer lights glow a malevolent red. Lydia leads Carl to his drums, waits solicitously for him to find the controls. Then she lifts her bass from its cradle and turns up the volume.

A moan begins, like a graveyard wind. Lydia weaves in a rapid bass melody.

When the fog reaches your knees, you pace slowly to downstage middle. Thus ends the rehearsed part of the show.

"Is ecstasy possible in destruction?" Medusa whispers through the effects box. The reverse reverb repeats each word, clarifying it before biting it off. "Can one grow young in cruelty?"

Fear becomes a chill rock in your stomach.

"Do you desire to see the Truth?" Medusa asks.

A stark white spotlight pierces the smoke to strike harsh reflections off your shiny latex bodysuit. With one hand, Medusa forces your head back, caresses your throat, cups one breast, hugs your bony ribs. Yes, she is killing you. You shiver, not altogether in fear.

"Do you desire essential satisfaction?" Medusa purrs. "I do."

With a savage tug, she rips an earring from your left ear, throws it to the stage, and mashes the silver nude beneath her boot. Blood drips on

your neck, warm, sensual. Medusa touches her fingers to it, brushes it across your lips. Delicious.

“Let us enjoy ourselves to the full. ‘Tis Nature’s law.”

Medusa steals lyrics from Rimbaud, Crowley, Huysmans, everyone you’ve read. She has an incredible memory for cruelty.

Women crowd around the stage. Someone thrusts a black-gloved fist into the spotlight. You wonder what they derive from Medusa, why her fury attracts and binds them, mothlike, as it does you. Medusa only smiles.

A flashbulb dazzles your eyes.

Medusa stalks toward the flash, hissing lines from *The Torture Garden* into the microphone. The crowd washes after her, waves against the breakwater of the stage.

She halts, swaying on stiletto boot heels. Anger pounds like a bass drum inside your skull. You have to fight her to see.

The fortyish woman holds a camera at arm’s length over her head and snaps another picture. Trendy gold fans shield her ears. Her painstakingly ratted hair glows plum in the lights. You recognize her as the critic from *Modern Image*. *Why could she be here, Medusa demands, unless to see if she has destroyed you?*

Now that she has your attention, the critic shouts something. Sandwiched chest-high against

the stage by the crowd, she is white-faced. You can't hear her over the Berlioz melody Ann's computer is generating. As you bend close to the footlights, Medusa switches on the flanger.

"I can't breathe," the critic gasps. Your microphone Doppler-shifts the words, giving them a ghostly echo.

Like a bird of prey, Medusa's laugh spirals up over the effects. She strides across the stage to Carl, drapes her arms over his shoulders, pinches his nipples through his black T-shirt. He freezes, rigid against your chest. "Count yourself lucky, bitch," Medusa snarls. "Some people can't see."

Abandoning Carl, Medusa adjusts the effects control slightly. When she speaks, a Medusan chorus speaks with her. "I don't recommend leaving tonight's show early. That really pisses me off."

You pray that Medusa is smart enough to leave the critic alone.

Someone shimmies over the edge of the stage. The girl has the angular hips of a voluptuous figure starved to thinness. Her clinging black velour jumpsuit is a cheap imitation of your latex. Like yours, her bangs are bleached bone-white. With a jolt, you recall the vision in the dressing room: the bloody white bangs.

Ann kicks in some heavy trumpets, guiding Carl into a dance beat. You near the girl to find her

quoting de Sade's *Juliette*. Medusa embraces her so that she can be heard over the microphone.

The girl falters, more interested in kissing the blood from your neck. Medusa trumps the quotation with more de Sade. "To judge whether love be madness, is not the lover's distraction sufficient proof of it?"

She yanks the girl's head back by the hair, then kisses her. The sound, multiplied by the chorus, becomes horrible, obscene. Ann has recorded the quote and feeds it through her sampler, breaking the words apart and reordering them.

You turn your back on the girl and dance to Ann's infectious music. Lydia grins with relief.

The girl rips the handgun from your belt, rattling the delicate effects box in the process. You spin. She is taking exaggerated aim across the footlights at the critic. Lydia's fingers stumble on the bass strings, but Carl's drumbeat is steady. "Sufficient proof?" asks the computer.

Medusa walks into the firing line.

Had she been serious in the dressing room about shooting you, about seeing your blood against the latex? Inside her, you are shrieking: *Don't be stupid! Killing me won't convince the critic you're not a poseur.*

"I'm not a poseur," Medusa purrs. "You, of all people, should know that."

The girl gazes at you with confused eyes the heart-stabbing blue of a mountain lake. Medusa quotes Crowley again: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." Through the shaken effects box, Medusa's voice sounds masculine, infinitely jaded, alien.

Panicking, you try to throw yourself out of harm's way. But Medusa is stronger, has always been stronger. Your body only sways. Death stares at you with the circular bore of the gun.

"Do what thou wilt," Medusa repeats.

The girl smiles as if Medusa has blessed her, given her something she never hoped to have. You struggle to speak the words to take back the gift, words that could save her, that would save yourself. You hear Medusa's cackle.

For an instant, you see Medusa through the girl's adoring eyes. You find Medusa as beautiful as fresh blood against white porcelain, as a drop shimmering at the tip of a hypodermic, as a star-filled breeze through a penthouse window. She is final. You are obsolete. Awestruck, overwhelmed, indebted, you embrace Medusa for the first time.

The change is instantaneous and merciful, like the bullet the girl puts into her own heart.

\*

Medusa lifts the dead girl in her arms, smearing blood against the latex suit. In her own voice, without effects, Medusa paraphrases

Artaud, speaking in funereal time over Carl's drumbeat. "It is I who have committed suicide today, torn myself from my body, battled against myself, wishing never to come back to myself."

A flashbulb goes off, then dozens of them, like heat lightning.

Elemental, primal, unleashed, Medusa regards her worshippers and considers what she will do next.

# Anatomical Venus

Her pink lips parted to hint at teeth. The faintest blush colored her cheeks. Her feathery eyelashes were real hairs, individually inset by hand. Her torso gaped open from pubis to collarbone. Inside the cavity, her fallopian tubes lay deflated across scraps of intestine. Her uterus was larger than my fist—maybe as big as both fists put together. I wondered if she had been pregnant.

Her heart, laid open, revealed its chambers. The main vein and artery were big enough to insert my fingers, as I'd seen done in a cadaver lab. A segment of lung draped her liver, which had escaped dissection. Her huge kidneys lay much higher in her body than I expected.

The glossiness of the organs disturbed me less than the even sheen of her limbs. No hairs or muscles defined them. Even though she'd taught medicine for more than two hundred years, she remained smooth and perfectly feminine.

Her half-closed eyes looked dusty, definitely glazed over. Perhaps it was easier to examine her like this, unconscious or dead, rather than aware and alert.

In 2000, San Francisco's science museum, the Exploratorium, exhibited a seven-layer Medical

Venus, cast in wax from an estimated 200 dissections. She'd never before traveled out of Italy. I fell in love with her, lying like Snow White in her glass coffin. I bought a membership to the museum just so I could visit her more than once.

During the exhibition's six-month run, the Exploratorium pioneered live web casts. One of them was a live tour of the Venus's home museum in Florence, Italy—Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Universita di Firenze Sezione di Zoologia 'La Specola'—the oldest public science museum in Europe.

Late in the 18th century, Pietro Leopoldo di Lorena, Grand Duke of Tuscany, decided to build a museum of natural history in Florence to showcase items collected by generations of Medici. After gathering a variety of new specimens, including taxidermied animals, the museum opened in 1771. Four years later, the Grand Duke opened the museum to the general public.

Originally, the Grand Duke did not favor dissecting cadavers. After he viewed the exquisite craftsmanship of Clement Susini, the most brilliant sculptor in wax of their time, Duke Pietro consented to dissection if it created anatomical models for teaching medicine. The Duke financed a laboratory next to the museum expressly for the purpose of sculpting the waxes. With help from

Giuseppe Fernini, Susini created my Venus. With her help, Felice Fontana, the museum's first director, pioneered teaching anatomy without dissection.

To create one model, several cadavers were prepared in sequence, sculpted in clay, then cast in plaster, before the wax was poured in. Words cannot do justice to the delicacy of the work, the nuances of color. I'd never seen anything—never imagined anything—like her. I needed to go to Italy to see more of the anatomical marvels in person.

\*

Once Mason and I got to Florence, La Specola was relatively easy to find. We crossed the Ponte Vecchio, still selling jewelry as it did in Michelangelo's day, and headed toward the Pitti Palace. The Museo di Storia Naturale occupied a nondescript blond brick building: not the most welcoming place. We entered through an archway, crossed a shadowy courtyard, climbed a flight of steep stone steps abuzz with students. Although the natural history museum's collections occupied all five floors, only the second floor was open to the public.

It wasn't clear how we bought a ticket to see just the anatomy specimens, so we paid a little more than three Euros for the entire zoological section. The path wound us through La Specola's

taxidermy collection, which we didn't give appropriate attention. Among its offerings stood a taxidermied hippo, who had been allowed to roam the Boboli Gardens before its demise. We also saw the skeleton of a dodo, but it might have been a model. Its label was in Italian.

Finally we reached the anatomical collection: 1400 pieces, all sculpted between 1771 and second half of 1800s, 550 showcases jammed into ten rooms. Cases of anatomical sections crowded the rooms: standing in glass-enclosed tables on the floor or ringing the walls in upright boxes like china cabinets. Framed sketches on yellowing paper climbed the walls. The artworks we'd come to see ranged from very small finger dissections or pieces of pathological organs to life-size reclining bodies. Each room held between 60 and 90 specimens.

Beneath wavery glass, the beautiful cases had wood inlaid in patterns of light and fire. No one would bother to do such remarkable workmanship in a modern museum. All the wax models had lovely napkins behind them, ivory satin edged in silver braid with a tassel or two. Unfortunately, age showed in a lot of places. The exquisite veneer peeled off some of the cabinets. Some of the white satin napkins highlighting the smaller pieces were falling to threads. Fraying mattresses supported the full figures. One of the

reclining models oozed, leaving an oily stain on his cushion.

The lymphatic room overwhelmed me with its collection of legs stripped down to their internal vessels. I wouldn't have thought it possible to dissect to that level: where all the flesh was removed and only blood vessels remained. Logically, the veins should collapse against the bone, not float in three-dimensional space as these did. I felt surrounded by marvels of medical science. Someone must have been drawing as someone else wielded the knife: that alone impressed me. But then to make a wax model that would retain the tracery and not collapse for the next 200 years...

Here and there amidst the showcases sat little desks with a single curved board on which to rest your right arm. These were meant for medical students who wanted to sketch, but I availed myself of one and pulled out my notebook. The only way to slow down enough to grasp what I saw was to transmute the evidence of my eyes into words.

The fellow I sat beside disturbed me more than all the others in the room, if only because his eyelids had been removed. His wide brown eyes stared upward, pupils slightly glazed. His mouth hung open just enough to reveal yellowed teeth. Unlike my lovely Venus, this Adonis didn't appear

dead or sleeping, but tormented. A victim. He appeared aware that he had been flayed.

What had the artist been thinking? He'd intentionally captured the look of horror in the man's eyes, the agony in his expression. Had it amused Susini to think that medical students were going to study this model for centuries to come? Had he meant recognition of the victim's pain to be a teaching moment?

Even as I puzzled over it, I had to admire the sculptor's accomplishment. The lymphatic model stood fully three-dimensional. If the glass hadn't been there, I could have run my fingers over him, tracing every tendon as it connected to each bone.

A web of tiny white filaments wriggled over the model like vermicelli. I believe they represented lymph vessels, since they seemed to emanate from little brown nodules at his elbow and in his armpit. The remnants of a caul folded back from his heart's nobbled surface. Mason pointed out the bow of ivory ribbon tying off his intestine.

Along the model's thighs lay the round white globes of his testes. I realized I found the severed penises around the room more disquieting than the real thing. I hadn't seen any in the museum that had been peeled, but several were severed to the root so that only a round tube led out of the bladder. This guy's penis had been tucked down

between his thighs, behind his testes.

While I wrote, a gaggle of Italian schoolchildren followed a teacher into the room. She kept shushing them and apologized to me when the boys clustered around, fascinated by the tattoo on my forearm. Amused that they found a live American woman more interesting than the memento mori around us, I wished we had a common language. Instead, we exchanged smiles.

Mason came back to get me. "There's an obstetrical room around the corner."

An English sign said that this room contained the only known mistakes in the museum: Because they didn't have microscopes and because they couldn't chop women open at every stage of pregnancy to check development of the fetus, the board discussing fetal development displayed all the fetuses as perfectly formed newborns of varying sizes. "Homunculus theory," Mason read.

In this room lay the Venus I'd loved in San Francisco. At La Specola, she had most of her skin in place, with only her breasts and belly lifted off. I discovered she was indeed pregnant. Her womb opened to reveal the fetus inside.

Nearby, a case held an anonymous torso, lopped off at mid-thigh and just below the breastbone. Beyond her gender, she had no identifying features at all. Her opened abdomen revealed a pair of twins, almost at term, knees

curled to each other's forehead, a yin yang of death. These were two of the most beautiful blond children I had ever seen, lacking only wings to be cherubs. Around each of their necks twisted a loop of umbilical cord.

I realized I was looking at the remains of three corpses. The mother must have died on the brink of delivery. In the days before refrigeration or embalming, these two little angel corpses and their anonymous mother had been sculpted immediately after their deaths. The tableau was horrible. And beautiful.

Unable to absorb anything more, I tracked Mason down. It was time to get lunch and write some more.

I enjoyed that bottle of Pironi more than any beer in my life.

# About Loren

Loren Rhoads is the author of the *In the Wake of the Templars* trilogy, a grimdark space opera set in a galaxy where humans are a minority. She is the co-author (with Brian Thomas) of *Lost Angels* and its upcoming sequel *Angelus Rose*, about a succubus and her angel. She's also written a bunch of short stories, which have appeared in everything from *Space & Time* to *Weirdbook* and from *Occult Detective Quarterly* to *Cemetery Dance*. She's had stories recently in the books *Best New Horror #27* and *Strange California*.

Loren is also the author of the nonfiction travel guide *199 Cemeteries to See Before You Die* and *Wish You Were Here: Adventures in Cemetery Travel*. She blogs about graveyards as vacation destinations at CemeteryTravel.com.

Loren's latest book is *Tales for the Camp Fire: A Charity Anthology Benefiting Wildfire Relief*, which she edited for Tomes & Coffee Press. It is a collection of short stories by Northern California's best horror writers.

Look for Loren's books on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Loren-Rhoads/e/B002P905PE/> or order them from your local indie bookstore.

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